DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 092 CS 211 039

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TITLE Reactivating the Learning Process: A Short History, a Brief Rationale.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (77th, Los Angeles, CA, November 20-25, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; *Classroom Environment; Critical Thinking; *Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Induction; *Learning Processes; Student Motivation; Student Role; Teacher Motivation; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Passivity

ABSTRACT

In most public schools today, where teachers must function as dispensers of knowledge and judges of correctness while students must function as listeners, repeaters, and memorizers, the learning process is passive. Such a passive learning process is an exhausting, burdernsome, role for the teacher and is draining on students, for it requires them to be silent, attentive, and disciplined in a manner that is not applicable in other life situations. Passive learning has not always been the rule. The Progressive Movement, begun by John Dewey, involved students in their education, preparing them not just for college--which many would never attend--but also for life. However, shortly after 1957, in response to the Sputnik scare and the belief that America was soft not only in technology but also in educational standards, the Progressive Movement yielded to the Academic Model, which looked upon language arts as a subject to be tested, structured, and measured. It was not until the mid-1960s, when critics pointed out that racial and cultural minorities were being left behind, that the Academic Model lost ground. Several recent studies show that since the middle 1970s, American schools have been influenced by a back to the basics movement, which came about as a reaction to the more progressive educational current of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This back to the basics movement is also characterized by the passivity of the learning process. It is important for educators to reactivate the learning process. An educational system which discourages critical and creative thinking is unlikely to aid students in becoming active and questioning members of their society. The key to reactivation is inductive teaching which excites, challenges, and allows students some control over their learning. The benefits of reactivation are great--for students, teachers, administrators, and society. (ARH)

Reactivating the Learning Process: A Short History, A Brief Rationale

It is not the overstatement of a moderately depressed English education professor that in most public schools today, at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels, the learning process is a passive one. I am in language arts classrooms every week in middle and secondary schools in my area, and the activities I see largely consist of students' filling out worksheets, taking notes, answering (very briefly) teachers' questions, and completing matching, fill in the blank, and true/false tests. While teachers in my area are justifiably proud of their ability to negotiate a complex curriculum with a myraid of demands that students spend a certain amount of time on certain skills and with certain types of workbooks, the entire process is passifying/pacifying the student. This in no way places the blame on the teacher -- individual teachers, in many school systems in my area, are told what and when and how to teach, and their usual, inventive response is not only one of survival but also one of subversive compromise for the betterment of their students. Yet, the national interest in controlling the teaching of students so that they are rendered docile, compliant, complaisant, is an insidious one. It is also expensive in all that that word implies.

Passive Learning: Teacher, Student, School

Simply put, a passive learning process for students requires a teacher to be the knowledge dispenser, the all-knowing answer giver, the constant talker, director, arbiter. Teachers not only give students all information in a passive learning situation, they are also the sole judges of the

acceptability, veracity, verifiability of that information. It is, essentially, an exhausting, burdensome role. It places all the responsibility on the teacher -- especially if the student does not learn or does not learn sufficiently.

A passive learning process is also draining on students. It requires them, for long periods of time, to be silent, attentive, and disciplined in a manner which is not truly applicable in other life situations. A passive learning situation -- as it exists in most schools today -- requires that students fit themselves successfully into a preexistent form and adapt, understand, and assimilate a narrow slice of knowledge in a highly specific manner. Acceptability of fit to a form or a structure determines the successful student in a passive learning process, not any form of integration or recombination with extant student knowledge.

For the school, too, passive learning makes for more school generated administrivia. Checklists of what is learned, record keeping of behavior which goes awry when students fall out of predetermined sets of behavior, scheduling of massive, wholesale testing and reporting and analyzing that testing, takes up in some cases a disproportionate amount of administrative time.

A Little History

Yet, to be frank, have we seen an era when passive learning was not the rule? Or are we in the midst of a new phenomenon? The answer is no; we have walked this path before. A little history lesson may help.

John Dewey wrote passionately about activating the learning process through a single concept, the individual's bent of mind, and felt that a child's interest is the basis for all learning. Dewey, often maligned as a hopeless liberal and optimist, was not alone in his belief. As early as 1869, Harvard University president Charles W. Eliot advocated that students be allowed to pursue what interested them in the curriculum. Certainly the Progressive Movement in education was innovative in paying attention to student needs and involving students in their education, preparing them not just for college -- which many of them would never attend -- but also for life. The Progressive Movement and its many transmogrifications (notably, regrettably, life adjustment education) yielded around 1957 to the Academic Model, an educational movement in response to the Sputnik scare and the profound belief across the nation that America was soft not only in technology but also in educational standards. The creation of the language arts as academic rigor was encouraged, and English become a subject tested, structured, and seen as a discipline (à la Jerome Bruner) which could be measured.

It was not until the mid-1960s, when critics pointed out that entire groups of students -- the poor, the racial and cultural minorities -- were being left behind in this academic wasteland, that the Academic Model lost ground. Through the Dartmouth Conference and other reports, the schools were criticized for their consuming passion for the subject, not the student. Learning, for a time at least, ceased to be the tell-and-~~and~~-test enterprise that it was post-Sputnik. Students helped to determine a small part of the curriculum through choice of courses (electives); scheduling of classes was

variable; grouping was done on interest and not by ability or class; college entrance requirements, once, as for the previous century, the whip over the heads of the high school teachers, were dropped wholesale across the country.

Of course, the movements give way to countermovements. By the mid-seventies, the national feeling was that students, active though they were in their learning process, were ill equipped to determine what and how they were to be taught. We needed to go, some urged, back to the basics. And back we went, citing accountability of the curriculum and competency testing, rendering the student, once again, a passive recipient of knowledge which then could be measured, tested, and pronounced satisfactory. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire sees, in such a model, teachers who deposit knowledge in students who serve as banks and who "meekly receive, memorize, and repeat" (75) the information. Most educators of the 1980s would not like to hear students described as meek; but receiving, memorizing, and repeating would hardly raise an eyebrow.

It may seem that we are further in the grip of that back to the basics movement. Certainly education has not been in the news to such an extent as recently. In the past few years:

the term "at risk" has entered the national vocabulary, giving us a handy phrase to use for all students who have not acquired the tell-and-test knack;

Allan Bloom (The Closing of the American Mind) says the universities have not only failed to open minds, they have "impoverished souls";

E. D. Hirsch (Cultural Literacy: What Every American Should Know) seriously believes schools teach skills only, not content, leaving students ignorant of their cultural heritage;

Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn's NEH study (What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know?) cites students' appalling basic ignorance in social studies and English;

teacher education programs are being villified across the country, in some cases being dismantled.

While it looks as if we should be hunkering down for another bombshell of abuse from the public at large, with further testing/control, passifying of students, I think the ice field is cracking. The movement is getting ready to shift again.

Towards Active Learning

A few observations may be in order. The February 1987 Language Arts devoted an entire issue to the idea of "empowerment" and its implications, empowerment, a term which starkly suggests that students no longer be passive recipients of their education. In Twenty Teachers, Ken Macrorie's most recent book, he calls for the performance of "good works" in the classroom, works by both teachers and students and in a collaborative, not a tell-and-test, mode. The latest issue of the Virginia English Bulletin, which looks toward the 21st century and makes some predictions about the future, in two articles cites a return to the use of electives as a possible improvement in education. In a 1986 issue of Chronicle of High Education, Mortimer Adler questioned whether the passive teaching of critical thinking, as it is currently promulgated through workbook types of exercises, is useful in the

least. Adler noted that in The Paideia Proposal "all genuine learning is active, not passive . . . it is a process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher" (32).

But there are three works which I would like to turn to, three studies which directly address the issue of reactivating the learning process and freeing the student from the passive role. Published in 1983 and 1984, perhaps these three studies have gotten lost in the media hype regarding the educational process. Perhaps it is wise for us to turn to their insights.

Ernest L. Boyer completed a study of 15 public high schools using the assistance of 25 educators who spent 2,000 hours, over 20 days, in each school. Sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Boyer's book High School directly addresses the question of the passive learning process. Boyer asks what he calls a "disturbing" question: "how . . . can the relatively passive and docile roles of students prepare them to participate as informed, active, and questioning citizens? . . . How can we produce critical and creative thinking throughout a student's life when we so systematically discourage individuality in the classroom?" (147).

In Boyer's concluding "agenda for action" (301), he specifically calls for "particular emphasis on the active participation of the student" (312).

John I. Goodlad is similarly concerned in A Place Called School. The book represents an eight-year study of 38 schools -- 12 of them senior high schools -- and a look at over 1,000 classrooms. Goodlad observed English instruction which had changed little over the decade, and an unfortunate emphasis on passive types of testing and drills:

> Remember the Friday morning spelling test? It's still there. Most of the elementary teachers in our sample listed it . . . . At all levels, these tests called almost exclusively for short answers and recall of information. Workbooks and worksheets, often a part of daily instruction, were used cumulatively by many teachers

> to mark pupil progress and achievement. These frequently were duplicated from commercial materials. The directions given on worksheets often were "copy the sentence" or "circle each verb" or "combine two sentences into one" or "add correct punctuation." If teachers gave tests involving writing paragraphs or essays, they seldom so indicated. (207)

Goodlad also states that what he terms "frontal" (103) teaching may not be that helpful: "some kinds of learning seem to require types of student involvement and collaboration not enhanced by teacher control and dominance. and prescriptions calling for just teacher-dominated forms of pedagogy can have negative effects on such learning" (104). Goodlad urges that "to be avoided is the daily repetition of classroom activities that encourage passivity and rote behavior on the part of students" (104).

Like Boyer, Goodlad found that explaining and lecturing were the major teaching activities in the classroom and that, ranking student behaviors, listening was at the top of the rank, taking no less than 25% of all student classroom time.

While Goodlad acknowledges that test scores have declined in the past decades, he notes that the conservative mode of teaching which has dominated the English -- and other -- classrooms has not changed. Further, he found that students in grades 4-12 said they liked subjects where they were least passive, citing arts, vocational education, and physical education as their favorites. If we insist on what Goodlad calls a "narrow range of repetitive instructional activities favoring passive student behavior" (128), we will not teach our students and will surely encourage their antipathy toward school.

Finally, Theodore Sizer writes, in Horace's Compromise, about "hungry" (54) students who raise issues and ask questions. He envisions a student not passive in the least but one who is "active, engaged in his or her own learning . . . the student takes the initiative and works at teaching himself" (54).

Sizer notes that students who are passive in school are not passive at all at work. But, he notes, the case is an old one:

> The contrast between the energy on the jobs and the lassitude in classrooms is striking. What is so sad about docility in school is not only that it is so pervasive, but that it is a condition of long standing. John Dewey warned about it. David Riesman and Edgar Friedenberg looked for yeasty, "counter-cyclical" young people in the 1950s. Paul Goodman, James Coleman and Postman and Weingartner continued the search in the 1960s. Charles Silberman, in his thorough study of the schools in the late 1960s, pinpointed the problem in the central chapter of his book Crisis in the Classroom, which he titled "Education for Docility." He argued that the students quickly learn what it takes to survive in school, and that is to conform to what the system and its teachers want. A colleague, Peter Holland, recently told me that, if anything, the situation has worsened since the 1960s. "The schools may be anaesthetizing the students . . . [There's] not enough stimulus." In visiting high schools, Holland, a former physics teacher and principal, noticed especially the increasing blandness of debate clubs and student newspapers. Many schools are quiet, apparently happy, orderly, but intellectually dull. They are not provoking, stimulating places, and their students are not hungry. A Hamilton, Ohio, athletic coach is quoted to the effect that schools allow students "to practice stupidity as long as they don't become discipline problems. They get good at dumbness." David Seeley sadly sums up his view: "Education has become a massive process for producing passive minds." (56)

Like others, Sizer links declining test scores to this passivity, especially in students' abilities to reason, analyze, and synthesize (58). While students are improving, Sizer contends, in "rote level learning," their ability to think critically and resourcefully is "lamentably weak" and weakening (50).

We must, Sizer says, abandon the right answer approach and learn how to question students so that they come to "redirect" thoughts and try a different scheme (105). The artificially orderly thinking of school -- with the computer as its model -- if not its god -- is valued by schools but not truly a part of critical thinking or active thinking.

We need to reactivate the learning process. We need to return to inductive teaching, messy, imprecise, time consuming and yet ultimately useful. We need to teach where the "point" is not laid out for students to justify and buttress -- slotting themselves in a preexistent structure like cows slotted intc ever narrower chutes -- but where students, with skilled, questioning teachers, discover the point. And the points. We need to reject the passifying/pacifying of students in teaching which excites, challenges, and allows students some control over their learning.

Such teaching:

ACTIVATES the passive student by asking him or her to respond, to codify, to formulate. It does not give students an intellectual algebraic equation to fit into.

MOTIVATES the teacher -- this is scary but useful. What were we trained for? To monitor the filling out of worksheets? With active questioning and teaching, with give and take, days become alive, passive becomes active.

PROMOTES genuine critical thinking not the ersatz critical thinking which, again, we see in workbooks.

ALLOWS for differences as students must explore, talk, come to tentative conclusions if they are to become active and learn to think.

We cannot continue, as Language Arts editor, David Dillon, frets, to "cap . . . far more than . . . actualize" (460) student potential and ability. If we activate the passive student, we have activated ourselves as teachers and, as Chaucer reminds us, we become like the parson who not begrudgingly or solemly or dutifully -- but gladly -- would both learn and teach.

Passive classrooms drain students and teachers of energy and joy and make learning the ineffective banking enterprise which Paulo Freire describes. We can ill afford, in preparing young people for a demanding society, to think that depositing our knowledge in their heads is sufficient. We need to listen to the news which Boyer, Goodlad, and Sizer bring us: American classrooms are, by and large, arenas of silence, not the yeasty rooms of argument, exploration, and understanding. It is to the latter which we must return. Only then will our students connect, truly connect, with an education, a literacy, which is not merely acquired for the day or for the test, but which is lifetime and bone deep.

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