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Existentialism in the Classroom

Existentialism had its beginnings in art, psychology, and education. This paper presents existentialism as related to education, with the basic philosophical elements that may also be applied to literature, the reflection of man's living and thinking. Existentialism is characterized by a reawakening of man's interest in himself. It is a theory of individual meaning that asks each man to ponder the reason for his existence. There are three main areas of concern: human subjectivity, paradox, and anxiety (8:11).

A basic premise is that existence precedes essence—the fact that an individual's existing is antecedent to any other understanding he may have of the world. Man first *is*, and then he asks what he is. The background for human reflection is human subjectivity: all pronouncements about the meaning of life originate from within the individual and all are unique with the individual.

Paradox is the holding of two contrary views of the significance of one's existing: one, that because of one's unique individuality, he is of absolute value in the world; the other, that one is of no value and can be replaced. Subjectivity tells us the first; empirical reason tells us the second. Man

seems to be the only animal aware of his own existence. His awareness of being is private and individual. In order to have an awareness of existence, he must also have a coordinate awareness of nonexistence, one of nothingness. This awareness lies at the root of some of the ultimate questions he may have about life; to understand what it means for something to be is to try to understand what it means for that thing not to be.

Anxiety enters in when one realizes that although he is certain of his own existence this existence need never have occurred, and that it could pass away in a second and disappear with no loss. This anxiety is most profound, signifying alienation, not only from one's fellow human beings but also from the world—from the very essence of existence. This is not pleasant to contemplate. Only when we are willing to be concerned by such ideas can we effectively turn them in the direction of a positive program of human action. Positive existentialism is to live one's life in such a way as to be deserving of something better than ultimate nothingness and obliteration.

In attempting to make one's life worthwhile, one is confronted with the question of values. Existentialism says that in the act of choosing responsible man brings values into being. The difficult part is accepting personal responsibility for one's

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own values and the notion that they may be without base. The claim that awareness is necessary for the choosing of one's values is common sense, and in awareness of choosing lies the individual's freedom. To live without alternatives is to live without freedom. Existentialism, therefore, reminds the individual that he is constantly, freely, baselessly choosing every thought, action, and value he has.

Over the past twenty-five years, existentialism has taken a popular, almost worldwide, flavor. New ideas have evolved in part from those expressed by Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre is a pessimist; he believes man is doomed to forlornness and anguish and "condemned" to freedom (12:23). The new existentialists have attempted to develop positive possibilities inherent in this philosophy. A positive existential approach can be seen as far back as William James, who emphasized "immediacy of experience, the union of thought and action and the importance of decision and commitment" (7:12). Rollo May agrees with James. He says there is no such thing as truth or reality for a living human being except as he participates in it, is conscious of it, has some relationship to it (7:17). He feels that existentialism is not a system of therapy but an attitude—not a set of new techniques but a concern with the understanding of the human being and his experience (7:18).

Existentialism "calls for a wider and newer view of anxiety, of courage, and of freedom" (1:80). Abraham Maslow discovered from his studies that certain neuroses respond to treatment only when problems centering about the meaning of human existence are faced (13:82). Frankl made a similar discovery while in a Nazi concentration camp: the people who survived were the ones with a sense of purpose and belief. He concluded that "man's search for meaning is a primary force in

his life and not a secondary rationalization of instinctive drives" (5:154).

Many existential psychologists have observed that information obtained in therapeutic studies may be applied to modern learning. Van Cleve Morris says, "Let education be the *discovery of responsibility!* Let learning be the sharp and vivid awakening of the learner to the sense of being personally answerable for his own life" (8:117). Existentialist education emphasizes the learners' experience of getting personally involved in subject matters and in significant situations. George Kneller says that education should center around the learner and should certainly not have its aim and point outside the learner (6:108). With these ideas in mind, let us look specifically at the classroom situation.

In the existentialist classroom, the teacher is of prime importance. He is a "facilitating person who assists the immature person to find effective ways of getting the information he needs to satisfy his curiosity about the world in which he lives" (2:97). The teacher's function is to assist each student personally in his search for authentic self-realization. He urges his students to question everything they read or hear; to commit themselves to their studies only because the subjects have become meaningful; to question and reflect upon all knowledge and to give it personal importance and environmental relevance.

"A good teacher is first and foremost a *person*, and this fact is the most important and determining thing about him" (3:6). A good teacher is not one who behaves in any certain way but who makes the best use of his own unique personality. It is important that the teacher realize the basis for his own behavior. According to Combs, an individual's behavior depends on "how he sees himself, how he sees the

situations in which he is involved, and the interrelationships of these two" (3:12). Behavior is only a symptom, the surface manifestation of what is going on within a person. The teacher must concern himself with the inner life of his students.

The existentialist teacher should have a rich, extensive, and available field of perception about the subject matter for which he is responsible. Teachers should have the most accurate understandings available about people and behaviors of people. The teacher needs to have a good self-concept, because what he believes about himself and the value of his students as people will have an important effect on how he behaves towards them. The methods a teacher uses should be flexible and fit the kind of person he is and the kinds of students he meets.

Teachers' emphases should be on the importance of personal involvement with ideas and commitment to the fact that they are part of the living and learning process. Teachers should be interested in knowing each of their students and each of their peers very well. They should have available in the schools a study atmosphere where they can reflect. If, for instance, a teacher could have a place for contemplation in the school library, he could use it not only for his own development but also for reflecting upon the needs of his students and making plans to meet those needs.

Exploring personal meaning is a creative process, and new teachers should be introduced to the elements (listed below) of an atmosphere in which such creativity is fostered:

1. Encourage experimentation
2. Value openness, flexibility, and individuality
3. Encourage communication and problem solving

4. Encourage differences, uniqueness, and integrity
5. Encourage cooperation through interaction
6. Trust the students
7. Give them a wide variety of choices
8. Provide an atmosphere that accepts fantasy and fun
9. Provide an atmosphere of acceptance

Betrayal should be avoided. There are many forms of betrayal that may limit the individual in his search for his authentic self. One may or may not agree with Clark Moustakas in his thesis of universal values: freedom, love, beauty, justice, and truth. He states that "every act of failure to stay with universal values is a form of betrayal" (9:2). He also says that the teacher must be aware of and involved with his students: "When the adult loses sight of the child as a human being, . . . there is no reality between them, there is no relationship" (9:4). Self-betrayal on the part of the student is equally devastating, and the result of this is alienation and inauthenticity:

Life comes from life and the teacher is the living agent in the school. The teacher must not abdicate the human dimensions which he can communicate to the child: respect for his individuality, recognition of his particular interests, needs, and directions, encouragement of honest expression of feelings and growth in self identity. Within the context of personal human attributes the teacher can engender real life, and significant learning can occur (9:7).

In regard to learning, the ASCD 1962 Yearbook has this to say: "Since learning is the exploration and discovery of personal meaning, the learning process itself must be a highly personal one" (2:71). The teacher should recognize this and try to create an atmosphere that includes all people present. An accepting atmosphere is the most important condition for au-

thentic growth of the student. If the student is to be healthy and fully functioning he must be allowed his freedom of being, his capacity to make choices, and his sense of responsibility about these choices. The individual's perceptions will not be brought out unless the classroom climate is safe for him:

It would appear that the capacity for acceptance is most likely to be learned in atmospheres which encourage openness and personal involvement. This calls for classroom climates which:

1. Encourage self-revelation rather than self-defense
2. Give each person a feeling of belonging
3. Create the impression that difference is good and desirable
4. Encourage children to trust their own organisms
5. Emphasize the existential, ongoing character of learning
6. [Require] the establishment of an atmosphere which is generally hopeful (2: 125-26).

If this atmosphere is persisting, the student will proceed towards realizing his authentic, fully functioning self. There are usually several characteristics present when the student has reached a high functioning level: he usually thinks well of himself and others; he sees himself as part of a world in movement and in the process of becoming; he sees the value of mistakes as well as successes, and he develops and holds to significant human values necessary to group processes; he is creative and acts in harmony with his values.

Curriculum should always aim towards the realization of self, student self, and teacher self. George Kneller says, "The existentialist's attitude toward knowledge radically affects the teaching of those subjects which are dependent upon systems of thought or frames of reference. School subjects are only tools for the realization of subjectivity" (6:63). Van Cleve Morris

says that if there were an existential curriculum it would probably center around self-creating subjects, such as the arts. Literature and history would be important because these subjects deal with the most important things in life: love, death, suffering, guilt, and freedom. Other existentialists feel that a large body of subject matter should be mastered, since this would enable the student to make wider choices. The more a student knows about the world in which he lives, the more likely he will be to make wise choices. Ideally the student should, beginning with his interests, be allowed to choose his own curriculum.

Most existentialists agree that the teacher's attitude is more important than the subject being taught. Regardless of the subject, the teacher should always emphasize that mistakes have value. Students should never be made to feel they have not given the teacher's or the book's answer, even though these may seem perfect at the time. "From mistakes, students may gain new insights and derive new and more realistic directions" (2:92). Mistakes, bad mistakes, are part of the process of growth. "Making mistakes is an essential part of learning and where errors are not permitted there is likely to be little learning either" (4:396).

Let us now turn to the question of evaluation. Carl Rogers believes that evaluation should be largely determined by the student:

If the true purpose of the individual and the group is organizing the core of the course; if the purposes of the individual are met; if he finds significant learnings, resulting in self-enhancement in the course; if the instructor's function is to facilitate such learnings; then there is but one person who is in a position to evaluate the degree to which the goal has been achieved, and that is the student himself (11: 145).

Combs suggests that "the kind of evaluation most likely to be effective is that

produced through counseling, in which the student may explore with his supervisors where he needs to go next in his training program and how to get there" (3:130).

Existentialist education is the most recent movement in education in the United States. So far there have been few schools that could be classified as completely existentialist. Summerhill, a small private school in England that has been in operation for forty years, is in the opinion of some such a school. Summerhill thrives on freedom: there are no requirements, no rules, no homework, no regulations, no roll taking, grades, tests, or social conventions. A. S. Neill, who founded the school, has shown that a free child is a happy child and the free child eventually becomes the responsible child (10:24). He says, "I hold that the aim of life is to find happiness" (10:24). His criterion of success is "the ability to work joyfully and to live positively" (10:29). Statistics on his former students show few exceptions to his theory of freedom in the education process. Neill places great importance on psychology in the classroom and the importance of self-regulation. He feels that "outside discipline makes men slaves, inferiors, masochists" (10:377). True discipline must come from the self, voluntarily.

This paper presents the basic concepts of existentialism. How man relates to education and his search for meaning in his life is the main concern of the existentialist. The best way to find meaning is through one's realization of freedom of choices. When man realizes he has the ability to choose his life and be responsible for himself, he is on his way to self-realization. Achieving this awareness is the goal of the existentialist. This is a personal approach; it stresses the importance of communicating in such a way as to make other people feel accepted and

worthwhile. The existentialist teacher is one who cares and is concerned, one who is involved with people. He knows that all learning is for self-realization and self-fulfillment.

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