

## **The Liberal Teacher in the New Millennium**

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### **Introduction**

From time to time it is useful to step back from the immediate and urgent demands of our own teaching context and reflect on those fundamental ideas which should guide and inform our work as teachers whatever our particular situation and problems. We can get so caught up in the details that we miss the big picture completely. From a new vantage point, we can re-focus our efforts and work more effectively towards more specific goals.

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) pointed out the “tyranny of the here and now” and showed that philosophy had a role to play in helping us achieve a degree of emancipation. He himself tried on many occasions to offer that wider survey which might help us gain perspective and broaden our horizons. One such example will help to set the scene for the ten principles which are set out below.

In 1951, Bertrand Russell published a short article entitled “The best answer to fanaticism - liberalism” (New York Times Magazine, December 16, 1951), in which he discussed the threat to a liberal and tolerant outlook from the resurgence of fanatical adherence to creeds and ideologies as the world entered the era of the Cold War. Russell, in characteristic fashion, observed that what one was certain of depended on geography, specifically one’s position with respect to the River Elbe. The good citizen is the one who does not resist “longitudinal inspiration”! Russell viewed the attitude of mind associated with fanaticism as a dogmatic conviction that the truth is already known, with the result that genuine inquiry involving a serious attempt to find out what is true is replaced by efforts simply to strengthen belief in whatever happens to be the received opinion of the day. Edification, as Russell put it, rather than knowledge.

Although Russell did not believe that complete impartiality was possible, nevertheless he defended the ideal of unbiased discussion and argued that people should be free to question and doubt. He summarized the case for free discussion in terms of its tendency to promote true belief and to undermine the drift towards authoritarianism and oppression. The liberal outlook, Russell maintained, involves a general disposition to see ideas as open to question, and a recognition of human fallibility.

It is significant that he concludes his essay by attempting to capture the essence of a liberal outlook in Ten Commandments which, as a teacher, he would want to advocate. The phrase suggests that Russell's commandments identify fundamental aims of education that any teacher ought to promote, and these include (i) learning not to be afraid of being eccentric in opinion, (ii) finding pleasure in intelligent dissent, and (iii) not feeling absolutely certain of anything. Russell's "liberal decalogue" is still worth pondering by anyone thinking about what it means to be an educated, reflective citizen, and the full version can be found most conveniently perhaps in Russell's autobiography, volume 3.

50 years on, and at the start of a new century, what "commandments" might be proposed for teachers to observe in their work with students? Drawing on insights from Russell's general philosophy and educational writings,<sup>1</sup> and applying the ideal of the liberal outlook to a teacher's own attitudes and manner, the following might constitute the guiding principles of a liberal, open-minded teacher at the beginning of the 21st century. Any apparent conflict between the final principle and some of the others is resolved when we recall Russell's point that we need to live without certainty without being paralyzed by hesitation, and also his emphasis on the need to have the courage of one's convictions.

### **Ten principles for teachers**

1. Think of yourself as a student as much as a teacher.
2. Do not pretend to know more than you do nor assume that what you think you know is beyond challenge.
3. Give your students truthful answers even where this is unpleasant.

4. Discourage the passive acceptance of expert opinion, including your own.
5. Ask questions and pose problems which invite reflection, discussion, and inquiry.
6. Do not shirk controversial issues in the classroom.
7. Do nothing to discourage curiosity and imagination in your students.
8. Show respect for your students' ideas by taking them seriously, and cultivate in yourself kindly feelings towards your students.
9. Try to respond to the particular interests and talents of each student, and see in each of them the potential to become independent and autonomous.
10. Do not be afraid to use your own well-informed judgment.

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed references cannot be provided in this brief essay, but readers interested in pursuing these ideas in Russell might begin with his essay "The functions of a teacher", in Russell, Unpopular Essays London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950. My own essay, "Bertrand Russell on critical thinking", Journal of Thought 36, 1, 2001: 7-16, will point the way to many other references in Russell's work.