

Assessing Pupil Progress: New Methods Are Emerging

JAMES L. LEARY*

Establishing commitment as a critical element of the learning cycle, thus allowing the evaluation of progress to become more personalized, could be the key ingredient for making a difference in improving student achievement.

WE KNOW that grades are certainly not "all bad" for all people. On the other hand we also know that grades are not a predictor of one's ability or desire to be a positive contributing person in society. In fact, a high school principal recently indicated his concern to me about the fact that the top three students (academically) from the graduating class of '71 are now in mental institutions, having "bombed out" from drug abuse. Now this is not a very pleasant thought, but it does illustrate a point.

Schools and universities have been, with rare exceptions, unable to arrive at ac-

ceptable procedures for evaluating student progress other than using the traditional grading system. Developing a variety of criteria for measuring competency seems to be the primary stumbling block. The majority of teachers appear to be judging student learning based upon some predetermined set of criteria in an external manner, similar to the way we judge competitive diving or gymnastics events. Discussions with university professors from across the nation lead me to believe that while they desire to make changes, the bureaucratic structure appears stronger than their willingness to explore evaluative procedures which are vital for enabling people to evaluate themselves. If universities continue to take this position, then it becomes even more essential for elementary and secondary schools to provide this leadership.

* James L. Leary, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Plymouth Community School District, Plymouth, Michigan

New Evaluation Procedures Are Emerging

Numerous recommendations for evaluating student learning are emerging from elementary and secondary school faculties, students, and parents. This is a very healthy sign that we are entering an era in which the shackles of letter grades are slowly being removed. Today there is visible evidence that schools are not only offering alternate evaluation procedures, they are supporting these by sound research. By conducting thorough investigations and involving diversified representation from within the school community, it is reasonable to assume that we stand an excellent chance of designing and implementing improved evaluation procedures.

A current positive trend is the involvement of students in the evaluation process. Parent-teacher conferences are now including the child. Students are being allowed to write open-ended answers to test questions and encouraged to defend their points of view. True or false and multiple choice questions are fading rapidly in classrooms where students are busily preparing to discuss topics which they have chosen. As teachers acquire greater skills in small group instruction, they soon recognize that no teacher can be in multiple classroom discussion groups simultaneously. Therefore, student involvement in determining what represents acceptable learning progress becomes a necessity. We must continue to expand and refine this trend.

The frequency of reporting to parents is also breaking with past traditions. Rather than follow a six, nine, or ten week marking period, educators are recognizing that stu-

dents and parents vary in their personal needs to review student growth. Therefore, flexibility is now being incorporated into marking schedules. Some teachers are using a flexible reporting frequency which follows a weekly or monthly schedule. Other teachers are developing efficient tear-off notes which are given to students each time they complete a skill or unit assignment.

Evaluation and Commitment Within the Learning Cycle

It is most encouraging to view the diversity being exercised in developing model evaluation systems. Why this new thrust of explorations? Perhaps it is because we are placing evaluation in its proper position within the learning cycle—to assess progress. The function of the learning cycle is often in conflict with students' hidden motives of enrolling in "snap" courses to get "good grades," rather than for knowledge they wish or need to acquire.

Grades have become so prestigious that we have distorted the evaluation element of the learning cycle. Sometimes instructors even use evaluation as a punishment by lowering a student's grade. We can often find evidence that evaluation is being used to control the instructional segment and to determine what the teacher considers to be the most important knowledge for all students—regardless of their needs or interests. (Example: A recent test question I reviewed asked: "Name the three most important dates in Michigan history." How can the same three dates be the most important for all people?)

The learning cycle, as presented in Figure 1 contains five basic elements. The

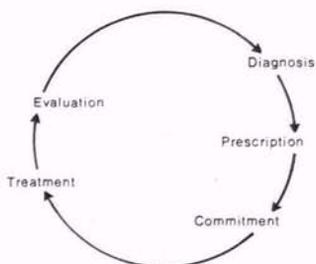


Figure 1. The Learning Cycle

single element which is most often overlooked is commitment. Yet commitment is a major factor in motivation; because in commitment lies personal meaning, understanding of one's potential, and recognition of the prescribed treatment. Commitment is as vital in the academic learning cycle as it is when a doctor prescribes to patients that they go on a diet or quit smoking. When a patient is involved in the process of diagnosis and prescription and recognizes the consequences of his or her choices, commitment then takes on personal meaning for seeking a treatment and assessing progress.

In education we tend to omit the element of commitment from the learning cycle. Rather, we are more concerned with making a group diagnosis, prescription, treatment, and evaluation. Then we wonder why students feel no personal pride or commitment toward "our" subject. Student involvement and consequential commitment take on a variety of features as we consider different age groups and course offerings. Nevertheless, each area within the curriculum can be tested against all five elements of the learning cycle.

In schools where grades are being dropped, we find a "caring for" concept developing that emphasizes personal growth and recognizes that achievement can often be measured only in terms of our ability to live effectively in a pluralistic society. We see students coming to a realization that a talent is not recognized until we share that ability with others. That even competition, when played by accepted rules is highly cooperative.

To enhance the "caring for" concept,

schools are developing a host of contemporary course offerings while departing from the traditional and formal comprehensive secondary school model. Instruction is now being presented under such titles as World Travel Hints, Mini-Course Explorations, Leisure Time Living, Home and Business Ecology, Post Graduation Survival, Living in an Urban Society, and Grass Roots Mechanics. Rather than use competitive grades for these courses, teachers are emphasizing teacher, student, and group evaluations in a helping relationship atmosphere. In this manner all students in the class work together to successfully achieve their goals.

Sustained Leadership Is Critical

A variety of evaluation procedures have been tried in the past without really taking a firm hold. In order to "make a difference" this time, we must be certain that sustained leadership is built into the change process.

To help cope with this problem, the Michigan ASCD has established a State Task Force on Alternatives for Student Evaluation to serve as a motivating and reinforcing agent. Now entering its second year, this task force is studying exemplary evaluation models, making presentations at local, state, and national conferences, as well as establishing a clearinghouse for materials and resource personnel. The committee also seeks to provide parents, students, and teachers with information which will help them deal more effectively with the everyday problems of student evaluation alternatives and their implications for the learner. State-wide conferences utilizing the team approach are currently being planned. The team from any one district will hopefully consist of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and board members.

The time is ripe for educators to put all elements of the learning cycle into proper perspective. Establishing commitment as a critical element for learning, with the consequent act of allowing the evaluation of progress to become more personalized, could be the key ingredient for making a difference in improving student achievement. □

Copyright © 1975 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.