

# THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader,

September is for most people connected to school; it is in many ways when the country begins a new year. Even if one is not a student, a school teacher or a parent with “school age” children, September calls up the experience of starting afresh with a clean notebook and new Fall clothes.

Congress is about to reauthorize the 2002 law which has the suspect name of “No Child Left Behind.” The name was borrowed from a children’s advocacy organization but with one crucial change. The organization’s motto was “Leave No Child Behind.” The verb in the imperative was a challenge to the government to do something. However, the law’s name pretends that something has already been done. It announces that the world is now different because goals have been set (a strategy that has also been wonderfully successful in Iraq).

One does not need much education to state desired results and then punish failing school districts and children. It would be almost impossible to find any school teachers who think that the law makes sense. Shouldn’t their voices make some difference? There will be some agonizing over reform of some of the complicated provisions of the law. It is doubtful that any good can be made of the mess.

The essays in this issue are about problems school teachers meet in actually trying to teach. The federal government’s posturing is not the cause of most educational problems, just a further obstacle to a focus on teaching and learning. The problems are not new. For at least a century and a half, schools in the United States and their teachers have been burdened with abundant rhetorical praise and a lack of political will and economic support.

But as the United States falls further behind in the education of its young people there may come a time when local communities get serious about the work of school teachers and the impossibility of school teachers to carry the entire work of education. The work of school teaching needs to be respected and schools in cooperation with family and work sites have to be designed to help poor children escape their poverty. And national politicians would have to become actually interested in the work of education, including schools, their teachers and their students.

## **READING, WRITING, RETAILING**

**By Dave Eggers, Ninive Calegari, Daniel Moulthrop**

President Bush's law known as No Child Left Behind in 2002 specified that by 2006 all teachers be "highly qualified." A laudable goal, clearly beyond debate. But while school districts must find increasingly qualified teachers, the legislation does not provide enough money to substantially increase teachers' learning potential.

Imagine that scenario in the private sector. A chief executive decides that he wants performance from his company. He issues a mandate that all employees be highly qualified. Then he proposes, as No Child Left Behind does, that the staff members be more tightly controlled, that they conform closely to his top down directives and that they be tested yearly to keep their jobs. And he wants all this without raising salaries a penny. Who would want to work for such an outfit?

This is the question on the minds of thousands of recent college graduates. Talk to students who intend to teach, and ask them how they feel about their chosen profession with this legislation putting teachers under such remarkable scrutiny. Educators must spend a great portion of their time preparing for standardized tests, and they face reprisals for themselves and their schools if they or their students do not perform correctly. Add to that the prospect that if they are unmarried or if their spouse doesn't make a good deal of money, their ability to own a home or car will be limited, unless they take on a second job. It's no wonder that only 18 percent of recent college graduates would ever consider teaching.

There's almost something darkly comic about it all. We place the highest demands on a profession, and not just through quality provisions of the legislation. We have unarticulated expectations that teachers be morally and ethically unimpeachable, possessed of dynamic, compelling personalities and agile minds and capable of guiding the learning, for example, of 35 hormonally charged 13-year-olds right after lunch.

After asking that of them, we pay them so little that they have to find work selling electronics and cleaning houses. Is it any surprise that 45 percent of new teachers leave our schools within the first five years?

The solution begins with fixing the legislation and carries down to each school district. Those behind the law have to recognize that schools will never attract the most talented teachers by making the job seem like a cross between a prison guard and the person who administers the written test at the department of motor vehicles. And districts need to make a commitment to higher salaries; it is the first step in improving not just their schools but also the community as a whole.

## **NO WAY TO TEACH**

**By Frank Smith**

A \$1.5 billion a year publishing industry now thrives by supplying trivialized instructional materials, basically fill-in-the-blank exercises and multiple-choice tests, because these items are easy for human and electronic teachers to score right or wrong. But students, as we all know, are not reading better than they did 30 years ago. The assumptions that the drills and tests are based on are all fallacious.

Contrary to what most bureaucrats think, students learn all the time, in school and out. They learn exactly what is demonstrated to them. If they believe that reading is a bore, that writing is difficult and pointless, and that teachers are antagonists in ritualistic nonsense rather than collaborators in worthwhile enterprises, it is because that is what they have learned in school. Children don't enter school with those beliefs.

Before school and outside school, children and students learn with remarkable efficiency through demonstrations and collaboration. They learn to talk like their friends, not because they receive systematic instruction in how to talk but because their friends help them to say what they find useful to say and to understand what they find interesting. Whether they become musicians, scientists or muggers they learn because someone shows them that particular way of life is desirable and accessible and helps them engage in that kind of life.

But in reading and writing and other subjects at school, students are unlikely to receive worthwhile demonstrations and collaboration. They rarely see teachers engaged in reading or writing that is not related to the drills and tests of instructional programs, and collaboration with other students is seldom permitted.

Students and teachers do not engage in literate activities like browsing through newspapers, enjoying novels, or writing letters to friends. Instead, they are submerged in what are supposed to be the components of literacy – mouthing sounds, filling in blanks, circling individual letters or words, answering endless trivial questions about inane characters in stories no one would read voluntarily.

Every atom of initiative is taken away from the teacher. Any teacher who thinks that good teaching is drilling and testing should start checking into a career in real estate; computer programs are the most efficient drillers and testers of all.

Good teachers know that confused or bored students can never be forced to learn anything worthwhile – and that nothing can prevent students from learning when their interest and understanding are engaged. But these teachers desperately need support.

## **THINKING**

**By TheodoreSizer**

How we adults live and work together provides a lesson. How a school functions insistently teaches. If we care about our children's values – how as a matter of habit they treat others and how aware they are of why they do what they do – we must look into a mirror.

This does not mean that each of us consistently must be a paragon. "There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice." As Thoreau realized, the struggle within the human heart to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong is never-ending. What young people should not experience is sustained hypocrisy. The school which claims that "everyone can be what he can be" but which demonstrably discriminates or silently tolerates discrimination imposed by higher authorities sends a devastating message. Do as I say but not as I do. No message is more corrosive, especially for teenagers.

As soon as we honestly focus on the "curriculum" provided by the school's daily functioning, we get into a nest of particulars. Morality is not "achieved," like the soccer trophies or the essay contest certificates which stuff the glass cases in the school's front hall. The state of a school's goodness is far more fluid. It depends on what each person brings into the community each year – indeed, every day. A school is praiseworthy if inside every single head – adult and child, producer and consumer – there is a clear reference to principle in every decision and a determination to do the best thing. This is an active process. We are forced to shift from nouns to verbs.

Of course, every school needs its nouns; and even its "no-nos." No violence, no theft. No absences. It also needs the processes – the institutional habits – that emerge when those strictures appear to be violated. The verbs emerge from these processes. "No violence" as a rule is clear until an ambiguous shoving situation arises. "No theft" as a rule enters a fog when someone "borrowed" a book rather than blatantly stole it. Valuing personal credibility collapses when students are shuffled every hour from one class to another, the majority of them effectively anonymous.

The heart of it all, in school and beyond school, is thinking about the practical meaning of absolutes. Such thinking does not necessarily weaken those absolutes. Rather, it deepens them. Civilized people are in the habit of thinking about the reasons for and the consequences of actions, and acting on that thought. All this takes time, a willingness to struggle, and a commitment to involve students in that endeavor. It is crucial for a faculty to make the time to consider – again with the students – the routines of a school, why they are needed, and what they tell us about what is more or less principled, what they signify about respect for truth, for differences and for fairness.

## IS TEACHING A GIFT?

By Gabriel Moran

Plato's Apology is the drama of Socrates on trial for being a corrupter of youth. Socrates' defense before the court is that he is not a teacher and he has no disciples. He contrasts himself with the Sophists who were the "professional" teachers of the time and whom he considers frauds. They claimed to be able to teach the highest wisdom, that is, knowledge of the good life. Socrates says he possesses no such knowledge and so he cannot be a teacher. But then he slyly adds: if I did have such knowledge then I could charge the modest fee that Evenus does. Actually, the fee charged by Evenus and the other Sophists was very sizeable. Socrates was being ironic about the amount of money involved.

It has long been debated whether Socrates is claiming that he is not a teacher or whether he is saying that being the opposite of the Sophists he is the true teacher. What is clear is that Socrates considers the practice of charging money for teaching to be proof that the supposed teacher is a fraud. He thinks that anyone who offers to teach the good life for a fee will pander to the student, saying what the student wants to hear. The supposed teacher will be anxious to keep the customers coming back. Since Socrates charges no money for what he does, he can challenge peoples' opinions and be hard on their inconsistencies. He makes no claim to deliver the truth.

Socrates' defense did not work. Perhaps his irony was too subtle for the court. He was, in fact, inventing the modern sense of "irony." Before Socrates, irony simply meant deception and lying. In Socrates usage, irony came to mean saying one thing while playfully suggesting that something else – perhaps the very opposite – is true. But on the matter of accepting money, Socrates clearly thinks that the money corrupts the process of teaching-learning. If teaching is the offering of a gift, how could one possibly charge money for it? Expecting to be paid for a gift is proof it is not a gift.

For professional teachers in today's schools, Plato's contrast is a continuing, if unarticulated, crisis. It was considered a scandal in the twelfth century when teachers began to be paid for teaching. That fact is dismissed with a smile today but it remains a conflict seldom discussed. Is teaching the selling of a commodity to the few who can pay the price or is teaching the offering of a gift that the learner receives because the teacher is trustworthy?

Plato's dialogue Protagoras is about a leading Sophist with that name, who carries on a vigorous debate with Socrates. I find Protagoras more helpful than Socrates in thinking about teaching. Protagoras' starting point is that everyone in a community is a teacher. As soon as the child understands the spoken word, the mother, the nurse and others teach the child through stories. Later, when the child masters the written word, the great works of poetry become the teacher. Protagoras points out that the law is a teacher for all of us throughout our lives.

Plato has Socrates argue that becoming a good citizen is not teachable. Otherwise, a great man such as Pericles would be able to bestow virtue on his son (who apparently did not turn out so good). Protagoras' answer to that paradox starts out from the right image of teaching but ends in a self-serving claim that undermines his valuable insights. That is, he returns to the root of all teaching with imagery taken from farming, husbandry and medicine. How does a teacher teach? It is similar to the way a farmer cares for crops. The farmer has to take account of the physical conditions for this particular crop. He or she has to apply help at the right moment in the right way. Protagoras says that manure applied to the root is helpful; on the sprout it causes harm.

This agricultural metaphor could be played out in great detail but the main idea is that teaching begins with a teacher changing the physical conditions and bodily shape of the learner, waiting upon a response. Throughout history other writers have picked up on this metaphor of human growth being similar to the growth of a plant or tree. What is often overlooked, however, is that writers, such as Comenius and Rousseau, distinguish between the growth of a wild tree that receives no attention and the cultivation of a tree that produces abundant fruit. .

Of course, it can still be objected that cultivating a plant is not an adequate image of human teaching. Nevertheless, when helped by images from husbandry and medicine, it is better than many assumed alternatives. The common seventeenth-century metaphor – writing on a blank slate – is still with us and is to blame for many rebellions against teaching.

Caring for a plant or an animal can involve specialists. But the human race could not have survived without the millions of people, especially parents, who learn on their feet how to do these things. Children learn from their parents, who learn from their parents. Fathers have always taught their trade to their sons, to the extent that they were able. Often the boy (and sometimes the girl) was sent to another family to learn the trade better.

Protagoras says: "You are spoiled, Socrates, because all are teachers of virtue, insofar as each is able and none is apparent to you. Well, just as if you should inquire who is teacher of Greek no single one would be apparent." His example of the teaching-learning of Greek is a telling one. To the question of who teaches the child to speak, two answers are possible: no one teaches or everyone and everything in the environment teaches. The second answer is more persuasive in that little Germans learn to speak German, but French children speak French.

Where Protagoras undermines his case and almost destroys his reputation in history is when, after rightly pointing out that every teacher is limited in what she or he can teach, he says there is a need for individuals to specialize in an area. Protagoras then claims that "I am one of those who can bring an advance toward virtue and I am therefore worthy of the fee that I charge." There are two serious

mistakes in his statement. No teacher can guarantee bringing about an advance toward virtue. Advances in virtue come in large part by how potential learners respond to the example of virtuous people. That process is not under the direct control of a teacher. In fact, if a teacher tries to be an example of virtue, that often gets in the way of teaching-learning.

There is still a role for verbal instruction but it can only contribute indirectly to a learner becoming virtuous. Academic instruction will not make an evil person become a good person. It can make a person already seeking to lead a good life be better equipped for the search. That is what Aristotle claimed for his course on Ethics; Protagoras should not have claimed more. Protagoras' certainty that he could bring about an "advance toward virtue" is his justification for charging a (large) fee for his service. This direct, causal connection, as Socrates saw, destroys the idea of teaching as a gift. It calls into question the trustworthiness of the teacher and hurts the trust that is needed in the teacher-learner relation.

How then stand contemporary professional teachers? Is the gift character of their teaching destroyed by the fact that they are paid for what they do? It cannot be denied that many sullen children sitting in classrooms do not experience teaching as a gift they are asked to freely accept. There is obvious coercion in a young person being legally required to be in school until the age of sixteen. Even college students may feel coerced while their parents are paying \$35,000 or more for their children's privilege of attending a famous university. In contrast to the 1930s when one out of ten students was grateful for the chance to be in a college classroom, today's college student may experience the ritual as a necessary and coerced requirement for getting a good job.

The whole system could use more built-in choices so as to emphasize that most classroom instructors are still offering a gift, trying their best to convince students that learning is a good in itself. Unfortunately, the educational system has often responded to student rebellion and/or boredom by letting students choose whatever they think they want to study, making learning entertaining and easy, and inflating grades to keep everyone contented. Much of this sloppy reform reflects an assumption that teaching-learning is just one more example of market exchange. The teacher is seen as an entrepreneur with something to sell; the pupil who may start out with naïve enthusiasm learns to play the system and get the best goods for the lowest expenditure of resources.

The best educational reforms go in the opposite direction, resisting the capitalist ethos in this area of life. At the moment of teaching-learning, a contractual relation of money needs to be blocked out. The teacher has a gift to offer and its acceptance requires disciplined effort. Yes, money surrounds the relation but it need not be the controlling factor.

Schools, including universities, used to provide a buffer zone to allow teachers and students to carry out their respective roles. The teacher receives money

from the institution, not from the students. The institution does have to raise money but to varying degrees the money comes from many places besides student tuitions. Likewise, the teacher's salary is only a part of the institution's spending which includes many other items. There are "universities" today that have no campus, no library, no social services; their advertising pitch is send us money and with little effort and no obvious teachers you can get a degree.

Even at real universities, graduate schools list their tuition by so many dollars per credit. I have often wondered what the effect would be if professors stood at the door and collected one-fifteenth of the course tuition each week. It might shake up some lazy professors who waste precious time if the students were acutely aware of paying up to three dollars a minute. Overall, however, it would be the last drastic reduction of the teacher-learner relation to buying a product. Students do not pay for so many minutes. The per-credit tuition is presumably for many other services than the two hours in the classroom each week.

The practice of stating undergraduate tuition as one flat fee creates a better buffer zone. It also hides an astounding waste in the way universities operate. Schools, including universities, ought not to be judged on their economic efficiency but that can be a temptation to extravagance and waste that are not part of the protection of teaching as a gift offering. The average salary of a school teacher in the United States is \$46,000 which does not suggest that the waste is in extravagant salaries. Some university professors are overpaid but the bulk of teaching is done by people who are just struggling to get along financially.

In summary, Socrates' contention that teaching-learning should not be a financial contract is surely the right principle then and now. But Protagoras was also right in pointing out that most teaching-learning is indeed a gift, outside the seller-buyer world. However, there is a place for specialized teachers who cannot avoid financial considerations. In our day, it is more obvious than ever that if there are to be teachers of chemical engineering, human sciences, advanced mathematics or medieval English literature, they need money both to prepare for the work and to continue doing the work well.

The tax-supported school is an admirable idea in which the whole community supports specialized teaching. There is also room for another kind of school in which colleagues support one another. In a university, courses on Chinese literature or Muslim mysticism that have tiny enrollments are supported by other courses on contemporary social trends or the twentieth-century novel. That is what a university is, a place that protects what is important but unfashionable learning against the cruel demands of the market. Universities today may be tending to pay teachers by how many students they attract (and whether they get good student evaluations) and canceling all but the best-selling courses. If that trend continues, we would not have learned much in the 2400 years since Plato warned about the terrible results of converting teaching from a gift offering to commodity exchange.