

“Isn’t that special!” Education as a ‘Reality’ Television Program
Reflections Prompted by *Teach: Tony Danza*

Dr. R. Zaslavsky

I

It is perplexing that it has happened. It is equally perplexing that it has taken so long. To what do all these “its” refer? The “it” that has happened is the spread of *soi-disant* “reality” television programming. The “it” that has taken so long is the intrusion of that programming into education. In just under forty years, the “reality” genre, which began with the injecting of the cameras of PBS into the living room of the Loud family in *An American Family* (1973), has eventuated in the snaking of the cameras of A & E into the classroom of Northeast High School in Philadelphia.

This cinematic invasion of a public high school is of concern to me professionally, personally, and socially. It is of professional concern because I am a retired English, Latin, and Humanities teacher, and not only have I shown in my writings my distress at the decline of our American education system, but also I have offered a set of reasoned prescriptions for its reform that seemed defensible and feasible. It is of personal concern because I am a graduate of that very Northeast High School (class of January 1960), and I was a member of the first group of students who completed their entire high school education at NEHS, having entered it in tenth grade (in February 1957) after its completion. It is of social concern because of my skepticism about the legitimacy of “reality” television programming either as entertainment or as instruction, but especially the latter.

My reservations about “reality” programming are grounded in an awareness that the “reality” presented in these shows is a bogus reality, more fictive in some ways than fiction itself. The virtue of fiction is that by freeing itself from the shackles of what is real, it is able to reveal what is true about what is genuinely actual. The vice of “reality” programming is that its faux reality renders it incapable of revealing what is true. Apparently, we have ignored the lesson of Albert Brooks’s hilariously prescient film *Real Life* (1979), in which a cadre of centaur-like beings (half-human/half-camera) invades a “typical” American household. The lesson of the film was pointedly expressed by Harry Shearer, who described the film’s inception thus: “The next day, he [i.e., Albert Brooks] came in with the idea about filming a family’s life. The whole idea of the camera as being somehow unintrusive and capable of finding the truth is ridiculous, and people should be reminded of it.”

II

The “reality” at immediate issue is Philadelphia’s Northeast High School, my high school. At its inception, NEHS was meant to be a premier high school, the school that would provide for the burgeoning outlying area of northeast Philadelphia an exemplary college preparatory education comparable to that provided by the inner city’s Central [Boys’] High School and Girls’ High School, what today might be called magnet schools, what then were considered as the only public schools that could go toe-to-toe academically with the best private schools.

That quasi-edenic beginning sustained itself for less than a decade, as the decline indicated in Frederick Wiseman’s documentary *High School* (1968), also set in NEHS, revealed.

Now, again, the spotlight is focused on that school because television actor and song-and-dance performer Tony Danza decided that he would reactivate his youthful plan to be a teacher by interning for a year, teaching tenth grade English, at NEHS. Why he, a West Coaster, and his producers chose NEHS for this grand experiment is never explained (unless the shot of Danza standing near the statue of Stallone as Rocky on the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s steps is meant to be an explanation). Neither are the reasons for the school’s accepting the proposal explained.

Indeed, many things connected with this project are left uncomfortably unexplained. Preeminent among these is the issue of what precisely are Mr. Danza’s qualifications. That Danza is both likable and earnest is undeniable. However, that is not the issue. The issue is rather that while Danza himself suggests that he majored in education in college, he never claims to have specialized in English, and a quick google search reveals that he did not. Why, then, is he teaching English? The answer to this question, I believe, goes to the heart of what is wrong with our schools. Today’s educators regard English, which should be the bedrock of a good education, as a “soft” subject, which results in its being given much shorter shrift than it requires and deserves. The English class is considered to be an arena of self-expression in which openness supplants rigor as the *sine qua non* of the desirable classroom. Such a point of view—the typical one in our colleges of education and in the school systems that they have spawned—leads to a classroom in which a defined and challenging curriculum is considered too stifling and in which teacher sensitivity to putative individual needs is more important than academic competence.

One wonders what would have happened if Mr. Danza had wanted to teach geometry or chemistry, calculus or physics. These subjects are regarded as at least marginally more rigorous than the so-called language arts. In these subjects, presumably, Danza would have had to show a modicum of numeric competence, although even here the required level of competence would have been lower than it was for my teachers in those subjects at this same school. Therefore, I

assume that if he had wanted to teach any of the mathematics or the natural sciences, the “hard” subjects, he would have been refused politely and been ushered to the door.

However, in English, amateurs are welcome. Mr. Danza is most emphatically an amateur. After all, he seems to have a very part-time course load of one class, and he is overwhelmed by the demands of teaching that, even though it is made to appear that he is a full-time presence at the school. How he spends the bulk of his time is a mystery. He does not use it to ensure that he has the materials that he needs to conduct his class, as he admits one day when he cannot find a handout of plot elements that he intended to distribute.

This is part of the larger mystery surrounding the source of the lesson plans to which he refers. He is never shown preparing a lesson plan, either in school when he is not in class (most of the day) or in his residence. We see him putting his wardrobe on but not putting his lesson plans together. In addition, when he uses his spontaneously generated lesson plans, he seems to be able to do no more than read them, and when the discussion verges beyond them, he seems more befuddled than most of his students.

Even if one puts aside the question of Mr. Danza’s academic competence, one can ask what kind of teacher he is. The kindest evaluation of him as a teacher is that he is a well-intentioned bumbler. The way that he runs his classroom—when he is not simply performing (or, talking too much about himself, which he is cautioned about by several of his colleagues)—runs the gamut from the bizarre to the inconsistent.

The most bizarre is his insistence that the students use a sanitizer when entering and leaving the classroom. Even the dullest of his students find this perplexing.

The inconsistency emerges clearly in three segments. First, at the beginning of his first class, he tells David Cohn (his instructional coach), “I’m going to start them working right away.” Then he goes on to waste the class period on chatter and introductions—presumably for the benefit of the television audience—without ever assigning any work (except the omnipresent nagging about the sanitizing). Second, when Monte Dunson—the token serious student and intellectual—complains that the class is not challenging enough, Mr. Danza promises that he will prepare some extra credit assignments to be offered to the class as a whole so that Monte will have the opportunity to do more demanding work. That promise is not kept, and—at least through the third episode—we hear no more about it. Third, when Daniel Peterson tells Mr. Danza that he intends to quit the football team, Mr. Danza strongly advises him to stick with it for his own good. Daniel follows Danza’s advice and is pleased that he did. Unfortunately, Mr. Danza is incapable of following his own advice: no sooner does Daniel renew his commitment to the football team than Danza jumps ship as football coach.

Finally, Mr. Danza's universal reaction to the pressure of his job is to cry. This tendency reaches such epic proportions that at one point his instructional coach asks him if he has cried yet that day.

Lest it be thought that I am too hard on Mr. Danza, let me say that his very amateurishness is occasionally a positive, to the extent that he is free enough of education college cant to have some good instincts about his students. About many of his students, he says, "What's bothering me is the lack of effort." His colleagues seem to regard this manifestly correct observation as controversial and aberrant. In addition, when three of his students with self-proclaimed learning "differences" ask to take his first quiz in the Resource Room—although it perhaps might be more accurately named the Resourceless Room—he correctly and gently asks them at least to give it a try in the classroom, thinking that he could free them of this crutch. As Danza astutely says later, "They've been told a long time that they can't do it." Danza wants to help them to see that they can do their work in the classroom where they belong. This is his most controversial action, virtually a firing offence. David Cohn (his ubiquitous instructional coach) informs him that the law requires that if a student asks to go to the Resource Room, the teacher must accede to the request. When Danza tells Cohn that the students might surprise themselves by doing at least as well in the classroom as in the Resource Room, Cohn replies, "It's not this [i.e., not how well they do]. It's the request." Then the principal (Linda Carroll), an assistant principal (Sharon McCloskey), and a cadre of Special Education teachers besiege Danza. This array of school personnel—especially the apparently very large Special Education department (which seems to be the largest department in the school)—represents what I call our insidiously harmful bureaucracy of incapacity.

All this reveals that in our public schools, no good instinct goes unchastised. The students know this all too well, and they know how to exploit the system that operates in this way. Howard (aka Frankie) Lynn says, "We don't learn anything when they're [i.e., teachers] strict." [Apparently, he does not learn when they are as lenient as Mr. Danza is either.] Stephanie Pyle has mastered the mantra, "We all learn differently." Nakiya Robley expresses her indignation thus: "I do not like quizzes. I think they're a waste of my time." Chloe Richardson could be an instructional coach herself with comments like: "I think the grade I got I deserved in a way, but also I didn't deserve, because it was his fault, like, if half the class—more than half of his—[failed the quiz,] then it's obviously something the teacher did." [That "obviously" is a nice touch.] When assistant principal Sharon McCloskey comes into the classroom to observe, Tammy Sloan says, "You know when Miss McCloskey comes into your room, like you're done, you're in trouble, like you're gone for sure. Bye, Mr. D." [When and how these intercut student commentaries are filmed is another mystery.]

I am not altogether blaming the students themselves for these attitudes. Rather, I am indicting the system that encourages them to become slick manipulators of itself at the cost of their own educations.

Even the presence of the camera in the classroom does not alter the behavior of the students. One student openly (and discourteously) chides Mr. Danza for sweating too much. Another student texts on her cell phone in class and expresses outrage when Danza calmly expresses his concern. The same student feigns crying and then—when Danza graciously goes to give her a tissue—peremptorily leaves the room as he turns toward the tissue box, slamming the door on her way out. In addition, after saying, “I can handle myself. I think I’m old enough to know right from wrong,” this very same student cannot understand why Mr. Danza thinks that it is inappropriate for her to brush her hair in class.

Of course, there is the lone voice of Monte in the wilderness, saying that *Of Mice and Men*, which Danza claims to have added to the curriculum, is “like a seventh grade book.” Contrastingly, Howard, who is classified as gifted, says, “*Of Mice and Men* is a very hard book,” and he claims to be incapable of understanding it, even after alleged multiple rereadings.

About the quiz that approximately half the class failed, Monte says, “I don’t think that it tested me at all” and “Anyone could’ve gotten an A on it, without even reading the book.”

Although I have discussed the schooling portion of the show at some length, I must note that it occupies a far smaller portion of the show than it should. In the first episode, for example, the bulk of the show’s final segment is devoted to a football game. [Northeast High was trounced.] The third episode is virtually entirely devoted to performances, by Danza with his students and by Danza alone. About the performance put on by the students, one must say that if they can memorize their parts in the show, they certainly ought to be able to memorize what they need to learn in school proper.

III

Finally, one aspect of the show that is peripherally fascinating is the institutionalized categorizing of students.

In the second episode, at a special training session for teachers who are pedagogically disabled because they do not appreciate the niceties of student learning disabilities, Special Education teacher Marianne Graol says, “There’s fourteen categories of disability.” What precisely these fourteen are is not specified, nor is the reason that there are only fourteen, and not forty, or four hundred.

Perhaps the most telling remark is made at the very beginning of the first episode by the teacher leading the orientation of new teachers: “There are only three groups of people in this world who may not be where they want to be: prisoners, people confined to mental health

facilities, and—who's the third group?—students. Absolutely." This insulting and degrading notion that students are in effect insane inmates and that schools are in effect psychiatric wards of prisons is as damning a specimen of self-condemnation as one could imagine. No wonder teachers leave the profession in droves and no wonder half the students (or more) drop out [read "escape"]. In a world like this, any learning that occurs is purely accidental.

One wants to shout at our education system, as I want to shout at my old high school, what Antony whispered to a brutally murdered corpse: "O mighty Caesar! Dost thou lye so lowe?"