

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

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As this copy was sent to the printer, Dr. Taba was on her way home from a year in São Paulo, Brazil, where she has been teaching at the University. Speaking more strictly, she was slowly returning to San Francisco State College and sent ahead this missive from some beach in Mexico where "with a gin tonica" she was "preparing to be lonesome for the warm, talkative Latins."

FRED T. WILHELMS

Teaching Is a Many-Splendored Thing

SOME things one learns and then learns over again with a sharp realization of a new significance. What teaching is all about has been such a thing to me. Over and over again some pertinent principles, long familiar, assume a new light and a new reality. I had always proceeded on the assumption that one teaches people as well as content, that one needs to change feelings and ways of thinking alongside developing new ideas and absorbing new facts. If these two do not meet, teaching is an empty gesture. This year, teaching in Brazil, this realization came sharply again, and became a daily experience.

My job was to teach foundations of education and curriculum development to a group of about 30 educational specialists in Latin America. As a consequence of an experiment in a field workshop for teachers, a course in group leadership was added during the second term. The participants came from seven Latin American countries in addition to Brazil, and were brought together by UNESCO and the Brazilian government

as a part of a Major Project in Improving Education in South America. The group was highly heterogeneous in experience and in academic background. There were teachers, normal school directors, school administrators, and technicians from the state departments of education. Some had only finished the normal school—an equivalent of twelfth grade—others had university degrees. They spoke two different languages, neither of which I had mastered in the beginning. Only five understood English. Translation was necessary all the way through and sometimes a two-way translation—from English to Portuguese, and from Portuguese to Spanish—was needed. Not a very promising prospect for teaching much or profoundly!

Improvement of Practice

The aim of the project is not just educational enlightenment, but a realistic improvement of educational practices. As I contemplated the group and my task of teaching something that was useful and that stood a chance of in-

fluencing educational practice, I was acutely aware of the dangers of indiscriminate cultural borrowing, be it of ideas or techniques. Practices and ideas that may be extremely useful in the United States, under different conditions may be useless at the best, and harmful at the worst.

I became aware of a vast distance between what I was prepared to teach and what my students needed to learn. What, for example, was useful to teach about curriculum development under conditions which included school systems where children attended school in three shifts a day, of two and a half hours each? (This was true of the state of São Paulo, for shortage of school buildings, and not of teachers.) What should one teach about child development, learning and the selecting of learning activities to people whose chief concept of teaching was assigning lessons from a book,

often without any explanation, and then examining the children the next day? (Those who could afford it hired tutors to teach the children at home.) Should one insinuate anything about integration of content when the programs and the texts consisted of a rather scattered, disconnected subject matter on such topics as definitions of forms of government and classification of plants? What can be conveyed about individual differences to people in school systems with state-wide examinations at the end of the first grade, which over half of the children failed; where still fewer could pass the entrance examination into the gymnasium? Thus continued the questions regarding selection of content to teach.

Then, of course, there were the people. How did their minds tick? What could they perceive and accept? What new ways of teaching could they understand



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without any concrete models? There were a few signs of suspicion about any importation from the United States. They had had much from us that was not too valid, including soft drinks and bubble gum. The simplicity of the inductive development of ideas offered in the course, lacked the aura of philosophical respectability to some who were used to "aulas" consisting of highly ponderous verbal abstractions. They themselves expressed both opinions and ideas with the firm absolutism of a final truth, and hot arguments developed when the truths voiced by different people did not coincide. It was extremely difficult to develop reasoning from causes to consequences. My questions of "why" and "wherefore" seemed to annoy them. A mighty big definition seemed to solve any problem better than any amount of analysis of causes and consequences. In other words, the empirical thinking on which was based the very structure of ideas I was stressing was a total stranger. It was extremely hard to pull out concrete illustrations. There was, for example, a lot of talk about "global education," but try and find out what they meant by it! Many propounded about integration of the individual into the society, but not a hint as to what one should do to accomplish this!

There were difficulties also on the score of work habits and skills. I could not see conducting a class without discussion, even though discussion via translation was extremely difficult. The first attempt nearly floored me. No one cared about the focus for discussion. Ideas and opinions ranged far and wide of the topic. At the slightest controversy, everyone talked at the same time—there was bedlam, and no one listened to anyone else. How to get disciplined and productive discussion?

A Beginning

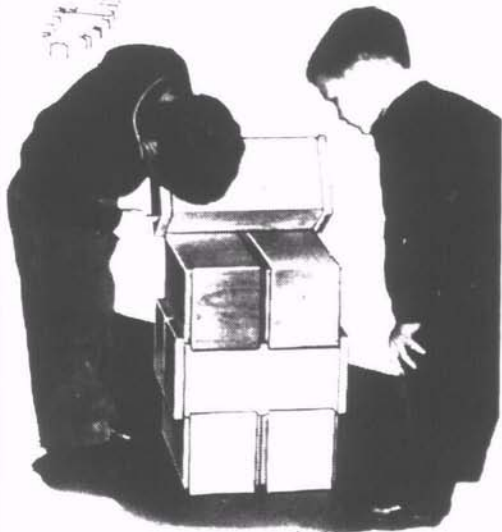
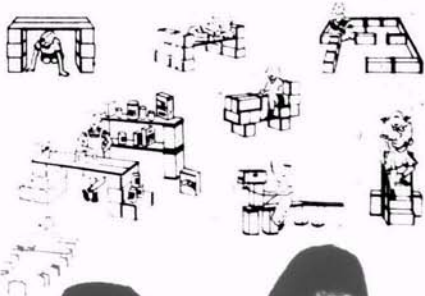
But the main problem was to develop active learning and active thinking on their own problems of education. Pencils were poised for taking notes on lectures, but the first assignment on analyzing and criticizing the objectives of their programs was met with an incredulous stare. Analysis? Criticism? What did the "professora" want? How many pages would she require? What was analysis anyway?

And so it went in the beginning.

After some fumbling, a pattern of teaching began to evolve to meet all these problems. The first item in that pattern was to select very carefully the most crucial things to teach, and to limit the coverage very strictly. Time was short and teaching through translation more than doubles the time needed to teach anything. The second item was to teach each new technique or idea in a threefold cycle: first, develop some pertinent principles with which to think; then, in small groups, to discuss these, supplying some concrete illustrations; and finally, either in discussion or in individual papers, to apply what they had learned.

For example, in treating the selection of learning activities, students first examined some of their own texts and programs and described what their students learned and how they learned it. Then the criteria for desirable learning activities were presented. With these they re-examined the programs. Then, to provide a new model, a unit with a full sequence of learning activities was carefully examined; developing the theoretical reasons for each activity. After that the students observed a laboratory class taught by two competent teachers who had just returned from the United States. Finally, each was asked to re-plan that portion of the teaching procedure which he had

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chosen for criticism. There were many opportunities for working in small groups, and many discussions about which procedures were productive and which not.

Some aid was also forthcoming. In the middle of the year we acquired a laboratory class. In September two scholarship students who had been studying in the United States returned, and the class could see some very modern teaching. An inspectors' seminar, with its discussion sessions, became a laboratory for the group process class.

The response to this treatment was amazing. It reaffirmed my faith in the human capacity to learn and to change, provided there is sincere and fairly skilled teaching. Discussions became quite productive, and "saida do foco" (departure from the focus) became a kind of crime. Starting from an almost complete passivity, at the end each developed a fairly respectable individual project, on some aspect of curriculum

development, teaching, or the use of group procedures. Many worked on patterns of diagnosing needs, for which techniques in South America are almost non-existent. It was a joy to see the group labor at developing and using the new tools: a different manner of thinking, systematic patterns of analysis, and a creative application of both criticism and analysis. Most surprising was the fact that in the final evaluation there were requests for extending the very features which were the newest and which at first were so unwelcome: more time for application of the methods of curriculum development; greater stress on human relations in the group itself, and as a technique of working with groups; an earlier start for the individual project, and of independent reading and discussion in small groups; above all, a warm gratitude for having found a "new way."

—HILDA TABA, *professor of education, San Francisco State College, California.*

Learning in Thailand

(Continued from page 424)

machinists, electricians, printers, dietitians, etc. A teachers college was organized in Bangkok to provide special education for school administrators and supervisors, offering evening classes and graduate work. With increased funds and an adequate corps of highly trained leaders in a wide array of specialties, the communities of Thailand are slated to have many better opportunities to realize the advantages which the modern age can provide.

Education in Thailand is strongly guided by the deep cultural values in the Thai heritage. Cultural values, however, are not fixed. There are emerging certain new values which are the products of the times. These new values are

having their effects upon the goals, methods and content of education. They are inducing changes in the ways in which Thai people think, feel and act.

It has been part of the history of the Thai people to seek a flexibility and astuteness in embracing the developments in the world which may best protect them and enable them to live in strength, respect and independence. They are continuing to be cautiously selective and sensitively adaptive. They, as many other people now in the process of building their nation's human and material wealth, are tapping world-wide experiences and resources and are seeking the best from any source; by this process they are likely to profit more in this search than will countries which feel that they have already arrived.

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