The Cult of Individualized Instruction

George Weber

Each formal "system" of individualized instruction has its problems, and must be judged by its results. This writer holds that "it is by no means proved that individualized instruction always results in greater learning."

For several years now, many teachers and schools have been trying to individualize instruction. For some of these, unfortunately, individualization has become a cult. The idea, however, is theoretically worth exploring. It is one approach to the old dilemma: How can we take account of individual differences while educating in groups? (Grouping, tracking, differential promotion, and enrichment are some other approaches.)

The rationale of individualized instruction is that pupils have different interests, different learning styles, different abilities, and are at different stages of learning. Yet the notion that children and young people have different interests that must be served by the instructional program is a dubious one. That they often have different

interests is beyond debate, but spending a lot of time and effort in trying to identify these interests and in adopting different programs to suit them is of doubtful usefulness.

As for different learning styles, the idea has some validity, but is often carried to bizarre extremes. The identification of such learning styles is not an easy matter, as most teachers who have tried to do it can attest. Students certainly have different abilities (or different levels of intelligence). That pupils are often at different stages of learning is also true. Some attempt to fit instruction to these different abilities and different stages of learning makes sense, and, as stated previously, there are a number of approaches to this objective.

The various attempts at individualized instruction fall into two general categories: informal and formal. In the informal type, the teacher tries to stay alert to the fact that some learners need more time to master a particular skill, body of knowledge, or understanding, while others need less. For the fast learners, the teacher provides additional challenges to reduce boredom. For the slower students, the teacher gives extra practice or drill—or just more time. The teacher also recognizes that a student who is having trouble learning something in a given way may benefit from a different tack. Different illustrations of principles and specifically designed homework often help. Many good teachers have followed these practices for years and continue to do so.

In the formal systems of individualized instruction, there is an attempt to provide "a unique program for every child." There is a conscious sequence of "diagnosis," "prescription," and "assessment." [1] In the diagnosis phase, something often called a "pretest" is administered to each child to ascertain just what he/she already knows, or can do, in the specific learning area. Then a "prescription" for his/her instructional program is selected and applied. This pretentiously named phase usually amounts to nothing more than the teacher's looking up, on a list or table prepared by others, the learning materials available to teach that topic. The child then works with those materials, or rather, works *through* them (since they are usually rigidly sequenced). Finally, for the assessment, a "post-test" is administered to see how much the student has learned. If he/she has achieved a certain level of mastery, he/she is allowed to move on to the next level of learning.

Three Systems Are Available

Three of the formal systems widely used in elementary schools are called Individually Guided Education (IGE) or the Wisconsin Design, Individually Prescribed Instruction (IPI), and Program for Learning in Accordance with Needs (PLAN). The first was developed by the University of Wisconsin, the second by the University of Pittsburgh and Research for Better Schools, and the third by Westinghouse Learning Corporation. PLAN utilizes a computer hook-up for assignment and assessment and involves what are called teaching-learning units (TLU's). These typically take the form of small packets that cover a single topic that can be treated in a brief span of time. The student rather quickly gets "feedback" on his/her performance. The students do not work with the computer, however.

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In practice, these formal systems have two major advantages. They force the school to define clearly what is to be learned and then to test carefully to see to what extent it has been learned. Ordinary elementary school programs do not al-

[1] Herbert J. Klausmeier, the developer of the Individually Guided Education (IGE) system, opposes the use of the terms "diagnosis" and "prescription." At the stage where other programs use "diagnosis," he says: "assess the level of achievement, learning style, and motivational level of each student." At the stage where other programs use "prescription," he says: "set instructional objectives for each child to attain over a short period of time." In practice, these differences between IGE and other programs may be semantic rather than operational.

ways do this. The other advantage lies in the concept of mastery. These systems stipulate that pupils must score 80 or 85 percent on a test of the material taught before they can proceed to the next unit. This is a revolutionary notion for many schools, where typically a subject is taught,

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tests may or may not be given, and then the teacher proceeds to the next topic no matter how many of the pupils have failed to learn the prior one well. The result, for pupils who do not sufficiently master each topic before the teacher moves on, is a cumulative deficit that sometimes leads to frustration, discouragement, or even a complete breakdown in learning progress. Since much learning is cumulative, it is not enough to half-learn each topic or learn only certain portions of it. We all know of persons who never remedy the gaps in their schooling caused by illness or a poor teacher, for example.

What Are the Problems?

Along with their advantages, these formal attempts at individualized instruction present a number of practical problems. In comparison with whole-class instruction, they reduce the amount of time that the teacher and pupil are in contact. To take an extreme case for emphasis, in a class of 25 second-graders, a 50-minute period of whole-class instruction gives each child 50 minutes of contact with the teacher—less, of course, the time the child's attention wanders. In contrast, if each of the 25 children is working by himself/herself and the teacher is going around the room from one child to another, the average contact between child and teacher is only two minutes! If the class is divided into four groups of about six pupils each, the teacher-contact time is greater, of course, but the principle is the same. Can the advantages of individualized instruction make up for this greatly reduced amount of contact with a live teacher?

A second problem arises from the required mountain of paperwork. Each child's progress and assignments must be kept track of. The PLAN system handles this problem—at some expense—by turning these considerable record-keeping chores over to a computer. In IGE and IPI, the teacher or aide must perform these duties.

It is hard to imagine just how voluminous this paperwork is unless one has examined several cases of programs in practice. Take, for example, a second-grade teacher with 25 pupils and 50 separate, discrete skills that may well have been defined for the year in reading alone. Each of these skills must be tested for each of the 25 children—a total of 1,250 tests! In addition, there are the skills in arithmetic and the other subjects that must be similarly checked—and checked with care. On an individual basis, this work takes far more time and record keeping than group testing that covers larger amounts of ground.

The paperwork problem is inherent in the penchant of the formal systems for breaking down skill areas (say, addition of whole numbers) into a large number of very specific, some would say minuscule, skills (for example, "carrying" to a different place, addition of items with different numbers of digits, and addition of long columns). Even some of the advocates of formal individualized systems readily admit to difficulties in this paperwork area.

Another problem stems from the inherent assumption that all children are at radically different stages of learning. In fact, of course, most pupils, particularly in the early grades, have many common instructional needs. That is, there is a whole list of things that they *all* need to learn. Seldom do children bring much academic achievement to school except in the field of reading. They all need to learn arithmetic, science, writing, and social studies. Even for those with some accomplishments in reading, there are new books to become familiar with and terms to learn. Why not do the necessary teaching to the whole class, or at least to large groups? When a teacher is informally attempting to individualize instruction, this is readily possible, but in formal systems it is difficult. Moreover, it violates the philosophy.

The situation is an illustration of how an approach that seems to prize flexibility can actually be quite rigid—and cult-like.

Finally, with young children there is the problem of keeping them at their assigned tasks in a productive way. Does the child understand the assignment? Does he/she understand what he/she is trying to learn? Will the student stick to it rather than day-dream or bother a neighbor? This is an important consideration because in individualized programs of all sorts a large number of children will be, at any one time, "working on their own." Young children, particularly, often lack the maturity and self-discipline to do that efficiently.

Judging by the Result Standard

In considering whether a formal system of individualized instruction in a given class or school is a step forward or a step backward, it must be judged in terms of its results. It is by no means proved that individualized instruction always results in greater learning. It seems to in some cases; it definitely does not in others. Perhaps the difference between the successful cases and the unsuccessful ones lies in incidental factors such as the aid provided by outside experts, the Hawthorne effect, the enthusiasm and extra work of teachers who volunteer for the new program, and the spur it gives to examination of goals and better evaluation procedures.

Individualized instruction is an excellent example of the truth that educational innovations should be tried cautiously, with proof demanded that they actually produce better results. The cult of individualized instruction often confuses the means with the ends of education. If it cannot produce better results in a particular instance, it should be—as it often has been—abandoned in favor of more orthodox, simpler procedures. EL

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