

We Look at the Future

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THAT TIME has three dimensions—past, present, and future—is a truism familiar not only to scientists and philosophers, but to all educators. Contrary to what might be termed reasonable action in the face of such a truism, the future has been largely *assumed* by educators rather than given explicit and systematic attention in the educational experiences of youth. Judged by our neglect of what lies ahead, neglect in comparison with our consuming attention to what lies behind, we have not actually accepted the necessity of education's approach to the future. In fact, we have not, for the most part, deliberately approached it at all.

One recent experiment, in which high-school students and, later, university students sought to build a "design for America," was an attempt to compensate in some degree for this neglect by giving extended study to the third dimension of time. The experiment becomes more meaningful, however, if certain premises are first indicated. For, while these may not always be carefully explained in advance to students participating, they are important to all who are involved in such an experiment, and should become increasingly evident to youth, as well as adults.

"Tomorrow" Is Important

The first premise holds that if education in a free society is honestly concerned with all essential aspects of life and reality, and if the future is itself a real phenomenon, then we are in fact violating our own conception of education when we fail to place the "tomor-

row" of American society side by side in its importance with its "yesterday" and "today".

Complacency Is Dangerous

That "tomorrow" has recently come to have a much more crucial and imperative significance than it did a century ago, is readily accepted as a second premise by thinking people of this age. In the adolescence of our national development, we could perhaps afford to "let the future take care of itself." Our frontiers were still unexplored; our national resources seemed endless; our economic system was growing into a young giant; our myth of bountiful opportunity for every enterprising individual seemed no myth at all. Today, we know that progress even in America is far from inevitable. We know that our frontiers are gone; our resources are limited; our economy suffers from periodic disease; our citizens by millions not only lack opportunity to gain security, adequate health and education, but are victimized by the ravages of war, unemployment, and fear which are the corollaries of that periodic disease. Hence we are beginning to know—for the first time deeply—than an easy, complacent confidence in the future is both insufficient and dangerous. We are beginning to say that we must *plan*—plan with all the foresight, all the ingenuity, all the knowledge and vision that as a nation we possibly can mobilize.

Are We Fatalists?

The third premise states that free men have the capacity, if they will but use it, to make the future what they want to make of it. To believe otherwise is to concede, in some form or other, a fatalistic theory of history. It is to concede that we are helpless pawns of a machine-like universe which, operating by an endless chain of causes and effects, already prepares us for what lies inescapably in the predetermined events of coming centuries. Such a fatalism, however widely held, is not only dubious philosophically, and traitorous

Some people believe that an understanding of today's problems should be a part of the general education experience of all youth. The way in which one group of secondary school youth dealt with these problems and their influence for the future is described by Theodore Brameld, professor of educational philosophy, College of Education, University of Minnesota.

to the whole spirit of democracy as a way of life in which men make their own history; but it is utterly destructive of any kind of education which would inculcate a sense of public power, of social or personal responsibility. Yet its insidious effect in the schools of our own day is enormous—an effect which should be counteracted once and for all.

Emphasis On Clear Thinking

The future is an excellent focal point for the crystalization of purposes which are strongly normative in character. Such is still another premise on which the case is built. As young citizens look clearly ahead, they envisage the ideal goals which in turn magnetize and channel their present efforts. To formulate with some certainty the ends toward which one is working helps greatly to precipitate effective means of achievement. Thus the emphasis in education upon *how to do things well* is tempered by a new emphasis upon *what to do them for*. We have needed this new emphasis for a long time. But in the light of the critical period in which we are now immersed, confusion or uncertainty of purpose may be fatal. It is less likely to be fatal if education is willing to give serious attention to the prospects and aims of American life.

Planning a Project

Floodwood, Minnesota, is a community of about 700 citizens in a rather poor agricultural district. The school draws youngsters from a ten- or fifteen-mile radius. Except for the unusual fact that many citizens belong to the consumer cooperatives, one may find in Floodwood most of the mores, occupations, and attitudes typical of any small American community.

In the Floodwood High School about fifty juniors and seniors joined together to work upon their "design for America." They spent five days per week, two hours a day, for a full semester, on the problem. Two teachers—one in social studies, the other in English—participated throughout. In addition, the science teacher, superintendent, and outside consultant frequently cooperated as they were wanted. The school board was apprised of the project both at the beginning and conclusion and, as far as is known, never raised an objection. Parents learned of it through

the newspaper, PTA meetings, commencement exercises, and interviews by teams of students.

With the aid of an elected student committee, the Floodwood project was modified and developed inductively as it moved from stage to stage. As it emerged, however, and as its participants recommended it for further experimentation, five major characteristics stand out.

Youth Looks for the Answer

Early study accepts as its primary aim a challenge to the blase young American's "So what?" For it should always be remembered that average boys and girls have soaked up a good deal of the ideology implied in discussing our second and third premises above. They see no great reason to worry about the future in a society so "rich in promise" to the industrious; and in any case, what could we really do about it, even if we wanted to? Hence, the problem immediately facing such a project is to arouse concern which in turn stimulates genuine interest and curiosity. In Floodwood, two principal means seemed effective; first, discussion with representative townspeople who recalled the period after World War I, and who were already gravely concerned over the impending reconversion period; second, study of the "between-the-wars" period to point up the instabilities and failures following 1917. It will be noted here, incidentally, that history is utilized as a functional resource rather than as a subject taught by itself.

Before the initial study is concluded, a crucial question is raised which suggests another of our premises. What kind of a society do we really desire? This is of course a normative question, and it is fascinating to watch young people search for an answer by group discussion and majority consensus. With the help of simple books like Stuart Chase's *Goals for America*, the Floodwood group gradually built a conception of dynamic purpose out of their own wants, their own ambitions, their own comparisons of democratic and anti-democratic principles. Their definition of democracy as "that society where the most people are most likely to get most of their wants satisfied" may not seem very academic to a political scientist, but they had fashioned and defended it themselves.

What Shall We Change?

If the experiment is to be more than wishful thinking, it must focus upon economic and political reconstruction. "What changes, if any," asked the Floodwood students, "shall we support in these areas in order to meet our criterion of the good society?" Here, then, are considered political left, center, and right programs. Controversial issues such as federal control, public works, the TVA, labor and management, proposals for full employment, and others, are examined with a view to arriving at group decision as to the best when judged by the ever-present normative standard already formulated.

The roles of science and art in a "design for America" receive their share of attention. Science is interpreted both as a comprehensive method of dealing with problems through intelligent control, and as a body of available knowledge which, if fully utilized, could already provide vastly improved systems of communication and transportation, better housing, stronger health, wider leisure. Art, too, is viewed both from the point of view of method and of content. Broadly conceived, it is a means of creative self-expression whether simple or sophisticated, individual or social. But, in the context of democratic striving, it is also the poetry of a Whitman or Sandburg, the architecture of a Wright, the murals of a Rivera—in short, the art of a people singing of their own hopes, forging them into indigenous patterns.

Education and its effectiveness in the area of human relations are carefully examined. In Floodwood, it was interesting to find young citizens considering public schools in terms of their effectiveness for a mature democracy. Criticisms of current programs were often devastating, but proposals were surprisingly practical. Human relations embrace the whole field of racial, religious, and national minorities; the role of women in an equalitarian order; problems of old age; of the family; and of class cleavages.

Over-all Objectives

Finally, in order to emphasize the comprehensiveness of the problem, attention is placed upon the interrelations of each of the major areas with all the others. In this re-

spect, accordingly, the Floodwood project exemplifies both general education and one type of integrated curriculum. Subject-matter lines are completely obliterated. The encompassing scheme is rather the promise of American civilization, and the kind of discriminating objectives which determine what shall or shall not be included as contributive to that promise. Economic reconstruction, because it involves the rebuilding of cities, is found to require, for example, the arts of municipal planning and architecture; the politics of regionalism; the sciences of transportation and public health; the human relations of Negro and Jewish rights; and the education of adults for democratic direction of the labor movement.

Methods of instruction and learning vary as widely as content. The fifty students in Floodwood by no means constantly met as a whole group. Much of their time was spent in subgroups of four or five where, with teacher cooperation and student chairmen, they worked on one or another specific problem pertinent to the respective area being developed. At intervals, subgroups returned to the whole class to report conclusions. Often a minority dissented from the findings of the majority. In the final part of the project, effort was made to review all previous recommendations and arrive at a final summary of major agreements and disagreements, together with proposed methods of action.

Was the Floodwood experiment a success? As measured by pre- and post-tests in attitudes and information, by many student essays, by parental support, and by the judgment of school officials, it was. Yet, its mistakes were many, and at moments, discouragements acute. Education for the future is not an easy kind of education. It demands both patient and enthusiastic teachers. It tempts indoctrination, which can be avoided only if student participation and judgment are thorough at every point. It needs unorthodox learning materials and techniques. And its real success can finally be measured only in terms of the quality of living in the Floodwoods of today and of the future.¹

¹ From a complete description and evaluation of *Design for America*, by Theodore Brameld, Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge. New York: 1945. \$2.

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