

Some of them didn't give up

Modes: the first successful classroom revolt

By BOB ROTH

Last year York University faced its first classroom revolt. It was not caused by a ring of conspirators, a group of subversives or the "paid outside agitators" that university president Murray Ross — according to his spring convocation speech — would have us believe are overrunning the campus.

It was initiated by first year students who simply became too frustrated by a compulsory course called Modes of Reasoning to remain still any longer. The lectures to which 1800 students were subjected twice a week were boring to the nth degree and the content was so irrelevant and unreal as to make one think the professor who originated the course first conceived the idea while watching the "Twilight Zone."

Before the protest was over, York saw a petition signed by 600 students rejected, a lecture disrupted and eventually, through persistent effort, a backdown by the Modes faculty and elimination of the course in mid year for those handful of students who had the courage and stamina to endure the three month running battle to its successful end.

Many facts about York, its students, its faculty and its administrators were revealed during the months of October, November and December as the issue developed.

Apathetic students call petition hopeless

The protest began when students circulated a petition asking that one lecture hour be turned over to students to discuss the problems of the course. Although 600 students signed the petition in a matter of hours, many others — although they admitted disliking the course — said petitioning would not accomplish anything. "Sure it's a bad course, but that's the way it is and there's nothing we can do about it," was the typical response.

This futility complex, unfortunately, was noticeable in a substantial number of first year students and it was a hard factor to combat in trying to mobilize students against the course. This drove the petitioners to question even more the kind of educational system that socializes students into a state of slave-like subservience to authority. How can it be, they asked themselves, that young adults coming to university feel that they are too powerless to control the very direction of their own lives?

The course director refused to even look at the names on the petition. He said he would not turn a lecture over to the students because it would throw out the whole lecture schedule. This experience brought home two very important points to the students:

- Some faculty members would sooner perpetuate a poor learning environment than upset the tranquility of an institution they depend on for their sense of security;
- Some faculty members consider lectures (as well as seminars) to be their own rather than seeing them also as the students' classes. This kind of attitude, they realized could only perpetuate the kind of passive one-way learning experience they were now facing — an experience which would never allow students the opportunity of truly developing their full potentials.

At this point the traditional argument that all things can be achieved through "rational dialogue" had been exposed. The students now had only one choice left to them.

On October 29 the normal calm of a Modes of Reasoning lecture erupted into a shouting match when disenchanted students got up from their seats to challenge the lecturer and the course. Their frustration was evident in their inability to articulate their demands. They were angry and confused. They knew they would probably be unable to outargue a professor of philosophy, but they knew they would have to try.

Adding to their hardships during the debate was the fact that a large section of the students in the lecture hall began to side with the professor. These same students who had had their petition refused, these same students who have been virtually kicked in the teeth were now swayed by the professor's oratory into supporting their own oppression.

Reps demand student oriented courses

When the debate ended, it was difficult to discern which side had gained the most from the conflict. The Modes of Reasoning faculty, however, realizing they might have a full scale revolt on their hands acted quickly. In an attempt to coopt the protest by strategically channeling the students' anger into a harmless direction, the modes department set up a system of student "representatives". A rep was picked from each class to attend a meeting with the modes faculty. What this did was break up the students' mass movements. Up to this point, all students opposed to the course had acted as a cohesive unit. Now, the faculty had succeeded in creating a go-between system whereby most students did not know what was happening because only the "representatives" came into direct contact with the modes faculty. This maneuver almost succeeded in destroying the protest.



The reps, however, were not to be coopted so easily. At the first meeting with the modes faculty, they demanded that the students not wishing to continue taking Modes of Reasoning be allowed to form "student-oriented" courses — courses which the students themselves would run with the help of a sympathetic faculty resource person.

The director refused. He insisted no major changes could be made in the course at this time of year because of the administrative problems it would cause. Maybe next year, he said. Unfortunately, many students gave in at this point. What the director said seemed logical, they thought. But there was still a hard core of about 15 students who could not accept the logic that says the university and its machinery is more important than the feelings and desires of the people the machinery is designed to serve. They knew there would be confusion if they tried to set up new courses in the middle of the year. But it was worth it. To break the chains of intellectual enslavement was more important to them than the inconveniencing of a few administrators who might have to do a little extra paperwork.

This small persistent handful of hangers-on were not given much encouragement in the weeks to come. Fellow students repeatedly told them to give up their hopeless cause. Modes professors denounced them as troublemakers. John Saywell, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science, told them, "You simply can't change a course for 1800 students in the middle of the year."

Mass support had long since vanished. The modes faculty had promised that the course would get better after Christmas. Most students, instead of relying on their own past experience, fell for this line. (At the end of the year some teachers admitted quite frankly that the course did not improve substantially in the second term.) The modes faculty was still justifying the boring and irrelevant nature of the course and it appeared the students' protest had been defeated. But it was all a charade. Within the Modes faculty a great debate was taking place — they had been shaken by student unrest over the course.

Modes counter-course finally formed.

The handful of 15 now made their final move. Going over the course director's head, they took their case to the faculty council — the most powerful faculty committee on campus. Which consists of faculty members from all departments of the university. To do this however they had to go through "proper channels". Which meant two sub-committees of faculty council. First they presented their case to the general education committee.

Here the students were astounded to hear that the Modes of Reasoning faculty had voted unanimously not to make the course compulsory the next year. Now the modes faculty were admitting the course's failure. Now, after telling students how good the course was, how it would get better etc., they admitted to themselves that it

was not worth keeping on the compulsory list. Another myth was shattered; the one which says the professor is always right and students are too inexperienced to know what is best for them.

But it was too late for many students. They had already been deceived. They were back in their classes now, passively accepting once again boring lectures and irrelevant content.

Now the group of 15 moved on to the committee of undergraduate studies where their motion to form a student-oriented modes counter course was passed. Then, on to faculty council. Until this time no faculty member had opposed the students' motion. Still there was a feeling of anxiety in the air as the students filed into the large room to attend the final meeting, which would determine once and for all if they were to be successful.

Their old nemesis, the course director, rose to speak. He opposed the students' motion saying it would not be fair to the other students in Modes of Reasoning if these 15 were now allowed to form their own course.

Would the other faculty members listen to him? After almost three months of constant fighting would the students' requests now be rejected? These questions were still running through the students' minds as they waited for the vote. But the course director's stand was in vain. The fact that the modes faculty itself had decided the course was not valuable enough to retain on the compulsory list was enough for the other faculty members.

On January 9, 1969, 15 students, all that was left of a group of 600 petitioners, formed the first Modes of Reasoning counter-course.

The new counter-course proved to be a valuable learning experience for the 15 students who developed it. With the help of a faculty resource person they were able to discuss content they felt was more relevant to their lives. They had seminars on student unrest, on the "God is Dead" theory and even examined aspects of York University itself and its effects on students.

Shortly afterwards, two other groups of modes students formed counter-courses too, and got them officially accredited. In at least one of the three groups, students decided that since learning and evaluation were two distinctly divorced items, they would not have a grading system. In this way they could concentrate on developing a new and viable learning environment, instead of having to concentrate on getting marks for the sake of passing. At the end of the year each student simply gave himself a grade.

All this may have seemed impossible only a few months before and had it not been for the persistent effort of a few first year students it would never have become a reality. But what was learned during their struggle was almost as valuable as what was gained in the end. Lessons were learned about the nature of York University which could be used in future conflicts.

Lessons learned from this first revolt

— Students, if united and persistent can attain the "impossible". Before the 15 succeeded in forming their counter-course, no course in the history of York University had been changed in mid-year. A significant precedent was set.

— Faculty members can be a conservative force in a dispute. Too many are so interested in their own position and security that they will not risk upsetting the boat.

— Rational dialogue has its limits. At some point in any dispute, when the battle lines have been drawn, the outcome of any conflict depends on how much power, influence, persistence and support each side has.

— When students become involved in a system of "representatives" they are weakened. Only through mass participation can students remain strong and united.

A final note to the freshmen of 1969

It is not the purpose of this article to stir you into radical action the moment you hit the campus. What it is meant to do is leave you with a few facts about a situation that occurred for first year students last year. Modes of Reasoning wasn't the only course that had problems. It was simply the one that displayed them most obviously.

You may find all your courses exactly as you expected them, but if not, remember your feelings of frustration are not unique. If you find you cannot stand lectures, if you find you cannot study for exams, if you find you cannot concentrate on your seminars from week to week because the content of the course seems meaningless to you — don't worry, there are others who feel the same way. And when your professor tells you that you aren't applying yourself or that you're lazy and maladjusted, just remember the feelings of a group of 15 freshmen a year ago: "There's nothing wrong with us. But there must be something wrong with a system that says the university and its machinery are more important than the feelings and desires of the people the machinery is designed to serve."