



Developmental Levels of the Teacher: *Switchbacks up the Mountainside*¹

Ted Ward

Introduction

Ted Ward challenges us to reflect on our own teaching style by writing of three levels of development of teachers. Popularly, this essay was titled *Switchbacks Up the Mountainside*.

Level 1: The tendency to see teaching as purely content oriented.

Level 2: The teacher or facilitator moves towards an approach which takes into account the needs of the learner. In this way learners who might ordinarily be uninterested will now become involved. Emphasis is put on how to facilitate so that students' needs and interests are met in a way which also gives them the content of the course.

Level 3: Beyond merely satisfying the needs of the learners and giving them information, this last level fully involves the learner and teacher together in the development process. A shared form of development is created, with both the learners' and teachers' needs being taken in to account.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How closely does this model of the development levels of teaching coincide with your own experience in training others? During your first training responsibility, how did you define "teaching" and "learning"?
2. Where are you now in terms of the three levels? What is your new focus and role?
3. What factors helped you change and make the transition to new levels? Describe your own "turning of the corner".
4. Where are you headed now in terms of development as a trainer or enhancer of growth?

Developmental Levels of the Teacher

Who can deny that the experience of teaching tends to change the teacher? For any sort of a teacher, the rich variety of circumstances and the unpredictable encounters with people encourage continual development.

Reflecting on my own career as a teacher, I see changes that fall into a pattern. This pattern is not unique to me. Through many professional and personal experiences with other educators, I have discovered that there is a predictable series of stages through which teachers develop. (To be fair

¹ Ted Ward. Developmental Levels of the Teacher. In *Nonformal Education: Reflections on the First Dozen Years*. Unpublished manuscript edited by Ted Ward, S. Joseph Levine, Dick Crespo, and Lynn Joesting. Michigan State University, 1984. This essay relates especially to nonformal education in the conscientization and community development mode. The relationship between teacher and learner—indeed, the relationships among all those in a learning community are considered as a set of levels or stages.

about it, I am acknowledging both the subjectivity of these observations and the development presuppositions that cause me to interpret the data the way that I do.)

Developmentalists tend to see growth and development in stages. We describe each stage of development and then look for evidences of the conditions that accompany the transformation from stage to stage. Developmentalists assume that development is a continual process, in the sense that it is a matter of lifelong change; but we also assume that certain “milestones” represent fundamental transformations. In the physical realm, these milestones are obvious, and the stages they herald are substantially different from one to the next—consider puberty for example.

Because of the developmentalist’s commitment to holism—all aspects of life influence and are bound up with each other—the clear evidence of physical stages would be a sufficient basis to argue that other aspects of life’s development would also be fulfilled in stages. This assumption underlies the wide variety of stage-oriented hypotheses and theory now binding together the literature of human development. Sheehy’s *Passages*² has brought many newcomers into contact with this literature. Its traditions are substantial: Ilg et al. stages of physical and emotional development;³ Erikson’s stages of psycho-social development;⁴ Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (with its developmental implications);⁵ Piaget’s stages of intellectual development;⁶ Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning;⁷ and Fowler’s stages of faith development.⁸

Teacher Orientation: Level 1

For many, the original motivation to become a teacher arises out of the love of a particular subject matter, content area, or skill. A youthful love of science motivates toward a career as a science teacher. For me, it was a deep love of music that attracted me into preparation for a career as a music teacher. Over many years as a professional educator, I have encountered many young educators who describe their interest in teaching as a concern to share the values of a particular body of knowledge, skills, or aesthetics. To hypothesize this *love of content* as the first level of teacher orientation seems well enough grounded in experience and observation.

If this is the first level of orientation, the motive is to bring valued content into the lives of others. A concern for the learner is present, of course, but the focus of the teacher is in the content.

The frustrations that the Level 1 teacher feels most deeply arise from the learner’s disinterest or lack of appreciation of the content. Because the teacher succeeds or fails in terms of the role of “bringer of content” the learner has more control over the situation than most “bringers” are able cope with. It is not unusual for Level 1 teachers to withdraw in frustration, convinced that “today’s students” are inferior or hopelessly distracted.

² Gail Sheehy. *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*. (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1976).

³ Frances L. Ilg, Louise Bates Ames and Sidney M. Baker. *Child Behavior: The Classic Child Care Manual from the Gesell Institute of Human Development (revised edition)*. (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 1955)

⁴ Erik Erikson. *Childhood and Society*. (New York, NY: Norton, 1950).

⁵ Abraham Maslow. A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*. 50 (4) July 1943: 370-396

⁶ Jean Piaget. *Origins of Intelligence in the Child*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1936).

⁷ Lawrence Kohlberg and R. Mayer. Development as the Aim of Education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 42, 1972: 449–496.

⁸ James Fowler. *Stages of Faith*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper&Row, 1981)

Level 1 teachers most readily succeed with students whose interest in the content, like the teacher's before them, can be fanned into a flame of enthusiasm. Level 1 teachers are thus apt to sharply divide students into two categories: good (highly motivated) and bad (lacking motivation).

Teacher Orientation, Level 2

Not every teacher reacts negatively to the apparent disinterest of students. Some, fortunately, come to see the sour signals from their students as a symptom of a deeper problem. As teachers gain experience, this deeper problem can be recognized and identified: the students, individually and as a group, have needs that the content is not meeting. Sometimes the needs of students are so fundamental to personal identity and self-worth that they are virtually blinded to the learning environment. What the teacher values and what the students need are miles apart. Sometimes the wise teacher finds at least a partial solution by helping the student see more clearly the potential worth of the content. More often than not, this strategy doesn't work.

When the teacher begins to take the *importance of the needs of learners* as seriously as the value of the content, the teacher turns a corner. A new level of development has been reached. Without discarding the earlier commitment to content, the teacher turns toward a new focus and adopts a new role. As Piaget has shown in reference to intellectual development, there is a "vertical integration". The importance of content is not rejected but it is subordinated to a higher value: the facilitation of the meeting of needs.

As teachers turn this corner and strike off on the Level 2 orientation, many are inclined to look over their left shoulder to observe with disdain their fellow-teachers who are still "trapped" in the preoccupation with content. Maturity on Level 2 is a matter of getting beyond this sense of superiority, recognizing with proper and humble appreciation that facilitation of the meeting of needs always involves the learner's encounter with appropriate content. For the Level 2 teacher, content cannot be narrowly defined disciplines and the recall-level learning that sometimes satisfies Level 1 teachers; but content is there nonetheless. Meeting needs always involves learning, and learning always involves learning *something*.

Sooner or later a new concern emerges in the developing of the Level 2 teacher. The limitations of Level 2 become a burden, and what had seemed so satisfying begins to go sour. The very process of facilitation proves to be inadequate for the more elegant and humane relationship as the fellow-learner that the maturing teacher craves. Level 2, with its emphasis on needs and facilitation of the meeting of those needs, creates in the teacher a compulsion to know—to be knowledgeable about the learner's needs and to know how to meet those needs. In time, the teacher tires of investing so much time and effort in diagnosing and prescribing. The limitation of Level 2 is that it does not allow for the closing of the social distance between the teacher and the learner.

Teacher Orientation, Level 3

Now and then we encounter teachers who have turned a second corner. A third level of development has begun. When this happens, unfortunately, such a teacher may leave the ranks of educators. Indeed, many institutional programs of education do not allow for this third level. When properly understood, this level is also a matter of vertical integration. It rejects neither the importance of content nor the importance of learners' needs; but it represents a different sort of relationship—one in which the teacher becomes a full participant in the life-walk of the learner. Such a relationship emerges from the new orientation toward communal development. By "toward communal development" I intend no suggestion of a cultish or political sort; nor do I intend to coin particular

jargon. Instead, the words are combined to indicate a commitment to *learning together* as a social process—a learning community. And they represent the consciousness of a stage beyond needs—beyond the action of the teacher to cause change in students—a stage in which the common ground sharing of teacher needs and learner needs become the basis for fulfillment of human development. In this larger fulfillment, all aspects of development are important: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and through it all, spiritual development.

The teacher in Level 3 is a participant in the learner's development process. Equally important, the relationship is seen as part of the teacher's continuing development as well. Frances O'Gorman has described the teacher's role in Level 3 as "accompanying"—no longer doing something *to* the learner, but becoming part of the learner's ongoing development. Such a relationship can be tough minded and demanding, but it always has a commitment to shared values and ideals at its core. One remembers the great teacher from Nazareth whose learners were invited into three years of a communal development through learning and service. They experienced life together—in cities, villages, and in the quiet of mountains and the sea. They learned from experiences shared. The teacher not only affected his disciples but, in turn, was affected by them.

The difficulty of recruiting and training teachers for nonformal education arises in no small measure from the need for Level 2 and Level 3 stages of development. So many beginners—teachers and learners—are still in Level 1. Training can add skills to the teacher, but training doesn't make much difference in the relationships and in the teacher's self-perception. Development takes time.