



Master: *A Reflection on the Master Teacher*¹

Ted Ward and Lois McKinney

He faced a tough training problem. Though his full-time students seemed eager to learn, they were barely literate and showed little academic promise. Several were backward villagers; one was a civil service misfit; a few were in the fishing business.

In his foresight, he feared for that day, three years ahead, when one of his better students would abandon him at a crucial moment, another would trade in everything he had learned for the first cash offer to come along, and a third would remain so unconvinced of the basic content of the course that he would defy the pressure of his fellow learners to hold onto his self-image as a skeptic.

Three Years

He knew he had only three years to accomplish his objectives. These unlikely learners had to be made ready to stand alone as the front-runners of a whole new culture. But despite his difficult training task, this teacher didn't build a classroom building or a dormitory. He didn't line up the chairs in rows. He didn't pull his students into three years of cloistered intellectualism. Instead, he headed for the countryside. He held seminars by the lake and in the mountains. They ate together, talked together, visited cities, and put their new learning into action. He carried on detailed debriefings of their field experience.

He lectured, and made his lectures meaningful through issue-oriented seminars. His teaching materials weren't elaborate, but he did know how to relate to his students' experience. He used many illustrations, all drawn from life as it was lived in that land and at that time.

He didn't "grade on the curve." Rather, he attempted to bring each student to a mastery of the learning. He was, of course, rather emotional and thus given to almost embarrassing outbursts of positive reinforcement when a learner showed some keen insight. His scolding, however, bordered on harshness, especially when the competitive behavior of his students threatened the quality of their learning experience. Those who knew him best were most aware of the depth of his emotion. They said that he was known to cry privately when he couldn't get through to people.

In retrospect, we might wonder about this teacher's competency. One of his students ended up a suicide; and as a teacher, he continually displayed characteristics that many would consider flaws. For one thing, he was excessively objectives-oriented—and wouldn't be diverted. He passed up, for example, several opportunities to give the corrupt political system a slap, and seemed more concerned about long-term social change than meeting the contemporary financial needs of the impoverished. (In fairness, we might note that he and his students were never unresponsive to those who came to them with physical needs. Their responses, though, were so unorthodox as to seem "other-worldly.")

Indictment

These are only details. His biggest failure, if it can be called that, was in not communicating to his followers across the centuries the validity of his nonformal ways and unorthodox means of teaching. Although this teacher's primary objectives were accomplished in such a way that his long-range

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objectives still affect human life, the hand of history writes one severe indictment: not many generations after those three years of intensive nonformal teaching, those who called themselves by his name began to construct elaborate educational institutions.

Somehow these well-intentioned followers lost sight of the fact that the master teacher had avoided the Greek approach to education, so widely known and well respected in his day. His concept of curriculum, classes, and teaching leaned toward the functional and away from the classical.

Though he conformed to some of the key expectations about what a teacher should be and do (they recognized him as “rabbi” and “teacher”), and though his relationship with his learners was that of master to disciple, he needed none of the social-distance of the formal school. He needed no lectern; his course outlines were in his head; he could convert any place and time into an instructional experience; he socialized freely with his students and even insisted on taking them along on his dinner invitations.

He liked to talk about issues and problems. He showed a jolly temperament, occasionally using a touch of humor to soften a barbed insight.

Always, he rejected formal status. When great crowds came to him, he responded to their interests and needs with no regard to formal schedules or even the protocol of the day. He dealt graciously with the unruly, even when the ceiling was torn away over his head. He paid no heed to sarcastic remarks about his hometown and was content to be called a small-town boy and the son of a carpenter.

His first students carried on discussions and lectures in the marketplaces, in the established temples and synagogues (though their religious centers were apparently in homes.) They did not depart significantly from the models of nonformal education he had established. In fact, they brought such vigor and enthusiasm to their dialogues that the power behind the formal establishments of government, education, and religion were seriously threatened—to the point of retaliation.

Doing as the Romans

Since then, there has developed a long history of schools and schooling in his name. Indeed, the established church, through its centuries of favor at the court in the Western world—from Constantine to the British Empire—has shown more regard for “doing as the Romans do” than for doing as the master teacher had done.

As the futility of human cleverness comes home once again, and the elaborate schemes for reforming the world through literacy and schooling seem less promising than ever, we’re again reminded of the approach of the master teacher. Humanists have re-discovered it and grope to make it work. Religionists call it discipleship training. Within the church, it is the sort of shared experience that develops saintliness. But the basic idea is strangely simple: teachers who live what they teach, deeply in love with those with whom they share a way of life.

This is education at its best.