

Options for Learning: A Process for Accommodating Individual Differences

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Photo: Charlene Rothkopf.

A well-known author and educator depicts a process for accommodating individual differences in the classroom.

Among approaches utilized by instructors to accommodate individual differences in the classroom, the process whereby students select their own learning experiences continues to be given scant attention at virtually all levels of schooling. Some view this approach as unrealistic; others simply misunderstand its potential for personalizing student classroom experiences. I find both views remiss, for under certain conditions, the optional approach to learning results in optimum

individual experiences for both instructors and students. Indeed it has been my experience that it allows instructors to learn more about students and to utilize a greater variety of teaching methodologies than traditionally practiced.

Undergirding this process is the recognition that:

... the initiation of such learning rests not upon the teaching skills of the leader, not upon his curricular planning, not upon his use of audiovisual aids, not upon the programmed learning he utilizes, not upon his lectures and presentations, not upon an abundance of books, though each of these at one time or another be utilized as an important resource. No, the facilitation of significant learning rests upon

certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner.¹

To facilitate this relationship so that optimum learning takes place, the instructor must: (a) accept goals for students that may be different from those planned for them; (b) agree to plans and approaches utilized by students to achieve needed skills and knowledge that may differ from those of the instructor; and (c) accept selections and sequences of learning experiences unique to the students' own dispositions.

To what degree, then, can students assume responsibility for selecting their own courses of learning? To what extent do they have the right to do so? What is important for each student? Who is to decide? Given certain parameters unique to the specific learning to take place, I say, let the students decide!

To expedite this process, essential prerequisites are necessary. First is the removal of all conditions and situations in the classroom that students may view as threatening. Central to this removal are behaviors that focus on accepting and respecting students for what they are, and for what they wish to achieve through their classroom experiences. Thus, the instructor must invite student input on a daily basis, treat students as equals with respect to mutual problems, implement their classroom experiences on the basis of their preferences for learning, and encourage their spontaneous efforts to the degree that the students feel capable of making productive choices.

How realistic is this approach? To what extent does it work, under what conditions, with what results? I find the optional approach to learning completely viable. My teaching laboratory for prospective elementary school teachers, for example, lends itself to this process. Built within parameters of skills that focus on the students' study of school literature and programs, their observations of pupils in their assigned classrooms, planning the pupils' learning experiences, creating materials for their classroom use, teaching the pupils and evaluating their progress, the students in my laboratory class individually select the particular skills they wish to develop in each of these clusters.

This is to say, from the options available to them, the students decide *for themselves* which books, articles, and research findings to study, the kinds of observations to make, the planning to

undertake, the teaching aids to construct, and the format and content of their microteaching experiences. Additionally, they opt for the quantity and quality of work associated with the grade they wish to achieve, and individually determine the degree to which they will work for the grade they select. Consequently, I find that they grow immeasurably in their capacity to make wise

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choices about their personal needs and interests as the semester progresses.

The parameters of the teaching laboratory are presented at the first class meeting in the form of performance criteria to which the students are invited to react. Invariably questions arise, needs are discussed, and interests are expressed. The result of this input is the establishment of a course syllabus based on various options open to students from which they select the learning they wish to achieve. To ensure that all the students have the opportunity to express their true preferences for classroom experiences, I also administer a diagnostic test to determine their priority targets more precisely. Thereupon their priorities for learning become my personal targets for teaching the class within the parameters of the syllabus that has been established.²

The diagnostic surveys administered over the past several years reveal that education students want to gain more knowledge about techniques for motivating pupils in their classrooms, teacher-pupil planning, peer tutoring, diagnostic

¹ Carl Rogers. *Freedom To Learn*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1969. p. 105.

² Syllabi change from semester to semester. A copy of the most recent syllabus is available upon order.

³ John I. Thomas. *Learning Centers: Opening Up the Classroom*. Boston, Massachusetts: Holbrook Press, Inc., 1975. pp. 205, 206.



Charlie, the boa constrictor, visits Randolph Elementary School, Arlington, Virginia. Photo: Gerald Martineau, The Washington Post.

teaching and individualizing instruction, learning centers, sources of materials, group dynamics, values clarification, classroom management, and open education processes. I therefore teach in terms of these specific priority targets in conjunction with the learning experiences individually selected by the students as outlined in the syllabus.

Teaching by example is customarily held in high esteem by prospective elementary school teachers. Thus, as a consequence of the students' expressed priorities, teacher-student planning in my laboratory class ensues on a daily basis. It is necessary in the optional approach to learning because it:

- Invites students to take responsibility for the purposes, procedures, and activities of the classroom;
- Clarifies directions, management, and limitations of learning experiences;

- Develops students' capacities to make appropriate decisions;
- Increases students' knowledge and understanding of the contributions of others;
- Builds classroom unity, cohesiveness, and togetherness.³

Through this process, problems are aired; feelings are discussed; solutions are projected; doubts are alleviated; attitudes are clarified; values are supported or modified; assistance is offered. As a result of the students' participation, I find that mutual trust, respect, and cooperation between instructor and students, and among students are invariably developed. And, increasingly, the students come to think of the teaching laboratory as *their* classroom—a good place in which to learn and to express themselves.

A mastodon knee bone, a horned toad, barbed wire, old catalogues, a mystery box, artifacts, historical documents, a boa constrictor from the local pet shop. In response to the students' expressed priority for motivational techniques applicable to their student teaching assignments, such materials—with built-in fascination—are utilized in the teaching laboratory. As a result, the students employ materials such as these to generate the natural curiosities of other pupils.

The students' other learning priorities are met in multiple ways. Predicated on the assumption that no *one* learning sequence exists for all the students, different approaches to teaching are utilized and different opportunities for prospective teachers to select sequences of activities are implemented in the teaching laboratory. The furniture in the laboratory is rearranged daily to suit the priorities expressed, despite the limitations the learning environment poses for instructor and students: that is, the use of a conventional classroom with furniture inappropriate to the selected laboratory activities, for a period of two class-hours daily.

Among the teaching and learning modes utilized are creative projects, small-group instruction, sociodrama and dramatic play, demonstrations, debates, panels, committee work, learning centers, small-group and total classroom discussions, independent study, instructor-student conferences, micro-teaching, and field experiences. Rarely does the need to lecture arise in the teaching laboratory because of the individual differ-



"The open classroom is a natural outlet for accommodating intra- and inter-personal differences in the classroom."
Photo: Joe Di Dio, National Education Association.

ences that must be accommodated.

Involving university students in their own education through the optional approach to learning appears to be supported by the findings of various researchers, among them, Baird as reported by Roush:

... students tend to feel that they had become more aware and more concerned with ideas when taught by teachers who used a generalist approach.⁴

I couldn't agree more! Indeed, I find that the generalist, optional approach to teaching and learning goes beyond the students' awareness of and concern with ideas to the *application* of the ideas to their classroom teaching. That is, the creative abilities and thinking of the students are released through this process so that they teach more imaginatively and effectively than did students who previously had been taught didactically.

High-ability students in particular seem to benefit more from the optional approach to learn-

ing, whereas some of the low-ability students find this approach difficult. Consequently, some anxiety tends to rise in this latter group without repeated clarification of the options available to them. The quantity and quality of the academic work in both groups has increased considerably over the past several years, however, despite the tension evidenced by some of the students. They write better; they teach better. They increasingly learn more about themselves—their needs, strengths, and resources—through the options they find available, thereby achieving guidance and direction to achieve subsequent learning experiences of benefit to them.

The optional route to learning is perhaps most applicable to elementary schooling, where time and circumstance do not dictate the learning

⁴ Donald C. Roush. "The Art of University Teaching." Unpublished paper. New Mexico State University, July 1976. p. 6.

experiences of students as they do at higher levels of schooling. An increasing number of research findings seem to support this thesis. Studies of the open classroom in particular indicate that self-expression, self-reliance, and self-discipline of pupils are achieved consistently when students are provided options for learning. Representative of these studies are those reported by Carbonari,⁵ Carini,⁶ Chittenden,⁷ Eisenberger,⁸ Knowles,⁹ Traub, Weiss, and Fisher,¹⁰ and Wilson, Langevin, and Stuckey.¹¹ A considerable number of other studies, less congruent, but related to optional learning as practiced in open-access school programs, also tends to support the thesis of this article.

Clearly, the truly open classroom is a natural outlet for accommodating intra- and inter-personal differences in the classroom. This is especially so when the pupils' preferred choices of learning are purposeful and productive. The open classroom's emphasis on the involvement of students in *designing* rather than solely in reacting to their classroom activities sharply differentiates it from the more traditional classroom.

I feel that almost any learning experience, provided it is constant with a core of skills unique to the experience, may be utilized to encourage the self-selection process. Pupils can select the arithmetic examples they wish to compute, the words they wish to spell, the science experiments they desire to undertake, the social studies projects they wish to implement, the art medium they want to express themselves in—all within prescribed boundaries of curricula stipulated by school policy. It is conceivable, however, that self-selected experiences by the pupils are not strictly the answer. Guidance by the teacher may be necessary. The teacher ensures the essential minimum; the pupils pursue the maximum of which they are capable. The teacher guides the pupils to alternative routes of learning, yet lets them decide the most pertinent route to follow to meet their individual needs and interests.

The fact that students within a classroom learn differently has been well documented. Nonetheless there are some persons who—as a result of studies too small in sampling, too specific in focus, and too narrow in scope—apparently believe and practice otherwise. Most such studies, with their focus on academic and personal differences between students, have persistently ignored

the differences *within* each of the students studied. It is my experience that the optional route to learning accommodates these "intra," as well as the "inter" differences of students. And, in so doing, it allows instructors to learn more about their students, and to practice teaching methodologies more applicable to the students' individual goals and aspirations than do traditional approaches to teaching and learning. ^{1/2}

⁵ J. A. Carbonari. "Report of an Evaluation Study of an Open-Concept School." *Educators' Report and Fact Sheet* 8(5): 1-2; 1971.

⁶ Patricia F. Carini, D. Dwain Hearn, Joel Burdin, and Lilian Katz, editors. "Evaluation of an Innovative School." In: *Current Research and Perspectives in Open Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, undated. pp. 101-13.

⁷ Edward Chittenden. "Research and Assessment Strategy." In: D. Dwain Hearn, Joel Burdin, and Lilian Katz, editors. *Current Research and Perspectives in Open Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, undated. pp. 39-44.

⁸ Velma D. Eisenberger. "Open Education and Internal Control of Navajo Beginners." Unpublished research report. Kayenta, Arizona: Kayenta Boarding School, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1972.

⁹ Gerald Knowles. "Open Education and Internal Locus of Control." In: D. Dwain Hearn, Joel Burdin, and Lilian Katz, editors. *Current Research and Perspectives in Open Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, undated.

¹⁰ Ross E. Traub, Joel Weiss, and Charles W. Fisher. *Studying Openness in Education: An Ontario Example*. Ontario, Canada: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.

¹¹ F. S. Wilson, R. Langevin, and T. Stuckey. "Are Pupils in the Open Plan School Different?" *The Journal of Educational Research* 66(3): 115-18; November 1972.



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