

Keats Spanow

## Cluttered Classrooms

By MEREDITH NEILL POSEY

Lighting, ventilation, seating, wall color, ceiling height, floor materials, acoustics, blackboards, the teacher's desk, and no doubt many other minutiae in the classroom have been the subject of much study. They have furnished meat for many a hungry degree candidate. Theses, dissertations, monographs, bulletins, "workshop" reports, articles in pedagogical journals have settled their business. The holders of the purse strings, in some instances at least, have loosened them and allowed a generous flow of dollars in the direction of the classroom. The day of the ideal classroom from the standpoint of its physical nature *should* be upon us.

But it is not. I have seen many classrooms in my time. I remember the one I sat in as a little boy in the first three grades. The building was of unpretentious random limestone. It had two rooms, one on top of the other. I sat in the upper room, which was reached by long straight unroofed stairs up the outside of the structure. Three grades were in the one room. Lessons were heard, while we stood in front of the teacher's desk, our toes touching a chalk line on the floor. Letters, numbers, problems were pointed out to us on the blackboard by a mild little man, using an old billiard cue for a pointer. For all his mildness we knew well his prowess with a ruler on the open palm of wrongdoers. The room was almost bare. A Madonna and a Sacred Heart hung on the walls. The hum of learning from the "scholars" at the much-whittled desks was audible. There were no clay models, no goldfish bowl, no *papier mâché* relief maps, no cut-out pictures, no "projects," no terrarium. No one moved from his desk without permission. All the tasks were directed. The whole scene *now* seems quite old-fashioned. But we boys were happy and learning.

One day much later I was promoted downstairs. I remember "Whiskers," the teacher. He was a fine robust man (I almost wrote MAN) with a square-cut flowing black beard. He was Irish and proud of his blood. For all our talk of "Old Whiskers" we loved him—the red marks on our palms notwithstanding. Fair and firm discipline always commands respect and very often love. The room, like the one above, was almost bare. The

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*teacher* was the object of our attention. His word was knowledge. His rule was law. His kindness was love.

I have seen many a classroom since that day. Some have been very different from those two. I recall one I saw a few years back. It seemed cluttered to me. Besides the side-arm chairs for the students, it had two office desks—one in front for the teacher during the class hour and one to the right of it over by the windows for the teacher when in conference. There were three sets of open book shelves with books and magazines piled helter skelter on them and one glass-fronted book case with books. On the side opposite the second desk was a five-foot, five-tiered display stand. Behind the first desk was a large map rack with a number of maps rolled up. Two large double-doored closets extended into the room on each side of the map rack. The room boasted two large dictionaries, one very large bulletin board on a stand, two office pencil sharpeners, a typewriter on a large table, and two wire baskets full of papers. It also contained five large pieces of heavy cardboard in five different places in the room, one large corrugated pasteboard box, one small wooden box, one steel letter file, two long sticks (for heaven knows what), one card file, one wastebasket, one pasteboard box of magazines, and one map rolled separately. Six of the student side-arm chairs were littered with piles of magazines and newspapers, and there was still another pile of papers in the room. Pictures and magazine articles were posted on both the wall bulletin board and the board on the stand. I wondered how the students taught in the room could ever focus their attention on the matter of instruction. As a teacher I do not like to compete with so many other objects of possible interest in a classroom. I have heard a university defined as a professor on one end of a log and a student on the other. Such utter simplicity in setting is, I believe, not absolutely necessary in a classroom, but it has much to recommend it.

With some teachers this tendency to clutter takes a more beautiful and pleasantly odorous form. These teachers seem to like to teach in herbariums. Believe it or not, I have seen nineteen flower pots with flowers in a row in a classroom, and I do not believe this number represents a record. The dear souls who tend these flowers know what they are about, for cannot Bacon or Browning be taught better among the begonias? or Plato among the primroses? or Villon among the violets? I

recall being assigned once to a classroom in a School of Engineering building, which room I discovered to be full of towering tensile strength testing machines! I flew in terror in search of another classroom. You see I did not subscribe to the theory that I would teach Tennyson to better advantage among the tensile strength testing machines.

Some *décor* is not amiss, though once I heard a snicker go around an English staff meeting, when a letter from the registrar to the English department was read in which he proposed that English classrooms should by means of appropriate pictures hung on the walls be given "an English atmosphere." The pictures were never procured, though they might have been helpful.

A classroom is a place to think. I think best when conditions are such that I can concentrate on my thinking. Distraction is the enemy of thinking. When a teacher is directing my thinking, I do not want my attention distracted by litter, by ponderous machines, by beautiful flowers, by sweet music, by street sounds, or by anything else. I want to think with the teacher. Whatever distracts me—and any sort of clutter does—militates against my ability to think. A notice or two, a picture or two, a flower or two I can ignore, when I want to concentrate, but the same things in profusion are highly disturbing. And when I teach, I want attention from those whose thinking I am attempting to direct. I want no competition for the attention of the students that can be avoided. For the accomplishment of real directed thinking the teacher must be the cynosure of neighboring eyes. He must not be runner-up to a litter of letters, a pile of papers, or a pot of pansies.