

ACTIVIST EDUCATION: SOME PRACTICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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The concept of activist education has been given prominence in contemporary Quebec through the reports of the current Royal Commission on Education.¹ In these reports the term "activist" is used to describe, on one hand, a set of educational aims: in addition to teaching the traditional skills and content, the schools are to produce individuals who can think for themselves, who are curious about the world around them, and who show initiative and self-reliance in the conduct of their affairs. On the other hand, the term is used rather broadly to indicate the kind of pedagogy that is recommended for the accomplishment of these aims. Teachers, and particularly those in the elementary grades, are urged not to rely on the traditional desk-bound and textbook-oriented methods of instruction. Instead they are encouraged to look for ways to increase pupil activity and involvement in learning by using such techniques as experimentation, research projects, discussion, and debate. They are also encouraged to be "child-centered" in their planning and to adapt materials and instruction to the characteristic ways that children perceive, think, and work at different stages in their development.

Readers of the Royal Commission reports will recognize that the above is an interpretation and possibly an extension of what the commissioners intended. In any case, it is obvious to students of education that the activist concept is not new but has had a long history in Western thought, from Rousseau and Pestalozzi to Dewey, Piaget, and Bruner. For those who are immediately involved in the development of education in Quebec, there are many interesting side issues to the social implications of activist education — and also many practical problems such as assessing and providing the material resources, desirable student-teacher ratios, and professional guidance that may be needed to implement the concept.

Professional guidance may be especially important. Where new, the principles of activist education will need to be presented in a way that is sensitive to the human problems involved in a change from traditional methods. If a supportive psychological climate is not created, feelings of distrust and cynicism on the part of some teachers may well result. It is

possible, as research by Jackson and Guba² would suggest, that veteran teachers, in particular, tend to develop a need structure that is consonant with the nature of their work, and that such teachers may show, for example, relatively high needs for deference, order, and endurance (at a task). This idea is in line with the general belief of social scientists that the demands of occupational roles tend to colour and mould the personalities of those who occupy them. Teachers who receive a strong emotional satisfaction from their work in its traditional form may experience some stress and anxiety as the approved way of fulfilling the teaching role changes. The problem is compounded by the fact that it is easy to discourse on the theory of activist education (as in the opening paragraph of this article) but rather more difficult to provide convincing and helpful examples that show it in practice over a period of time. Some teachers may have little need for such examples since they have always used activist principles to some degree. Other teachers may wish to try these principles but feel that social and material conditions in their school and community make it impossible. For a few, the threat involved in using a less controlled and stereotyped approach to teaching may be intolerable, and although they may be effective teachers in terms of certain educational aims and within the limits imposed by their personalities, they can never be expected to function comfortably except in highly structured situations where they have complete control and direction of all pupil activity.

The greatest difficulty for those who must guide the introduction of this new approach may, however, come from the over-enthusiastic *avant-garde* who, without sufficient planning and experience, immediately attempt more through activity methods than they or their students can handle. It has happened before in education that attempts to revitalise teaching or introduce new approaches have been discredited because they were introduced too indiscriminately and too quickly or because more was claimed for a method than might legitimately be expected of it. With these considerations in mind, there may be value at this point in examining some of the cautions that might be raised about activity methods.

It will, however, be instructive if we first examine the term "teacher presentation" which will be used in juxtaposition with "activity methods" during the remainder of this

discussion. By teacher presentation is meant that method whereby the teacher may use in one lesson some questioning, some lecturing, some audio-visual aids and, usually, some means of having the pupils practice what they have learned. Pupil activity does occur but the lesson is not planned to make it the major event. Both information and motivation come to the learner through the teacher rather than from the learner's first-hand contact with primary sources or concrete materials. It must be admitted, however, that in the case of certain skilled teachers the line between teacher presentation and activity methods does become blurred as they manage what appears to be a combination of the two. Perhaps teacher presentation can best be described by noting that it is a modern variant of the Herbartian method and is the typical lesson that student teachers give during practice teaching.

If the educator turns to psychology for justification of activity methods, he will find a general consensus in research and theory that activity on the part of the learner does, in many instances, tend to enhance learning. When the learner has, for example, worked out for himself a more effective way to perform a skill, or evolved a concept that permits him to classify information, or hypothesized a principle that enables him to solve a problem, it is likely that understanding and retention will be superior than if his experiences were confined to reading a text or following a teacher presentation. We would, however, stress the word "likely" in the previous statement — not only because of the tentative nature, at this moment, of any of our conclusions about learning, but also because the statement begs the question of possible interactions between method of learning and such variables as personality traits (for example, anxiety and compulsivity) and differences in intellectual potential. A more important observation about the statement, for practical and educational purposes, is that it may lead to the crude and unwarranted conclusion that because we cannot detect any overt activity on the part of the learner, learning is not taking place.

In the past, there has been some tendency to deny that talking about something could constitute an activity, and it might not have been rare, at one time, to hear statements such as the following: "All that happened during that lesson was a lot of verbalization by the teacher and children; no activities were undertaken and I doubt that any real learning occurred."

Yet, provided that the teacher had his attention, even the most "passive" listener or non-verbalizer in such a class may have been led to think in a way that reorganized quite profoundly his intellectual and attitudinal orientation towards the topic of the lesson. If the teacher's presentation led the listener to reorganize his previous knowledge mentally into a concept or principle of a higher order than he previously had, then a significant change in what some psychologists are currently calling "cognitive structure" may have occurred.³

The results of such a change may not become apparent until the new concept or principle becomes a mediating element in directing the learner's behaviour at some future time, and so novel may the new behaviour then appear, as in the sudden solution of a problem, that observers may be tempted to attribute it to some supposedly contemporary process such as insight. Although its effectiveness may depend in part on the nature of what is to be learned, teacher presentation, if skilful, may be very economical of both time and energy. In spite of this advantage, it remains, however, a technique by which the teacher manipulates the learner's intellectual processes. By its very nature it must ultimately concede some place to self-directive and activity methods, particularly if the learner is ever to learn how to be his own teacher or is to understand how new concepts and principles are generated within a field. Thus we return to activity methods and a consideration of how they may be made more effective by using the kind of verbal learning that is at the heart of teacher presentation.

Perhaps the import of our thinking will emerge more clearly if we take as an example of an activity method the kind of social studies project that a teacher in the upper elementary grades might plan with his class. (We do this at the risk of venturing into a curriculum area in which we are not expert and also of giving credence to the idea that activity methods are confined to social studies projects in the elementary grades.) Let us suppose that the project is around a topic that is popular with some teachers — the life of the Eskimo people. In addition to learning how to locate information, work independently or cooperatively, and make a presentation or report of the results of their own work, the pupils will usually acquire a quantity of detailed information about Eskimos. A further and more fundamental value will emerge, however, when the teacher leads the pupils to elaborate in verbal form

the higher-order generalizations or principles that may follow from their research: What is the relationship between environment and culture? What determines the social organization of a people? Given their present way of life, what are the problems that a people such as the Eskimos must face in the course of further social evolution? In this form, and without building up to them, these questions would in most cases be unsuitable for the grades we have in mind, but they are suggested here to indicate the direction that the pupils' thinking might take as they assess (with the encouragement of their teacher) the results of their research.⁴

In at least some cases in the past, those who used the project method were too hesitant to carry the learner on from his experiences at the concrete level, too timid about raising challenging questions that might have to be left without immediate answers, and too negligent in stimulating the learner to sort out and state the key concepts and principles involved. It is the latter, we believe, that accumulate as cognitive structure and remain as powerful mediating influences on thought and action long after the specific details are forgotten. The degree to which this exploitation of a project or similar activity is possible will depend on the potentialities of the original topic. The best topic is one, which, to use a phrase from Bruner, is "highly nutritious for its weight,"⁵ that is, it yields not only a wealth of specific knowledge but also lends itself to the higher order mental operations we have been describing. Whether or not Eskimos are a potentially nutritious topic may be open to question. In any case, it would be well to get as much out of them as possible before considering whether to take up another project.

Prominent among concepts currently associated with activity methods is that of discovery learning. To provide for discovery learning the teacher creates a situation in which the learner is able to relive and thus appreciate the processes by which some fundamental knowledge in a discipline was generated. For example, in science or mathematics a class, or individuals in it, might discover and state for themselves a key proposition that otherwise would be presented to them by demonstration and verbal exposition on the part of the teacher or textbook. Similarly, something akin to discovery learning may occur in a history class when the instructor provides students with copies of original documents and has them

write history for themselves. In the words of Ausubel, "autonomous discovery probably enhances intuitive meaningfulness by intensifying and personalizing both the concreteness of experience and the actual operations of abstracting and generalizing from empirical data."⁶ On the other hand, there are obvious limitations: there is just not sufficient time for schools to use this as the principal method of instruction and there is no guarantee that the very nature of the process ensures that pupils will arrive at a correct solution. Extensive promptings and hints from the teacher are often required and so we have "guided discovery" and "adventurous participation" suggested as compromise solutions. As is the case with many innovations in pedagogy, the ultimate status of what is undoubtedly a potent teaching technique will depend on the skill of teachers in using it where and when it is most appropriate.

As a final point among these considerations, we would note that where learning has proceeded through activity methods, careful consideration should be given to the way achievement is measured and assessed. If activity methods aim at developing in the learner the ability to plan for himself, locate information independently, and think critically about the significance of his findings, then appropriate tests of these outcomes should be used. Because of a simplistic faith that these results naturally accrue from activity methods, there might be a tendency to neglect their objective assessment. This would be unfortunate: not only would it not allow for an evaluation of teaching effectiveness, it would also fail to provide the evidence that would justify in the eyes of the public the value of a new, and probably more expensive, approach to education. It might be wise, too, to consider the possibility that pupils taught by activity methods may not do quite as well on traditional tests of formal skills and content as pupils taught by traditional methods because of the reciprocal relationship that usually exists between methods of teaching and methods of testing. Most of our existing tests were devised to measure the results of traditional teaching methods. The problem here may be one of knowing to what extent one can expect traditional objectives to be served by new methods which were, after all, adopted to serve an enlargement of the original aims.⁷

The cautions and observations we have noted in no way

exhaust the topic of activist education. Obviously there are many different ways that this particular educational concept can be applied, and it will need considerable study before its full implications for the revitalization of Quebec schools can be understood.

References and Notes

1. *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec*, Government of the Province of Quebec, Vol. 1-3, 1963-65.
2. P. W. Jackson and E. G. Guba, "The Need Structure of In-service Teachers," *School Review*, 65 (1957), 176-192.
3. By higher order concept or principle we here mean one that organizes and structures the content more extensively and systematically for the learner. It is then a more powerful concept or principle because it subsumes more and enables the learner to deal with a wider range of particular instances.
4. These questions are suggested to indicate the *kind* of relationships that a teacher who knows and appreciates the potentialities of his subject may see at or near the top of the spiral curriculum in social studies. In the lower grades he is more concerned that pupils approach these problems in a form suitable for their present level of functioning than that they leap immediately to the terminology and abstractions of the university scholar.
5. J. S. Bruner, "Learning and Thinking," *Harvard Educational Review*, 29 (1959), 184-192.
6. D. P. Ausubel, "Implications of Pre-adolescent and Early Adolescent Cognitive Development for Secondary School Teaching," *The High School Journal*, 45 (1962), 268-275.
7. The reader who is interested in this problem of measurement may wish to examine the results of research comparing activity and traditional methods as reported by Sells *et. al.*, "Evaluative Studies of the Activity Program in the New York Public Schools: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of Experimental Education*, 9 (1941), 310-322 and summarized by Lee J. Cronbach, *Educational Psychology*, (2nd ed.) New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963, pp. 15-16.

Surely our problem is to adapt education to contemporary living: to redefine the humanities, to revitalize language, to redirect mathematics, to redesign the applications of natural science, most of all to deepen our knowledge of man himself and teach him to live with his fellows. This is a task for the teacher and it can only be performed by a teacher who understands modern problems and who is ready to adapt his own classroom techniques to contemporary needs.

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