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ABSTRACT

Behavioral objectives in the teaching of English are criticized. The primary objection is the a priori expectations and reasoning which is a necessary part of these objectives. Behavioral objectives are said to restrict the flexibility and mobility of the English teacher in his classroom interaction. The entire concept of writing behavioral objectives is seen as being misconstrued in that learning, concepts, and information are made the center of instruction rather than the student. If the goal is to create better learning situations, it is felt that the solution should be to create imaginative creative, flexible, humane, and humanistic teachers.
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MAGIC, BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES, AND ENGLISH

Part I

by DIRK MESSELAAR and ROBERT J. KEEFE

The following is a list of objectives related to attitudes about poetry quoted in *Behavioral Objectives and Instruction* by Robert S. Kibler and others. The original source is *Selected Objectives for the English Language Arts 7-12*, by Arnold Lazarus and Rozanne Knudson. The objectives are as follows:

1. to respect poetry as a priceless art form, as something that may heighten one's sensitivity to living.
2. to accept the fact that poetry is essentially secular and hedonistic — that it celebrates things of this world, as John Crowe Ransom and other have observed.
3. to regard as possible treasures the poems one likes now, but to be willing to reassess this treasure from time to time, subjecting it to one's changing tastes.
4. to appreciate beauty of sound in poetry, and the relationship between sound and sense.
5. to enjoy discovering the paradoxes and planned ambiguities of poems.

We are not sure how characteristic these objectives are, but, assuming that they are not atypical, they might give us some insights into the validity and value of constructing such objectives. Most English teachers, we believe, would agree in essence with the above objectives. But it is more than essences that we are talking about here. We are saying that guidelines like these would be the framework within which a school system would teach its students appreciation of poetry.

We do not have to go too deeply beneath the surface of these objectives to see that what is presented as *objective* rationale for evaluating a student's response to poetry is in fact highly subjective ("to accept the fact that poetry is essentially secular and hedonistic"). For each one of these objectives alternatives could be written with equal validity. Not that those listed will necessarily be negated; simply that other, equally valid objectives could be established as the goals of the study of poetry in a given

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English department. If this is the case then, perhaps, each teacher should write his own objectives for the teaching of poetry. But to allow this is to increase the subjectivity to a point where we are right back where we started.... with no uniform standards.... nothing objectively measurable.

There are, of course, many reasons for rejecting the behavioral objectives approach to the study of English (most cogently explicated in the NCTE publication *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English*): the possibility that the objectives will become the end rather than the means (as teaching for college boards in some schools); the problem of there being any relationship between the stated objectives and what actually takes place in the classroom; the problem of setting up objectives for a class of students before the class even exists.

It is the last problem which presents the greatest threat to good teaching. The behavioral objectives approach implies that administrators and/or teachers can presuppose a set of absolutes — i.e., *any* class should learn by the end of the year. But good teaching is not made up of absolutes, it is made up of relatives. The good teacher tries to find out where the class is (a specific class), and tries to take them from there to someplace else. The less-than-good teacher is the one for whom a set of behavioral objectives would be a boon. There would be no concern for who the students were, nor what their past experience might have been; here are the objectives (as established by the teacher or administration). If the less-than-good teacher wants to be considered good, somehow or other he must get his students to give the right responses... again, the means becomes the end. The results could well be a further obfuscation in the attempt to delineate 'good teaching.'

Perhaps the only reasonable place for behavioral objectives is in the final exam. In our English department we are teaching on the elective system. One of the courses is entitled 'Comedy and Humor.' A description of the course and a list of the materials to be used was written up in our course outline. With these as guidelines, the course was begun. Before long it became clear that the intended level of the course was in fact beyond the capabilities of the students in the class. If a set of behavioral objectives had been established before the class had begun, would the teacher have been shirking his responsibilities not to stick to them? What if he pragmatically scrapped the objectives and

wrote up some new ones? What about the time wasted on the original ones? As the teacher approached the end of the semester he could see that there was no way that he could have predicted the final outcome of the class...and yet he can list very clearly now what the class accomplished, and in essence the final exam will indicate whether or not the students have learned what he tried to teach them about comedy and humor. Perhaps this is the only legitimate time at which a teacher can talk about what his class should learn or should have learned.

"Objectives" should grow out of the developing relationships of the class, the teacher, and the subject matter. All classes are different; all students are different; and the subject matter is the only possible constant in this fluctuating relationship. Therefore to presuppose a set of goals for a given class is to assume that teachers and students are the most important and dynamic ingredients in the learning process.

English teachers often work intuitively. Much of the best teaching, and consequently some of the most effective learning, takes place within a framework of spontaneity which is unconstrained by any *a priori* behavioral objectives. English, an experience so directly committed to "personal growth", is too firmly entrenched in the complex web of personal and intrapersonal life. It cannot be subjected to objective evaluation systems any more than human beings themselves can be realistically subjected to objective measurement.

Mager defines behavioral objectives as "statements of desired behaviors which specifically identify and describe in observable, measureable terms what is to be accomplished." Implicit in this definition, then, is the notion that one knows what to measure and that one can observe the characteristics to be measured. Neither of these assumptions are possible in the most important, "higher-level" goals of English instruction as exemplified in the poetry objectives cited earlier. None of these objectives can be systematically measured except in some nebulous and peripheral form. These internal processes (understanding, appreciating, critical thinking, feeling, loving, etc.) are both too long-range and too internal for measurement.

The behavioral approach favors short-term, fragmented teaching. Proponents of behavioral objectives would have teachers identify and measure the intermediate steps which are prerequisite to the more important, internal, long-range goals. This

would ostensibly help them steer a steady course. Appreciation, imagination, creativity, or spirit of inquiry cannot, however, be dissected into segments to be measured; the true aims of English instruction are too intertwined with life to allow such an analysis. Instead of reading, talking, writing, listening, and generally interacting in a real situation as James Moffett and others would have students do, behaviorists would have us analyze and systematize language (life) behavior into verifiable, isolated, observable constructs.

The primary objection which we have to behavioral objectives is the *a priori* expectations and reasoning which is such a necessary part of writing these objectives. This could easily contribute to the "pygmalion effect" which already appears all too often in the classroom. Behavioral objectives restrict the flexibility and mobility of the English teacher in his classroom interaction. A self-fulfilling prophecy can have no better companion than a behavioral objective. They are merely the teacher's, administration's, or society's subtle expectations being transmitted into a purportedly objective, scientific format.

In general the entire concept of writing behavioral objectives is misconstrued in that learning, concepts, and information are made the center of instruction rather than the student. What students need is more interaction with other students and teachers, not a more efficient interaction with learning. The latter is the *raison d'être* for behavioral objectives. If the goal is to create better learning situations, the solution should be to create better teachers; teachers who are given the freedom to be imaginative, creative, flexible, humane and humanistic.

Part II

by THOMAS G. DEVINE

To say kind words about behavioral objectives is — in some circles — akin to saying kind words about the devil. My personal predilection to kind words prompts the following comments. (The devil will be treated in a final paragraph).

I think we teachers of English have over-reacted to the whole topic. Our rather special professional and humanistic education helped us see almost at once the basic weaknesses inherent in the

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