**THE TAO OF TEACHING:**

**ROMANCE AND PROCESS**

Stefan Schindler

*Who would prefer the jingle of jade pendants*

*if he has once heard stone growing in a cliff?*

Lao Tzu

**PART ONE: LOGOS**

George Bernard Shaw once remarked that the only time his education was interrupted was when he was in school. Lao Tzu, the legendary founder of Taoism, said in various parables much the same thing to Confucius.

Taoism is a Chinese philosophy and way of life dating back several millennia, codified around 500 BCE. Confucius told his students that in Lao Tzu he had met a dragon.

Confucius favored a multiplicity of strict social roles and rules. In contrast, Taoism emphasizes intuition, spontaneity, simplicity. Its supreme concept, the Tao, is symbolized by a circle with a bright side and a dark side, divided by an S curve down the middle.

The dark side is called yin and represents receptivity, contraction, restraint. The dark side is called yang and represents activity, expansion, freedom.

The curving line between yin and yang signifies the golden mean or middle way, the life of harmony, ratio, balance.

The Taoist art of life treads a path between extremes, balancing opposites in a centered, equanimitous way, subtle and bending as a blade of grass.

***Students, Teacher and Syllabus***

Let us contemplate the Tao sign as a symbol for the educational process. Any particular course has three components: student, teacher and syllabus. These three components may be mapped onto the Tao sign in various ways.

The syllabus might be the middle way between teacher and students. It is the river down which the boat of learning will float. Teacher and students climb aboard at the beginning of the semester and sail toward a horizon of hoped-for satisfactions.

Or: the students may be seen as the middle way, balancing their insistence on the linear path of the syllabus (yin) with the spontaneity and exploratory exuberance (yang) of the teacher.

Now let us put the teacher in the middle. Visualize the Tao sign and see the students on one side, the syllabus on the other. The syllabus is yin: the structure, limits and constraints of a reading and testing chronology. The students are yang: a seething cluster of freedoms, all wanting their needs met, their curiosities satisfied, ready to follow the trackless paths of their own tangents. The teacher is the connecting thread, the balancing act between the structure of the syllabus and energy of the students.

A good teacher balances the objectively imposed discipline of a syllabus with a sensitivity to the subjective needs of the students for whom the syllabus exists.

The alchemy of education requires that facts be counterbalanced with a constant cultivation of feelings. Thus the importance of drama in the classroom. A good teacher is captivating, spontaneous, audacious, humorous, passionate, risk-taking and progressive. Teaching requires the finely tuned skill of sustain a multiplicity of exquisite tensions. Without the tension, learning dies of inertia. Keeping the tension effective – day after day, week after week – there’s the rub.

A thoughtful teacher carefully balances information with experience, theory with practice, predictability with surprise. Hence the need for flexibility in the use of that philosopher’s stone, that piece of hot ice called a syllabus.

A syllabus is a good thing. It allows all three elements of the educational endeavor (students, teachers, administrators) the security of a well-planned order of events.

On the other hand, there is almost nothing more dreadful than a boring teacher; and one sure way to generate boredom in the classroom is to follow a syllabus with rigorous strictness regardless of the learning – or nonlearning – among students.

Boredom haunts academia. It may seem like a quiet thing. In fact, it bellows through halls of the American educational system and is euphemistically named “the discipline problem.”

Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that boring teachers should be brought to trial for the murder of young souls. Depending on the structure of a syllabus, and on a teacher’s attitude toward that structure, a syllabus may be as much a graveyard as a highway to enlightenment.

To stay on the right track, Whitehead suggests attunement to “the rhythmic claims of freedom and discipline.”

In his book *The Aims of Education*, Whitehead notes that a good teacher has clearly in mind what the student must know by the end of the semester. The syllabus maps the route to those objectives. Whitehead also asserts that the key to successful educating is pacing. Pacing, of course, is built into the very structure of a syllabus; it is an essential element of a course’s chronology. Yet pacing also includes spontaneity, sensitivity, flexibility. One of the great challenges of teaching is the constant adjustment of quantity of information to quality of learning.

No teacher can know ahead of time the exact talents, concerns and needs of the uniquely individual humans that make up a class. Thus the chronology inherent in a syllabus may need to be modified by the pacing required for diverse students. It is amazing how many teachers forget this fact.

***Romance, Precision, Generalization***

Whitehead’s model of education is organic. He draws our attention to the natural rhythms of development. Children exhibit cycles of attention and effort in the way they learn. If we take a hint from nature, Whitehead argues, we will structure the educational process in terms of a tripartite cycle: romance, precision, generalization.

The first task of a teacher is to romance the students: to excite their curiosity and awe in order to give the path of learning a heart.

Without romance, without emotional soil, one is merely planting seeds in sand. For Whitehead, hard work is the second natural phase of the educational process. The logic is simple: effort naturally follows interest.

This second phase, precision, exhibits the discipline required for learning: study and practice trial and error, the patient mastery of those precise details that disclose the mystery of a subject and make it the student’s own. But the real test of mastery is utilization, Whitehead’s third stage: generalization. It is the application of what has been comprehended, the art of utilizing knowledge. It is the fruit, the creative freedom that issues from the discipline of hard work.

This three-fold cycle – romance, precision, generalization (RPG) – is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment. The phases overlap in rhythms of shifting emphasis. Whitehead criticizes education in the twentieth century as focusing too exclusively on precision, with little or no time for romance and creativity. Modern pedagogy suffers from a staggering stasis, manifest as a whirlwind of mostly meaningless motion. The ignorating, curiosity killing, soul deadening imbalance is so obvious and omnipresent that President Reagan’s blue ribbon research team on the state of American education called its report “A Nation At Risk.” Whitehead’s worldview clarifies the issue and offers common-sense guidelines for reform.

Note the magic of Whitehead’s approach: the metamorphosis of the triad (RPG) into a simple, organic, yin-yang dyad. The generalization stage, being creative, carries with it its own romance. Creativity *is* romantic. It generates the interest that will sustain the discipline required for the next stage of study. Thus the process of romance, precision, generalization, once begun, quickly becomes a simple respiration between precision (yin) and romantic generalization (yang).

Perhaps the clearest example of this process is learning to play a musical instrument. The first successful playing of a simple tune generates enthusiasm for learning more complicated melodies. The satisfaction garnered from initial effort yields the promise of even greater satisfactions through additional effort. Creativity is more than just its own reward. It stimulated desire for even higher rewards.

Whitehead wrote the essays in *The Aims of Education* between 1912 and1928. They echo the ancient wisdom of Lao Tzu. Whitehead’s process philosophy takes is inspiration from nature’s cycles. The dialectic of practice and performance, tension and release, yin and yang, is universal in all the arts.

As Stravinsky was fond of insisting, the balance between Dionysian freedom and Apollonian discipline is key to creating great art. It is also key to the great art of educating.

**PART TWO: POESIS**

Teaching is

A performing art

Climaxing in

The artistry

Of the students.

The target

Of the teacher’s arrow

Is to become

A witness.

**PART THREE: PRAXIS**

How may a teacher romance students?

Answer: Any way that’s legal.

If this issue were taken seriously, our schools – overnight – could be turned into the gardens of learning for which students hunger and critics clamor.

Aristotle, quoting Plato, asserts that philosophy begins with wonder. We may generalize: All true learning begins with curiosity and awe. The beginning stages of education have nothing to do with forced memorization. Thus Whitehead, in discussing the rhythmic claims of freedom and discipline, describes the romance phase as “claimed” by freedom, just as the following precision phase is “claimed” by discipline.

To be romanced by something, to be in wonder at it, is to direct attention to it freely, willingly. Human being have this happy attribute: we are glad to be interested in something interesting. Students should be glad to be in school. That’s how interesting teachers need to be. Accordingly, teachers should be given maximum support in the exercise of their creativity.

Teachers are alchemists. The magic of their alchemy is catalyzing and cultivating inquisitive subjectivity. Students who are sufficiently curious will gladly be creative. The generating of adequate interest will naturally tend toward the mastery of skills that teachers and society alike desire for the students. But the interest, the romance, must come first. All curriculum reform that fails to start with this realization is fatally misguided.

Interest is a feeling. Whitehead chooses the word *romance* to emphasize this fact. Every educator is obliged to create a certain quality of experience that is organically the most fertile foundation for learning. The shuffling of curricular content needs to be guided by the primary aim of generating enthusiasm for the mysteries of life, history and the universe. The core of the curriculum should be joy; that is to say, the triple joys of curiosity, discovery, creativity,

A human being will often find other human beings fascinating, unless of course confronted by the backs of their heads. Overcoming educational inertia includes paying attention to classroom environment. Nature loves a curve, because curves and growth go together. So take a hint from nature and put the chairs in a circle or semicircle. By arranging chairs into what Martin Buber and Paulo Freire call a “dialogical” format – giving life to the sacred hoop of Socratic dialogue – the students are literally give the classroom a human face, thereby overcoming the boredom and brain-death associated with their traditional militarist imprisonment in linear rows.

If, as John Dewey showed, we learn by doing, then a teacher’s task is to catalyze romance through student involvement. Begin, for example, with sharing; more specifically, sharing dreams is guaranteed to capture interest and excite the imagination.

As the course continues, students begin breading about each other (not to mention the teacher!), and the results can be as enlightening as they are hilarious.

If the teacher unabashedly shares some of his or her own dreams, the students become bolder and more open with theirs, and a classroom of strangers becomes a community of heart-centered communicating souls.

Keeping dream journals helps keep writing romantic.

Ask a question, thereby evoking student involvement. A successful course is a mutually participatory event. Teachers benefit by paying heed to their students’ needs.

Begin class with a story; and see where it leads.

Sustaining the joy of discovery, perpetuating the romance during the disciplines of precision, is by far the teacher’s greatest task once the process has begun. But if the process has begun romantically, fueled by the igniting of wonder, it is infinitely more likely to achieve education’s goals than any process that merely pendulates between memorization and imitation – the lowest rung on Plato’s ladder of knowledge.

A teacher is not sitting – i.e., hiding – behind a desk. A teacher is up front, out front, taking risks, making connections, blowing minds.

A classroom of students is a cauldron feelings. The task of a teacher is to heat it up, and stir it into gold.

*(A longer version of this essay was originally published in “College Teaching,” Volume 39, Number 2, Spring 1991; and republished in “Process Papers,” Volume 9, March 2005.)*