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Freedom School Notes

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Jane Stembridge, a native of Virginia, was on the staff of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee when she wrote this article. "Stokeley's speech class" was held at the Work-Study Institute in Waveland, Miss. in early 1965. At that time Stokeley was a field secretary for SNCC in Hayneville, Alabama.

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The most important class was "Stokeley's speech class." He put eight sentences on the blackboard, with a line between, like this:

I digs wine
The peoples wants freedom
The peoples wants freedom

I enjoy drinking cocktails
The people want freedom
The people want freedom

Whereinsoever the policemens
goes they causes troubles

Anywhere the officers of the law
go, they cause trouble

I wants to reddish to vote

I want to register to vote

Stokeley: What do you think about these sentences? Such as -- The peoples wants freedom?

Zelma: It doesn't sound right.

Stokeley: What do you mean?

Zelma: "Peoples" isn't right.

Stokeley: Does it mean anything?

Milton: People mean everybody. Peoples means everybody in the world.

Alma: Both sentences are right as long as you understand them.

Henry: They're both okay, but in a speech class you have to use correct English.

(Stokeley writes "correct English" in corner of blackboard.)

Zelma: I was taught to use the sentences on the right side.

Stokeley: Does anybody you know use the sentences on the left?

Class: Yes.

Stokeley: Are they wrong?

Zelma: In terms of English they are wrong.

Stokeley: Who decides what is correct English and what is incorrect English?

Milton: People made rules. People in England, I guess.

Stokeley: You all say some people speak like on the left side of the board. Could they go anywhere and speak that way? Could they go to Harvard?

Class: Yes - No. Disagreement.

Stokeley: Does Mr. Turnbow speak like on the left side?

Class: Yes.

Stokeley: Could Mr. Turnbow go to Harvard and speak like that? I wants to reddish to vote.

Class: Yes.

Stokeley: Would he be embarrassed?

Class: Yes...No!

Zelma: He wouldn't be, but I would. It doesn't sound right.

Stokeley: Suppose someone from Harvard came to Holmes County and said, "I want to register to vote." Would they be embarrassed?

Zelma: No.

Stokeley: Is it embarrassing at Harvard but not in Holmes County? The way you speak?

Milton: It's inherited. It's depending on where you come from. The people at Harvard would understand.

Stokeley: Do you think the people at Harvard should forgive you?

Milton: The people at Harvard should help teach us correct English.

Alma: Why should we change if we understand what we mean?

Shirley: It is embarrassing.

Stokeley: Which way do most people talk?

Class: Like on the left.

(He asks each student. All but two say "left." One says that southerners speak

like on the left, northerners on the right. Another said that southerners speak on the left, but the majority of people speak like on the right.)

Stokeley: Which way do television and radio people speak?
Class: Left.

(There was a distinction made by the class between northern commentators and local programs. Most programs were local and spoke like on the left, they said.)

Stokeley: Which way do teachers speak?
Class: On the left, except in class.
Stokeley: If most people speak on the left, why are they trying to change these people?
Gladys: If you don't talk right, society rejects you. It embarrasses other people if you don't talk right.
Hank: But Mississippi society, ours, isn't embarrassed by it.
Shirley: But the middle class wouldn't class us with them.
Hank: They won't accept "reddish." What is reddish? It's Negro dialect and it's something you eat.
Stokeley: Will society reject you if you don't speak like on the right side of the board? Gladys says society would reject you.
Gladys: You might as well face it, man! What we gotta do is go out and become middle class. If you can't speak good English, you don't have a car, a job, or anything.
Stokeley: If society rejects you because you don't speak good English, should you learn to speak good English?
Class: No!
Alma: I'm tired of doing what society say. Let society say "reddish" for a while. People ought to just accept each other.
Zelma: I think we should be speaking just like we always have.
Alma: If I change for society, I wouldn't be free anyway.
Ernestine: I'd like to learn correct English for my own sake.
Shirley: I would too.
Alma: If the majority speaks on the left, then a minority must rule society. Why do we have to change to be accepted by the minority group?
Stokeley: Let's think about two questions for next time: What is society? Who makes the rules for society?

(lunchtime)

The class lasted a little more than an hour. It moved very quickly. It was very good. That is, people learned. I think they learned because:

- people learn from someone they trust, who trusts them. This trust included Stokeley's self-trust and trust, or seriousness, about the subject matter.
- people learn more and more quickly from induction rather than deduction.
- people learn when they themselves can make the connection between ideas; can move from here to there.
- people learn when learning situations emphasize and develop one single idea -- which is very important to them personally.
- people learn when they can see what they are talking about. He used the board.

Among other things they learned these. That is, they themselves concluded:

- there is something called "correct English" and something called "incorrect English."
- it is not embarrassing to these people themselves.
- it is made embarrassing by other people.
- because it is embarrassing to them.
- they are a minority, the people who use correct English.
- they decide what is correct English.

--they make that important and use it to shame people and keep them out of society.
 --they make requirements for jobs and acceptance.
 --they decide who is acceptable to society.
 --by shame.
 --but not everybody can be shamed.
 --not Mr. Turnbow, for example.
 --the main thing is to understand what people mean when they talk.
 --that is not the main thing to society.

I recorded the whole class because it is a whole thing-one thing. That is why people learned. At least, that is why I did.

I think the best way to write about Waveland is to tell about that class. Because that was what the Waveland Institute was about. Some other classes were good, and some were bad. Vicki Levy and Phyllis Cunningham came and we all talked about sex. That was good because what we talked about was important and Vicki was free to talk about it freely, as was most of the class. No one seemed to assume that sex was anything but great. Hurray!

Jeanette's class was good when the kids got to talk freely about the Atlanta staff meeting and they had plenty that needed to get out...and needs to be heard. My class was good because I talked about myself and my hang-ups, which made them able to do that -- or begin to. About shame. About fear of shame. About guilt. Morty's class in math was good, I hear, because he is very dynamic and because the kids were tired of words by that time. Carole Merritt was good when she talked, but she had to handle administration and, in the case of guest speakers, retreat. She should teach.

Audio-visual was good because it is better to see things. The kids didn't like to see films about poverty and hunger. They liked story movies. They liked Casey and Mary and Emmie's filmstrip on FDP. I liked Viva Zapata. So did they.

The opposite of Stokeley's class was Zinn's. He started with three words on the board: Freedom, Education, Power. It took a long time to kind of start over with specifics. He also had way too much material and lectured too much. He had a lot to give and he wanted to, but he wasted himself. I did that too. We didn't know. I think we learned a lot.

I don't want to make conclusions or proposals. I think Stokeley's class can stand on its own. Not only that, I think it is better than anything I could say. Just two things: he spoke to where they were at, and they were at different places, and the places changed during the movement of the discussion. Secondly, he trusted them and he trusted himself...and they trusted him.

I think the primary hang-up was not the staff's lack of knowledge or concern, but the lack of freedom to put it across. Self-trust. Self-love or something like that. I think we have to be pretty damn free to teach anyway. Or to learn?