



ÊTRE ET AVOIR

“To Be And To Have”



John Eldridge

Introduction

George Lopez is the only teacher in a small primary school in Puy-de-Dôme, Auvergne, France. Accordingly, all his students, regardless of age or progress, have to be taught in one single class.

Nicolas Philibert's 'Être et Avoir' documents an academic year at George's school. It is filmed with all the wistful melancholia of French cinema, and as the seasons roll inexorably by, the viewer is slowly drawn into the remote world of a small farming community. Snow sheets the landscape, the rain floods it, and when the sunshine of spring finally emerges, it brings with it, two new graduates from George's school.

George, now approaching retirement, lives above the school, and as far as one can tell, the school is his life; We see him first thing in the morning laying out the materials for the day, and preparing to greet his students as they stumble from the school minibus; we see him late at night preparing the next day's activities, still in his classroom.

The film gives us all kinds of glimpses of George's numerous roles, as teacher, as advisor, as counsellor to students and parents alike, as disciplinarian, and as friend. In George's school, tradition and humanism embrace each other like long-estranged partners, and this for me was one of the most fascinating themes of the film.

Tradition

There's no fashionable methodology to be observed in George's school. Dictation is perhaps the favourite item in his teaching arsenal, multiplication tables are clearly in vogue (no signs of calculators), and the

younger children learn to form their letters through prescribed methods through mechanical copying exercises.

Routines are valued too. Children stand up at the beginning of the day, and are expected to treat their teacher, and each other, with due respect. Behaviour is to be orderly. Transgress from the rules, and George is upon you, not with the rod, but with an intense, moralising brand of psychotherapeutic discipline, in which you have to account for and justify your misdeeds under a barrage of Socratic questioning.

George is never angry, but he can be very, very disappointed in you, and even as a viewer you feel yourself start to wilt under his gentle but relentless assault. In class, you are praised where praise is merited. There is no empty encouragement, no 'very good, nearly, try again,' for wrong answers. Wrong is wrong. You are taken back to the beginning of the process and you start anew. George does not let you off the hook.

George does however eschew physical punishment, unlike one or two of the parents, who are quite happy to administer old-fashioned agricultural slaps to their children (one suspects the children might actually find these short, sharp shocks far more congenial than one of George's withering inquisitions). Or, as one mother personalises the learning process, after a frustrating homework session at the kitchen table, 'What's six times two smacks, huh?' – or words to that effect. George censures, but he never humiliates, never degrades.

Humanism

George is a teacher who cares, not just for learning, for lessons, but for each and every one of his children. A student cannot make an interjection of any kind in George's lesson without George asking for further comments, asking the child to explain, to justify, to say more. Within his traditional method, there is an emphasis on learner opinion and viewpoint that would shame many purportedly humanistic practitioners in far more progressive environments. Personalisation for George is never tokenistic. We never learn whether or not he is acting from any specific articulated philosophy, but what does shine through is a belief that the natural curiosity of the learner must be encouraged and that this is the *prime* role of the teacher, as opposed to, say, the completion of material, or the syllabus.

In the same way, the teacher is not the ultimate arbiter in George's class, and when work is completed, all students are invited to evaluate and comment on it. The students sit and work in groups, and discuss their work within a room that is pristine in its organisation. The class library, wall-charts, displays of student work, class 'zoo', materials - everything is in its place. You have entered a learning environment. Not a classroom.

Ownership

A recent article suggested that as teachers we can never be static in our development. Rather, we must always be either in a process of growth or decay. It was instructive to see that George, approaching retirement, pondering with his class how many thousands of dictations he has delivered over the course of his career, does not appear to be in a state of decay at all, even though, he must have repeated the same courses and lessons time and time again.

Is it that George has understood, as many of us perhaps have not, that education is only minimally about curricular initiatives, textbooks, and syllabuses? Or is it just the result of circumstances in which George has had no choice but to assume responsibility and ownership for all aspects of his students'

education that has led to the humanisation of his classroom?

Certainly there are no tiresome committee meetings for George, no forum for complaints about materials, teaching methods, testing methods. If something doesn't work, basically it's all in George's hands. One doesn't envy George's workload necessarily, but the film is a powerful indication of what trust (even if enforced) in teachers can achieve.

To George, teaching is a vocation, his life's work. To many practitioners it is merely a job. This is not terribly surprising. After all, when we are effectively told what to teach, when to teach it, with what books, with what method, and to what end, not only do we feel somewhat less motivated towards the exercise in general, but also far less inclined to take any responsibility for any resultant failures.

This is not George Lopez's world, however. And in this sense, George is a *professional* teacher, with skills, knowledge, ethics, and autonomy, empowered by his society (even if reluctantly) to develop its younger generation.

Postscript

Être et Avoir was chosen as one of the best films of 2002 by a select body of international film critics. After its surprising commercial success, George Lopez started a court case arguing that he should be paid a percentage of the considerable profits the film made. In 2004, the French courts dismissed his case. Regardless of George's star qualities, or the contribution of his teaching methods to the commercial success of the film, this was a documentary only, and George had agreed to be filmed with no contract for commercial reward. Just one more ethical question provoked by a film which already contains almost endless potential for generating discussion and reflection within our profession.

Some Ideas for Using *Etre et Avoir* for Teacher Development

Etre et Avoir is a rich resource for teacher development activities; What works well is to give pairs or groups of teachers a discussion theme each to consider before reviewing the film, then ask them to focus particularly on their assigned theme during the film so that they can report back on it in a concluding plenary discussion phase. Suitable themes might include:

i) Mixed ability Teaching

- Is mixed ability teaching a good idea?
- What does a teacher need to think about if s/he is teaching a mixed ability class?
- How successfully do you think George copes with such a heterogeneous class? What techniques does he use?

ii) The Classroom Environment

- What do classrooms in your experience look like? How would you like classrooms to look?
- What does George's classroom look like? How important is the classroom environment to the teaching / learning process that you see in the film?

iii) The Role of Routine

- Do you think there are certain routines that are important in education? If so, what are they?
- What routines do you notice in the film? How important do you think these routines are?

iv) The Role of the Teacher

- What different roles do teachers need to be able to cope with in the course of their work?
- What roles does George assume during the film? How successfully?

vi) Student Involvement

- In what ways can teachers involve their students in the learning process?
- How does George 'involve' his students? With what success?

Other themes that might be examined could include discipline, teaching methods, class and school size, the role of parents, evaluation and feedback.

Special Needs

George's class seems to contain most of the archetypes, from the slow learner, to the chronically shy student, to the student with severe concentration problem, the student with serious illness in the family, and the student with behavioural problems. What perhaps is worth noting is that firstly, George is aware of all these problems. He knows his students, and he knows what is happening in their lives outside school as well as inside. In a very real sense George seems to treat all his charges as students with special needs. Secondly, he does not ignore or minimise the problems of his students, and whether it be through the strictness of his classroom routines, a disciplinary talk, or a quiet chat in the school garden, there is a firm insistence that problems must be confronted, considered, and challenged, and that however young the child, whatever background they may have, they are still able - with guidance - to engage in critical thinking about their learning and their lives.

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