

Self-Evaluation: One Approach

AN article, which I read recently, described a class of seventh graders evaluating themselves. This report concerned an experiment designed to help the student recall his work and grade it: If the grade agreed with the teacher's then all was well; if not, a conference followed, arranged to help the student to see his work in the proper light.

This article gave me much to consider. Actually, what is self-evaluation? Or more important, what is its worth? What are the results it achieves? Is it enough to ask a child if he *knows* whether he does excellent, average or poor work? Does he know what to do about it, assuming he is capable of grading himself? It seems to me that there is a fine distinction between grading one's final achievement, and of acquiring, step by step, the skill of evaluating the accomplishments of an exercise. I personally do not consider it beneficial to ask a student to declare himself on grading. I do not believe it adds anything to his education. If there is ever a conflict between the grade set out by the teacher and that which the student has estimated for himself, it is

evident that there is some confusion in the pupil's mind as to what was expected and what was accomplished. If such confusion is allowed to continue until an examination period, it is also obvious that valuable learning time has been wasted, and, more serious, bad habits are allowed to encroach on a clear slate of learning experience.

How can a child evaluate his own progress? How can we determine whether his estimate of his work is a true explanation of his achievement? When put to the test, does he try to guess what his teacher thinks of him, or does he try to push his luck by a display of self-confidence? Is the child with an overdeveloped sense of modesty able to evaluate himself fairly? And most important, is he estimating his achievement on the basis of his own capacities, or does he use another's achievement as a yardstick?

It occurred to me in reading the article on "Self-Evaluation," that even the seven-year-olds in our dancing class had learned to evaluate themselves most accurately. Perhaps it is easier to teach self-evaluation in a dance class than in some intellectual studies, but teaching *self-evaluation* is exactly what took place. This is not a one-time occurrence, a year-end self-examination. The teacher does not sit down and say, "Now tell me what you think of your work." It is more of a daily routine, an exercise. Learning self-evaluation is part of learning a skill.

This all came about in a creative dance class in which the need to develop better technique was important in order to match the already well developed creative expression of the individual and the group. Motor coordination and muscular control are, as a rule, a slow and repetitive procedure. How could I speed this up or, more important, how could I impress upon each child the need to work

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to his fullest capacity to gain this skill? I have always felt that prolonged drill encouraged daydreaming, a lack of concentration. I knew that if we repeated an exercise a sufficient number of times something would eventually click with the student. The overall pattern, or even a slight clue might fall into place, and suddenly—he has it!

How many times had I encouraged a disheartened student, struggling with a movement that still eluded his grasp, or his perception, with the trite comment, "Keep trying; some day you will get it, and then you will never lose it." All of this is true of course, but I wondered if this was absolutely necessary, if there was not some other course of action that had more positive aspects to it. The project started as a game, but I soon recognized its value.

Developing Judgment

The entire class was instructed in an exercise, a simple movement, involving perhaps only one part of the body. The instruction was always presented in two ways: *demonstration* by the teacher (for a complete picture of the whole movement), and *analysis* of each facet of the movement that made up the whole. After several repetitions for practice, each child would then try the exercise alone or in small groups (no more than three in a group). Upon completion of the exercise, each child was requested to announce whether or not he had performed it correctly. If the child said his performance was correct, and this was the case, he was told to sit on one side of the room, (which we shall now call "A"). The child who judged his exercise correct, when it was not so, was of course requested to sit on the other side of the room, called "B." However, if a child

said his exercise was *not correct*, and if this was a *true* evaluation, he too sat on side "A," or with those who were correct in their judgments.

In the beginning an occasional child would sometimes say his exercise was wrong, even though his performance was correct. His failure to assess himself correctly was indicated to him by requesting him to sit with the "Bs" (those who were wrong). This always startles the individual child, as well as the class, but it invariably helps to clear up the entire idea for them. How could this be? The performance was correct, they saw it, but the child now sits with the "wrongs" (B). The children look from one side of the room to the other, partially grasping the meaning, partially aware of a new discovery.

At such a time, I would always point out that "Really you *were* right, but *now* you are wrong." A simple statement, but it begins to make sense. They recall what the teacher had explained earlier, that many people learn a movement by observing (a kinesthetic response), and others learn by being told which muscles to move (an intellectual response). They remember also comments by the teacher that it makes no difference how they learn, the important factor is the *feeling* they get in their bodies (muscle-memory), which helps them recall a learned movement. The teacher then continues explaining why the child sits with the "Bs"—that it is not only necessary to do it correctly, but to *know* that it is correct. If it came out right by accident, then the student is not aware of the fundamental nature of the exercise and can never hope to repeat it correctly at will.

Here again a new insight is achieved. Those children who were overly modest learn that this does not pay, for it is just not recognized as a virtue. It is interest-

ing to note that these children do not repeat this error in self-evaluation. They invariably come around the second time with a more valid picture of themselves.

Then we go back again to those who were wrong and knew it. Why were they wrong? Did they know what they did or did not do to fulfill the exercise? Sometimes these youngsters know immediately, and the teacher emphasizes the importance of knowing one's mistakes in order to improve. "If you don't know whether you are correct or not, you can't improve. You can't go on to more advanced work, can you?" This becomes almost a theme song.

But the song cannot go on to those who have not been able to estimate their own performances. What then? Here good, creative teaching comes in. It is obvious that the child does not understand the exercise, and the burden of re-explanation must fall upon the teacher. In a setting such as this, a child will do his best to perform accurately; but even if he cannot—if his coordination or muscular strength is not fully developed—he is nevertheless learning how to estimate his performance. This conscious determination to understand the exercise in order to be a "right," rather than a "wrong," is a strong motivating force for rapid improvement.

In choosing the spots for "A" and "B," I always endeavor to find new locations for them. This is important, because we are not concerned with "A" or "B" as goal posts; they serve as temporary placements for emphasizing what has been done by the various individuals. By changing each grouping place in the room, the teacher makes it less likely that the children will identify a spot as a recognition of status.

I would like to make it clear now that this "game" or exercise, is not a competi-

tive endeavor. It is presented only after much work has been done to develop the understanding that individual effort to reach *one's own maximal capacities* is the most important factor in learning to dance. I make it clear in the beginning that no one can hope to progress exactly like any other. It is carefully pointed out that each child has a body which differs from that of any other. They look about them and are convinced that truthfully they all are of varying shapes and sizes. The short stocky child moves differently from the tall willowy one—not incorrectly, just differently. The one with flat feet has one way of walking; the pigeon-toed child, another. A tensed or angular individual may perform the same exercise as a more tranquil or relaxed person, yet the results will be quite different.

Unique Instrument

The idea of using one's body as an instrument is not an unusual concept developed in a dance class. However, learning proper use of one's own capabilities is another matter. A cello has the same number of strings on its nice, plump body as a slim violin, but no one would attempt to play both instruments in the same way. Two musicians might play the same melody on the violin and the cello, yet the results are achieved within the framework of each instrument. It is also pointed out that a Stradivarius may enhance a talented, accomplished musician's performance, but it is no secret that many great performers use, with much success, instruments which are not so perfect in construction.

When the child is ready to make use of his body as an instrument, that is when he becomes confident and enthusiastic about his creative work in the dance. Only then is an effort made to interest

him in working to perfect body technique so that his body will do his bidding. When all these concepts have been established, the child is ready for self-evaluation. He is not only ready; he enjoys making such an assessment.

I have found that children prefer to discover their own mistakes before the teacher does or, at least, they like to tell of their discovery first. The opportunity to play the "game" comes only at timely or needed intervals. In between these intervals, during regular classwork, I find the children accepting and applying corrections more readily in order to comprehend and execute an exercise.

There are a few important factors that make this self-evaluation especially meaningful for the children. Early in the development of this study, each child learns that he is not expected to be perfect. "If you are a perfect dancer, there is no need to study, nothing more for which to work." Each pupil, however, is expected to perform at his own peak. This is clearly illustrated in the game also. Sometimes one child is approved as "right" when his performance looks more ragged than that of some child called a "wrong." The children may be startled at this—a raised eyebrow or two.

Immediately the teacher explains that for the first child, the result was the best performance to date and represented his best efforts, while for the second, the performance did not reflect his total or best effort. In our dance setting this explanation is usually acceptable, inasmuch as the children have already learned that different bodies are capable of different performances; that the goal for two children may have been the same, but that there are several ways of reaching that goal. The way each child learns to develop muscular coordination and control warrants another article, of course, but

suffice it to say, that this concept of *self-uniqueness* should precede that of self-evaluation.

One other value of playing the "game" is that it can be expanded to the other children, encouraging them to become good *observers*. I prefer this term to *critics*. Sometimes we ask the class to tell us if an exercise performed by one child is correct or not. We go through the same procedure as we do for self-evaluation. It is interesting to notice that the children develop a great deal of objectivity, and are even willing to recognize that a child who has more body limitations than another can be considered as being a "right," even though his performance did not match the other "rights." We work at this second stage, namely that of evaluating others, only after the first part is thoroughly comprehended.

At this point, the teacher must exert great caution and engage in the utmost supervision. It must be remembered that the purpose in evaluating another person is that of developing keen observational faculties. Friendship plays no part in this exercise. An *observer* labeled a "wrong" for trying to be sympathetic with a special friend, or perhaps overly severe in a reverse relationship, recognizes consequently the meaning of what we are trying to establish. In many instances, an observer who pinpoints a fallacy in another child's exercise, may recognize that he, too, has the same problem. A great deal is accomplished here by allowing both children to work out their difficulties together.

The possibilities in this method of instruction seem endless, even in other fields of education. We suspect, of course, that it may be easier to develop the skill of self-evaluation in the dance—a body

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are often listed as important outcomes, without careful measurement.

The work on creativity (Torrance, 1962) offers leads into the problem of the measurement of formerly vague and ambiguous terms. The first step is still definition. In the case of careful research, these definitions must be operational. They must be capable of being used by various researchers in reliable ways. Clear-cut evaluation requires operational definitions of personality variables such as motivation, self-concept, interest, social adjustment, mental health. When this has been accomplished we will be able to shift from making either vague claims for the success of programs or the virtual neglect of their measurement. We will probably find these terms too huge, or useful only as broad constructs, and will substitute sub-variables for them. This has already occurred with the term "mental health." We will also explore the relationships among these variables, academic achievement, and the teaching-learning process.

We may end up with our old slogan: each child learns in his own fashion, and no single approach is best. If we do, it will be with an added power: we will have developed the tools to assess what programs work for which children, and why.

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Self-Evaluation

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activity. Here, effort and accomplishment are quite apparent. The "feel" of the muscles when a movement is performed, the appearance of the body (even to the extent of looking in the mirror) that accompanies the control of those muscles, all tend to give the student an instantaneous recognition of effort and accomplishment. What is more, the teacher, too, is aware of his achievements and evaluations at the same time. The possibilities of introducing advanced work prematurely are less likely in such circumstances than in those situations in which communication of results is not as readily apparent.

It seems to me that it is important for educators to note clearly the difference between self-evaluation and grading. The former is a learning process, the latter a competitive placement. I hold no brief against competition. In its place, it is a great stimulus for one to work harder, to increase even further his performance. I would like to make clear that a competitive drive without the ability to evaluate one's own accomplishments may become a frustrating experience. The "naturals" sense all this themselves and proceed to greater and greater heights. It is the larger proportion of eager and conscientious individuals, geared to a routined set of directions, who must be taught how to move or think creatively, and then how to evaluate their learning. In essence, it is a consciousness, rather than a "self-consciousness," of one's self. I maintain that self-evaluation is not an art or a skill inherent in all of us, but is a method of study which must be taught in all the early stages of education.

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