

# Planning in the Core Class

DONALD BERGER

What functions does the planning committee fulfill in a core class? Professor Donald Berger, Northern Illinois State Teachers College, DeKalb, offers practical help to teachers who are just beginning to implement a core concept in their classes.

COOPERATIVE PLANNING is accepted as an integral part of better teaching by an increasing number of secondary school teachers. Informal experimentation in implementing democratic procedures is current in general education, or "core" and "common learnings" courses, and is not uncommon in the general arts. Utilization of group process is increasingly prevalent in the specialized areas of the curriculum which lend themselves more readily to the experience concept of learning.

An analysis of efforts to initiate cooperative processes reveals that the use of certain specific techniques is becoming rather widespread.<sup>1</sup> One such technique is the "planning" or "steering" committee whose function it is to work with the teacher in planning class activities. A condition encouraging the use of this committee technique may be the limited block of time allotted to most courses in a typical upper-school schedule. Many teachers would prefer to use "full-group" planning procedures in applying the complete process of cooperative learning: stating purposes, evolving procedures for attainment of goals and evaluating results. Too fre-

quently, however, inadequate time allotments necessitate modification of the more idealistic procedures, and the "planning committee" has emerged as a substitute, but practical, technique for planning group work.

## Full Group Initiates Plans

"Full-group" planning is essential in the initial stages of stating objectives, evolving criteria for selection of experiences, defining and clarifying problems and deciding upon methods which the class will use for group organization and evaluation. Arriving at these decisions through group discussion consumes much time, as those experienced in working cooperatively with groups can testify. Teachers and students do not begrudge the time or effort devoted to such activities. Values are obvious to those who have had successful experiences with democratic processes in the classroom.

Democracy must become compatible with group efficiency, however, when goals are set by learners who have a sincere interest in attaining them. When schedules allow only five 40- or 50-minute periods per week for group work, teachers know that if all plans are cooperatively developed by the entire class there will remain little time for problem-solving. The "planning

<sup>1</sup> Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, *Toward Better Teaching*, 1949 Yearbook. The Association, Washington, D. C., 1949.

committee" would appear to be a technique which partially alleviates this difficulty and still provides students with valuable experiences in cooperation.

### A Class Studies Committee Technique

The origin of such a planning group may be better understood by reviewing the experiences of members of an eleventh-grade core class<sup>2</sup> who employed the committee technique as the basic method for planning their class activities.

After the group of 45 juniors had set up their objectives and selected a problem for study, they accepted the suggestion of a committee, but had to decide how it was to be formed, its function and its relationship to the class. Each person was asked to write recommendations and several students summarized these in a mimeographed report for the group's consideration. The class agreed that the report was in no way conclusive, but might serve as an initial guide for the committee. The group hoped that class periods might be set aside for frequent evaluations to help the committee improve itself. They felt also that the functions of such a group would undoubtedly be modified after it became active.

The class's recommendations as stated in the following summary became the first guideposts for the committee:

- *The committee:* The planning committee shall consist of five student members and the teacher. One of the student members shall serve as chairman. The group is to be a well balanced one

<sup>2</sup> Eleventh grade core groups, Horace Mann-Lincoln School, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, 1948.

with the members of the group representing various points of view in the class. This is stressed as being necessary in order for the planning committee's decisions to reflect the feelings and opinions of the entire group. Membership is not permanent, as all class members shall have the opportunity to work on this committee.

- *The meetings:* All meetings shall be scheduled and open to all students, who are welcome to come and give their opinions. Meetings may be held during free hours, study periods in "core," lunch hour, or, when necessary, after school.
- *Relationship between planning committee and the class:* The planning committee is an integral part of the class. The class should remember that the committee's efforts are solely for the benefit of the class. The committee should report to the class on all its decisions and recommendations for studying a problem. Its recommendations should be presented in such way that the group understands the reasons for the planning. These suggestions should be subject to modification by the group. As soon as possible when starting to work on a new problem or experience, a long-range program should be mapped out by the committee to give the students some over-all picture of their study.

As the first committee sought to satisfy the needs of the group and to plan meaningful individual and class experiences, it encountered many problems. Solutions to most of these difficulties were reached when planning committee members were able to answer the following questions: (1) What do we need to know to help plan for the solution of this problem? (2) Where can we get help? (3) How shall the group be organized for work? (4) How

can we best consider each member of the group while working on this problem? (5) How shall we bring our plans before the group? (6) What kind of records shall we keep? (7) How shall we use the core teacher?

#### FUNCTIONS OF A PLANNING GROUP

Similar problems are met by most committees who assume major responsibility for planning for a larger group. These questions may be used as guides in developing an understanding of the functions of a planning group.

#### **What do we need to know to help plan for the solution to this problem?**

Whatever the nature of the problem to be solved at any time by a committee, inevitably the first step would seem to be one of trying to understand better not only the problem itself, but its implications. It is usually helpful for the committee to try to recognize original purposes, to push back to basic reasons before proposing courses of action.

Invariably one or more members of a committee develop ability to question a suggestion, a decision, or a process proposed. It is not uncommon for such a group member to ask, "Why are we planning to do this?" or "What are we supposed to be trying to do in the first place?" or "Will it be worth while, or is it just something to keep the group busy?" These persons, in some instances, consciously define this function for themselves. It is natural for them to question everything, and they soon discover that such questioning generally results in better discussions, more careful thought concerning a problem, and consequently better decisions by the committee.

Others learn the need for such techniques through unpleasant experience. When plans are brought before a full group for their acceptance, modification or rejection, without knowledge of underlying purposes on the part of the committee, one can predict that the class will raise questions that evince the need for such understandings. Plans without purposes clearly in mind are apt to be not acceptable. It is therefore essential that a committee think through the reasons for doing a thing before advocating some course of action.

Still other students seem to learn this technique of questioning by being asked to assume such a role during committee meetings either by the chairman or by the teacher. The teacher must frequently practice such a function himself. Group members may learn that there is value in having at least one member asking the "eternal why" when so much of the time the "what" and "how" are pressing for solution.

Teachers notice that at the outset most committees lack this ability to relate plans to purposes. This technique is definitely a learned one. It is acquired in the experience of working with a full group, in profiting by mistakes made in previous planning, in observing how the teacher encourages critical thinking, or in witnessing the increased effectiveness of responses by other group members who have learned the technique more readily. Results of group evaluations offer further incentives for planning committees to examine purposes more carefully.

A thorough definition of each problem is requisite to better planning. No plan can be completed unless there is some knowledge of the problem to be

solved or the topic to be studied. Some problems cannot be solved by the student members of a planning committee and the question, "Where can we go for help?" encourages further exploration and learning.

### Where can we get help?

Most committees can find practical help by using resources of the core situation, the school or the community.

The core teacher serves as a primary resource. It is not so imperative that he know the answers to the many questions asked as it is for him to know where students may find answers for themselves. Certain skills and attitudes characterize this teacher function: knowledge of sources of information, ability to help students locate information needed, and willingness to admit that his knowledge of a subject is scant or nonexistent and that persons are available who may be better qualified to help in the solution of problems.

Students often ask teachers to suggest various methods that may be used in presenting information to the group. Knowledge of communication media and those that can be used for creative self-expression is invaluable. A creative approach to handling communication techniques has sometimes resulted in interesting experimentation for students and teachers.

If library facilities are part of the equipment of a school, they will be used more than any other resource. The planning committee may ask the librarian to join the core group in the early stages of planning their work. He may discuss with them the resources of the library, techniques of locating information, and places where they can go for help if the

school collections prove inadequate.

When needed resources are not available within the school, students should be encouraged to use those of the community. A wide range is generally needed to help in solving problems defined for study by an active class. Community surveys to determine what resources are available for learners at any given level should be undertaken by students and staff who are initiating the core curriculum.

### How shall the group be organized for work?

Any class can experiment with groupings and with new techniques for presenting information and materials. Various techniques may be used at one time or another by core groups. The dance, creative music, dramatizations, interpretive reading, panels, radio recordings, tape recordings, charts and maps, pictures and murals, sketches, debates, symposiums, exhibits and displays, lectures, trips, films, student-led discussions, reports, informal discussions, book reviews and creative writing are but a few that can be used in a program which, in its philosophy, aims not only to follow the interests of learners but also to broaden them.<sup>3</sup>

Students gradually learn that changing situations call for fluidity of grouping. Such experimentation is considered healthy by the teacher and is fostered at all times. Committees can strive to develop a certain balance in any group they set up, in order to insure a measure of success. Persons may be chosen with

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<sup>3</sup> These techniques have been used effectively in core classes such as those at The New School, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Illinois.

regard to how their personalities could be improved by the situation or problem to be presented to the group. Readiness is a factor that ought to be discussed when people are considered for certain responsibilities. The degree of readiness might be based on the committee's judgment of how the responsibility would affect the individual. In most instances the teacher's advice on plans for grouping or allocation of responsibilities will be sought by committee members. When in doubt about readiness, members may ask the teacher to speak with certain students and to encourage them to undertake suggested jobs.

### **How can we best consider each member of the group while working on this problem?**

Recorders in some planning groups keep class lists to which they refer when individuals are considered for certain jobs or during committee evaluations. A special responsibility undertaken by any person is noted on the list. The group may use these lists also when evaluating its work. Each group member is then discussed from the following standpoints: (1) Has he participated actively in the work so far? Is he interested in what we are doing? (2) Does he need special help from the teacher? (3) Has he been given enough responsibility? (4) Is he interested in doing something that we could use in our work, *e.g.*, making maps, cartoons, charts, graphs, etc.? (5) Is there anyone who is ready and wants to lead the next group discussion?

The teacher can encourage the planning group to refer to the objectives set up by the class at the beginning of the

school year, as is done in many core classes, and to discuss needs of individuals and the group in the light of these goals.<sup>4</sup> Since students do not always understand the individual's needs as well as the teacher does, the latter must frequently emphasize the importance of planning experiences that will help certain students.

In meeting this problem, the planning committee is becoming increasingly concerned with discovering the particular abilities of each group member and utilizing the talents of each in the service of the group. Through a long and difficult process group members are learning also the responsibility of democratic leadership. Using the talents of group members is not a planning committee's sole function; the committee is responsible, along with the teacher, also for providing for the *needs* of all students.

### **How shall we bring our plans before the group?**

After several experiences of reporting proposed plans to a class, committee members realize that their peers hold certain expectations as to the purposes of any plan, suggested methods of carrying out the project, and the way in which the endeavor and their part in it are to be evaluated. Alternate plans are usually found to be helpful in encouraging group thinking. Opportunities are then given for the full group to plan various aspects of the accepted skeleton proposal.

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<sup>4</sup>"A Core Curriculum Class in Action," an excellent film strip distributed by Audio-Visual Materials Consultation Bureau, College of Education, Wayne University, Detroit, Mich.

### What kind of records shall we keep?

The recorder may keep a weekly schedule posted on the bulletin board. Forms are mimeographed with spaces for writing in each day's program. These are filed and thus a brief running record is kept of the program.

It is often difficult at first for the teacher to convince committees of the need for keeping records which will safeguard continuity and help later groups in planning. The need is usually not felt until direct experience proves that records are essential. When a committee keeps a list of agreements reached, decisions made, and jobs to be done, these are usually well known to all committee members, and such records may seem to be additional "busy work" until the first change of committees. Then it becomes more apparent that the new group cannot plan without a better knowledge of what has been done by the previous group.

Beginning with the second committee both the chairman and the recorder can be encouraged to keep more careful records. These may be kept in simple form resembling minutes, generally highlighting the decisions made, a brief resume of plans to be used by the person who will later report to the class, and sometimes listing "next steps."

At the termination of each unit of work the chairman of the planning committee can write a more detailed description of the work. These records prove to be very helpful during later evaluation sessions.

### How shall we use the core teacher?

"What part should the teacher play in our group work?" was a question

posed by the first planning committee to the class of eleventh graders mentioned above. The function of the teacher was quite a disturbing thought to them, since they had not considered it before, but the result of the discussion was a more careful analysis of his role. The discussion was recorded on a wire recorder, and the following synthesis of ideas was made by the teacher:

- The teacher should help the group keep to the point in discussions.
- He should supply additional information overlooked by students in planning or discussions.
- He must play a definite role in the group—not sit on the side lines.
- He should advise, give extra help to those students who ask for it or need it.
- He should evaluate individual growth as well as the group's progress.
- He should help people find information.
- His function is particularly important on planning committees. He should help incoming groups to orientate themselves as to problems faced by previous groups.
- He must be concerned about "efficiency."
- He should let students learn by making mistakes, but this should not continue for too long.

### ROTATION ON PLANNING COMMITTEE

We might accept these proposed functions as practical ones, applicable to most core classes. The technique of encouraging a group to define the functions of the status leader may be of value also in a teaching-learning situation which provides experiences for developing leadership skills.

An obvious disadvantage in using the planning committee technique is the fact that many vital learnings experienced by members while serving on the planning group are denied other students until they become members at a later date. Therefore numerous opportunities to learn the techniques of cooperative problem-solving, to develop analytical and creative thinking and to acquire skills and attitudes involved in cooperation are limited, at least temporarily, to the few students on the planning committee. Not until the entire class has gone through the complete process of cooperative planning does the group, as a unit, understand its significance and benefit from such learning.

#### **Planning Should be Inclusive and Continuous**

When classes are large some students may never serve a long enough period of time to acquire these skills and attitudes. Too rapid turnover in membership on the committee in order to give all students experience in planning ignores

individual differences. Operation of group intelligence ought not to be restricted to segments of a class at any given time. The level of group morale is frequently raised as more students learn through direct experience what is involved in the planning process.<sup>5</sup>

When more teachers and administrators are convinced that skills, attitudes and techniques learned by students working cooperatively are as important as, if not more important than, the facts, knowledge and understandings inherent in the subject matter studied, more time will be given those teachers who are willing and able to guide this significant process. Until then, many techniques will be utilized that are only modifications of the functional and the ideal.

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<sup>5</sup> These statements are generalized from student evaluations of the planning committee technique as utilized in several education courses at Northern Illinois State Teachers College, DeKalb, Illinois, 1949-50. If mature students recognize limitations of this technique it is logical to assume adolescents will encounter more serious problems as they use this procedure.

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