

Royal Bank Letter

Reflections on Our Times

The Importance of Teaching

We are all in favour of education, but we tend to take for granted the people who provide it.

If our society cares about the future, it will resume giving teachers the support and credit they deserve ...

TEACHING IS ONE OF those things, like editing a newspaper or managing a baseball team, that everybody thinks he or she can do better than the experts. Everybody has taught something to somebody at one time or another, after all. We begin our amateur teaching careers as children by imposing our superior knowledge on our younger siblings or playmates. As students, we pass judgement among our peers on this or that teacher's capabilities. As adults, those of us who do not teach professionally stand ever ready to criticize those who do.

An educator himself, Bergen Evans once struck back at people who presumed that any fool could be a teacher. Commenting on George Bernard Shaw's aphorism, "He who can does. He who cannot teaches," Evans wrote: "The common inference from this much-quoted statement, that the teacher is a sort of failure in the world of action, greatly comforts anti-intellectuals. But almost to a man successful men of action (all of whom think they could be teachers if they turned aside to it) have proved failures as teachers." He did not document his information, but it rings true.

In any case, Shaw's quip does not stand up to logic. Teachers *can* do something, and *do* do something; they teach. Like any other professional activity, teaching requires a cultivated ability. To be done exceptionally well, it also requires a special talent and sense of vocation.

TEACHING IS ONE OF those things, like editing a newspaper or managing a baseball team, that everybody thinks he or she can do better than the experts. Everybody has taught something to somebody at one time or another, after all. We begin our amateur teaching careers as children by imposing our superior



There are "born teachers" just as there are "born statesmen" or "born musicians."

Practiced diligently by men and women of talent, teaching is as much of an art as Shaw's metier of play-writing. The trouble from the teacher's point of view is that there are a lot more teachers than playwrights or men of action like generals or financiers. Education is one of our nation's biggest industries. Because of the sheer number of those who teach in schools, colleges and universities, they have become part of the landscape. Like the familiar features of a landscape, they tend to be overlooked.

Unlike sports, politics, entertainment, the arts or the law, teaching does not give rise to “stars.” Nobody ever got a Nobel Prize for teaching achievements. True, many academics have come in for high honours, but always for something other than their work in the classroom — a book, an economic treatise, a ground-breaking scientific experiment.

School teachers, as opposed to university professors, are particularly under-recognized. Who is to say that a woman conducting a kindergarden class may not be contributing as much to society than the most degree-laden university president? Given the evidence that our very first brush with education leaves a permanent stamp on our characters, that teacher could be molding a future Abraham Lincoln or a Madame Curie. More likely, though, she is molding a whole class of the type of responsible citizens upon whom the well-being of our society depends.

Teaching is a creative act, never more so than in primary and secondary schools. Good teachers, like good artists, have their own individual styles

To be done exceptionally well, teaching requires a special talent and sense of vocation

of performing. They also respect the individuality of their students in the realization that everybody learns through his or her own perceptions. The story is told of a legendary teacher who was asked at the start of the term what

his course matter would be. “I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t seen my students yet.”

It would be a wonderful world if every teacher deeply understood each and every child and put that understanding into effect, but that would be asking too much of human nature. The world would be equally wonderful if every youngster came to school to learn. There is an element of truth, however, to the old teachers’ room joke that for every one who wants to teach, there are 20 not wanting to be taught. The teacher has the peculiar dual task of inculcating knowledge while at the same time breaking down resistance to its inculcation.

‘The mediocre teacher tells ... The great teacher inspires’

Because instruction is an interpersonal affair, different teaching styles work on different students.

An abrasive performer might drive his more timid students into their shells. But there was Rudyard Kipling, who, in his autobiography *Something of Myself*, recalled his English and classic master. “He had a violent temper, no disadvantage in handling boys used to direct speech, and a gift of school-master’s sarcasm which must have been a relief to him and was certainly a treasure trove to me ... Under him I came to feel that words could be used as weapons, for he did me the honour to talk to me plentifully ... One learns more from a good scholar in a rage than from a score of lucid and laborious drudges.”

Kipling’s phrase, “a good scholar in a rage,” should remind us of the point, often forgotten by those who belittle teachers, that the best of them have a broad and deep range of knowledge. First-class teachers seek to ignite in their students an enthusiasm for their subject by example and leadership.

Just what makes a first-class teacher has always been a matter of debate between educational liberals and conservatives. Even the traditional method of teaching by terror — spare not the rod and spoil not the child — has its supporters among parents who feel permissiveness in the schools has gone too far. On the other hand, there seems to be general agreement that the traditional technique of making students learn by rote produces not rounded human beings but programmed automatons.

On the other hand, a certain amount of didactic learning is necessary to show the student the way. “Some flabby persons try to make education painless,” one-time teacher W. E. McNeill wrote. “Do not,’ they say, ‘ask students to learn facts, but teach them to think.’ O thinking — what intellectual crimes are committed in thy name! How can a man think if he doesn’t know?”

Instilling a zest for learning is instilling a zest for life

At the same time no one would dispute that the aim of education should be to produce individuals able to think for themselves and not merely follow what someone else has told them. And the way for teachers to accomplish this is to concentrate on what M. F. Ashley Montagu called “the drawing out, not the pumping in.” Teaching should excite a youngster’s natural curiosity. Instead of giving pat answers, it should raise questions. It was a wise mother who asked her young son after school not “what did you do today?” but “what questions did you ask today?”

It has been said a thousand times in different ways that education should not stop at school: that the proper role of the school is to prepare the mind for lifelong learning. The theory is that you do not get an education in a classroom: you learn *how* to get an education, which in the long run you can only acquire by yourself. In fact, the word “educate” comes from the Latin *educere*, which means “leading out” the student into a wider world of knowledge. It is by stimulating a zest for learning in general that teachers can perform their greatest service to those in their care, for a zest for learning is a zest for life. And a zest for life is what allows people to live contentedly for all of their days.

Given what is now known about the psychology of learning, everyone ideally would be taught in a small group with the teacher acting as participant, leading the students in the pursuit of ideas and motivating them to think about all aspects of life. Instruction would be tailored to the learner’s personality, and tightly focussed on individual weaknesses and strengths.

In a world that is far from ideal, that is not the reality. “In education, we have long given lip service to the fact that all human beings are different,” said Earl C. Kelley, professor of education at Wayne University. “But we have proceeded as if this were not so.”



The teacher is expected to serve as a surrogate parent

The exigencies of economics lead to uniformity. Even in prosperous jurisdictions, education is strapped for funds. At its worst, inadequate funding makes for overcrowded classrooms, and education becomes a kind of mass production

process, complete with a fair percentage of rejects. Teachers being human, there is always a temptation to treat students as so much raw material to be fed through a diploma-producing factory. The temptation is compounded by the fact that the educational system can be satisfied by filling “production norms.”

This helps to explain why, for instance, it is possible for some young people to graduate from high school unable to read and write adequately. When such things happen, the cry goes up: “Where were the teachers, for heaven’s sake?” But to blame teachers for the failings of modern public education is a classic case of shooting the messenger. Teachers did not invent the system, nor do they run it. It is the product of politics, and it is administered by educational bureaucrats whom teachers often regard as their sworn enemies.

If the public, though its elected and appointed delegates, opts for a levelling process in which no student is allowed to fail, or curricula so soft that youths can loaf through their school days, it is not the fault of the teaching profession. If parents are careless enough or dumb enough not to notice that big Johnny can’t read, they are hardly entitled to protest.

“If a doctor, lawyer or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn’t want to be there and were causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some concept of a classroom teacher’s job,” wrote Donald D. Quinn, himself an experienced teacher. Faced with this daunting situation, some teachers tire of catering to individual needs and striving for professional excellence.

“A teacher is like a candle which lights others in consuming itself,” wrote Giovanni Ruffini in an early description of teacher burn-out. In inner city schools such as the one referred to in Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, where student behaviour ranges from “co-operative to life-threatening,” burn-out must be a terrible professional hazard.

First-class teachers seek to ignite in their students an enthusiasm for their subject by example and leadership

The proper role of the school is to prepare the mind for lifelong learning

You do not have to look as far as the slums of New York to see where social trends have added to the already-heavy burden borne by teachers. Broken homes, teenage promiscuity and drug and alcohol

abuse are common in nice middle-class neighbourhoods too. Parents are often too apathetic or busy to meet their parental responsibilities. Problems of youth that were once dealt with at home have been dumped into the schools.

In a materialistic society, young people have their attitudes shaped by a commercial pre-packaged youth culture which encourages precocity and contrariness towards authority. Materialism also permeates parental attitudes. In his recent admirable book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom wrote:

"Fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise — as priests, prophets and philosophers are wise. Specialized competence and success are all they can imagine." In this spiritual vacuum, it is often left to the teachers to instil higher values.

Society has always expected an awful lot from its teachers, and now we are expecting even more from them. We expect them to serve to a large degree as surrogate parents, dealing with the emotional tangles and torments of the adolescent years. Teaching is one of those rare jobs in which one's work is wrapped up in one's personality. It is very demanding psychologically. The abdication of responsibility within so many homes adds to the psychological drain.

Yet at the same time as the complications and vexations of teaching life multiply, the public persists in undervaluing the teacher. Every thinking person would agree that the hope of the human race lies chiefly in education, but most of us pay little attention to the people who provide this precious service, nor do we give them much support in the vital job they do.

Fidel Castro had his priorities straight when he declared: "We need teachers — a heroine in every classroom." Teaching is not usually associated with heroics, even though it takes actual physical courage to face up to the lurking threat of violence in some North American high schools

today. The only teacher-hero in recent popular literature who readily comes to mind appears in Thomas Flanagan's novel *The Year of the French*, in which the protagonist risks imprisonment to instruct poor Irish children in illicit schools proscribed by the English in the interests of keeping the Irish in subjugation. He and his enemies appreciate just how important education can be when freedom is at stake.

A tradition that has been lost and should be found

More commonly, however, the heroism is not so dramatic. "If I had a child who wanted to be a teacher, I would bid him Godspeed as if he were going to war," wrote James Hilton, author of the great novel of teaching, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. "For indeed the war against prejudice, greed and ignorance is eternal, and those who dedicate themselves to it give their lives no less because they may live to see some fraction of the battle won."

Not every teacher is a hero or heroine, of course. There are good, bad and indifferent ones, ranging from those who totally devote their lives to their students to those who totally devote their lives to themselves. Our social priorities do not make it easy to encourage the best and the brightest to teach. Surveys of students who consistently get top marks in university show that they intend to go into more prestigious and more lucrative professions. To a large extent, teachers themselves tend to be different about their occupation. "I beg of you," said William G. Carr to a representative teacher, "to stop apologizing for being a member of the most important ... profession in the world."

"Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it lost tradition," Jacques Barzun wrote. If this society knows what is good for it, that regard will be restored. Parents and other concerned citizens will do all they can to make a teacher's life less troublesome and give due credit to the profession. To a large extent, teachers are in charge of the future. The fate of the people in the future depends on how well they are taught today.



First published in September 1989, by Royal Bank of Canada. Current editions of the Royal Bank Letter are also available on the Royal Bank Financial Group web site at www.royalbank.com/news.