

GOOD TEACHING— MACRORIE STYLE

A REVIEW ESSAY

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Kenneth Macrorie has had another good idea. He has brought down to cases the notions about teaching he has been arguing in *Uptaught* (1970), *Telling Writing* (1970), *Searching Writing* (1980), and other books. In *20 Teachers* he enables (he likes that word) some good teachers to describe, more or less in their own words, what they do in their classrooms. Professor Macrorie's idea of good teaching is sound and valuable. It is also narrow, and therefore the teachers he has chosen tell pretty much the same story. But the settings and events of their teaching vary because they teach different subjects and skills: woodworking, science, photography, acting, physical education, writing, reading, mathematics, literature, social studies: one is an army sergeant, and another is James Britton. All are in his book because they get their students to do "good works." In the introduction he defines "good work" as work that students value, "that counts for them, their fellow learners, and persons outside the classroom" (xi). By the end of the book the phrase can be more accurately used to name not what students make in their learning but rather the kind of work they put into it. That is really what this book is about: how good teachers, or enablers, as Macrorie wants to call them, make learners active in their educations by giving them chances to help decide how they will learn, and by inviting them to consider what the knowledge and abilities they are adding to themselves have to do with what they already know, are, and can do.

So, for example, Sam Bush, who has taught woodworking at the Hill School and now at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts, requires his students to decide what they want to make and to work out in their drawings or in the wood the rules of measure and design he refuses to pronounce for them at the beginning. Like some of the others in *20 Teachers*, he exercises more control than perhaps his students know. Once "I see what he's after" (4) he starts to ask questions to shape and specify a student's choice, and early on he makes a judgment that profoundly affects how things are going to turn out: "the drawing period is the hiatus in which I decide how

much good wood I'm going to invest in this guy" (5). "The aim," however, "is to get kids to make their education rather than receive it" (10).

That aim is universal in *20 Teachers*. It is usually founded on an explicit trust that students will learn by making their own ways through a problem, or that they already know enough to say something honest and interesting about it. In a mathematics class at Bowdoin, Bill Barker puts a problem on the board and then moves around the room while small groups work together to try to solve it. "The hardest thing is to hold back and let them struggle" (62). In her elementary school classroom in Michigan, Vera Milz gets children to write their own books and doesn't worry about immediately correcting letter formation, spelling, and syntax. "I found absolutely no evidence that children stayed with the same mistakes" (87). David Curl, who teaches photography at Western Michigan, tells his students, "I can teach you about photography, but I can't teach you to *become* a photographer. You have to learn by making mistakes and bringing the work to class to discuss it." (95). At one point in his class Don Campbell, a high-school physics teacher, gives his students a list of problems they must solve. They can't solve only some of them and settle for a C or a D; they must keep working at the problems until they solve them all. ("Well, what if my friend helps me? . . . "I don't care if you stand on your head if that's how you learn to do them, as long as you get them right") (142). Steven Urkowitz, who teaches literature in New York colleges, and Carol Elliott, who taught acting to writing teachers at Bread Loaf, give students a passage, or ask them to find one for themselves, and figure out how to interpret it. "You're on your own as a reader," Urkowitz tells them. "I'll try to help, but it's like learning to ride a bike. You just do it" (104).

Of course, you don't just do it. Like Sam Bush and Don Campbell, Urkowitz has not only provided the bicycle--it is his requirement that the passage be found in Euripides, say--but he is running along behind guiding and steadying the ride. The point is to arrange the event as artfully as one can so that much of the initiative and substance of the learning comes from the learners. Doreen Macfarlane-Housel, a high-school teacher of literature, tries to wean her students "from the authority of books and articles about poetry and begin to respond to the works themselves" (32). "I'm not saying, 'Because you feel this way, therefore it's true,' but 'If you've had this experience, or seen someone else in the family, or wherever, have it, that's as valid as some other expert coming along and saying, "Well, I've witnessed this too" ' " (38).

The principles of this kind of teaching are familiar to most teachers of writing. So are many of its practices: small groups, personal responses, journals and reading logs, free writing, writing with the students, the publication of student writing, and other tactics

that encourage students to work it out for themselves, to discover or ground the general in the particular, and to possess and be proud of what they have learned or made. Macrorie sums up the tenets of this kind of teaching in a short essay at the end of the book, "What Enablers Do."

They all hold high expectations for learners. They arrange the learning place so that people draw fully on their present powers and begin to do good works. They support and encourage rather than punish. They ask learners to take chances that sometimes result in failure, and to use their mistakes productively. They nurture an environment of truth-telling that puts learners at ease while they are experiencing the excitement and unease of challenge. (229)

Those are generous feelings and purposes. Teachers of writing who already share them will be fortified in their conviction by the demonstrations of this book. Teachers as yet unpersuaded will have much to think upon if they consider the enthusiasm and claims of success set out by teachers at every level and of different subjects. And teachers of writing who know something about the kind of teaching described in *20 Teachers*, but who have been suspicious of it as loosely controlled, improvisational, and given to indulgent standards of judgment, will be reassured by how carefully these teachers have thought through their teaching, and by the insistence of many of them they must, in Macrorie's words, "test the work of the classroom against work in the world outside" (232).

I accept the principles and use many of the practices described in *20 Teachers*. Although I was heartened by evidence of its presence and force in different classrooms, I was also put off by an enthusiasm that sometimes is close to zealotry, a single-minded conviction of being in the right that puts everybody else in the wrong. I was disappointed too by most of the student writing in the book. Although many of these twenty teachers, and Macrorie himself, talk about themselves as if they are a beleaguered (and saving) remnant, in fact the most powerful and esteemed books and essays about the teaching of writing in the past ten or fifteen years have promoted teaching like that described in this book. Certainly the number of such teachers has greatly increased in the past decade. For all my agreement and sympathy, the student writing in the book made me ask, What's it all come to?, and the tone of zealous advocacy made me wonder, Where do we go from here?

Let me explain, beginning with my response to some of the students' writing. One day an elementary-school student was hanging back from the activities of the class. Her teacher asked her if she was having a bad day. She said yes, and the teacher suggested that she write about it.

Today when I whs eating my sadwich one of my sadiwchs fell on the grownd. And Jenny and ilsibith siad ew. And I siad it was it fanny. And when I was playing freez tag. And sarah was it and I said tims she taged me. And when she taged me it was clos to my arm it skrap me and it hert. And avre persun tught me. And I din'd like it (157)

That is a good piece of teaching, and a good piece of writing, maybe the most memorable in the book. What disquiets me is that six or eight grades up the line students seem to be writing the same paper with a larger vocabulary but diminished variety and pungency. This is the last paragraph of a paper by a high-school student.

I was standing talking to Bobby. I think he was trying to calm me down, but it wasn't helping, knowing my friend was hurt and they were taking her to the hospital and I was too scared to go with them. Then all of a sudden, I don't know what happened, but I just put it in my mind that Ame was going to the hospital and she might need me, and I was just going to have to get over my fear of them. But when I turned around to get in the car, it was gone, and so was everyone else that was going to the hospital. (17)

I am not here renewing the complaint, familiar to Professor Macrorie, that writing about personal experience confines students to narrative forms and small climaxes of self-discovery. Another high-school teacher gets quite sophisticated analyses by encouraging students to start with personal responses and to keep asking how poems elicit these feelings. She also gets:

His poems stimulate my mind, spark my imagination. I'm pretty sure that the emotion that I felt was excitement. After reading each poem I was forced to go back and read it again, and then I couldn't help but say, "Yeah!" He was so right. He had put into words things that I had contemplated once, as well as really great ideas of his own. (33)

My point is that these latter two pieces of writing are no better than that consistently received by high-school and college teachers who teach writing in ways Macrorie would call traditional--stipulated assignments and forms, a lot of correction, maybe some lectures and drill on topics like transitions and sentence variety. Even the best student writing in *20 Teachers* is less spirited and memorable than that of the best undergraduate papers I used to receive in the 1960s and early 70s, when I was one of those traditional writing teachers and my students had presumably come from pre-enlightened high-school

classrooms. The student writing in Macrorie's book, and the writing I read now of high-school and college students, suggest that there may even be a kind of neo-Engfish taking shape as students push a practiced vocabulary of self-discovery and personal response across the page. Like the students I see in my visits to high schools knocking out a week's journal entries at lunch on the day they are due.

The teachers in *20 Teachers* do not always look to the quality of their students' work to judge the effect of their teaching. "I think Kim showed some insight into herself in that paper, a turning point in her life" (17). Her teacher wrote about the author of the sketch about the accident whose last paragraph I have quoted above. The teacher of the student who wrote the paragraph on poetry was pleased because in it she showed that she now valued her own responses ("Now we get to the stuff that really matters: what his poems do to me") (33). Such testimonies to the value of self-development run all through *20 Teachers*. Sam Bush says, "I tell them as often as possible that the release and development of these capacities--perseverance, imagination, courage, and decisiveness--are the value of the work and the point of the course" (5). "It's not for the science," one of Don Campbell's former students tells him while thanking him for the course. "It's because you taught me to be honest and to say what I observed" (147).

This point is explicit in a well-written account of an army sergeant by Professor Macrorie himself. John Sheffield is not really a teacher in the style that Macrorie admires. True, he first let the recruits make up their bunks sloppily. But then he came in and showed them the single right way to do it. True, he didn't holler at them to clean the barracks on Friday night. Macrorie neglects to note, or forgets, that Sheffield didn't have to holler. He had the whole coercive system of the military to get the work done; as I remember those Friday night GI parties, we cleaned the barracks not because tolerant sergeants released us into a love of the work, but because if we didn't pass inspection we didn't get to go to town on Saturday night. John Sheffield seems to have been a shrewd, loyal, entertaining man from whom the sheltered Ken Macrorie and his companions learned "to be more open in their judgment of other people with different backgrounds from theirs" (227). The lesson is valuable. But it has nothing to do with making a bunk or with much of the other peculiar business of being a soldier. Sheffield is like the writing teachers in *20 Teachers* whose students improve during their time with them--become more confident, more self-aware, happier in school--but who do not necessarily improve as writers any more than do students whose teachers in effect show them the right way to make their bunks and even occasionally holler at them.

The bias against such traditional teachers is the second reason the book troubles me. "I wish I had been in your class when I was a

kid," Macrorie says to one teacher. She answers, "I wish I had, too" (161). She is the good teacher who got the cranky girl to write about her bad day, but here her self-satisfied dismissal of other teachers makes her seem smug. This tone runs as a minor theme through much of *20 Teachers*. Sometimes it comes out as an absolutism that encourages overstatement: "I don't see any point in talking a lot about any other kind of writing," one teacher says in defense of her practice of asking students to write nothing but narratives of personal experience; "in [teaching] expository writing you never have to touch the human being" (57-58). Often it shows in the readiness of some of these teachers to tell anecdotes in which wrong-minded administrators and colleagues frustrate or belittle their work. Most distressingly, the tone takes over in an unfortunate "Open Letter about Schools" with which Macrorie closes his book. For Macrorie the lecture is a synecdoche of an authoritarian system that crimps and kills. "Do you lecture?" he asks a teacher. "Oh no . . . I would never do that" (137). Who would, or who would admit it, if the lecture were what Macrorie makes it to be in his "Open Letter." He excoriates it as the discourse of a priestly caste that imposes knowledge rather than inculcates learning. It is impersonal and rigid, requiring everyone to learn the same matter at the same pace; it is part of "The Lecture-Test-Grade System" that discourages and demeans those who can't or won't learn by regimen; in an astonishing burst of non-sequiturs, Macrorie argues that the cast of mind that says, "We have the word, will tell it to you, and examine you to see if you got it right" is responsible for "an atomic bomb that killed thousands of horrified Japanese, a people who excelled at physics, mathematics, and their applications" (236).

Alert and honest man that he is, Professor Macrorie provides matter that counters and complicates these moments of excited simplification. The best of these twenty teachers, to my mind, is Charles Van Riper, professor of speech therapy at Western Michigan. Van Riper is a specialist, an authority, a priest of his tribe; he literally wrote the book for his course in speech pathology. Reflecting in a splendid essay on an introductory course he is about to teach for the sixtieth time, he remembers that in 1936 the course enrolled six students. Now it never enrolls fewer than one hundred. So he lectures. He tries to learn the peculiar diversity of each semester's class by asking for written personal responses to some common readings and then selecting some students to talk with him alone or in groups. He has a wonderful repertoire of tricks in his lectures. He selects a student at random to tutor while the others look on and listen. He turns out the lights so that students can think about what he has just said and then asks them to tell him when the lights go on again. He assigns a paper in which students tell him something he doesn't know but should. Van Riper belongs in *20 Teachers* because of his

assumption that everybody can learn the knowledge he opens to them, his readiness to let people learn through mistakes, his deep concern that students value and use their learning. But he would also be at home in a book about the great traditional teachers of the generation that lectured to him when he was an undergraduate, the grand old men (mostly) of academic legend who made their knowledge interesting by theatrical displays of their fervent interest in it. Van Riper refers to "the evils of the mass teaching imposed on us" (118). That is all he has to say about that. He doesn't try to make a shelter within the system in which he can teach in ways he is proud to think of as alien to it. He adapts himself to the lecture, and the lecture to his style and purpose, so that he and his students can get on with their good work.

What the kind of teaching promoted in *20 Teachers* comes to, then, is a humane way to live in a classroom. I believe that students in such classrooms are likely to value the intellectual enterprise of school and to see themselves as participants in it. Nothing in Professor Macrorie's book, and nothing outside it either, persuades me that these students will learn to write more tellingly, or even as variously, as students who have been writing in traditional classrooms. Where we ought to go from here, therefore, in my opinion, is Professor Van Riper's way. Even if we could radically change the structures of schooling and the ways of its teachers, perhaps we shouldn't--maybe something is going on, some good work being done, in traditional classrooms that we ought not to lose. Professor Macrorie might agree. After he has vented his irritation at traditional schools in his "Open Letter," he imagines accommodations with them like that of Professor Van Riper. He hopes that its readers will pass his book on to teachers and say, "'Take what appeals to you and forget the rest, or the whole thing . . . I just thought you might be interested'" (250). Teachers of writing should be interested. Read in the tolerant, eclectic spirit Macrorie counsels at the very end, and with some skepticism about successes claimed in it, *20 Teachers* will give all teachers of writing some ideas, a few tactics, or maybe just a charge of cheerful energy to fit with and bolster those principles and habits of teaching they have learned to trust.

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