

# Classroom Management Makes Instructional Alternatives Available

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**M**OST educators share some common reasons for offering instructional alternatives within their classrooms. These may include our understandings of how we learn (we learn in different ways), our awareness that interest and motivation often increase as the variety of choices increases, our respect for the benefits accrued through the decision making process itself, or our concern that students be given the information and responsibilities that go along with being a consumer of services. The overriding issue in discussions I have had with local school staffs, for example, is not why alternatives should be offered in the classroom, but rather how can more instructional options be offered in specific classroom settings?

Although classrooms have always been managed somehow and in a variety of ways,

I believe that no instructional program will continually offer instructional alternatives unless certain management features have been addressed.

## Two Program Examples

Let me give two examples. I have seen a locally developed high school mathematics program that offers 1000 students options in setting objectives, in assessing performance, in sequencing skills, in using either books, games, or other instructional materials, in grouping with peers or teachers, and in progressing at different rates. The two teachers who designed the program pointed to a card catalog system and said "we have just begun to catalog the available materials to the specific objectives of our mathematics courses. At this time the file is very incomplete, it has only about 14,000 entries, but it will be more complete by next September."

This attention to variety and detail was reflected in the degree to which their record

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keeping system supported instructional decisions (both for teacher and student) and the ways in which it encouraged student and teacher interactions.

In another program, a primary second grade reading program, I was told that the staff had originally provided an open classroom setting. There was a large variety of books, audiotapes, playing records, film strips, games, and other manipulatives available to the children. After opening up these options in instructional materials to student choice, however, the teachers said that they began to get uncomfortable with their lack of information about who was using what materials, what kind of materials seemed to be most useful for particular students, and their concern that some students may not be using much of the variety that was available to them.

In other words, to support continuous child use of the available options and to better monitor the effectiveness of the materials for different students, the teachers were asking for and beginning to design their own management system. In the process of developing a management system, these teachers were finding that they were putting greater attention on the kinds of decisions that were being opened up to the students. They were now discussing other alternatives in addition to instructional materials (for example, sequencing, rate, grouping, assessment) and were beginning to identify a hierarchy of instructional decisions that seemed appropriate as students moved through their six year elementary program.

## **Features of a Management System**

Whether a program is in primary reading or high school mathematics or whether it is a science or business education program, there are certain management procedures that must be addressed when attempting to provide a variety of instructional alternatives. These features of a management system include: specific decision making procedures, an information record keeping system, attention to accessibility and use of these records, instructional planning ses-

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sions, and a repeated relationship between assessment and instructional activity.

The decision making procedures relate to who makes what kinds of classroom decisions. The decision makers of a classroom can be the students, the teachers, the program itself (that is, the decision is predetermined by test score or completion of an activity), or combinations of students, teachers, and program. If a staff is planning to offer instructional alternatives (whether alternatives in objectives, instructional materials, or sequencing), the logical question is who is going to make the decision that a particular option is appropriate for a particular student. One practical answer forced upon a program is that the more instructional options offered, the more the locus of responsibility must be shared.

If some of these instructional decisions are to be based upon some recorded information, then there are two more features that are included in the management system: what kind of recorded information is needed and how is this information going to be made readily accessible? The recorded information may, of course, include available instructional options and individual student use of these options as well as results of student assessment.

Along with identifying what information is to be kept on records is the important consideration of who will be expected to use this information. If, for example, a student's use of past options is expected to be valuable to a future student decision, then this information must be easily accessible to the student. This accessibility, in turn, begins to identify the nature of the record keeping instruments. (A teacher's record book alone

would be very inefficient if all students must have access to some of the information in that record book.)

The variety of instructional alternatives and the extent to which teachers, students, or joint teacher-student decisions are made will begin to dictate the need for planning sessions to be held and regularly scheduled. If a staff decides to offer alternatives in unit sequencing it may be necessary to schedule regular student-teacher conferences to discuss the prerequisites and the appropriate sequence of units for each student. Again, the more alternatives that are to be made available within an instructional program, the more necessary it becomes to be able to schedule these planning sessions as part of the entire program.

In addition to decision making procedures, record keeping system, accessibility of these records, and planning sessions, most programs that offer instructional alternatives have a fifth feature to their management system: a formalized and predictable pattern between assessment and instructional activity that is repeated within each unit of the program. This pattern includes the nature of the testing (pre, mid, and post unit tests), when conferences or other kinds of assessment are scheduled, when instructional activities occur, and when (and by whom) decisions to skip instruction or receive more instruction are made. Needless to say, these patterns are often more complex than the traditional unit pattern of a class assignment, a resulting post-test and a teacher decision either to go to the next unit or give some additional activities if the class scores are unsatisfactory.

### **Relation Between Planning and Spontaneity**

There is a final observation that I don't pretend to understand but that is reinforced by my own experiences as a teacher. There occurs in classrooms that are implementing instructional options a very interesting relationship between planning and spontaneity, between freedom and discipline. These "opposites" are clearly interrelated.

I am reminded of a fourth and fifth grade math program that we were trying to describe two years ago. It began to look like an extremely tightly controlled program with few options other than student rate of progress. There were no options in objectives, sequence of units, or assessment. There were possibilities for different "prescriptions" of book pages and activities but few real alternatives in instructional materials. We could not quite understand why the children were so consistently stating that math was their favorite subject now, even more fun than gym.

Then we began to have described to us the repeated unit pattern of assessment and activity. In addition to having a recorded pretest for each unit and a resulting decision to leave the unit or have appropriate assignments made, there was a unit prospectus and a non-recorded practice pretest that could be taken by the student any number of times before taking the "real" pretest. The students told us that they were using these practice pretests over and over again, going back to the prospectus, going to friends, parents, older siblings who had been in the program, anybody who could help them perform perfectly on this practice pretest. This process could take a student many weeks but the point to all this was for the students to officially "pass" the recorded pretest, "skip" the entire unit, and not have to be "taught."

Without the system, without the prospectus, the practice pretest, the pretests, and the prescriptions that had been planned, designed, and implemented by the teachers, there would have been no rules to play by and no system to beat.

That brings me to my final point. The more that instructional alternatives are offered within a classroom, the greater the need for a management system but also, paradoxically, the greater the possibility for spontaneity, joy, and the excitement of the unexpected. We should keep in mind that although how to provide a variety of educational alternatives is a professionally serious topic, the resulting environments are anything but somber. □

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