THE PROFESSOR AS VICTIM OF HIS TRAINING

by Jonathan Fairbanks

Our mission on this panel is to assess faculty as a factor in experimentation. I will argue that faculty tend to restrain innovation rather than foster it. This is partly because of the special role faculty have in preserving the integrity of academic curriculum. Experimental courses are difficult to evaluate whereas the standard reformation history course (for example) meeting thrice weekly for a semester, with a heavy reading list, and frequent call upon the library's reserve desk, bolstered by substantial research papers and memory-straining examinations--this type of course is relatively easy to assess, if indeed it occurs to anyone that it needs assessment.

The second reason for faculty's tendency to treat curriculum conservatively is that our graduate training did not encourage us to be innovative. Quite the reverse; for most of us, our graduate training was a stiff, often oppressive apprenticeship. In becoming a historian, for instance, we were schooled, we were formed, we were shaped. We were not encouraged to free-associate or think imaginatively or pursue whimsy. In this respect graduate programs seemed designed to create plodders out of poets. By the time most of us clutched the doctoral sheepskin, we had been thoroughly disciplined. Thus we exited from ivy walls and entered a new set of ivy walls to pass along our discipline as we learned it.

My perspective on college faculty derives largely from my experience over the past eight years at two institutions (SUNY and Skidmore College) where I conceived and administered two programs that created academic controversy. The first program (the Wilderness Workshop) telescoped into the next (the Adirondack Institute). The

latter offered credit courses in six liberal arts disciplines, using the outdoors as the place of instruction. Since an understanding of the nature of this type of program is crucial to what follows in this paper, I will illustrate our pedagogy by describing one of the English courses we offered.

Students were required to read ten volumes of literature in a course entitled, "Wilderness in American Literature." The reading tended to be classic (Thoreau, London, Faulkner, Hemingway, Jeffers, and Roethke), although as the program matured I became a little more idiosyncratic and daring in my selections. All reading was done independently by the student before he or she arrived in the Adirondacks for the ten-day instructional period in the field. Upon arrival, the students were given a preliminary examination on the reading. The testing was rather specific in order to determine the extent and quality of the reading. If a student failed this exam, he generally failed the course because it was, after all, an English course and there seemed little justification in awarding credit to a student who had not done the reading.

In addition, students were required to keep a daily journal during the ten days in the field, participate in evening seminars around the fire, and write a final exam, synthesizing one's readings with the wilderness experience. Groups comprised 12 students and two staff, one of whom was an academic.

The rationale for the course was that direct experience with the wilderness would offer insight into wilderness literature. Consequently, most of the instruction occurred by exposing the students to as many facets of the wilderness as feasible. The curriculum involved a nightwalk, extensive bushwhacking, river fording, a 24-hour solo, a bivouac on a peak--standard activities borrowed from the Outward Bound curriculum and modified somewhat by the propensities of the particular instructor. There was an attempt to attune the student to the wilderness--by taking him straight across beaver ponds, through the thickest spruce, jamming up waterfalls, navigating by the sun and stars. Erudite discussion followed experience; people

grew close; community developed. In my welcoming speeches, I indicated that the student would have three encounters: with one's self, with others, and with nature. The benefits of this kind of program are generally well known, so I need not elaborate. I might qualify by saying they are not well known nor appreciated by academics. Academics generally concentrate on scholarship and view ancillary benefits as peripheral.

The English course I have described above was designed and controlled to protect the sanctity of academic credit. If students took the course for a lark, they failed it. Our academic instructors were well credentialed, the literature was above reproach. The brevity of ten days of instruction was compensated for by the careful unraveling of the curriculum, the continuous exposure to the wilderness, and the intensification of time. Time carries different freight depending on how it is loaded. Academically, we appeared to have been successful, and garnered several substantial endorsements. For instance, Frank Bergon, professor of English at Vassar College and one of our summer faculty, thought highly enough of our reputability to dedicate his recently published Wilderness Reader to the "staff and students of the Adirondack Institute."

But all of this made little difference to most faculty. The course was suspect because it varied from the norm; it eschewed laboratories, libraries, and classrooms; it was a bird my colleagues could not identify and therefore was of questionable value. Many judged it adversely without ever discussing the details of the course with me. Most professors who inspected our program approached it with a bias that prevailed in the end.

My ideal of a professor is one who approaches all subjects with an open mind, displays a careful and impartial intellect in making judgments, and refers only to evidence. A scholar is one who declares upon gaining knowledge and whose judgments are controlled by knowledge. This is why a scholar tends to be respected--because he is envisioned as the model of intellectual discretion and careful judgment. We like to think of the professor as the informed speaker as opposed to the irresponsible

individual who says whatever he thinks about whatever he wants with little respect for facts.

But if these were my expectations, I was often disappointed. And the reasons for this arise primarily from the type of individual who enters the profession and the type of training he receives. Thoreau said he "traveled a great deal in Concord." My academic travels are nothing unusual: I have instructed at four colleges. But in 1977 I decided to try to expand the Wilderness Workshop into an institute at an independent college or university where I would be unencumbered by the red tape of a state university system. I sent a four-page prospectus to a number of colleges which yielded interviews at 20 institutions. The prospectus proposed using the wilderness English course I had established at SUNY as a model for other disciplines. During my interviews I observed a pattern. The administrators (deans and presidents) were intrigued and interested, partly because the proposed institute would enhance the image of the college and might help recruit students. In other words, quite aside from the educational merits of the program, they considered it in terms of how it might help the institution as a whole.

Faculty, on the other hand, were wary. They tended to see me as a strange bird who might bring a pestilence to their college. I was regarded as an outsider who was peddling something, and violating territory--someone who had an alternative mode of education which brought their own traditional method into question. My methodology was too radically different from what they knew. Besides, many of them confided, why introduce a radically new method of instruction if the standard methods (their own) were already working successfully? These appear to be good questions. However, the very questions created a polarity where none existed. The just questions to ask would have been: 1) Does your method work? And if so, how do you know that it does? 2) Exactly what is the method? 3) What is its place alongside of traditional methods? That is, are you supplementing existing methods or are you attempting to revolutionize education?

For the faculty, my presence quickly became a power issue. If Fairbanks is brought in here as the fair-haired boy, what happens to our stake? The faculty invariably decided it was better and safer to say no, and do it with the usual excuse of "his proposal is not academically rigorous enough to justify credit." Professors are the ultimate arbiters of academic credit, and as long as they control credit, they can use that power to discourage change.

It would have been easier for me to have introduced the course from within--in fact, I did that at SUNY--but not as easy as one would think. I succeeded in my innovations at SUNY by scampering around the ends, never by plowing straight into the line. To be more specific, I worked quietly through the chairman and launched the first course without ever presenting the syllabus to the English Department. If I had followed due process I would never have succeeded--just as one does not get a job by applying to a personnel department. Faculty are jealous guardians of the academic sphere to the degree that they function as nay-sayers and obstructionists. Innovations and change occur in spite of faculty. They meet and discuss and modify proposals endlessly in the style of the Supreme Court. They take forever because they can afford to take forever. Their strength is in deliberation; their weakness is in action. Accomplishment for a professor is generally limited to publications, and this is largely pursued alone for the benefit of the self. In short, the great problem with faculty in respect to change is that 1) they do not think corporately; 2) there is no pressure on them to produce change. Placing an academic proposal before faculty is much like pushing it into a long dark tunnel. It will be months, perhaps years before that proposal reaches the other end--if it does not languish in the meantime. And if it does emerge, it is likely to have a very different shape.

There is another reason faculty inhibit change. Although I have said they do not think corporately, on curriculum matters they function corporately; thus they present the worst of both worlds. By not thinking corporately, they do not move with

any particular speed toward creative change for the sake of their corporation (i.e., the college). But faculty are a democratic lot and so insist on all the processes of democracy. For instance if a professor wishes to propose a genuinely unique course (and by that I mean unorthodox, unconventional, radically different), it must pass through a legion of committees. Thus many new ideas, I expect, are never launched because of the enervation the new idea faces as it staggers through a noble democracy which really is a burdensome bureaucracy. The academic senate puts creative ideas through a scrutiny that often requires the creator of the idea to prove his innocence, as it were, as he attempts to diverge from the status quo. Why should one bother? Why become a focus of controversy? Why even start the process if it will take a year or two for it to pass--if it does?

How to solve this impasse? One solves this problem by reducing faculty power. Give the Dean the power to allow a professor to try something new. Let us assume the Dean is ideal: open minded yet of sound judgment. He is intelligent and secure enough to recognize promise and shrewd enough to winnow out the flaky from the sound. Let us also leave some power to our colleagues, for someone must review the success of a new course in order to insure academic reputability. So a small, high quality review committee (perhaps three members) should review the new course after it has been tried to determine the degree of success. The committee would then send its advisory report to the Dean who would in turn consult with the course professor. The course would then be adjusted, continued as it was, or discontinued. Again, to avoid campus politics as much as possible, the Dean would be empowered to make this decision. He would function as a benevolent despot.

If an institution wants change--genuine, exciting change--this is how it would have to function. The Dean would have to exercise strong, creative leadership. Faculty power in curriculum matters would have to be reduced. Bright ideas come from individuals, not from committees. Review--as opposed to preview--would insure academic integrity.

To present an example of excessive faculty power: During my attempt to establish an institute, a prestigious college in New York State expressed interest to the extent that my proposal received approval from the president, the dean, and the faculty academic affairs committee. The English Department was relatively small and ruled by three tenured professors, all of whom disagreed with my pedagogy. By refusing to approve the English course, they effectively barred the Institute. Their power seemed inordinant in this situation. One of the professors remarked that he felt he need know nothing of bears in order to teach Faulkner's "The Bear," and that my attempt to introduce real, furry bears into the curriculum would in no way enhance the reading of "The Bear." I, for my part, felt he could indeed teach the story successfully without any particular knowledge of real bears. A story can be read and taught in many ways. I saw myself as allowing him his way but the priviledge was not reciprocated. I was seen as violating established practice. But all who innovate violate established practice--if one must see it as a violation.

Consequently if faculty (collectively) see themselves as protectors of a tradition, they will invariably function as preservationists rather than as innovators. They will tend to take a defensive position when confronted with change. If they do not slay the innovators with swords, there are other, quieter techniques such as starvation and suffocation.

The sort of individual who is drawn to the academic tradition partly explains this obstructionist mentality. To generalize: on the debit side, we tend to be egotistical, solitary, self-seeking, contentious, and verbal. We are cowed during our probationary periods as assistant professors, then often become insufferably arrogant and righteous and unaccountable once we have received tenure. Our loyalties are first to our selves, second to our discipline, third to our academic grouping, and only last and rather vaguely to our institution. We are forever in an adversary relationship with the administration who are seen as Machiavellian, intent on depriving us. These, of course, are our worse characteristics but characteristics most of, alas, recognize in our colleagues if not ourselves.

Professional resistence to change also reflects one's training, and can be seen analagously in other professions where, for instance, there is an inordinant reaction among M.D.'s toward chiropractic and acupuncture. The resistence is largely a reflection of American medical training rather than the official explanation that chiropractors, for instance, are misinformed, uneducated, and dangerous. There may be instances of these charges, but why throw the baby out with the bathwater?

Training obviously has benefits where a student is taught to do something well in respect to a tradition. But training is also an indoctrination where in absorbing a certain tradition we come to set it above other methods which vary from our own. We come to believe what we are taught--whether it is a catechism or the Yale doctoral program in deconstruction of literary texts.

Academics fight for their doctrine as if it were a case of survival, and attempt to dominate if not destroy alternate schools of thought. If these schools persist, we refer to them condescendingly. We are like Christian sects, convinced that our sect reflects the True Word and all others are but faint, often errant facsimiles. When I studied analytic philosophy at Cornell, existentialism was not included in our courses because the analytic philosophers did not recognize existentialism. When I studied English at Northwestern for my M.A., I was told to symbol hunt in Blake's "Milton" even though I had no interest in symbols and might as well have been picking up eggs in a hen house. When I attempted to introduce biographical material about Thoreau into a reading of Walden, I was told that I was violating the principles of New Criticism, the prevailing doctrine at the time. Finally, I remember a geology class 25 years ago at Cornell where the professor gently ridiculed theorists who believed in continental shift. My conclusion from these experiences is that the possessers of knowledge are but temporary stewards, and most academic thinking tends to be conformist and dogmatic. This argued for a very open mind since God was clearly not in his Heaven and all was not right with the world. These examples of doctrinal clashes are routine and commonplace. Innovation often breaks in from the outside and revamps.

A professor's training reflects a successive narrowing from the broad sweep of the B.A. to the rather more concentrated M.A. to the rigorous confines of the Ph.D., culminated by an elaborate dissertation on an obscure topic. This training does not encourage breadth of mind; rather it endorses extensive knowledge about limited subjects. It tightens us up; it narrows us; it specializes us. The MLA job list announcements cry out: "We need a specialist in late 19th century American literature." Whether you wish to be a specialist or not, you better become one.

Secondly, graduate training fragments the student. Matters of the mind become paramount; questions of the spirit are pushed aside as if they were beneath us; questions of the body are put aside altogether, left off-handedly to physical educators. The wilderness literature course I instructed deliberately engaged the whole person: mind, body, and spirit. The course's particular success arose from bringing all dimensions of an individual into play simultaneously. The student did not feel sated in one respect and starved in another. But my colleagues asked, "What's a nice literature course like you doing out in the woods?" They saw the blend not as enriching but as polluting--the purity of the academic enterprise was being compromised. Irwin Levine, a political scientist at Skidmore, called it derisively a "camp."

All this in spite of my pains at providing a substantial reading list, conventional testing methods, and enforced standards. It did not matter how well I executed the course; what disturbed my colleagues was <u>how</u> I was doing it. They concentrated on process rather than on results. This is not because my critics were perverse; it was because the course violated their sense of propriety. What I was doing was not seemly. One Skidmore English professor sniffed, "I don't feel comfortable with the length of the instruction period," as if he were feeling clammy from too much rain. My colleagues enjoyed none of Thoreau's expansiveness: "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly." Indeed, Thoreau remarked on another occasion, "Scholars have for the most part a diseased way of looking at the world." While some of my critics were simply pedestrian,

others were yearning to do something creative but were hampered by the baggage of their doctoral pasts.

Training is after all training. There is a reward/punishment scheme which encourages obedience. When you enter the august company of doctoral candidates, your course professors do not say to you: Become all that you may. They imposed themselves, their curriculum, and their program-shaping upon you so as to produce a reputable scholar. Some of us no doubt need such a shaping. I, for one, did, so I am carping against the very forces that gave me sufficient training to be a competent professor. There is a gain, but there is a loss. The gain is in our becoming proficient as scholars; the lost is in the confinements of indoctrination. I escaped the indoctrination because I never bought it. When Howard Mumford Jones at Harvard looked at my vita, he said rather contemptuously, "My God, you've got a checkered career." Indeed, I'm checkered, probably pocked, and many times I've believed myself undertrained compared to my colleagues. But my gain is in the perspective of the alien, the outsider, of the perpetual Outward Bound instructor who happens to teach at a college. The other gain is a true sense of liberty where, in lacking a tradition, I am unconsciously untraditional; I tend to look at education primarily for what is novel in it, for what may be happening, for what might occur. I am made restless by the status quo even while respecting it. I would want my daughter exposed to traditional education simply because tradition has substance, value, and standard. But I would not want to see my daughter submitted to deconstructionist literary criticism as a Ph.D. candidate at Yale. I am afraid she would come home obliterated.

Finally, change is doubtful in the 1980s because the industry of higher education is in a prolonged depression and so the cautious and conservative voices will dominate. Once we ride out the 80s, there may be a flush of new ideas in the 90s if the good times return. Our national economy will remain inflationary through the decade and hard times encourage the sterile vocationalism we see in the determined faces setting off for law school. Philosophy is seen as useless, a mere ornament;

bring on the computer graduates and the engineers. Indeed if you are searching for a job and have been an innovator in education, delete this from your resume. Chairmen search for faculty who are specialists; colleges seek administrators who are managers; industry seeks technical graduates. The world is quickly becoming programmed and it is all electronic.

Shall I close with no ray of hope, no possibilities for the creative spirit? Quite honestly I do not feel these are very creative times--at least in higher education. But for those who must be creative, for those of us who wish to bring about change, for those of us who yet have visions that dance in our heads like sugar plums on Christmas eve, as an old warrior I can give some advice; and this is exactly what you must become: a warrior--indeed, not merely a warrior, but a general.

First ascertain the terrain. What is your landscape? Which way does the water run? Where are the valleys? Where are the hills? Move your army through the valleys; remember Hannibal and his elephants in the Alps. The mountains will hamper you. To become explicit: Analyze as precisely as you can where power lies within your institution. Next, consider who your proposed change--let's call it an innovative course for expediency sake--will benefit, and analyze just why it will benefit these parties. Eventually when you approach these parties for support you will emphasize your innovation in those terms, just as an advertising man markets his Pepsi. Third, consider those individuals or factions who will likely become your adversaries either by acts of commission or omission. Consider how to disarm them or steal around them. Make them grab at air as you speed away. Then mount your campaign, subtlely, ingeniously, delicately, insuring always that you are in control, that nothing unforeseen rears its ugly head. Soon all those who have a vested interest in your enterprise will become advocates of your innovation. If you assume all of your allies will help you along lines of their own self-interest, you will seldom miscalculate. A simple example will suffice. When I was having difficulties at SUNY with my immediate supervisor, the Director of Continuing Education,

I approached the Dean of Graduate Studies who I knew was concerned about faltering graduate enrollment and suggested we add graduate courses to the Wilderness Workshop. He responded enthusiastically to this proposal.

As Dean of Graduate Studies, he also supervised the Director of Continuing Education, and soon I was working closely with the Dean on establishing Workshop graduate courses, and my problems with Continuing Education dissipated. I had neutralized my supervisor.

The lesson is simple and stark. An innovator must be a skilled politician. In the late 60's and early 70's idealism and rhetoric were enough to carry the day. Now, one must employ strategy and slip through the lines. Ignore due process wherever you can; it will only stall and perhaps quash you. Once your course is established, then reroute through due process to receive its blessing. (Seldom will a committee refuse to endorse a course that is functioning and successful.) Present your proposal as crucial to the survival of the college. Become friends with the administrators, and they will exert necessary leverage where needed on your behalf. Be prepared to be controversial and suffer from being different. Remember envy is often disguished admiration. Neutralize the enemy; protect your flanks. Remember warriors, even generals, sometimes die. Those who seek change become ready targets but our culture only goes forward with the energy and vision of those who dare to go first.

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