Education goes beyond course material

By Michael Flecky, S.J.

"Your education begins when you can tell your teacher to go spit in his cap." A very good instructor of mine was in the habit of putting that claim before our class at the end of a term.

The shock and anxiety in the group was apparent, particularly on the faces of those students who regarded every word from the teacher as from an oracle and dutifully recorded each in well-worn notebooks. I have remembered that lesson more than any other from his class, and especially appreciated its wisdom during the fever of test time.

Such advice may seem perverse doctrine to students who have spent an entire semester discerning the mind of a teacher and cracking the code for a final paper or exam. Indeed, it may seem positively outrageous to one who has spent an academic career looking forward to a comprehensive professional school qualifying exam. But for one who is liberally educated (as opposed to being trained in a vocation or indoctrinated) test results frequently are a poor measure.

In the right light, material being tested helps point the student in a direction of personal discovery. In less hopeful cases, however, mastery of test material can be mistaken for creative achievement and can close the door to the rewards of further study and questioning.

Hidden in the suggestion that education must sometimes occur in spite of teachers and their carefully programmed packages of information is the hopeful confidence that the student will become a responsible and effective thinker in his or her own right.

That is the most challenging moment of one's education, the moment a student takes charge of the learning process, when course material is acknowledged as necessary but possibly insufficient, and a grade is weighed against the student's honest self-evaluation. It is hoped that this is an occasion to which the teacher himself is not a stranger.

When I tell my students that a very important grade is the one they give themselves, a surprising few seem willing to allow themselves that authority. To suggest that a student might just be capable of independent learning is perhaps to fly in the face of what many of us have been taught from the time we learned to select a channel. The advertising industry devotes much attention to our belief that we are smelly and unlovable, radically unacceptable and utterly helpless.

The toothpaste I look at every morn-

ing confounds me with the sage advice that I will get best results by squeezing the tube from the bottom and working up. Bereft of such savvy directions, so we are led to believe, each of us is thoroughly lost and unable to follow our own best lights.

It is from this state of induced helplessness that today's successfully educated students will be liberated. The problem of learning in the future will lie not in the quantity of information available but with paralysis in making sense of it. The word education itself suggests a "leaving out from under." A lot of prepositions, all suggesting some movement-away from helplessness, over-dependence, and sheepish docility.

If teachers and students abandon the liberating enterprise of education to the limited activity of testing, approval, and evaluation, we will have settled for a false security that the present world does not have the leisure to bear. We will ultimately be dissatisfied. And we will have wasted a precious opportunity.

Students to show art

The annual student art show will open April 28 with a reception from 7:30 to 10:30 p.m. in the gallery on the second floor of the Fine Arts building, according to Dr. Roger Aikin, director of the gallery.

The show will feature prints, photography, paintings, drawings and sculpture.

The gallery is open to the public Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, noon to 4 p.m.