Ideas into Action

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NOTE: Initiated this month, Ideas into Action *will report frontier work by ASCD Commissions and Committees. Assignment of the commissions is to explore problems and issues in their areas of responsibility and to facilitate an exchange of ideas and information on these; that of the committees is to carry much responsibility in the business, organization and on-going work of the Association.*

These groups have an important function in furthering our professional growth. We hope this new department will serve as an effective stimulus to such growth.—R.R.L.

Myth and Fact about Learning

FOR the past several years the Research Commission of ASCD has sponsored a series of Curriculum Research Institutes, some of them in cooperation with the National Institute of Mental Health. Of late the Research Institutes have focused sharply on the factors that influence learning. That focus has by implication suggested certain myths or misconceptions held by many people about the learning process. In contrast, it has made explicit the "facts" about learning. Let us consider some of the myths and facts.

Myth #1. *The student learns what the teacher teaches.* Essentially, this notion about learning puts the learner in a very passive role since he must accept and absorb what the teacher sets forth to be learned. There are two assumptions in this myth that appear to be false. One of them is that what is significant to the teacher is equally significant to the learner; the other is that the quantity of facts learned is identical with the quantity of facts taught.

Fact #1. *Students cannot be taught directly, nor can we facilitate learning in the sense of making it easier.* Studies in perception demonstrate that all learning is selective. We perceive and learn what we purpose to. It becomes apparent that for a teacher to expect his meanings to be taken over completely by the learner is unrealistic since the learner is *selective* of what the teacher has presented. Learning begins with the learner, not with the teacher. But the teacher can make learning possible by providing information, materials and the setting. The greatest contribution he can make is that of listening to and encouraging the learner—in short, by being present in the full human sense.

Myth #2. *One has learned if he "knows."* To put it differently, if one has memorized facts, he has learned. An eighth grader will talk about the phylo-

genetic scale even to the extent of using the term correctly to answer a test item. Yet if one were to ask him to tell what the term means he would be unable to say. Knowledge of the word had become the substitute for knowledge of the thing. The trap we can fall into is to believe that because one uses the proper vocabulary he has vision and insight—that he has learned. Students attest to the prevalence of this myth by asking questions such as, "What does the book say?" or "That's not what the teacher said." Believing in this myth reaps for us a bitter harvest. The learner comes to have little faith in his experience and in his ideas, for these are secondary to knowing the proper words.

Fact #2. *One has learned when he has experienced growth of the self.* Any other type of learning is transient and disappears when the external pressures are removed. It is this fact that presents the greatest challenge to teachers. The challenge is to build a "curriculum bridge" from that which interests (the self structure) youngsters to that which they should learn. To do this a teacher educates himself to ways in which he can ascertain aspects of the self-structure of youngsters and, in so doing, the teacher learns to respect and cherish the uniqueness of the learner. Frequently, the teacher discovers his own individuality in this quest.

When the learner experiences growth of the self in learning, he finds it unnecessary to surrender to authority and becomes more self-directing in future learning endeavors.

Myth #3. *Learning occurs through exposure to discrete curriculum areas.* Youths are required to learn by being placed in different subject matter classes for a certain number of minutes per day.

It is even becoming commonplace for this type of organization of the school day to be found in the elementary school. One of the notable exceptions to this tendency is the ungraded or nongraded unit.

Finding themselves in classes organized along discrete subject matter lines, youths soon discover they must become expert at shutting off and turning on their learning. Since there is little attempt made by school personnel to have one segment of the school day relate to another, the student is forced into this "stop and go" type of learning. It is curious, indeed, that we seem to abandon youth at the time in learning when greatest help is needed. One of the most difficult tasks in learning is that of seeing relationships between seemingly discrete factors, yet we leave this task to the learner.

Fact #3. *Learning is integral.* It is not an acquisition of discrete elements. When a person learns he becomes a different person to some extent. By virtue of the fact that a new learning is integrated with older learnings a student comes to perceive, understand and think differently. When this type of integration of learnings has occurred, a person is in position for new learning to occur. Quite often, when a person learns through seeing relationships, his needs become illuminated to him—the road to future learning is opened. This means that learning does not always bring closure. As a matter of fact, learning seems to precipitate learning rather than terminate it.

It is not too uncommon to observe a person who has learned something of significance and to note the profound changes such learning precipitates. When he is not forced into compartmentalizing his learning, the person sees relationships, his behavior changes and his learning needs become clearer to him.

Myth #4. *Only the intellect is involved in learning.* It is difficult to say whether more educators than lay persons subscribe to this misconception of learning. Many of the grading and grouping practices in education suggest that we believe in this erroneous notion of learning. Should a person believe in this myth about learning he would find it easy to apply a simple formula: mental capacity = the number of facts to be learned. The task of the teacher would indeed be less fraught with decision making if this were true.

If one embraces this myth he may be led down the garden path to the point where he finds it justifiable to blame and even castigate children for not learning. It would not matter that tension stemming from conditions in the home, at

school or with peers preoccupies one and stands in the way of his learning. As long as one has the intellectual capacity he will learn, saith the advocate of this myth.

Fact #4. *Learning is a complex process which includes the intellect.* School guidance personnel and clinical psychologists could offer an abundance of information to support this fact about learning. Their files are replete with cases of children who are quite able, intellectually, but whose personal lives are characterized by conditions that make them "learning cripples." These are the children referred to by the Australians as "homesteaders."

Research studies on underachieving children reveal that many factors are involved in learning. For instance, the general level of anxiety and the level of anxiety about testing situations have a pronounced effect on one's learning, regardless of intellectual capacity. Similarly, the research findings on the achievement motive suggest that intra-family relationships influence learning. To complicate the matter even more, boys appear to choose quite a different road for learning than do girls.

There is research to support the "Facts" mentioned above. It is nonetheless true that as educators we must learn to do the research we need to make our professional endeavors more precise. We cannot ask people from other disciplines to do this research for us. The educator will need to re-define his role to include the research function in order that he may discover more about the learning process and aid children in experiencing greater self-fulfillment.

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