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AUTHOR Handleman, Chester
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ABSTRACT

Schools and educators are being called to task so that students will be able to achieve academically and gain basic skills. While few people argue with the need for gradual, reasonable, and proven changes in curricula, the massive infusion of innovative curricula and teaching methods often intended to maximize affective learning may have had a substantially negative effect in that the cognitive development of students may have been neglected. Such innovations as mastery learning may train students on a specific or limited group of problems but may not enhance the ability of the student to generalize to a larger domain. Over-use of objective testing at the expense of subjective examination may be partially responsible for lack of adequate development of writing skills in students. Among the things that educators can do to begin to address these and similar problems are: (1) place greater emphasis on subjective testing and development of writing skills; (2) accommodate low achieving students through guided studies; (3) maintain or strengthen academic standards; (4) primarily emphasize basic skills and cognitive development; and (5) mix traditional education with proven innovative concepts. A solution to the crisis in the schools and colleges will not be attained soon. (Author/JDS)

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CHANGE IN THE CURRICULUM

Chester Handleman, Ed.D.
Dept. of History and
Political Science
Broward Community College
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

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For more than a decade, at first scattered and now frequent, voices have been heard warning against many of the newer but often questionable forms of instruction that have been inundating our schools and colleges. Yet these warnings have usually gone unheard in the rush toward massive infusions of "innovative" curricula and teaching techniques which have become commonplace today. Many professional educators in recent years have presented so-called "objective studies" and "controlled research" to demonstrate that earlier teaching methodologies were essentially in error. Few people would argue that gradual, reasonable and proven changes are necessary for the curriculum as they are for all areas of human endeavor. What is at issue, however, are the many radical and unproven innovations which have become ubiquitous in classrooms throughout America.

Many of those who have supported the new methods for the "New Students," as described by well-known writers such as K. Patricial Cross and others, have maintained that competition should be removed from the learning scene; that

academic "grade inflation" is of little matter, since teaching the student rather than "subject matter" is the major goal; and that accommodating the underprepared and the disadvantaged is more important than academic achievement. Cross's argument that we guarantee education for "each" (through individualized instruction) rather than for all students does not really help to solve the difficulty.

The overuse of objective testing formats in the classroom, sometimes almost to the exclusion of written, subjective or "blue book" tests has simply added to the problem. While the grading of subjective or written tests is certainly more time consuming than that of machine grading of the "multiple choice" exams, the former often reveal students' academic difficulties in many ways not indicated by objective ones. Indeed, some of the radically innovative instructors even question the necessity of students' having to learn course material in a comprehensive fashion anyway. Some have preferred to teach a "few topics" of a discipline "in depth," thus omitting most of the course material as such. This approach can be useful for advanced students who already have a thorough grounding of the basic subject matter of a discipline; it may be a questionable practice, however, for most lower division college students. Of course, using such a teaching format can be far easier on both

instructor and student, especially in the non-technical and non-scientific areas. But does this method accomplish one of the main objectives of education--that the student gain a reasonably comprehensive grasp of an area of learning? Too often we hear rationalizations maintaining that in today's world, when knowledge has grown in geometric proportions, it is not necessary for students to learn much subject matter; that "it is better to teach attitudes, interests and skills because students can always look up the facts." A physician, lawyer or teacher with such a background would be of doubtful value in today's society.

By 1975 a strong reaction to the above educational philosophy had already developed in many areas. The public and the popular media are now demanding that basic education and more rigorous effort on the part of both instructors and students be required. One can hardly look at a newspaper or a popular newsmagazine that does not rail against the many questionable and permissive teaching formats that have been so much in evidence since the early 1960's. As recently as five years ago such criticisms were rarely heard. Yet today the people, represented by a "grass roots" movement, are increasingly calling schools and educators to task so that students will once again be able to gain basic academic achievement and skills as indicated by acceptable scores in subjective and objective tests. Simply to employ so-called

"social promotion" methods until a student graduates does not solve the problem. Yet in spite of this obvious crisis, most of the educational journals continue to be mainly concerned with still more "innovative" and "non-threatening" grading, teaching machines, larger amounts of audio-visual materials and interpersonal relationships, etc.

Fred M. Hechinger, the Education Editor of the New York Times, asks some serious questions about innovative teaching formats of the past two decades and more, which were to accomplish so much, when he says:

> At the moment, when the most revolutionary happening seems to be the rediscovery of the Three R's, it may be enlightening to take a nostalgic look back at the Golden Age of Progress--the 1950's and 1960's. Brave new worlds then seemed like prosperity in 1929, just around the corner. Foundations were pouring liberal amounts of seed money into experimentation.
>
> Now, a quarter of a century later, what has happened to these seeds? Why have so many of them failed to grow?[1]

Hechinger refers to examples such as the Ford Foundation's support of curricular innovation in providing funds to wire the entire school district of Washington County, Maryland for closed-circuit television and to many other TV projects which have failed and have long since ceased to exist. He also cites the disappointing results of "teaching machines," which in the late 1960's promised to do so much for education. Many of these and a myriad of other

"individualized instructional formats, Hechinger maintains, have, for a variety of reasons, failed to live up to expectations and are gathering dust in the warehouses of many school districts and colleges.[2] The system of "vouchers" and performance contracting formats are other devices that have likewise proven a disappointment, even though they were once hailed as a panacea for futurist educational methodologies. Still other curricula and instructional devices which were to accomplish so much have likewise not lived up to their supporters' earlier claims and thus have largely been discarded. Indeed, some of the results of these formats have been so disappointing that they caused a public demand, to some degree with validity, to "bring back the basics."

Wilbert McKeachie, hardly a conservative in educational circles, questions the value of "contract grading" and "mastery grading" and generally deplores the phenomenon of academic grade inflation that is so ubiquitous in recent years.[3] He maintains that mastery systems of grading, contract, and pass-fail grading are resisted because they are not efficient conveyors of the information useful in predicting future performance. McKeachie argues that in the contract system of grading, students gain points not for achievement but, rather, for carrying out those activities, such as writing papers or reading books, that should be inducive to achievement, adding: "Thus rather than measuring learning, one

assesses whether the student has engaged in activities that are the means to learning.[4]

McKeachie is even more critical of "mastery" learning. He points out that "an achievement examination in a course is ordinarily designed to sample a group of problems or generalizations that a student can be expected to solve or be able to generalize to a larger domain." But in mastery learning, he argues, that students ordinarily have to learn specific and limited information rather than a generalized area from which specifics may be drawn in a test situation. He maintains that five problems, for example, which have not been specifically studied during the course would be more of a reasonable sample of future problems than five which a student had already memorized.[5] Says McKeachie:

> Letting students turn in book reports over and over again until they do them right is a fine teaching technique, but not a good assessment device. The student who writes an acceptable book report after ten tries is probably less able to write a new report acceptably than the student who does it right in the first place. Thus the grade on such a rewritten paper is not likely to be a valid predictor.[6]

One of my own studies asked the opinions of 74 faculty members from five Florida Community Colleges concerning curriculum and instruction as it pertains to their own experiences. The findings of this study (both objective and subjective, open-ended questions were employed) clearly indicate

that perhaps three-fourths of these respondents believe that a more moderate approach to further innovative efforts in curriculum and instruction is needed. Approximately this same percentage also maintains in varying degrees that some of the heroic efforts which many community colleges employ in dealing with underprepared students should be reduced. The disappointing results of many of the so-called "innovative formats" they had tried were a major reason for this negative response. For supporters of these programs constantly to blame improper application of innovative techniques for their failure is hardly a solution to the problem.

Even John Rouche, long an advocate of innovative curricula and instructional methods, now appears to have changed his earlier position to some degree. Although many of his previous writings have downgraded cognitive compared with affective learning, he now has begun to speak out for basic skills in education. Rouche now maintains, for example, that "social promotion is cheating" in public education, claiming that the problem of high school graduates who don't have the skills necessary to survive is no longer confined to those who are low on the socio-economic scale. He goes on to say: "Yet in many cases these illiterates are students who have achieved both good grades and the commendations of their instructors.[7] Of course, the highly publicized article in a recent issue of Newsweek, which describes the problem of

a 1976 valedictorian from a District of Columbia High School graduating class who was repeatedly unable to score higher than the lowest tenth percentile on college entrance examinations is too well known to require documentation.

At the 1976 annual meeting of the College Entrance Examination Board at Princeton, New Jersey participants were very concerned with the serious drop in the academic achievement scores of recent high school graduates. One discussent, Ben Lawrence, Director of the National Center For Higher Education Management Systems, said that in trying to promote equal educational opportunities for all people, colleges and universities must not lose sight of their commitment to quality education and academic standards. He asked whether advocates of easy access to higher education are certain that a just community for higher education can be achieved without an appropriate balance between access and quality.[8]

What does this obvious deterioration of academic standards mean for the United States? Of course, the public schools and colleges are still graduating many thousands of high achieving students today; but this does not alter the fact that far larger numbers are receiving diplomas which signify little concerning disciplined effort, academic achievement and useful skills. "Change" is indeed needed in the system, but not the change which the more liberal and highly

innovative educationists have long been advocating. Moderate and reasonable change is useful and appropriate in education as in all areas of human activity. Yet radical and permissive curricula and instructional formats (many far more extreme than mentioned above) are not usually the change most needed. As already indicated, one change that is demanded, which may indicate a return to more substantive education, would include a greater emphasis on subjective testing and more emphasis in developing writing skills. The all objective test (easy to grade but of limited use in making comprehensive evaluations) should be more often combined with a greater use of written or subjective classroom tests. Grading these papers should not put inordinate demands on an instructor's time. Even as little as one-third of a test of the subjective variety would be useful; this would still allow two-thirds of that test to be of the easy-to-grade objective variety.

The "open-door" philosophy of the community college is a correct one; yet this should not mean that academic standards of a reasonable level cannot be maintained. While it may be true that many college administrators and faculty members are concerned with the possible decline in the number of people of college age who will be attending their institutions in the immediate future, as demographers warn, this should not be a signal for lowering academic standards

even below those which already exist. Students, as people in general, usually regard more highly that which they respect; if they believe that their institutions demand reasonably high standards of academic work, they may not only tend to study more but may sometimes be less inclined to become college "drop-outs."

A realistic "guided studies" program in a community college could help to accommodate some low achieving students; but others might be better served by entering into certain types of "on the job training programs" that are available in many fields. Still others might do well to withdraw from college and return at a later date when their willingness to study is greater and their life goals are more specifically focused. Skilled guidance counsellors can be of assistance in helping students to determine their vocational aspirations. But community colleges or other post secondary school institutions should avoid trying to "hold" obviously unpromising or unwilling students simply to keep up enrollments, or for the specious argument, in this particular instance, of serving the "needs" of the community.

Literally hundreds of articles are now appearing in the public media criticizing the overly permissive curricula and the lack of academic standards in much pre and post secondary education today. They point out, at the

same time, the growing numbers of "basic schools" that have been started throughout the country in recent months. A typical example of these institutions describes the vastly improved levels of academic achievement that has resulted from the establishment of sixteen basic schools in Philadelphia:

> The "back-to-basics" schools require--examinations on minimum essential requirements at the end of each school year before promotion to the next grade.
> An emphasis on mathematics drills, reading with stress on phonics, homework in all grades on a regular basis and letter grades.[9]

While special efforts to improve students' reading and mathematical skills have been in progress for some time (reading labs, etc.), the same cannot be said for students' lack of writing skills. The Dade County (Miami, Florida) School System has recognized this writing crisis and, therefore, will require, beginning in the Fall of 1977 that students radically deficient in writing skills take a special course to correct this weakness.[10] One would hope that each academic instructor would also be required to include some written as well as objective testing formats in order to help resolve this problem; a so-called "special course" in writing is not usually enough to solve a problem as serious as this one.

One Miami-Dade Community College teacher comments on the situation as follows:

> I think the problem is that students come to college without much writing experience. In social studies you can get by with true-false questions. Only the English teacher makes you write. [It might be added that many do only to a limited extent].[11]

Mrs. Margaret Dinn, a Dade County language arts consultant, explains:

> There's no question but that in the non-composition classes at the secondary level less writing was being done than we would have liked. As you got carried away with making films or planning a dramatic production, the writing got forgotten.... If we teach youngsters to write well, we can help them express their own thinking in a more clear and organized way.[12]

Students should gain experience not only in writing skills but also in ability to include substantive information in subjective tests. Yet it did not have to be that way if basic skills and substantive information had been given as much emphasis in the schools and colleges in the past two decades as so-called "affective" learning. While both, indeed, are necessary, the prime emphasis in teaching should be on the former. As already mentioned, some innovative teaching techniques may be useful if they are carefully considered and if they insure substantive learning. Yet it should not be used as an end in itself, with little consideration for basic knowledge and the development of learning skills. This fact is convincingly dramatized by Mara Wolynski, a victim of so-called permissive and innovative education. She describes the non-traditional

and permissive school which she attended; the students spent much of their time being creative and were told that the way to be happy in life was to create. But she did not learn to read until she was in the third grade because "early reading was thought to discourage creative spontaneity." Says Wolynski:

> Accordingly we were forced to be creative for nine years. And yet Sand and Sea [the name of the school] has failed to turn out a good artist. What we did was to continually form and re-form interpersonal relationships and that's what we thought learning was all about and we were happy. At 10, for example, most of us were functionally illiterate, but we could tell that Raymond was "acting out" when, in the middle of what passed for English he did the twist on the top of his desk.
>
> When we finally were graduated, however, all the happy little children fell down the hill.... No matter what school we went to, we were the underachievers and the culturally disadvantaged. My own reading comprehension was in the lowest eighty percentile, not surprisingly I was often asked by teachers how I had gotten into high school.[13]

This type of educational experience is finally beginning to be recognized by the American people for what it is. The prestigious College Entrance Examination Board, for example, is adding two writing tests to judge college bound students next year, tests which a generation ago had been a regular part of these exams. Sidney P. Marland, President of the College Entrance Examination Board, maintains that the new tests "reflect a serious concern on the part of the College Board membership over the perceptible

deterioration of writing ability among the young."[14]

A solution to this crisis in the schools and colleges will not be attained soon. Yet there already are small signs on the horizon that appear to indicate that the problem may alreacy have "bottomed out." The frequent demands from the public media and from the public itself during the past year or more may be an indication that change for the better may be in the offing. Yet most of the professional education periodicals have made little discernible effort to change their image; permissive, ultra-innovative and affective teaching still appear to be their watchword; and the same may be said for many of the more influential educational organizations on both the state and national levels. As mentioned above, reasonable and moderate innovation in the curriculum can be useful; but such innovation should not be allowed to reduce academic standards and interfere with the correct evaluation of student performance. A proper mix of traditional education along with limited and proven innovative concepts should yield far better results than much of the change that has so often been employed in recent years under the label of innovation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]F. M. Hechinger, "Innovative Education: Where Have The Innovations Gone?" Current, (February 1976): 20.

[2]Ibid., 20-21.

[3]"Universities Are Urged To Reassert Values." Chronicle Of Higher Education, November 1, 1976, 1.

[4]Wilbert J. McKeachie, "College Grades, A Rationale And Mild Defense." A.A.U.P. Bulletin, Vol. 62, No. 3, October, 1976, pp. 73-75.

[5]Ibid., 321.

[6]Ibid., 322.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Chester Handleman, "Faculty Views On Curriculum And Instruction At Five Florida Community Colleges." Community College Review, North Carolina State University (January 1977), 21.

[9]Ibid.

[10]John Rouche, "Community College Students Lack Basic Skills." Nova University News, September 1976, 3.

[11]"Back To The Basics," Durham [N.C.] Herald, October 11, 1976, p. 2.

[12]"Students Learn To Get It Together--On Paper." Miami Herald, December 19, 1976, Sec. D., 1 and 17.

[13]Mara Wolynski, "Confessions Of A Misspent Youth," Newsweek, August 30, 1976, 11.

[14]"New Test," Miami Herald, December 19, 1976, Parade Section.

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