

## HORACE

COALITION OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS  
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Dear Colleagues and Friends:

Some familiar words, spoken among us at recent Coalition gatherings, provoke fresh thoughts about teaching. Let me push four forth:

### DISPOSITION

Dictionaries give the word "disposition" various definitions: a natural tendency or bent of mind; an aptness or capacity for doing something; a normal or natural condition.

However, what I like about this word is its interplay with the pedagogically too familiar word "motivation." We teachers are supposed to motivate our students. The word for me is now an almost useless cliché. I hear Vince Lombardi motivating his team by pumping up the Packers' adrenaline at half time or Pavlov getting his mutts to drool. As we use it, "motivation" generally puts the onus on *us*. We have to jazz up or interest or lure or inspire or activate the kids. How misplaced!

"Disposition" is, to my touch at least, a cooler word than "motivate." It seems to imply less action, the quiet habit of students exhibiting their normal and natural condition. What we would all prefer is that the kids would want to be disposed to do important activities themselves. "Disposition" implies their initiative and their readiness to engage. The student-as-worker metaphor assumes a worker disposed to work, to dig in, to be involved.

The danger here is that *disposition* will seem to be independent of teacherly hands and will be ignored by us. We'll expect that

it occurs simply as a matter of luck, prior teaching, genes or a phase of the moon. But a student's self-directed willingness to stretch the mind, the readiness to give a new idea some attention, and the willingness to stop chatting, jiving and bopping around are habits that can be developed and rewarded. We can publicly applaud these happy, student-initiated acts when they surface. We can signal an expectation, especially as we start with a new crop of students (particularly older adolescents), that they will be disposed to put their minds to the matter that gathers this class. We can make our consternation visible and audible when disposition on the part of some students fails to emerge. In essence, we can create a classroom climate which reinforces habits of "wanting to engage with the ideas of this course." Good teachers work conspicuously to change and develop habits, rather than taking student dispositions as a given.

Such is a way to provoke kids to be disposed to engage. It is significantly different from the extrinsic enticement suggested by "motivation." *Disposed to think hard* is a habit we want to promote.

### GATHERING

"Gathering" is a word for gardeners -- as in *gathering* in the lima beans or the tulips and for clergy who are *gathering* a flock of the faithful. "Gathering" is not a word usually prominent in the teacher's lexicon. When a cleric friend used it recently, it struck me how useful this familiar word was. "This teacher," it was reported, "failed to *gather* his kids." I think

this not only meant that the teacher was unable to quiet the kids down or set forth the scope of the day's lesson, but that he hadn't focused the kids' attention to the task at hand. Perhaps we teachers all need the paraphernalia of theatres: the flicking and then the dimming of lights brings a hush, an expectation; the attention of the audience is *gathered*, and the playgoers are disposed to engage (at least until persuaded the engagement isn't worth the effort). The actors start with the advantage -- and the courtesy -- of receiving attention.

We've all taught ungathered classes: "Sit down, Joe...yes, you can borrow my copy...did you get your homework in...you know, the topic for today is Napoleon...I said, SIT DOWN, JOE...have you ever had a Napoleon for dessert at a French restaurant...you're late, Bill, again...well, the original Napoleon wasn't a pastry chef, ya' know [laughter expected but unreceived]...he filled the vacuum left by the largely leaderless revolution...or would you say revolutions, Rosie, from what we covered last week...for the last time, JOE, SIT DOWN..."

Not all classes, obviously, are *gatherable* (particularly the second portion of those barbarisms called "split periods," which sandwich a bolted lunch between twenty-minute snippets of "class"). But more can be, if we recognized the importance of gathering. Providing "coverage" without a psychological focus is largely a waste of everyone's time. Some modicum of willing attention by a critical mass of the class can, in time, seduce the rest into a bit of attention, prompting in them some inkling of a disposition to care about the subject of the class. So, we should take whatever is required -- a minute, five minutes, even ten -- to gather the group. Use an anecdote; lower voices; use the expectant hush; make unexpected connections.

Gathering is more than merely getting physical order: it is getting psychological, intellectual order. Making short shrift of it leads to great waste. We all must think harder about how to provoke it.

## INTENSITY

An effective gathering has intensity: the whole minds of the kids are focused. "Pay attention!" we snap at some kids. "I heard you...I'm paying attention..." we hear back. The youngster may be justified in rejecting our rebuke if *attention* is no more than knowing what the topic for today's class is ("Yeah, I'm awake. I know we're on page 67..."). But attention, to be educational, must have energy, must be active, must be *intense*.

One sees intensity in the actions of finalists for the #1 spot on the Chess Club; on the face of the quarterback talking to the coach during time-out when it's fourth down and six inches on the opponent's ten; and through the strained non-movement of the debater listening to the other team's argument. All of us teachers want this kind of intensity in our classes.

How can intensity be promoted? First of all, recognize that it's tiring to intensely engage: no one can do it for all 54 minutes of each of the five or more classes in a typical school day. Then recognize that intensity usually flows from *personal* concern. Concern can be generated: the game or debate *demand* intensity for success, but curricula rarely do. The more Willy Loman can be integrated into a student's immediate situation, the more powerfully will Loman's meaning strike. Intensity is a quality that makes fresh and rigorous thought possible; it flows well from connections.

How does one "connect" the necessarily removed -- the mechanics of gerunds, the categories of phyla, the abstractions of mathematical functions? Sometimes one can't, except to insist on (or persuade into) the mental ditchdigging that is often required. Yet second-level connections *can* be made, if we try to use them: brainteasers, analogous situations, simulations -- good teachers use such routinely. More should, more of the time. And we should remember that a class that is poorly gathered and superficially attentive -- not intense -- is one which is learning little, however assiduously we teachers Cover The Material.

John Goodlad in his *A PLACE CALLED SCHOOL* made a devastating summary of many of the classes that he and his colleagues observed. "Boredom," he wrote, "is a disease of epidemic proportions." We teachers tolerate such classes because we believe we've held up our side of the bargain. Intensity - that's the student's job, we argue. Such an excuse is too easy. Indeed, it is irresponsible.

Kids who have been lured into intense engagement are the antithesis of bored souls. The pedagogy for *intensity* needs more thought from us, and stress.

### JOY

Another familiar word is "joy." For some of us, "joy" now primarily denotes a dishwashing liquid. Others find it saccharin: Joy to the World. We rarely say in public that we "want to be joyful." Nonetheless, we know when we experience it, and often when we see it.

Joy is a form of exquisite intensity. Watch the members of a track team when its relay quartet pull commandingly ahead in the last event of a close meet. Visit backstage with the high school cast of *Godspell* after their final, successful performance. Observe a student who is savoring a legitimately high grade received on a legitimately demanding test.

It's nice to be joyful. It is also (odd to say) an eminently practical condition, especially for learning. Joy spurs confidence, and confidence is one of the preconditions for plunging into new ideas.

For me, joy is not merely being happy. There's nothing wrong with a giddy good time -- hilarious Friday gossip in the faculty dining room -- but *joy* carries heavier baggage, the awareness of fresh accomplishment, challenges overcome.

Does joy just happen? Yes, but conceivably we teachers can try to make it happen more often than it might otherwise simply emerge, by setting assignments which allow for students' individual accomplishments. A writing assignment to describe the character in a play is a useful exercise; one which also asks each student to paint a verbal portrait of a contemporary person of analogous mien offers the possibility of freshness, of personal invention, and maybe thereby joy.

Fifteen years ago I wrote a short book which sought to sort out some objectives for schooling. Three themes ultimately emerging in my text were "power" (intellectual rigor and information), "agency" (sufficient self-respect and confidence to act resourcefully) and "joy." I tentatively entitled the book *PLACES FOR LEARNING*. My editor at the Harvard University Press, Ann Orlov, insisted on adding to the title: *PLACES FOR JOY*. The notion of joy, it seemed to her, was rarely promoted as a priority in schools and needed special emphasis with my book. "Joy isn't purposeful," many solemn educators argue. "Sloppy romantic artsy stuff." "You don't win the Sputnik or Toyota race with joyfulness." Ann believed, as do I, that such an earnest view is not only chokingly narrow but also silly.

Good schools are joyful places -- places of happy intensity, places where kids (at least much of the time!) are disposed to try to use their minds and hearts for worthwhile ends: *Joyfully*. Or so we teachers hope.

Familiar words: *disposition, gathering, intensity, joy*. And too, I trust, useful words for teachers to ponder again.

Best Regards,



Ted Sizer

*From the Editors:*

**Summer Workshops**

Many people are calling and writing us to ask about the exciting Summer Workshops planned at Milton Academy. In July, the Coalition will be providing a truly unusual "hands-on" experience for a number of Coalition teachers.

The Massachusetts Advanced Studies Program (MASP), which is now a Coalition Associate School member, is a six-week summer enrichment program for high school juniors. MASP will host 2 separate week-long sessions that put Coalition teachers in a classroom, teamed with a MASP teacher in their field. The pair will develop and try out lessons specifically developed to highlight the principle of "student-as-worker."

Classes are taught in the morning, in two- or three-hour blocks, thus paralleling many CES schools' schedules. The afternoons will be devoted to videotape analysis and discussion with central staff members, Coalition teachers and MASP teachers. This opportunity to work with a like-minded teacher, a small number of students and a high degree of freedom promises to provide rich experiences, as well as useful and generative models for other Coalition teachers.

*The bad news:* Space is limited: only 14 places per week, 28 in all. *The good news:* The materials and videotapes that grow out of MASP team-teaching (as well as the Incentive Grant work currently underway) will be available at all future Symposia.

Those teachers from Core and Associate schools interested in attending the Workshop should send for an application (that must be returned to us by April 30). The two workshop sessions will occur during the weeks of July 12 and July 26. Since the planning for this event is complex, we encourage all interested teachers to keep both weeks open until we see how best to arrange pairings.

***Congratulations to Teaching & Curriculum Incentive Grant Recipients***

During the summer of 1986, we announced the availability of small grants to be awarded to Coalition teachers who were interested in experimenting with teaching styles and redesigning curriculum in an effort to teach the skills thought to be essential in their subject areas. These Incentive Grants will enable individual teachers to conceptualize, plan and document teaching and learning over the course of one semester. We are pleased to announce the current recipients:

Roger Alexander (Lincoln High)  
Susan Groesbeck (Brighton High)  
Madeleine Friedman (Nova Middle)  
Gary Hanson (Lincoln High)  
Joseph Potenza (St. Xavier's Academy)  
Barbara Reed (Westbury High)  
Kristin Urban (Lincoln High)

***About HORACE***

**HORACE** will now be printed on a monthly basis. Forthcoming issues for the remainder of this school year will include an excerpt from an article by Holly Houston discussing the issues surrounding school restructuring, a case study on the School Budget Project by Joe McCarthy and Sue Follett, and guidelines to curriculum reform and textbook use by Grant Wiggins.

We encourage you to write us with suggestions for articles in future editions of **HORACE**. It would also help us greatly if each school would tell us how many copies of each edition of **HORACE** are needed for distribution. Call Jeanie Herzog at (401)863-3384 with this information.