Relevance in Innovation

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ALTHOUGH the concept of relevance has been applied to nearly every possible educational circumstance, it has not been significantly associated with innovation. It would appear that the two are mutually nonrelated, even though the very nature of relevance should, by definition, be practically synonymous with innovation. Indeed, the state of the art will be advanced only when educators become completely aware of the importance of associating relevance with innovation, to the extent that the two concepts are literally inseparable. As such, it is important to define and describe the criteria, the necessary conditions, and the essential components of relevant innovation in education.

Criteria of Relevant Innovation

Identification of Need. It should be demonstrated that the change has been introduced for the purpose of meeting specifically identified needs.

Improved Education. When implemented, it is expected that the change will result in improving the education of students, either directly or indirectly.

Exportability. The procedures and techniques are able to be exported and adapted to situations in other schools in order to solve similar problems and achieve similar solutions.

Some of the publicized innovative programs meet the first and second criteria, but very few, if any, can even come close to being in accord with *exportability.* Consequently, educators become unwittingly frustrated when they read and hear about the remarkable innovative models in other schools and then realize that their own situation, by contrast, appears to be sterile, hopeless, and impossible to change.

Although it may not serve as any consolation, it should be pointed out that the highly lauded model solutions to the problems in education have some highly nonviable characteristics which create serious obstacles to educators who wish to implement similar programs in their own schools. Among the most prevalent nonexportable and, consequently, nonrelevant characteristics of the programs most often publicized are the following:

1. The model programs are neither adequately nor honestly defined in terms of providing educators with the information they truly need if the programs are to be adapted elsewhere.

2. The programs are poorly evaluated, if at all, and significant data are rarely available to other educators.

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3. Recently implemented programs are too often prematurely publicized before being proven successful through the test of a reasonable amount of time and before the results of competent evaluative procedures are made known.

4. The staffs of the model programs, for the most part, have been handpicked, either through hiring or transfer.

5. Outside funding is provided from a variety of sources, none of which would be available to other schools.

6. Nearby universities provide interns, personnel, and other resources that would be unavailable to most of the schools in the country.

Conditions Necessary

Regardless of how great the need for change, little, if any, relevant innovation will take place unless the following internal and external conditions exist within a school or district:

Enlightened School Board. The local school board must be an enlightened body, deeply committed to encouraging and supporting demonstrably needed innovation. Many school boards give only lip service to needed reforms.

Competent, Courageous, and Knowledgeable Leadership. The leadership at the building and district levels must be committed to actively participating in the search for solutions to problems in education, and possess the courage to proceed with the follow-up implementation of those changes that are needed. Those in positions of leadership *must* be equal to these tasks.

Research and Development Funds. District funds must be allocated for the purpose of active research and development in the area of needed programs, and there must be qualified personnel to design and conduct the evaluation of newly implemented models.

Extensive Involvement. There must be broadly based involvement in the decision-making processes, including representation of all persons who will be affected by the changes.

Learning Environment. There must be a true feeling on the part of students, teachers, and parents that their school has a productive and a pleasurable environment for teaching and learning.

Essential Components

In order to meet the standards of relevance, the following components must be thoroughly detailed in any proposed innovative program:

Perceptions of Need. Perceptions of the need for change must be broadly accepted and arrived at through rigorous sampling and involvement of all persons directly or indirectly affected by the change.

Statement of Objectives. The objectives to be met and measured must be shown to contribute significantly to improvement in teaching and learning, either directly or through restructuring or reorganization of the curriculum.

Planning. There must be a period of time designated for planning, with a written proposal resulting from broad participation, and arrived at after thorough examination and investigation. The blueprint should have considerable built-in flexibility, and it should represent a wide range of thoughtful effort.

Evaluation. The method and technique of evaluation must be part of the proposal. This should be guided by highly qualified personnel who recognize that evaluation is a continuous, scientific, ongoing process.

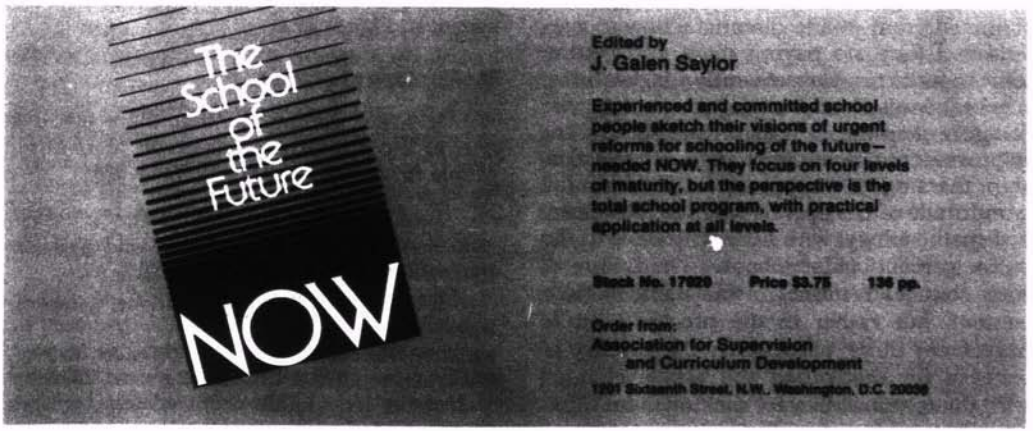
Spin-off. It is important to calculate in advance, as much as possible, the effect of any proposed change on other programs currently in existence. The effect should be positive, and great care should be taken to avoid doing anything in the name of innovation that would be likely to detract from or impair other existing programs.

Implementation. The most often encountered problems at the outset of a new program are primarily due to the anxieties of the persons involved. It is most important to have planned in advance for dealing with the initial birth pangs of any new program.

Adaptability. A truly relevant innovation should be adaptable to situations in other schools and districts. This implies that the program be implemented in the initial stages with available personnel, facilities, and resources.

Clearly, innovation is a seriously complex undertaking, involving much more than mere desire and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, too few educators have any extensive knowledge of the dynamics of change, and the type of help and assistance that would be worthwhile are practically unavailable. Of equal importance is the enormous pressure that educators must face as a result of the drastic need for reform in most of the schools.

The first step toward overcoming these problems could be the recognition of a need for greater sophistication in understanding the nature of the problems, as well as insistence upon agreed-to criteria and conditions for relevance in innovation prior to initiating the component development of changes. This could alleviate the frustration of failure and vain effort, and hopefully pave the way for more widespread, positive, successful reform. □



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