

The Place of Affective Learning

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I WAS pleased to be invited to write this editorial because the topic for this month is of the utmost importance. It could well come about that this is one of the most important issues in the history of this publication.

The reason for this statement is that it has now become abundantly clear, from research and from reason, that *how a person feels is more important than what he knows*. This seems true because how one feels controls behavior, while what one knows does not. What one knows is used in behavior, to be sure, but the way it is used depends upon positive or negative feelings. It is possible to be a saint or a demon with similar knowledge. History furnishes ample illustrations of knowledge being put to evil uses. The Nazis who slaughtered six million innocent people knew too much but felt too little.

We in education are slowly waking up to the fact that feelings are really important. This can be seen in educational literature. There is much discussion of the self-concept, the self-image, and of the fact that if one thinks too little of himself he becomes immobile and unable to learn. In fact, the person who has come to hate himself and others does not take in much subject matter.

All of this causes us to take another look at subject matter and its uses. None of the above is to imply that what one knows is not important. One's proper

subject matter is the universe around him, and without some comprehension of that universe and his relation to it, he could not know how to deal with it, no matter how he felt.

Subject matter and feeling are so closely intertwined that they can no longer be considered a duality. Everyone who learns something has some feeling about it, and so, as in so many other areas, they are inseparable. No matter what we do, affective learning goes on anyway. When this affective learning is positive, the learner becomes constructive in his behavior.

We need to reconsider our ideas and attitudes toward subject matter itself. It has long been considered an end in itself. If the learner came through in possession of a large store of subject matter, we have said he is "good." If the subject matter was something the learner could not or would not store, and be able to prove that he had stored it, he has been considered "bad," or at least a failure.

We ought to be able to reconsider the role of subject matter in the education of our young without being accused of not valuing subject matter. It is not a question of reducing the importance of what is learned, but of seeing the relationship between accumulated information and the unique learner. I have on occasion been charged with not wanting learners to learn anything, but only to feel good. This is not true. One of my

basic criticisms of the traditional school is that those in attendance do not learn nearly enough. We have reared a generation of people who have been schooled but not educated.

The main reason for this outcome is that with our rigorous subject matter approach we have closed personalities when we should have been opening them. We have used fear and anxiety as motivating devices, and this has repelled the learner when we should have been attracting him. When the learner has not, because of these destructive feelings, learned what we adults purpose him to learn, we have had to resort to coercion of one form or another. Coercion sets in motion a whole cycle of negative affects, often resulting in open hostility and rejection on the part of both learner and teacher. Many such learners are then headed toward the human scrap-heap—the rejects known as drop-outs, the educationally disinherited, who in most cases will be unable to cope with the society of the future. It is from this human scrap-heap that most of our delinquent and mentally ill are drawn.

The basic error in most of our curriculum work is that we start with the materials, which are the tools of education, not the product. We choose our tools first, and then look around to see what we are going to do with them. These materials are usually chosen without regard to the individual differences among the learners, often without regard to the culture of the community where the school is located. Curriculum building is the only operation I know about where the tool is chosen before what is to be built is known or decided upon.

We have for so long chosen the curriculum with little regard for the feelings of the learner that we are of course un-

skilled in planning curriculum with affect in mind. When new understandings show us that how a person feels is more important than what he knows, our old assumptions and procedures will no longer suffice. We are faced with a requirement to learn new methods of using materials. If we had spent as much time in considering the feelings of the learner as we have in choosing and presenting information, we would by now know how to go about it.

We cannot say that, although planning curriculum with affective learning in mind is a clear necessity, we do not know how to do it, and so we will continue to ignore it. Since such planning is a requirement, we will have to learn how to do it, just as any other workman must do when his past methods have become obsolete.

Getting Started

I cannot of course tell others how to do this. Each school system and each individual teacher must solve this problem in his own way, taking into account his own resources, the nature of his unique learners and the community in which he works. I can, however, make a few general suggestions, which may provide a way of getting started.

Many schools have committees which work on curriculum. Every school needs some organization of this sort. A school cannot in these changing times continue to operate well without somebody examining what is being done, and what ought to be done in the light of new evidence and new conditions. Even in a factory someone has to spend some of his time in planning.

I would like to see such a committee not address itself to the material first, since this had been done many times. I

would like the committee members to ask themselves a new set of questions.

How can we secure commitment to the learning task on the part of our learners? *Educational Leadership* had a whole issue on commitment recently, and some articles on the topic even splashed over into another issue. I know of no way to get anybody committed to any task anywhere without consultation and some choice. This raises another question.

What are the ways of bringing about consultation and some choice with the learner? In other words, how go about teacher-pupil planning, so that what is to be done makes some sense to the learner? There is a rich supply of literature in this field.

How can we take advantage of the learner's uniqueness, rather than considering it a handicap?

How can we give the academically gifted a chance to use his ability without depriving him of many of his peers? In our own form of segregation, the gifted are actually deprived.

How can we make available to the learner his proper subject matter, which is not alone held in a book but consists of the whole world around him?

What shall we do about marks? Do they on the whole bring about more negative than positive feeling?

What are our devices for rejection, and how may they be reduced?

These are only a few of the questions which might be raised. Any committee sensitive to the feelings of learners will find more. Eventually, after all of these questions are effectively dealt with, the committee will finally come to this one: What materials shall we use, and how shall we use them?

I have a strong belief that every learner should feel better, more able to

cope with unknown vicissitudes, more courageous at the end of a class than he did at the opening. If he feels worse, less able and less courageous, then the class has damaged him, rather than helped him. If this is oft repeated then he is on his way to the human scrapheap.

I further strongly believe that if a teacher behaves in such a way as to open selves, open personalities, and then has something around for people to learn, they will learn. And this learning will be greater in quantity and in usefulness than would be the case if learners are driven to close themselves. We cannot open selves and render them receptive if we start our classes with threats.

The future must appear promising, not threatening, if learners are to come toward the teacher rather than retreat from him. The learner must have confidence in the teacher, feel that there is no double-cross in prospect, before he can open up. This confidence is not conveyed alone by what we say but mostly by our behavior.

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