

The need for

A New Conception of General Education

IN AN era when astronauts can streak numerous times around the earth in a few hours, the question, "What is general education?" has special relevance. Also this question may need new answers. Does general education encompass an understanding of the many technical terms associated with space exploration? Does general education involve a knowledge of the scientific principles underlying space travel? Does general education include the wisdom to examine the moral question of man's right to explore the universe? Or does it involve all three—and more?

How does one determine that education which is essential for all in an era when knowledge is far outstripping man's feeble efforts to grasp it? What distinguishes the general from the special in an age in which the highly technical is becoming the common language of children and youth? Can there be such a thing as general education when knowledge itself is becoming so complex and specialized?

These and similar questions require a reexamination of the common conception of general education, if we are to improve the education of tomorrow's citizens who are pupils in today's schools.

The traditional concept of general education refers to that part of a student's education primarily concerned with his life as a human being and as a citizen. It is intended to deal with that knowledge, those understandings and values, and those skills needed by all to function as individuals and as members of the society of man. According to this conception, specialized education is concerned with providing him an occupation or profession by which he can be a productive participant in that society.

In practice, the distinction between general and specialized education has been thought of primarily in content terms. As a result, we face continuing problems of determining what content is of worth for all and what is of value for occupational development. There is much overlap in such a view, since the various fields of inquiry have in them both general education aspects and specialized aspects. Also, the problem of time arises, in terms of the need to decide when the shift of emphasis should be made from the focus on general, common, integrating education (usually

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thought of as the province of our elementary schools) to a major focus on the specialized education that will differentiate the banker from the physician, the electrician from the printer, the journalist from the musician.

A restatement of a conception of general and specialized education may help to clarify and perhaps to alleviate these problems. Suggested here is a series of propositions which may serve as a framework for a formulation of general education.

Proposition 1: *The concept of general education must be broadened.*

In the space age, those learnings needed by everyone must encompass a far wider scope than heretofore. Four examples will suffice to illustrate the need.

First there is the area of foreign languages. For more and more people in the United States familiarity with a second or possibly third language is becoming important; for our country it may become essential. According to our usual conception of general education, where is the place of foreign language?

A second example is the obvious one of scientific literacy. Scientific understandings beyond the simplicities and generalities of earlier times require serious scientific study of a continuing nature as part of general education.

A third area of understanding is that of economic competence, not the competence of consumer education and budgeting alone, but competence in the complexities of foreign trade, taxation, national debt and budget, and the like. It is not too much to ask the citizen who votes for our lawmakers to have some elementary understanding of those very issues upon which the legislators make decisions of wide and far-reaching significance.

Finally, there is education for effective, constructive and satisfying use of time, an area of general education currently unduly neglected. The three-day weekend is upon us. How the time is to be spent should be the concern of general education as it attempts to provide the student with resources for satisfying expenditure of time.

Proposition 2: *Education for the good and effective life in an ever-changing society must encompass a longer period of time than hitherto accorded to it.*

The traditional view of general education relegated it to the elementary school with gradually decreasing allocation of time through the junior high school years into the high school, which has been considered the locus of differentiated education attuned to future goals and ambitions. Such time limitations are now, however, unrealistic. In six or eight years we cannot hope to develop the citizen-individual ready to take his place as a mature member of his local, national, and world communities. Young people who drop out of school at age 15 or 16 are obviously unprepared to meet their personal-social-civic-economic responsibilities.

Similarly, it is doubtful whether those students who at age 14 or 15 decide upon careers in the business, professional, and laboring world are sufficiently prepared for life as literate human beings and citizens.

Some way must be found for conceiving general education as the province of both elementary and secondary education, while at the same time recognizing and providing for those differences in aptitude, interest, abilities, and aims that mark our student population. The next two propositions attempt to clarify this idea.

Proposition 3: *General education must be thought of not in terms of specific content, skills and understandings to be taught to all students over a specified time in the educational structure but in terms of purposes and processes that permeate the educational organization.*

In any effort at a definition of general education one should start with the question "What purposes are for the common good and what processes are needed by all?" These, then, should become the central core of general education to be achieved through varying means, media and methods which then become the specialized, differentiated facets of the instructional program.

To illustrate, the purpose of general education is the development of the citizen and of the integrated, self-directive individual. In more specific terms it is concerned with the development of man in all his manifestations—the scientific man, the social man, the discriminating man, the private man; indeed, the thinking man. It is concerned with his familiarity with his environment, with his humaneness and human-ness, with his self-understanding and sense of integrity, with his wholesomeness and his wholeness, with the universality of his perceptions, motives, sympathies, with the wisdom by which he recognizes competence or quackery in the vast array of specialists who surround him.

To state purposes in a different form, we might speak of developing the open mind, the considered judgment, the reasoned way of thinking. Or purpose might be thought of as the ability to live in a changing world where the only constancy is change itself.

Along with purposes, general education must be thought of as involving *processes* essential to effective existence. A spirit and method of inquiry can be

considered a process which guides learning and action. The method of inquiry may vary from situations involving discovery of scientific principles to situations involving analysis of historical data to situations involving matters requiring practical solution.

The process of critical judgment, while similar to a method of inquiry, adds the dimensions of value and discrimination. The citizen-individual needs to be able to judge that which is appropriate to a given situation, the person best qualified for particular responsibilities, the lasting qualities of a musical composition or work of art as compared to the transitory and superficial nature of the majority of so-called creative endeavors. It is this ability to discriminate the good from the less good, the transitory from the lasting, the beautiful from the ugly that Canon Bell called intelligence itself.

A third process is essential for effective living in our time. I should like to call it the continuing quest. Somehow we must imbue our students with the spirit of continuous growth and development, the spirit of searching and questioning, along with the means to do so. We must provide them with the tools for lifelong learning, the skills of seeking and understanding information, the ability to abstract that which is important and relevant from a mass of unsorted detail. More importantly we can and should provide them with the means by which they can raise questions, formulate hypotheses, seek right directions.

Proposition 4: *Specialized education must be thought of within the framework of general education, not following it in the organizational scheme of our curriculum. Specialized education must be conceived as the individualization of content and method needed to make liberally educated citizen-individuals out*

of a disparate, varied, heterogeneous aggregation of children and youth assembled in any given school.

Such a proposition is not an argument for tracking or any of the varieties of ability grouping now prevalent. Rather it is meant to suggest that throughout the elementary and secondary school programs ways must be found to individualize content and method in order to achieve the purposes and processes at the center of general education.

To illustrate, for some adolescents, becoming thinking men may best be accomplished by solving problems of automotive mechanics while for their fellow students this may best be brought about through solving problems of ionization in the science laboratory. Both are learning skills of critical thinking and problem-solving methodology.

If we look upon the student studying crafts or music or journalism as being engaged in one of the functions of general education; namely, acquiring some means by which to enrich and enhance his use of leisure time, we shall then see that whether he studies art, music or writing is a matter of individualization. Whether he pursues the study into an occupational or professional use is largely irrelevant to our discussion. If our approach is a truly individualized one, the student will be encouraged and guided to explore his full potential in any and all areas. One student in first year journalism may find that he has exhausted his own resources and interests in that field. Another may find himself inspired and equipped to pursue further study of it.

I have deliberately used the word "individualized" rather than "specialized." The term "individualized education" is a more accurate usage than "specialized education." In our efforts to provide edu-

cative opportunities for the youth of mechanical bent, or clerical or scientific or literary, we have really been attempting to provide education appropriate to that individual. If we think of these efforts as individualized education, we can then bypass the dilemma posed by the time factor. Individualized education is contiguous to general education and proceeds as an integral part of it, while the traditional conception of specialized education is of something that comes along at a more or less specified time following a groundwork in general education.

These, then, are the four propositions which may guide us in thinking through a new construct of general education. It follows from these points that general education must pervade and permeate the instructional program; that it involves individualization of instruction throughout the school program; and that some way must be found to fuse the myriad aspects of education into coherence, consistency and balance.

What are effective ways of implementing these ideas? I believe that any curriculum design for the future must include some provision for unifying and integrating the total educative experience of the learner. In my opinion, consideration must be given to the inclusion of some kind of continuous, coordinating seminar type of experience, or core, for the purpose of integrating and clarifying the various experiences of the student and of relating these to the contemporary world experience of which he is a part. This seminar should also have the responsibility for guiding the individual's personal-social growth and development. How such a seminar would be staffed requires, of course, careful thought. Such a seminar may necessitate the development of a different kind of instructor,

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.

Learning Center—Congreve

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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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