

Fitzwater Center Award

I want to thank the Fitzwater Center for this honor. It was very unexpected, and it has made me think about my development as a teacher. Somewhat like Kafka's prisoner awaiting trial, I have been thinking about what I did to deserve this.

One of my earliest lessons was from Ruth Ring, a colleague at Conval then and a teacher here at Franklin Pierce now. She said in response to an administrator's question about her curriculum, "I teach students, not curriculum." I thought that was clever, but, over time, I realized the wisdom in it. When we obsess on curriculum, it is all too easy to forget that the real product is the character and wisdom of our students.

In our schools today, content is king. Even our elementary schools, once a bastion of character building, cooperation and collaboration, have been forced to abandon anything that doesn't point towards the content of the tests their students will be taking, starting in the third grade.

The third grade! What I remember of the third grade is learning the taste of glue and feeding half my lunch to the mongrel dog who showed up at noon every day. Yet, our third graders now, some in tears, are introduced to tests designed to ask them questions they can't possibly answer. I'm willing to bet that more students get a perfect score on the college boards than on these third grade tests. By the time students get to high school, some of them fill in the answer sheet bubbles randomly, then spend the rest of the allotted time reading something they are really interested in. In our wisdom, we use the results of these tests to measure our success as educators.

How did we get here? All of our examples of great teaching from antiquity are based upon the development of character and wisdom. Socrates' tests were daily discussions on how one ought to live his life, on what should be the basis for decisions, and on how one could discern the nature of justice, the highest level of character.

Seneca told us that mankind was born for virtue, but not with it. We have to acquire it. And what is virtue but character. Montaigne wrote that we should be less concerned with how well filled our students' minds were, than how well formed their characters were.

Emerson believed that education was the accumulation of culture, that culture was measured by self-improvement, and that self-improvement was the development of character.

Yet, here we are, 170 years into our experiment with public education, and we have given ourselves over to facts, information and skills. Although we talk about it, and we have to get character hours for recertification, character is not our mission. We assume that our teachings of facts and skills will produce some wisdom and character, but for the most part we leave that to the family and the church, if indeed our students are lucky enough to be heavily influence by either.

Instead we measure how well filled our students' minds are. And if they are not well filled, we do everything we can to fill them, coercing them if necessary. Nothing worth learning can be memorized, yet we have embraced the fact-based curriculum.

Why then do we do this? Why our obsession with facts and information? Maybe because it is the easiest and safest to measure. In another era, we used to give "Citizenship grades," our closest attempt at measuring character. But now, we seemingly encourage students to demonstrate lack of character by giving them suspensions without consequences and alleviating the responsibility of their actions from them. To the least able to act with character and wisdom, our schools are a Peter Pan place to be.

Measuring content is so much easier. A quiz, a test, mostly objective, heaven forbid having to explain the "standards" of a subjective evaluation. We motor along, teachers carefully dispensing information to students, and parents happy that, somehow, their children are doing much better than they did in high school. And that is not really surprising, because that is what many of them demand of school—that their students do well, no matter their intellect or character. And by nursing those students along, and concentrating on easy-to-measure content, we make sure they do well.

In his 1990 Acceptance speech for New York City Teacher of the Year, John Taylor Gatto complained about the abstract logic of our schools. That somehow, despite dedicated and caring administrators, teachers and staff, our schools just didn't educate very well. Perhaps one of the reasons is that the experts on education are not seen as the people who educate. Despite my 31 years of teaching, I am not considered an expert on education, especially on important things—our governor is, our part-time legislators are, our congressmen are, some local citizens on the school board are, and most assuredly, most of the parents of most of the students I have taught are. And what I teach in my classes is guided by their expertise.

The refuge I have taken from the abstract logic of schooling has been my advisorship to the school newspaper and my courses in philosophy. As

advisor, I have been privileged to work with a long succession of students who ooze character and values. By definition, to be the editor of the student newspaper is to be responsible. The editor creates the paper and then puts it out to the public for evaluation. Nothing builds character more quickly than that. My editors volunteer their time and efforts, and they own the paper. I advise from afar, admiring their efforts and accomplishments, but making sure no one thinks they are mine.

In philosophy classes I am blessed by the fact that, educationally, I am off the grid. There are no state standards for philosophy, no content tests to pass to show I am doing a good job, no pressure from parents on what and how to teach, no colleagues with whom I must compromise. Because of this, I have come to accept Socrates' wisdom and set as my goal that students learn to know themselves. I use classical texts but assign reflective and personal reactions to the concepts. Their final exam is a paper describing what they believe is true about the world and about themselves, read aloud in class. I have made a separate peace with the abstract logic of our schools and that is why I continue to teach.

I would be remiss if I did not mention some other reasons I am here today. One is the Critical Skills Program in the education department of Antioch-New England, and its former director and now education department chair Peter Eppig. That program defined me as a teacher and fueled my energies for most of my career. Peter continues to inspire me with his vision and encouragement.

Another great influence has been my colleagues at Conval High School, especially those in the English department, and especially Jill Lawler, our department leader, and John Sullivan, now deceased, who got me started with a vengeance. All of my colleagues have put up with me much more than I deserve.

And finally my students. I cannot tell you how many students have inspired me over the years, sometimes for their knowledge, but much more often for their characters. My mother used to say teaching kept her young. I think teaching has strengthened my character. My students have taught me that they will only learn from someone with integrity, and that they will only respect someone who respects them. If I want to be a good teacher, I know I have to have both.

Once again, I thank the Fitzwater Center for this recognition.