

SELF-INITIATED INTERESTS?

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"DO teachers know that? . . . Why don't they practice it?" This was the reaction of a bright, senior boy to an explanation of a diagram of certain processes as goal-seeking behavior. The diagram showed the learner striving to overcome obstacles in order to reach his goal. The boy had the highest group IQ score in a large suburban high school.

"I think they usually do, Jim," the teacher replied. "What do you mean, 'Why don't they practice it?'"

"Well, when they want us to do something—like listen to something they read, why don't they tell us *why* we should listen?"

Perhaps not infrequently Jim's question goes unasked, even unformulated, in many high school classes. Many students, not knowing how the things they are told to do in class relate to their interests and desires, care little about the tasks set for them. Some of these students become sullen, some misbehave, some, like Jim, are even "kicked out" of some of their classes at least once.

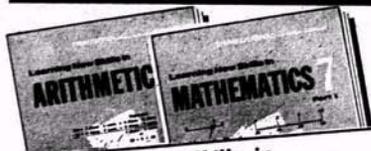
The first day of the "psychology for living" class, Jim, upon entering, had

thrown a pencil across the room to another student. The teacher said nothing. Later in the course Jim told the teacher that he had expected her to reprimand him for throwing the pencil. He had been surprised when she did not. Jim became quite interested in the work of the semester course in psychology. Upon graduating from high school he celebrated his freedom by joining the Marines.

Does Jim's experience suggest anything about what happens to student interests in high school? Often student interests are ignored or, at least, not dealt with overtly.

Ignoring student interests works reasonably well, it appears, for those students who have accepted going to college as a goal. The college-bound students frequently assume that teachers know what the students need to know to be admitted to and to succeed in college, or, at least, they accept most high school work as barriers to be overcome to reach their goal of college admission. These students may find that some of their high school work appeals to their present interests or they find

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outlets for their interests in extracurricular activities.

However, for the student who has not accepted college as a goal, the lack of apparent relationship between his interests and much high school work makes many school requirements mere interferences with the activities that he wants to engage in to satisfy his own interests, unless he has some vocational goal and finds courses that appear to help him toward his goal.

For students who have neither college nor vocational goals, much of their high school work appears to be irrelevant. This sometimes leads to a rejection of the school so that these students do not even attempt to find satisfaction of their interests in the school's extracurricular activities.

Some of these students see the school as an institution in which teachers try

to make the pupils do what the teachers want. Occasionally this leads to the student's testing the teacher to see how far he will go in trying to impose his will upon the student. Jim was surprised when the teacher declined to make an issue of the pencil throwing. It appears that he thought this teacher was different. He became interested in the work of the class and did not become a disruptive influence.

Evidently some students' main observable interest in high school classes is testing the teacher's authority. In one sophomore class the teacher started to hand a boy a supplementary book. The boy commented, "I don't want one."

The teacher replied, "You don't have to have one," and took the book back.

"I'll take one," said the boy.

When the teacher does not satisfy the student's interest in testing whether the teacher will impose his authority, the student may find some other interest that can be satisfied in the class.

What Can Be Done?

Goals of the learning activities can be made clear to students. Some teachers do take the time at the beginning of a course to tell the students what the goals of the course are. Other teachers find it effective to ask the students what they expect to accomplish by their study of the course. Of course, some student answers are disturbing: "I just want to graduate and U.S. history is required."

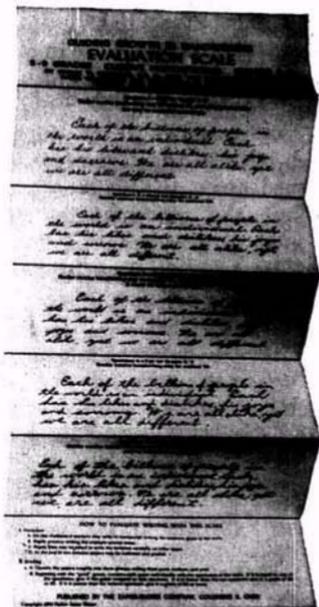
Instead of rejecting this as an insolent comment, a teacher might ask, "Why do you suppose that this course is required?" In the give and take of the ensuing discussion some students may begin to see that the course has something to offer them. At least they find

out that the teacher has some objectives that are broader than giving them daily lessons.

Some teachers use a discussion of goals of the course as an opportunity to help students to see the relationship between their goals and the learning activities. As they elicit student comments about their purposes, they accept and clarify the student ideas, whether or not the teacher agrees with them. Thus they help the students to understand more clearly what the students' goals are and to explore possible consequences of their goals. The student who says, "I hate school," may, at least, be helped to see that if he rejects all school activities the teacher may have to control his actions to prevent disruption of learning for other students.

Unfortunately, some teachers think that they are helping students to understand and accept the goals of the class work when they say, "Pay attention to these problems. Algebra is very important. You will use it all your life." If this is true, and the teacher wants to help the students to see the importance of the subject, exhortation is less effective than showing the students how algebra could be used in their daily activities now or in the future.

By accepting and clarifying expressions of students' interests, the teacher helps them to organize their interests for productive learning activity. He guides students' thinking by clarifying those ideas that are most likely to be productive. However, those student ideas which do not seem useful for clarification provide information for the teacher on what is likely to succeed with particular students. The teacher may find it necessary to revise his plans if



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student comments indicate that he is not able to help them to understand and accept the goals that he has in mind.

"Getting Back to the Story"

In an average level sophomore English class in which the teacher was concerned about the inattentiveness of many of the students, the teacher conducted a discussion of "A Good Clean-Cut American Boy." Part of the discussion went as follows:

Tom: Kids are dirty when they are nine, but a sixteen year old wouldn't be as dirty as the boy in the story.

Teacher: I don't know that I agree.

Bill: His father was too critical of him. He should have bought him new shoes instead of criticizing him for wearing two-toned shoes.

Teacher: All right. In the story we saw the problems that developed when the boy married.

Ron: My parents worry too much about me too. They're always telling me not to drink.

Teacher: Mary?

Mary: What is so terrible about getting married?

Teacher: He is too young.

Mary: A sophomore in college ought to be old enough to get married.

John: Yes, lots of people are married by nineteen.

Teacher: Getting back to the story. In this story we have seen the central character grow up.

Bob: I said the kid never grew up.

Teacher: Will you please turn to page 172 to read the next story?

In this instance several students indicated by their comments that they were, in their own way, applying ideas from the story to their own lives, but the teacher ignored or rejected every student's attempt to relate the story to

his own interests. Fortunately many teachers do seize on such expressions of student interests. They do not accept or develop every student idea, but enough of them are accepted to help the students see that the study of the subject is related to their own interests. It is not surprising that the teacher in this instance had some difficulty with control of the class.

Some teachers have found it helpful to listen to a tape recording of their teaching or to have an observer tally their comments to see what they do with most student ideas. One teacher could not believe it when an observer told him that he talked over 80 percent of the time when he thought he was leading a discussion. After two more observations, however, the teacher decided to try changing his teaching style. He determined to de-emphasize lecturing to his English classes and to stress development of student ideas instead. He is now much more pleased with the results in his classes.

Teachers who have modified their behavior to use an inductive approach to teaching language report that students become much more interested in the study of English. Teaching inductively requires a change in the teacher's role from that of primarily giving information to stimulating student thought and helping students to express themselves effectively by encouraging them to talk about the subject and accepting or clarifying their own ideas.

There is a need for research at the high school level to determine whether taking time from the teacher's presentation of the subject for the development of student interests would affect the student's learning of the subject. It

seems that such a change might increase achievement in the subject or/ at least facilitate the attainment of greater student interest in the subject and greater self-direction in learning.

Student Interests

The more obvious means of providing for student self-initiated interests are mentioned last because these, although important, are not as vital as what happens in the day-to-day classroom activities. Elective courses, seminars, independent study, and extracurricular activities, while significant means of providing for the development of student self-initiated ideas, do not generally affect as many students for as much time as what happens in the typical classroom from day to day.

The extracurriculum has long been an avenue for students to explore self-initiated interests. Many schools offer an increasing variety of clubs and activities providing for the development of such interests.

Fortunately, however, the idea that extracurricular activities provide adequately for the development of student-initiated interests does not appear to be very widespread. The recognition that the development of student-initiated interests is a legitimate part of the school curriculum is seen in the expansion of independent study programs.

Some independent study programs provide an opportunity for the student to set goals for himself. When the student sets his own goals, rather than doing work assigned by a teacher, he has a greater opportunity to develop his own interests. Other schools are

using seminars in which the student may have an opportunity to determine for himself an area of study which he pursues rather independently.

Another facet of developing student interests is shown in an approach to grouping for instruction. At Homewood-Flossmoor High School, for example, students are allowed to choose the level of the course that they want to take. In most required subjects there are four levels: basic, intermediate, advanced, and honors.

The counselor helps the student to decide on the level of course that he will take in each subject but it is the student's decision that is final. In some respects this is grouping by level of aspiration. This gives the student an opportunity to choose a more demanding level of work in courses that are in the areas of his special interests, and, if he wishes, he may take less demanding work in other areas. This may provide him with more time to develop his own interests.

If a primary goal of the secondary school is increasing the individual's responsibility for his own actions and increasing his self direction toward worthwhile goals, then the daily activities of the student in the secondary school should contribute to this goal. If the goals of most learning activities are imposed upon students, we cannot expect students to assume much responsibility for their own behavior. To help students to become responsible for their own actions we must stimulate the development of their self-initiated interests and help them to see clearly worthwhile goals that are acceptable to them.

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