

A Look at Secondary Education Methods Courses

Do instructors of secondary education methods courses "practice what they teach"?

AT THE beginning of this century attention to professional preparation of secondary teachers was largely concerned with their acquisition of subject matter. At that time the theory of formal discipline advocated tough mental gymnastics to train the faculties of the mind. Knowledge of subject presupposed ability to teach; therefore, techniques and problems of teaching were not included in the curricula of prospective high school teachers. Beginning high school teachers, leaving the liberal arts colleges and universities without professional training in the art and science of teaching, were following the most recent guides they had, examples of teaching methodology set by their professors.

The examples of instruction set by his college professors are sure to influence the neophyte, even though specific attention is now given to developing his skill in teaching ability. There probably exists some relation between quality and extent of the formal academic and professional training of teachers, on the one hand, and their initial adjustment and in-service growth on the other.

Identifying Teachers

It is reasonable to assume that teachers of education courses should be ex-

pected to exemplify desirable patterns of instruction. These experienced educators should not only help prospective teachers learn more effectively while pursuing their own college programs, but they should also help them leave college better equipped to handle both the subject matter and the youngsters of their future high school classes. It may be assumed, also, that those instructors of education who are recognized as superior teachers are wielding strong influence on the quality of teaching which is to be found in secondary schools.

To understand better the contribution of these superior instructors, an analysis was made of the manner in which they conduct a course from the initial planning of content and selection of instructional procedures to the final evaluation.¹ The analysis was concerned with the manner in which courses are taught by teachers named by their administrative officials as superior teachers, in charge of four basic education courses which are commonly found in undergraduate teacher training programs of prospective secondary teachers. Over 100 universities

¹ Margaret Gill. *Procedures Used by Superior Teachers of Secondary Education*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Austin: The University of Texas, 1956.

and colleges noted for their teacher training programs were selected as the basis for choosing the superior instructors. Two hundred instructors participated.

General Methods Course

One of the courses examined was secondary curriculum, or high school methods, the basic course in secondary methods, whatever the title might be. Four aspects of teaching this course were analyzed: general class organization, over-all planning (content, objectives, course requirements), instructional procedures (frequency of use of those selected and reasons for use), and evaluation (of the course, student and instructor). The final portion of the study was concerned with how the course is related to current practices in secondary schools.

Plan of Organization

General methods instructors favored generally a unit kind of class organization with units developed progressively throughout the course, rather than an inflexible type of organization which is characteristic of pre-arranged syllabi, textbook centered or daily lesson approaches. However, there were descriptions ranging from textbook centered to problems approach. These same instructors considered their classes to be informal, although not one described his class organization in ways that would indicate it was extremely informal.

Over-all Planning

Even though preferences slightly favored independent planning of content by

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individual instructors, there was considerable cooperation when several different people were teaching sections of the same course. Suggestions from students of areas of interest were often sought at the first of a semester, but the suggestions were generally limited to minor aspects of specific areas already selected by the instructor.

Objectives for the course were most frequently selected by the instructor in advance of meeting the class. However, considerable setting of objectives was done cooperatively with other instructors teaching sections of the course. Little planning was done in cooperation with students. When student suggestions were utilized, generally they were confined to the selection of relatively unimportant, minor details, after the over-all objectives had been determined by the instructor. Yet the methods course is where would-be teachers are to learn how to carry on teacher-pupil planning.

Course requirements were determined in advance with student reactions sought at times relative to somewhat unimportant aspects of the course.

Instructional Procedures

Procedures were varied during a semester more often because of changing needs of the class than because of the maturity or ability of students. Instructors selected teaching procedures when they first knew they would teach the course, rather than waiting to meet the class or obtain information about the students. Few changed procedures in order to illustrate different types of teaching methods, which constituted a significant part of the subject matter of the course.

The procedure used most frequently in the methods course was *discussion*. The chief reason given for use was the

opportunity to emphasize expression of students' opinions, a practice which obviously belongs in a course devoted to consideration of teaching procedures. Although discussion seemed to be recognized as contributing to the development of critical thinking, it was not valued as a procedure which increased learning of subject matter. Neither was it considered of value in helping future teachers acquire such concomitant learnings as tolerant attitudes and skill in oral expressions, advantages often attributed to the discussion method. *Informal lecture* was the second most frequently used procedure.

When a *student panel* was used, although very infrequently, its use was justified by the values which resulted for those who participated in the panel presentation, rather than as a means for increased learning by the entire class. Developing ability to organize resource materials was not considered a valuable reason for use. *Student reports*, also, were used infrequently because the advantages were not for the entire class. When students presented outside material, it was limited to interesting information which might otherwise be omitted, rather than the fundamental subject matter of the course. Reports were not considered helpful in motivating students or arousing interest in the subject.

Projects provide practical orientation to the teaching profession, according to reasons given for use. However, this kind of learning experience was considered to be of little value when defined as working with youngsters, making special visits to youth centers, the "Y," etc., or constructing teaching materials. Failure to use projects, such as the three types mentioned, seemed more often to be the result of the practice in many colleges

and universities of restricting certain learning activities to education courses other than the general secondary methods course. Construction of teaching materials was especially neglected. When projects were a part of the course, they were usually left to the initiative of individual students and carried out on the student's own time.

Although there was expressed recognition that *written reports* increased subject matter understanding and developed the ability to locate and organize data, there was little use of this activity. Written reports did not seem to increase interest in the subject, or to enrich the course for even the better students.

Examinations, used for the most part infrequently and at irregular intervals, provided a basis for evaluating the work of students. Increased learning was not one of the values of examinations. Neither were the results used for additional planning of the course.

Resource people were seldom used although they were recognized as sources of current, practical information about the teaching profession which would not be found elsewhere. It seemed to be considered undesirable for students during the period of pre-service training to become acquainted with teachers or administrators who are active in the profession.

Data relative to the use of *audio* or *visual materials* indicated their infrequent use in spite of the fact these aids to learning were recognized to be strong motivating factors and effective for presenting the subject matter. Even though the course being examined is concerned with methods of teaching, these two kinds of instructional materials were not used with any particular attempt to demonstrate their effectiveness as aids to teaching-learning.

Individual attention was available when students with learning problems needed help and also when the causes of learning difficulties needed to be discovered. However, individual instruction was not emphasized for students experiencing difficulty and not mentioned as an advantage for the fast learners. Activities involving individual students or small groups of students were used infrequently because the values were only for the small number involved.

For the most part, according to the data, the secondary methods course consists of informal lecture and discussion. Perhaps it might be expected that more kinds of instructional procedures would be used for illustrative purposes in the course where general methods of teaching is the subject matter. A majority of the instructors found to be most satisfactory those procedures that are informal and involve the entire class. However, a majority of the instructors did not name a teaching procedure they would consider most satisfactory.

Evaluation

Evaluations of the course were most often unstructured, informal and verbal, becoming a part of the general class discussion. If evaluations were in writing, instructors seemed to prefer them unsigned. Evaluation of instructors was objected to because of the attention focused on one aspect of the teaching-learning situation to the exclusion of other pertinent factors. Instructors assumed the entire responsibility for evaluation of the student. Conferences for evaluation purposes were held only with students doing poor work. Student participation in evaluation seemed to be limited to evaluation of themselves or each other only at the time of oral reports, panels or group activities. Student-

teacher cooperation in evaluation was practically nonexistent.

Relating the Course to Current Practice

The methods course is related to what is taking place in the secondary schools most often through use of illustrations, examples and references to high school subjects, supplied by the instructor, taken from the text or from readings and experiences of students. Participation in activities with high school age groups or observation in high school classes was limited. This implies a classroom centered approach to the secondary methods course influenced by the instructors' experience and the text, rather than based on current secondary school activities.

Information about Students

In general, academic background and professional interests were the kinds of information recorded about students. Personal data sheets usually supplied this information, although maintenance of regular office hours with students encouraged to visit was a fairly common way of obtaining information.

Studies of College Teaching

Perhaps these findings should not be regarded as discouraging when an examination of the professional literature of education since the beginning of this century reveals that almost no attention has been given to college teaching. Little detailed, documented information exists about any methods of college teaching *per se*, and even less about secondary education courses and methods used by the teachers of these courses.

There appeared in 1927 one of the first recognitions of the role of professors of education. G. H. Betts asserted what was

to appear increasingly when he reported a study by instructors of Northwestern University's School of Education. He stated that the professors of education were only average in general effectiveness and presentation while at least theoretically the best teaching in a university should be found in its School of Education.²

At this time most colleges and universities were in the embarrassing position of prescribing work in teaching methods for their students who intended to teach, yet for which methods the majority of the faculty had no real sympathy. However, the role of professional education was beginning to be recognized both favorably and unfavorably.

In 1932 Lester Rogers directed a word of praise and criticism toward the teaching of professors of education.

While men in education have been instrumental in effecting marked changes in the work of the kindergarten and the elementary schools and somewhat less significant change in the work of our secondary schools, they have, in their own work, more frequently followed the traditional university practices rather than change their procedures to conform to the principles that they have helped to make effective in our public schools.³

From 1940 to 1950 there seemed to be a decrease in interest in instructional procedures, education courses and their instructors. No efforts appeared to represent concerted attempts to examine any part of college teaching. Departments of education followed the example of other departments; they, also, failed to examine their instructional procedures.

² G. H. Betts. "College Students' Reactions to Education Courses." *School and Society* 25:494, April 23, 1927.

³ Lester B. Rogers. "The Place of Schools of Education in the Program of Improvement of University Instruction." *School and Society* 36:262, August 27, 1932.

However, in 1950 there appeared an increasing and widespread interest in appraising college teaching, which was reflected in a report issued by the Committee on College and University Teaching of the American Association of University Professors. Ruth Eckert recognized the importance of this report in the statement:

The widespread search today for valid means of appraising college teaching is a highly encouraging sign, for it shows that we are thinking more realistically about our education problems.⁴

Earl Kelley expressed optimism regarding methods:

We seem to be coming into an era of method. There are signs all about the country that people are becoming interested at last in how we put beliefs into action.⁵

In the study of secondary methods courses and also in the professional literature, it seems quite evident that teachers of education have failed to assume the lead in exemplifying ideal teaching procedures or considering ways to improve teaching. However, changes in contemporary society are making it necessary for instructors at all levels and in all areas to examine their teaching procedures and evaluate new media, new instructional procedures, and new subject matter. Interest in college teaching seems to be now at an all time high, if the quantity of material being published in the professional periodical literature is a true indication. However, as was true at the beginning of the century, too much that is being written is general in nature and still frequently represents

⁴ Ruth E. Eckert. "Ways of Evaluating College Teaching." *School and Society* 71:65, February 4, 1950.

⁵ Earl C. Kelley. *The Workshop Way of Learning*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951, p. xii.

(Continued on page 367)

teachers to describe their ways of working, to describe the growth of children, to show any evidence that they had that showed a change in the children, and how that change was produced.

Findings

This has not been a problem in action research in the strict scientific sense. It has been a problem study based on the scientific approach to help us think critically about our procedures and teaching tools. We are convinced that bulletin boards are a worthwhile teaching aid, that if used properly with guidance, the work will produce gratifying results. We believe this report is evidence of this conviction.

Teamwork and cooperative effort are essential in a study of this kind. Planning, experimenting, testing and evaluating are the core of the whole idea and genuine enthusiasm and interest on the part of the participating teachers are imperative for the success of the project.

In conclusion we present a brief summary of our evaluation of the entire study; its strengths and weaknesses and how we feel this research has affected our teaching.

Our strengths: The group has continually felt that the study was worth the expended time and effort. They have realized the value of bulletin boards as a teaching aid in the areas of subject matter and social learnings; and that, as in all good teaching tools, the use of bulletin boards is a means to an end rather than an end in itself and as teachers and pupils plan and evaluate together greater learning takes place.

Our weaknesses: The teachers in our group found testing the real value of bulletin boards very difficult and felt very strongly the need for devising more ways of testing learnings we assumed

were inherent in bulletin boards. We were not always sure just where we were going and very much needed the help of our consultant. Some members of our group hesitated to take the time necessary for a study of this kind.

Our teaching has been affected by making us more aware of the value of bulletin boards in changing the behavior of children and providing additional stimulus for learning.

A Look at Secondary

(Continued from page 359)

opinion rather than facts. Too little attention has been given to instructional procedures used by education instructors. Attention to methods and specific instructional procedures has been obscured by controversy over the need for methodology. With the aroused interest in college teaching professors of education have the outstanding opportunity to exercise leadership in improving instruction at all levels, a kind of leadership which may rightfully be expected from them.

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