

The 'Playful' Professor

He's been called a maverick, a rebel, an innovator and a gentleman. And all of these descriptions please Dr. William Stephenson, distinguished research professor in the School of Journalism.

"To be creative is to laugh at conformity and correctness," he has written. Without this ability to laugh, Stephenson might well have been discouraged many times in his long and productive career. His ideas have not always been accepted.

Stephenson was educated as a physicist at Durham University in his native England. Later he received a second PhD in psychology from London University. Utilizing his knowledge in both disciplines, Stephenson then developed an objective, scientific method for measuring people's subjective attitudes on any given subject. Called Q-methodology, the system has strong disciples and some detractors. But no one denies the creativity of its founder.

Stephenson gives another example of putting things together creatively. "I am working on a science supplement for newspapers about science and society. The supplement has to have a title. I play around with the word 'science.' I put a 'p' in front of it to make 'pScience.' See, now it can remind you of psychology, because the first letters are the same. Or the 'p' can remind you of people.

"Yes, it pleases me very much when I come up with an idea," he says.

As he talks about creativity, words like "please," happy" "humorous" and "good-humored" are repeated.

"Creative people are likely to be sunny, happy people. In England, in my student days, a distinction was always drawn between intelligence on the one hand and cleverness on the other. Colleges and universities reinforce and reward intelligence, with its conforming responses of right answers to logical questions, and stamp out cleverness, with its humorous, smart, wrong-headed answers to all questions."

What can people do about being creative — other than be born funny? "Where there is controversy, there is always an opportunity to be creative," Stephenson believes.

Besides his controversial research method, Stephenson is also known for his "play theory" of mass communications.

He began to look seriously at mass communications research in 1958 when he came to Campus. At that time most other researchers were studying mass communications as persuasion and information. Stephenson looks at mass communications as play, entertainment and enjoyment. We enjoy television. We like to read the funnies and "Dear Abby."

Stephenson stands for a special way of living and doing intellectual work — combining a wide ranging curiosity, inventiveness and zest, uniting the amateur's lighthearted disregard for established wisdom with the professional's seriousness about maintaining sharp intellectual equipment, one man says.

Stephenson would agree that creativity is based on skills and talents. "The creative person may well be emotional, good-humored, have enthusiasms and all else; but he also knows more about more, has more skills of mathematics, logic, statistics, illogic, writing, symbolic logic, languages, philosophy, manipulative talents, and the like, all requiring hard and often arduous work for their acquisition. It is to

these skills that he adds his ingenuity, seeing things uniquely, doing things creatively. The skills are as essential as the ingenuity; the one without the other is like a forest without trees."

Stephenson once wrote a book about what he thought a college should be. He believes that students should "intermingle," that they learn from bull sessions and debates. Tutors and teachers, he believes, should be around only to keep things "boiling." For two years students should be "left alone to talk about God, to talk, to dance." They should learn skills like math and languages. It should be "a creative free-for-all," he says.

And students should really play. He estimates that he spent a third of his time in college at sports.

Stephenson's play theory spills over from mass communications into many aspects of life besides education. He thinks that Americans worry too much about winning to really enjoy play. "We shouldn't be training children to think games are so important, like Little League." Play should be fun.

Play should be fun — a simple, obvious and profound idea. Stephenson has spent his life puncturing the pompous and pricking the puffed self-important intellectuals. "I've often told people what they did not wish to hear," he admits.

His ideas have gained some measure of acceptance, now, though. Students and faculty from journalism, psychology and other areas gathered last May for the presentation of "Science, Psychology and Communication: Essays Honoring William Stephenson."

The essays, touching on issues ranging from psychometrics and self psychology to marketing and political science, were written by associates and former students who have known and respected Stephenson.

"Inventor and leading protagonist of Q-methodology, Stephenson has for the past 35 years significantly influenced theory and research in psychology, communication and the social sciences," the editors state.

At the presentation, Stephenson said, "My work has just begun . . . at the age of nearly 70 I feel fit enough just to begin something that I wanted to begin 40 years ago and no one would listen to me, no one would listen to a single word. I'm ready for a lot of controversy still," he chuckled.

He is directing a new program this fall to improve the public understanding of science.

"We've had a science writing program here on Campus for several years, but I'm glad we haven't done much with it. We would have done it all wrong. Now I've turned my mind to it. And I've had some ideas."

"Science writers need to be trained in photography — science is visual."

"Science writers need to use the terms and point of view of the people they are writing for, not the terms and approach of the scientists they are writing about."

"I've just written a devastating paper about 60 years of intelligence testing. It's all been wrong," he says.

"A reviewer accused me of provocativeness." He sits quietly at a long table stacked with books and papers. He's a small man wearing a baggy brown sweater. His face is ruddy. His eyes are very blue and widen playfully. "Perhaps I am provocative," he says, and smiles. □