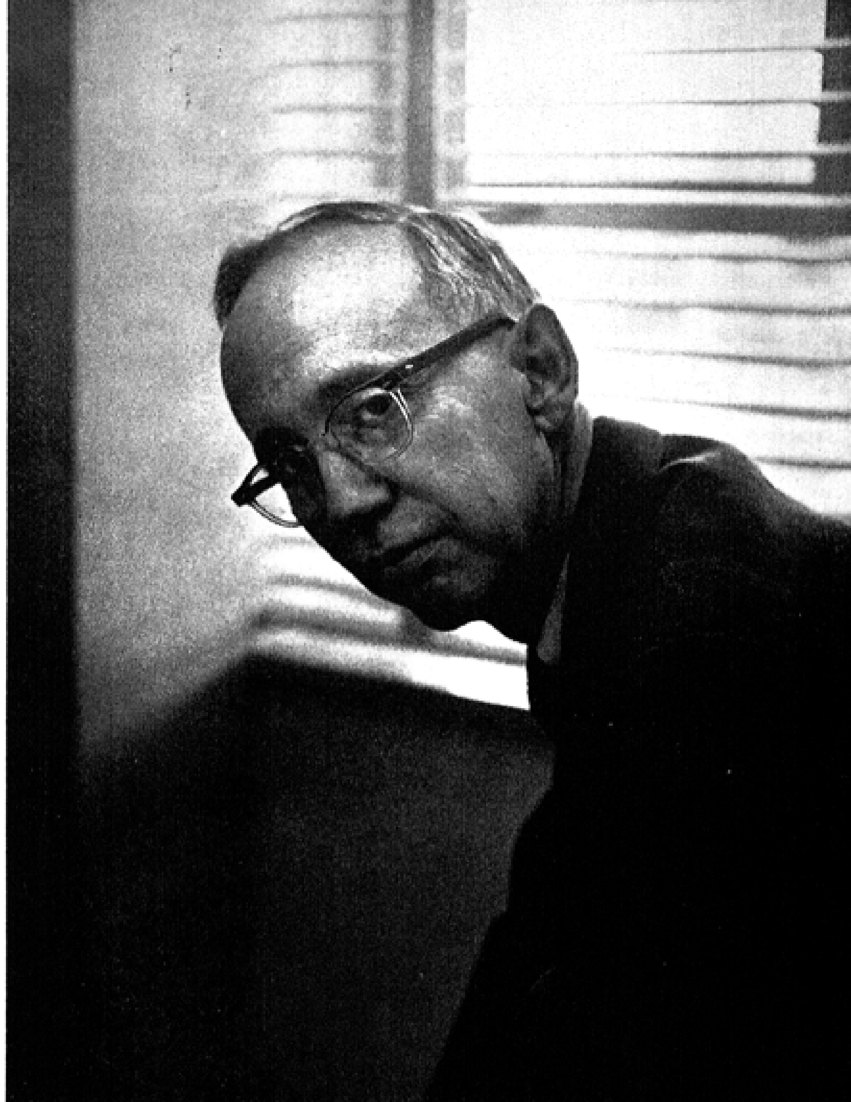
# Classroom Craftsmanship

By Charles M. Hudson



*George W. Gardner photo.*

The activity of a teacher as teacher logically divides itself into two main parts: getting ready—that is, preparing himself and his subject for a class; and getting across—that is, presenting this material (or better, communicating it) to the class.

General mastery of one's subject is *a sine qua non* of effective teaching. Such command is more than a matter of amassing additional information, new facts, about your disciplines. It is also an increasing mastery of its principles, its rationale, the significance of its parts and their relatedness to each other and to the whole. Furthermore, every teacher has his corner of the garden which he is expected to tender with particular care. It is no easy task to maintain this mastery of a specialized area and at the same time to keep on terms of familiarity with the whole discipline of which that area is a part and with related disciplines as well. If this were all, it would be demanding enough. But a teacher is expected—and rightly—to be a useful committeeman, an adviser, a keeper of records, perhaps an administrator or subadministrator, and preferably not to shirk his duties as father, husband, and citizen (not to mention the responsibilities of social life, church work, and other commitments which weigh upon most of us).

Yet somehow, despite all these other clamoring obligations, the new material coming out in one's field must be absorbed, and familiarity with the old constantly renewed. The judicious use of weekends, summer vacations, holidays, abstracts, rapid-reading methods, and other more desperate measures will serve to fill some of the holes; but new ones are constantly being formed by the shifting sands of time, and there will always be embarrassing gaps in a teach-

er's knowledge which he will simply have to live with.

The need of constantly renewing one's familiarity with old material is especially felt by teachers of humanistic subjects, and particularly, I think, by teachers of literature. I have constantly to reread, say, Keats' poetry, not only to get fresh insights which a re-reading brings, because of new interpretations that have come out on Keats and because, I hope, of my own enlarged awareness, but also to recapture the immediacy of the aesthetic response without which my treatment of a Keats poem in class may well not ring true and alive. Each year in Humanities 2 I teach *Crime and Punishment*. I have to reread this long novel at least every two years (and skim it rapidly in the intervening years), not only for the exalted reasons just given, but just to recall the details of the plot.

IMMEDIATE PREPARATION FOR A SPECIFIC COURSE, semester, or class is a matter of selection, organization, and emphasis. What points should be brought out today? In which order should they be developed? What relative emphasis is to be given to each one? In this organization, the mass and difficulty of the material, and the particular level of the class, are dominant factors. Inexperienced teachers often ignore this factor of class level. Freshly minted Ph.D.'s are likely to have trouble here, especially if they have had no teaching experience. They charge into an undergraduate class with the confidence of a St. George, eager to slay the dragon of ignorance with the weapons of the graduate school. In the office of every college teacher who teaches undergraduate classes there ought to be hung this sign: DON'T PUT THE FODDER TOO HIGH FOR THE CALVES. The danger is particularly great if we have two or three levels to teach, as most of us do. Different approaches have to be planned ahead of time for each class and the plan rigorously adhered to, with the class level kept constantly in mind. And the greater our knowledge, the harder the planning is.

Now you are standing before a group of students in a particular classroom. How do you get across? Your problem is one of communication. What I have to say from now on will be concerned primarily with the lecture method, though much of it will be applicable to the discussion method as well.

If a teacher is going to teach largely, or even partly, by the lecture method, he ought to learn some of the fundamental requirements of effective public speaking. Some teachers seem to think that basic forensic techniques are beneath them, that they can rise above such pedestrian concerns by the sheer force of their knowledge and intelligence. Now there is some truth in this. We have all known great lecturers who violated one or more of the textbook rules for effective speaking and who were yet both informative and inspiring. Very well; if you are a genius, you are superior to all system. But most of us are not geniuses, and to assume that we cannot profit by learning more of the craftsmanship of lecturing is in my opinion a combination of sheer laziness and unwarranted conceit.

Take such a simple matter as the speaking voice. Here is a person who spends much of his professional life standing up and talking to an audience, and he makes no effort to improve his enunciation, vary his tonal levels, inflections, and tempo, or even to turn up the volume so that those on the back row can catch a few of his proffered pearls. I had a teacher at Vanderbilt who lectured to more than 100 students once a week, and his voice was so low that he seemed to be addressing the desk behind which he defensively sat. The students in the back row were in a limbo of quiet where they understandably devoted themselves to doodling, diddling, day-dreaming, or dozing. The problem has particular relevance to the situation at M.U. For 21 years I have fought a running battle of decibels with compressors, turbines, lawnmowers, hot-rods, motor scooters, bulldozers, and loud-voice laborers with no respect for my literary divinities. In such a situation, either you speak up or shut up.

Then there is the problem of various physical mannerisms and nervous habits that add nothing to our speaking effectiveness. Are you a continual earlobe tugger, tie-fingerer, coin jingler, brow wiper, chin pincher, nose stroker, platform pacer, button twister, or lectern leaner? I agree with Gilbert Highet that one of the worst offenders in this whole area is the constant -er punctuator. Now, as Professor Highet reminds us, to -er is human, and an occasional -er as we gather or regroup our thoughts, shift our mental gears, or find ourselves at a momentary loss for words, is allowable and forgiveable. But listening to a 50-minute lecture regularly punctured by a barrage of -ers is like riding in a Model T Ford over buckled concrete. The cult of informality need not go so far; and if the lecturer wants to give the impression that he is thinking as he goes along, he can do it less jerkily through the use of fewer pauses and by varying his inflection, tone, and tempo.

What about the matter of lecture notes? If you can deliver a clear, orderly, well-phrased lecture without notes, covering all the ground intended and getting in all the necessary facts, I compliment you and I envy you. There is nothing more awe-inspiring than to watch such a speaker in action. But for most of us it is a dangerous practice. As for the other extreme, the manuscript follower, he labors under a terrific handicap, and he will have to be an excellent oral reader to bring it off. But it can be done. For every manuscript reader who can effectively deliver a lecture in this fashion, however, there are those who bow their heads over the lectern as if in prayer, and monotonously read away in a tone that makes it clear that this is being read, not said. Most teachers wisely adopt a middle course, using full or few notes according to personal need, the kind of material being presented, and other factors.

GILBERT HIGHET IN HIS STIMULATING BOOK, *The Art of Teaching*, makes an excellent case for humor in teaching, and Claude Fuess asserts that a teacher without a well-regulated sense of humor is doomed ultimately

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to desiccation, and I heartily agree with them both. To be sure, instruction is in many cases a solemn business, and I have no good word to say for the classroom buffoon who would substitute entertainment for education, and the superficial quip for serious inquiry. But we need a change of pace; we cannot always be doleful beasts of burden; students welcome an occasional classroom outlet for their youthful buoyancy; and most of all a proper seasoning of humor helps to establish and maintain a rapport between the teacher and the students.

I am not thinking so much of calculated jokes and anecdotes, or of deliberate witticisms planned with mischief aforethought—though even these have their place, especially if the teacher is actor enough to introduce them with apparent spontaneity (an allowable hypocrisy)—I am rather thinking of the whole attitude of the teacher that allows him to carry his learning lightly, not to take himself and his subject too seriously, and thus to be able to inject humorous comments unpremeditatedly into his teaching when such comments are relevant and pedagogically effective. Of course, no teacher should deliberately try to be funny if it does not come easily and naturally to him. But if you have a humorous streak, don't squelch it in the name of professional dignity and the high seriousness of the educational enterprise, use it.

Along with adequate preparation, I would say that the second most important quality of the good teacher is enthusiasm. A teacher without enthusiasm is like a missionary without zeal for his gospel, like a salesman without faith in his product; and like them he will get no converts or customers. "The teacher whom the students will remember best," says Mark Van Doren, "is the teacher who most radiantly enjoys his own experience of learning. To the good teacher the subject is never dead. It is new every day . . . he rediscovers it with every class."

And yet enthusiasm alone is not enough. It must not be empty or misapplied. I remember a high school teacher of English I had whom we shall call Miss Gush. Her way of teaching the poets was to read the purple passages with purpler passion, pausing now and then to exclaim, "Isn't that beautiful!" or "These are such lovely lines!" or "What a wonderful image!" without explaining to us why the passage was beautiful or the lines lovely or the image wonderful. She taught literature with "e's": exuberance, effervescence, and ecstasy. Hers was an empty enthusiasm. Then I knew a college instructor in English who could get excited only over metrics. His was a misapplied enthusiasm.

Even so, the enthusiast, whatever faults he may have, is preferable to his opposite, the person who teaches with all the vitality of a limp handclasp. Such a teacher was my college Latin teacher, Professor X. One of the great army of the defeated, he had long ago given up the battle and was engaged in a mournful retreat. Carlyle once defined the right sort of teaching as "Thought kindling itself at the fire of living thought," but in Professor X there were not even glowing embers, only cold ashes. What a contrast was Professor Edwin Mims, professor of English at Vanderbilt in those days. Appraised objectively, Dr. Mims was not a superb teacher. He had a rather rasping voice and an annoying owlish habit of peering over the top of his spectacles. His oral interpretation of literature could be given at best only a B minus. Now and then he would find himself at a verbal loss, and after groping frantically for the appropriate word or expression he would abandon the sentence in midair. But all these flaws were burned away in the fire of tremendous enthusiasm, which was neither empty nor misapplied. Dr. Mims taught from the depths of a great conviction which was both contagious and compelling. Whatever he was teaching was for the moment the most important subject in the world, we were the most important audience in the world, and helping us catch a glimpse of his vision was the most important mission in the world.

Perhaps I am mistaken in including a discussion of enthusiasm under classroom craftsmanship, for, in its finest expression, it is undoubtedly a quality of teaching that cannot be acquired as one of the techniques of pedagogy, and lack of enthusiasm is often due to a temperamental lethargy that is beyond repair. And yet a certain measure of enthusiasm is within our command. If one's classroom apathy is due to vitamin deficiency, glandular imbalance, insomnia, neurosis, or other physical or psychic affliction, then medical or psychiatric help is in order. More often, I think, such apathy is due simply to a lack, or more likely a decline, of one's faith in the tremendous significance of what one is doing as a teacher, and it is to a recall to this faith that I wish to devote my closing words.

Many teachers have apparently lost confidence in the subject they teach, the students who are being taught, the profession of teaching, and themselves as teachers. They would scoff at Bertrand Russell's statement that "teachers are more than any other class the guardians of civilization," and seem to teach on the assumption that education is the injection of the insignificant into the indifferent by the incompetent. Perhaps they secretly agree with the Shavian dictum that he who can does, he who cannot, teaches. They have become, at best, in Arnold's phrase, "light half-believers of our casual creeds." Such teachers should do one of two things, change their jobs or themselves. They need a reawakening analogous to a religious conversion. They need the conviction that comes with a reconsecration to the high calling of the teacher.

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The foregoing article is based on excerpts from an address given by Dr. Charles M. Hudson, University professor of English, before a faculty meeting during Arts and Science Week on the campus. He titled his well-received speech "Classroom Craftsmanship: A Professorial Potpourri of Pedagogical Principles." The condensed version presented here is less than half the length of the original.