

U.S. universities give teaching 'dirty end of the stick'

This article originally appeared in the April 19, 1963 *Threshold*, as part of a continuing series of essays by faculty members on academic issues of their own choosing.

Dr. Mackey's comments are of particular relevance this year, in the light of the nationwide debate over the proper relationship between teaching and research on the American campus.

Moreover, they offer interesting comparisons to the remarks of Professor Clark Read which appeared in these pages last week.

We are indebted to Professor Mackey for permission to reprint his article.—Ed.

By LOUIS H. MACKEY

"Cast thy bread upon the waters," says the Preacher, "for thou shalt find it after many days." Soggy, one suspects, and unfit to eat. I should like to drop a few crumbs of my own into the umbered currents of the controversy: teaching vs. research. I am prepared to relish them in whatever form they return.

In the nature of things there is no more opposition between teaching and research than there is between science and religion. But as the men in black and the men in white have from time to time put up a science-religion battle, so the student and the study have often been set at enmity by their respective handlers.

Neither research nor pedagogics is an end in itself. The aim of teaching is the communication of old knowledge in a way that will inspire (among other things) the discovery of new. The aim of research is the discovery of new knowledge in a way that will expand and correct the old.

Eternal Verities Safe

The eternal verities are out of danger. What is contested is the grubby little facts. And the one fact, grubby but not so little, which I am mulling over is the fact that the teaching function is getting the dirty end of the stick. In practice. And in theory. In the American university. Present company not excepted.

The eagle of the American university comes evermore home to roost on the assumption that the instigation, organization, and promotion of research is the one end to which all other activities, instruments, and persons are to be subordinated. And this is false. If the business of research is the uncovering of knowledge, then this must be added: Some knowledge, but not much, is intrinsically good. Most of it is only useful, either tributary to a larger understanding of self and world, or just plain silent-flush useful. Even that knowledge which is good-in-itself is not necessarily good-in-all-circumstances; the most sublime truth of religion may not be relevant to the problem at hand, and there are times when prayer would be grotesquely irrelevant. *Itaque magis in minimis.*

People, however, are ends. And while it cannot be denied that research serves people, neither can it be denied that teaching does the same, and rather more directly. Yet many universities, and all graduate schools, proceed from the axiom that all knowledge is inherently and absolutely good. The corollary of which is that teaching, since it produces little new information, but mostly just spreads the old stuff around, is a menial function. The consequences are legion: the teaching function of the university is demeaned in manifold ways in the persons of those who perform it and those who most obviously benefit from it. Undergraduate students and those faculty who are concerned with teaching them are set under the rubric "more." The "real" university is the *communio sanctorum* of research personnel and all their expensive appurtenances.

What accounts for this attitude? Many things, no doubt. But apart from the obvious fact that research is better-paid (if not more rewarding) and easier (students, being people, are such nuisances), there are three factors I would mention: the modern lack of a sense of tradition, a mistaken concept of 'profession,' and the strange but widespread notion that teaching cannot be evaluated while research can.

Teaching Misunderstood

In reverse order: it is argued that teaching cannot be evaluated and therefore cannot be valued. Research, it is implied, can be evaluated and is therefore appropriately rewarded. This contrast is nonsense. Teaching can be evaluated as adequately as research. Every department chairman knows (if he cares to) what kind of teaching job his staff is doing. He will, among other things, consult student opinion, and weigh it critically from the vantage of his years and experience.

If it be protested that a large element of personal judgment enters into this evaluation, I reply that a correspondingly large subjective element enters into the estimation of research—for I suppose no one is so naive as to think that the application of a micrometer to a stack of publications, or a majority vote of distinguished scholars, constitutes an evaluation of research. I have heard it said: it is easy enough to know the great teachers and the soporific ones, but the large group in the middle cannot be handily ranked. True, and the case is the same with research. I could at this moment name the few giants in philosophy, and the innumerable bits of dead wood. But I or anyone would be hard pressed to grade the moderately good people in between.

The Student's Strength

People who show an interest in undergraduate teaching are often met with this argument: teaching is all very well, even necessary, but one should not circulate too exclusively among undergraduates; one should publish in order to test his thought in the crucible of the opinions of his peers. (Incidentally, the last of my peers who told me this admitted that he had not read anything I had published.)

This argument has a powerful appeal: it suggests that the undergraduate teacher is playing at wooden swords with the kids when he should be out swinging steel with the jocks. Nevertheless, it is specious. Of course one should communicate with his equals. But it is not the case that undergraduate teaching is debilitating. The reverse is often the case. Much of the contents of any scholarly journal is an exercise in intellectual self-abuse, about as productive and as entertaining as its physical counterpart. Whereas little is so strenuous, so invigorating, and so exciting as teaching—provided one does a job of it. I have never found that the professional naivete of the undergraduate hurt his intelligence or his philosophical perspicacity.

It is curious, by the way, that universities do not officially recognize teaching as a profession. Physics is a profession, as are engineering, sociology, English, French, German, and even (on occasions) "poet" and "artist." But teaching is not. I call this curious, because it seems to me that teaching is the only profession I have. Philosophy I regard as my vocation—and

if that sounds pretentious, all I mean by it is that I should have to "philosophize" even if there were no people around to teach, even if (professionally) I dug ditches or ran a lathe. Not that I think of teaching only as a profession: I would make a nuisance of myself talking even if I weren't paid to do so. But the fact is that I do make my living teaching, and that teaching, therefore, is at least my profession.

Finally, tradition: I suspect that much of the preference given to research is a product of the widespread lack of a sense of tradition in academia. The contemporary notion of research is of rather recent origin. Its prototypes are the laboratory of the natural scientist (a modern invention) and the study of the *geisteswissenschaftliche* scholar (a nineteenth-century German parody on the laboratory). In fine, research in the modern sense knows no tradition, only frontiers. Teaching presupposes a tradition to be critically transmitted, enhanced, and enlarged. The contemporary lack of a sense of tradition issues naturally in a failure to understand the importance of teaching. It is noteworthy that the partisans of research regard graduate teaching as the only "real" teaching, for here one is always at the frontiers, i.e., one is helping future professionals work through bibliographies of current and past research so that in their own bibliographies-to-be they may not—a fate equivalent to scholarly death—repeat any work that is already done. Nothing could be less interesting to the researcher than the rediscovery for himself of an ancient or even eternal truth.

The Worth of the Past

Bernard of Chartres, in the twelfth century, said: "We are like dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants; we see more things than the ancients and things more distant, but this is due neither to the sharpness of our own sight nor the greatness of our own stature, but because we are raised and borne aloft on that giant mass." The twentieth century would simply reverse this: "Newton did very well for a man of his time and circumstances, but of course he couldn't have known, with his relatively crude techniques, etc., what we know now." Whatever justification there may be for this attitude in the sciences, it is not self-evident that this should be our stance toward the past and the pedagogues who try to keep its memory green.

It may be objected: but if no one ever published, the tradition would be slim indeed. True. I am not saying that no one should publish. Only that teaching is every bit as important as research and publication, and should not be downwind as if it weren't.

Socrates was only a teacher. That he happened to be Plato's teacher is our good luck. But his worth as a teacher is not equivalent to his effect on Plato's publication list. Teaching is not an adjunct or a stimulus for publication. The majority of my students will never publish a line: which does not decrease one bit the value of introducing them into the richness of the past and into the excitement and rigor of thinking of that past. People are ends; and there is something to be said for helping them to achieve an understanding of themselves and the cosmos even if it never revolutionizes veterinary science nor adorns the uncut pages of a learned journal.

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I am aware that all this is one-sided, biased, unfair. In the long run I am in favor of objectivity and fair-mindedness in all things. But the controversy between teaching and research is a short-run fuss, which exists in fact though it shouldn't in principle. And before a balanced discussion of principles can take place—first you have to get their attention.
