

# Instruction for What? Practices That Merit Priority: 1975-1980

Harold G. Shane

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**F**OR AS long as I can remember, we have had an emergent series of priorities in U.S. education. While none of them were universally accepted by the public and the teaching profession, they nonetheless served to provide instructional guidelines.

During the Great Depression—the threadbare thirties as Groucho Marx once called them—a number of educators urged that priority be given to the progressive practices of the “new education.” These included better methods of teaching, more heed to the needs of youth, social reform through education, and the like.

Wartime priorities permeated schooling in the United States during the first half of the 1940's, and interest in instruction was muted. Immediately after the war, material problems such as coping with inflation, with the teacher shortage, and with increasing enrollments competed with instructional priorities.

Widespread and often caustic criticisms of schooling beginning in the 1950's resulted in priority being given to curriculum reform. Ideas generated in the fifties eventually were reflected in such developments as “new math” and “new science” curricula and in reflective ASCD Yearbooks such as *What Shall the High School Teach?* (1956), *Creating a Good Environment for Learning* (1954), or *Research for Curriculum Improvement* (1957).

The unsettled sixties and the first half of the uncertain seventies lie so close behind us as to require few reminders of priorities given to the role of instruction in relation to the war on poverty, to the humanism reflected in ASCD's *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming* (1962), to the exploration of assessment and accountability, and so forth.

In the perspective of the past briefly revisited here, what does the future seem likely to hold? Will we have different instructional priorities?

## **Mutations in a World Remaking Itself**

It seems likely to me that we will not have to tally new priorities. Rather, we will have new instructional *mutations* and a new

urgency in the context of a world which stands on the threshold of what appears to be an entirely new era. What will happen in this era is anyone's guess. Expert opinion is deeply divided. Persons like Robert Heilbroner and Walter Laqueur emphasize in their recent writings the doomsday dangers in the

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human prospect. Dennis Gabor and Jonas Salk in their social commentaries are respectively challenging and optimistic about our attaining the status of a mature society.

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So what are the instructional priorities suggested by mutations in a world remaking itself?

I would propose that instruction must begin more completely to concern itself with *realities*, with *alternatives*, and with their *consequences*. What can instruction do to help children and youth more fully to understand a real world of starvation, of highly dangerous atomic weaponry, and of rapid resource depletion—a world carrying the heavy load in 1975 of 47 percent of all the humans who ever have inhabited it? What

alternatives must we contemplate on this globe and what are the implications of our choices? In terms of personality development—in terms of perceiving, behaving, and becoming—what personal qualities do we need to strengthen in an intellectually and socially nutritious environment?

Explicitly, I would contend, as alternative paths are examined, that the content and methods of instruction on a priority basis should provide data-based experiences which emphasize with even greater conviction the importance of such factors and insights as security, good interpersonal relations, communication skill, knowledge that makes one useful both to self and to society, respect for the sacredness of a promise, the understanding that each privilege is balanced by obligation, and the awareness that opportunity and responsibility are inseparably linked together.

In short, I find myself urging that we more methodically contemplate adding an active moral dimension to the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor domains so widely recognized since the 1960's. By "moral" I mean a dimension focused on justice and equity as well as on the academic realm, emotional development, and motor accomplishments.

If we fail to do the job, social scientists a century hence (if there are any a century from now) will have every reason to wonder why in 1975 or 1980 educated people with a knowledge of the past and an awareness of present danger could have been so lacking in the ability to think wisely and to act with determination.

—HAROLD G. SHANE, *University Professor of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington.*

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## Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	Rivergate
1976	March 13-17	Miami Beach	Convention Center
1977	March 19-23	Houston	Civic Center
1978	March 4-8	San Francisco	Civic Center

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