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The Practitioner's Dilemma—Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

BY RONALD SWARTZ

I

During our days as students we often learn much that impresses us so.

I remember the time when I first heard how B. F. Skinner's theories could make pigeons dance.

And then there was my encounter with Carl Rogers' wonderful theories which suggest that freedom And self-direction can create an educational revolution.

And oh how I remember when I first heard that Sigmund Freud's theories suggest that our id and superego are constantly at war with one another.

But now I am older and the brilliance of the theories of Skinner, Rogers, Freud and others do not seem to sparkle as such as they once did.

II

I have now been teaching for over three decades, And as the years take their toll I seem to know less than I did when I was a student.

As with Socrates before me, I find that the wisdom I have acquired over the years is worth little or nothing at all.

Unfortunately, I have found that the theories I learned as a student

Do not work as well in practice as they do in the books and articles written by Skinner, Rogers, and Freud.

III

The theories that were taught to me when I was younger

Have not been easy to use when I have tried to help my students improve their learning abilities.

In some ways the theories I learned as a student have often proven to be inadequate.

When I go to class with the aim of helping my students learn.

And in moments of despair I have been known to think that it is foolish to become familiar with new theories and research that overwhelm me everyday.

IV

What I often think I need is the courage and perseverance To think for myself about how to handle situations that somehow do not really fit into the theories I have learned over the years.

Moreover, in sober moments, I realize that my limitations as a person make it desirable to learn as much as I can from others.

Although the theories I have acquired over the years have usually proven to be somewhat inadequate,

I have nevertheless learned that I need to go beyond my own mind for ideas that might challenge me to be a better teacher.

V

The theories we learn from Skinner, Rogers, Freud and others,

Are not absolute truths which can be readily used in clinical and classroom situations.

On the contrary, I have found that the theories I use are like nets which have big holes in them.

And I seek out new theories because I wish to find better nets that will hopefully allow me to catch the kind of fishes that have gotten away in the past.

We need new and better theories because in order to improve our practice, it is desirable to search for ideas that might help us deal with phenomena unaccounted for by our old theories.

VI

As we seek for better theories that might improve our practices,

We should always realize that our new ideas may at times fail us as our old ones once did.

The new theories we learn will probably prove to be somewhat inadequate as we explore the mysteries of the universe.

In a very real sense our quest for better theories is unending,

And it is often the case that the new theories we find only illuminate a small aspect of the infinite labyrinth we call our world.

VII

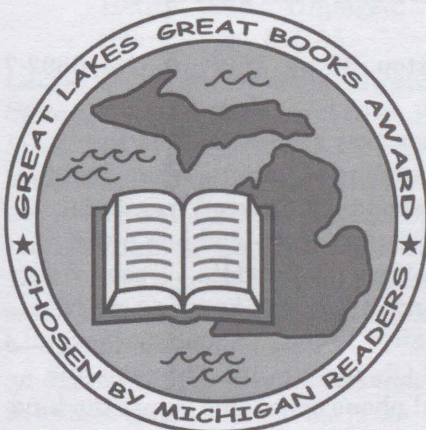
While traveling through the infinite labyrinth that is
our home,
We occasionally stumble across an article that brings
some light to a place where darkness once prevailed.
And as we learn more from the minds and books of
others
We will hopefully be able to improve the services
We offer to the people who come to us for help.

VIII

For those of us who have not yet found the absolute
truth,
The quest for new, and perhaps better, knowledge is
a professional necessity that is difficult to ignore.
And although I still admire the theories of individuals
such as Skinner, Rogers, and Freud,
I have been most impressed by the Socratic dictum
that all human beings, even the wisest among us,
must struggle throughout their lives to rid them-
selves of ignorance.
And the education I received in school years ago now
seems so imperfect that I at times become sur-
prised when I realize that I am the teacher in the
classes I attend.

Ronald Swartz received a Ph.D. from New York University in 1971. He is now a professor of education and philosophy at Oakland University, where he is a member of the Department of Human Development and Child Studies. The poem published here challenges practitioners and teachers to use a variety of theories in responsible ways. First published in 1981 in The Personnel and Guidance Journal, 59 (8), p.550, this poem is also available in PDF format at <http://personalwebs.oakland.edu/%7Eswartz/Bin/The%20Practitioners.pdf>

2005 Great Lakes Great Books Award Winners



On the following pages *Michigan Reading Journal* Editor Linda M. Pavonetti reviews the winners of the 2005 Great Lakes Great Books awards as part of her Window Seat column.

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