

Mountain-Top Workshop

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WHAT MAKES a workshop? People, environment, ideas, a state of mind, a point of view? All of these factors contributed—each in turn and each in varying degrees.

When I think back over the experiences we had at Estes Park, it is the people and environment that come most poignantly to mind. Was it the two weeks of informal living together in a beautiful spot that makes clear, on second thought, the many ideas that were expressed? Was it the uniqueness of a way of working that contributed a state of mind and a point of view that seem to have become innate? One cannot be sure just which contributed what, but of this I am sure: whenever a choice of ways of working is presented, I will speak up quickly in favor of just such a workshop removed from common, everyday environments where the phones ring, routines are followed, and hats and gloves are worn to lunch.

How did we work? Of course there was planning but as I remember, it never interfered with doing. We might do any-

thing we liked. The University of Denver, co-sponsor with the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, made no demands for exams, class sessions, outside reading or term papers. Credits could be earned and the individuals desiring them could decide the form in which evidence of learning should be made.

Five members of the group assumed the first responsibility for planning. They talked together on the purposes of the workshop and decided a tentative plan of procedure. There was no mention of content. When the whole group assembled before the fireplace at our first meeting, the tentative procedure and the purposes were presented for discussion by all of the workshopers.

There was some dissension. "We came here to have you tell us what you know, to inform us about the trends in education, to give us your advice on what to do. We have problems to solve while we are here. That is why we came."

"Shall we try this way of working as an experiment? We can change it as we go along. Yes, we can plan a panel discussion on the schools in wartime for Friday, if you wish. Yes, individual conferences will be scheduled for everyone who wishes them. Yes, there will be many resource people coming to visit us and everyone may talk with anyone. Yes, there is a library of two hundred books in which you may read or not, as you wish."

And so we began, first with cross-sectional groups where a county superintendent, a principal, a teacher of English,

There are woodland paths and the whiff of mountain pines between the lines of this description of a workshop in Estes Park, Colorado. The remoteness from telephones and hat-and-glove luncheons left everyone's mind free for weightier matters. Ideas flowed readily—there were dissensions, yes—but when differences were aired in an atmosphere of cooperative thinking, they lost their ominous portent. Frances Mayfarth, editor of Childhood Education, tells us of the working of this workshop, sponsored by a national organization and drawing a diverse group of people from many educational positions and from coast to coast.

a teacher of first grade and an elementary supervisor might discover and discuss mutual problems. Then there were interest groups where those in subject matter fields might exchange ideas, develop a course of study, outline a unit of work, collect materials for future research, or evaluate past activities. Child development attracted a group of ten one day, thirteen at another time, and five for a trip to observe the Park play group for young children.

Individual conferences might be found in session on the front porch, before the fireplace, even on horseback high on a mountain pass. The resource people came and went—fifteen of them—not wholly successful with the group because of their limited stay and lack of orientation in our way of working.

At the end of the first week we evaluated what we had done. We made some changes in grouping. One resource person was drafted for daily discussion with one group. Another resource person worked intensively for two days with one member who had a tough curriculum problem to solve. The panel discussion seemed to satisfy the demand "to be told what and how."

The second week saw changes in group leadership as the more aggressive skeptics took on more responsibility for developing group thinking. Some who had been quietly passive "opened up" with their own

ideas and contributed intelligently to group and individual discussions. We agreed to continue the group discussions of new problems our first week's experiment had revealed, with voluntary shifts in personnel and changes in attack. A round table in the middle of the second week and a general group meeting for final evaluation completed the cycle of grouping which at all times remained flexible and informal.

Fun and frolic had their place: hikes with the park naturalist, films to see and games to play, spontaneous dramatics, handicrafts in the shop, a bonfire supper and sing, trips to the village, eating out and aimless walks across the mesa and along adjacent streams. Everyone enjoyed sitting on the porch—some rocked and some didn't. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner seldom found the same people at the same tables. Everyone circulated widely, talked freely, and lived comfortably. There was a spirit of inquiry concerning the ideas of others. There were arguments and differences of opinion. There may have been social and intellectual upper-uppers and lower-lowers but not obviously or offensively so. Everyone gave something and each took much away.

"Let's do it again, and soon," was the auld lang syne of departure.

The purpose: cooperative planning and problem solving. For me, it worked.

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