10.

Teaching Teachers: A Faculty View of The New Haven Teachers Institute

Richard H. Brodhead

The New Haven Teachers Institute might be described as a program in which two groups having a great deal in common—the faculties of Yale University and of New Haven's public high and middle schools—come together to discover and build on their common interests. Whether they teach older or younger students, in public or private institutions, such a description might continue, all of the participants of the Institute are members of one profession; and whether they teach at the most advanced or the most elementary levels, they all work in the same disciplines, and so inevitably share assumptions and commitments. What could be more natural than for them to pool their thinking?

Alternatively, the New Haven Teachers Institute might be described as a program in which two groups having next to nothing in common—the faculties of Yale University and of New Haven's public high and middle schools—conspire to invent interests that they might be said to share. The work these groups do, this account would emphasize, might go by the same name, but in fact the terms on which they practice their profession put deep gulfs between them. One is used to teaching the extremely privileged, the other, commonly, the extremely unprivileged; one assumes students already highly prepared, the other students who need to be prepared; one associates its discipline with recent elaborations of specialized knowledge, the other with traditional and basic skills; and of course a host of other differences follow from these. When these groups come together, this account would conclude, it is less likely to be because they feel united in their labors than because they are troubled by the lack of such a unity. And if they assume in advance that they have large areas of common ground, they are likely to be unpleasantly surprised.

The anomaly of the Teachers Institute—but also, I think, the reason why it works—is that both of these contradictory descriptions fit it equally

well. Half of the paradox of the Institute is that when its participants approach each other expecting to find a community of experience, they find, instead, how different their work-lives are. In my own case, while I certainly knew in a general way that the classes the teachers in my seminar taught were quite unlike my own, I was still constantly surprised by the particulars of their educational situations, and by the reminders they offered that our everyday worlds were worlds apart. Most of my teachers, I learned, locked their classrooms while teaching; where I teach, of course, control of students' physical behavior is so perfected as to be invisible. I sometimes find college freshmen immature in their literary responses; looking at one teacher's photos of his sixth graders reminded me that his audience was immature in a much more fundamental sense. I am sure I am not the only Institute instructor who found that the more I learned about who and what and where and how my teachers taught, the more out of place I felt. What did I, of all people, know about the situations these teachers faced day after day? And what possible application could what I did with my students have in scenes so utterly remote?

Anxieties of this sort are built into the role of an instructor in the Institute; and no doubt our teacher-students have their own corresponding versions of these anxieties. What helps alleviate them is that the other half of the Institute's paradox is also true: namely that when its participants approach each other expecting to be irrevocably divided, they are always discovering that there is, after all, real community between them—that their professions (in the sense of both what they do and what they believe in) are in fact not unrelated; and that the other's work might strengthen his own.

The Institute builds on the simultaneous oneness and difference of its constituent halves in the way it organizes their work together. The Institute operates through a set of seminars, each led by a Yale professor and containing eight to twelve New Haven teachers, in which, after exploring a subject of mutual interest, the teachers prepare a detailed plan for a curriculum unit growing out of that subject, to be taught in their classes the next year. The Institute aims to strengthen public education, in other words, not by acting on it in an immediate way—by providing funds, for instance, or inserting outside experts directly into the teaching process—but by helping its teachers form more thoughtful and imaginative ideas of how education can be designed. The faculty leader of the seminar makes no pretense to know how, exactly, the students at the far end of the process ought to be taught; but he does pretend to know, and in an especially expert way, something that might enrich and enliven the educational program that is offered to them. In the seminar he invites his teacher-students into some portion of his expertise, then asks them to

figure out how they can adapt what they learn there to the needs and uses of their classes.

To say this is to suggest that the role of the faculty in the Teachers Institute is a peculiar one. On the one hand, he must be the instructor of his seminar. To bring its members to the point where they can think their subjects and protocols through in a genuinely new way, he must be willing really to teach them: to lead them to new materials, and above all to open out new frames of understanding for them. But on the other hand, he must also *not* be the instructor in any usual sense. His goal, here, is less to teach his students than to enable their teaching of their students. They are not in his seminar to learn his subject, but to remake it into their subject. In this sense his real function is not that of expert or authority but that of co-collaborator, working, with his high- and middle-school counterparts, to reinvent the terms on which their shared field can be communicated to others.

Teaching one's usual subject in a context where teaching has such unusual goals is a stiff challenge. Performing the role I have just outlined requires one to construct kinds of courses almost by definition radically unlike anything one has taught before. And even when the outlines of the course turn out to be well-drawn, the work, session by session and exchange by exchange, of making the seminar serve these quite unfamiliar ends requires large measures of patience, flexibility, and willingness to fail and try again.

The challenge of having constantly to rework the usual terms in which one conceives and presents one's field is, I would argue, the greatest benefit that a program like the Institute offers its faculty participants. To show how it operates, I might tell a little about my own experience. When I was asked to teach in the Institute for last summer, I had the (at this point very vague) idea that I might offer a seminar on autobiography. The topic seemed plausible enough. Autobiography was a subject of sufficient generality, I guessed, that it might hook up equally well with the work of teachers at many different grade and aptitude levels. It seemed, as well, a kind of writing that might have very general appeal, one that did not assume a pre-commitment to "literature" unlikely to be found in early grades or inner-city schools. I had just been teaching a series of autobiographies in a seminar at Yale, so that the subject was of fresh interest to me. And I had found in that class that autobiography offered an especially effective way of demonstrating the nature and action of style—another reason why it might be useful to teachers trying to promote awareness of language and its powers.

These were the grounds on which I first proposed my course. But significantly, thinking of this course as a project for the Institute made it

take some further turns. It was clear that in this context I could not expect the primary interest in the internal play of complex literary texts that I would take for granted in a college literature class—the claim for autobiography's interest would have to be framed in very different terms. Further, if my seminar was to speak to the central problems its participants faced as teachers, it could not deal with literature alone, but would also have to address the issue of student writing. In face of these necessities my course gradually refashioned itself—most crucially, by coming to identify autobiography not with a few remarkable books but with a primary human impulse, the impulse that makes us, in addition to living our life, also have to tell it and retell it: to record it, to recount it, in a hundred familiar ways to bring it to expression. Conceived in this way, any kind of text—a formal, printed life, but equally, say, a scrapbook; the stories of illustrious men, but equally those of students themselves—could become a revealing object for the study of autobiography. And conceived in this way, autobiography could be presented to students as an expressive art they were in many ways masters of—such that a program of student writing built out of autobiography could make writing not some alien, unmasterable skill designed endlessly to expose their incompetence, but part of their existing competence, a power already in their power. As finally evolved my seminar's idea was to stimulate thought on the reading and writing of autobiography, with reading and writing understood not as separate but as means to one another: to produce courses, thus, in which doing their own autobiographical writing would make students aware of the problems the authors they read were facing in their writing; and in which seeing how these authors solved their problems would enrich the store of expressive means at the student's disposal.

This was the state my conception had reached by the time the seminar began meeting, in the spring. But of course once it met, it was clear that many further adjustments would have to be made. One thing the first meeting revealed was simply that the actual participants in the seminar were much more diverse than I had imagined. They were diverse in every way, but most crucially in their prior understanding of the subject: one of my teachers thought that autobiographies were written mainly to make money; another clearly knew much more about contemporary American ethnic autobiography than I did. Just as significantly they differed in the audience their work would be directed back toward: some of my teachers taught high school seniors, others sixth graders; one had accelerated sections, several remedial ones; some taught English, as I had expected, but one taught it as a second language; and two taught mainly history, and one taught only chemistry.

Another problem that quickly became clear—not that it was completely

unforeseen—was that my teachers and I lived in very different literary universes. The works that occurred to me as standard examples of autobiography were largely unknown to them, and I was often equally ignorant of theirs. I had not planned, of course, to rely on obviously oversophisticated texts—*The Education of Henry Adams*, for instance, or *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (but what does autobiography mean, to a professor of American literature, if it does not mean works like those?). But even the works I thought would be more widely teachable often turned out to be, from their point of view, unsuitable for use with their classes. How our study could be focused became as big a problem as how our interests could be made compatible.

But the greatest difficulty was that none of us knew how to do the different *kind* of course that an Institute seminar embodied. We all knew how to be either the teacher or the student; how to be co-collaborators was more of a mystery. I certainly knew how to present a subject to a class; making a class re-imagine how a subject could be presented was a different proposition. Let's not study books as if they were independently interesting, I was saying, but only as they could help make students aware of and adept at expression in the most general sense; but of course all my acquired instincts as a teacher went in exactly the opposite way.

I will not pretend that all of these difficulties were ever overcome. But I will say that they were overcome much more successfully than I initially expected. And further, the way in which they were resolved showed the practicability of the Institute's ideal of collaborative co-creation. In our discussions my teachers and I could see at once that no single texts we could look at would be teachable in all (or even in very many) of our classes. But we could also see that aspects or problems in autobiography could be identified that all of us could profit from investigating, and that each of us could then relate to his teaching in his own way. Our weekly sessions, then, were organized around a series of questions about autobiography, some mine, some theirs, some genuinely mutual inventions: the question of voice in autobiography—how individualized expression is achieved in language, how autobiography's voice both reflects and creates the individual identity of the living autobiographical subject; the question of autobiography's history—how and why the self's record of itself has changed through time; the question of sincerity—how autobiography can recover and record authentically felt experience, whether it need reflect such experience or can invent the life it purports to record; the question of selection—what could be put into or left out of an autobiographical account, what different images and knowledges of the self different ways of selecting its history might create; and so on.

For each week's session we would read written selections that focused

the issue at hand in a particularly illuminating way. These assignments were sometimes my constructions, sometimes my teachers' ideas—but in many of the most successful cases they were a combination of the two. I wanted to hold two sessions first on autobiography's tendency to organize life-history around moments of crisis, then on what happens when sheer uneventful everydayness is made into autobiography's focus. I had the idea that this contrast could be pointed up by comparing James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," a piece in which crisis is piled on crisis—a father's death in a historic race riot, an initiatory birthday on a crisis of belief—until the texture of ordinary life all but disappears, with selections from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which potential crisis is always being defused by the pleasurable memory of mundane detail. These texts served to make my point well enough, but the point was both reenforced and marvelously expanded by the works my students added to our assignment: first a sheaf of their own students' essays, full of remembered hurricanes, arrests of parents, and deaths of beloved pets—perfect proof of how various crisis can be and how natural it is for us to arrange our told lives around them; and second, examples from their own reading of literature of the everyday—several of which, including an unforgettable passage from Laura Basse's *An Uncertain Memory* (a book I had never heard of), turned out to illustrate this idea far better than the work I had chosen.

Having talked about our readings in such a way as to bring a general problem in autobiography to our own fuller awareness, we would then try to reverse ourselves, and to consider how what we had been discussing could be made available to our students, and how it could lead to a program of student writing. This was the part of our work to which the teachers had the most brilliant contributions to make. I will not pretend that my co-workers were all pedagogical geniuses. Nevertheless when it came to thinking up ways in which a more or less abstract idea could be translated into a program of exercises, they exhibited a freewheeling improvisational inventiveness that I found quite remarkable, and from which college composition teachers (myself included) had much to learn. The best of their ideas—which they freely borrowed from each other—not only set interesting challenges for their students, but also made their writing not ancillary to learning but a central means through which learning could take place. One week I had them read selections from Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Wordworth's *The Prelude*, and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* as representative of different ways in which the self pictures and understands itself in different cultural and historical situations. How, I then asked, could you get this idea across to your students? One answered: "You could have them come to class

dressed up in the costumes of a different period." Another: "Not that; then they'll think the difference is just one of costume. Tell them they have to talk the way they would have at that time." And another: "Or have them tell what some part of their day would have been like in different historical circumstances." And another: "Or have them take one of these readings and then write an account of something that has happened to themselves, but using, say, Shepard's way of feeling and describing it; then rewrite some event in Shepard's narrative, retelling it as they would have experienced it." In an exercise like this last the act of writing might give a student a feeling for the historicality of experience that he would be unlikely to get from reading and discussion alone. But I falsely isolate it as an example: the worth of such a dialogue lies less in any set assignments it might produce than in the way it reenlivens everyone's ideas of what they could ask their students to do.

The actual good that a seminar of this sort will achieve, either for the teachers who take it or for the students they then return to teach, is not easily measured. It is easy to dream up wonderful benefits that participation in the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute might yield—a teacher corps rededicated to its work and and refreshed in its sense of what that work is really about; in consequence, a student body for whom the elements of knowledge are made accessible, not remote, and lively, not deadly, through their education. Whether any of this is so is, of course, not in my power to say. But I can say, from my own case, what benefits the Institute yields on the faculty side. When I signed on with the Institute I expected that the pleasures it would yield would be largely those of the worthy cause—the mild joy of knowing that, with only minor personal inconvenience, one had made a contribution to the public good. But I am not the only participant I know who felt, upon completing the Institute, that the principal good I had done was to myself.

It might be explained this way. To be a professor of the humanities is to assert at least implicitly that, however narrowly it is organized in one's daily practice, the work one is engaged in is of general human applicability, and its study of general human value. But in the world of the university this assertion is neither very seriously challenged nor very easily confirmed. The claims of the humanities are already granted there—but granted, we know, as one of the assumptions shared by the well-educated, the very assumptions that set them apart from those outside the wall. Teaching in a program like the Institute takes this profession out of its usual supportive confine and challenges it to reestablish its validity. In doing so it subjects this profession to strenuous testing: makes it have to discover what it is in its work that can claim to be of really general significance, and how it can establish that significance to the whole au-

dience it purports to address. The strain of this situation is genuinely painful, but even a very incomplete success in it yields a correspondingly great pleasure; the pleasure of finding that what is most important to us can in fact be made important to others—and not just the others who agree with us already, but those who have the least reason to share our assumptions in advance.