Letters

Mastery Learning Confusion . . .

Regarding Carl Glickman's claim that "Mastery Learning Stifles Individuality" (EL, November 1979, pp. 100-02), I continue to be amazed at the number of people who confound mastery learning with Benjamin Bloom's stand in *Human Characteristics and School Learning*. Mastery learning deals with instructional events and programs; *Human Characteristics* deals with the nature of individual differences. While there is some overlap, the overlap has tended to hurt rather than help mastery learning. Bloom's thesis in *Human Characteristics* tends to provide an upper limit for the potential of schooling in this country and abroad. This upper limit is a useful one to keep in mind. The present state of schooling in this country and abroad provides a second perspective on the problem of schooling, however. Somehow maintaining a dual perspective—on what *is* and what *might be*—is necessary if instructional improvement is to be accomplished. When mastery learning is viewed in the context of this dual perspective the results are quite clear. Mastery learning programs typically result in a higher level of learning than what is, but not as high a level of learning as what might be (at least what might be according to Bloom).

Unfortunately, without this separation, many educators tend to toss off mastery learning mainly because they disagree with Bloom that individual differences can be altered and can conceivably approach some "vanishing point." As is the case many times in education, such people tend to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Lorin Anderson
College of Education
University of South Carolina
Columbia

. . . and Dilemma

Reading your recent issue on mastery learning [*EL*, November 1979] prompted some thinking from both past personal experience and present observation.

Let us assume that a mastery learning instructional model is introduced within a science or social studies class in a departmentalized school. Mastery learning research says little about grading procedures in these classes, but one could assume that if a student mastered all the objectives in a reading or mathematics class, the student would receive a grade recognizing that degree of mastery. Would this also apply to nonreading classes?

I know of no teachers in departmentalized schools who give grades solely on the basis of academic skills or knowledge learned to mastery. Learning and grades are not synonymous. Do we know students, perhaps ourselves, who mastered teacher-presented skills or knowledge but who failed to turn in research papers, projects, or other such assignments and thus were given poor grades, were failed, or were given an incomplete?

Perhaps we were lazy, had other things to do, could not write well, or could not be creative without mastered skills and knowledge.

I'd welcome dialogue with mastery learning theorists and practitioners about this dilemma. I thoroughly enjoyed the issue. The ideas gave clarity and added scope to my own work with teachers in non-basic skills departmentalized schools.

Harry Stein
School Program Coordinator
Department of Education
State of New Jersey

Teacher Union Propaganda

Your November 1979 article, "Collective Bargaining and Supervision: A Matter of Climate," [*EL*, pp. 175-77] brought out several significant points for educators, especially curriculum supervisors, to be concerned about.

The statement, "However, the 'catch-22' of negotiated participation in curriculum development is restrictive contract language," is particularly significant. We submit that "restrictive contract language" is precisely the goal of union officials in their drive to control every phase of our educational system—even the minds of our children.

Concerned Educators Against Forced Unionism, the education division of the National Right to Work Committee, has published a four-year study of social studies textbooks in high school use and their treatment of the American labor movement. The highly acclaimed project, "Classroom Treatment of the Right to Work,"

clearly shows that bias against the right to work principle exists. Less than half of the 200 textbooks reviewed even discuss right to work; of those that do, 65 percent are inaccurate, incomplete, or overtly biased in their presentations.

We urge curriculum leaders to be alert to this attempt on the part of union officials to manipulate the education of students. Teacher union propaganda has reached a critical stage, and controlling the curricular committees through legislative and bargaining chicanery is all too possible.

Your readers who may be interested in finding out more details about the right to work bias study, including copies of the specific critiques of biased textbooks, may write to CEAFU, 8316 Arlington Boulevard, Fairfax, Virginia 22038.

Susan E. Staub
Staff Director
Concerned Educators Against Forced Unionism
Fairfax, Virginia

Back-to-Back Contradictions

I am a regular reader of *Educational Leadership* and generally appreciate the useful information and readable format. Your October 1979 issue on school and teacher effectiveness was of particular interest to me because of its very direct relation to my work.

Two articles that appeared back-to-back in the issue were the Jere Brophy article on "Teacher Behavior and Student Learning" [pp. 33-38], and the article by Good and Grouws entitled "Teaching and Mathematics Learning" [pp. 39-43]. I believe that both of these articles contain potentially misleading and clearly confusing statements about small group instruction. Brophy provides a list of "elements of fourth-grade mathematics instruction." The first listed element is: "1. Concentrate on whole class (not small group) instruction." The major source quoted for this "element" is Good and Grouws' (1979) article in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. The Good and Grouws article in *Educational Leadership* does say to concentrate on whole class instruction (page 40), but later on (page 43) we find the following statement:

> One important situation that we have not actively explored is the use of the program with small group instruction. Some of the teachers in the control condition who taught mathematics to groups of students achieved very good results.

This is not just a contradiction of Brophy's statement; it is a serious contradiction *within* the Good and Grouws article. I cannot understand why these two articles would make such a strong negative statement on something about which they seem to be so uncertain.

I have to wonder if Good and Grouws intended in their initial statement to be referring only to whole class versus individualized instruction? In any event, it would appear that their later statement puts Brophy in the position of not only making an inadequately supported statement, but putting it first on his list of "elements."

I looked up the original article in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* (71:355-62) and found it to be less contradictory but no more supportive of Brophy's statement. To quote that article:

> However, it must be emphasized that these variables were expressed in the context of other variables . . . Hence, it is difficult and perhaps misleading to overemphasize the meaning of any individual behavior.

This would appear to be a statement that could be aimed directly at Brophy. At any rate, I find it unfortunate that a large number of instructional leaders who regularly read your journal may be misled by the Brophy article. A lot of harm may be done to good small group situations.

Thomas E. Rowan
Mathematics Coordinator
Division of Academic Skills
Montgomery County Public Schools
Rockville, Maryland

Brophy Replies

I believe that Mr. Rowan has misread and overreacted to the phrase "elements of fourth-grade mathematics instruction," taken out of context. First, I did not make any *general* statements about small group instruction. Instead, I only stated that the Good and Grouws research supports the use of a whole class approach for fourth-grade math instruction. I stand by that statement.

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able with it. Right now those who work in local school buildings may not even know this high-speed equipment is available or, if they do, they are awed by it. Even if a professional specialist were at their elbows, they might not know—for now—how to ask the right questions that would pull from the various information resources some ideas or materials they might use in classrooms the next morning. In any event, if change is to be brought about, experts who do not themselves work in those schools must recognize how the teachers and principals who do work there think and feel and behave.

Existing information resources are used by some educators. No doubt more educators can be made aware of these resources. More can become occasional or regular users. But new equipment alone will not bring about that expansion of services. What is needed, everywhere, is improved coordination of services.

Ultimately the nation's education information resources must be organized more equitably and efficiently. Along with continued support for that cadre of communicators and linking agents who are genuinely eager to help, we need a major nationwide effort to consolidate and coordinate information services. Clearly, it is up to you to prod the education information community to get together and hammer out where it plans to go in the next few years to meet your needs and the needs of the students in your classroom. In the meantime, what can you do now?

Meanwhile . . .

First, identify the information resources and services that are intended to help you—those nearest you, those most responsive, those with the most capable personnel.

Then determine your own information—seeking priorities. (For example, you simply can't afford to subscribe to every publication or phone every information center that might offer useful information.) For which topics and at what level of detail do you really need valid new information?

Finally, think through with care, in advance, the questions you will pose. The art of asking focused, precise questions is well worth cultivating.

In addition, keep in mind that learning opportunities are more likely to improve if you don't limit your information searches only to sources and ideas that confirm your long-held beliefs and preferences. EL

Fred S. Rosenau is East Coast Representative, Far West Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, Washington, D.C.

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Elsewhere in my article, I noted that small group instruction is effective in the early elementary grades. The work of Jane Stallings, among others, supports this. Small group instruction may be effective in the intermediate grades, as Mr. Rowan suggests, but as yet I have not seen *evidence* (as opposed to testimonials or armchair speculation) to this effect.

Some teachers in the Good and Grouws research got good results using small groups, but others did not, so that mean scores for this set of teachers as a whole were mediocre. Thus, this study provides no evidence favoring the use of small groups, as such, although it does show that small groups *can* be used effectively for fourth-grade math instruction by *some* teachers. In any case, as with most issues of educational methods, we need to move beyond relatively primitive "whole class *vs.* small groups *vs.* individualized" questions and begin to ask what particular kinds of small group instruction are effective with what kinds of students for bringing about what kinds of outcomes. EL

Jere Brophy
Professor of Teacher Education and Educational Psychology
Michigan State University
East Lansing

Have Something to Say?

If so, write to us. Letters to the editor are usually edited for brevity and are printed only if space is available. Letters must be signed, although we will withhold an author's name if requested.