

The Role of Commitment in Learning

Basic to an improved quality of learning is an understanding of the role of commitment on the part of the learner. This article views some of the blocks to learning and suggests several characteristics that mark the healthful commitment to learning.

IT IS ALMOST a century since Ragged Dick, a poor bootblack, made his appearance among the heroes of American fiction; and although he is now a stranger to most readers, the formula which his creator attached to his success became a familiar one to all of us:

Dick had gained something more valuable than money. He had studied regularly every morning, and his improvement had been marvellous. He could now read well, write a fair hand, and had studied Arithmetic as far as Interest. Besides this he had obtained some knowledge of grammar and geography. If some of my boy readers, who have been studying for years, and got no further than this, should think it incredible that Dick, in less than a year, and studying evenings only, should have accomplished it, they must remember that he was very much in earnest in his desire to improve. He knew that, in order to grow up respectable, he must be well advanced, and he was willing to work. . . . He knew that it would take a long time to reach the goal which he had set before him, and he had patience to keep on trying. He knew that he had only himself to depend upon, and he determined to make the most of himself, — a resolution which is the secret of success in nine cases out of ten.¹

¹ Alger, Horatio, Jr., *Struggling Upward and Other Works*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1945, p. 246.

With these words Horatio Alger helped the first of his heroes, Ragged Dick, one step up from the streets of New York toward becoming "a young gentleman on the way to fame and fortune." And there is something about this magic formula of determination and diligence, of *commitment*, if you will, which has always been an ingredient in the American formula for success.

Blocks to Desirable Learning

All of us who are teachers are well aware of the essential truth of the suggested equation of commitment and learning, and yet most of us cannot help but believe that this Horatio Alger equation is somehow oversimplified and as frequently misleading as it is helpful. Commitment, and its visible symbol in effort, is a quality we would all agree to be praiseworthy; and yet it is a quality which can easily slip over into narrowness of purpose on the one hand or obstinacy on the other. It is perhaps time for teachers carefully to re-examine the concept of commitment to see wherein it truly facilitates

learning and wherein it stands in the way of learning. Intelligent teaching rests upon rejecting any naive concept of commitment which might impede learning and upon employing judiciously a refined concept which might rather energize learning. Commitment must thus be looked upon both as a precaution and as a prescription.

Perhaps the first way in which a naive conception of commitment has often barred genuine learning is when teachers have permitted or encouraged students to become prematurely committed to a point of view rather than to a point of inquiry. Commitment is always characterized as much by emotional dimensions as by intellectual dimensions, and this can easily lead into dangers. Most of us know students who will, during the initial stages of dealing with a problem, become committed to a particular solution to that problem. When this happens all subsequent investigation really becomes an attempt to reinforce a prejudice. This is one reason why good direction of learning is that which helps students avoid reaching hasty and premature solutions to problems and encourages a disposition toward suspended judgement — a disposition which, while antithetical to a superficial conception of commitment, lies near the heart of the genuine article.

Closely associated with this first bar to desirable learning is one which arises through the inadequate application of the emotional dimensions of commitment. Sustained application to a problem, which is a sign of healthy as well as unhealthy commitment, does not require that the student maintain the same emotional pitch or tension

throughout the problem. Most desirable learning occurs from problems in which the learner feels involved, and in all cases of self-involvement some emotional toning is inevitable. And yet most desirable learning processes also demand thoughtful periods which are free from emotional stress. A healthy commitment is one which is able to maintain motivation over sustained periods of time, even though the latter may be interspersed with thoughtful periods which permit the relatively dispassionate search for truth. Good teachers are eager to encourage their students to intersperse the fever pitch of active work with periods of reflection, speculation and planning and are not dismayed when overt progress appears slow.

A third bar to effective learning which has often been overlooked by teachers too impressed by effort and diligence on the part of their students lies in the adoption of a fixed and narrow method of attack. This is probably the most serious bar to learning which commitment may erect. In psychological terms it may be referred to as rigidity or inflexibility of set. A rigid approach, in which a student sees only a single way in which to arrive at the solution to a problem, may pass for a healthy perseverance whereas in fact it may easily be the greatest stumbling block in the way of the learner. Whenever a learner, set upon one goal, applies the old imperative of "try, try again," but always tries the

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same pattern for solution, we may well question whether the determination and commitment shown are real instrumentalities in learning. The kind of commitment which says, "I'll do it this way or else I won't do it," is the kind of commitment which has slipped across the border into obstinacy. And yet some teachers are very prone to praise this attitude of "stick-to-itiveness" and reward effort so indiscriminately as to reinforce in students just such a limited type of commitment.

Healthful Commitment to Learning

But when all the limitations of a naive belief in commitment have been recognized and guarded against, it must also be recognized that without positive commitment most learning becomes limp and barren. It thus becomes part of the job of the creative teacher to examine and define for himself those characteristics of a committed person which make him an effective learner. On some of the characteristics of the healthily committed learner we can probably agree.

First of all, the healthily committed learner exhibits a quality of intelligence which takes careful forethought of ends and consequences: he can tell you where he's going. With many would-be learners there is a great hustle and bustle of random activity, ill-purposed and ill-directed. If learning accrues in such activity, it is largely accidental. The reasons for hustle and bustle—for the expenditure of effort—may be in no wise related to genuine commitment. Poorly disciplined students in a classroom often demonstrate this type of activity: as soon as a new topic is approached they are eager to

"pitch in" and get at it. Such activity is most often merely a sign of released animal spirits. Genuine commitment, by contrast, is rather a characteristic of that learner who takes stock, who makes haste slowly. Only as a learner begins to see where he is going can he muster a sustained motivation that will surmount difficulties which may arise; without this sustained motivation the occasions of substantial learning are rare indeed.

Second, the sincerely committed learner reveals a high quality of intellectual integrity. This is to say that the committed learner is genuinely oriented to the task; his concern is not with pleasing the teacher, conforming to the expectations of his fellow students, or achieving status by arriving at "any answer." His concern is rather with defining and accomplishing a task which he sees as germane. Ostensible commitment, which is concerned with fulfilling the task as the teacher wishes it fulfilled or in reference to the expectations and plaudits of others in the group, will unquestionably produce learning; but the learning produced may be quite foreign to the type of moral fiber which democracy requires. Not praise but assistance to students in achieving success in such germane tasks is the only way this type of sincere commitment can be established in students.

Third, the healthily committed learner is anxious to escape the limitations imposed by his own biases and to shift his perspective in order to achieve his purposes. Commitment to a task need not be characterized by that rigidity previously mentioned; it may instead be characterized by a qual-

ity of flexibility which leads the student to shift his "set" until a new and forthright path to the goal is recognized. The healthily committed learner is anxious to view a problem as others view it; he responds to the frustration which arises when one hypothesis fails him by seeking a new hypothesis to try—not by compulsively following the same course again and again. In watching him work, one will see no sign of compulsive, repetitive behavior but rather a persistence of motivation which allows him to set a problem aside and return to it fresh and with renewed vigor. Much of successful teaching rests upon the skill of the teacher in helping students recognize the importance of taking time to look for new perspectives. Too often teachers mistake laying a problem aside temporarily for lack of commitment; it may well be that this is rather the sign of a genuine commitment to an end-in-view.

Fourth, the sincerely committed learner is anxious to test out his ideas and to act upon them. Probably the most easily recognized characteristic of the committed learner is his disposition *to act*. The very nature of a value or a belief is that it carries with it some commitment to action. Too often our school learning situations become theoretical in the sense that they do not lead students to the point of seeing what a new learning would mean to them in terms of their own action, and thus our students have acquired neither beliefs nor values. The disposition to try out and act upon our discoveries is one we can well afford to foster.

The fifth characteristic of the gen-

uinely committed learner is perhaps more a special case of commitment to action than it is a separate characteristic. It is very easy to be committed to something that everyone about you believes. But it is one of the characteristics of learning that it often carries one beyond the point of widely accepted belief or practice. This has been referred to as the subversive role of ideas. While the committed learner will be willing to recognize that the belief he has arrived at may not be final—that all the evidence may not be in—he is nonetheless willing to stand up and be counted for that which he thinks to be right and true. He has the courage of his convictions. With the tremendous pressures toward group conformity which exist among American youngsters it requires skillful teaching indeed to establish that type of atmosphere which permits or engenders courageous individuality.

And this brings us to the most important point to be made concerning the role of commitment in learning. If commitment is part and parcel of the most sincere type of learning, this same commitment which characterizes the learning process will come to characterize the learner. Commitment is more than an ingredient of good learning; it is the core of good character. Only to that extent to which we can encourage genuine commitment in learners can we hope to generate the power of character in learners. Unlike the product of the Alger formula, it is this character itself and not the material success to which it may lead with which we are concerned.

Commitment, like most other dispositions, is neither inherited nor

learned by preaching; it is learned through its successful practice. And if teachers are to encourage the development of this disposition, they will have to be careful to distinguish between the genuine article and its more frequent imitations. They will have to distinguish between effort which is guided by foresight of genuine ends on the one hand and compulsive activity on the other; they will have

to encourage the diversity of attack and viewpoint which different individuals can bring to or carry away from learning situations; they will have to foster the idea that a belief sincerely examined and found well-grounded is the surest guide to action. When they have done these things they will have made their contribution toward producing the resolute and committed persons the world so badly needs.

LOUIS E. RATHS

What Is Teaching?

This article examines the functions of a teacher in today's world. It also indicates the relationship of learning to values, thinking and competency.

EVERY AGE answers for itself this most difficult of all questions and our age is no exception. As times change significantly the conception of what is needed in the teaching process changes too. Are there some general areas of agreement on what is most needed in today's world?

Fault finding is common from outside the profession of education and from within it. As one looks at the many criticisms one recognizes that it is not possible to construct a policy for our times which will please everyone. It can be said, however, that there is an insistent demand that education at all levels should be more concerned with *values*, with the clarification of them, with the conservation of those we hold

most dear and the reconstruction of others which are inadequate or in conflict.

There is also a pressing emphasis on the notion that teachers everywhere should give more attention to the *intellectual* aspects of schooling. It is said that there is a neglect of the thinking and planning process and that our young people are learning rather to conform to situations than to think through them.

Along with values and reflective thinking there is a recurrent demand that we pay strict attention to "know-how" and that our children should have a firm grasp of the skills that we associate with the purposes of education.

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