

Tools for Learning

TEACHING UNDERSTANDINGS

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UNDERSTANDINGS are basic outcomes of the educative process. Many understandings which an individual develops are utilized in the reasoning process and become sources upon which the individual draws when called upon to solve many of the problems of life. A large number of understandings appear to be transitory, but in reality have served as the means of developing other important controls of conduct such as habits and skills, attitudes, interests, ways of thinking, ideals, tastes, and prejudices. Understandings which are well taught abide with the individual in one form or another even though all of them are not remembered. They are foundational to the building of the total behavior of an individual.

Understandings have their genesis through the senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight, and through the kinesthetic sense. Understanding begins when meaning or interpretation is given to any sensation or percept. For example, an 8-year-old child observes steam coming from a kettle in the kitchen, falls while sliding on smooth ice, listens to the song of the rippling brook, drinks water to quench his thirst without attaching many meanings to these various aspects of water or without seeing relationships among them.

As this same child in the third grade at school comes to grips with a study of the many interesting phenomena of water, steam takes on new meaning, the formation and use of ice are better understood, sanitation as related to drinking water is appreciated, and streams take on added significance as his knowledge about water expands. He gradually develops an understanding of the

meaning of the ways in which water affects his life. The breadth of his understanding depends upon the degree to which he has been guided in utilizing his total sensory gateway in learning about the many aspects of water. The depth of his understanding depends upon the extent to which he has been permitted to share in purposing, planning, executing, and evaluating his experiences in the study of water.

The above concept implies that any single understanding is never complete, that the teacher must provide a variety of experiences to permit learners to utilize their various senses in developing broad and deep backgrounds of information.

Understandings are developed most effectively through an individual's intelligent reaction to his experiences. Teachers may assist pupils greatly in benefiting from school and other experiences by helping them to identify the important elements in an experience, to know what the facts in it signify, and to see relationships among its important aspects.

Ways of Developing Understandings

There are several specific ways in which teachers may extend, enrich, and deepen the experiences of pupils in order that new understandings may be developed and to make possible the strengthening of understandings already begun. A few of the more important ways are discussed in the following paragraphs.

1. Motivation must be provided for pupils to enter wholeheartedly into classroom experiences. This is accomplished effectively through *genuine* and *sincere* pupil-teacher planning. When skillfully done, such planning results in pupils feeling definitely responsible for the tasks at hand. They become devoted and loyal to the life and activities of the group. They help set their own goals and assist in determining the degree to which their objectives have been realized. Interest of this kind leads on to tireless effort in

Teaching understandings is a subtle process, requiring more than mere memorization. Introducing Tools for Learning this month with suggestions for approaching this type of instruction is Gilbert S. Willey, assistant superintendent in charge of elementary education in the Denver Public Schools.

getting background and information and in achieving the purposes which have been established by the group and by the individual.

2. The use of the unit approach to teaching provides a natural way of exploring and discovering facts and establishing proper associations of ideas. Through this plan the group chooses a topic for detailed study which is of greatest interest to the members at that particular time. Popular among interests of fifth- or sixth-grade pupils are such topics as the air age, heavenly bodies, music in our lives, and hobbies. Such topics when examined thoroughly and completely offer much in the way of deepened understandings of the many forces affecting children's lives.

3. Many understandings are engendered through full utilization of the school and community environment. Frequently the richest resource for developing clearer understandings are persons within a stone's throw of the school, about whom the teacher is not aware, but whom the pupils would make known if permitted to have a voice in the affairs of the classroom. Carefully planned trips through the school and community also offer much in the way of building rich and meaningful concepts.

4. Visual aids play an important part in making meaningful the school experiences of pupils. Photographs and pictures, maps, globes, the silent film, exhibits, and displays bring concreteness to an otherwise abstract situation. Trips to museums, dairies, grocery stores, and other community centers are effective visual means of clearing up misconceptions and strengthening understandings.

5. Through the broader use of audio aids, many pupils who learn best through this medium are especially helped in gaining understandings. The backgrounds of all pupils, however, may be enhanced through the judicious use of audio aids. The sound motion picture is worthy of much wider use in classrooms. Recordings of bird songs, nursery rhymes, speeches, musical productions, and pupils' oral contributions are suggestive of promising aids. Telling of experiences by pupils and teachers is important in building concepts. Well-directed discussions provide another effective audio medium. Through discussion it is possible to discover and clarify misunderstandings and to develop understandings of the proper relationships of

many phases of the topic being considered.

6. Creative expression on the part of pupils has a prominent place in the development of understandings. The urge to create seems to be innate, but creative expression does not spring from a vacuum. The ability to write a poem, to develop a song, to construct a telephone, or to produce a picture requires research and background. The teacher who discovers talent and encourages its expression has done much to assist pupils in gaining deepened understandings concerning problems which are significant to them. This implies that an important function of the teacher is to discover special interests and talents in pupils and to see that these are permitted to flourish.

To Summarize

The teacher's chief role is that of guide, one who knows resources and who knows how to liberate the potential abilities of pupils. The teacher who realizes the importance of all these things in making possible rich experiences of pupils must seek earnestly to understand *how to teach understandings* effectively.

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