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AUTHOR Longstreet, Wilma S.
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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an initial effort toward an applied theory of eclecticism by examining different movements and methods of instruction. The two major movements described include a) "deschooling" the society as proposed by Ivan Illich by disorganizing public school organization, and b) personalizing instruction by encouraging the individual needs and interests of students to greater depth and broader range. Major methods described cover independent study, lectures, the discovery format emphasizing the student role as investigator, programmed learning as a modified lecture, and discussion-inquiry dealing with student feelings. Results of the examination of the above movements and methods led to a major conclusion; none of the teaching approaches described, or passed over, used to the exclusion of others is sufficient for the needs of modern-day schooling. Only together do they begin to offer a range complex enough to cope with today's education. Fitting teaching formats to situations and desired ends is necessary and reemphasizes the need for an applied theory of eclecticism. (MJM)

TOWARD AN APPLIED THEORY OF INSTRUCTIONAL ECLECTICISM

Paper read at Conference on English Education April 7, 1972

Wilma S. Longstreet

The history of twentieth century education has been characterized by over-simplification. We have jumped from bandwagon to bandwagon embracing each as if it were the answer to the multiplying problems of our schools.

In the past, simplicity of the educative process was a dominant characteristic. Education was a straightforward, relatively clear-cut process based on a one-to-one relationship either in the form of apprenticeship (for the poor) or of a private tutor (which, in effect, was the rich man's apprenticeship). Even today, we can experience that form of teaching. Parents know apprenticeship teaching every time their children ask them how to do something. In such situations, parents are likely to be quite successful for it is usually the child who initiates the question, who feels the need to know and who often has the possibility of applying what he learns immediately.

The present-day movement to "personalize" instruction so that it would suit not only the abilities but the interests and needs of students without reference to some group criteria, is really an effort to transfer apprenticeship traditions into the modern public school setting, which is a setting utterly different from any ever existent previously during the use of apprenticeship. We have somewhere in the neighborhood of 32 million elementary students, 16 million secondary students and 8 million college-level students. These immense numbers have required large-scale planning--buildings that were not just chosen by the luck of there being an extra barn available--teachers who could be counted on not only by their presence, but by the extent of their knowledge in a period of the proverbial knowledge explosion--supplies--books--etc.

It is fairly obvious that any organization on such a massive scale would be incompatible with a curriculum based completely on personalized instruction. I am sure you are all well aware of the many not unjustified attacks on public

school organization. Kohl, the writer of The Open Classroom, would have as many curriculum variations as there are combinations of students and teachers.[1/] Illich would "deschool" the society.[2/] There is little doubt but that the schools would have to be "de-organized" before personalized, or, as I would call it, apprenticeship teaching is to again become the major instrument of instruction. Yet, the revision, and even the total destruction of public school organization, really does not tell us very much about what students should study, or how teachers should teach. All that personalized instruction tells us is that we should follow the needs and interests of students and encourage these, on an individual basis, to greater depth and broader range. How teachers are to do this remains a wide open question.

It is my sincere belief that if personalized instruction is taken to be the best and perhaps only remedy to the problems of our schools, we will have stumbled into the most colossal oversimplification of this century. What are some of the beliefs supporting a total dominance of personalized teaching? First, there is the incredibly naïve assumption that studies undertaken while one is a member of a group are less effectively learned than those undertaken individually. Men learn immeasurably from each other--including when they study together. In sharing common concerns and exchanging insights about common learnings and experience (this means both during and after classes), men often achieve more imaginative ideas, more complete understandings than if they had been left on their own or even guided by a teacher. This is called "serendipity." Moreover, and importantly, the existence of any society depends upon a core of shared understandings. We would be eliminating education from helping to develop such common insights--do we really want to do this? The difference between change and anarchy lies in the shared understandings of people even when they disagree about what "change" is best. There is still another point. The de-organization of our schools for the sake of increased personalization, implies that people will spontaneously feel the need to learn such things as "reading,"

"information theory," "political organization and operation," etc. And that may be true (I have no proof it is not) but there has been no example in human history of the majority of a people becoming literate or learning how to control the power-bearing instruments of their society without that society having preestablished both the means and the intention for this to happen. The question is more than whether people would feel the need to read, but how great their understanding of the power of the media, of persuasive techniques, advertising, biased writings and the like would become if education were based only on their personally felt needs and interests.

Having thus come out against personalized instruction as this has been epitomized by the sundry free schools that have popped up around the country--schools which have little in common but their desire to free the child from the oppressions of public school organization--does not mean that I am against personalized instruction conceived of as <u>one of a number of available methodologies</u>. In other words, I am making the distinction between "personalization" that is seen as a valid substitute for mass, organized public school education and personalization as one of a number of teaching methodologies which is often called "independent study." I have to go one step further and say that a truly responsive, aware educational system must be cognizant not only of individual identity and self-meaning, but of the meanings, feelings, etc. that we all carry because we are societal members as well as individuals--because the need to belong is as powerful an affective need as that of expressing one's own individuality. Granted, the relationship of the societal and the individual is complex and is becoming steadily more complex--but hiding our heads in the sand and shouting for "personalization" and "deschooling" will do little to increase our understanding.

The complexity of teaching boggles the mind. In the midst of that complexity, teachers are constantly making decisions. The tendency is to simplify the

complexity of the decisions that need to be made by embracing one or another instructional methodology as if it alone were sufficient for education. In essence, each methodology somehow simplifies the teaching situation so that a particular kind of goal can be achieved. Whenever one kind of learning--one kind of objective--is emphasized to the exclusion of other kinds, we have the phenomenon of educational oversimplification. For example, the lecture has been the predominant teaching format of the past centuries (introduced 1848-monitorial system). It reduces the range of teaching decisions to those concerned with content. The backgrounds and personalities of the students, the ability of students to achieve their own insights, the nature of the classroom environment--to name but a few vital factors--are ignored. The lecture is, however, a powerful means of telling, in a brief span of time, about the achievements and efforts of others. It can sum up briefly, and insightfully, the lifetime work of geniuses and near geniuses. It cannot give students that direct involvement with the application of processes and concepts in a variety of situations that the accelerating explosion of knowledge demands. It cannot relate, except by accident, to each individual's affective involvement in what he is learning. It cannot take continual recognition of what students are learning so that a sense of achievement may be developed.

The past twenty years have seen other instructional methodologies proclaimed as remedies to the lecture--the lecture, itself, having become almost a naughty word. For instance, in the "discovery" format, the emphasis is shifted somewhat toward the student who is perceived as an investigator of the content to be studied. He is to discover from his empirical observations and inductive reasoning, the underlying principles of the content that have been previously chosen and presented to him as needing explanation. Teaching is reduced to guiding the student through the steps of "discovery" without telling him what it is he is to discover. Aside from the obvious contradiction between "guidance" and "discovery," this format limits the range of teaching decisions

to whatever the student is capable of discovering in the content at hand. Disregarded, for all practical purposes, are the affective development of students, their ethnic-socioeconomic backgrounds, the immense intellectual power to be achieved by being able to absorb, in relatively short periods of passive learning, the efforts and outcomes of others, and the vital importance of collecting, storing and retrieving information not merely for the sake of "discovery," but for increasing one's ability to work better within known established channels.

Programmed learning, frequently thought of as "teacher proof," is, in essence, a modified lecture, telling students about the content in small units or frames which provide continual feedback to the student regarding how well he is understanding the material. In effect, programmed learning is a very linear view of learning which has little room for the creative insights of students and little real concern for their interests. It deals only with what can be pinpointed and defined, while so much of living escapes such definition. The student may be actively involved in responding, but still far from having to do any really creative thinking. He can be completely apathetic and still perform well in school. Such an approach does little to encourage students to initiate activities on their own or to become involved in manipulating processes in unpredictable ways so that new uses of information may be discovered.

The "discussion-inquiry" has come into its heyday in the past fifteen years, especially among secondary English and social studies teachers. The major thrust of this methodology is to involve students in problems that are personally relevant to them. While the Deweyian conception of "inquiry" would follow what is considered the natural processes of thought when excited by a felt need, the rather widely used "discussion-inquiry" format embraces the unstructured realm of student feelings as well. To have students express their opinions and reactions is central to this approach, and additional techniques, such as role playing, are used either to provoke thoughtful,

involving discussions or to culminate a discussion with some practical demonstration. In effect, teaching reduces itself to getting students to react to some given content. Even the content tends to take a secondary role to the goal of student expression. In an era when information is gaining in importance and the ability to develop well-founded opinions is vital, the "discussion inquiry" format, used as the major instrument of instruction, is unwittingly leading students to believe that all they have to do is to express a few ideas that have occurred to them and somehow come to terms with these. If a Shakespearian play is read, discussion regarding the students' likes or dislikes must be held. Johnny has barely understood the language used by Shakespeare, but he must decide upon and express his opinions about Shakespeare's works, thereby eluding him into believing that he has a basis for such opinions. This is the opposite of what occurs when only the lecture method is used and the opinions of students are never asked for, as if these could have no validity. Both the "discussion-inquiry" and the "lecture" formats, used exclusively, mortify the processes of reasonable opinion formation. In the one, having command of a set of well-grounded facts tends to be ignored; in the other, a series of useless facts is often communicated along with vital information in what is known as the "ground-covering syndrome."

None of the teaching approaches described, nor those passed over, used to the exclusion of the others is sufficient for the needs of modern-day schooling. Each deals with only a few aspects of the teaching-learning process disregarding others. So long as each format is recognized for what it is--a simplification of teaching so that certain kinds of objectives may be emphasized while others are held in abeyance--they are all useful. Together they begin to offer a range of viable means complex enough to cope with the complexities of education

Teachers need to be mindful eclectics, able to take an objective view of what has been done and of what should be done in the classroom, capable of seeing the drawbacks as well as the benefits of each instructional format, and willing

to analyze classroom decisions before, during and after they have been acted upon. Teachers need to be open-minded, applied theoreticians of eclecticism. They need to view all conceivable approaches to teaching as having validity under certain conditions and toward certain goals.

The eclectic teacher must continually consider his students and their backgrounds, the nature of the content and the goals to be achieved. Let's take a practical example. Suppose a high school English syllabus requires the teaching of Hamlet or some other Shakespearian play. What are the goals really involved in studying a Shakespearian play? It is certainly not to make Johnny a Shakespearian writer, nor even to make him a Shakespearian critic, though, in some cases that might eventually be the outcome. Obviously, there is a gamut of goals, some of which would be perceived by one teacher, some by another. The pertinent point is that the teacher is clear, in his own mind, why Hamlet is being studied.

For the sake of argument, let us say that the goals decided upon are: (1) an increased awareness of the cultural heritage of this nation and (2) an increased understandirg of the student's own life and times as these might be illuminated through the perceptions and insights of Shakespeare. What kinds of learning would such goals entail? Certainly, an awareness of cultural heritage does not imply knowing a specific quantity or quality of facts. It is as much "cultural heritage" to be acquainted with other Elizabethan plays as to be aware of the details of Shakespeare's life. A good amount of personalized teaching, in the form of independent study, could fruitfully take place here with the teacher helping students to find areas that interested them as well as guiding them in their research.

On the other hand, a description of the Elizabethan theater, so different from a modern-day theater, might be considered important to anyone's ability to visualize how the action of the play was performed. Yet, if the acquisition of such information were to take too long in relation to the total time allotted the unit, the real goals of reading Shakespeare's work might be sidetracked. A

lecture format coupled with some visual aids would probably best respond to the need. A programmed learning approach would really be inadequate in this instance not only because one of its major characteristics is an unlimited time factor, but also because of its insistence that a student know certain facts before he goes on to acquire new facts. Obviously, the different aspects of the description of the Elizabethan stage are not tied to a linear sequence, nor must the student know them all to get a feeling of the way staging was done.

The goal of self-illumination through the reading of a great work would necessarily mean preparing experiences that would involve the student both conceptually and emotionally. The personalized format, which, at first seems a most likely choice might really not be the best approach, especially if the students are generally immature and inexperienced. Insights into one's own personal meanings generally implies that new perspectives can be brought to these so that they will be understood in new ways. The "discussion-inquiry" format with emphasis on small group interaction and/or pupil-pupil-teacher-pupil interaction could probably contribute more to the student's self-understanding than any independent exercise.

Let's go a little further. The interpretations of Shakespeare's works are numerous and have varied both from individual to individual (as psychological phenomenon) and from century to century (as sociological phenomenon). A lecture concerning these variations and following the afore-described discussion-inquiry approach might further contribute to increasing the students' understanding of how their own views and feelings have been influenced by their times as well as give them a broadened perception of human universality. So I am coming out for a lecture method because I think students need help or "telling" in coping with the complexity of Shakespeare. If a second Shakespearian work were to be studied, the lecture format should give way in this instance to a "discovery" approach. That is, the students might be

encouraged to conceive of several different interpretations of the play's underlying meanings without any hint on the teacher's part as to what these might be. The students would be asked to support their interpretations from the empirical evidence within the play or in the playwright's background, or in the historical period, etc. The students' intuitions and feelings would also be considered as proper sources for reactions. The outcomes of this approach could be further analyzed in a "discussion-inquiry" format.

This analysis of fitting teaching formats to the desired ends could go on. It is important that, as teachers, we are aware of what each format can and cannot do for us, for our students, for the content and for the particular setting and situation. Above all, there should be coherence between the means and the goals adopted. If we are trying to encourage creativity or self-expression through writing, the use of a "lecture" or "programmed learning" format is most likely to be inappropriate. On the other hand, if the development of composition skills is the objective, a "programmed learning" format might be the most appropriate choice. The teacher needs to ask and seek the answers to such questions as whether a programmed approach to the learning of skills is detrimental to the creative-affective development of students. Would a programmed approach, mingled with other instructional formats, be more effective? Is the affective development of students being over-emphasized so that a disregard for information is a possible outcome? In what ways can teaching formats be combined so that students will undergo a balanced, cognitive-affective-creative development?

Such eclectic questioning, which I would call applied theorizing/about instructional decisions, should become the hallmark of the professional teacher. This paper is only an initial effort toward an applied theory of eclecticism. Most of all, it is a stand against oversimplifying the teaching act.

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