CHAPTER XIX

THE ACTIVITY AND PROJECT METHOD OF TEACHING—
INFORMAL AND INCIDENTAL LEARNING

What to Look For. Distinguish between the activity, project, or progressive method and the traditional method. What terms distinguish these two methods?

Note the claims that are usually made for each method.

What were the results of one of the early experiments on the effectiveness of the activity method, and why can the results be questioned?

Learn the features of the Collins experiment with the project experiment, and learn how the results were evaluated.

How can arithmetic be taught by the activity method, and what are both the immediate and the more remote results of such methods of teaching?

What were the results of trying to teach English by means of a puppet show?

Is the material covered when taught by the informal, activity, or project method?

Give your reactions to the policy of postponing formal arithmetic for several grades instead of beginning it in the first or second grade.

An experiment was conducted that is referred to as the Thirty Progressive Schools. Learn the features of the experiment and the results. Note that not all the results are on the side of the more modern methods.

Give consideration to the relationships of the traditional and progressive methods of teaching and American democracy. Which is more in harmony with our philosophy of government?

What are the results obtained from the new and old methods in terms of subject matter and personal development?

Introduction. Methods of teaching range from the rigorous question-and-answer, textbook, and drill method to the project and purposing type of teaching. The former makes little appeal to motive and is not based on an activity program; the latter is based on problems, purposes, and motives.

Controversy has raged for many years over the comparative effectiveness of the older and newer types of teaching. The experimental
evidence is not one-sided, with all of it supporting one type of method. Some evidence indicates that pupils taught through drill and review, with emphasis on the acquisition of facts, do better in examinations designed to measure the extent to which facts have been acquired. Progressive educators insist that education consists of much more than the acquisition of facts and even that, besides acquiring many other values, children actually learn more facts under the project, activity, and purposing method than under the more traditional type of teaching.

Teachers and administrators today are deeply interested in the activity, or project, method of teaching. This movement is at present attracting the interest of educators as hardly ever before. Leaders are arguing heatedly, and even bitterly, over its merits and demerits. We have the "progressives," on the one hand, advocating this method of teaching and sponsoring experiments; on the other, we have the "conservatives," or "essentialists," denouncing some features of it and pointing out the virtues of the more formal methods.

In the public press, because of the results obtained from history tests given to high-school graduates a few years ago, a torrent of editorial criticism was poured out against the schools. The apparent lack of knowledge was caused, it was claimed, by progressive methods of teaching. We were told to get back to teaching the good old fundamentals in the good old-fashioned way. Whatever progress the country had made in going to the dogs, and it seemed to be a good deal, was laid at the uncertain feet of progressive education, with its activities, projects, and purposes.

Even though it has not been and is not a prevailing method, the activity method of teaching is not new. It is probably as old as teaching itself. Some teachers have always taught by means of controlled activities and larger units. There have also been philosophers throughout the ages who have expressed disapproval of the rigorous, formal, lock-step type of teaching and advocated a more liberalized method based on the pupils' normal interests and activities.

Some fundamental differences exist between the more common traditional type of teaching and the newer methods that have been designated as activity methods. The traditional method is more formal and systematic. The work is divided into definite courses, or subjects. Lessons are assigned, and formal recitations and examinations are considered very important. The program is carefully planned and diligently followed, with a specific time and place for each subject. Drill, review, and systematic study are stressed, and such terms as thoroughness, mastery, habit, skill, and knowledge are used to describe the objectives and outcomes. The teacher is conspicuously in control, and the work usually centers in the content of textbooks.

The activity school is less formal and lays stress on activities and projects that are lifelike and appeal to the pupils' natural interests. The teacher is in control but less conspicuously so, being less master than in the traditional schools and more guide and helper. During the course of the school day the students are engaged in units of work, and in projects, and take excursions; and the aim is to acquire abilities, knowledge, and skills through these projects and activities instead of reading assigned pages in a text or working the next 10 problems in an arithmetic assignment. Students under the activity method will have a school garden; do school banking; audit school accounts; and, through series of units and activities, gain the skills and abilities that are acquired more directly in the formal study stressed in the more traditional school.

In the philosophy of the activity school, terminology is quite different from that of the traditional school. Instead of stressing drill, thoroughness, and discipline, the terms employed are interest, purpose, attitude, learning in a natural situation, and learning psychologically rather than logically. Exponents of the activity method state that education is much more than acquisition of facts and skills and is more concerned with the development of interests, initiative, the desire to learn, and personal qualities conducive to living successfully with one's fellow man.

Those who attack the activity school usually claim that the children it educates do not acquire the fundamental abilities that almost everyone agrees are essential. They insist that the activity, or project, methods are largely hit-or-miss and leave too much of the control to students too immature for such responsibility. Students' own interests are not a safe guide to follow, according to those who favor the more formal type of teaching. As a net consequence, the work is indefinite and often chaotic, and the students do not learn the subject matter.

The sponsors of the activity movement state, however, that their students learn as much, and probably more, subject matter and that they gain many intangible values not acquired in the usual schoolroom. They point out that, in spite of the drills, reviews, questions, and answers of the traditional school, many students fail to learn effectively. They also mention that students of the activity school actually acquire more information and have more knowledge than students in schools laying the greatest stress on such acquisition and also that the interests, needs, and wishes of children are observed to a greater extent than in
the more conventional type of school. Furthermore, those of the activity
school maintain that much of the learning in the typical school is
artificial and not lifelike to the child but largely rote and mechanical.
On the other hand, when a child learns through activities and projects,
he acquires his skills and knowledge from a natural problem and in a life-
like situation. Consequently, the work of the school has meaning to
him because it is real and vivid.

These issues are fundamental, for they pertain to the learning and
living of the school child. Since the principal purpose of the teacher is
to guide the pupil to learn effectively and to live successfully, these
issues are also vital to the student of educational psychology.

The major purpose in discussing the activity, purposing, or project
methods is not to argue for its effectiveness but to show that these
methods provide additional means for stimulating learning, for develop-
ing personality, and for providing for individual differences. These
more modern educational methods enlarge our concepts of learning, and
the educator should have an experimental attitude toward any method
that will develop the students. Furthermore, no given principle of
learning or educational method has a monopoly on effectiveness. It is,
thus best to enrich the experiences of the students as far as possible by
utilizing all accepted methods.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

An Early Experiment. Even as far back as over 30 years ago, a
report was made of a grade school in which the students did not study
arithmetic, grammar, history, and the other traditional subjects but
instead learned through activities, which consisted of observation,
games, handwork, stories, pictures, and music. The pupils thus taught
were studied when they had become high-school students, and it was
then discovered that they did better on the average than students
taught in the usual way. This, of course, does not prove the superiority
of the activity method, for the students from the activity school may
have been superior in capacity and consequently might have done
superior work regardless of the method employed in teaching them.
Nevertheless, the report of this work is important in showing that
the activity type of teaching and the project method do not belong
exclusively to this decade.

Results in Various Areas. One of the more extensive studies of the
project method was made in Missouri in a rural-school situation. Three
rural schools were included. One, known as the experimental school, had
an enrollment of 41; two others, known as the control schools, had enroll-
ments of 29 and 31, respectively. Over a period of 4 years the project
and activity program predominated in the experimental school; in the
control schools the traditional methods prevailed; the object of the
experiment was to test the effectiveness of the method stressing purposes
and motivation.

In the experimental school the day was devoted to four types of
project—story, hand, play, and excursion. The investigator’s words
describe these projects:

Play projects represent those experiences in which the purpose is to engage
in such group activities as games, folk dancing, dramatization, or social parties.
Exursion projects involve purposeful study of problems connected with en-
vironments and activities of people. Story projects include purposes to enjoy
the story in its various forms—oral, song, picture, phonograph, or piano. Hand
projects represent purposes to express ideas in concrete form—to make a rabbit
trap, to prepare cocoa for the school luncheon, or to grow cantaloupes.

The teachers in the experimental school tried to stimulate situations
so that these various types of projects grew naturally out of lifelike
experiences. For example, the children studied the causes of frequent
typhoid fever in the home of Mr. Smith, one of the residents of the
school district. They made visits, wrote for bulletins, made flytraps,
and prepared reports. This project caused them to do considerable read-
ing, reporting, and writing; they found use for arithmetic in calculating
costs for window screens and flytraps; and they also had experience in
manual training. Thus, as a part of their motivated activity, they
received excellent training in oral and written English, arithmetic,
manual arts, and sanitation and hygiene. Because they actually studied
a real problem and made real recommendations to Mr. Smith on how
to avoid typhoid fever, the pupils also developed definite ideals and
attitudes toward hygienic and sanitary living.

Many other projects grew out of their immediate environment, such as
how Mr. Long made molasses, how the dandelion spreads so rapidly,
how tomatoes were canned at the local factory, what was seen at the
big circus and at a trial in a juvenile court, and how the county agent
tested soil. Out of such projects the grade pupils of this experimental
school were expected to obtain the knowledge and skills that are expected
to be achieved through the traditional curricula. The exponents of the
project method maintain that out of the children’s rich experiences
they acquire certain ideals and appreciations which probably are more

1 Collings, Ellsworth, An Experiment with a Project Curriculum, p. 48, The
Macmillan Company, New York, 1926.