It is a pleasure to write this essay to honor K. Danner Clouser, my long-time friend and colleague. He has influenced us all by his advice, kindness, writings, and sense of humor. Dan is master of the one-liner, the king of repartee, and the champion spinner of wonderful tales. At his retirement party from Hershey in 1996, he invited some of us to his home where we were mesmerized by his stories. He told of leaving his home when the near-by Three-Mile Island had a partial melt-down; only Dan could make that horrific event both extremely funny and deeply moving.

In what follows, I will examine Clouser’s philosophy of education. He has written extensively about integrating humanities into professional education in general and medical education in particular. I want to show that Clouser’s stated goals are largely epistemological, and like those of John Dewey, concern the development skills and dispositions to make students more aware of problems and better able to solve them. After briefly discussing the goals, teaching techniques, skills, and dispositions that Clouser recommends to make students better problem-solvers, I critically examine his views. I suggest that there is a tension in Clouser’s work, primarily because he seems committed to two different, possibly incompatible, lines of argument about the proper goal of teachers of medical ethics or other humanities in medical education. Clouser seems to waffle on whether our goal as humanities teachers should be to try to make students not only better problem-solvers but better people. I will argue that he is either inconsistent, or he presupposes his own moral theory, without argument, in his philosophy of education. If this is correct, then Clouser has not argued for a key assumption and left his position open to misunderstanding.

I. EPistemological Goals

John Dewey writes, “... the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education – [and] the object and reward of learning is the continued capacity for growth” (Dewey, 1916, p. 117). Clouser’s educational goals are also largely epistemological, and similar to
Dewey’s contextualist or pragmatic philosophy of education (1916, 1929). Clouser, like Dewey, focuses upon having students develop habits and attitudes that will enhance their problem-solving abilities with respect to issues they are likely to encounter. Clouser states his goals as follows: First, he seeks to discredit both dogmatism and versions of relativism (the view that everyone’s moral opinion is as good as everyone else’s, a view he says many students think prevail once they step outside the bounds of medicine and science). Second, he emphasizes the value of courses that are problem-oriented, relating to issues in student’s lives. Third, he advocates fostering the ideal of developing students’ sensitivity to real-life problems: “One wants the student to develop a ‘feel’ for raising the right question, for ferreting out the real argument, for locating the pivotal point” (Clouser, 1972, p.15).

Like Dewey, Clouser’s philosophy of education focuses on methods to teach students to be sensitive to problems that they are likely to encounter, and helping them develop the critical skills to structure useful responses. Clouser’s overall approach emerges in his comment that instructors should aim at “integrating instead of accumulating, questioning instead of recording, discussions instead of lectures, depth instead of breadth, sowing instead of harvesting” (1972, p.9). Clouser writes, “I am not trying to lead them to a certain preconceived level of ‘scholarship;’ I am attempting to seduce the students into critically examining their own beliefs, feelings, and value commitments. Their own contradictions, ambiguities, and confusions are flushed from the underbrush and focused upon” (p.1972, p.16).

Why should medical and other professional schools want humanities programs? Clouser’s answer is for the same reason they want students to study pathology, physiology, and other courses – it helps them become better physicians. In this age of complex and changing moral and social problems, humanities can teach students to understand issues and find sound solutions.

II. TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Several techniques advocated by Dewey have been used by Clouser for teaching humanities in medical school. They have become the gold standard in our field because they are so successful in helping students become better problem-solvers (Clouser, 1972). First, small interactive