

# The Way I See It

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## LEARNING TAKES MORE THAN TIME ON TASK

It was early in the morning—six o'clock or so—and I was in a hospital in Philadelphia for my second bout with infectious hepatitis. The nurse came into my room and said, "You have a telephone call at my desk. Can you get up and take the call down there?"

I put my bathrobe over that silly hospital gown, walked down to the nurse's desk, and picked up the phone. My wife was on the line. She said, "Your dad just died."

I heard that phrase—"Your dad just died"—more than twenty years ago. I *learned* about my father's death that way. And though it sounds superfluous to say it now, I *never forgot* what I learned that day. The information that I received—"Your dad just died"—had real meaning for me. I did not need to hear it again and again in order to remember what I had been told.

Learning is a very personal thing. Individuals learn or they do not learn. Groups, schools, organizations, or cultures do not—cannot—learn. Only individual human beings can learn.

Learning is always a union of past experience and present experiencing. Past experience helps each of us build up a body of knowledge, feelings, and values that constitutes the very core of our psychological being. The core of knowledge, feelings, and values then serves as a base on which we stand when we receive new information, new stimulus material, in whatever form. It is with that base of previous experience that we "make sense" of what we hear and see and feel.

Difficulties in teaching and learning arise when the stimulus material is so foreign to the learner that an interaction or union between the past

experience and the present experience is difficult, or when the processes used to foster such an interaction or union are inappropriate or ineffective.

A careful look at many of the curriculum materials used in schools today reveals the meaningless nature of much of the substance being made available to learners. There are no concepts, no ideas, no meaningful "handles" to get hold of in order to understand what is there. Isolated facts and unrelated detail are everywhere. Trying to comprehend the curriculum materials available in many schools today is like trying to read a dictionary, item by item, page by page. The information is technically correct and factually accurate, in the main, but it is basically meaningless because the possibilities for relating what is there to a learner's past experience are incidental or nonexistent.

The research that has been accomplished over the years with "nonsense syllables"—and that is what many curriculum materials actually seem to be like—makes it obvious that rote learning, repetition, and continuous drill are required if short term memory is to be achieved. Long term retention is practically impossible unless mnemonic devices or other such techniques are employed.

The point is important because the latest "in" thing in education is "time on task." All other things being equal, which they never are, of course, "time on task" is directly related to achievement in school, some experts say.

To suggest that students who spend more time on their lessons learn more than students who spend less time hardly seems to be a revolutionary concept, though the notion is being heralded by some people in that way.

But what is "time on task"? What is the task on which the student spends time? Almost always it involves some type of curriculum material: textbook, workbook, filmstrip,

ditto sheet, or experiences with materials of various kinds. Almost never are students expected (or even allowed) simply to think, reflect, create, contemplate, or conjure up ideas on their own. One explanation for the generalization that time on task is directly related to achievement may be a function of the fact that, when the task itself requires the learner to try to make sense out of meaningless curriculum materials, more time results in more learning. How much easier it would be and more enduring if the curriculum materials were meaningful rather than meaningless in the first place.

The point is important because the *processes* of teaching and learning tend to be shaped by the *materials* of teaching and learning. If the instructions on the worksheet say, "fill out the blanks," for example, the teacher will probably pass out the material and say, "Fill out the blanks." If the textbook directs the student to "read the section below and answer the questions at the end," the teacher will probably say, "Read this section and answer the questions at the end."

Most of us like to believe that teachers specify objectives, select curriculum materials, and then contrive educational experiences for their students, in that order. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most teachers *start* with curriculum materials.

Thoughtful analyses of curriculum materials may help us understand why many learners have difficulty relating their own past experiences to such stimulus materials. It may be that by improving the quality of the curriculum materials themselves (in other words making them more mean-

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ables the teacher to select and display material, and the ease of using the equipment.

Because the gym classes took place in large rooms, it was found that an auxiliary sound system was needed to amplify the audio. Other concerns centered on the cost and availability of videodisc equipment.

### Mejore Su Pronunciación

The second disc, *Mejore Su Pronunciación*, is designed as an individual study aid to help American university students overcome common Spanish pronunciation problems. The disc was organized into chapters. Chapter One concentrated on the use of the Spanish "A" sound, and Chapter Two the Spanish "D" sound. Each chapter is divided into subsections: basic pronunciation rules, bilingual vignettes, practice segments, and a self-test. A user's guide completes the disc package.

From the Spanish evaluation we developed two composite student profiles with neither type of student having any experience with the videodisc. The first student did quite a bit of "hunting and pecking" when using the disc; the second student used the table of contents and the decision frames to select material for viewing.

Both types of students were impressed with the overall potential of the videodisc. The most attractive features were: the ease of handling the equipment and its flexibility which enabled them to work at an individual pace and repeat program segments as many times as necessary.

The students suggested that the segments be shorter, allowing more entry points into and out of various segments. Although some students found the equipment difficult to operate and were never comfortable with it, they still saw great potential for the videodisc.

As an audiovisual aid the videodisc technology has a lot to offer. The players are simple to use, and as one teacher reported, relatively "grunch proof." The software (program) is durable and inexpensive when compared to film or videotape, and the disc is more capable of responding to the needs of the classroom teacher or student than conventional media. The technology has been developed to allow the user

to easily customize a prepackaged audiovisual program to respond to a specific classroom need.

The only thing currently missing is the development of a large base of *quality interactive* software for the players. Although there are many research and development projects studying the videodisc, available software is limited. And since the videodisc is a play only medium, the worth of the technology to education will be ultimately defined by the quantity and quality of interactive software available in the marketplace. ■

### References

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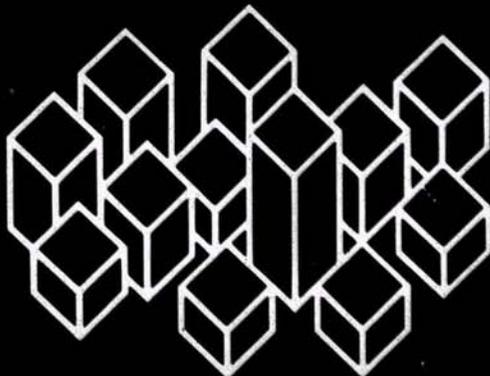
ingful, more informational, and more capable of being related to), we will be able to increase the amount of learning and decrease the time.

If we can increase the amount of learning and reduce the time, then we will be in a position to make available even more stimulus material and raise achievement levels still higher.

Raising levels of achievement on lower levels of expectations is one thing (for example, higher achievement on minimal competencies). Raising levels of achievement on higher levels of expectations is an educational accomplishment of a very different order.

Repetition and extensive time on task are not necessary, unless the substance of the learning experience is not meaningful to the learner. I still remember what my wife told me when she called me that morning, more than twenty years ago. ■

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