

*We Learned to Plan by Planning*_____

In this article a group of juniors and seniors at the Northern Illinois State Teachers College, DeKalb, write about their experiences in learning how to plan and work together. The writing of this article was itself a cooperative venture undertaken at the close of a semester's course in education which the students planned with the help of their instructor, Donald Berger, associate professor of education.

THIRTEEN OF US students have just completed a unique experience in planning a college course in education. We'd like to relate it together, just as we have worked together. We hope this article serves two purposes: a way of helping us summarize our learning experience, and a method of sharing our experience with others who may be interested in group process on the college level.

We're juniors and seniors¹ representing many of the fields of study offered at Northern Illinois State Teachers College—industrial arts, home economics, physical education, science, speech, and English. This course in the secondary program, "Basic Procedures in the Guidance of Learning," is our last education course which is usually taken just prior to student teaching. We had four courses in education before the one described below: psychology and mental hygiene in our

first two years of general education, and adolescent psychology and tests and measurements during our junior year. Traditionally, students call this course, "Techniques," and consider its purpose primarily preparation for student teaching. Not only this idea but many others were changed considerably after we were enrolled.

The very way the course began was quite different. As Werner once said during an evaluation session:



North Phoenix (Ariz.) High School

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Being a senior and rather prone to arriving at class after the second bell, I was startled to discover that my favorite back seat in which I had formerly caught many a forty winks had become part of a circle. Not having been greeted by the usual oratory, and on noting the lively conversation being carried on by the other classmembers, I surmised that the instructor had not yet arrived. I was surprised to discover a man motioning me in a friendly manner to be seated next to him. It took only a few moments for me to understand that "the circle" and the "teacher-sitting-next-to-me" were part of a very new experience for me. After all the students had introduced themselves, I realized that many major fields were represented, and I began to wonder just how this course would help me in my own field.

The "lively conversation" Werner refers to was undoubtedly group response to one of those tantalizing questions our instructor often asks, and in this instance it had to do with the type of classroom procedures we would use in the course. Most of us had never before experienced any type of classroom procedure during high school and college other than the conventional lecture-read-recite-examination method. There were instructors who experimented with variations of the above method to be sure, but essentially there was not too much deviation from the traditional pattern.

After a student had taken a few courses he could rather easily estimate what the instructor expected insofar as attendance, recitation, required work, and reading were concerned. That was fine. It gave one a sense of security. A student could work independently. One's performance was acceptable so long as the term paper was handed in

and the exams were passed. One could go from day to day, subject to subject, year to year with no major disturbances. Everything was right "in the groove," so to speak. In reality the groove might become a rut, a rut that could easily get deeper and deeper. There were times when one's complacency was shaken by thoughts: "Just how much am I getting out of this? Will these memorized theories, laws, poems, dates, events benefit me? Will they help me to become a better teacher?"

Getting Started

During early planning sessions we discussed the different ways that classrooms might be organized for action to determine the type we would employ for our own purposes. Democracy, benevolent despotism, autocracy, and laissez-faire were analyzed and evaluated. We agreed unanimously to have a democratic classroom, although at the time we weren't quite sure what such a classroom would be like, nor were we aware of the problems that we were to encounter later.

The instructor gave suggestions as to how we might get started. He volunteered four questions that we might discuss. Our responses to these questions helped us decide on the purposes, procedures, and desired outcomes:

- What objectives shall we select for the course?
- What problems shall we select for group study?
- How shall we organize ourselves as a group to achieve our objectives?
- What method of evaluation shall we use in appraising individual and group progress?

Group study, analysis, and decision-making in the problem areas posed by these questions resulted in the acceptance of a democratic pattern.

After group deliberation of each question, committees volunteered to summarize group thought and to study more thoroughly the questions raised by the class. They reported back to the group with a proposed plan. This plan was frequently modified as the program developed. The value of flexibility in any teaching-learning program was exemplified at the very outset of our experience in planning.

Organizing for Action

Our plan of organization provided that a curriculum chairman would volunteer to lead the class discussion of each problem defined for study. The chairman was assisted by a recorder and an observer. The chairman was to be in charge of committee meetings and to lead and summarize group discussion. At the end of each day's work the observer was to give a report which evaluated the activity as to the quality of participation, value of the experience as related to high school teaching, interest and attitude of group members, or other criteria suggested for the improvement of group process. The recorder was to keep a record of the group's discussions and mimeograph all important material in order that each of us might have a copy.

Defining Our Problems

The class decided that some sort of plan was needed to help choose the problems that would be discussed during future class meetings. Each student mentioned several problems during the

first two days, problems which we thought should be discussed as a group, and others which called for individual study. We decided that each person should do some careful thinking and then list the problems he desired to study. A committee was appointed by the class to summarize the suggested problems. A list of these problems was placed on the blackboard for group study. By defining and clarifying each problem and combining similar elements in several, seventeen problems were reduced to seven major ones. Together we ranked them in order of importance. Class members then volunteered for committees to investigate the problems and devise methods of presenting the results of their study to the class. Each committee, composed of chairman, recorder, and observer, held an average of six or seven meetings before the time on the class calendar for presenting their material to the group.

Using Many Resources

It was amazing how varied were the techniques employed by these committees for their presentations. There were lectures, group discussions, field trips, slides, role-playing, panels, tape recordings, guest speakers, round tables, demonstrations, films and filmstrips, illustrated reports, maps, and observations of classroom situations. For example, one committee working on the problems of fostering better administrator-teacher-parent relationships, decided the best way for the class to explore this problem was to invite three persons representing these groups to participate in an informal panel in class. A principal, a teacher from the laboratory school, and a parent from the local high

school's PTA discussed questions posed by the committee and the class. Later the class discussed the panel and evaluated each person's contributions in addition to suggesting ways of improving human relations in this phase of public education.

As we proceeded to work on our problems we learned that some could not be solved without recourse to resources other than those present in our group. Instructors in our major departments, and others not representing our major fields, such as teachers in our campus school, an instructor in the art department, the specialist in audiovisual education, teachers and parents at the local high school, and the dean of men were called upon to help us in our study. As we discovered that not all learning takes place by reading alone, so, too, we learned that the problems we faced in becoming better teachers could not be solved by using the resources of our own campus. For observation and study of classroom situations, for example, we left the campus to spend a day in the core classes at the New School of Evanston Township High School.

The Planning Committee Begins to Function

After the class had devised a tentative list of problems to study and had established what we hoped would be a workable democratic group organization, we were faced with the additional problem of evolving plans of study for the group. We, as a class, realized the steps involved in cooperative planning were necessary, but to apply them to our own situation required a great deal of thought. Since the time factor had to

be considered (twelve-week course), we used a "steering" or "planning" committee technique to help the class define and clarify its problems, as well as to propose methods of attacking them and to evaluate results. This committee was formed by volunteers from the class with the recommendation that each person serve on this committee before the end of the quarter. Since our problems were chosen from the list submitted by the class, this advisory committee was but a representation of class opinion.

The function of this steering group was later defined in action as they arrived at decisions concerning the "what," "why," "when," and "how" of our problems:

- What problem should we study next?
- Why should we study it?
- How shall the group be organized for study?
- What activities shall we suggest for solving the problem?
- To whom shall we allocate individual responsibilities?
- What kind of records shall we keep?
- What methods shall we use in evaluating each person's progress in understanding the problem, and group process?

The first planning committee, enthusiastic and confident in their new idea, met for the first time with the instructor. It was not the conventional type of committee meeting. Subsequent meetings were also informal. Sometimes we would discuss our problems over coffee in the cafeteria or in an evening session at our instructor's home or office. Before this first meeting the thoughts prominent in our minds were that the work would be a "snap." We soon dis-

covered that cooperative planning of a college course is not an easy process. Even with the coffee and the quiet atmosphere, the task proved to be more difficult than we had anticipated. Cooperative learning on any level creates many problems, but we learned to plan by planning in spite of our many mistakes, and we have confidence that high school students can learn as we did.

The planning committee felt that our class discussions at first were too general. As time elapsed we found that, although we didn't feel that we had always solved our problems, we had stimulated much thought. We came to the conclusion that one of our first problems was that of class interest. The reporting committees wanted to present their material in such a way that they would be assured of an enthusiastic response. We tried to think of methods such as field trips or movies which would differ from conventional techniques, but we learned that although these methods would motivate student interest, it was necessary to evaluate any technique according to the purposes to be achieved and/or the content of the problem. Merely to assign pages to be read in a text was another extreme and would defeat the purpose of our cooperative plan.

At one time we devised a method of allotting topics for reports. We tried to allocate topics to those of us who were not given many opportunities to contribute to the class's activities in other ways.

After a period of committee discussion and debate our plans were presented to the class for their acceptance, revision, or disapproval. Upon presenting our plans we encountered differ-

ences of opinion which often lead to the revision of our original drafts. The opinions of the class members were respected by the committee, and the class appreciated the work we had done on our plans. If a plan were carefully evolved with purposes clearly in mind and a variety of suggested activities, the class more willingly accepted the plan. A thorough definition of each problem became a requisite to better planning. No plan could be completed unless there was some knowledge of the problem to be solved or the topics to be studied.

The hours we spent in discussion of plans helped us to think more clearly and reason more logically in problem-solving. We learned that four people representing varied major fields could plan together and evolve a program applicable to us all. As we sat around the tables in the cafeteria we were not just teacher and students—we were individuals planning together for the good of us all.

Evaluating Progress

The frequent evaluation of process and of our understanding of the problems defined for study was accepted by the planning committees as a part of their responsibility. The former was provided for by the observer's functions and the latter was taken care of by testing—mostly the situational, problem-solving variety, planned by the committee as an integral part of the problem outlined for the group.

The problem of individual evaluation was solved by employing a conference technique between instructor and student during which time each of us evaluated himself in the light of the

criteria suggested by an evaluation committee and later accepted by the group. These criteria, based upon the purposes outlined at the beginning of the course, were accepted as worthwhile goals for all of us. In modern teaching we knew there was no room for grades. However, since our college does use letter grades, we had to devise a practical means of arriving at them. Each problem had to have individual evaluation, which in turn was correlated with the method of evaluation set up for the course.

The conferences helped us to evaluate our work in terms of objectives that were not always easy to measure, but the fact that methods for measuring growth according to these criteria did not always exist did not discourage our experimentation. We tested our objectives against those we hoped to use when working with adolescents and reasoned that a sound evaluation system on the college level should apply to the high school level as well.

What Have We Learned?

Insights into how learning takes place and the function of education in a democracy were gained by direct experience in a process which itself was democratic. Many of us agreed with Erwin when he wrote a plea for "learning by doing."

A student might readily be classified as an animated storehouse of factual knowledge. Perhaps an example will help clarify my point. In this particular instance I was at a family get-together. I was visiting with a farmer, a nurse, a school teacher, several businessmen, and another college student. We had a lively discussion. The farmer

told us about some of the difficulties he had encountered in the breeding of plants and animals. The school teacher explained some of the techniques that she had to employ in order to encourage boys to participate in social dancing. The nurse gave some thrilling accounts of surgical operations she had witnessed while overseas during the war. The businessmen voiced opinions as to why and how the consumer public should be educated. It was a very enlightening, spontaneous conversation. They stressed their points by illustrative examples which were colorful and full of human interest. The other student's and my contributions were limited to courteous attentiveness, although we were asked to clarify some minor points of little significance such as the Mendelian law, or a specific anatomical structure in the body, or a professor's viewpoint as to why we had a depression in 1929. It was then that I realized that genuine understanding and learning stems from *actual experience*. Sure, textbooks help to acquaint you with subjects, but they alone are just words without much meaning. They are separate from your daily life. You haven't actually experienced them.

Since the school is the main medium of education, one can see the importance of having competent teachers. Teachers must practice what they preach. If they are teaching democracy they must have a democratic society within their classrooms. They should teach cooperation by being cooperative.

We found group process to be the strongest single motivating force in our class. It eliminated the traditional pressures exerted by competition and teacher influence. We prepared our work for the class by keeping in mind that we had a responsibility to share our information with the group, whereas in former classes we presented our material to satisfy the teacher's critical eye.

This procedure kept us alert and responsive, eager and expectant. There were no sleepers, no bored expressions, no persons doing homework for another class.

We learned to give as well as to accept criticism. Mickey, for example, who could always give advice and who would cooperate if things were done her way, learned to respect the viewpoints of others. The group as a unit was responsible for all planning and all action. Group process, perhaps alone, made our class truly democratic.

From it all grew social sensitivity—awareness of others, their individuality, and from this grew an interest in one another which carried far beyond the fifty-minute class period. After class hours in the lounge, smoker, cafeteria,

or the tea room, conventional teaching, cooperative planning, group dynamics, the core program, grades and evaluation, and many other problems were discussed. Our group was interested in solving our problems. The best critical thinking resulted. We had gained a primary interest which proceeded to act as a force in electrifying our newly accepted views of teaching.

Our instructor often said, "We know that most teachers teach as they were taught. I hope that we can create in this classroom a learning situation that is educationally sound and basically similar to the one you may evolve for and with adolescents." We know what this teaching-learning situation has accomplished for us. We hope that we can achieve similar results with youth!

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