

academic for his graduate classes. And how does he teach? What's his method? Well, that depends — because things are changing. Somewhere in some college there is undoubtedly a heavyweight, on the verge of being fired, who is teaching silence to freshmen so that they can hear themselves. Maybe somewhere else a teacher has renounced grading and is letting the students write what they want. Most Freshman English teachers, however, are doing the standard thing. They're demanding and then grading "themes" on capital punishment and on lowering the voting age. They're compelling students to drudge through topic-sentence exercises, outlining exercises, library exercises, inference-judgment-report exercises and a flood of other dreary busy work. They think they know the difference between a B minus essay and a C plus essay, and they teach their students to believe in such foolishness. They "correct" their students' work with *ex cathedra* judgments, none of which a student is at liberty to ignore.

In Freshman English, the method teaches you — in case you haven't already gotten the message — that writing is a drag. It's a job you do to please someone else (God knows that writing a theme on The Vanishing Individualist is hardly your own idea of how to spend Sunday night.) Writing is school work and "English" is learning how to please your English teacher. What interest there is in the course is provided not so much by your writing experience as by the method. That is to say, you may write something tonight but the payoff, the real excitement, won't come until next week when the papers are handed back and you can find out "what you got." That's what makes it all worthwhile; that's what school writing is all about: pleasing the teacher.

The very essence of Freshman English is that term paper they force out of you. In perfect order, impeccably footnoted, unreal and totally useless — that term paper, that empty form, is pretty much the content of the course: submission — alienation — learning to live a pretend intellectual life, pretend-caring about pretend things.

Sometimes you even get a pretend choice; you're allowed to pick your own topic. But you don't get to make the one choice that would give the whole business some meaning: the choice to write no paper at all. Oh, you can make that choice. But then you don't get through Freshman English, which means you don't get through college and, therefore, don't get your hands in the gigantic goodie-box which is programmed to open only upon insertion of a college

assignments, grading, rules and so on. If **how** you're taught exerts a profound effect, what about the physical environment? What does a classroom teach?

Consider how most classrooms are set up. Everyone is turned toward the teacher and away from his classmates. You can't see the faces of those in front of you; you have to twist your neck to see the persons behind you. Frequently, seats are bolted to the floor or fastened together in rigid rows. This classroom, like the grading system, isolates students from each other and makes them passive receptacles. All the action, it implies, is at the front of the room.

What would be better? A circle? For a while, I used to ask classes to sit in a circle (in rooms where we weren't bolted down). It was much better. But after a time I became depressed about it. It was still awkwardly geometrical; it was still my trip, and they were still dutifully following orders. I felt that if I told them to sit on each other's heads, they'd do it. So next semester I simply took a position in the second seat of the fourth row or thereabouts. I still do this most of the time. Some classes begin to move their chairs around, often within a matter of days, into a sort of loose, pleasant jumble, although they usually maintain a certain pious distance from me, leaving me at the center of a small but unmistakable magic circle. Occasionally, a class is unbelievably faithful to the traditional seating plan. They sit mournfully facing an empty altar and they sprain their necks trying to see me and the other students. I curse and mutter but they hold firm. It's almost as though they're saying, "screw you, you bastard, you're going to have to tell us to move." And I swear to myself I won't. But I usually give in about half way through the semester.

But why those chairs at all? Why forty identical desk-chairs in a bleak, ugly room? Why should school have to remind us of jail or the army? (A rhetorical question, I'm afraid.) For that matter, why are there classrooms? Suppose we started over from scratch. What would be a good place to learn stress analysis? What would be a good place to study Zen? To learn about child development? To learn Spanish? To read poetry? You know, wherever I've seen classrooms, from UCLA to elementary schools in Texas, it's always the same stark chamber. The classrooms we have are a nationwide chain of mortuaries. What on earth are we trying to teach?

The scariest thing about a classroom is that it acts as a sort of psychological switch. You walk into a classroom; some things switch on in you and others switch off. All sorts of weird unreal things start to

happen. Sometimes we'd sit on the grass outside. It was only a very small gain though. Given our conditioning and the overall college context, I could have held that class at the beach, at home, in the Avalon Ballroom. I would still be holding it; they would still want to rest limply in my hands — good natured, obedient students. Neither they nor I can get out from under our schooling so quickly as we might like.

I think that what we need is not to touch up or modernize classrooms but rather to eliminate them. (Question from the audience: "Where would we learn?" Answer: "We'd manage.")

"They exploit and enslave students;"

"THEY EXPLOIT AND ENSLAVE STUDENTS; THEY PETRIFY SOCIETY..."

Let me not be accused of ignoring "what's right with" our schools — to use the patriotic jargon. Schools are where you learn to read, write sort of, and do long division. Everyone knows about that. In college, you learn about Pavlov, Java Man and why we fought the Civil War. You may forget about Java Man but you get to keep your degree just the same, and it gets you a job. College is also where they discover new medicines, new kinds of plastic and new herbicides to use in Asia. But everyone knows all that. I want to return to the exploit-enslave-and-petrify part.

It's ironic. Radicals dream midnight police raids, or sit around over coffee and talk with glittering eyes about Repression — about those internment camps that are waiting empty. And all the time Miss Jones does her quiet thing with the kids in the third grade.

People like to chat about the fascist threat or the communist threat. But their visions of repression are for the most part romantic and self indulgent: massacres, machine guns drowning out La Marseillaise. And in the meantime someone stops another tenth grader for a hall-pass check and notices that his T-shirt doesn't have a pocket on it. In the meantime the Bank of American hands out another round of high-school achievement awards. In the meantime I grade another set of quizzes.

God knows the real massacres continue. But the machine gun isn't really what is to be feared most in our civilized Western world. It just isn't needed all that much. The kids leave Miss Jones' class. And they go on to junior high and high school and college. And most of them will never need to be put in an internment camp. Because they're already there. Do you think I'm overstating it? That's what's so frightening: we have the illusion that we're free.

In school we learn to be good little Americans — or Frenchmen — or Russians. We learn how to take the crap that's going to be shoveled on us all our lives. In school the state wraps up people's minds so tight that it can afford to leave their bodies alone.

Repression? You want to see victims of repression? Come look at most of the students at San Diego State College, where I work. They want to be told what to do. They don't know how to be free. They've given their will to this institution just as they'll continue to give their will to the institutions that engulf them in the future.

Schools exploit you because they tap your power and use it to perpetuate society's trip, while they teach you not to respect your own. They turn you away from yourself and toward the institutions around you. Schools petrify society because their method, characterized by coercion from the top down, works against any substantial social change. Students are coerced by teachers, who

take orders from administrators, who do the bidding of those stalwarts of the status quo on the board of trustees. Schools petrify society because students, through them, learn how to adjust unquestioningly to institutions and how to exercise their critical thought only within narrow limits prescribed by the authorities. In fact, as long as a heavy preponderance of a nation's citizens are "good students" and are in some way rewarded for their performance, then dissenters and radical thinkers are no threat and can be permitted to express their opinion relatively unmolested. Free expression, to the extent that we have it, is a luxury commodity made available by the high standard of living and by the efficient functioning of such disguised forms of repression as schooling.

As the tensions in our society work their way up to the surface, some overt rebellion appears in many settings; certainly it appears in schools, which offer at least a meeting place and staging ground for young middle-class rebels. May it grow in good health. But, as our college presidents are fond of pointing out, the great majority — the great silent majority — are there "not to make trouble but to get an education (for "education", read "degree")."

"THEY MAKE DEMOCRACY UNLIKELY."

Our schools make democracy unlikely because they rob the people, who are supposed to be sovereign, of their sense of power and of their ability to will meaningful institutional changes.

The democratic ideal — to which even the most conservative college trustees usually give lip service — means government of, by and for the people. It means power in the hands of the people. Our schools, however, remain less suited to this ideal than to an authoritarian society; they are more effective in teaching obedience than in fostering freedom. Our textbooks may teach one kind of political system but the method by which our schools operate teacher another. And the method wins out over the textbooks overwhelmingly. A more substantial degree of democracy will become likely only when we understand that political freedom is not merely a constitutional matter; it's also a state of mind, which can be either nurtured or blighted in school.

I don't mean to ignore the reasons that already abound to explain that immense gap between our ideals of democracy and the system we see operating. Some people, for example, argue that democracy only works well in small political units and that centralized democratic government of 200 million persons is just not possible. Others insist that the people are and will always remain too stupid and ill-informed to make political decisions.

A socialist country where schooling is standardized and coercive might well, in time, develop an electorate as dismal as ours even though its constitution provided the most extensive political freedom for the individual and even though it had eliminated class exploitation in the traditional sense. In fact, the resources adhering to a powerful socialist government create a very special danger in this area. That's why the growing student power movement has the greatest importance politically. The most that political radicalism comes to include educational radicalism, the more nearly attainable democratic government will be.

Capitalist or socialist, a democracy cannot possibly function if its citizens are educated to be clever robots. The way to educate children for democracy is to let them do it — that doesn't mean allowing them to practice empty forms, to make pretend decisions or to vote on trivia; it means that they participate in the real decisions that affect them. You learn democracy in school not by defining it or by simulating it but by doing it.

If students and teachers ran their own schools, it would do more for democracy than all the government classes ever taught.

Also, in considering the effect of



diploma. Or maybe you even get drafted right away. Yeah, you've got a hell of a choice. And college teachers like to style themselves "seekers after truth." Sure. "Know the truth and the truth shall get you a B." The truth in a freshman term paper is about the same truth a banker can expect from his shoeshine boy.

I'm sorry to sound so snotty about composition teachers. God knows, I've been there too. In my first year I even assigned research papers in Freshman English. I didn't really want to but I did it anyway "to prepare students for their other courses." I prepared them all right. My method was the term paper. What I taught was alienation and servility. Now I try to unprepare students for their other courses. I only wish I were better at it.

The medium of schooling, by the way, covers much more than

happen. Any teacher who has tried simply to be real in a classroom knows what I'm talking about. This is so hard to express ... you walk in and everyone's face is a mask.

Last semester I had the best room yet. Because of overcrowding, one class was in an apartment living room on the edge of campus. The school did its well-meaning best to kill the room, boarding up the door to the kitchen and the can and literally filling the small room with long formica-topped grammar-school tables (the formica itself is a message; furniture has won; you ain't carving no initials in these desks, baby). For a while we floundered miserably but then things got better. Sometimes we sat in a big square. Sometimes we sat on top of the tables; once we crawled under them where it was dark and restful. Sometimes we'd pile up the tables and sit in a bunch on the