

One would think it is much easier to persuade an audience that a classroom is an environment and that the way it is organized carries the burden of what people will learn from it. Yet, oddly, it isn't. Educational discourse, especially among the educated, is so laden with preconceptions that it is practically impossible to introduce an idea that does not fit into traditional categories.

Consider as a primary case in point the notion that a classroom lesson is largely made up of two components: content and method. The content may be trivial or important, but it is always thought to be the "substance" of the lesson; it is what the students are there to "get"; it is what they are supposed to learn; it is what is "covered." Content, as any syllabus proves, exists independently of and prior to the student, and is indifferent to the media by which it is "transmitted." Method, on the other hand, is "merely" the manner in which the content is presented. The method may be imaginative or dull, but it is never more than a means of conveying the content. It has no content of its own. While it may induce excitement or boredom, it carries no message—at least none that would be asked about on the College Boards, which is to say, worthy of comment.

To our knowledge, all schools of education and teacher-training institutions in the United States are organized around the idea that content and method are separate in the manner we have described. Perhaps the most important message thus communicated to teachers in training is that this separation is real, useful, and urgent, and that it ought to be maintained in the schools. A secondary message is that, while the "content" and "method" are separate, they are not equal. Everyone knows that the "real" courses are the content courses, the kind of which James Bryant Conant is so fond: The Heritage of Greece and Rome, Calculus, Elizabethan Drama, The Civil War. The "fake" courses are the methods courses, those conspiracies of emptiness which are universally ridiculed because their finest ambition is to instruct in how to write lesson plans, when to use an overhead projector, and why it is desirable

to keep the room at a comfortable temperature. (The educationists have got what they deserve on this one. Since they have saddled themselves with a trivial definition of "method," what they have been able to do in their courses has wavered from embarrassing to shocking. The professors of the liberal arts have, so far, escaped the censure and ridicule *they* deserve for not having noticed that a "discipline" or a "subject" is a way of knowing something—in other words, a method—and that, therefore, their courses are methods courses.)

"The medium is the message" implies that the invention of a dichotomy between content and method is both naïve and dangerous. *It implies that the critical content of any learning experience is the method or process through which the learning occurs.* Almost any sensible parent knows this, as does any effective top sergeant. It is not what you say to people that counts; it is what you have them *do*. If most teachers have not yet grasped this idea, it is not for lack of evidence. It may, however, be due to their failure to look in the direction where the evidence can be seen. In order to understand what kinds of behaviors classrooms promote, one must become accustomed to observing what, in fact, students actually *do* in them. What students do in the classroom is what they learn (as Dewey would say), and what they learn to do is the classroom's message (as McLuhan would say). Now, what is it that students *do* in the classroom? Well, mostly, they sit and listen to the teacher. Mostly, they are required to believe in authorities, or at least pretend to such belief when they take tests. Mostly, they are required to *remember*. They are almost never required to make observations, formulate definitions, or perform any intellectual operations that go beyond repeating what someone else says is true. They are rarely encouraged to ask substantive questions, although they are permitted to ask about administrative and technical details. (How long should the paper be? Does spelling count? When is the assignment due?) It is practically unheard of for students to play any role in determining what problems are worth studying or what procedures of inquiry ought to be used. Examine the types of