

# Working with Learners for Integration and Continuity

**What are effective alternatives in achieving an improved and orderly arrangement of learning outcomes?**

No experience is educative that does not tend to both knowledge of more facts and entertaining of more ideas and to a better, a more orderly, arrangement of them.<sup>1</sup>

THE present concern with integration and continuity, in the face of widespread clamor for sporadic and fragmentary crash programs in education, is a plea for an improved and orderly arrangement of learning outcomes through a balanced program. Current pressures to disregard over-all organizing principles suggest that it was no accident that the yearbooks of two professional associations, both prominent for their leadership in curriculum development, focused last year on the problems of integration and continuity, respectively. In Part III of its fifty-seventh yearbook, the National Society for the Study of Education published a provocative set of papers addressed to the basic problems of achieving an integration of learning experiences. In another dimension, the sequential elements of the curriculum were the specific concern of ASCD's 1958 Yearbook, *A Look at Continuity in the School Program*.

Interaction and continuity in the learning process are characteristic outcomes

<sup>1</sup> John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938.

of intelligent concern by teachers for the integrating potentials of the scope and sequence of experiences they develop as they work with learners. Although it is axiomatic to speak of these outcomes only as processes taking place in the learner and not as characteristics of curriculum organization, their emergence as prized values in true education depends on the conditions set up for the learning process. For the learner to achieve integration, that is, a simultaneous unity of understandings, skills and knowledge, his school experiences need to be planned to enhance rather than to diminish his opportunities for establishing creative lateral relationships.

Likewise, to achieve continuity or a pattern of chronological relationships between successive learnings, the learner must be assisted by a planned curriculum that encourages rather than thwarts the possibilities of the cumulative effect in learning. However, even though over-all curriculum preplanning should properly be concerned with building in such possibilities for lateral and sequential relationships, the final responsibility for integration and continuity of learning devolves upon the teacher and the learner as they work together in the classroom situation. Thus the problem

narrows for the teacher to the question of asking whether there is indeed an organizing principle for instruction which offers sufficient guidance to assure a meaningful unity of experience characterized by interaction and continuity.

### Two Approaches

Looking at the current educational scene, one discerns at least two areas of diverse practice that purport to answer this question but which, in the view of the writer, serve to block the realization of optimal continuity and interaction in the working with learners. First, there is the widespread prevalence of teaching which depends upon organizing principles drawn from the logic of organized race experience such as chronology, spatial extension or the progression from the simple to complex. On the other hand, a second area of practice is characterized by classrooms where on-going activities bear little relation to a thoughtfully planned curriculum structure. Where the first is remiss in the assumption that interaction and continuity are the products of communicating an integrated view of knowledge, the second fails to recognize that foresight and insight are causally related through teacher and taught.

#### The Highly Structured Curriculum

The following analysis is designed to review concisely five of the more characteristic patterns of organizing learning experiences so that the learner receives an integrated view of knowledge:

1. With *spatial extension* curricular activities begin with experiences close at hand and extend outward in an ever-

widening circle. Thus, in the elementary school, social experiences may start with the school or family and then expand into the immediate and wider community. The reverse situation would be one of *spatial contraction* in which the larger scene is studied before the more intimate environment. This organizing principle is in operation often in the study of geography when the solar system is studied first and one's own state or community is studied later.

2. When *chronology* provides the organizing classroom element, activities involve a study of events in the serial order of their happening. Being the dominant organizing idea that determines sequence of experiences in the study of history, the content of such a course sometimes becomes merely a progression of wars or royal dynasties or presidential terms. Such a principle places heavy emphasis upon building "background" for understanding a subsequent event.

3. With the *simple to complex* formula for ordering classroom activities, the learning experiences progress from the study of simple aspects of living to the more complex forms of individual and social life. Thus, often in the field of childhood education the seemingly simple culture of the Indian tribe or Eskimo community is studied before the more technical pattern of life in an industrial nation. The biological sciences offer splendid examples of this organizing principle in setting up courses and course sequences around the evolutionary stages of animal development, the simple amoeba being studied prior to the more complicated earthworm or grasshopper.

4. Progressing from the "known" to the "unknown" encourages the development of new understanding based upon the logical sequence of building concepts upon what is already known to

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be true. Curricular experiences in the areas of exact sciences like mathematics often are planned in accordance with this organizing element; for example, geometry teachers utilize this sequence extensively in emphasizing the nature of proof.

5. Finally, proceeding from the *specific to the general* suggests a sequence in which the student develops specific skills or acquires particular aspects of a field of knowledge before experiencing the total or general use of such skills or knowledge. This atomistic approach which emphasizes learning the component parts of an operation before synthesizing the various parts is sometimes in evidence in physical education, business education and the arts.

Such principles of organization appear sufficiently valid for an educational program designed primarily to transmit the cultural heritage through a learning process conceived in mechanistic terms. However, the inadequacies of using any of these concepts as the single organizing principle of the curriculum designed to meet directly the problems, needs and interests of learners are fairly obvious.

The principle of chronology, while it may be useful in bringing out the serial order of events, does not provide necessarily the best means of teaching basic concepts or of pointing the relationship of present day problems to their historical backgrounds. Similarly, modern means of communication and transportation reduce the significance of the concept of geographic extension, for students may be just as aware of events of global consequence as they are of a situation that confronts their personal lives. The limitations of any single principle of structure that is imposed by the nature of a special subject point to the need for a deeper probing for an or-

ganizing theme suitable to give general framework to classroom experiences.

### *The Structureless Curriculum*

In opposition to the rigidity of classroom procedure implied in the curriculum where continuity and integration are prescribed in the organizing scheme, there may be contrasted a pattern of instruction conspicuous in its lack of a pre-planned structure. Integration and continuity are sought in the dynamics of group processes within the individual class and without particular reference to basic curricular structuring. There is much to support this view, particularly that aspect which insists that interaction and continuity are not necessarily the result of providing the learner with an integrated view but rather of developing individuals who can achieve these outcomes for themselves. However, there seems implicit in this pattern of teaching a denial of responsibility for assuring that present experiences of learners meet the criteria for maturity conceived in broader terms than those provided by a single class.

The principle of continuity suggests that the present is related to the future and the teacher is accountable for the kind of present experience his classroom offers the young. In this regard Dewey made clear the special role of the teacher when he wrote:

The present affects the future anyway. The persons who should have some idea of the connection between the two are those who have achieved maturity. Accordingly, upon them devolves the responsibility for instituting the conditions for the kind of present experience which has a favorable effect upon the future.<sup>2</sup>

The suggestion here is that, in react-

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938. p. 52.

ing to one extreme some segments of modern education may have gone to another. Is there not then some middle position that offers a unifying principle which at once avoids the rigidity of a conventional curriculum and the vacuity of the unconventional?

### A Third Alternative

Recent surveys show that scattered throughout the country are a number of core programs in general education where teachers, through a preplanned structure of problem areas, are encouraged to develop significant learning units characterized by genuine problem solving. Advocates for a definite organization of scope hold that the criteria for deciding which experiences are educative must be developed from a wider base than that provided by the individual class.

Furthermore, modern research in education as well as in allied fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology provides the educator with considerable insight into the nature of the learner and the culture in which he learns. Why not capitalize upon this accumulated knowledge in assessing priorities in the selection of curriculum experiences? Agreement by the school staff on a series of problem areas pertinent to a comprehensive general education need not preclude abundant opportunity and challenge for the teacher and his class to develop related units of work cooperatively.

#### A Theory of Organization

The central role of selected problem areas in curriculum structuring and of problem solving experiences in the classroom is further emphasized by recalling Dewey's suggestion that instructional procedures are unified to the extent that they produce improved habits of think-

ing. In considering the appropriateness of educational method he suggests:

The important thing is that thinking is the method of an educative experience. The essentials of method are therefore identical with the essentials of reflection. They are *first* that the pupil have a genuine situation of experience—that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake; *secondly*, that a genuine problem develop within this situation as a stimulus to thought; *third*, that he possess the information and make the observations needed to deal with it; *fourth*, that suggested solutions occur to him which he shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way; *fifth*, that he have opportunity and occasion to test his ideas by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover for himself their validity.<sup>3</sup>

It is easily observable that these elements of reflective thought have become classic in their influence upon instructional processes that purport to unify experience toward increased integration and continuity. Having referred to this theoretical construct for working with learners we now examine what it means to project these concepts into the classroom.

#### The Practical Application

Many core teachers recognize and utilize the organizing principle of problem-solving in determining scope and sequence of learning within their classroom. Achieving breadth and continuity in this context is evident in the present example of a teacher working with learners in a real problem-solving situation which occurred recently in a community on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. For many years the town had existed on both sides of an old navigable canal connect-

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916. p. 192.

ing the Chesapeake Bay with the upper Atlantic seaboard. When a Federally-sponsored project replaced the low, outworn bridge with a long cantilever structure, high enough to allow ocean-going traffic to pass under it, the parts of the community located on either side of the narrow canal suddenly became separated by more than two miles of highway over the bridge and its approaches. As the community, as well as the school, became aware of the cleavage and social change brought by this transportation dilemma, a ninth grade core class undertook a study of the possibilities for keeping their local community intact by establishing ties of solidarity between the two sections of the town.

The chronology of events during the eight or nine weeks involved in the study records a discernible pattern of interaction that is highly provocative of integration and continuity:

1. Having recognized that here was a natural "situation of experience" which offered interesting participation for the class, the teacher was careful to examine with the class all aspects of the situation that made it truly a problem for solution. This meant that the full range of relationships within a community—political, social, cultural, recreational, spiritual, educational and others—came under class surveillance as its members sought the ramifications of social change wrought by more difficult transit between the sections of their community. Analysis of the problem as a learning experience can be in this situation as integrating as the synthesis implied in the subsequent solution.

2. With the problem defined through certain activities of an exploratory nature, further analysis drew the class deeper into a fact-finding survey of the

community for teasing out cues to the problem's solution. Here the principle of continuity came into full use when students applied the generalizations of initial analysis to ordering the directions of further investigation. That is, to use Dewey's description of continuity, "something is carried over" from an earlier experience to a later one.

3. Since integration in learning calls for an organization of experiences in relation to purpose, pupils in this class were challenged to organize their findings in a way that suggested possible solutions to the common problem. For example, a committee of the class which had amassed considerable information on recreational needs and services, developed a proposal for dispersing athletic and social facilities on both sides of the canal. Similarly, another group recommended to service clubs that locations for their meetings be established on an alternating basis in both sections of the town. Still another group, sensitive to the role of governmental agencies in determining community lines, called for cooperative approaches to town planning and zoning issues with equal geographical distribution of members for these boards as well as for those in the areas of traffic, sanitation and parks.

4. Carrying these recommendations to the intended civic and political agencies provided members of the class suitable occasion to test their ideas by application. Thus the progression of class activities from original explorations of the problem to the eventual validation of proposed alternatives marked a vivid example of achieving continuity of learning through analysis and synthesis, through selecting means appropriate to desired ends.

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dents, that there should be sections for the more able pupils in English, the social studies, and courses in mathematics, science, and the foreign languages which are elected by pupils with a wide range of abilities.<sup>2</sup> This sectioning is to be "subject-by-subject," thus precluding any possibility of developing a comprehensive "problems of living" core program.

Those who advocate such programs believe that they provide more adequately than do conventional subject-centered courses, for the development of the common attitudes, understandings, and skills needed by all for effective democratic citizenship. Students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and from all levels of ability live and work together on the solution of common personal-social problems. A program of this character would be carried on throughout the entire secondary period in a block of time ranging from two-thirds of the school day at the lower levels to one-third of the school day at the higher levels.

What does the Conant proposal have to offer as a substitute for this common integrating program of general education? In order to develop "social-cohesion," a single course in the senior year in problems of American democracy is to be required and here the grouping is to be heterogeneous. This course, together with heterogeneously grouped home rooms, "tied closely to an effective student council, physical education classes and general student activities," constitutes the program for developing social cohesion and mutual understandings. We may well be skeptical of its adequacy in an era characterized by anxiety and confusion.

To sum up, the segregation of the "talented 15 or 20 percent of the stu-

<sup>2</sup> Conant, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

dents in order to permit them to take the "tough courses," reduces the core to a program for the mediocre or slightly above average student. And even if the core could survive this divisive procedure, it would still have to face the fact that the extensive ability grouping of students at lower levels of talent, precludes the organization of a block-time "problems of living" core program. Boards of education and administrators who are interested in strengthening their programs of common citizenship education, had better take a hard critical look at the Conant proposals before adopting them.

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