

Educating the Individual

BY DENNIS PETERSON

As we watched in horror the television coverage of the Los Angeles riots in April 1992, commentators told us that the black community had erupted in anger and frustration, and that the crowd was venting its anger on other non-black residents or passersby. In reality, the community had not erupted, and the crowd did nothing; only individuals erupted, and only individuals assaulted and battered other individuals.

Groups do not act; only individuals act. Although individuals may act in concert, even then it is the individual members who act (and are, therefore, individually responsible for their behavior).

Similarly in the classrooms, classes do not study, learn, play, or do anything else; only individual students study, play, learn, etc. A realization of the validity of this premise leads to the corollary: teachers do not teach classes; they teach individuals. But the rub comes when someone asks how one should go about individualizing instruction. Perhaps the following tools and suggestions will help you begin that necessary task in your own classroom.

Cumulative Folder

Perhaps the most untapped (whether overlooked or avoided) tool for individualizing education is each student's cumulative record file in the school office.

Although the specific contents of this folder may vary from school to school, most of them will contain similar information: standardized test scores, previous teachers' comments, family information, attendance records, disciplinary notations, parental notes, and perhaps even samples of the student's work. No matter how complete the file is, however, all of that information is worthless unless it is used.

After settling into the school year and gaining an understanding of individual students, a teacher should make a habit of perusing the files of several students each week. In many cases, this practice will be a real eye-opener, providing extensive insight into your students' behavior and/or learning patterns.

Avoid beginning this perusal too early in the year, however. Do not "poison the well" by reading test scores or other teachers' comments before getting to know the students a little and drawing some conclusions of your own. If a teacher is not careful, he or she can make cumulative files a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Also, do not base your teaching approach for one or more students upon only one test score. Although standardized tests can be quite accurate, many factors can influence student performance on such tests (e.g., student illness, stress, or preoccupation with family or social problems; interruptions or distractions during the

testing sessions; or environmental conditions in which the test was administered). Rather, use a variety of information sources, many of which can be found with the test scores in the cumulative folder.

Observations

As Yogi Berra reputedly said, “You can see a lot just by looking.” Every teacher should develop a talent for informally and inconspicuously observing individual students in the classroom, in the hallway, at lunch, after school, during parental conferences, and at extracurricular functions.

During class time, especially during a lesson, notice facial expressions (frowns, raised eyebrows, embarrassment, excitement, etc.); habitual behavior (rituals, nail biting, etc.); and social interactions. Make an informal observation of individual student’s social interactions with classmates, with both older and younger students, with parents and siblings, and with other adults.

An excellent opportunity for observation is the home visit. Try to visit in the homes of as many of your students as possible. It can open your eyes to a variety of factors affecting—for good or for ill—the student’s learning. Note the physical environment. Does the child live in a very messy home? The answer might provide a clue to the reason for his or her neatness (or lack thereof) on his or her homework. Does the child have a place to study and do homework effectively? Is his or her home filled with good literature? Does the television occupy a central place (both literally and figuratively) in his or her home? These are all data you can glean simply by being observant.

Conferences

Another excellent tool for understanding the student, and thereby becoming better able to individualize his or her education, is the parent-teacher conference. Although teachers often have negative reactions to the very mention of such conferences (undoubtedly the result of some unfortunate bad experiences), they can nonetheless be a very positive teaching tool.

In his article *The Parent-Teacher Conference: A Positive Approach to Parental Involvement*, Dr. Charles Walker (2002) says that the purpose of the parent-teacher conference is “to develop an atmosphere of trust and cooperativeness between a prepared and organized teacher and interested parents, each [of whom] shares a mutual concern for . . . the child.”

In particular, this initial meeting is crucial. Walker continues, “It is a getting-acquainted time. In most instances, it is the foundation upon which future parent-teacher relationships will be built.”

During the conference, maintain eye contact and primarily be a listener. “The more a teacher listens,” Walker advises, “the more he understands the parents, which in turn helps the teacher understand their child.”

Such a conference can help you better understand the child and gain insight into how best to go about teaching him or her. A conference conducted during a home visit is especially effective.

Learning Styles

Practically every teacher will readily admit that each student is different from other students. Each has different strengths and weaknesses, different favorite and unfavorite subjects, different home environments, and even different ways of learning. Yet we so often ignore these critical differences when we teach, somehow expecting every student to learn the same information at the same pace by the same method—and enjoy it as much as we do ourselves.

Because each child is different, we cannot deal with each one the same way. One interpretation of Proverbs 22:6 is “Train up a child as he was made, according to his own individual makeup.” Too often, however, we are so caught up in teaching “the class” (i.e., the ephemeral “average” student) that we bore the fast learner and leave the slower learner behind. Instead, we should take steps to provide for the needs of not only the average learner, but also the slow learner, the late bloomer, the unmotivated student, the discipline problem, and the advanced student.

Increasing emphasis is being placed on the individual learning styles theory and its application in the traditional classroom by matching teaching methods with corresponding individual learning styles. Essentially, the theory states that each child has primarily one method by which he learns best: visually (he or she must see the lesson), orally (he or she must hear or talk through the lesson), or kinesthetically (he or she must do something with the lesson). The challenge is for teachers to recognize each student’s learning style, to help the child recognize and use his or her learning style, and then to apply that knowledge to the teaching situation.

But is this not difficult—maybe impossible? Difficult, yes; impossible, no. Trying to match teaching with every student’s style of learning on every day of the school year would lead only to frustration and burnout. Even to attempt doing so is unreasonable. But as John O’Neil, writing in *Educational Leadership* (October 1993), said,

“. . . teachers have a duty to ‘stretch’ outside their own styles, and . . . planning lesson content and activities with several broad ‘types’ in mind is the best way to make use of styles theory.”

Certainly, every teacher might ask, “How?”

Initially, begin with varying your primary teaching method, incorporating other methods periodically. If you tend to lecture most of the time, plan to include some hands-on activities, small-group or team work, oral assignments, and writing projects. Use a variety of audio/visuals during lectures (e.g., models, overhead projections, slides, filmstrips, cassette tapes, pictures, cartoons, videos, etc.).

Varying teaching methods throughout a unit, a class period, or even an individual lecture will allow all learners to learn in their own styles at least some of that time, to be comfortable at other times, and to be stretched and challenged at other times.

Rita Dunn, a widely acclaimed expert in the application of the learning styles theory, believes that “Students can learn almost any subject matter when they are taught with methods and approaches responsive to their learning styles strengths. . . . When students cannot learn the way we teach them, we must teach them the way they learn.”

Wise use of the cumulative folder, observations, conferences, and the learning styles theory can strengthen any teacher’s instruction. Good teachers are always pursuing ways to enhance student learning, but the best teachers do so with individual faces in mind.

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References

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