BAD ATTITUDE

Confronting the Views that Hinder Students' Learning

BY VINCENT RYAN RUGGIERO

S OME YEARS ago, while conducting a workshop, I had an interesting conversation with a teacher who had recently been a runner-up for "Teacher of the Year" in her state. Even though she had been in the profession for about 15 years, she seemed to have retained the high enthusiasm and optimism of a beginning teacher. Nevertheless, something was troubling her. "A few years ago, when I returned from a sabbatical," she explained, "I noticed a difference in the students. They seemed less interested in learning, more impatient, less polite to one another, and

Vincent Ryan Ruggiero taught for 28 years in the Humanities Department at the State University of New York at Delhi. He has authored numerous books on ethics, rhetoric, and critical thinking, and is currently president of Mind Power, Inc. He may be reached by e-mail at betterattitudes@aol.com. This article is adapted from his book Changing Attitudes: A Strategy for Motivating Students to Learn. *Copyright © 1998 by Allyn and Bacon. Reprinted with permission. A companion workbook for use with students,* Thinking Critically About Attitudes, *is also available from Allyn and Bacon Publishers (call 800/278-3525 or visit their Web site at www.abacon.com).*

less respectful of me than my previous classes had been. At first I decided that the students probably were no different, but that being out of the classroom for a year and working with adults had affected my perception.

"When the impression didn't go away but became stronger," she continued, "I thought I might be experiencing burnout. But that didn't seem likely because I was still excited about teaching and enjoyed interacting with students. In addition, preparing lively and interesting lessons had always been a strong point for me, and I was sure the lessons I was then using were at least as good as any I had used in the past. Eventually, I decided my original impression had been correct—the students had changed, in fact were continuing to change, and not for the better."

My interest in that teacher's story was heightened by the fact that my own experience in the classroom supported it. And since that time, hundreds of teachers have shared similar stories with me. Indisposition to learn seems to be considerably more widespread than it was a generation or two ago.

What is the cause of this indisposition? Depending on which pundit one reads, the fault lies with teacher incompetence, parental dereliction, or socioeconomic deprivation. Without denying that these factors exist and in many

cases seriously aggravate the situation, I propose that they are not the main cause of the problem. That cause is the *attitudes* students bring to the classroom, attitudes that obstruct teaching and thwart learning.

The negative attitudes we see in our students can be traced to ideas of "selfism" advanced by modern philosophers and/or psychologists throughout this century and, in some cases, in previous centuries. Of course, very few students are familiar with the original expression of these ideas, but many are familiar with popularized (and sometimes distorted) versions of the original ideas. And virtually all students have been exposed to the advertising industry's and the entertainment and communications media's glamorization of the self-help message. This glamorization may have a more powerful effect than reading because it occurs when the mind is essentially at rest.

The concept of self-improvement has undergone dramatic change since 1911, when Ambrose Bierce mockingly defined self-esteem as "an erroneous appraisement." Good and bad character are now known as "personality differences." Rights have replaced responsibilities. The research on *egocentrism* and *ethnocentrism* that informed discussion of human growth and development in the mid-20th century is ignored; indeed, the terms themselves are considered politically incorrect. A revolution has taken place in the vocabulary of self. Words that imply responsibility or accountability—*self-criticism, self-denial, self-discipline, self-control, self-effacement, self-mastery, self-reproach,* and *self-sacrifice*—are no longer in fashion. The language most in favor is that which exalts the self—*self-expression, self-assertion, self-indulgence, self-realization, self-approval, self-acceptance, self-love,* and the ubiquitous *self-esteem.*

Not content with self-adulation, many psyche-strokers have escalated their message. They now urge self-worship! Swami Muktananda chants, "God dwells within you as you; worship your Self," confirming the message of Ramtha, the reportedly 35,000-year-old warrior who speaks through the actress Shirley MacLaine. Ray Bradbury, science fiction writer turned theologian, preaches, "We are God giving Himself a reason for being." Psychologist Will Schutz exults, "I am everywhere, I am omniscient, I am God." And New Age author Jack Underhill inspires his readers by proclaiming, "You are the only thing that is real. Everything else is your imagination...."

The hyperbole may have increased, but the essential message of selfism has been the same for almost four decades. Such prolonged exposure to any theme is bound to influence not just young people but adults as well. As a result, many adults outspokenly champion that message and strongly resent any criticism of it. Others have not formally embraced the message but tend to regard it favorably and are skeptical of arguments against it. Still others are not so much favorably disposed to the message as they are familiar and comfortable with it and therefore disinclined to question it. Taken together, the number of people in these classifications is larger than the number who have become suspicious of selfism and are therefore willing to subject its claims to critical examination. Fortunately, the latter group includes many teachers, undoubtedly because they, more than any other group, have had to deal with the consequences of selfism.

Why Students Aren't Learning

The cartoon shows a blackboard with "A, B, C, D, E, F, G" written on it. The teacher stands with chalk in her hand, having just been interrupted by the little boy standing at her side. "I hope that's about all of them," he says. "I'm beginning to lose interest." Every teacher knows that beneath the humor lies the depressing reality that many students share the little boy's perspective. For them schoolwork is a useless distraction from the unceasing enjoyment they believe to be everyone's birthright. Their lack of motivation prevents them from acquiring basic skills and knowledge, as well as from developing the habits of dependability and persistence necessary for success in school and in life. They attend class irregularly, refuse to do homework, and are contemptuous if not downright hostile toward their teachers and peers.

Pundits are largely oblivious to the problem posed by such behaviors, no doubt because they are so busy crying malfeasance and reciting the old accusatory litany: "If the students haven't learned, the teacher hasn't taught," "The more teachers are paid, the less they accomplish," "Their workday and workyear are too short," "Tenure has ensured incompetence," "The teachers' unions have too much power." Nor are teachers the only objects of such criticisms. Parents, too, are presumed to be shirking their responsibilities, and being too permissive, indulgent, and quick to defend their children, even when the behavior in question is not merely disruptive but criminal.

No reasonable person will deny that there are incompetent or irresponsible teachers and parents; in fact, a strong argument could be made that the extent and degree of dereliction are greater today than they have ever been. But the carpers too conveniently ignore another, in some ways more significant fact—a great many, and perhaps most, of today's parents and teachers espouse values very similar to those of past generations:

> They urge students to become active participants in learning and in life.
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> They stress that truth is discovered by study and reflection.
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> They emphasize that the essential ingredient in achievement is effort.
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> They value informed opinions over uninformed opinions.
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> They urge a more demanding moral standard than personal preference.
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> They portray intellectual activities as rewarding and satisfying.
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> They believe self-improvement involves changing one's self.
>
> They place a high value on critical thinking and encourage its development.
>
> They urge students to practice self-discipline and make their lives count.

The Source of Opposing Values

If large numbers of teachers and parents have not abandoned these time-honored values and in fact are doing their best to promote them, who or what is causing so many young people to adopt *opposing* attitudes? The answer is so obvious that one can only marvel that the pundits have succeeded in ignoring it: *mass culture,* the ideas and values disseminated by the entertainment and communications media (books, newspapers, magazines, popu-

lar music, radio, and television) and by the advertising industry.

> In opposition to active living, mass culture promotes a spectator mentality and a desire to be entertained.
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> In opposition to objective truth, mass culture extols subjective, design-it-yourself reality—"If I believe it, then it is true for me."
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> In opposition to achievement through effort, mass culture promotes achievement through proclamation—"I am good, I am talented, I am wonderful."
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> In opposition to informed opinion, mass culture suggests that all opinions are equally meritorious.
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> In opposition to a demanding moral standard, mass culture extols doing whatever feels good.
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> In opposition to intellectual activities, mass culture teaches that the only satisfying activities are those that dazzle the senses.
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> In opposition to improvement through constructive change, mass culture promotes accepting and asserting one's self and inflicting self on others.
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> In opposition to thinking, mass culture (particularly the advertising industry) plays on the public's needs and desires and prompts people to suspend critical judgment and accept biased testimony as fact.
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> In opposition to self-discipline, mass culture lauds immoderation and lack of restraint.

In fairness, it should be noted that media and advertising people did not conceive these ideas themselves; they merely encountered the thinking of various scholars and researchers (often in popularized form) and embraced that thinking. The idea that morality is relative and subjective, for example, derives from such philosophers as David Hume and Bertrand Russell. (As the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero once remarked, "There is nothing so ridiculous but some philosopher has said it.") And the notion that self-esteem is indispensable for achievement can be traced to humanistic psychology, notably the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. In some cases, mass culture represented the original ideas faithfully; in others, it oversimplified or otherwise distorted them. But in every instance the disseminators have presented the ideas more powerfully, and to a vastly wider audience, than the scholars had done. Theories that once were accessible only to advanced students of narrow areas of specialization are now broadcast, often dramatically, to millions of people who lack the maturity or educational background to evaluate them discerningly.

Consider the impact of a single medium, television. By age 18 a person who has watched three hours of television a day (from age 5) will have been exposed to over 14,000 hours of mass culture's ideas and values, enhanced by laugh and applause tracks, background music, and other devices of emphasis. Much of that time, of course, is devoted to commercials, which, since the advent of the 15-second commercial in the 1980s, occur at a rate of 44 per hour. The average television viewer is bombarded with more than *48,000 commercials annually,* each of them a cleverly designed appeal, wrapped in the values of mass culture.

Among the myriad themes of popular culture, three are particularly powerful and inimical to learning: self-indulgence, impulsiveness, and instant gratification. Self-indulgence says, "I am entitled to do or say whatever I wish because I am more important than other people"; impulsiveness, "I should follow my urges because spontaneity is more desirable than reflectiveness and restraint is repressive"; and instant gratification, "Pleasure delayed is pleasure denied." The logical corollary to these themes is that anyone who promotes self-control, restraint, and delayed gratification—notably a parent or a teacher—is ignorant of human nature, obstructive of the process of growth and development, and in violation of other people's inalienable rights.

Little wonder that movies depict parents and teachers as nerds, neanderthals, or worse. Or that best-selling self-help authors like Wayne Dyer and Peter McWilliams scorn the lessons of home and school. Dyer (1995) informs his readers, "You are sacred, and in order to know it you must transcend the old belief system you've adopted" (p. xii). (Imagine the extraordinary arrogance and gall required to condemn so cavalierly *all* the lessons of *all* parents and teachers!) McWilliams (1991, 1994) goes further, defining "evil" as the "unnecessary life experience" or "learned junk" imposed on unsuspecting students by parents, teachers, and other authorities. He advises his readers to reject that "shell of imitation good" and seek the genuine good, which lies where else but in everyone's core self, that lovely "sea of peace, calm, and joy."

From all indications these writers, and the legions of others who share their good child/evil adults perspective, are quite serious. More's the pity, for their theory defies common sense. They would have us believe that everyone comes into the world virtuous and wise and becomes evil and foolish only when parents and teachers begin to guide their development. The problem is, the parents and teachers were once children themselves. How did *they* lose their virtue and wisdom and become corrupters of the young? Are *their* parents to blame? And were *those* parents not deprived of their perfection by *their* parents before them? Where did it all begin?

The self-help gurus and other sages do not follow the logic of their position and ask these pertinent questions because doing so would allow those convenient villains, teachers and parents, to absolve themselves by pointing the finger of blame back to the previous generation. And the inevitable infinite regression, through which every generation assigns responsibility for its condition to the previous generation (all the way back to Adam and Eve, who blamed the devil), is not nearly so much fun for the pundits as blaming flesh-and-blood contemporaries.

Silly theories aside, *the principal reason for today's academic deficiency is that mass culture has undermined young people's desire to learn and their respect for parents and teachers.* This unfortunate situation is not likely to change dramatically until the purveyors of that culture acknowledge their responsibility to help rather than hinder the process of education. Teachers, of course, cannot afford to wait for that happy eventuality; they must help students see the fallacies in mass culture's perspective on life now so they can make the most of their time in school.

Recognizing Obstructive Attitudes

Before students can be motivated to alter their attitudes, they must first understand which ones are beneficial and

which create obstacles to their success and personal fulfillment. The most obvious way for students to achieve this understanding would be to have them analyze their own behavior, conceptualize and evaluate the underlying beliefs, and decide whether they are reasonable. Not only is that way too sophisticated and difficult for the great majority of students, particularly younger students, to follow; it also demands a level of interest and motivation relatively few students possess. The approach taken in my book, *Changing Attitudes,* and its companion workbook. *Thinking Critically About Attitudes,* is considerably easier and more practical: providing students with already conceptualized and expressed ideas and guiding them to test the ideas against their own experience and knowledge. In this article, we will examine several widespread, unhealthy attitudes and consider the context in which each is likely to occur and the way it blocks learning. More importantly, we will probe the error of each attitude and identify an alternative perspective that enhances rather than impedes learning. This treatment, alas, will not be—indeed, *cannot* be—entirely free of controversy because we teachers have been exposed to the same mass culture that has corrupted students' attitudes and values. Although that culture may not have affected us nearly as broadly or as deeply as it has our students—for example, it may not have succeeded in displacing our core values—we cannot reasonably deny its existence or the likelihood that it has to some extent affected our thinking about important matters.

Two brief examples will illustrate the fact that mass culture influences teachers as well as students. If a professor had said 40 or 50 years ago, "There are no right answers in this course," the students would probably have reported him or her to the dean for admitting incompetence or for proclaiming that a course they were paying good money for lacked meaningful content—or both. Then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the "no right answers" saying was heard in classrooms around the nation. Did it miraculously occur independently to a few hundred thousand people? Hardly. Political correctness of the day required that professors talk like that (much as it required them to arrange classroom seating in a circle and adopt the attire then fashionable among students). Instead of objecting to this disclaimer, many otherwise brilliant individuals willingly surrendered their better judgment and proceeded to chant "no right answers here," often for years, apparently never once wondering whether this mantra harmed students' motivation to learn or contradicted the "objective" testing used in the course.

The second example is more contemporary. Legions of elementary and secondary school teachers remind their students at every opportunity, "You can be anything you want to be and do anything you want to do. There are no limits except those you impose on yourself." Since they say this in complete seriousness, they obviously have never pondered the odds of a tone-deaf man singing lead tenor at the Met or a 5' 1" woman playing center for the Los Angeles Lakers. No matter how pure the intentions of such teachers, they are talking lunacy, and cruel lunacy at that. Life itself imposes all kinds of restrictions on us all, and the earlier in life we learn it, the less traumatic the realization will be. Some of us are positively overflowing with musical potential; others couldn't carry a tune with the combined assistance of Pavarotti, Domingo, and Carreras. Some have impressive mechanical aptitude; others couldn't program a VCR if their lives depended on it. And so on down the long list of capacities.

Why are so many teachers committed to the "you can be anything" message? Certainly not because they have no other choices. With a small investment of imagination, they could think of half a dozen inspiring things to say that have the additional virtue of being sensible and honest, things that build genuine rather than false confidence. No, they say it for no other reason than that the self-help industry has proclaimed that students won't feel good about themselves unless they say it, and if students don't feel good about themselves they are doomed to failure.

Some readers may take offense at the suggestion that teachers, as well as students, are vulnerable to fallacious thinking. This reaction is understandable. For several decades, mass culture has incessantly promoted the notions that any ideas one has are necessarily correct because one has them and that acknowledging one's limitations destroys self-confidence. Far from being the insights they are purported to be, these notions have proved to be powerful obstacles to progress in the various academic fields, as well as impediments to students' learning. They promise intellectual liberation but create slaves to whim, first impression, and self-serving interpretation. If we want students to defer judgment, give every idea a fair hearing, and base their evaluation on an idea's strengths and weaknesses rather than on its familiarity or compatibility with their personal viewpoint, we must model this behavior through good example. Preaching alone will not be enough.

A Strategy for Dealing with Attitudes

Attitudes are difficult to address in the classroom because the beliefs that underlie them are seldom expressed verbally and thus tend to remain below the level of students' consciousness. To say that these beliefs are not expressed in words, however, is not to say there is any great impediment to expressing them. Similarly, to say students are generally unaware of their attitudes does not mean they cannot *become* aware. It is possible, in the words of the cliché, to "get in touch with" our attitudes, and not just in the sense of experiencing them. We can apprehend them intellectually, know them *in terms of the beliefs they flow from.* A male chauvinist might, for example, come to the realization that his attitude toward women could be accurately stated as "Women are inferior to men," "Women exist to be dominated by men," or even "Women are contemptible." This realization would enable him to assess his attitude.

The strategy for helping students to cultivate more positive attitudes is rooted in this maxim: *The sharper and more complete one's awareness of a phenomenon, the more fully it can be understood and evaluated.* By expressing attitudes as beliefs, we make them accessible to logical analysis. Such a transformation is in no way artificial because attitudes and the beliefs that fuel them are interwoven. Every attitude implies one or more corresponding beliefs. If I display hostility toward you, the implica-

tion is that you have done something to me to warrant my attitude. If you have done nothing to me, my hostility is clearly misplaced. If I consider your presence in "my" workplace or neighborhood, or your very existence, to be an offense against me, my hostility is not only misplaced but profoundly illogical. As long as my hostility remains below the surface of consciousness, I will undoubtedly never be disposed to test its appropriateness. Only when I encounter it as a belief, either through my own effort at self-understanding or through reading or addressing a homework assignment, am I likely to be able to appraise it.

Simply stated, the strategy for dealing with attitudes is to (1) determine the specific attitudes that impede student learning in your course, (2) express the attitudes as beliefs, and (3) guide students in analyzing the beliefs and reaching conclusions that reflect both the principles of logic and the students' own experiences. Of course, many students have little or no acquaintance with logic and, given mass culture's elevation of feeling over thought, are inclined to view their own experiences shallowly and are indisposed to trust logic. Moreover, the knowledge that a belief is unreasonable will not automatically lead to rejection of the attitude associated with it. Still, one thing is certain—the more insight students gain into the beliefs discussed here, the more difficult it will be for them to maintain unhealthy attitudes such as the ones that follow.

Unhealthy Attitudes

"Being myself makes self-discipline unnecessary"

For almost half a century, psychologists have focused more attention on "being" and "becoming" than those concepts had received in any previous age. Unfortunately, the result has been befuddlement rather than insight. If an author had titled a book *On Becoming a Person,* say, a couple of hundred years ago, he would have been thought intellectually deficient. Educated people would have said, "Dear fellow, one doesn't become a person—one simply is a person. To speak of becoming what one already is is ludicrous." But times change. In the allegedly enlightened mid-1900s, Carl Rogers' book of that very title became a bestseller and profoundly influenced both the profession of psychology and mass culture. Rogers (1961) expressed this view of being and becoming:

> *I find I am more effective when I can listen acceptantly to myself, and can be myself*...When I accept myself as I am, then I change...We cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed. (p. 17)

In this and other books, Rogers resurrected Rousseau and scorned the historic wisdom that had been shared throughout the centuries by virtually every intellectual tradition, West or East. Moreover, he created a confusion that has plagued the self-improvement industry up to the present. Virtually every book, article, tape, seminar, workshop, and educational program on the subject rhapsodizes about becoming, developing, and actualizing the self—and then promptly contradicts itself by defining the process in terms of being what one already is. This near unanimity is understandable—to approve the idea of changing the self would be to commit heresy against the doctrine of inherent goodness and individuality.

The popular expression of the self-help message is "Let yourself be—put aside artificial constraints and inhibitions and allow the authentic you to burst forth." With prior restraint of the self branded anathema, we should not be at all surprised that students regard self-discipline as an impediment to self-actualization.

The challenge to teachers is to help students overcome the prevalent confusion about being and becoming. Common sense supports the traditional view that we are all persons by virtue of being human. Our personhood, like our humanity, is utterly complete, and it is ludicrous to speak of becoming what we already are. Because the essence of becoming is change, we can become only *what we are not.* Change, of course, may be either a matter of degree or of kind, so we can both gain qualities we don't now have and also enlarge the qualities we do have. The unmannerly can acquire manners, the cruel can become kind, the monolingual can master other languages. Similarly, those who are already studious, tolerant, patient, or compassionate can become more so. Change, of course, is not always for the better. Accidentally or by choice, we may become worse than we were. Everyday experience reminds us that we can ill afford to relax our effort to improve.

This understanding of becoming blends perfectly with the ideas that we are imperfect rather than inherently wise and good, and that both individuality and knowledge are gained by effort rather than being inborn. All of which underlines two axioms upon which genuine self-improvement, in or out of the classroom, rests: Human knowledge, wisdom, and goodness can always be increased, and self-discipline is required to sustain the effort to improve.

Students should be encouraged to replace the attitude "Being myself makes self-discipline unnecessary" with *"The great challenge in life is not being but becoming, which requires self-discipline."*

To help students discover the desirability of this change, have them list at least 10 activities people undertake to improve themselves—for example, going on a diet, starting a bodybuilding program, learning to play a musical instrument. Next, for each of the activities they listed have them answer the following questions and then discuss their answers in class: Does this activity require effort? Are people sometimes tempted to miss a session? Does missing one session increase the tendency to miss others? Does forcing oneself to attend all sessions increase the chance of reaching the final goal?

* * *

"If I have high self-esteem I will be successful"

Long before this became a prominent attitude of many young people, it was embraced by the psychological community. Since the early 1960s, psychologists have regarded self-esteem as the indispensable ingredient in mental health: People who possessed it were bound to succeed; those who did not could expect failure or even more dire consequences. According to one well-known psychologist, *"whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in 20th-century America, then widespread 'mental illness,' neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur"* (Dobson, 1974, pp. 12-13, emphasis his). Researchers who shared this view claimed to find connections between low self-esteem and gang violence, domestic abuse, terrorism, armed robbery, murder, hate crimes, and child abuse (reported in Baumeister, Smart, and Boden, 1996).

To ensure that children would not suffer these consequences, schools initiated programs to build students' self-esteem, assuming that they were promoting academic excellence in the process. In many cases the approaches constituted an extravagant departure from traditional pedagogy: Academic standards were often lowered for fear that students' egos were too fragile for occasional failures, and self-affirming activities, such as the chanting of "I'm special," "I am beautiful," and "I believe in me," were instituted. Business and personal development seminars adopted a similar approach: One sales trainer advised his clients to flood their minds with sentences like "I'm smart," "I'm graceful," "I'm talented," and—presto!—they'd have those qualities (quoted in McGarvey, 1990).

Although millions of people continue to believe that high self-esteem is unqualifiedly good and low self-esteem is dangerous, research contradicts this view. In one National Institute of Mental Health study aimed at establishing a relationship between low self-esteem and juvenile delinquency, the researchers found that "the effects of self-esteem on delinquent behavior is negligible" and added that "given the extensive speculation and debate about self-esteem and delinquency, we find these results something of an embarrassment" (quoted in Bobgan and Bobgan, 1987, p. 60).

Similarly, a scholarly review of close to 200 research studies on the relationship between self-esteem and violence produced some surprises. If the prevailing wisdom were correct, the reviewers reasoned, then women should commit more violent crimes than men because their self-esteem tends to be lower; rapists, juvenile delinquents, gang members, and psychopaths would be expected to have unusually low self-esteem, black men should have been more violent than white men during the days of slavery; and the only way a normal person could be made to torture others would be to have his or her self-esteem stripped away. However, in each case the authors found that the evidence documented the *opposite.* Women are less violent than men. Rapists, juvenile delinquents, gang members, and psychopaths have high self-esteem. Black men were considerably less violent than white men dur-

ing the days of slavery. And the actual training of torturers (lamentably still pursued in some places) consists of *increasing* their self-esteem and sense of superiority. But what of all those studies, mentioned earlier, that purportedly found a correlation between low self-esteem and various kinds of violence? On close examination, the authors found, those studies were far too heavy on assertion and much too light on evidence (Baumeister, Smart, and Boden, 1996).

From this review of the research literature, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden reached a number of conclusions: that people with favorable opinions of themselves have a greater desire for self-enhancement and a greater sensitivity to criticism than those with low self-esteem; that aggression, crime, and violence are not caused by low self-esteem but by "threatened egotism"; and that egotism is most likely to be threatened when people make "unrealistically positive self-appraisals." They recommend that the therapy for such people should consist, not of building self-esteem, as they already feel superior to other people, but of "cultivating self-control" and "instilling modesty and humility."

Stanton Samenow, an expert on criminal behavior, shares this perspective. He has found that rapists, kidnappers, and child molesters generally do not have a negative self-image; they see themselves as decent human beings. They commit crimes not because they don't know the law, or because they can't tell right from wrong, but because they decide that they are exceptions to the law and the moral code. A criminal, Samenow explains (1984), "believes he is entitled to whatever he desires, and he will pursue it ruthlessly...[He] does not regard himself as obligated to anyone and rarely justifies his actions to himself. The justifications come later and only when he has to defend himself to others."

Educational research has produced almost identical findings. A group of University of California scholars, many of them *favorably* disposed to self-esteem theory, reviewed the research on self-esteem and found, in the words of sociologist Neil Smelser, "the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent" (Kohn, 1994, p. 274). In an international study assessing both math competency and self-image about math performance, Koreans scored highest in proficiency but lowest in self-image. Americans, on the other hand, scored lowest in proficiency but highest in self-image (LaPointe, Mean, and Philips, 1989). Purdue University researchers compared the problem-solving performance of low self-esteem and high self-esteem individuals and found that "the higher the self-esteem, the poorer the performance" (McCormack, 1981).

These conclusions should come as no great surprise. They were conventional wisdom for centuries before self-esteem theory was conceived. Socrates' choice of imperatives—"know thyself" rather than "esteem thyself"—implies his understanding that in the absence of self-knowledge there can be no reasonable assessment of whether esteem is deserved. And Samuel Johnson, the famous 18th-century lexicographer, wrote:

> Such is the consequence of too high an opinion of our own powers and knowledge; it makes us in youth negligent, and in age useless; it teaches us too soon to be satisfied with our attainments; or it makes our attainments unpleasing, unpopular,

and ineffectual; it neither suffers us to learn, nor to teach; but withholds us from those, by whom we might be instructed, and drives those from us, whom we might instruct. (Danckert, 1992, p. 111)

Johnson also observed, more ominously: "He that overvalues himself will undervalue others, and he that undervalues others will oppress them" (Danckert, 1992, p. 98).

Barbara Lerner, in an article published in this magazine in 1985, noted that both Alfred Binet and Sigmund Freud defended "earned self-esteem" over the "feel-good-now self-esteem" that is now fashionable. Binet believed self-criticism is important, that it isn't inborn but must be learned, and that, in Lerner's words, "self-criticism [is] the essence of intelligence, the master key that unlock[s] the doors to competence and excellence alike." Freud was convinced that the child is absorbed with self and pleasure and can only be successful in his or her career or personal life by getting beyond self to challenges and beyond pleasure to reality.

A growing number of scholars and educators are endorsing this older perspective. "It makes no sense for students to be full of self-esteem if they are empty of knowledge," argues Paul Vitz (1994, p. 18), because they will have to face reality some day and realize that the self-adulation was empty whereas the ignorance remains real. For Martin Seligman, "what needs improving is not self-esteem but...our skills [for dealing] with the world" (cited in Reeve, 1996, p. 152). Summarizing contemporary research, John Marshall Reeve explains that the view of self formed in early childhood is shaped by "wildly biased parents," but eventually, through exposure to "peers, teachers, task feedback...and social comparison," a view simultaneously more realistic and more negative emerges—more negative because, contrary to the parents' view, "the self comes to realize that it is probably not the fastest, smartest, prettiest, and strongest self in the history of the world."

Reeve believes the evidence is clear that "increases in self-esteem do not produce increases in academic achievement; rather, increases in academic achievement produce increases in self-esteem." He therefore endorses a shift in educational emphasis from building self-esteem to developing academic skills through active, problem-based, collaborative learning. This approach, he believes, will develop a healthy self-view, which he defines as "authentic, realistic, and well articulated."

The evidence is certainly disturbing to the many educators who have embraced self-esteem, but it could hardly be clearer: The notion that high self-esteem automatically leads to success and low self-esteem to failure is unrealistic and obstructive of learning. In Alfie Kohn's words, "the whole enterprise could be said to encourage a self-absorption bordering on narcissism" (1994, p. 274). Teachers will do their students a service by shifting attention from the *self* performing the tasks to the *tasks* being performed, so that students can come to experience the sweeter and more meaningful satisfaction that *follows* accomplishment. That means replacing the attitude "If I have high self-esteem, I will be successful" with *"Self-esteem is of two kinds: earned and unearned. Only earned self-esteem is healthy and satisfying, and it doesn't precede achievement but follows it."*

One of the exercises used in *Thinking Critically About Attitudes* to help students discover the greater reasonableness of the latter attitude is as follows: List five difficult challenges you have successfully met—for example, learning to play chess. Then reflect on each experience and try to recall whether your self-esteem increased, decreased, or stayed the same after your achievement. Be prepared to discuss your findings and their significance in class.

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"I have a right to my opinion, so my opinions are right"

"Well, that's my opinion!" The statement, familiar to every classroom teacher from the early grades through graduate school, is made with the confidence medieval miscreants displayed when they rushed through the cathedral doors a few steps ahead of the authorities and cried "Sanctuary." Once formally labeled as an opinion, an idea is considered safe from criticism, challenge, and even simple questioning. Thus, the expected response on the teacher's part is to cease offending and acknowledge the validity of the student's statement. If the rules of this game applied equally to all players, teachers could at least be assured that *their* opinions would be accorded similar respect, but, alas, that is not the case. When the teacher says something that a student disagrees with, the teacher is still the offender because the student's right to be right trumps the teacher's right to her opinion.

Opinion has not always been so highly esteemed. "Here is the beginning of philosophy," wrote Epictetus, a first-century Greek philosopher, "a recognition of the conflicts between men, a search for their cause, *a condemnation of mere opinion*...and the discovery of a standard of judgment" [emphasis added]. Sir Robert Peel defined opinion as "a compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs"; John Erskine as "that exercise of the human will which helps us to make a decision without information." William Wordsworth claimed that far from liberating us, opinion enslaves us. André Gide offered this lament: "Most often people seek in life occasions for persisting in their opinions rather than for educating themselves. Each of us looks for justification in the event. The rest, which runs counter to that opinion, is overlooked....It seems as if the mind enjoys nothing more than sinking deeper into error."

The common thread in all these observations is that all people have a natural tendency to exalt their opinions. My term for this tendency is "mine-is-better" thinking. It first manifests itself in early childhood in attitudes such as "my Daddy is stronger than yours," "my dolly is prettier," "my bike is faster," and so on. In adulthood it can be found, albeit in muted form, in the attitude that our status symbols are more impressive and *our opinions more worthy* than other people's. (For some strange reason, many of us seem able to maintain the "mine-is-better" attitude and simultaneously feel envious of others.) Even when it is not delusionary, the "mine-is-better" tendency is an impediment both to sound thinking and to effective functioning in society; one might have reasonably expected that an industry that promoted self-improvement would oppose it. Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred. By promoting self-

adulation and self-assertion, self-improvement mavens have legitimized the "mine-is-better" tendency.

The attitude "I have a right to my opinion, so my opinions are right" leads to a number of unfortunate assumptions. One is that there is no need to exercise care in thinking or to consider a variety of viewpoints before selecting one. Another is that the way the opinion is expressed—the precision and felicity of the words, the coherence of the phrasing, the observance of the conventions of grammar and usage—is unimportant, and teachers who place emphasis on such matters are fussbudgets. A third assumption is that questions about or challenges to one's opinion are personal insults to which the appropriate response is first to repeat the opinion, then to shout it, and finally to couple the shout with a personal insult to one's antagonists. The victor in this barbaric form of debate is, of course, the loudest, most insulting clod in the room.

The challenge for teachers is to help students discover that "I have a right to my opinion, so my opinions are right" is a logical fallacy and to adopt in its place the attitude *"I have a right to my opinion but since opinions don't come with a guarantee, I can't have confidence in them until I've tested them thoroughly."*

There is no quick and easy way to wean students away from the doctrine of opinion infallibility, but well-chosen initiatives, if sustained, can be effective. Teachers can create learning situations in which students have an opportunity to examine a variety of opinions on issues. Every academic field includes many once-controversial and still-controversial issues, and students can profit from exposure to both. The former illustrate opinions that have been definitively validated and invalidated, as well as the process by which this has been accomplished. The latter allow students to apply the process, at least at a rudimentary level, and prove for themselves that opinions are sometimes right and sometimes wrong.

As they employ these learning challenges, teachers should seize opportunities to explain and reinforce several important realities. First, *opinion* is simply another word for *idea,* and ideas differ widely in quality. Also, the sense of attachment and loyalty we feel toward our opinions proves that they are familiar, not that they are correct. Third, the phrase "having a right to one's opinion" refers to nothing more than the democratic tradition of free speech; in other words, that the Constitution guarantees all citizens the right to express their opinions *regardless of whether those opinions are right or wrong.* The purpose of this guarantee is twofold: to ensure that everyone enjoys the fundamental freedom of expression, and to enrich the dialogue about issues important to individuals and society so that the best ideas can be recognized and implemented. The framers of the Constitution's Bill of Rights presumed that the dialogue would be a spirited one, in which every idea was subjected to challenge. The attitude most in keeping with this ideal of free speech is that the expression of an opinion is but the first stage in a two-stage process; the second stage is vigorous debate.

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"Expressing my negative feelings will relieve them"

According to psychologist Carol Tavris (1982), "Freud's and Darwin's theories represent a crucial pivot point in Western thought: for once the belief that we can control anger—indeed, must control it—bowed to the belief that we *cannot* control it, it was then only a short jump to the current conviction that we *should* not control it." Western society, in particular the U.S. populace, made that jump enthusiastically, with both feet. By the early 1970s, psychiatrist John R. Marshall observed with dismay that "there is a widespread belief that if a person can be convinced, allowed, or helped to express his feelings, he will in some way benefit from it. This conviction exists at all levels of psychological sophistication...[and] in almost all psychotherapies" (quoted in Tavris, 1982, p. 121).

The mischief this idea has wrought is considerable. It spawned therapies that celebrate rage, some urging the pummeling of inanimate objects symbolizing human beings, and others encouraging confrontations in which other people are accused of real and imagined offenses. A particular target in these confrontations is parents, who are believed to be responsible for whatever has gone wrong in one's life. It is not at all fanciful to see a connection between psychology's endorsement of emotional exhibitionism and both the loss of civility and the rising incidence of violent behavior.

Tavris exposes the error of the catharsis theory by demonstrating that expressing anger does not alleviate it but, rather, intensifies it and makes us feel worse instead of better, an idea that may seem new today but was well known among the ancients. She cites this passage in Plutarch: "For he who gives no fuel to fire puts it out, and likewise he who does not in the beginning nurse his wrath and does not puff himself up with anger takes precautions against it and destroys it." Modern research reinforces this view. In one study third-grade children were given three ways to deal with their anger at a classmate: talk it out with adults, play aggressively with guns, or receive an explanation of the reasons for the offending child's behavior. The third way was most successful. Another study compared several approaches to anger to see which lowered the blood pressure most. The most beneficial approach to vascular health wasn't ventilating or suppressing anger, but calming down, reflecting, and employing reason. Tavris concludes:

> The psychological rationales for ventilating anger do not stand up under experimental scrutiny. The weight of the evidence indicates precisely the opposite: expressing anger makes you angrier, solidifies an angry attitude, and establishes a hostile habit. If you keep quiet about momentary irritations and distract yourself with pleasant activity until your fury simmers down, chances are you will feel better, and feel better faster, than if you let yourself go in a shouting match. (p. 144)

These findings have important implications for education. They strongly suggest that students' displays of rudeness and hostility are learned behavior traceable to the fallacious notion that emotional health depends on ventilating negative feelings. What can be learned, happily, can also be unlearned. To that end, teachers should help stu-

dents understand that restraint and self-control enable one to learn more effectively and to function better in everyday life. In other words, teachers should help students see the wisdom of replacing "Expressing my negative feelings will relieve them" with *"Expressing negative feelings serves only to aggravate them and make me feel worse."* This, of course, does not mean that we can never communicate displeasure—only that we overcome our angry feelings before doing so.

Students' own experiences will provide ample data for analysis. Have them list as many instances as they can when they got really angry and expressed their anger to others, either to the people they were angry with or others to whom they complained about the situation. Then have them reflect on each situation and decide whether expressing their anger diminished or increased it.

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"The teacher's job is to entertain me"

Some students fidget in their seats, glance pleadingly at the wall clock every few seconds, and emit anguished sighs. Others are frozen in a variety of poses, staring catatonically, their faces expressionless. Eventually the bell rings, signaling the first group to race for the door and the others to awaken and slog to their next scheduled trance. Above the din, someone utters the mantra you have come to anticipate yet still dread, "This class sucks." The experience never fails to depress, but it is particularly painful when the day's lesson was one you tried to make especially lively and challenging. Constant repetition of this experience may be a major cause of teacher burnout, albeit one that receives little attention in the research literature.

Why do students behave like this? The way they talk about their teachers and courses provides a partial clue. They say, for example, "He is so boring—he goes on and on about every little detail," "That course is the most uninteresting one I ever took," and "I couldn't ever sit down to read that dumb textbook without falling asleep." Occasionally their remarks are more positive, as in "She is interesting," "He really makes the class lively," and "That textbook is easy to understand." But whether the assessment is negative or positive, its focus is almost always the teacher or the course rather than themselves. The only significant exception to this is when they are speaking about grades. Then they say "I earned an 'A' in that course." If the grade is low, of course, the phrasing is altered to "She (he) gave me a 'D.'" (For a pleasant fantasy, imagine a world in which the students assigned all credit to their teachers and all blame to themselves.)

Granted, when one person stands in front of 30 others every day and does most of the talking, the focus of the 30 is understandably on that person. Also, in a culture that gives more emphasis to rights than to responsibilities—or more precisely, assigns the pronoun *my* to rights and *your* to responsibilities—the dominant theme is predictably "the ways in which that person is denying me what is rightfully mine." But neither of these facts explains the concern that courses be interesting and lively. After all, one can at least imagine a society in which students care

little whether a course sends chills up their spine but do demand that it transcend the superficial and penetrate the complexities of the subject.

That our students clamor for interesting, lively courses is attributable to lifelong conditioning by the media, especially television. *Sesame Street* set the standard that all subsequent instruction was expected to meet and no genuine instruction could ever meet. What teacher has life-sized talking animals to assist her, a technical staff to transform inanimate letters and numbers into dancing creatures, a film crew to ensure a pleasing variety of lens angles and distances, and an editorial staff to cut and paste and otherwise keep the instruction artificially stimulating? Even if the students had never seen a *Sesame Street* show, their several hour daily dose of television viewing—a substantial part of their waking lives—would have accomplished the same conditioning in them. An hour of television today typically includes extravagant visual and auditory stimulation—bells and lights on the game shows; explosions, car chases, and violence in dramatic shows—and almost constant shifting of attention from the show to a newsbreak to a cluster of four commercials to the next segment of the show. And so on, throughout the hour. The total number of attention shifts per hour is typically more than 800!

Television is essentially an entertainment medium, and any other purpose it may serve, such as communication, quickly takes on the form, texture, and trappings of entertainment. The men and women who have bid for students' attention from that electronic box have thus always been, in a very real sense, entertainers. The transaction has never required the slightest action on the part of the entertained. Thus, however unrealistic it may be for students to see the classroom as a stage on which teachers perform for their approval, that vision is perfectly consistent with their life experience. Our challenge as teachers is to help them see the teaching and learning situation more realistically and accurately; to understand that our role is much less significant than theirs because, although learning is often accomplished without the teacher's contribution, it can never be accomplished without the learner's; and to replace the performer/audience metaphor with that of guide and traveler. We must also help them appreciate that no teacher is talented enough to make the class interesting and lively alone, but even a mediocre teacher can do so with the students' assistance. In order to accomplish these things, we must help students get beyond the unrealistic attitude "The teacher's job is to entertain me" to the more mature *"The teacher's job is not to entertain me but to guide my learning, which depends upon my active participation."*

One good exercise for this purpose is the following:

> Get a pencil and paper. Then turn on the TV set (assuming it's not already on) and select a program, any program. Watch it for *exactly 15 minutes.* (Use a clock or timer.) Record the number of times the image changes on the screen by making a simple stroke tally on your paper. Don't concern yourself about whether what you're seeing is the program itself or a commercial or a newsbreak. *For each new image on the screen,* make a single stroke tally. The changes may come fast and furiously, so be ready for them.

Most students will be amazed at the number of image changes they tally. Class discussion should address the fact that each change represents a forced and in most cases ar-

tificial attention shift and that the cumulative effect of years of television viewing is an expectation, in some cases a demand, that reality—in the classroom, on the job, in everyday activities—match the artificial standard. Of course, it cannot meet that standard, so the result is boredom, frustration, and anger. The key insight students should take away from this exercise is that the problem is not the teacher's but theirs, and they alone can solve it.

Teachers, of course, can help. We can shift the spotlight from ourselves to our students, creating a classroom situation in which the important activities—asking and answering questions, solving problems, analyzing issues, interpreting and evaluating data, and reaching conclusions—are performed by them rather than by us. Putting them more directly in charge of their own learning makes it impossible for them to say, "This class sucks" without experiencing the liberating insight *"and I am responsible."*

□

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