

Needs Assessment as a

CURRICULUM *management* and *needs assessment* are two terms which vividly reflect the adoption by educators of labor-production metaphors and slogans. Such terms appear, on the surface at least, to be useful to describe what we in education are all about. These terms also are indicative of the response by school people to the recent cries for accountability from institutions and the individuals who inhabit them.

It has become increasingly apparent that we are often eager to adopt not only the metaphor but also to accept the underlying assumptions and technologies of non-educative practices and theories. It is the purpose of this article to examine some of the premises which appear to underlie *needs assessment* as an educational technology and to discuss these premises in terms of the educational issues to which they are related.

Needs assessments may be likened to the World War II pinup posters of Grable, Bacall, and Turner—sexist as they were—in that they hide as they reveal but manage, under certain conditions, to be tantalizing. Also, like the photos, they have received much attention in the form of speculation, some might say fantasizing, about form, content, and usability.

In our search for release of tensions—I am now talking about the tensions produced by the call for us to account for the efficacy of our pedagogical actions in terms of some *good*—we have turned to what appears to be a reasonable proposition. That is, by stating goals of instruction and determining by some means whether the students in schools are able or not able to demonstrate facility with those goals, we can then design a curriculum which will zero in with deadly accuracy upon the acquisition of knowledge and skills which contribute to the goals.

Stated another way, the educational needs are determined by the distance of the student's present behavior from some desired behavior. When that distance is established we can then, so the argument goes, put the school's resources to bear upon reducing or eliminating the distance.

I would like to argue that such a mode of determining what a curriculum will be or should be rests upon at least three tricky premises—tricky in the sense that the issues raised in discussing them are usually ones that we ignore or toss off as being somehow “too theoretical” for our practice-oriented energies to deal with. In fairness, it should be noted that designers and advocates of needs assessments also consider certain



Concealing Technology

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problematic matters in some detail. These difficulties, however, are usually seen in relation to the operation of the strategy, technological in nature, rather than as fundamental concerns basic to the decision to adopt the technique. I would propose that the substituting of technology for open and public debate about vitally important matters is a morally dangerous one.

Premise 1: School is a purposeful institution and that purpose can best be articulated as the producing of desired changes in students' behavior.

There is a long tradition of acceptance of this notion, usually as dogma arising out of conventional wisdom. If Johnny can't read it is *obvious* that the school has failed because it has negated its reason for being; that is, reading is desired behavior and it is the school's socially-mandated job to produce a reading Johnny.

Schools as social institutions have accepted almost without question—though often at a non-self-conscious level of thought—the charge to somehow make over human beings into people who think, feel, and act with ease, appreciation, and efficiency. The school, in other words, is the stimulus which acts upon the child, who

responds in some fashion; and the character of the response indicates the success the school has achieved.

This notion is being challenged to a degree by those, students and others, who insist that it is *not* up to the school to be the active *initiating* agent in the process of changing people, but that the school's proper, more humane if you will, role is to respond to the student as stimulus and release the role of initiator to the student.

In this challenge is a basic reformulation of the premise so that it would read something like this: Individuals are purposeful by nature and are able in varying degrees to articulate their own lives so that the school can work *with* them toward making those lives more as the individuals want them to be.

Premise 2: Desired behaviors can be determined by educators.

The controversy over whether it is more important for the school to act upon learners from the point of view of the needs of society, the learner's "needs and interests," or the subject matter/discipline requirements

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of competence seems to me to have been an exercise in reasonably futile rhetoric. (This is not to argue against the conclusion that programs in schools tend to *reflect* a subject matter orientation.)

Evidence of the challenge to this premise can be found in the brouhaha surrounding what might be labeled the "call for relevance" from critics of schools, inside and outside the establishment. We are being told that it is not appreciated when *we* determine where the learner will find himself, in terms of his behavior, after a period of instruction.

Certainly we can formulate objectives until they are spewing from computers coast-to-coast with the ease of a river flowing to the sea. "But," part of our population tells us, "the objectives bear no relation to my world, my perceptions of it, my place in it, or my aspirations for it." And to those who claim that the plethora of statements of desired behaviors allows considerable choice, the response that the objectives offer a carefully controlled and limited world view can, I think, be defended.

Premise 3: *When it is determined that desired behaviors are not a part of the student's life, the school can alleviate or eliminate that condition through the formulation of a curriculum and an instructional program.*

This assumes that we, as a profession, have a well-filled and diversely compartmentalized bag of tricks. I would submit that we are not yet at this stage of diagnostic/prescriptive expertness. We have little evidence to support the view that one set of learning opportunities is more effective than another for producing certain outcomes, that one teaching strategy can be clearly demonstrated to be superior to another, that certain environmental factors are more effective in terms of student learning than some others, and, more important, that we can articulate with any clarity the reasons for making

selections among the curricular and instructional offerings that *are* available.

More critical to the acceptance or rejection of this premise, though, is the assumption that there is some logical and rational leap from objective to instructional offering. There is reason to suspect that the condition of our limited repertoire may rest upon our as yet underdeveloped ability to infer the appropriate instructional pattern and strategy for achieving the objective under consideration. It may be that such an ability is, after all, not at all possible to achieve and is a pedagogical sacred cow to be sacrificed upon the altar of professional humility.

The raising of these issues as they appear to me to relate to needs assessments is not meant to reject the technique *in toto*. As one who has labored in the disparate vineyards of theory and practice, public schools and private university, teacher associations and administrative bodies, I would hope that the deliberation which accompanies any curricular discourse would be consciously reflective of what that discourse tells us about our professional actions and the ideological stances basic to them.

When we decide to operate within a needs assessment technique to determine what shall be the nature of large segments of children's lives, are we aware of the boundaries and methodologies which will limit our moves and which will, to a large extent, shape our product? Do we examine with precision and intensity the assumptions and built-in controls upon which such a system depends? And, finally, can we defend with systematic clarity our decision to accept or reject the mode as a guide for our professional activities?

It is to be hoped that deliberation of this nature will widen our vision as well as help us to focus our energies toward a more considered conception of what schooling is and should be. □

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