

Innovations: Where Are We?

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TO ANYONE viewing the modern educational system from the outside, it might appear that no institution has ever had so much expertise at its command, so many professional aids at its disposal. To the professional educator looking from the inside, it is more apt to seem like a world gone mad. Is the whole spectrum of educational innovations an enormous, disordered cacophony or is something of value, some major manifestation of real potential, beginning to show itself?

A starting point in the search for an answer might be the act of reviewing in an orderly way what has happened so far. For example, the total picture might be categorized into the following general types: (a) individualized programs, (b) the curriculum, (c) organization, (d) staff use, (e) new materials and media, and (f) facilities arrangements. A brief look at the scope of each category may yield a revealing overview of the entire scope of innovations.

Individualized Programs. In attempting to find meaning and purpose in the area of innovations in general, and individualized instruction in particular, it might be helpful to examine the basic assumptions that seem to form the style for individualization, as well as to examine the forms of individualization that have developed. Six assump-

tions appear to be fundamental to the concept of individualized instruction (5). First, the individual should be able to work at his own pace. Second, he should be able to work at times that are convenient to him. Third, the slow learner should not be embarrassed by feeling that he is much slower than the others. Fourth, individuals are at different points in their progress along a simple continuum, a patently controversial assumption. The fifth assumption is that a few conditions, easily identifiable, interfere with learning progress. These must be diagnosed and the student helped to overcome them. Sixth, the students should be able to select from the wealth of available media those that he finds most effective in his own learning.

In an article of this sort, it is possible to do no more than enumerate the several basic styles that constitute what passes for individualization (6: 27-32). A brief listing would yield the following: independent study, interaction of small group work, student planned forums, project group investigations in out-of-school time, human relations workshops, discussion groups for under-achievers, the "student pair" technique, the "consilium" (time set aside for students to pursue educational areas of personal interest in seminar, individually, in joint projects,

etc.), travel-study, advanced study, work study, community seminars, student participation in advisory councils, individualized evaluation for student progress, home-bound instruction, "last opportunity" school, and social adjustment rooms. This list is not inclusive and, further, there are almost limitless variations on these themes that can be exercised by individual schools and instructors.

The Curriculum (6: 55-93). Although in-service institutes for teachers have played a major role, and much has been published by nationwide committees, the greatest dispersion of ideas has been through textbooks. A list of specific changes in curriculum would be nearly endless. However, certain common characteristics are worth mentioning. For example, most curriculum innovations emphasized discreteness in academic disciplines. Further, content was generally built around key concepts, ideas, and principles. Modes of inquiry were often emphasized. Certain exploratory programs went in the opposite direction, such as various interdisciplinary innovations and the teaching of skills as part of substantive teams.

Organization (6: 95-120). Many aspects of the environment can be organized. In the main, facilities, program, time, and students can be organized in one way or another. Facilities may be organized into such things as school clusters, educational parks, and school-within-a-school. Program organization may include sequential units for individual progress, multiple tracks, and a variety of nongraded approaches including phasing, modules, and continuum learning.

Time organization involves both the school year (for example, twelve-month year) and the daily schedule. Most common among recent efforts on the twelve-month year are the usual nine months with a six- to ten-week summer school, the trimester plan, the quarter plan, and the more recent "45 days on and 15 days off" plan. As for daily schedules, with flexible scheduling patterns the theoretical possibilities seem limitless although practical possibilities are less so. Students themselves can be organized into

large lecture groups, small discussion groups, small seminar groups, still smaller activity groups (for example, laboratory or research teams), and as individuals.

Staff Use (6: 123-53). There have been some drastic changes in the roles of teachers, administrators, and other staff members. In some instances the role of the teacher has changed from the tell-assign-recite-test role to that of diagnostician, decision maker, co-operator, strategist, manager, facilitator, guide, evaluator, friend, and fellow learner. Various forms of interdisciplinary and unidisciplinary teams, often with aides, have been developed. Differentiated staffing has become a common term. The roles of administrators and guidance personnel are continually evolving and proliferating. There is more of a tendency to regard principals once again as the educational leaders of the schools. Growing school-university alliances have created many new dimensions in staff utilization.

Media (6: 155-89). Perhaps the most spectacular and visible changes have been in educational media, where an entire new "knowledge industry" has grown up. The list is seemingly endless and includes such concepts and hardware as learning packages, a variety of computer capabilities, dial access retrieval systems, programmed instruction, telelecture techniques, simulation, and gaming, plus all the current technical communications used in the library. There are definite propellents and inhibitors of media usage. Three major propellents are their obvious application in individualization, their use in unfamiliar programs, and their overall panacea-like quality. Common inhibitors are cost, complexity, unfamiliarity, and inappropriateness.

Buildings and Campus Arrangement (6: 190-214). Although new building and campus arrangements have been slower to catch on, newer campuses are featuring some radical departures from the multi-storied buildings with 30 x 30 rooms. One of the major concepts has been that of interior adaptability. This may be accomplished with knockdown walls, sliding panels, or ac-

cordion partitions, or through the more rigid approach of fixed but varied size classrooms.

At present, the ultimate in interior adaptability seems to be entire buildings without interior walls, with acoustical control and flexibility by rearrangement of furniture, rolling bookcases, etc. Another common innovation is the pod, with a media center or office on the inside, and with open or flexible classrooms fanning out in every direction.

A Rationale for Innovation

According to one definition, innovation is "the introduction of a novel element, a driving force, a practical advance that deviates from the established or traditional forms" (6: 1). Any attempt at innovation makes the obvious assumption that things could be better than they are. In our society the need for change and innovation seems fairly apparent. Unruh and Alexander noted some of the major societal changes (6: 8-11): increasing numbers of people (crowding, lack of privacy, food problems, etc.)¹, automation (on the job, in the home, in society), urbanization (pollution, crime, recreation), changes in the labor market (product to service orientation, job updating, hard work lessening, more complex tasks possible), conflict of cultures (it is neither desirable nor possible to "anglicize" everybody), medical and biological advances (longer life, social-moral decisions of birth and death), changes in ethical and religious values (new conceptions of freedom, equality, and morality),

¹ Parenthetical insertions are by the writer.

media (instant news, advertising), travel, and international involvement.

The dangers in change seem equally apparent. Change inevitably results in some confusion. Mental and emotional adjustments have to be made. Two manifestations of danger appear in a change oriented situation. At one extreme is the "change for the sake of change" syndrome. At the other extreme is the disorientation that usually results. As old standards and procedures are questioned, a feeling of uncertainty and rootlessness results, which may then lead either to involvement withdrawal or a crystalizing of resistance to all change.

Innovations of Value

There is one identifiable trend in innovation criteria that is worth mentioning. To a growing degree there seems to be a tendency to judge the potential value of change on humanistic and goal oriented bases rather than on the criteria of simply finding more mechanically efficient ways of doing things. Such criteria include respect for individual differences, high self-concept, self-responsibility and self-direction, social conscience and the intercultural view, and aesthetic sensitivity.

On criteria such as these are based such innovations as the more successful open schools. By using humanistic criteria to test innovations, the process orientation in the open classroom looms of greater importance. Two of the better known examples are the British Infant Schools and the North Dakota Schools. The Infant School characteristics

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indicate the kinds of assumptions that are inherent in the more successful open schools. The following list is abstracted from John Featherstone's "The British Infant School" (3: 195-205): (a) there is no formal class structure, (b) the teacher starts the morning by listing the available options and then moves around among the students while they perform their separate tasks, (c) there are virtually no subject matter distinctions, (d) there is an abundance of commercial and homemade devices, (e) basic mathematical relations are stressed more than arithmetic, (f) the mode of operation varies greatly between classrooms, (g) students handle and play with books before they can read, (h) there are usually no texts or class readers, but a variety of sets and individual books, (i) the child gets a blank notebook and diary, and free writing is an integral part of the curriculum, as is art, and (j) children have private shelves where they store their writing books, accounts of experiments, art, lists of books they have read, etc. The openness consists essentially in the relationship between the student and teacher, in the degree of freedom of student choice, and in the more natural approach that is taken to the learning process, not in movable or nonexistent classroom walls.

George Dennison's report on the First Street School (2) noted characteristics similar to those of the Infant Schools. In virtually all schools of this type, while discipline problems may exist, they are less paramount and are focused student-to-student rather than student-to-teacher. Most of the tensions of dominance and control are missing. The relationship is more authentic. High schools are in the business of being open, too, and exhibit substantially the same characteristics as do the elementary schools. Shawnee Mission Northwest High School is a good example (4: 105-107).

How To Innovate

There is no foolproof model for successful innovation. Certainly the criteria of the humanistic needs of students are of primary importance. The process is also important.

Stephen K. Bailey identified what may be the essential ingredients when he spoke of the British Teacher Centers (1: 146-49):

1. Fundamental educational reform will come only through those charged with the basic educational responsibility; to wit, the teachers.

2. Teachers are unlikely to change their ways of doing things just because imperious, theoretical reformers—whether successions of Rickovers or Illiches or high powered R & D missionaries from central educational systems—tell them to shape up.

3. Teachers will take reforms seriously only when they are responsible for defining their own educational problems, delineating their own needs, and receiving help on their own terms and turf.

It is impossible to escape the uneasy feeling that much attempted innovation in this country has violated at least one of these propositions. Teachers, too, have needs which must be met. Though there is no foolproof model, perhaps if the worth of any innovation is judged with humanistic standards of student needs, and if initiation takes place at the behest of those involved—the teachers—then success of some sort may be likely.

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