

What Dare We Leave Out?

EARL C. KELLEY

So frequently we are tempted to try to solve all our instructional problems by "adding to" or "taking away from" the courses of study. The author of this article examines our traditional tendency and suggests a sounder principle upon which decisions must be made in an education that fosters wholesome living, development and growth.

I AM SURE that the editors, who have created an issue of this journal around the topic, "What Shall We Teach?" and who have permitted me to deal with what we dare leave out, will not mind if I cast them in the role of devil's advocate. I feel free to do this because I know they are substantially in agreement with the point of view which I shall attempt to set forth. Indeed, I can visualize them with "tongue in cheek" as they posed the problem, for they know that we do not really "teach" unless we define the word to mean the arrangement and facilitation of learning experiences; that learners learn when we are skilled and competent in making it possible for them to do so.

"What Shall We Teach?" implies that "we" are going to make decisions about what other people will learn. It is not altogether clear who "we" are, but in this context it does not seem likely that the learner is one of "us." The implication seems to be that "we," teachers, administrators, supervisors, curriculum developers, and textbook writers, are going to decide what someone else, far from the scene of decision, is going to learn.

The notion that we can do this is

based on an outmoded concept of the nature of knowledge and of learning. It is the outcome of the "receptacle" or "acquisition" idea of knowledge and learning. Knowledge is seen as something which exists in its own right, and can be poured in to the passive, receiving learner, much as a jug can be filled with whatever we choose to put in it.

We have known for a good while¹ that knowledge does not exist before learning begins, that it is a product of learning rather than a pre-condition to learning, that it is subjectively held, and is never the same in two individuals. Learning (and one of its products, knowledge) is a result of experience and the reconstruction of experience. There is no knowledge until the learner creates it. It seems trite to say that no decisions can be made concerning what is to be learned without relationship to the learner,—the individual unique learner. Since all learning is based on the learner's unique experience and purpose, it becomes a question as to what he *can* learn, not just what he is willing to learn, or what we think he ought to learn.

The idea that *we* can decide what to

¹ See *A Reconstructed Theory of the Educative Process* by William H. Kilpatrick, 1935.

put in or leave out has done incalculable harm to the development of man as an informed, adequate inhabitant of the good earth. It has caused people to be diverted from learning rather than being drawn to it. It is responsible in large degree for the drop-out problem of the secondary schools, and the desire to drop out from the elementary schools. There are no reliable statistics on drop-outs, because many who stay in school until graduation have dropped out in all but the physical sense. It has caused us to think ill of our learners because they do not do what they cannot, and has created a barrier between us and our young. When the young have rejected our selections, we have accused them of perversity or being the carriers for evil spirits.

This mistaken view of the nature of knowledge is the breeder of authoritarianism, and makes democracy in the classroom well-nigh impossible. If we decide what is to be learned, then it becomes our duty to see to it that it is learned. To do this, we have to invent many devices for coercion. When a learner is being coerced by a status leader he can hardly be said to be living democratically. Responsibility for learning is transferred from the learner, where it belongs, to the teacher. When the teacher comes into the classroom at the start of the semester, laden with mimeographed material, and says, ever so nicely, that this is what is going to be learned, and the teacher is going to see to it that it is learned, the students relax and say, in effect, "O.K., sister, you see to it, and we won't have to worry about it." It is improper, if not indecent or immoral, for twenty-five people to start a semester's sojourn

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when only one of them knows or has given consent to what is to take place.

It often occurs, when proposals are made for innovations in curriculum, that teachers say, "We don't have time for that. We have more than we can do to get the material covered." Material, as used here, means choices from the field of human knowledge which someone has selected, and often the selection has been made by someone who lived long ago. These are the sacred cows of the curriculum, and no harm must come to them. They are the "solids." Whenever I hear the word "cover" thus used, I get a picture of a shovel and a pile of dirt. It is hard to see what covering has to do with learning.

Dictates of Tradition

We have up to thirty hours a week for forty weeks each year to use with each learner. That is a fair piece of time; the pastor of the church would think so, since he has to do most of his teaching in about one hour a week. We use this time according to our values. We put the most time on the activities we value most. If we have to get the material handed down from antiquity covered, then we will not have time to do other things. We cannot say that we do not have time, but should say that we have already decided how we intend to use it.

What do we dare leave out? A great deal, judging from what we have done in the past. The sum of human knowledge is so great that a dozen curriculums could be made up without overlapping, or even using anything we

teach now. What we teach now has been *selected*, and that means that other whole areas have been rejected. We have indeed been daring in what we leave out, or would have been if we had made our selections consciously. We have rather accepted the dictates of tradition and habit, and then acted as though that was all there is to learn.

In my own high school days, teachers required that I know *Evangeline*, but never mentioned *Leaves of Grass*. I heard much about George Washington, but never knew until much later that he had a compatriot named Tom Paine. I studied English history,—could name all of the kings and queens from John to George V, but heard nothing of the history of the continent, without which much English history lacks meaning.

I wish I could say that the above is just a relic of a day that is gone. Unfortunately this is not true. It is of course true that some of the selections have changed, but the hit-and-miss operation is still in vogue.

At the present time, we dare leave out nearly all learning of the contemporary world. We start way back at the beginning and then never reach the present before the end of the semester. This keeps us from dealing with controversial issues, since the past is no longer controversial. We think this is "playing it safe," although it is hard to see what is safe about sending people out from our schools who are unfamiliar with the current scene, and thus unable to deal with it.

Known answers, on which we spend so much of our time, have value when they are brought to bear upon current problems, and only then. We need to have known answers from the past, but

then we must use them. Creative action can only take place when we deal with unsolved problems,—answers that have not been validated.

We have dared to leave out, in most of our schools, study of the labor movement, although Junior may have to do his own homework because his pa has to go to a union meeting. We have dared to leave out instruction in an understanding of communism, seemingly on the theory that not to mention communists will make them go away. At the same time, communism is so close to us that we have to interrupt the class in history or economics for an air raid drill! We hope that socialism will stop creeping if we don't mention it. Judging from what I see in the papers, socialism is one of our great perils, taking precedence over communism on some days. But we dare leave out instruction in an understanding of it, so that our young do not even know what they are against. In answer to the query posed by the editor, it would seem that we dare leave out anything we want to, particularly if it is of current interest or concern.

Solving Current Problems

If we are to have well-educated people, there are some things which we dare not leave out, and these seem to be more crucial than those items we dare omit. We dare not leave out those items which are of current concern to the learner and which arise from his unique experience and background. These items are bound to be controversial in some degree, because they *are* current, and have not been settled. The road to the past is from the present, and relevant items from the

past can only be selected when the present dilemma is known. This turns the usual operation around. Instead of collecting a large store of known answers before viewing the current scene, and then trying to conjure up the answer which applies, we must start with the current scene, and ask ourselves what we need to know from the past to solve present problems. This latter process pinpoints learning about the past, so that there is a good chance of learning what is needed. When we start with the past, the mathematical chance of having the answer we need when we need it is too small to be operationally sound.

If we are to start with current interests, concerns and purposes of the learner, this obviously implies consultation with the learner as to what is to be learned. The short-cuts to speed up teacher-pupil planning are alluring and deceptive. There is no way to start where the learner is short of consulting with him about it.

"But we don't have time! We have to get the material covered," again cries the anguished voice of the teacher in the chains of habit and tradition. In the interest of simple efficiency—just from the standpoint of saving time—we cannot afford to go forward without consultation with the learner. We must find out what *can* be done before we try to do it. If we go ahead without finding out what can be done, we stand a good chance of wasting the whole semester. Untold numbers of semesters have been wasted because the teacher did not have time to find out what to do.

"Do you mean that we teachers should abdicate?" If you are enthroned,

then you should abdicate. But after you get off your throne you will have much more to do than you had before. Instead of issuing edicts and administering rewards and punishments, you will have a chance to bring your maturity to bear in a useful way in the living experiences of living learners. When you abdicate, you may have to work harder, but you will become more valuable.

"But what about transmitting our culture—our heritage?" There you go again, wanting to transmit something! If our students are learning, what have they to learn but our culture? Is not the waterworks as much a part of our culture and heritage as the Missouri Compromise? Or does our culture come in books alone?

"Oh, yeah, but I want *my* children to learn something!" Here we can get together. One of the primary reasons for rejecting the idea that we can decide what to include or leave out is that under that method, the amount learned has been so pitifully small. The way to step up the quantity and quality of learning is to find out what can be learned, what is apropos to the learner, and stop guessing about it or riding our own intellectual hobbies.

Of course I know that we cannot hope to abandon our inherited curriculum overnight, and to start operating according to the needs and capabilities of the learner. Such changes have to come slowly. We must take our communities along with us, so that the people will know what we are doing, and have enough confidence in us to help us. We need to see ourselves in a revised role before we can function differently. We need patience with ourselves, our col-

leagues, our pupils and their parents as we all think through our basic educational problems and gain courage to act in accordance with the dictates of reason and scientific findings rather than mysticism, habit or outmoded faculty psychology.

To summarize, the only answer I

know to the question posed in the title of this article is that we dare not leave out any item of study which is raised as the learner views the current scene in relation to his present condition of growth and development. We dare not include anything so foreign to his present condition that he cannot use it.

Assignment: The World

LEONARD S. KENWORTHY

International understanding is so vital an area that today's schools cannot relegate it to a place of minor emphasis. This article outlines some of the important concepts which should be developed in this area. It also suggests specific materials and resources in relation to each concept.

“WHAT an assignment!” is probably your first reaction to the title of this article. And how right you are. The study of the world in our schools today assumes staggering proportions when we think in terms of two and a half billion persons, nearly a hundred nations plus many other political units, seven or eight major cultures, problems of many kinds in all parts of the world, the United Nations and its specialized agencies, the foreign policy of the United States, and the many other topics which can rightfully be included somewhere in the already crowded curriculum for pupils in the second half of the twentieth century.

Obviously teachers, supervisors, principals, parents and other persons interested in a modern curriculum need to

concern themselves with the basic concepts which should be stressed. They ought to consider carefully the experiences which may be appropriate for children and youth of different age levels and degrees of maturity in a given locality. They need to be able to evaluate wisely the effectiveness of present programs and insofar as possible of proposed programs in this world-wide field in terms of behavior, attitudes, understandings, skills and knowledge.

This is an enormous task, but it needs to be done and done now if the pupils in our schools are to be adequately prepared to live in today's world. Nothing short of a look at the total school offerings from the preschool level through college, university or teacher education institution will be adequate. Aims need to be clarified, experiences of many kinds outlined, resources evaluated and prepared, and

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