COMMON SENSE PSYCHOLOGY FOR HISTORY TEACHERS

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It is a given that history teachers want to teach their students all the history they possibly can. They are excited by history, believe students can learn valuable things as a result of its study, and work to find ways in which they can cover more history in their courses. This is a laudable goal. Yet in worrying about how to teach as much history as possible, history teachers frequently ignore common sense, with the consequence that despite the teacher's zeal, students learn less than they should. This essay describes how a teacher can use a little psychological common sense to insure that students learn more.

When it comes to common sense relative to human behavior, humanistic psychology has much to teach us. The principles of humanistic psychology have evolved from the observations of a rather small group of clinical psychologists who have concluded that the most important psychological needs are a desire to be accepted and feel important, a desire for respect, and a desire to believe that other people care about you; in short, the desire to be able to relate to other people in a psychologically satisfying way. Common sense could have told us as much. At one time the impact of this message on schools was great, probably too great in that it held out hope for an educational nirvana that could not help but fail. During the heyday of educational reform in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, humanistic psychology influenced school structure (open education, alternative schools, classrooms without walls and so forth), curriculum design (courses on aggression, intimacy, human sexuality), and pedagogy (non-verbal communication skills, affective teaching designs and so forth).

The success of such educational ventures seems to have been mixed. Simply changing a few things didn't produce the results reformers envisioned, although, to be honest, it is not at all clear what reformers wanted. Because of the lack of clarity in the thinking of many educational reformers, a general air of frustration and dismay eventually set in both on the part of educators and the public. As a consequence, humanistic psychology's potential for contributing to educational excellence has been lost in a post-reform era bent on getting tough, teaching the basics, and saving the educational establishment from its excesses.

This is just a brief history, indeed too brief if one's concern is the history of a decade or so of educational reform stretching into the mid 1970s. But the purpose of this essay is not to analyze educational reform. It is to suggest, rather, that there is a good deal of common sense in the things humanistic psychologists say.

Let us turn to some specific things humanistic psychologists have said and look at the relevance of their comments to the application of common sense and to the task facing the history teacher, especially at the introductory level. Carl Rogers, a giant in the field of humanistic psychology, suggested that he finds it valuable to accept other people for what they are. The more he tries to listen to people's problems and concerns, the less inclined he is to attempt to "fix things." Rogers has an optimistic outlook on human nature, as reflected in his view that people, basically, have a positive direction. Perhaps Rogers's most important argument is that learning is the product of an interpersonal attitude that a teacher has toward students and that each student has toward the teacher.

Arthur Combs, an educator rather than a clinical psychologist, drew from humanistic psychology to talk about "barriers to learning."[1] The barriers, Combs suggested, were anything that threatens instead of challenges, reduces self esteem, substitutes fact for meaning, or discourages a person's commitment and involvement. On classroom climate, another author argued that "feelings of acceptance are nurtured in an atmosphere of openness and caring."[2] Being more prophetic than we realized at the time, the late Paul Goodman insisted that teachers needed to be humanized before schools were completely destroyed by the students they had alienated.

There's nothing new or revolutionary in what these people have said. Unfortunately, however, many teachers have not listened. They think these people are either fuzzy minded idealists who know little about the real world of teaching or foolish educators who would substitute having students feel good about themselves for learning academic content. In fact, learning academic content and feeling good about oneself are not mutually exclusive; each is related to the other. Knowledge of subject matter contributes to one's feeling good about oneself, and feeling good about oneself contributes to gaining more knowledge of subject matter.

Another psychological component of good teaching has to do with what in psychology is called reinforcement theory, meaning encouraging positive behavior and discouraging negative behavior. According to this theory, there are three ways to modify behavior. All three methods work, although two, we are told, can have negative psychological consequences. Punishment is the most extreme way to change behavior. Less extreme, but as with punishment a way to do psychological damage, is negative reinforcement. We've all had lots of that in our lifetime. "Well kid, you ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer." "Big deal. You got an A in math. In this class you're flunking. How can you be so smart in math and so dumb in history I'll never know." Sound familiar? No wonder many students, given a fairly constant does of such hostility, eventually decide they are people who don't have much on the ball and proceed to act in ways that reinforce this loser's image.

The final type of reinforcement, the one that seems to work the best, is positive reinforcement. As teachers we've all given this type of response to students, although frequently we are stingy with our praise. Too often it goes to those who probably need it the least and is withheld from those who need it the most. In terms of psychological theory, the general advice is to ignore negative behavior as much as possible but always to praise positive behavior. Too many of us fail to follow this advice with the result that we have more than our share of classroom problems, and, perhaps of greater importance, our students fail to learn as much history as we would like. Yet, I suggest, if we would pay attention to reinforcement theory and utilize it consciously as part of our teaching, we would have fewer frustrations and greater success.

Another common sense ingredient has to do with how students develop confidence in themselves. If I had to pick one thing that most disturbs me as a teacher, it would be the fact that so many of my students, no matter what age, no matter whether graduate or undergraduate, lack confidence in themselves as people. And to the degree I can make any dent in this self perception--and I'm not claiming that as one person I can do much--I believe I have succeeded as a teacher.

For people to develop confidence in themselves two ingredients are necessary. First, people must accomplish something. Thus, if a teacher makes few demands on students, they will be in no position to develop self confidence. The reason so many young people have such a negative academic self image and lack confidence is because no one has required them to accomplish anything. In high school, most young people know that if they put in their time and make a minimal effort, they will be passed along from grade to grade and eventually graduate. In college many know they can select courses that make few serious academic demands on them. They graduate from college having manipulated the system with the consequence that their academic self confidence remains low. All they have accomplished is to beat the system. And, they know this took no special skill. Hence they recognize themselves for what they are: Con men rather than wise men. While the former appear to be confident, at heart they are unsure of themselves. The latter, by contrast, have considerable self confidence, even if they don't wear it on their sleeves.

The second ingredient in developing self confidence is the availability of positive reinforcement for a challenge met or a job well done. That is, it is not enough to meet challenges with success. That helps, but it isn't everything when it comes to developing self confidence. Why? Mainly because people's successes have either been ignored by people important to them or their success has been met with ridicule. For students the story is frequently the same. "Big deal. So you got a B+ in History. Your sister got an A." Or "I could do well too if I spent all my time studying." Such statements undermine people's justified feelings of success and cause them to fail to develop as much self confidence as they should. Teachers must not fall into this trap. They cannot ignore student success--remember, teachers are the ones who make demands on students--and they must not give negative reinforcement. If teachers set challenges for students, they must give praise--and lots of it--when students start to meet these challenges. And students who make even limited progress must get praise, just as the student who does very well must also be praised. Both need to be encouraged.

In summary, self confidence is developed by facing challenges and by being praised for having met such challenges. Reinforcement theory, which emphasizes the benefits of positive reinforcement, and common sense ideas about psychological barriers to learning are important to a history teacher who wants to be more effective in the classroom. Presuming the history teacher is a good student of history and teaches history in its rich complexity, he can be more effective in creating a classroom atmosphere that maximizes learning if this triad of ideas is used.

A word of caution is in order concerning these common sense ideas. A teacher cannot be a foolish romantic. That is, a teacher, while having a positive attitude and using positive reinforcement, cannot assume that good will and sensitivity will solve all problems. It is important to remember that the main ideas of humanistic psychology came from a clinical setting in which psychologists worked with people with emotional problems. One needs to be careful not to push the ideas of humanistic psychology too far or assume that all students will or should respond with enthusiasm when a teacher uses a few techniques to foster a supportive atmosphere. Teachers must bear in mind that some people are more private than others, that some are more shy, that some want to reveal much less of themselves than a teacher might want. But the sensitive teacher can work to create an atmosphere that encourages both sharing and privacy, that says to one

student that he is free to share private thoughts and to another that he is under no obligation to share them.

Another point for a teacher to keep in mind: Some people, for whatever reason, are insensitive. And, it is easy for insensitive people to put sensitive ones on the defensive and thereby manipulate them. The wise teacher must not allow students or himself to be manipulated or hurt by insensitive students. Thus, it is important for teachers to have self confidence. A self-confident person is not easily put on the defensive and will have the strength to stand up to insensitive youngsters and channel, if possible, their negative behavior in more positive directions. In any event, a teacher cannot allow insensitive students to destroy a positive classroom atmosphere even if, at times, they have to take drastic steps. In summary, a teacher must be strong, yet thoughtful. The teacher must know how to modify student behavior and not be changed by student behavior. Unfortunately, too many teachers allow students to change teacher behavior rather than vice-versa.

What are some practical tips by which a history teacher can put these common sense ideas into practice? First, the teacher needs to spell out clearly this philosophy to students. It is important to emphasize that students learn best in an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable, where they believe they are surrounded by people who are supportive of them, and where they can use their energy to learn rather than build psychological barriers to protect themselves from their teacher or fellow students. This process needs to be repeated from time to time to remind students why the teacher does certain things.

Secondly, the teacher needs to be patient yet firm in implementing these ideas. The teacher needs to stress that no student will be forced against his or her will to share personal thoughts or feelings. If the teacher is patient, encouraging but never criticizing the quiet, more private students, most of them will gradually develop trust in the teacher and in the class and will be willing to share with other students.

The teacher also needs to emphasize that students will be rewarded on the quality of their work and that the teacher will help those who want help, but that he will not express personal dissatisfaction if a student chooses to do poorly. That is, students must be reminded that in the final analysis it is the student, not the teacher, who is responsible for learning. Students who fail to complete assignments or who do poorly on exams will not be rewarded with passing grades. But the teacher must make clear that failure to perform academic tasks successfully will not be used as an excuse by the teacher to destroy the positive classroom atmosphere. Neither must students be allowed to ignore their academic responsibilities and then request extra work assignments. Students must become aware of the academic consequences of refusing to apply themselves and realize that extra work is simply a ploy devised by students to allow them to escape meeting the academic challenges they face. As I remind my students: If your father or mother needs complex heart surgery, who do you want as a surgeon, someone who passed the appropriate exams or someone who failed the exams but who was allowed to pass because he did extra work? Allowing students to avoid academic challenges destroys their chance to become responsible and undermines the development of self confidence. Teachers must not allow this to happen.

The teacher must first learn all the students' names and insist they all learn each others names. This is the first step in creating a positive

classroom environment. If a person cannot take the time to learn someone else's name, it indicates the degree to which that person has become insensitive to the psychological needs of others. There are various techniques for everyone learning the names. One successful method is to put students in a circle a week or so after class has started, have each student in clockwise order repeat the name and an interest of each student in the class. The last person to give the names and interests of the students will be the teacher who will proceed in a clockwise order to give the name and an interest of each student in the class. Then for several days the teacher needs to emphasize the names, test students by calling on them to repeat the names and so forth until it is apparent everyone has learned the names of everyone in the class.

The next suggestion is a product of the name exercise. That is, to the degree the size of the room allows, students should sit in a circle much of the time. This encourages interaction and encourages a positive classroom atmosphere. But whether or not the class sits in a circle is far less important than the emotional climate that evolves in the classroom.

Some teachers like to use group work as a method of instruction. If teachers use small groups, they work better, it seems to me, when they are kept small--no more than five students--when the teacher picks the groups, when the groups have specific tasks to perform, when the tasks can be completed within 15-20 minutes at the most, and when groups are not used every day. Within this context of group work it is possible to use some questions that will allow members of the group, at least early in the school year, to share personal thoughts and feelings prior to their beginning work on assigned academic tasks. I might ask students, for example, to tell something about themselves and then to share a feeling they have had in the past few days--anger, happiness, frustration--and why they have had this feeling. Students may feel some trepidation about sharing these kinds of thoughts at first, but they will become more relaxed and open as time passes. The teacher has to remind students that they are encouraged but not required to share and that the teacher will tolerate no peer pressure of a negative type to force students to share their thoughts and feelings. Once students get used to this type of activity and once a positive classroom atmosphere starts to evolve, it is not necessary to have sharing sessions except once in a while or when it appears that students need a reminder.

The teacher can also do some of these same things with the whole class. Again, the teacher needs to emphasize that student response is voluntary, but should continue this technique even if no students respond the first time or two it is tried. The teacher can ask students to share an accomplishment of which they are proud. The teacher can begin the process, and then respond positively with a "thank you for sharing that with us" to the few students who respond. No matter how few respond the first time, the teacher should be very positive. In time, students will become more relaxed and willing to share their thoughts and feelings. Some may not say anything in class but will tell the teacher on the side. The teacher must be positive about this, while gently encouraging the student to share this with the rest of the class the next time. A teacher can use such techniques for not more than ten minutes--fifteen at the absolute limit--no more than once a week in the beginning and then less often as the semester passes.

As time passes, and if the teacher is enthusiastic about the subject matter, makes legitimate academic demands, and utilizes plenty of positive reinforcement, class enthusiasm, attendance, and motivation will increase. Students will realize that they are important to the teacher, and the result

will be a learning atmosphere that is more enjoyable to everyone and in which students learn more history. And as I indicated at the onset, that's the goal of a history teacher.

NOTES

[1]"Modern Concepts of Learning," an address given by Arthur Combs to the Michigan Department of Education Staff, May, 1966.

[2]Elizabeth Hunter, Encounter in the Classroom, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972).