

Freshmen Deal with Realities

JULIAN C. ALDRICH

College freshmen can study realistically current social problems and there is a place for this type of consideration in college classes—so says Julian C. Aldrich, professor of education at New York University. Mr. Aldrich gives meaning to this point of view in his account of how one class studied the labor question.

THE RAILWAY EXPRESS strike was in full swing, pickets walked before the Childs' restaurants and the Safeway stores, Mr. Curran had just told the seamen that Communists had ruined and undermined his union, and John L. Lewis was defying the Denham ruling that the heads of the AFL and CIO must sign the non-Communist pledge. Beef steaks had passed the \$1-a-pound level and had just begun to lower, but prices were up seven percent from spring and forty percent since a year ago. Wages, profits, strikes were in the headlines.

The Problem Is Explored and Defined

A class of thirty-three freshmen chose labor as the most pressing immediate problem. The Marshall Plan and the Palestine partition were next in line. In exploring the labor question the students' personal relations were explored—the inconvenience from failure of services, the lacks arising from the former tug-boat strike and the Mayor's declaration of a state of emergency, the frequently quoted "high wages cause high prices," the statements of parents that unions were telling owners how to manage their businesses, the rule of Communists which endangered our government. Out of these impressions questions arose:

Why are unions necessary?
How are unions run and financed?
Who sets wages and on what bases?
What do mediators and arbitrators do?
What causes strikes?
Should unions or business men control hiring and firing?
What is the difference between the Wagner Act and the Taft-Hartley Act?
How influential are Communists?

The group accepted the problem-solving approach to the whole question, obligating itself to analyze the problem, identify feasible courses of action, collect and interpret ideas and information, reach a tentative decision based on sound inference, act in accordance with the decision reached, and challenge and rethink one's own pattern of thinking in the light of the decisions made. A students' guide,¹ prepared by the Social Studies Department, served as an aid to the process of problem-solving.

Defining the problem in light of knowledge and understanding possessed at this stage was the next task. Some of their questions referred to the present status of the worker. Others noted the trend in labor relations, the ways in which labor and management and government interacted, the why of

¹ Social Studies Department, New York University School of Education, *The Worker in Modern Industrial Society*. New York: N.Y. University Bookstore, 1947.

present controversies over wages and fair labor practices, the reaction of labor and management and the public to strikes and disputes, and the comparison of our labor relations with those in other countries. These served as guides to the subject matter of study, and were developed in outline form during class conference. The content was to be taken from the press, books on labor, specialized articles, and technical (some text-) books. Current controversies were to be studied in the press, and by visitation if possible.

Critical Use of Source Material

It is at this point that textbooks get in their best or worst contributions to critical thinking. Rare is the volume which analyzes a problem and leaves the decision to the reader. The author, writing from his expertness, orders the data, interprets, and draws conclusions. Professors tend to accept, or to reject and substitute other interpretations and conclusions.

In this instance the class assumed another task—to be critical of reference materials as sources of fact and as sources of judgments. While the group sought to analyze the whole question, each individual worked on a problem of his own. One girl, who worked part-time in a beauty shop, wanted to know how the union operated for the benefit of workers. Another, disturbed by the criticism of the NMU as Communists, studied the extent to which that union was controlled by the rank and file. Several sought to find the techniques used by labor and management and to reduce significantly labor strife during the war. Some studied aspects of the wage-price-profits controversy.

Basic to each of these studies was the selection and criticism of material. The guide book contained many of the key documents—the Norris LaGuardia Act, the NIRA, the National Labor Relations Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the War Labor Disputes Act, the Taft-Hartley Bill, some court decisions, and the constitutions of the AFL and CIO. It also had selections from two Brookings Institution studies, a textbook definition of wages, and selections ranging from Ricardo on wages to union and United States Chamber of Commerce material on labor disputes.

Beyond this students were expected to go, and did. Most of them read Faulkner and Starr, *Labor in America*; many read Huberman's *The Truth About Unions*, or Brooks' *When Labor Organizes*. The range of reading was wide—while most read about 1500 pages (during the eight-week period), some read as much as 3500 pages. The newspapers, magazines, and radio commentaries were well covered. The class as a whole visited the National Maritime Union and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; and several paid visits to other unions, to union meetings, and to the NAM New York office.

The materials used were discussed in class in terms of coverage of the questions studied and expertness of the source. Points of view were discussed and compared. Backgrounds of writers and speakers were explored. Discussions of the Taft-Hartley Bill and the Wagner Act were compared with the documents.

Individual and Group Research

As individual studies were completed

they were presented to the class (often with other related studies) for analysis and discussion. Questions were asked regarding sources of data and the relevance of the conclusion to the data. The instructor was one of the group seeking to find the trend of the data and the value of the decision. Often the student would find questions for further study and challenges requiring some revision of a conclusion.

To summarize the work, the class set group problems to decide. Representative ones included:

Should the group support the Safeway workers in their demand for higher wages and lengthened vacations?

Should the group support price controls and wage controls?

What methods of labor-management cooperation should the group support and advocate?

A two-hour period was set for such problems. Students who had studied related problems were assigned to the panel, and the group presented the problem in its parts—the definition, the feasible solutions, the pertinent data, the pertinence and adequacy of the data, and the group consensus. The whole class criticised the steps, adding from individual reading and study, raising questions on assumptions and conclusions, and seeking applications of the decisions.

Advantages and Disadvantages Appear

In evaluating the study of the worker in modern industrial society, the class felt that they had developed an increased understanding of labor's place in society, the basis of present disputes, and some ways of resolving differences.

They had found that labor leaders (whether Mark Starr of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union or Jim Curran of the National Maritime Union) were people who were trying to do a necessary job in an American way. They found both union officials and business leaders sincere and honest according to their assumptions. They felt they had learned an approach to current problems, a problem-solving approach that put reason above emotion.

The major disadvantage, they felt, was that they had increased arguments at home. Their parents argued with them more about labor problems and accused them of being indoctrinated with Communist ideas. Similar criticisms reached the curriculum advisers of the students. The class decided that this was a new problem that should be worked out.

Information Is Shared with Parents

A class period was given to a consideration of ways and means of informing parents of the work, and several additional periods were arranged outside of class. The students were given freedom to work out such a program; and it was decided to invite all parents to visit one period of the class at which time the method used and the material studied could be discussed. A two-hour period was reserved and parents were invited.

The group assigned five members to present the method which had been followed. They explained the process of problem solving and showed how they had used it in analyzing their problems, in selecting and interpreting data, and in reaching a tentative decision. They compared this method with textbook lecture courses and told what

values they thought came from their work. The rest of the class presented a few of the individual studies and discussed some of the group problems. A final question period was used by the parents to discuss the problem of labor rather than the method used.

The class agreed that sharing was an additional worthwhile experience. Parents expressed interest in their studies and decided there was no indoctrination but good critical thinking. Other students in this curricular group heard of the program, and the juniors asked the freshmen to repeat it for them.

Essentials of Method

This unit of work illustrates some of the essentials of the teaching of controversial issues.

- ▶ Problems selected were real to the students, not imposed upon them by the teacher. It seems better if the students participate in the selection of the problems studied.
- ▶ Problems selected were accepted by the students, their advisers, their parents, and

the community as ones which are proper for mature study and discussion.

- ▶ The method of study was an approved problem-solving procedure. The objective was to develop critical thinking, not to support or attack a "case."
- ▶ The teacher was not the authority; authority was derived from data and their validity. The teacher's particular function was assumed to be the direction of study and research, rather than posing final answers.
- ▶ Wherever possible, points of view were expressed by the proposers: the CIO digest of the Nathan Report, interviews with NAM officials, reading of the CIO News and NAM pamphlets.
- ▶ The teacher sought to have the students understand and be able to defend their procedure in problem solving. The responsibility for analysis was theirs, not the teacher's.
- ▶ Criteria for the selection and criticism of data and conclusions were developed by the group, not imposed upon them by the teacher. The class judged whether it had considered and dealt with all pertinent viewpoints in order that its decisions might be fair.

What Can We Do About It? _____

LORETTA E. KLEE

Two junior high school social studies classes and their instructors cooperatively explore some local controversial problems and gain insight into the functions of a city government while mapping out practical steps to follow in city improvement. Loretta E. Klee participated in this five-week project as director of social studies in the Ithaca, New York public schools.

WHAT is the most serious problem facing Ithaca and what can we do about it? This highly controversial

problem was presented to the seventy-seven "citizens of Highville" by their recently elected "mayor."

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