

## Learning Center ... Catalyst for Change?

EARLIER this year, in a report of an independent study program which is in progress at the University of Chicago Laboratory High School, I made the statement:

In a school which contains vast college-library resources, language laboratories, a highly intelligent, motivated student body, as well as a genuinely competent faculty, there is every likelihood that broader and deeper learnings might be accomplished if the students have wide opportunities to use fully all of these resources. Furthermore, it is suspected that other learnings can be accomplished when the student pursues knowledge in this broader context.<sup>1</sup>

This statement was based on preliminary findings from our experiment which seemed to indicate that students, when given opportunities to order a major share of their learning activities will: (a) learn as much in each subject as will students using regular class meeting arrangements; (b) make much greater use of independent study centers; (c) grow in their ability to think critically and to define and solve problems; and (d) reorder their conceptions about the role of the

teacher and the purposes of the school to the extent that they will accept more responsibility for their learnings.

The question has now been raised: "If every school were to inherit a modern up to date center for learning, equivalent to a composite of all that has been conceived about such centers to date,<sup>2</sup> how would the existence of such center affect the program of the school and the activities of the teachers and the students?"

If inheritance was all that took place, I predict that little or nothing educationally exciting would occur. It is true that excellent facilities *may* contribute to improvement in the educational program of a school, but I contend that the mere availability of these facilities does not predetermine change or growth.

Our extensive University High School library<sup>3</sup> was available for two years before the freshman program was conceived. Without it, our efforts to initiate independent study activities would have been seriously curtailed. But, as a result of this program, we now recognize that

<sup>1</sup> Educational Facilities Laboratory. "The School Library." New York, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Blanche Janecek. "New University of Chicago Laboratory School Library." *A. L. A. Bulletin* 55:132-33; February 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Willard J. Congreve. "Toward Independent Study." *North Central Association Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, Spring 1963.

even our library is woefully inadequate. It must be extended to include all learning media and be expanded to accommodate two or three times as many students in independent or small group study sessions.

### Teachers Welcome Change

We believe that the teacher is the most powerful force behind improved educational change in a school. Teachers can and want to move ahead. If teachers are given the opportunity to become intensely involved in planning a learning environment for their school, and if, in so doing, they are permitted to come to grips with some of the major problems facing education (e.g., individualizing instruction, developing the interdependent, creative, open-minded citizen), and if they are supported by a school administration, a school board and a community which recognize that it is possible to improve schools beyond what they in previous generations experienced, then centers for learning can play an essential role in reconstructing education.

Let me now assume that teachers in each school do work together to develop a learning environment, one aspect of which is the elaborate *center for learning*. In defining this environment, the teachers develop opportunities which enable each student to proceed according to his needs, interests and abilities, allow the student to make choices about his learning, and stimulate him to assume responsibility for his own development.

Furthermore, let us assume that this environment is scholar oriented. Students are not spoon fed. Rather, problem solving and student investigations are the

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techniques used for most learning. Students are required to seek out sources of information, to develop problems, state hypotheses, collect data and come to conclusions much on their own. Right and wrong are seen as relative terms rather than absolutes, and students are encouraged, even required, to defend conclusions based upon data which they have collected, even though their conclusions conflict with the notions held by the teacher.

### Students on Their Own

Now, under these circumstances, the fully equipped center for learning becomes essential. Under guidance, students structure their own learning problems and then proceed to seek information on their own. Some use books, because their reading speed and comprehension permit them to delve into even the most complicated writings. Some are fluent enough in a foreign language to use original foreign sources. Other students are drawn to the technical audio-visual aids. They learn more quickly from demonstrations, and supplement these experiences by using books. Some students use programmed learning facilities, others resort to the study of mathematical, scientific, geographic or historical models. In using this vast body of resources, the student not only learns, but in addition, he learns about the many ways of learning. And, even more significant, he learns those ways of learning which are best for him.

The teacher no longer spends his entire day teaching groups. Instead, he participates in a wide variety of activities. He gives lectures on the structure of the knowledge, the manner of the thought processes involved, and the kinds of problems which, when investigated, will

open up to the student concepts and understandings vital to his development. He also meets with small groups and with individuals, helping students to reflect upon their growth and to evaluate their learning progress. He has time to react to questions raised by students, helping them to focus their inquiries and to increase their perceptions.

The teacher also has time to locate and to develop materials which should be included in the center for learning. He prepares large group demonstrations in detail which are then photographed, recorded and made a permanent part of the center's resources.

### A Flexible Institution

To capture the full impact of the potential of this type of "environment for learning," one must detach himself from much which is considered traditional (and to some, essential) to the secondary school program. As I see it, effective use of a center for learning cannot be attained unless the custodial function of the school is abolished. The school must become a flexible institution, where students can come and go, an institution which encourages students to use the many other educative agencies at times when these are most important to their learning.

With the elimination of the custodial responsibility, class groups will be convened with full regard for function, not simply for student control. Together, students and teachers will determine the nature of the group activity and who will profit from participation. Large blocks of time will be provided for independent work in the learning center. The teacher will alter the size of the groups, he will provide individual help, consultation and evaluation periods with-

out a sense of guilt or by giving other students busy work to keep them out of mischief.

Abolition of required daily class meetings does not mean abandonment of society's concern for the educational development of its youth. But educational development no longer will be measured by the number of classes attended, courses completed or information regurgitated on examinations. Instead, growth will be determined by evaluating learning progress. Attendance will be required only of those students who cannot progress under the independent structure. But the attendance requirements will be based solely upon the student's need for the school's activities rather than upon a concept of required attendance regardless of educational need.

### The Entire School

With such freedom and flexibility, the *entire school* becomes the center for learning. Students will be found working on experiments in the science labs. Not each student going through the same exercise as the next, but rather each student exploring his own problem, collecting data on his hypotheses, arriving at his own conclusions. Writing laboratories, social studies laboratories, and mathematics laboratories will be added to the already existing science and language labs. The opportunity for independent, creative learning, which for so long has been recognized as important in the arts, will become essential in all areas. As students discuss their techniques and findings among themselves, they will discover one of the basic notions of interdependence, i.e., how much can be learned from each other.

The predetermined curriculum, with

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specifically educated for the purposes of the seminar, or it may require the services of several staff members working closely together. In any event, such an approach deserves examination.

It may well be that the conception of general education advocated here poses more problems and raises more questions than it answers or solves. However, this conception may have in it the key for bringing about a unity of purpose and focus in our educational experience and a continuity greatly to be desired. It may lead to an educational program that bears some relation to purpose and philosophy, and it may lead to procedures that derive from research investigations, and to patterns of curricular organization not yet devised. There could be many worthwhile consequences growing out of a sincere effort to consider education as a continuous individual process, such as the abolition of grade levels and the elimination of marks as we have known them. Certainly any effort that attempts true individualization within a conceptual framework of general education as a unifying force will inevitably result in change, hopefully for the better.

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specific units, concepts to be covered, learning opportunities and group examinations all spelled out, will become obsolete. Teachers will become catalytic co-learners, not directors of learning or trainers. To be sure, teachers will still guide, assist, enlarge and evaluate, but they will engage in the tremendously important function of helping the student *open for himself* the great vistas of understanding. When some students advance beyond the teacher's knowledge in certain aspects of a discipline, such ac-

complishment will be rewarded by the teacher rather than treated with suspicion and insecurity.

#### What Are the Steps?

By now, perhaps, the reader is convinced that I have lost contact with reality. To be sure I have been reflecting upon what I see to be long-range possibilities. I have not attempted to spell out the steps by which we shall reach these goals. Each school and each community may approach them by different routes. Moreover, each and every step will require careful planning; many will require changes in the hearts and minds of the people involved.

But, returning to the utterly practical, we do know, from our freshman program, that many 13- and 14-year-old youngsters can order their own learning and love to do it! Furthermore, interest and ability to do this seems *not* to be related to intelligence. We also know that teachers will become interested in and excitingly creative about new possibilities. They will create change. They will work hard to get students into effective learning groups. They will organize schedules to meet the needs of different students. They will also accept the challenge of new evaluation procedures. But they need the confidence of the administration and the parents to do this.

What can be the outcome in each school, should centers for learning suddenly become available? It is unlikely that any school will change simply in response to the creation of the center. Rather, progress will depend upon the educational leadership of the school and the community. But, with vision, persistence and creative hard work, the center for learning could become the catalyst to an educational revolution.

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