

## Versions of a Self-Generative Classroom in the University

Steven Carter

On the first day of the spring semester, 1970, I handed out to my sophomore literature/writing classes a document which read in part:

In a sense we are beginning as failures. The fact that we have come into this room—you as students, myself as faculty—immediately begins our disqualification for what Carl Rogers calls “freedom to learn.” We are victims, not of the System—which I refuse to condemn since condemning it gives a sense of importance to something which deserves neither acclaim nor vitriol, and which further “buys” or enslaves, *both* those factions which praise and blame it—but of our laxity, our satisfaction in allowing roles to be placed upon us by the System. You as students, who will “conduct yourselves honorably at all times,” and who must be “worthy of the privilege of attending the University of Hawaii;” and myself as a teacher whose power and authority may become as much a defense mechanism as a measure of stability in the classroom.

The reasons for such a statement—and the teaching philosophy which comprehends it—involve an approach to the college classroom which is a product of different sources and influences dating back more than a year, to when I was writing a series of essays on what I imagined then to be an innovative theory on teaching. At that time I placed strong emphasis on things like the teacher’s classroom personality, his need to empathize with the students, and, in freshman classes, his obligation to work with experience and identity toward a firmer basis for writing

excellence. I was applying these ideas to the classroom when I borrowed a copy of Carl Rogers’ *Client-Centered Therapy*, from a colleague (who later helped me a great deal to see classroom variations on the basic theme of Rogers). In chapter ten of Rogers’ book, a chapter dealing with student-centered teaching, the relationship between teacher and student is not elaborated upon from certain assumptions, as I was doing before, but reduced to a common denominator: two human beings staring at each other across silence. The terror and simplicity of Rogers’ idea fascinated me. To *facilitate learning* and not to *teach*; to dispose of the teacher’s authority in the classroom; to allow a sense of responsibility to evolve from the students—these notions swept across our (two of my colleagues and myself were interested at the outset) customary views of teacher-student relationships like a fresh breeze. We discovered that the convenient *persona* (and assumptions) of *teacher-qua-teacher* had to be dropped; the students, given responsibility for their own education, soon demanded it. Applied to writing courses at the university level, Rogers implied these points:

1. The grading system had to go, since it placed direct authority in the teacher’s hands alone, a canker in the midst of a true atmosphere of learning.
2. Responsibility for the class—in all phases—sprang from its once-exclusive sovereignty in the teacher’s will to every student and the teacher. Class discussions became not teacher-directed, but student-directed, or there were no discussions at all. The

teacher had to learn to endure painfully long stretches of silence, sometimes fifteen minutes long, until the students, conditioned to systematic response to questions directed at them, realized that *their* will was being drawn upon; the fate of the class depended upon it.

3. All assignments, readings, etc., would become class-decided; with suggestions, if needed, from the teacher.

4. Pragmatic notions like *goals* and *motives* in the student or teacher became outmoded, because:

A. The idea of a goal, or pretending to know where the class was going to end, was absurd. It was too close-woven to the teacher-planned, student-accepted texture of other courses.

B. The class, divesting itself of limitations prescribed by people outside the class—grades, competition, values harmful to a class interested in education and not service—became infinite in its self-creative potential.

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Rogers demanded a pure application of his student-centered ideas. Ideally—and some teachers have done this—the thing to do was to come in on the first day of the course and say nothing; pick up a newspaper, read it awhile, then put it down and stare at the class, which would immediately wonder: when is he going to teach us something? My own experiment in a self-generative classroom nevertheless began when I, unconsciously at first, departed from Rogers, and, with the suggestions of friends and colleagues, began to work out my own style and approach from the healthy kernels of his ideas.

The first obstacle was the grading system. Ruling it out sounded fine, but the administration required some kind of grade for each student and a computer card proving his presence in the class. My decision opened many possibilities, but there was plenty of room for temptation. In cancelling the value and meaning of grades during the first semester, I decided to let the students choose the grade they wanted. If I had said deserved, the entire reason for changing the grading philosophy would have been rendered absurd; there would have been no change at all. Deserving is an idea detached, I feel, from a true classroom experience. It requires judgement, traditionally, on the part of the teacher, but sometimes on the part of the student, who may be given the freedom to be honest with himself in selecting a grade he deserves. But, how honest can a student

be with himself while working with a standard he has nothing to do with, which has nothing to do with the class; a standard which merely provides an external structure, an artifice to plug his performance into? Why judge at all? One may self-evaluate in terms of changes in attitudes, work habits, awareness of others in the class and their changes. Judgement implies finality in what should be a continuing process; too much is left behind in many classrooms with the final grade and the release into summer. So I asked the students to select a grade which had nothing to do with what happened in the classroom, since the grading system itself did not. Put another way, we reduced grades to an absurdity—or better, in the literature sections—a self-parody. Because we were reading *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*, at the time, two works which use parody in their themes and structures, our efforts to create a sense of responsibility made a neat parallel with the content of the course. We found a way to use grades against themselves by inflating them out of any possible value. This was not a “cop-out,” as some less-enthusiastic and ill-informed colleagues imagined; but a concerted effort to dramatize the effects of a system inimical to the design of a student-centered course; and, to use the artistic process of some of the books we were reading—to apply it to our own destiny as a classroom.

One effect of this decision was an upswing in my popularity, which added an ominous possibility, to the growing list of possibilities the students had freed themselves to explore. Actually, the newly-emerging problem was twofold: the students were—some of them—mis-emphasizing their freedom by thanking me for going out on a limb by giving blanket A's. They felt duty-bound to answer my trust with a kind of service-in-gratitude, a fealty they thought they owed me.\* This response was quite moving; almost none of them had been allowed to decide anything on his own before; the aether I exposed them to changed them visibly and radically. But the danger that I would assume the major role in the classroom again was too great; and when I read my journals aloud at the end of the term, I warned them that thanking me for my trust was, once again, to take the reins out of the proper hands and put them elsewhere. The fault was immediately and easily traceable: the grading system, while parodied with some success, still held sway in the classroom; and I couldn't blame some students for applauding, for the wrong reasons, the chance for a gratuitous A. (Most of them were still worried about their GPA's no matter what happened in English 100 or 253.)

\*In the majority of cases, students did not take advantage and

"cheat," as many of my colleagues were too quick to assume. The mis-emphasis occurred as they worked too much simply for me, in gratitude, for making a gesture toward freedom in their education. I wanted them—and have made it clearer this term—to work for themselves, and the class, where the real trust begins and ends. The teacher, to paraphrase W.H. Auden's comment on art, is small beer.

At the same time other influences were being felt, taking me further from Rogers. But excerpts from a self-evaluation I prepared along with my freshmen, will help show where the experiment stood at the end of the first semester:

Some people, I think quite understandably, had difficulty adjusting, since what had come before, and what was still going on in other courses here at the University was so familiar; stamped with the usual patterns of coercive education for good and for bad. But I think the shock of change can be used to help determine your attitudes, the "why" of those attitudes, and thus help make your transition easier. If you talk, as we have, with other students who have made the change more gracefully, or with fewer problems, perhaps their experiences can explain yours. The stated differences between your reaction to the class and to yourselves may help contribute to your own adjustment. And this adjustment needn't be a victim of the time element Cathy brought up in despair; it can develop after the semester, into the future, as long as you are willing to talk to people about what happened here. Even if the problem of adjustment springs admittedly from your own unwillingness to contribute to the course, there is still room for change: the atmosphere of the course needs it, demands it, to survive . . . .

. . . I began by considering the course as an event: that is, our coming in and sitting down as an event to be considered in writing by and for the class. About this time we also presented our personal experience in love together; we related to each other personal descriptions of what happened to us at certain points in time. We have gone beyond that now, to ask why, and consider the course at *this* point in comparison with its earlier stages.

. . . I have also had some soul-searching to do about the role of my personality and ego in the course; from the first day of change, the self-questioning began. I used to find it easy, for example, to control a course by directing all the attention, awareness, and

empathy, if there was any, to myself: and I enjoyed it. When I started teaching three years ago, I found it was pretty easy to be spontaneous and funny, and to make the rather dry content of exposition courses more enjoyable. I was also inspired, as every young and liberal teacher will be, with the idea of inculcating the students with my inspiration (on politics, the war, etc.), pacing the floor, pounding the blackboard, ranting, all to a respectful and sometimes shocked silence. And I was quite pleased with myself. But no matter how successful I was in this multiple role of raconteur-teacher-orator-comedian, I realize now that I was still in some kind of innocent subterfuge, since I was a "nice guy"—considering the class subordinate to me. I would talk, they would listen. I liked the students, but it was still *my* ego, *my* knowledge, over against their youth and "wanting to learn." They had no say in the course at all . . . .

. . . Certainly the criteria I used doesn't matter anymore. In college we used to talk about teachers who "changed our lives." When I started teaching, and up to this year, I wanted to perform that godly function for my students: to be the greatest thing in their lives, to send them out of my class with their heads spinning, armed to take on the world.

What I have come to realize in working with you is that I wasn't arming them for anything at all. As long as the old teacher rules/says/does system was underway, the students were bound to forget most of what I said anyway. I said and did nothing about education, what their education meant—except some jokes about the administration, safe jibes which added weight but little substance to the "good-guy" image I coveted a while ago.

Given their own responsibility as a driving force, most students did the work well. A few took advantage, and I spent many sleepless nights wondering what to do about them. I was still losing sleep worrying about this and other aspects of the experiment when the spring semester began. But certain things had changed, and from my list of confessions sprang two ideas which took me further from Rogers, and helped create the final phase of the experiment, as it stands now. The first was my notion that *every course must be about education*. No matter what the content—art, history, economics, English—the concept of what education is, why everyone is there, student and

teacher, should be kept in mind, written about and discussed, always. The second idea was that the students themselves were the essential content of any course; that is, students in any classroom should be held in everyone's mind as more important than anything else, then what the course is "about," in the Catalogue. Only then, it seemed to me, could we discover real reasons for reading and writing about Keats or Conrad.

These two precepts gave me a firmer basis from which to attack again the second of two major obstacles I had started with at the beginning: how to make writing—and reading—relevant to an open-ended classroom, which had become its own essential text, subject, syllabus, and *modus operandi*.

My first major break with Rogers in the spring was, of course, the document, or "rap-sheet," I handed out to both sections of English 252. It seemed to me that, given the style I was moving toward, certain principles, or non-principles, had to be agreed upon before we started. As long as I didn't impinge upon their freedom, I felt safe in offering these first-day ideas. I suggested (and these could only be suggestions, since from the beginning I made it clear that I had no power: not to grade, not to assign, not to direct) that we consider the following possibilities:

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1. That the grading system has one terrible flaw: a tendency to drain one's will and responsibility, allowing him to rely upon fear and threat for momentum, rather than a free willingness to learn something for its own sake.

2. That the very idea of "school" is, in itself, self-defeating for a class because of the twelve- or thirteen-year coercive sway it has held over our memories and feelings. The negative aspect of grades is, of course, tied up in this larger system.

In connection with the second possibility, I quoted from an article written about an experimental school operated by the San Francisco poet, Jack Spicer:

There are many unhappy kids at Pacific/maybe they are kids who felt the COLD outside too soon and froze and for them a little communal warmth would help. But I suspect that the cold is not "out there" but in the way one deals with what's out there. Even a woman is a cold slab when one must "deal" with her/plan/arrange/design—play the architect. And they don't call them intentional communities for nothing/intentional i.e., consciously limiting the range and complexity of what's out there in order to fulfill a

dream. Whether it be Plato's Republic or Rimmer's Harrad or 1984 it matters not/that state of mind which necessitates intentionality IS cold!

I take Spicer to mean this: that once education begins to serve anything, it surrenders its essential being which is not to serve or be served, just as love or conscience is not to be served in a system of intentions and outwardly-prescribed ("cold") rules; but to *be*, and be enjoyed. Of course, all this abstraction was prey to cynicism, so I tried to bring it down-to-earth by saying (in the original rap-sheet):

As it stands, you are here now because you are serving:

- a. The requirements of your college.
  - b. The larger requirement of units needed to graduate.
  - c. The even larger requirement for graduate school, a job, family, and success in a future which has, in large measure, been expected of you by society.
  - d. The chimera of grades which destroys any infinite potential education may have had, by considering an A (in relation to a B, putting students in negative competition with each other) the ultimate mark of excellence in any given situation. A fake standard, arbitrary and exclusive of too many variables in the classroom. A fake structure, enveloping willy-nilly any class in a curve which dictates (even in a class where teachers deny they grade on a curve) to the majority of the students a vague residence on the "average" level. Students rarely ask each other, especially after the course is over: what did you learn? how did you change? but—sadly—what did you get?
3. The third possibility I suggested was: if there is no real self-willed reason for writing and reading in the college student, his teacher, then, will labor under a curse, and lose many opportunities for change and growth in both the student and himself. I felt that no matter how much information and skills may be taught under the old system, the class would be hurt without a chance to discover, freely and without pressure, the reasons for these skills, for memorizing the lines of Keats or Wordsworth for regurgitation on final exams. In freshman English, the students are told they must come to class to learn to write to serve other courses; in sophomore literature, the majority of the students (here at our university) come to serve their graduation requirements. This is not to say all

students are cynical about these things and get nothing out of the courses; I mean to say that too often they take *why* they are in any university course for granted. I felt that any classroom, whether in English or not, which allowed such passings-over of basic educational assumptions, began as a failure and ended as one.

4. I suggested that the aforementioned "reasons" for education and learning should grow out of the classroom itself, the student-centered awareness, and, particularly in literature classes, a conscious rapport between the class and the books. There was every possibility that, after approaching him fairly and with respect, a student would not find Robert Browning interesting. He was invited—encouraged—to say why, and was not penalized.

5. I made the aforementioned plea that every class be about education, as well as English, economics, history, art, etc.

6. Following this was the suggestion that the students and the class, parts and the whole, were more important than the erstwhile "content" of the course. This did not mean taking a lax attitude toward the books, the reading, and the writing assigned: quite the opposite. Given a chance to discover that Yeats and Conrad, no matter how great their genius and ideas, were worthless without an enthusiastic, non-conscripted response, the students, hopefully, would do more than analyze their works. They would be given opportunity to communicate to the class what changes they might have gone through in the assigned books, and which books seemed meaningful or meaningless—and why.

7. Finally I strongly suggested—within the limits of my non-authority, of course—that everyone take the course on a pass-fail basis, thus committing himself, for once in his life, to a conscious choice against grades for his own will and motivation in the classroom.

Pass-fail was limiting of course—the ideal would be no grades at all, in any form—but the choice was more attractive than the seductive backlash effect of all A's, which in many ways was an unfair burden to place on the students. I guaranteed all P's, since the outmoded idea of failure in the teacher's eyes—a "closed system," as the anthropologists say—was rendered absurd by our own

system: even where recalcitrant or negative students were concerned. At the end of each class session, no one would be able to walk out innocent and unaffected. (Earlier the real moral choice about grades, conscience, and responsibility was made quite clear.) The most inflexible student who preferred dictated standards in a dictated classroom had to be aware of changes all around him: other students were embracing the chance to accept help and suggestions from the teacher instead of relying on him to create their standard and direct their destiny in the class. Stubbornness or fear or disinterestedness would be countered with their precise opposites in a student-centered classroom, along with a teacher who refused to assign F's to anyone. With this open-ended aspect of the class in mind, the seeds of change and re-evaluation had to be sown in the uncooperative student. They might never take root, however, but he would know—and be reminded constantly—that the class design *allowed* the chance, a month into the summer, a year after the class, for change and regret that the choice was not made. In any other course, receiving an F literally shuts the door and, by definition ends all potential; puts the class and the teacher out of his mind as forgotten and useless—and wasted—quantities.

Some of the immediate reaction to these suggestions, in both sections of the course, *Modern British and American Literature*, was chaos and cynicism. Many of the students defended the grading system, giving arguments I will discuss later; some were worried about their GPA's; the rest distrusted my comments *prima facie*: they had had "radical" teachers before, with slogans and lip-service. Lip-service, in this context, meant lecturing the students about the unexamined life, etc., and never allowing them to reexamine their lives in the classroom over against what came before, or what might come after.

I asked them to do what I had done: write a paper saying why I am here. Regardless of how one felt about grades and education, a general airing was necessary before re-definition and re-creation of a generative classroom structure could be put into operation. Everything was written on dittoes\* and copies given to everyone in the section. We talked about the papers, and some positions began to shift more dramatically than the semester before, when no commitment or moral choice was demanded of the students, *vis-a-vis* grades.

\*We continued this practice, including papers and rap-sheets, intra-class communications regarding the class and/or the literature, so that *everyone* read *everything* the classes produced.

The majority of the students were astonished by what they had written. It was less important, after all, for a student to be locked in an assumption decided by his experience in education, than it was for him to say why. In any case, the students were honest. Numerous reasons for grades were revealed: to please parents, friends, advisors, employers, the private fear or love of competition, and so on. Gradually the absurdity of the idea of education as a service to a less-worthy ideal, began to appear. Competition, for example, where students were not working *with* their classmates, but against them. And the corollary: most courses, in spite of what their instructor says, have at least a ghost of a curve behind their grading.

The majority of the students admitted (and appeared to discover for the first time) that they had never spoken to most of their classmates in the past, let alone learn from them. Class discussions had been conducted in an atmosphere of learning purely about something: assumptions about who was doing the learning, and from whom, were never allowed to share the content of the course.

Then we talked about the class itself. What place should books and writing have in an atmosphere directed *at* the students and *for* the students, and their changes and growth? An elementary question, but profound: all questions raised in class discussions were reduced to simple, common denominators which helped to re-define our roles. Someone suggested that writing—whether about the course or the literature—could freeze moments of change for individual students in relation to the stories and poems, and other members of the class, so we decided on the production of rap-sheets, similar to my initial handout, which included analyses of what had happened in a certain class-meeting; profiles of changes; the connection between a poem and the class; or a general reaction to a poem which evolved into a deeper formal analysis.

We had found an honest reason for writing in the classroom, but there was a danger: that the literature would be used solely to serve off-the-top-of-the-head notions about education and the classroom and/or the books themselves, without an intelligent understanding of what was going on in either the poem, or short novel. This danger was of real importance because in a required course in English literature, many students will enroll who hate to write, who do not like to read, and who have squirmed painfully under pressure in the past; producing solely because of that pressure. Collectively, we had to find a *raison d'être* for and with those students.

The answer came in a suggestion from a friend, who had

helped me once before when the experiment started to falter, that the literature might be viewed as a metaphor for the class. Of the two halves of the metaphor, tenor and vehicle, the tenor (the class) was more important; but the vehicle (the literature) could be made significant too, in more than one way.

The value of literature (content) as metaphor for the parts-and-a-whole classroom depends upon change; the willingness and ability of the student not only to record his changes, but also to find a common way to measure them. With literature as the answer, there had to be more than rap-sheets to keep the class together. If, after reading Keats' poems and letters for two weeks, a student had a change-of-attitude toward Keats, he told the class so. Some people, whose reactions to Keats' letters to Fanny Brawne were reactions of distrust, soon discovered why they felt this way: because other students told them. In my view, this was better than quizzing them on quotation and titles.

But, in order to find changes against literature, it is important to understand the literature; so what would have occurred in any other literature class occurred here too, but for a different reason. We decided on a number of serious, in-depth papers for the semester, which each student would write, and we also decided on a final self-evaluation paper detailing the changes in attitude which took place during the term. The rest, essentially, was a *tabula rasa* for the students and myself to complete.

As a member of the class, I selected my role with care, and offered information—talking sometimes, sometimes using hand-outs—toward understanding the “meaning” of the literature *per se*. In this role I resembled any other teacher, except the context and reason for being there were different. Through a process of trial and error, we found that our best classes were those in which small groups of students would rotate among themselves, getting to know each other and developing a consciousness of the class as a whole. My potential, of course, included more reading under my belt than they; so I too would move from group to group to answer questions, listen to suggestions, again, like any other teacher.

Soon—after several crises—both sections did what I hoped they would do: they began to create their own identity and momentum. Rap-sheets based on the first “why am I here” papers led to other rap-sheets. Although the literature was significant in knitting us together, most important of all was the fact that the students were beginning to speak in terms of the literature; without coercion or pressure they began to assume and describe meaningful connections between the books and their

private lives, or the life of the class. One student reminded us of the happy limitations of requirements by deciding to write a long research paper on Yeats, instead of one each on Keats and Browning. Once I made it clear that taking time with the poems and working with them, was the best way to move the class along and help other students over the rough spots, good, solid papers began to appear. Fully half of the first series of papers I received on Keats and Browning treated poems we had not discussed in class. Many students chose, because there were no requirements, to select poems, or groups of poems, untouched by class discussion, and try their hand at them. This pleased me the most because it illustrated the pure potential of a self-generative class at work, students working without me, for the class and themselves.

One student, in noticing the evolution in Keats' *Odes*, from escape to resolution, made a connection between the class' own attempts to escape responsibility in the beginning, and so helped us over a crisis.

Early in the term I was asked by a committee member to solicit suggestions from my students about improving the course. In their replies, something like 75% of the students talked about pass-fail, enthusiastically enough to suggest it be made *compulsory*. It was clear that they saw the truth, but were, at that point, unwilling to go after it. They did not like grades, but they also did not like having to make the moral choice about them either. I pointed this out in a rap-sheet by reminding the students of Keats' path from escape to maturity, in poem to poem. They realized, finally, that compulsory for "the good" was just as useless as compulsory for "the bad."

Our standards remain the highest. Without what most of us now feel as the limitation of an A, simple excellence in writing (communication) and reading become necessary for their own sake. The penalty for laxness is now far dearer than an F; it involves the structure and potential for change in twenty-five people (the number of students in a section), all of whom must care for each other—or the class dissolves.

In fact, the potential for disaster in a self-generative experiment is just as evident as the potential for greatness. If enough students decide not to commit themselves, if enough simply do not want to do the work—then the class literally falls apart; and what is left may well be the still small voice of the teacher continuing his new role on a near-empty stage—because there's nothing else to do.

But, it seems to me, the experiment *must* be tried. The alternatives, at this point in time, are too terrifying to contemplate: masses of unquestioning students shuttled in and out of college by similarly unquestioning teachers, who

often will not bend, who are afraid of their students, who do not care—who, in short, *teach the material, do their jobs, and stop short of the things that make for a real education*: conscience, responsibility, and constant self-examination.

I mentioned earlier that no one can leave an experiment of this sort in an innocent state; everyone, whether he commits himself or not, will know the choice was placed in his hands. He will know that the issues involved ranged further than the willingness to read a poem or do a paper. If he "failed" in a class which refused to fail him, it will have been because he let himself, and a few other people, down. And when he looks back on the class, he will know the difference—for the other students have told him so—between his kind of failure and a mark on a piece of paper.

#### Objections:

1. What about the *rest* of the System? When students leave the class, chances are they will drop right back into the grading routine. Won't the experiment ruin them?

Answer: Precisely. We all agreed to be ruined, if that's what must happen. Change has to begin somewhere. If a student in my class can be made to see that he doesn't need an A or a B to show him where he stands, then his enlightened stance against the grading system will be worth his future ordeals. He will *know*: before, he did not. One colleague, worried about any departure from the curve established in literature courses, objected that the learning process is complicated enormously. Indeed? I hope to complicate it even more!

2. Wouldn't the class time be better spent in honoring the Catalogue, and teaching literature?

Answer: I honor the Catalogue but leave myself open to the possibility that a classroom may assume the responsibility of questioning itself day-by-day, as well as questioning and studying the literature. The only reason the Catalogue gives for sophomore literature at the University of Hawaii, is that it is required to serve the purposes of other General Education requirements which were developed, as far as I know, without the advice or consent of the students. When questions of conscience and moral responsibility come up in the literature, the class may create its own living context by examining assumptions the Catalogue and the administration leave untouched.

3. The *good* student will produce, more often than not, while the *bad* student won't, whether there is or isn't a grading system. Why then the fuss about *moral responsibility, etc.*?

Answer: Why then the grading system? In any case, the

real question is *why* the student produces. The *poor* student, in a grading situation, often feels intimidated by the brighter students and the teacher, who continually discourage him on the basis of poor work alone. Remove the threat of a D or an F, and the stigma of competition, or humiliation, or resentment—three good reasons in themselves for poor performance—disappear. What happens then is not guaranteed to turn all *poor* students into dedicated, productive, responsible adults in a self-generative class, but they have a 100% better chance here than in the old environment, limited by the curve of a grading chart.

There are good, serious teachers who believe in grades and do not alienate their students; I only ask that they examine the possibility of a *higher* standard—in which they can still participate and offer advice—where so many of the negative accoutrements of grades disappear.

The essential argument for grades seems to be this: there must be something to *push* the student, and to insure his performance in the classroom—and something to measure that performance by; *but*, performance can be measured without the use of grades, which become, in this connection, an unnecessary artifice whose negative aspects the teachers and students don't need. As for the *push*: if, after being given continual encouragement, help, attention, and support, from the class as well as from the teacher, and after being shown reasons why *he* should be the motivating force behind his own education, the student still refuses to push himself—then why push at all?

Administrators are interested in this system for two reasons: first, to keep the courses uniform; and second, to keep the University what it is at present. I am interested in the student, what he is, and what a self-generative classroom can make of him. But this does not mean that I can sit back and say, "Learn for yourselves." Let me quote from another educator, George Dennison. In his recently-published book, *The Lives of Children*, what Dennison says about the child is applicable, also, to the older student:

If compulsion is damaging the unwise, its antithesis—a vacuum of free choice—is unreal. And in fact we cannot deal with the problem in these terms, for the real question is not, what shall we do about classes? It is, what shall we do about our relationships with the young? How shall we deepen them, enliven them, make them freer, more amiable, and at the same time more serious? How shall we broaden the area of mutual experience?

Later Dennison describes an educational situation from his own experience, where he tries to interest twelve-year-

old Jose, in reading:

He understood that I had interests of my own, a life of my own that could not be defined by the word "teacher." And he knew that he, though not a large part of my life, was nevertheless a part of it.

Now, given this background, what must Jose have thought about my wanting to teach him to read? For I did want to, and I made no bones about it . . . The fact is, he took it for granted. It was the right and proper relationship, not of teacher and student, but of adult and child.

And so I did not wait for Jose to decide for himself. When I thought the time was ripe, I insisted we begin our lessons. My insistence carried a great deal of weight with him, since . . . he respected me. My own demands were an important part of Jose's experience. They were not simply the demands of a teacher, nor of an adult, but belonged to my own way of caring about Jose. And he sensed this. There was something he prized in the fact that I made demands on him. This became all the more evident once he realized that I wasn't simply processing him, that is, grading, measuring, etc. And when he learned that he *could* refuse—could refuse altogether, could terminate the lesson, could change its direction, could insist on something else—we became collaborators in the business of life. It boils down to this . . . We adults are entitled to demand much of our children . . . The children are entitled to demand that they be treated as individuals, since that is what they are . . . There is nothing in this process that is self-correcting. We must rely on the children to correct us . . . (to) throw us off, with much yelling and jumping, like a man in a pair of shoes that pinch his feet.<sup>2</sup>

*Collaborators in the business of life!* How Dennison's method makes an absurdity of the argument held by many educators that we must set the students against each other, in competition, to prepare them for a dog-eat-dog world. In other words, to assume the *status quo*, to ignore the possibility of change; to prevent the students from participating in that change. Students *are* the world—the classroom is the medium of life; or, to paraphrase Pauline Kael, it is not just the teachers or students who lose—we all lose.

1. From the uncollected article by Jack Spicer, "More from Pacific High."
2. Dennison, George, *The Lives of Children* (Random House, 1969) as quoted in *The New York Review of Books*, XIII:6, October 9, 1969, p. 35.

## We Might As Well: A Student's Point Of View

By Steven Carter



*Steven Carter is Instructor in the English Department at the University of Hawaii. Receiving his B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley, and his M.A. from the University of Arizona, Mr. Carter has published essays on the teaching of poetry in such outstanding journals as College Composition and Communication, and Arizona Alumnus Magazine.*