

Despite Pressures, Some Good Teaching Does Occur

Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Jun 11, 1973;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times

pg. A3



Teacher Paul Kuhlmann gives a lecture to history class.

Despite Pressures, Some Good Teaching Does Occur

Good teaching does occur at Hamilton High. It does not occur as often as everyone would like.

But perhaps it occurs more often than might be expected, given the pressures and distractions teachers face daily, and the current moods of the young people and adults who share the classrooms.

Poor or indifferent teaching also exists. And, on occasions, the unrelenting tensions take their toll on those less able to cope.

It is 8:03 a.m., an hour hardly conducive to a lofty discussion of philosophy.

But the first bell of the day has rung and the students—some still drowsy—file into the classroom for "Philosophy Through Literature," one of Hamilton High's most creative new courses.

The teacher is Art Sarna, white-haired, grandfatherly, often given to peering over eyeglasses that constantly slide down his nose.

This day Sarna would not lead the class. Instead, an outside speaker—one of many who are brought in—would be heard. He is a Gestalt psychologist.

On other days, the class would hear a black poet, and spokesmen from the John Birch Society, the Christian Scientists and an antidrug group of ghetto dwellers.

The speakers are Sarna's idea, and in part the responsibility of the students, who help decide who shall be invited and arrange for the actual appearances.

Despite the occasional sleepy yawns, the speaker provokes a lively discussion by students, prodded by Sarna's posing of questions and focusing on issues in a way that never sug-

gests students' opinions are anything less than welcome.

It evolves into an exchange on the issue of responsibility with many students clearly believing that individuals must accept responsibility for their lives and conduct.

A black girl challenges them, emphasizing the role that environment plays in the way people act. She talks about life in the ghetto and what happens to responsibility "when someone points a gun in your stomach."

A white student resting his chin on his arm, deeply concentrating on her words, nods slowly.

The principal termed it "a medical emergency." The teacher in question had been under a good deal of strain, mostly related to personal causes rather than classroom pressures.

But in the spring, it became too much. The school administration and some students realized something was wrong.

One day, the teacher had to be led from the classroom by a vice principal. The teacher was, as one person remembers it, "completely out of contact with reality."

While the teacher was persuaded to remain in the principal's office, an unsuccessful effort was made to locate relatives or a doctor who had been treating the teacher.

Finally, the teacher was taken by police to a nearby mental health clinic for emergency care.

"It was a very regrettable incident," the principal said later. "We've had to work with the youngsters a great deal to make them under-



Wayne Johnson, twice voted most popular teacher.

Please Turn to Page 11, Col. 1

GOOD TEACHING

Continued from Third Page stand what happened."

Wayne Johnson—young, long-haired, dressed casually in jeans and tieless, voted most popular teacher by the senior class for two years running—has to yell in his Missouri twang to get the attention of jabbering students.

The class is U.S. history, nothing fancy, all average students, just 11th-graders fulfilling a course requirement.

The room is different from most others at Hamilton. The walls—and ceiling—are adorned with humorous posters: President Nixon in undignified poses, a pop-eyed cat chinning itself on a crossbar over the words, "Hang in there, baby."

And there are old front pages of newspapers and enlarged photographs, including one of Johnson looking sinister.

Election Outcome

Before Johnson can launch his lecture, the students are demanding a discussion of the city primary election held the day before. He yields easily.

His comments are punctuated with his personal ideas and experiences, and sprinkled with words like "cool" and "bummer."

Several students want to know why minor candidates bother to run.

Johnson explains what motivates them, their deep belief in causes, their faith in a political system. It was the same, he tells them, during the Progressive period (which the class is studying), and he cites reformers like Robert LaFollette and Upton Sinclair.

Some questions are silly, but he fields them without a hint of disdain.

"Did you ever consider running for anything, Mr. Johnson?" asks one student, admiring the teacher's grasp of politics.

"Only for the border a few times," Johnson shoots back, bringing moaning laughter at his pun.

His tone for the lecture is not a great deal different. It is relaxed, seemingly unstructured (he talks from his own notes; a textbook is never in sight) and he appears to genuinely enjoy the subject.

He is respected by students. The story goes that Johnson initiates his classes at the start of the year with a warning that he has not gone to college five years to allow some

adolescent to tell him how or what to teach, and after they have gone to school as long as he has, he might consider listening to what they have to say.

Johnson moves into the lecture with a chronicle of labor troubles and the plight of miners at the turn of the century.

A student remembers that the popular song "Sixteen Tons" had something to do with miners. Johnson says it certainly does, and goes on to explain how the song describes the miners' woes and why it is significant.

Mild Reproach

When the gum-chewing gets unbearable, Johnson turns to a girl and says half-seriously, "Honey, please stop snapping your gum. I think you're going to blow out my right eardrum." She chuckles, but gets the message.

Johnson attempts to enliven his discussion of corruption during the Taft Administration with a comparison of the Watergate scandal. The effort does not get very far because few students know much about Watergate.

But teachers like Johnson who work hard at it do succeed more often than not. As one former student of his put it:

"I remembered everything he said because of the way he presented it or some stupid thing he said."

The teacher is in her 50s, a matronly manner, given to issuing constant warnings to her students: "If you talk, zero. That's right, zero. Zero if you talk."

There is a tone of beligerence from two or three of the youngsters, and some give her a fair amount of harassment. Still, most seem not terribly disruptive. Mainly, they do not seem to want to be there.

One youngster in particular talks aloud frequently and is openly scornful of her. She tries to ignore him most of the time (later she tells a visitor he is a "rotten kid" who is being put out of the class).

She takes the class through the lesson with less than spectacular success. Near the end, when she says she is about done, there are audible sighs of relief.

Emotional Outburst

Then, just before the bell sounds, there is an astonishing scene.

While the students are still there, she goes to a visitor in the rear of the room. In a wrought-up state, she complains loudly how the youngsters will not do any work, are not the kind of students Hamilton used to have. They all want handouts, she says. They are TV kids, if they do not like it they turn it off, she declares.

Some of the students laugh, others look half-embarrassed. The bell ends the scene.

Paperback books on the causes of the Civil War are being passed out to students. There is loud talking, but most of it is about the books and what they may contain.

When the teacher, Debbie Bissiri, starts to talk, the class quickly becomes quiet, and note-taking begins almost immediately. The class is advanced-placement U.S. history, a college-level course.

The teacher is picking her way through the early 19th century for incidents that led to intersectional conflict. She describes a state that had defied the federal government, but one student leaps ahead and says, "That sounds like nullification."

"Right!" the teacher exults, smiling. She and the class are of a kindred nature, their minds locked into the same wavelength.

Now she is at the blackboard, writing names, phrases, concepts. The answers flow from the class, and the level of discussion

differs little from that found in a specialized college course on the Civil War.

Before the period ends, the teacher asks that the paperbacks (also college caliber) be read forthwith. After the bell, four boys remain to talk with her about the day's discussion.

The scene is a class in child care, in which many of the girls have enrolled because of their obvious interest in children. But for five weeks, they have been discussing pregnancy, and they are getting weary of the subject.

The teacher begins her lecture, reading word for word from sheets of paper before her. She has assigned one student to take notes for the class on the blackboard with chalk.

"She just reads from books," one student mumbles. "All of us are going to walk out that door knowing nothing."

Here is a sampling of her instructions to the class:

"You may have cravings for unusual things like pickles and ice cream."

"This book is about the Lamaze method. It's supposed to be painless childbirth. It sounds like something foreign to me."

Leland S. Simon is the faculty character. He is thin, bearded, wears a single blue-and-white earring and is thoroughly cynical about the public school system. He serves herb tea to visitors.

The class he is teaching today is "Man and His Environment." Simon has heard about a company planning to build a city in a forest—but one that is ecologically sound and blending into its surroundings.

He suggests the class get together a collection to send for information on the project.

The class is furious.

"How could you give \$5 to support something that's going to destroy a forest?" one student demands.

Says another: "You've taught us all year that things should be natural and here you are supporting someone that's going to move into a forest and destroy it."

He listens to their protests, then fires back. "I have tried all year not to be absolutist about anything, and here you are being absolutist before you know anything about it. It's the word 'city' that blows your minds."

Simon challenges students, provokes them, even angers them. He ends up ridiculed by some and virtually worshipped by others. Not all of them agree with him, but most agree he makes them think.

Simon does an incredible amount of research and preparation for his classes. He is loaded down with information sheets he makes up on subjects from health food to pollution. Sometimes, he dispatches the class on projects, the results of which he types up and puts in pamphlet form.

A 10th-grade English class has just finished reading "A Raisin in the Sun." The teacher asks some questions, gets no response and proceeds to answer them himself.

He then asks the class to turn in their books and he distributes a new novel, "Harlem Summer" by Mary Elizabeth Vroman—a slim paperback.

After giving a brief synopsis of the book, the teacher asks for volunteers to read aloud.

Two people raise their hands. He chooses a girl.

It is a slow, halting process but with the teacher's help she makes it through the first chapter.

Another student is chosen and he is a better reader and the chapter goes quickly.

He chooses a few more readers who, with workmanlike skill, plug through the very simple sentences that fill the book.

Meanwhile, many of the students are reading ahead, looking out the window or have cut class altogether and are roaming the halls.

Says one absentee student: "I have already read 'A Raisin in the Sun' twice and when they read aloud I am always ahead of them and I get impatient for them to hurry up. That's why I'm not there today."