Age of Creative Insecurity: Student-Centered Learning

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ABSTRACT

Trapped by inflexible mechanisms, many institutions are unable to adapt smoothly to the changing expectations and needs of their clients. Our educational system is particularly out-of-synch. Student-centered teaching—participative education—through unstructuring is one method for encouraging a flexible, creative, classroom environment. However, as this article points out, grades as the criteria for success, the learned need for predictability, the tendency to reward conformity, and inexperience in group decision-making techniques have hindered the development of student-centered learning.

> "Education, like fresh rolls, goes stale. And in today's Knowledge Society, the problem is not getting new information: it is developing new ways to learn, and to apply new knowledge."[1]

"EDUCATION" is an integral part of the American social process and tends to reflect society's basic characteristics. The success ethic is one of the most important of these characteristics. Very early in a student's life, the teacher is established as an authority figure.[2] The teacher's power to influence the direction and possible outcome of a student's future has an impact at once reassuring and forbidding. Constant reinforcement of the teacher's importance leads, more often

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than not, to an unquestioning attitude on the part of the student. Students quickly realize that by pleasing the teacher, i.e., by doing the assigned work, they will receive good grades—a token of the teacher's pleasure and a welcome relief to their parents. Predictability in academic performance is rewarded.

What then do we have? A social institution which has substituted means for ends. Grades are paramount, and education is only secondary. In this climate success becomes equated with conformity. Creative energies are stifled and our educational system becomes an agency for social control. Success based on the banal practicalities of yesterday deadens the spirit. "To gain the independence, freedom and security required for creativity, the normal individual has to reject this concept of success." [3]

Our graduate students are caught in an out-of-synch phase. Bits and pieces of the old system of education have been replaced by innovative and often far-reaching programs, but the old philosophy remains. No new guiding spirit of sufficient strength to supplant the old ethic has yet been invoked. In 1967, Marshall McLuhan predicted that "the very first casualty of the present-day school system may very well be the business of teacher-led instruction as we now know it. . . . Education will be more concerned with training the senses and perception than with stuffing brains." [4] Nevertheless, grades, the teacher as authority figure, and the success ethic remain as constant reminders of a system more concerned with the source of a statement than with its content.

Doubts concerning the efficacy of traditional teaching methods have led to experimentation with other techniques. Frequently, emphasis is placed on student-centered teaching rather than instructor-centered methods. The assumption is that university learning based on the lecture method with questions and discussion is (1) "insufficiently experimental," (2) "too authoritarian," (3) "too passive in the role in which it places students," (4) "too detached from students' on-going lives, their hopes and involvements, the points where their psychic energy is most involved," and (5) "too impersonal." [5] In "Participative Management in the College Classroom" R. H. Killmann cites several studies which support the hypothesis that student-centered teaching is more effective in stimulating critical thinking among students.[6]

Student-centered teaching results when students are allowed (1) to set classroom objectives, (2) to establish means of arriving at these

objectives, and (3) to evaluate progress toward attainment of these objectives. Before students can assume this novel role it is usually necessary to unfreeze traditional forms of response. Reducing the formal classroom structure, or "unstructuring," is part of the change process. Methods to reduce the structure of the classroom environment have been developed in order to facilitate the generation of student involvement or participation in the education process. Within this pattern the instructor assists student activity but does not direct it. Participation will, in theory, increase student motivation and classroom performance will improve.

This article is a study of participation in the classroom. It focuses on a course in library management and the effect the process of unstructuring has on efforts to encourage student-centered learning. The time span covers a three week period. Classroom dynamics are evaluated against the results of studies reported in the fields of education, psychology, and management.

The instructor's decision to permit students in the library management class to participate meaningfully in their own education was a fateful one. Overlooked was an implicit assumption that, given this right, the students would be able to handle it effectively. This was not the case, and the reasons are manifold. Students are conditioned to respond to a set of achievement factors structured by their teachers and by society at large. Students do not learn to provide their own structure. Authoritarian attitudes develop with students viewing themselves in a subordinate role. This type of training fosters a need for predictability in the classroom setting and, frequently, an inability to adapt effectively to ambiguous situations.

When the instructor gave students the right to participate, he took one additional step. He removed himself from the traditional role of class leader. It was now up to the students. In retrospect, this move was overly drastic. Students lack experience in classroom environments which are leaderless and, as a result, relatively unstructured. The importance of the teacher's role as leader should not be minimized. He initiates structure. He functions as a mediator and sets goals and objectives. "Burke (1966) found that the leader's failure to provide goal orientation within the group led to antagonism, tension, and absenteeism. This effect was most acute when there was clear agreement within the group regarding who was to act as the leader." [7]

The instructor realized after the third week that his efforts to elicit student participation were not producing the desired effect. His stu-

dents needed a more formal structure. He returned to the lecture method. The intent here is not to analyze the instructor's motivations or capacities but rather to examine why the management class was unable to take advantage of the opportunity to govern itself. The following suggestions, however, have been collected as a guide for teachers who may be considering various forms of student-centered teaching.

1. View unstructuring as a process, not as a state to be reached.
2. Analyze yourself. What level of trust do you accord your students?
3. If you are grade oriented, lecture: Participative methods are not for brain stuffers.
4. Be suspicious of your motives. What do you really expect from "them?" What is your "hidden agenda?"
5. Evaluate the students. They will exhibit varying degrees of facility in group processes.
6. Do not impose participation. Propose it. The do-it-or-else approach will rebound.
7. Do not use the sink or swim technique. Be supportive, eternally supportive, even to the Flood.
8. Do not assume group cohesiveness. It does not come easy. It must be nurtured.
9. If you are in a hurry, forget it.
10. Learn together. Joy is in the act, not the re-act.

The original "confrontation" of the students in the classroom with a (posited) unstructured learning situation posed a threat to prelearned attitudinal needs for predictability in the educational setting. Why weren't the students able to adjust? One student in the class remarked, "It is unfortunate that we are not used to making up our own minds about what we want to do." Another student observed, "I don't consider myself creative or imaginative at all." Graduate level students reasonably can be expected to exhibit more intelligent learning patterns than undergraduates. In this they conform to expectations. Years and years of reinforcement finally produce a Roman copy. Paul Torrance in *Creativity* reports a "tendency for the academic performer to reproduce already established conclusions." [8]

The instructor's decision to alter his traditional role in favor of a student-centered, participative method caused dismay in the class. Some students doubted the validity of the group approach. This change in

expectations challenged the students' own resourcefulness. From the standpoint of predictability, most students would have preferred the lecture method with discussion periods used to iron out difficulties of comprehension. Now they were being asked to take control of their own education, albeit in a limited sense.

The traditional classroom experience is significantly different from the unstructured experience. Students in the traditional situation have only one major responsibility, i.e., to satisfy the instructor's expectations. The instructor states his goals and the students conform. The goals are clear and unambiguous. In the unstructured situation the instructor denies students the security of goal clarity. They are forced to make responsible decisions themselves. The students are now in an ambiguous situation. They are without a structure from which to proceed. According to Kurt Lewin, "An unstructured region has the same effect as an impassable obstacle. Being in unstructured surroundings leads to uncertainty of behavior because it is not clear whether a certain action will lead to or away from a goal." [9]

Students usually adapt quickly to the realization that the first priority is goal setting. The management class was no exception. Faced, however, with the necessity of creating their own goals, students viewed early disagreements within the group as sufficient reason for withholding allegiance.[10] Class discussion regarding the "failure" of students to challenge the views of their colleagues offers additional support for the conclusion that there was a general lack of experience in class-based, group interaction. In the traditional classroom setting, the teacher is the focal point for disagreement and acts as final arbiter.

Newly-formed groups must surmount numerous difficulties. Initial behavior is usually self-centered and relatively unsatisfying to others in the group. There is a tendency to project. There is a failure to listen: Frequently, progress will appear meagre. Resentments arise. Discussions on goals might seem endless and the group will be critical of its aimlessness. These deliberations and questionings are natural. The early stages of goal negotiation hold the promise of future compromise and the threat of imminent withdrawal.

C. D. Smock has shown that groups placed under stress exhibit "a greater tendency to make an early attempt to recognize structure in an ambiguous situation." [11] Pressure for "closure," coupled with disagreement on goals, forced some students in the management class to choose self-oriented goals. Murray Horwitz's findings were confirmed: "If the group goal is not accepted by a significant portion of the group, we

should expect to find relatively poor coordination of efforts and a relatively high incidence of self-oriented rather than group-task oriented behavior." [12] Similarly D. C. Korten reports "that in stressful situations where goal and path clarity are not established, there will be a tendency to avoid the situation or leave the group." [13] In the management class individual students withdrew into the security of their own "hidden agenda."

Two major barriers had to be overcome before the class could accept an unstructured situation. One of these has already been discussed—goal and path clarity. The second barrier was group cohesiveness. Students did not readily identify themselves as part of a functional, decision-making group. They had no standard against which to judge the qualities of the group. In a traditional setting only the instructor has need for this kind of information. He functions as a gatekeeper. In the management class, the setting of goals would have been facilitated if the group had been cohesive. It was not. Dissimilarities were exaggerated. The frequency of meaningful interactions dwindled. As the search became more strained, the group lost any potential for cohesiveness and the search for goals came to a halt. Failure was signalled by the reappearance of the instructor in his traditional role as lecturer and discussion leader.

J. R. Hackman, Yale University, Department of Administrative Sciences explained the problem to the author this way:

> "Our conclusions from the experiment would support your notion that the most likely explanation for the failure of unstructured learning situations to "take" for many students does *not* have much to do with the quality of the student involved. Instead, we now believe that a combination of (a) the many years of 'traditional' classroom experience held in common by all students and (b) the setting of the unstructured course within a traditional education system may explain why it is difficult to get such courses to work effectively—at least at first." [14]

Unstructuring and attendant meaningful student participation ultimately failed in the management class. By the end of the third week a sense of malaise pervaded the classroom. Disputes went unsettled, alienation set in. Common goals were never adopted and group cohesiveness—what little there had been—drooped noticeably. Unstructuring had failed, but in the process, definite flaws in the traditional education system were uncovered. Some of these flaws may have been

exacerbated by personality traits generally characteristic of professional librarians.

Library literature is replete with overt criticism of certain professional characteristics. Two statements by Mary Lee Bundy should suffice to establish a general feeling for the tenor of these comments: "One reason why libraries have been more than ordinarily change resistant is partly because of the more authoritative nature of their internal relationships."[15] ". . . A semi-profession whose members do tolerate the requirements for submissiveness at the expense of professional goals."[16] The choice of librarianship as a career is fairly indicative of certain personality traits which would be especially counterproductive in an unstructured, participative situation. "An individual guided by the judgment or will of individuals superior to him in authority or power would find that being open to experience would serve no useful purpose. A novel phenomenon would be disturbing since if it posed a problem it would arouse the anxiety associated with prospective initiative on his part. He finds it safer to rely on traditional rules or on the judgment of older, wiser, and superior persons."[17] Students in the management class clearly exhibited many of the classic features ascribed to the authoritarian personality. The learned need to rely on the instructor as the source of truth is one of the greatest failings of the traditional classroom. This need, in the words of Ivan Illich, leads to "psychological impotence."[18]

The increasing tempo of change challenges institutional inflexibility. Herman Kahn, Director of the Hudson Institute, views this tempo as a basic, long-term, multifold trend.[19] If Kahn's prognosis is correct, society will have to develop techniques to recognize change patterns in advance. Change must be incorporated into our institutions without endangering psychologically supportive needs for security and predictability. Certainly, the learned educational patterns of behavior exhibited by the library management class were antithetical to the actual requirements of the situation.

The management class reacted to the threat of an unstructured situation by a return to structure and an authority-dominated position. Their low tolerance for ambiguity did not allow time for effective group interaction to develop. In pursuit of goal and path clarity they established quasi-goals known only to themselves. In a rush toward threat reduction they created an impassable thicket of alienation. These students are entering a profession which is looking to them to provide the leadership necessary to adapt, to change, and to survive.

Student-centered, participative education can be successful. Given the current state of education, however, the recipe calls for carefully measured ingredients. Traditionalism often subverts the best intentions of the instructor to be innovative and of students to participate in meaningful change. Stress narrows the options, and inexperience creates pain and self-doubt. Nevertheless, new arrangements, new possibilities can occur. As John Holt says in *Freedom and Beyond*, "True education doesn't quiet things down, it stirs them up. It awakens consciousness. It destroys myths. It empowers people." [20]

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