

*The Challenge and Responsibility of the L.D.S. Teacher*¹

by BRUCE B. CLARK*

The subject of this paper, originally delivered as a talk to graduating English majors and the English faculty at Brigham Young University, and now slightly revised as an essay, is an ominous one. The responsibilities resting on the shoulders of a teacher, as any teacher knows, are both frightening and wonderful. No role, unless it is parenthood, provides a more awesome challenge than does teaching. And it is in the realm of these challenges and responsibilities that I wish to share some thoughts.

Because I am an English teacher, what I say will have a special relevancy to the teaching of English; but I hope I have spread the focus enough to encompass the broad field of teaching as a whole. Also, part of what I say will explore the challenges that all teachers share, and part will explore the special challenges peculiar to L.D.S. teachers.

As a beginning let me describe seven types of teachers that I feel we should determine with all our will power never to become:

(1) First is the sentimentalist—the teacher who reacts emotionally to everything and everyone he teaches. I don't believe a teacher can get away with gushy sentimentality even in grade school. The children will see through it and mock it. Certainly in junior high and high school the weepy or saccharine teacher will be looked on by students as both shallow and weak. The ineffectiveness, indeed the harm, of such a teacher in college is so obvious as to need no comment. We cannot teach those who do not respect us, and no one respects the sentimentalist, not even his fellow sentimentalists. (I am not, of course, talking against genuine sentiment, which has its place in education as in life, and lies at the center of literature. The difference between sentiment and sentimentality

¹An address given at the English Department award banquet, May 15, 1964.

*Dr. Clark is professor of English and chairman of the English Department at Brigham Young University.

is the difference between emotion that is honest and emotion that is cheap, surfacy, and false.)

(2) Second is the cynic—the sophisticated intellectual egotist who believes in nothing, not even the subject that he teaches. He analyzes to scorn and examines to ridicule. Criticism for him means hyper-criticism. He is skilled at finding fault with all that he reads and with all of the students he teaches. In his role as teacher he is at the opposite extreme from the sentimentalist, scorning all forms of sentiment, both the true and the imitative; and in his dread of being regarded as “soft” or “wholesome” he sustains a pose of flippancy and snobbish boredom. Students may learn from such a teacher, but often he will do them harm greater than the help he gives them.

(3) The third undesirable type, the sadist, is a first cousin of the cynic. His attitude towards everything, including especially his students, is negative always, and he prides himself in failing as many students as possible, justifying himself by his “high academic standards.” He delights in student blunders because they give him an opportunity to ridicule. His students are in the grip of his power, and he punishes them without mercy, finding fault equally with all that they do and all that they don’t do, much like a Setebos delighting in the plight of a Caliban. He enjoys the suffering of others, and seems even to get a masochistic pleasure out of his own sour attitude. Pessimism is his dominant mood, sarcasm is his main weapon, low grades are his principal threats, and his students are his victims.

(4) Fourth is the egoistic show-off, the teacher who uses his classroom mostly as a theater in which to parade his personality before a captive audience. He is so interested in himself that he has little concern for others, including especially his students. Whether they learn or don’t learn, whether they fail or pass, is secondary to the marvelous experience they have of seeing and hearing him, and he hopes that they appreciate him as he deserves to be appreciated. In my criticism of such a teacher, I don’t want to imply that teaching should be dull and flat. Quite the contrary, it should be as vivid as possible, and every good teacher is properly part showman, perhaps even with a tinge of the prima donna in his nature. But teaching that focuses on the teacher’s desire to display himself

rather than on the needs of the students will always, I think, be bad teaching.

(5) Fifth is the faddist, the hobby-horse rider, the teacher with narrow interests who cannot see beyond his own myopia. Here we find the classicist who sees nothing of value in modern literature and art, and the modernist who views all literature and art before 1900 as uselessly old-fashioned; the American enthusiast who won't waste his or his students' time on foreign works, and the traditionalist who feels that only the uninformed will stoop to read an American book; the preacher-type teacher who turns art into a tool for instruction, using only those works that are explicitly didactic, and the obscurantist who scorns anything that can be understood; the scientist who sees nothing worthwhile in art, the artist who sees nothing worthwhile in science, and the moralist who sees nothing worthwhile in either art or science. Narrowness and prejudice can ruin an otherwise able teacher, who in his limited vision often becomes a cultist crusading to shape his students in his own narrow image and labeling as evil anyone who doesn't share his constricted views. In religion such narrowness can be especially dangerous, for one narrow man's orthodoxy may well be another narrow man's heresy. In religion, as in literature, as in art, as in education, as in life, the broad view should be cultivated, not at the sacrifice of truth or of critical standards, but with the reward of truth and of deepened critical standards. And all of this, I believe, is in harmony with the Prophet Joseph Smith's counsel that we should seek all things virtuous, lovely, and praiseworthy, getting the riches of the mind and spirit out of the world's best books.

(6) Sixth is the information-giver, the teacher who deludes himself into believing that he is fulfilling his teaching role when, like a machine, he feeds students a mass of facts and has them parrot the information back in examinations. Years ago I took a course in Shakespeare from a famous Shakespearean scholar. I looked forward to the course with excitement—and left it with disappointment. In it we learned every detail of Shakespeare's life, every date in and around his career, multitudinous facts about the publication of all his plays, and about their sources, innumerable items of information about the Shakespearean theater, and the language of Shakespeare's London, and the politics of Shakespeare's England. Everything,

in short, except an understanding of Shakespeare's writings. We had missed the most important thing; and with this missed, all of the other things were of little importance. I am not suggesting that knowledge is unimportant. It is very important, both as an end in itself and as a tool. But beyond knowledge lie principles and relationships and thought-processes and value-judgments that should be the ultimate concern of both a teacher and his students. Ignorance is dangerous, but knowledge without responsibility may be more dangerous. More than to give information, a teacher needs to help guide a student's mind to think, and even beyond that, to help him shape his character. Giving information is easy. Forming a thinking mind is hard. And shaping a strong character is hardest of all, partly because it must be shaped mostly from within. Giving information is only the beginning of a teacher's responsibility; the end is to stimulate, excite, motivate, lift, challenge, inspire.

(7) Seventh is the "wage-earner teacher," the person for whom teaching is primarily just a job, just a way to make a living. I am not implying that a teacher should work for a sub-standard salary; he should not. As a highly trained professional person, he is worthy of an adequate salary and should get it. But if he is a first-quality teacher he will work for higher wages than money. His reward will be the growth of his students and of his own vision, and the satisfaction of unselfishly giving himself in the service of the human struggle upward. As teachers we must resist the trend of our time to demand more and more money for less and less work, and we should also resist a growing tendency among ourselves to waste our energy in complaining about salaries, and about the burden of papers to correct and students to advise and committees to serve on. We need to subdue any feeling within us that teaching is just a job and cultivate an attitude of dedication in our work. At least we must do this if we want to rise above being mere wage-earners and become great teachers. Frankly I worry about the future of our profession when I see such teachers as P. A. Christensen and Orea Tanner² reach retirement age, with such as Karl Young following only a few years behind. Will those of us who are younger fill their places? We may have

²Professors emeriti of English at Brigham Young University, having served as outstanding teachers on the Provo campus since 1927 and 1938 respectively.

the knowledge and the skill, but will we have the power and the dedication?

Up to this point I have been talking mostly about extreme attitudes that as teachers we should avoid. Let me shift ground a little now and talk more directly about our goals in teaching. First, I believe, we should recognize that above all else we exist professionally to serve our students. This means that we should be concerned about them and available to them, outside the classroom as well as in it, for much of our best teaching is done outside the classroom. If we hide from our students, making ourselves as inaccessible as possible, we are neglecting one of our major responsibilities.

Some say we should be as objective as possible in teaching, treating each student impersonally. To the extent that this applies to standards of grading, I agree that it is the proper and necessary attitude; but to the extent that it applies to our relationship with the personalities of the students, we must see them as individuals. Every student is a unique personality and must be approached uniquely. The right way of handling one student may well be the wrong way for another, and we must treat each as sensitively and wisely as possible.

I remember a boy suffering from cerebral palsy whose brilliant mind was hampered with spasms that weakened the control of his body. He needed special arrangements to complete his examinations, and I would have been inexcusably unfair if I had treated him the same as the other students.

That boy's uniqueness was, of course, visible and invited immediate sympathy. Sometimes the injury is hidden inside. I remember a Freshman English student who was so torn emotionally that she could not complete some of her assignments. A few months earlier her father had shot her mother and stuffed the body down an abandoned well because the mother had caught the father molesting this girl, his own daughter. The father then shot himself as a posse approached his hideout in a clump of mountain trees. This girl had seen too much of life and too little of love. She needed the special understanding that a teacher can give when the parents have failed.

Sometimes, too, we must be firm and seemingly harsh. It is easier to be tenderly considerate than to be rigid, but sometimes rigidity is needed. I remember a boy who asked me to falsify a grade because he said he was suffering from an in-

curable disease and did not want to die with a "D" on his record. He was a brash boy who had never learned to be honest with himself; always he had found a way to maneuver around the truth. I told him that it was better to die with a "D" on his record than with a lie on his conscience. This is the cruellest thing I have ever told a student, but it was right. At least I *think* it was right.

These are dramatic examples. But, in less extreme ways, all of our students are unique personalities and need to be treated as such if we are to influence them beyond just feeding them information. I shall never forget the student who came to my office three or four years ago and said, "You are the worst teacher I ever had, and I've had some bad ones." I was stung by his comment, not by the falseness of it but because, as I thought the course over, it was true. I *was* his worst teacher. At least I was for him a bad teacher. He had special academic problems and I had failed to help him overcome them. I may have been a good teacher for other students in the class, but I was a bad teacher for this particular student. Our responsibility is not only to teach *part* of the students but to teach *all* of them who come to us. And when a student fails, a teacher fails also.

I suppose there has never been a teacher skilled and powerful enough to reach all his students, but we need to try. There is the student who sleeps with bored or weary eyes, and the one who sleeps with eyes open but mind closed; the one who says "I dare you to teach me," and the one who, like a sponge, uncritically absorbs everything; the girl who has learned to use her body more than her mind, and the boy who spends his time looking at her; the would-be writer who thinks that his small talent excuses him from learning anything, and the memorizer who confuses an accumulation of facts for genuine knowledge; the girl who always has a sympathy-winning explanation for her failure to measure up to her image of herself, and the boy who has brilliant possibilities but is so torn in the depths of his own thoughts that all we can see is a tangled mass of potentiality; the student who tries very hard and is very sweet and very wholesome but just doesn't have the mental strength to come through, and the one who terrifies because he is obviously brighter than the teacher; the gregarious student whose personality makes him always the center of a circle, and the one who is a misfit in all groups and all sit-

uations; the student who never speaks because he has nothing to say, and the one who never speaks although he has much to say, and the one who speaks often even though he has little to say. All of these and the hundreds of others equally diverse, all must be reached. At least we should try.

Part of our responsibility is to help students enjoy the excitement of learning. Perhaps teaching should at times be painful, but it should never be dull. I came out of high school hating English, although I had loved it in earlier years. A succession of dull teachers had poisoned me against it, the worst of whom was the football coach who taught English to round out his schedule and who spent one full semester reading to us *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in the flattest, most drearily monotonous voice I have ever heard in a classroom. The only things that saved me from hating the whole world of literature were a mother who encouraged me to love books and an inner compulsion that caused me to write dozens of grim short stories and romantic poems in secret, and to read endlessly. It wasn't until I was lucky enough to have Wallace Stegner as a Freshman English teacher in college that I rediscovered a pleasant relationship between the formal study of English in the classroom and the things I was reading and writing in secret. Even then I was so conditioned against English that three more years were needed to get the poison, and my passing desire to be a chemist, out of my system so that I could return to the first-love of my boyhood, literature, and could decide that teaching English would be my life.

Therefore, I repeat: Perhaps teaching should at times be painful, but it should never be dull. The best guarantee against poor discipline is good teaching. If the teaching is good enough, the students will be attentive and responsive. When students are bored and unruly, the best solution is not harsher rules but better teaching.

I would like to say a little more about the hard work of being a good teacher, because I think it *is* hard work—hard and long. Anyone who thinks otherwise can probably find and keep a job teaching, but he won't be a good teacher. One of the unfortunate things about teaching as a profession is that all teachers, whether strong or weak, energetic or lazy, inspired or dull, are paid about the same. Oh, we hear talk of merit pay, etc., but the truth is that the best teachers aren't paid much more than the worst teachers. They may be worth

several times as much, but they won't be paid according to their worth. The strong ones will be paid too little, and the weak ones will be paid too much. Therefore, the rewards for a good teacher must be other than money. Fortunately, the rewards are abundant, and they are available daily, including the wonderful pleasure of teaching itself.

If we are good teachers we will have to work hard just to complete our daily tasks. Even so, I don't think most of us ever reach our potentiality as thinking, creative human beings. Most people, including both those of us who are teachers and those who are students, operate at about half efficiency, I fear. We sleep too much, eat too much, idle too much, and waste too much time in trivia. We need to work harder, think deeper, exchange ideas more constructively, and create more abundantly. One of our special problems as teachers is that we talk constantly about the need to do scholarly and creative work—and then spend hours of precious time explaining why we don't have time to do these things. I am convinced that we do have time if we will organize and discipline it. Many years ago I planned to do a great deal of writing. In fact, I thought writing would be my central career. Then came doctoral work and teaching, and writing was forgotten. Well, not really forgotten but pushed to some indefinite time in the future. Then, about five years ago, I read some place the awful comment that if one has not published by the time he is forty he will never publish. I was annoyed by the statement, partly because I was already a little past forty. And I determined to write. Now, in the past four years, which have been the most crowded of my life, I have made time to write, in spite of increasingly extensive administrative responsibility, and without giving up teaching, even for a semester, because teaching is the relaxation that keeps me sane in an otherwise too tense existence. If I can do it, anyone can do it. At least any of you can do it.

As a final point I want to comment on what I feel are our special responsibilities as L.D.S. teachers, particularly for those of us who teach L.D.S. students in an L.D.S. school. Above all, I think we have a special responsibility to live the Gospel, remaining as true as we can to its fundamental principles. I have heard some say that we have no more responsibility than do all members of the Church. But I don't feel this way. I feel that because we are selected to teach the youth of the Church we have a special responsibility to be loyal and spiritual

in our personal lives. Our students need to observe our activity in the Church, to sense our faith, to hear our convictions. I do not mean that we should spend our class time preaching to our students. Our responsibility is to teach the subject matter for which we are professionally trained, and besides, preaching tends only to alienate the most sensitive of the students. But occasionally we need to let students know where we stand on the vital issues of the spirit. They need to know that we have studied philosophy and literature and science and remained strong in our faith in the Gospel. They need to know that we have explored the unanswerable questions with our testimonies intact. I am not asking that we betray our integrity. I am asking only that we fulfill and share it.

As I say all of this I hope no one feels I am denying my loyalty to the world of literature and art that I respect so much. I believe we have a solemn obligation to teach in harmony with the fundamental principles and practices of the Church, and I believe we have an equally solemn obligation to be defenders of liberal culture and the humanities. And, which is most important of all for me, I believe we can keep both loyalties strong, without hypocrisy or double-talk or double-think. Through the centuries literature, and especially poetry, has been the bulwark of man's faith and the guardian of his spiritual ideals, as well as the goad to his conscience. That there should be, or seem to be, a battle between religion and art is most regrettable. Of course, there are extremists on both sides, but we should lament them, not extol them. We should pity the men of religion who see art as an obstacle to their Christian faith, and we should pity the men of art who see religion as an enemy to their ideals. Many have deplored the rift between religion and art, and many have pleaded for an armistice. But too often the crusader for religion has been willing to compromise only on his terms, with the bulk of art thrown out of his ideal Christian republic and only that left which can be turned into the handmaiden of religion; and too often the crusader for art has been willing to compromise only on his terms, with religion knuckling under to acknowledge not only its sins and prejudice but also the ultimate supremacy of art. If the war between religion and art is lamentable, the efforts to end the war with such unequal compromises are hardly less lamentable. As L.D.S. teachers, we need to speak courageously our confidence that liberal education and religion

are comrades in arms against the common foes of selfishness, materialism, and all things maudlin, superficial, and gross. This is the goal of education, and this is the challenge of the first-quality teacher.

I have been talking about the ideal teacher. My students will testify that as a teacher I too fall short. My only plea is that I am human, and that, however, inadequate, I see the vision.