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Teaching: The Down Side

Richard Mitchell

A college professor has a very good life. He can often sit in his office for hours, staring out the window, thinking. He gets paid for that. No one rebukes him for sloth.

Sometimes when I am sitting in my office, thinking, a student comes to see me. An attractive young woman, perhaps. How pleasant. But she doesn't drop in just to visit and chat, or even to join me in thinking, but to complain about a grade on an essay. Too bad. But I'm glad to see her anyway.

I know her. She is in training to become an elementary school teacher. She has taken my course in American Literature because she needs a humanities elective at 11 a.m., and the jewelry-making class was filled. She doesn't really like my course, but it's nothing personal. It's just that she doesn't like literature, and this is the only literature course she's ever taken.

A front seater

I already know that she doesn't like literature, because she sits in the front row. Therefore I have occasionally asked her as a class began, not with professional intent but just to be neighborly how she liked some reading just completed. She has always replied, after only a brief pause, exactly the same words: "Sore eye."

I have been teaching in southern New Jersey for a long time. I understand "sore eye." It means: "It was all right." And by it, she means that it was all right for Hawthorne and Emerson and Twain to have written such things, and that they didn't disturb her unduly, and even that it was all right for me to have assigned them. After all, that's the sort of thing you have to expect in a literature course. It's not meant to be useful, like what she learned in her speech course, which is required of all incipient school teachers.

I know her pretty well, as I have known her brothers and sisters by the scores and the hundreds. She has

heard the names of Washington, Franklin and Jefferson, but she has not heard of Madison, Hamilton, Adams, or Tom Paine. She does know something about the Bill of Rights. She knows that it guarantees the right to vote and the right to "quality education." She's not certain about the relation of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, but she knows that one of them, unless they are really the same thing, establishes the principle of majority rule. This time next year she is going to be teaching children all about their rights as free citizens of this great land.

At the moment, she's upset about the grade on her paper. She hasn't gotten a D in a long time. That was in her basic math competence course, which you do have to pass with a C before you can become an elementary school teacher. After all, math is important for an elementary school teacher. She made it up. She has to pass this humanities elective too, although she doesn't actually need a C. A D will do. But it looks bad. She's gotten mostly A's in her education courses, and she's worried about her transcript. I, too, am worried about her transcript.

"D" for danger

I have given her paper a D only because it is very unusual these days to give anything an F. She thinks that Billy Budd was "definitely" deprived of his civil rights because no special provision was made for his handicap. Then she writes about mainstreaming. She evades commas entirely by a liberal use of dashes, and her subjects and verbs agree only at random. Many of her sentences are complete, but she sees no need to arrange them in paragraphs. This time next year she will be teaching little children to be minimally competent in literacy.

She is friendly and humane. She loves children. She has always been "good" with children. She has had many courses in how to relate to them.

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

She's never heard of Madison or Hamilton. And she's headed for a job—teaching our children

She has actually observed them. She knows how to enhance their self-esteem through classroom situation strategies. She knows the value of creativity and the utilization of audio-visual techniques and devices. She can prepare instructional modules on Choosing a Career and Modifying Students' Perceived Responses to Senior Citizens. She's even ready with lesson plans for third graders on Alternative Sexual Life Styles and Family Living. She thinks she might like literature more if only it had something to do with her chosen profession.

Not as good as TV

She does like some literature. She has read *Sybil* and *The Thorn Birds* and has begun *Shogun*, but it's not as good as the TV version. Like many other books, like *Billy Budd* in fact, it's too "cut and dry." Sore eye, of course, but she can't really relate to it. She prefers to read about the real problems of real life. She enjoys *Psychology Today*. It will help her with her work. It will help her to understand her students, which is the most important skill a teacher can have. With it, she will be able to identify the particular learning disability of every student in her class. Then she can clarify their values and encourage them to express themselves and practice problem-solving in a real-life situation by role-playing and actually reading from the script of a particularly relevant episode of *Little House on the Prairie*. She is not aware that there is a book by that name.

I feel my values growing dim, even cut and dry. I am beginning to worry about my transcript. I feel an ominous twitch, the onset of a sore eye. I hear a distant, grating rumble from Jefferson's grave. I hear Professors of Education saying—they say it often and always with a smug smile—"Well, you just make a little push out of Snow's

ear. She has been deprived of knowledge in the name of creativity, deprived of skills in the name of self-expression, deprived of understanding in the name of values. Next year this time she will be doing the same to others. She'll have a license.

D's aren't cost-effective

If I give too many D's, my enrollment will fall. My department's enrollment will fall. We will not be cost-effective. I will tell her not to worry, that I'm sure she'll end up with a C. She will. She is, after all, a consumer of goods and services, not just a student. She will go away content. I will continue to enjoy the very good life of a college professor, staring out the window. No one will rebuke me for sloth. Jefferson is dead. ■

Richard Mitchell is a professor of English at Glassboro State College and also publisher of Underground Grammarian, a satirical journal devoted to a crusade against sloppy and pretentious writing. His article first appeared in the Washington Post, with whose permission it is printed.

Star Gazer

Astronomer and Nobel Laureate Harold C. Urey told this story on himself:

Crossing the University of Chicago campus one midday he encountered a fellow scientist, stopped to talk, and engaged in a rather lengthy and technical discussion. As they parted, Dr. Urey asked, "Was I coming from this direction or that?"

"From this one," said his colleague.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I was coming from that direction to be on my way to lunch. Coming from this one, I must have already eaten."