

The Community as a Learning Laboratory

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THE community is where the action is! Communities are rich with institutions of our culture, modes of living, ideas, issues, resources, the real people, places, and things—the good and the bad. This is the world of the child, the not yet adult, the young and the old. This is the world of the social-industrial state, the teetering political institutions—small towns and urban areas, areas of overpopulation, the scene for war protesters . . . the stage for individual and cultural revolutions. This is the most vibrant *teaching-learning laboratory* to be found!

This is the laboratory which can help to bridge the gap between *what we know* and *what we do* in education. Utilizing the community and its resources expands the notion of the classroom to include the entire world of the child. This expansion or redefinition of the classroom draws upon the real world for examples in the learning process.

A Community Laboratory

One such example of an effort to utilize the community as a learning laboratory is an ESEA Title III project—"The Three Dimensional Project"—in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. Born of the conviction that reform movements need more than critics, this project is developing a model for preparing teachers to utilize their community as a laboratory. Participating teachers from a dozen school districts are working with the

project staff in the design of curriculum which focuses on vital social issues. Inquiry into these problems takes place within the community-laboratory.

Using Old Sturbridge Village, an outdoor museum (which is a re-creation of an early 19th century New England community), teachers and students examine: the communication process, the role of the family, morality, government, and authority, comparing and contrasting the 19th and 20th centuries. An in-depth study of these issues provides a historical perspective giving new insights to what might have passed as a problem unique to the 1970's. Teachers and students are experiencing the problems of scholarly researchers in search of answers to pervasive social problems. The community and its primary resources—people, town reports, diaries, account books, gazetteers, town records, archive maps, topographical and road maps—are the text for the course. While gathering data in search of a solution to their problems, students utilize cameras, tape recorders, gravestone rubbing, and sketching, as methods of recording.

The idea of using the community is not a new one. The concept of the real world, as a source of learning, can be traced to the very beginning of public education surfacing again during the progressive movement.

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Programs of the past decade such as outdoor education, open-campus, work-study, school camps, independent study, Outward Bound, Inc., and the community school, while diverse in nature, all share a common characteristic in the use of the community as a laboratory.

Emergence of Ideas

In a sense, these programs are a response to the contemporary critic of education's call for relevance, a responsive environment, cultural pride, the examination of values, freedom, autonomy. While those who view themselves as the saviors of the educational process—the Paul Goodmans, the John Holts, the Rousseau philosophers—bask in the romantically perceived successes of the informal school, public education is not devoid of individuals capable of developing imaginative ways of meeting the educational needs of our students.

While these erudite pedagogical protesters, the experts of what cannot be done in the schools, spend their time citing the widespread failures of public education, there are those "giants" who are truly concerned with the teaching-learning process. Such persons are those truly concerned with the task of the teacher and the learner. They are not dreamers, nor mere mouthpieces of dissent, but rather the true reformers, suggesting alternatives, providing solutions, taking an analytical look at the realities of public education with a view toward reconstruction.

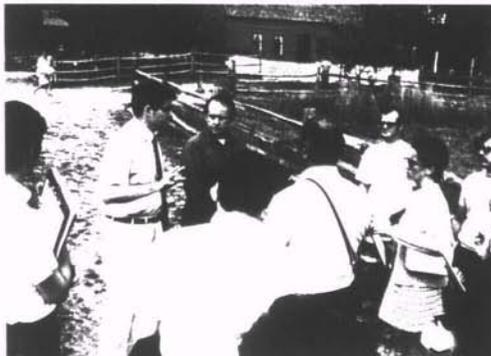


Teachers prepare a 19th century meal.

The seeds of the programs which expand the notion of the classroom can be traced to those of the Comenius "breed," the contemporary counterparts of Dewey—the Jerome Bruners, the Hilda Tabas, the Jean Piagets—who "put their money where their mouth is." These, the giants of today's education, are providing a process of learning, a theory of instruction, and programs based on such; they are offering the practitioner a way of coping with the multitude of problems inherent in any program which deals with the needs of students.

Implications for Education

A redefinition of the learning environment, this expansion of the classroom has an impact on every facet of the educational process. The teacher's role changes as he moves out into the community, for the tools of the trade are now obsolete. The classroom textbook has yet to be written which can



Project participants use Old Sturbridge Village to illuminate vital social issues.

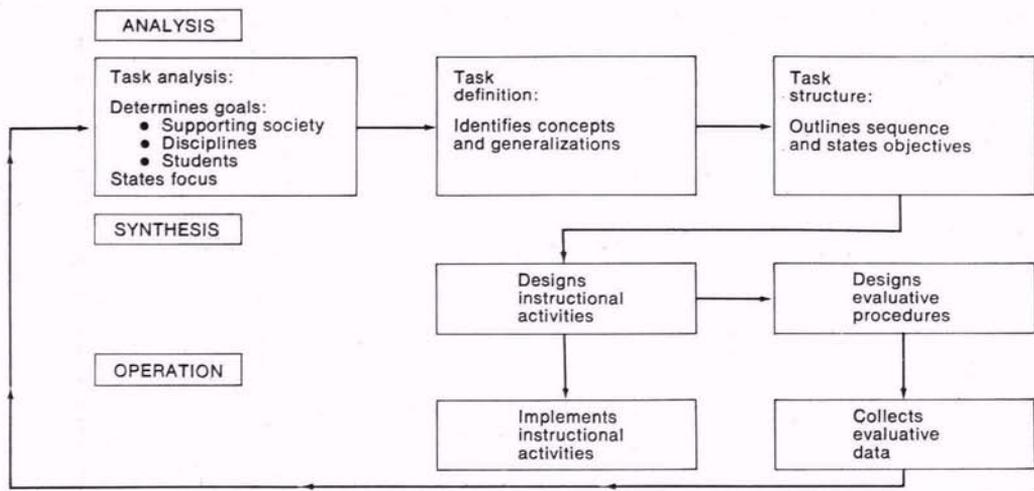


Figure 1. A Design for the Development of Community Models

provide the teacher with those resources needed to examine the community. The teacher becomes a *diagnostician* of students' needs, a *decision maker* in determining the direction and focus of study, a *curriculum developer* in the research and development of those materials necessary to this kind of inquiry, and an *evaluator* of the instructional process, the sequence of activities, and the cognitive growth of students. (Figure 1 diagrams the process of designing community models.) This new role requires training and time.



Sturbridge students test materials that use the community as a laboratory.

The impact of this "breaking down of walls" is felt by the community as citizens are drawn into the educational process. The school and society must learn to work together in the development of successful school programs.

Administrators must also become a part of this process if teachers are to receive the support necessary to withstand the controversy, the difficulty, that inevitably accompany the untried and untested.

The value of experimentation, the piloting of designs, and the gathering of feedback, for the revision of those parts which seem unworkable, should not be ignored. Educators must not become complaisant in their existing accomplishments and attempt to implement in wide scale the result of limited pilot studies, nor should they let their optimism and enthusiasm cloud the realities.

The implications of programs which attempt to restructure the teaching-learning environment are sure to touch on every paradox in education. Those programs which survive will be the ones that come to grips with the relationship of in-school and out-of-school reality dealing with individual growth in a context of common values, those which prepare a student to cope with society's norms as well as to change them. □

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