Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Gerald Collier (Ed.). *The Management of Peer-Group Learning: Syndicate Methods in Higher Education.* Guildford, Surrey: The Society for Research into Higher Education, 1983.

During a recent discussion of university teaching a professor complained:

"It's very difficult to teach my large class because the students are so varied in background. Twenty-five of them already know the material and the other half haven't a clue. There is only one teacher but at least two very different groups."

My smart alecky reply was:

"Actually, as you have described it, there are 26 teachers in the room. Each needy student could have an individual tutor and you could circulate, monitoring the pairs."

I was not being totally facetious. When we are narrowly focussed on and solely committed to a single model of instruction — a sharply inclined pyramid with a single source of knowledge and authority at the top — we are almost always prevented from accomplishing a number of things which many of us feel are important in learning and teaching:

- adjusting to heterogeniety in the group
- promoting the growth of individual responsibility for learning
- responding to and using the unique attitudes, inputs and approaches represented in the group
- remediating misunderstandings
- making more efficient the labour intensive business of teaching and learning
- encouraging cooperative efforts aimed at overcoming ignorance rather than competition with the rest of the class
- redefining knowledge as personal, deep understanding rather than discovering what it is that the teacher wants
- simulating team problem-solving which is an important activity in most areas of life and even is becoming more frequent in the traditionally individualistic and isolated world of academic scholarship.

A common prescription for improving instruction is reduction of class size. The ideal teaching situation is the one proposed by James Garfield: a simple bench with Mark Hopkins on one end and the learner on the other. Thus the same structure is preserved but the "class size" is reduced to the minimum. Less frequently proposals are made to change the basic structure of omniscient teacher and naive learner.

The book, *Peer-Group Learning* offers a look at a loosely defined system of instruction which it is claimed addresses and may even produce the kinds of processes and outcomes listed above.

Of course, other systems of instruction, for example PSI, offer similar promises and, interestingly, present problems similar to the ones raised by the authors in this volume. This point will be returned to later.

The first part of *Peer-Group Learning* provides nine short, readable case histories (all in postsecondary institutions in Great Britain, the U.S., and Australia) of what the authors call the Syndicate Method. The method (as defined in Chapter 1 by Professor Collier) involves students working in small groups, usually with an instructor or tutor, to develop a presentation which addresses a particular problem. Variations are numerous, e.g., groups have been formed along friendship lines or by assignment; tutors may act as traditional instructors, resource persons, group facilitators, or observers; the problems to be studies may be defined by the instructor or by the group; presentations may be made by individuals or by the group, orally or in written form.

Given the welcome brevity of each chapter — 5-10 pages — descriptions of how the Syndicate Method was practiced in each course are too sketchy to allow one to replicate those procedures without additional detail. However the authors do offer brief descriptions of specific procedures. The particular details are critical as evidenced by numerous authors commenting upon the need for detailed, explicit procedures concerning tutor role (pps. 96-99), student assignments (pps. 43-44), evaluation criteria (pps. 90-91), etc. But, then this book is not a guide although one chapter offers helpful "Guidelines for the Aspiring Practitioner"; rather it is an introduction, or better, a series of short demonstrations. A well-designed index allows the reader to assemble practical suggestions by various authors.

The case histories include applications of the Syndicate Method to whole courses, as well as to parts of courses; but they are limited for the most part to "softer" areas such as French Literature, Sociology, and Clinical Problem-solving. It would be interesting to read of applications to more traditional, information-passing courses such as introductory Chemistry or Statistics. The cases provided are interesting and offer a crisp "you-are-there" view of the methodology applied.

In the second part of the book, authors discuss the method more generally, frequently elaborating on concerns raised in the previous chapters. As mentioned earlier it is interesting that these concerns are similar to ones raised by those writing about Simulations, PSI, Adult Learning Environments, etc.

For example:

● Teachers must cope with role changes. The instructor may have to assume the role of designer and manager of a learning environment; he or she may act as a resource person, and like a Victorian child, speak only when spoken to, and then only for brief periods. The instructor may have to relinquish the position of absolute authority, of truth-giver. Implementation of the method requires not only the acquisition of new roles but also the acquisition of new skills. With these changes come, importantly, the loss of old, familiar rewards such as status (e.g., p. 61).

● Students, too, must learn how to deal with global matters such as responsibility for learning and with specific ones such as how to help organize a group to maximize productivity while sharing tasks.

● Assessment and evaluation must be re-thought. The learners themselves should be involved in the design of assessment procedures; some attempt may have to be made to match "requirements" as seen by teacher and as seen by learners. Related to this area of concern are the contingencies of reinforcement which represent the economy of the learning system. Beaman, et al (1977) raise the important question of whether the lack of grades in tutorial systems reduce their potency. More specifically: what contingencies should be arranged in order to encourage both the content learnings and the aquisition of other skills and knowledge (e.g., those related to successful group interactions?)

● The need for structure must be recognized and dealt with. It is important to note that the Syndicate Method is presented as a new methodology; it is not seen as merely the traditional, casual technique of organizing occasional work and study groups.

Two questions arise; the first is: Is it worth it?

Unfortunately, research on educational innovations generally is sparse and rarely demonstrates acceptable research techniques. Asking an innovator or his acolytes whether or not the new method works is a little like asking loving parents about their child's talent, beauty, or intelligence. The book offers some research data although most of it concerns degree of students' satisfaction (and even on this issue there are mixed results, see, e.g., p. 52).

The effects of peer tutoring have been studied; tutees seem to gain from it and so do the tutors. See for example the work of Allen (1976), Cohen, et. al. (1982), and Beaman, et al (1977). To the extent that the Syndicate Method allows each member of the group to alternate tutor/tutee roles, we might expect positive outcomes.

It is suggested by one author (p. 76) that the major effects of the treatment may not have shown up on the written tests that were used. One is naturally inclined toward a bit of cynicism. Scores of thesis students have suggested that the lack of evidence of a particular behavior revealed through their evaluation instruments perversely indicates the presence of an even more important and ephemeral state, trait, aptitude or whatever. Such a bizarre conclusion can most generously be attributed to a mystical streak. More positively one might urge the researchers to develop evaluation techniques which will reveal these apparently chimerical effects.

In general, innovations seem to be best studied across instances and over time by independent investigators. The use of meta-evaluation as well demonstrated by the Kuliks (e.g., 1979, a,b) seems particularly appropriate and powerful. It is to their credit that the authors do repeatedly call for more research and one even suggests a number of specific areas for further study (pps. 112-113).

The second question to be asked is: if the innovation proves to be worthwhile, is it likely to be widely adopted? Despite repeated demonstrations of the efficacy of certain instructional techniques, the structures of education and the contingencies they provide for those engaged in teaching and learning often prove to be a major barrier to the implementation of an innovation or to its maintenance. Leaving the innovation baby on the doorstep of education has rarely led to adoption and to the provision of a permanent home. It is encouraging that this book recognizes adoption as a problem, offers some suggestions to prospective adopters and provides a variety of instances presented by practicing teachers in a number of disciplines, rather than from a group of educational researchers. The book is written in a style that makes these case histories of applied research in educational innovation accessible to any college or university teacher.

The book contributes to the small but growing literature which, taken as a whole, sounds an important theme for the 1980's: real instructional improvement will not be achieved by peripheral and cosmetic changes, even when the changes are elaborate and expensive, involving, for example, complex hardware. What is needed is a reexamination of the basic structure of learning and teaching. The educational environment if it is to develop in each student effective ways of learning — as an independent and responsible learner — will be different than those most commonly found in classrooms. This book leads us to think of alternatives.

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