

NOTES ON TEACHING IN MISSISSIPPIINTRODUCTION TO THE SUMMER - Jane Stenbridge

This is the situation: You will be teaching young people who have lived in Mississippi all their lives. That means that they have been deprived of decent education, from the first grade through high school. It means that they have been denied free expression and free thought. Most of all -- it means that they have been denied the right to question.

The purpose of the Freedom Schools is to help them begin to question.

What will they be like? They will all be different - but they will have in common the scars of the system. Some will be cynical. Some will be distrustful. All of them will have a serious lack of preparation both with regard to academic subjects and contemporary issues - but all of them will have a knowledge far beyond their years. This knowledge is the knowledge of how to survive in a society that is out to destroy you . . . and the knowledge of the extent of evil in the world.

Because these young people possess such knowledge, they will be ahead of you in many ways. But this knowledge is purely negative; it is only half of the picture and, so far as the Negro is concerned, it is the first half. It has, in a sense, already been lived through. The old institutions are crumbling and there is great reason to hope for the first time. You will help them to see this hope and inspire them to go after it.

What will they demand of you? They will demand that you be honest. Honesty is an attitude toward life which is communicated by everything you do. Since you, too, will be in a learning situation - honesty means that you will ask questions as well as answer them. It means that if you don't know something you will say so. It means that you will not "act" a part in the attempt to compensate for all they've endured in Mississippi. You can't compensate for that, and they don't want you to try. It would not be real, and the greatest contribution that you can make to them is to be real.

Remember this: These young people have been taught by the system not to trust. You have to be trust-worthy. It's that simple. Secondly, there is very little if anything that you can teach them about prejudice and segregation. They know. What you can and must do is help them develop ideas and associations and tools with which they can do something about segregation and prejudice.

How? We can say that the key to your teaching will be honesty and creativity. We can prepare materials for you and suggest teaching methods. Beyond that, it is your classroom. We will be happy to assist whenever we can.

How? "You will discover the way" - because that is why you have come.

THIS IS THE SITUATION * * * Charlie Cobb

Repression is the law; oppression, a way of life -- regimented by the judicial and executive branches of the state government, rigidly enforced by state police machinery, with veering from the path of "our way of life" not tolerated at all. Here, an idea of your own is a subversion that must be squelched; for each bit of intellectual initiative represents the threat of a probe into the why of denial. Learning here means only learning to stay in your place. Your place is to be satisfied -- a "good nigger".

They have learned the learning necessary for immediate survival: that silence is safest, so volunteer nothing; that the teacher is the state, and tell them only what they want to hear; that the law and learning are white man's law and learning.

There is hope and there is dissatisfaction - feebly articulated - both born out of the desperation of needed alternatives not given. This is the generation that has silently made the vow of no more raped mothers -- no more castrated fathers; that looks for an alternative to a lifetime of bent, burnt, and broken backs, minds, and souls. Where creativity must be molded from the rhythm of a muttered "white son-of-a-bitch"; from the roar of a hunger bloated belly; and from the stench of rain and mud washed shacks.

There is the waiting, not to be taught, but to be reach out and meet and join together, and to change. The tiredness of being told it must be, 'cause that's white folks' business, must be met with the insistence that it's their business. They know that anyway. It's because their parents didn't make it their business that they're being so systematically destroyed. What they must see is the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America.

PROBLEMS OF FREEDOM SCHOOL TEACHING * * * Mendy Samstein

The Freedom Schools will not operate out of schoolhouses. There will rarely be classrooms, certainly no bells, and blackboards only if they can be scrounged. Freedom Schools in Mississippi will be a low cost operation since funds will be very limited. Furthermore, the community will have little to offer in the way of resources. In many places, particularly in rural towns, there are no really suitable facilities available either in the white or in the Negro communities. As a result, most Freedom Schools will have to be held in church basements, homes, back yards, etc.

In some towns in the state, the students are waiting with great excitement in anticipation of the Freedom Schools. In other areas, however, special interest will have to be created - the teachers themselves will have to recruit students before the Freedom Schools begin. In these places, you will find that you are almost the first civil rights workers to be there, and if you are white, you will almost certainly be the first white civil rights workers to come to the town to stay. You will need to deal with the problem of your novelty as well as with the educational challenge.

There will be some advantages which will, we hope, overcome some of the material shortcomings. If you go to a town where COFO has had an active project for some time, you will probably be greeted warmly because there is a great deal of support for the Freedom School program. However, even if you go to a relatively new place, you can count on some things: In no community will there be a Freedom School unless the people of that community have expressed a desire for one, have shown their support by finding housing for staff at low cost (typically \$10 a week for room and board), and have scouted out a place for a Freedom School.

The greatest advantage, however, will be the students and, we hope, your approach. In the final analysis, the effectiveness of the Freedom Schools this summer will depend upon the resourcefulness and honesty of the individual teachers - on their ability to relate sympathetically to the students, to discover their needs, and to create an exciting "learning" atmosphere. The informal surroundings, the lack of formal "school" trappings, will probably benefit the creation of this atmosphere more than the shortage of expensive equipment will discourage it. Attendance will not be required, so if the teacher is to have regular attendance from his students, he must offer them a program which continues to attract; this means that he must be a human and interesting person.

It is important to recognize that these communities are in the process of rapid social change and our Freedom School program, along with the rest of the summer activities, will be in the middle of this ferment. The students will be involved in a number of political activities which will be relatively new in Negro communities in Mississippi. They will be encouraging people to register to vote, organizing political rallies, campaigning for Negro candidates for high public offices, and preparing to challenge the Mississippi Democratic Party. These activities will be a large part of the experience which the students will bring to your classes. In most instances, we believe that this will help the Freedom School program and you should capitalize on these experiences by relating it to classroom work. You will need to know something about these experiences, so you will have the opportunity to share them by canvassing, campaigning, distributing leaflets, etc. with the students. You will define your role more precisely when you arrive by consulting with COFO voter registration people in the area. It will probably be important to the students that you show willingness to work with them but you will have to balance this against your own need to prepare for classes, recreation and tutoring.

In some communities, however, the situation may go beyond this. The community may embark upon more direct kinds of protest, resulting in mass demonstrations, jail, and any number of eventualities. We have no specific suggestions to make if this situation arises. You will have to play it by ear. We can only say that if you are teaching in a Freedom School in Mississippi, you must keep a sensitive ear to the ground so that if this should happen, you will be aware of what is happening in the community. You will have to decide if a continuing educational program is possible, and, if it is not, what modification of the program you can arrange to make this summer as constructive a period for the community as possible.

REMARKS TO THE FREEDOM SCHOOL TEACHERS ABOUT METHOD * * * Noel Day

TEACHING TECHNIQUES AND METHOD: The curriculum is flexible enough to provide for the use of a wide range of methods in transmitting the material. The basic suggested method is discussion (both as a class and in small groups) because of the opportunities this method provides for:

1. Encouraging expression
2. Exposing feelings (bringing them into the open where they may be dealt with productively)
3. Permitting the participation of students on various levels
4. Developing group loyalties and responsibility
5. Permitting the sharing of strengths and weaknesses of individual group members.

However, presentation lectures, reading aloud (by students), the use of drama, art, and singing can be utilized in many sections of the curriculum. We recommend, however, that discussion be used as a follow-up in each instance in order to make certain that the material has been learned.

TEACHING HINTS:

1. Material should be related whenever possible to the experience of students.
2. No expression of feelings (hostility, aggression, submission, etc.) should ever be passed over, no matter how uncomfortable the subject or the situation is. Both the students and the teacher can learn something about themselves and each other if it is dealt with honestly and with compassion.
3. The classroom atmosphere should not be formal (it is not a public school). Ways of accomplishing an informal atmosphere might be arrangement of seats in a circle, discussions with individuals or small groups before and after sessions, use of first names between teachers and students, shared field work experiences, letting students lead occasionally, etc.
4. Prepare ahead of time for each session.
5. When using visual materials make certain they are easily visible to all students and large enough to be seen. (When smaller materials must be used, pass them around after pointing out significant details.)
6. Let students help develop visual materials wherever possible (perhaps after class for the next session.)
7. At the end of each session, summarize what has been covered and indicate briefly what will be done in the next session.
8. At the beginning of each session, summarize the material that that was covered the day before (or ask a student to do it.)
9. Keep language simple.
10. Don't be too critical at first; hold criticism until a sound rapport has been established. Praise accomplishments wherever possible.
11. Give individual help to small groups, or when students are reading aloud or drawing.
12. A limit of one hour (an hour and a half at most) is probably desirable for any one session. This limit can be extended, however, by changing activities and methods within a session.

DISCUSSION-LEADING TECHNIQUES

1. The leader must always be aware of his role: that he is, on the one hand, only the leader and not the dominant participant, and on the other hand, that he is in fact the leader and responsible for providing direction and keeping the discussion going.
2. The use of questions is probably the best way to start and keep a discussion going. The questions should be:
 - a. simple and clearly phrased.
 - b. in language understood by the discussants.
 - c. not answerable by "yes" or "no".

3. The best types of questions fall into three categories:
 - a. Those investigating emotional response (e.g. how did you feel when? or how would you feel if?)
 - b. Those investigating motivation (e.g. why did you feel that way? why would you do that? why do you think that?, etc.)
 - c. Those in response to others' reactions (e.g. what do you think about what Bob said?)
4. The physical arrangements can affect the quality of discussion. The best arrangement has everyone in view of everyone else. The leader then stands to introduce a visual aid so that it is visible to all.
5. The leader should be careful to be adroit at keeping the discussion on the track.
6. The leader should occasionally summarize what has been said:
 - a. to provide continued direction
 - b. to provide smooth transitions from one major topic to another.
 - c. to emphasize important points (and by exclusion to de-emphasize irrelevant points).
 - d. to re-stimulate the group if discussion has lagged.
7. The leader should encourage participation by everyone. Some techniques for this are:
 - a. direct questions to silent participants (do not press if they continue to be reticent).
 - b. use of small groups with the usually silent members as reporters.
 - c. praise when the usually-silent members participate.
 - d. relating topics to their personal interests and experiences.
 - e. re-stating inarticulate statements for them (e.g. Do you mean? etc.)
8. The leader should be sensitive to lagging interests and over-extended attention spans. (The form of activity can be changed after a brief summary of the discussion to that point. A change of activity form is often restful -- particularly when it requires some physical movement, such as breaking one large group into smaller groups scattered throughout the room, or putting review in the form of a TV quiz game, or asking that a particular point be dramatized, or a picture drawn, etc.)
9. The leader should have all resource materials, visual aids, etc. at hand.
10. The leader should always leave time for the students to ask him questions.
11. The leader should be willing to share his experiences and feelings, too.
12. The leader should not insist that words be pronounced in any particular way. Respect regional variations (e.g. Southern pronunciation of "bomb" is typically "bum"). The basic point is communication -- if it gets the idea across it's good.
13. The leader should not be critical-- particularly at the start. For many of the students, JUST BEING ABLE TO VERBALIZE IN THIS SITUATION IS PROGRESS that can easily be inhibited by a disapproving remark or facial expression.
14. Learn the students' slang. It can often be used to ease tensions or to express tones of feeling and certain meanings more succinctly than more academic language.
15. Protect students from each other's verbal attacks and downgrading (ranking, etc.) -- particularly the slower or less

articulate students.

USING DRAMA: Probably the best way of using the dramatic method is the extemporaneous approach. In this approach, learning lines in a formal way is avoided. A story is told, or a "Let us suppose that" or a "Pretend that..." situation is structured, and then parts assigned. The actors are encouraged to use their own language to interpret the story or situation and some participants are assigned to act the part of non-human objects as well (e.g. trees, a table, a mirror, the wind, the sun, etc.) Each actor is asked to demonstrate how he thinks the character he is portraying looks, what expression, what kind of voice, how he walks, what body posture, etc. As soon as each actor has determined the characteristics of his part, the story outlined is reviewed again, and then dramatized.

This method can permit the expression of a wide range of feelings by the students, involve their total selves, stimulate creativity, provide the teacher with insights about the students, and at the same time, get across the content material.

USING SPECIAL RESOURCE PEOPLE: There will be many talented people in Mississippi this summer. Some of them will be attached to projects in voter registration, community centers and freedom schools (you). There will be other professional people who will not be staying long enough to follow one project through from beginning to end, but they are eager to make what contribution they can. Included in this category are physicians, attorneys, ministers, and, most notably, entertainers. In the group of entertainers will be some very eminent folk singers and comedians. (Folk Singers are being recruited on a formal basis. Lawyers are too. Physicians and ministers may, or may not be attached to specific programs.) Whatever their formal status, these people will represent a great advantage to your program. You, however will have to make the best use of them. You should try to make their contribution as great, and as well-coordinated with the regular program, as you and they can make it. This will require creative thinking and prior planning for both the guests and the freedom school personnel.