

## **October, 1997 - Mark DeStephano, S.J., Modern and Classical Languages**

Among the many challenges facing us as faculty members here at Saint Peter's College, I most often hear colleagues mention two: remediating the lack of preparation many of our students have in basic skills, and overcoming their passivity in the face of our efforts to engage their interest. I suspect that most of us have had the experience of going to a class enthused about a new idea we have had, or thrilled with the prospect of sharing some aspect of our discipline, only to be met by a sea of seemingly unimpressed students. In the earlier years of my teaching career I interpreted this as either a lack of students' interest in the educational process or as a sign of their intellectual dullness, and I inevitably reacted in a condescending manner. It was only after a number of years that I finally recognized a fact which should have been obvious to me from the start.

In his "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1902), perhaps one of the most perceptive essays written in our times, the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) writes that, "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life." Simmel observes that the "metropolitan type of individuality" is characterized by an "intensification of nervous stimuli," which leads one to the brink of psychological breakdown. Particularly at the close of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the move from the personal and somewhat controlled world of the countryside to the seemingly impersonal chaos of the city created the need for most people to develop strategies for survival in the urban setting. City dwellers are simply unable to respond to the overwhelming wave of nervous stimuli produced by very large numbers of people concentrated in the metropolis. The over-agitation of one's nerves by these countless stimuli results, according to Simmel, in the growth, in most, of what he calls a "metropolitan blasé attitude," a nervous exhaustion which manifests itself as an apparent lack of interest in everything.

I believe that the "blasé attitude" described by Simmel accurately reflects something of our more difficult students, especially those who have come from large inner-city schools. Their apparent disinterest hides the true lack of direction in their lives, especially in the area of their college education. Uninterested students almost universally lack a sense of why they are in college, other than their perception that "everyone else does it." They are bombarded with so many offers, demands, and challenges in our technological society that many students become lost in a morass of "goods," which are all presented as having the same importance in their lives. To my mind, our greatest gift to these students as their mentors and professors is to help them to develop some idea of what they dream of accomplishing in life and what they need to do in order to meet their goals, no matter how unattainable these may seem. Even more important is our responsibility to make our students aware of why and what they must learn so as

to achieve personal satisfaction and some measure of academic success in a highly competitive marketplace.

To that end, I have found it very helpful to speak with my students in the first week of class, and to ask them to write a one-page "dream sheet." I ask them to tell me three things: (1) what their "dream career" is, even if it seems unreachable; (2) what career they think, practically, they can attain; and (3) for which career they are currently preparing. I then ask them to write another paragraph in which they are to identify one skill or habit that they would like to develop during the course of the semester (e.g., spelling correctly, writing more concisely, reading something other than their college work for at least thirty minutes a night, learning to write a good business letter, improving their vocabulary). I then ask them to write one final paragraph in which they are to describe one aspect of their personal development: which they would like to address (e.g., to be more reflective rather than reactive, to be more prayerful, to dress more appropriately, to eliminate the use of foul language as much as possible, to speak more properly, to be more attentive to the needs of others).

In the following days I require every student to make an appointment to speak with me in order to discuss his or her "dream sheet." I do my best to develop the skill he or she identified, and to attend carefully to the aspect of personal development he or she indicated. I then try to have two follow-up interviews, one at mid-term and one before the final examination, to monitor how the student perceives his or her progress toward perfecting the skill and growing personally. I designate certain class days in which I ask students to participate in simulated job interviews (in Spanish), and then critique them with the class. Finally, after the simulated interview, I ask the student volunteers to speak about their "dream sheets," and open the floor for discussion. My experience has been that students not only crave this kind of *cura personalis* which has always been a hallmark of Jesuit education, but they also become more attentive in class and return to speak with me about their goals and dreams long after my course has ended (if not been forgotten!).