

# The Gatekeepers

*Faculties of education discourage their best students from becoming teachers.*

By Jerry Jesmess

Every profession has its gatekeepers, the college professors who not only teach but also sift out the slow, the lazy, and the mediocre, those unfit to practise the profession for which they are preparing. One must have intelligence, drive, and stamina to get through schools of engineering, law, or medicine.

In faculties of education, the reverse seems to be the case. After a few weeks in the program, the students most possessed of those qualities begin to slip away. By the time education students begin their practice teaching, the best and brightest have already defected to other disciplines.

Like the other disciplines, faculties of education separate the wheat from the chaff but, unlike the other disciplines, they then throw away the wheat.

My former college roommate is a perfect example of this phenomenon. He was a rarity among education students, a physics major with an A+ average and a genuine desire to teach.

I, on the other hand, slid downward into education from the sciences. I had entered university fully intending to become a biochemist but soon discovered that science lectures were difficult to follow after all-night bridge sessions. Add a hangover, and they become unintelligible.

Discussions of Bloom's Taxonomy and Maslow's Theory, however, made perfect sense under those same conditions. It seemed to my immature mind better to smile and nod as the professor spoke of educating the entire child or teaching to the affective domain than to toil for countless hours memorizing the data from the Periodic Table of the Elements.

My roommate, however, became visibly upset when an education professor spent most of a class period praising an innovative high school chemistry teacher who had spent an entire week videotaping his students as

they square danced in order to demonstrate the movement of electrons in a chemical reaction.

My roommate dropped out of the education program the week after we entered into teacher self-appraisal, a program that focused on how empathetic, caring, supportive, and enabling we were.

I had always assumed that he, like so many other bright, hard-working education students, had tired of the Mickey Mouse nature of his education classes.

But a few weeks ago, I discovered that his professors had convinced him that he would have made a poor teacher. He was not interested in motivating reluctant learners, they told him. He would prefer to share his knowledge with students who wanted to be in his class.

With their typical emphasis on motivation and caring, and their denigration of the importance of subject mastery, the professors convinced my friend that he was not teacher material.

As it happens, I was given the same message, but it did not bother me too much. I recall once answering the test question, "What single quality do you feel is the most important for a teacher to possess?" with "Knowledge of his subject."

Our professor later discussed the test with us in class. The question was an open one with no single correct answer. Mine, however, was definitely wrong. Higher up on the list were caring, being non-judgmental, placing the child at the centre of instruction — even understanding Bloom's Taxonomy.

For someone like me, who chose to avoid the sort of professors who would ask their students to memorize such trivia as valence numbers and atomic weights, such criticism was like water off a duck's back. For a top physics student, one truly dedicated to

his studies, however, such criticism must have been terribly disturbing.

We need not shed any tears for our ed school dropout, by the way. He found his way into the legal profession and now earns enough money to keep his sons in private school.

I like to think that by the time I entered the classroom several years after my graduation I had at least somewhat redeemed myself by finally learning what I should have learned in college. Eventually I developed a genuine passion for acquiring and sharing knowledge.

In a way, it is fortunate that I was a late bloomer. Had my epiphany occurred sooner, I never would have made it through my education classes.

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"Many pedagogues ... are simply dull persons who have found it easy to get along by dancing to whatever tune happens to be lined out. At this dancing they have trained themselves to swallow any imaginable fad or folly, and always with enthusiasm. The schools reek with this puerile nonsense.

"Their programs of study sound like the fantastic inventions of comedians gone insane. The teaching of the elements is abandoned for a dreadful mass of useless fol-de-rols...

"Or examine a dozen or so of the dissertations ... turned out by candidates for the doctorate at any eminent penitentiary for pedagogues, say Teachers College, Columbia.

"What you will find is a state of mind that will shock you. It is so feeble that it is scarcely a state of mind at all."

*H. L. Mencken, 1928*