“BOY, this sure was a fun way to learn,” Ruth Ann exclaimed.

“I like learning this way better because my teachers help me a lot more than when they stood in front of the class and talked,” said Peggy.

“Our school is different from the high school. They all have to use the same book and open to the same page during their classes,” explained Fred.

These comments were made about learning “stations-centers-places.” Peggy, Ruth Ann, and Fred, three students at Mebane Middle School, had expressed in their own words some of the reasons for using learning stations as one method of instruction in the classroom.

One Way To Individualize

Many professional educators believe that individualization is one way to “effective learning.” Use of learning stations is a means to implement the concept of individualization in the classroom.

To illustrate this, let us suppose we are doing a unit on Australia. There are four objectives: (a) the students will name and describe the animals native to Australia; (b) the students will describe the physical land features of Australia; (c) the students will name the natural resources in Australia; (d) the students will describe the different types of life styles in Australia.

Now—how to individualize this unit through learning stations? First of all, pretest the students on the four objectives (it is important to pretest in order to evaluate the student’s present knowledge of the unit). Second, set up learning stations for the objectives. Third, assign students to the learning stations based on pretest results. Students whose prior knowledge or understanding is sufficient to achieve a particular objective are not required to attend the learning station relating to that objective.

Going a little further, let us take the objective of naming and describing the animals native to Australia. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to be able to use the media center, that is, use the card catalog and encyclopedias. In most classes, some students do not have this skill, some need a review, while others are adept at it.

In order to let “the others” move forward, explore, extend experiences, and avoid boredom, the teacher may want to set up a skills learning station for some students on “how to use the media center.” In this way,
not everyone has to study this skill, only those who do not have it. By having different areas set up with objectives and skills, it is possible to organize learning activities to fit each child at his own pace.

More Time To Help

The teacher has more time to help, support, and guide students when he does not have to dictate to them and try to rule them. After an orientation on how to use learning stations, teachers can actually see the difference in the amount of increased time they have to devote to helping students learn.

To aid in the orientation of students, it is helpful to have explicit directions—either taped or written—in each classroom, ditto sheets for each child to keep, and a combined teacher-student week of learning how to use learning stations. In due course, there is freedom from wasted class time spent repeating instructions needlessly.

In addition, the learning station has all materials needed to complete the objectives, for example, a variety of textbooks, newspapers, magazines, art paper, paint and brushes, crayons, filmstrips and projectors, transparencies, overhead projectors, worksheets, charts, tapes, and recorders—in other words, anything to help the students learn the concepts. By having all these materials available to the students, the teacher no longer has to man an information booth. Therefore, cutting out time spent in locating materials in the classroom and in repeating instructions, the teacher becomes a teacher.

It does take time to prepare the learning stations so that they are valuable and attractive; but any worthwhile preparation is not easy, so why not prepare a method that frees class time? Once the job is done, everything is ready to go.

A Pleasant Style

Each child has a learning style that is best suited for him; and when a child receives instruction in a way compatible with his learning style, his experience is a pleasant one and pleasant circumstances are sought, not rejected.

Let us go back to Australia and its animals again and see how we can make this unit fun and valuable for each student. First of all, in setting up the learning stations, it is important to make them attractive. Bright colors, pictures, mobiles, bold letters—use anything to catch the student's attention. The classroom sets the tone for learning, so why not make it a happy place to learn?

Second, think of as many activities or ways as possible for the students to learn the objectives. The students can draw a mural of the animals and their habitats; make puppets of the animals; read textbooks, magazines, and newspapers; do research in the media center; watch films and filmstrips; write fictional stories or poems involving the animals; make up crossword puzzles about the animals; listen to a mini-lecture; play picture identification games, etc.

Communicate these activities to the students (usually written under the objective), and let them choose the ones they would like to do to achieve the objective. Thus, with a variety of projects and all the materials needed to complete these activities, the students have many avenues to explore and choose from.

One question frequently asked is, suppose the child chooses to draw all the time? Hopefully, a little guidance combined with the act of drawing or doing an experiment will arouse the curiosity of the student and eventually will lead him to participate in a multitude of learning experiences.

Learning stations are one method to be used in teaching. This approach is successful with some students, while others are "turned off." Therefore, it is important that teachers be cautioned not to make this the "only way" method, but rather to use it in connection with other techniques. If learning stations are used in this perspective, that is, as one method of helping students learn, both teachers and students may find in learning stations—whether skill building, exploratory, or reinforcing—the opportunities for more help and more individualization, all happening in an atmosphere of fun.