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How Do People Learn?

By Ralph W. Tyler

In opening this discussion I thought it would be useful to spend a few minutes on three questions: What is learning? How does one learn? What is the role of a teacher?

WHAT IS LEARNING?

It is an acquired change in behavior, using behavior in the broad sense to include thinking, feeling, and acting. We all, of course, recognize that what people learn is acquired, not inherited. That what people learn is a way of behaving may not be so commonly understood. As a result of learning a person reacts differently; he has acquired a new pattern of behavior.

Teachers commonly seek to help their students acquire several different kinds of behavior. For example, in working with college teachers, I find them trying to develop in students such patterns of behavior as: understanding, skills, interest attitudes, ability to think critically, and the like. Although I do not teach in the area of public policy, I suppose that you would seek to help the people you work with to become increasingly more constructive as citizens, which might involve developing the following sorts of behavior: interest in public problems, an attitude of concern for the public welfare, ability to analyze each important problem far enough to identify the major difficulties and issues, familiarity with proposed policies for dealing with the problems, ability to predict probable consequences of alternative policies, and willingness to act in support of policies which appear to be best for promoting the public welfare. Learning for your purpose may mean acquiring such patterns of behavior.

HOW DOES ONE LEARN?

How does one learn, how are new patterns of behavior acquired? The brief answer is: by practicing these patterns and getting satisfaction from them. *You cannot learn something you have not practiced.* You have to carry on the kind of behavior which is to be learned. This behavior must be satisfying, or the result of the practice will be nil.

Learning is an active process on the part of the learner. The learner learns what he does—the teacher cannot learn for him.

But mere practice is not enough. *To learn the student must be involved; he must put something into it.* Unless the person is involved and giving attention to it, practice will not bring about learning.

To carry over what he learns—really to learn so that he can use it later—the learner must understand clearly the connection between what he is learning and where he can use it in his life. This is one of the values of concrete illustration and of having the student bring in examples from his own experience. *Only as the learner perceives the connection between what he is learning and the ways he can use that learning in his own life will the learning become part of his behavior.* This is particularly important when dealing with abstract ideas and principles. The teacher must help the person see where they can be used.

Effective learning requires varied experiences in which to practice this learning. Frequent practice or rehashing of the same thing is much less effective than variety in approaches, in which the learner can see common elements in a variety of situations.

Each idea and relationship must be within the learner's ability to perceive at his stage of development. Since the learner must practice the behavior he is to learn, the behavior involved in each step of the learning process must be within his capacities. A child learns to read by reading, but in the early stages, he is asked only to recognize very simple phrases, which are gradually increased in complexity as he becomes able to handle them. So it is with adults in learning to understand public policy problems.

Finally, a major condition for effective learning is that *the learner obtain satisfaction from carrying on the desired behavior.* Behavior which gives us satisfaction is continually repeated, while that which is not satisfying is quickly dropped.

These six are major conditions for effective learning and help us to understand how one learns.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A TEACHER?

What is the role of a teacher—one who is trying to give guidance and leadership to learning? He cannot learn for the student, but if he perceives learning as something in which the learner is active—is to practice and thus to acquire patterns of thinking that become part of his continuing equipment—the teacher can do several things.

In the first place, he can, prior to working with the learners, clarify the behavior he is seeking to develop in the individuals and groups he is going to teach. A common difficulty in teaching is the lack of a clear idea about what sort of behavior the teacher wants to develop. To illustrate this attempt to clarify in your own mind the behavior which needs to be developed by a given group with whom you are working, we might use the analysis suggested earlier as to what might be desired in an effective constructive citizen. As a teacher, you might consider several aspects of the situation to decide whether this kind of behavior needs to be developed at this time by this group. Do they lack interest in public problems? Is this something which needs to be developed? If the teacher is sure his group is already interested in public problems, then he can go on to other possible goals.

Does this group need to develop an attitude of concern for public welfare? Suppose in working with a group, you find they are concerned with their own selfish interests and are not much concerned with the general public welfare. This may suggest the need for helping them to feel the importance of rising above self-interest. In this case the public good would be the goal you as the teacher might seek. Do they need to develop greater ability to analyze each important problem far enough to see the issues involved? If so, this becomes a goal and sets your task of helping them to practice analyzing problems. You do not tell them what proper policy is, but give them a chance to examine the problem to see what the issues are.

Is the group familiar with proposed policies for dealing with these problems? If not, developing such familiarity may become one of your goals. Is the group able to predict the probable consequences of alternative policies that are proposed for dealing with these problems? If not, developing the ability to predict probable consequences may become one of your goals. Are the members of the group willing to act in support of policies which appear to them to be best in promoting the public welfare? If not, developing the disposition to act in support of one's beliefs may become a goal.

You can see that each of these kinds of behavior involves somewhat different experiences for the group if they are to learn the behavior. Hence, only by clarifying our goals can we plan our teaching effectively.

In the second place, the teacher can stimulate the learner to react. What are some means of stimulation? A common one used in teaching is the appeal to intellectual curiosity. Every human being has a need for understanding things, for making sense out of his world, for relating things to himself. Help the person to see that his present way of explaining is not adequate and stimulate him to work out a better understanding. Another means of stimulation is the appeal to social motives. Everyone wants to belong to his group and to be recognized by the group. Encourage the person to take part in the group so that he will be recognized. These are but two illustrations of a number of appeals that can be used to stimulate the learner to react.

In the third place, the teacher can help to guide the learner's reaction. The most common way is to guide it through questions, as Socrates did. This is an effort to focus his attention on points or ideas that he can perceive, and by helping him to move from one point to another, he can be made to see relationships more easily. Teachers guide behavior sometimes by lecturing or telling people what to do, what to look at, what to make of some phenomenon. The demonstration is another way of guiding behavior. The teacher goes through the process, and the student follows it. In seeking to develop attitudes, feelings may be guided by helping people to have the same experience as people who have the desired attitudes.

In the fourth place, the teacher can help provide satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the resulting behavior. One satisfaction for a learner is realizing that he understands or that he can do things he did not do before. Another is group approval for his actions. Still another is the satisfaction of achieving actual results for the community. It is important that the desired behavior is rewarded. The teacher should help the learner get such satisfactions or help him sense his inadequacy when his behavior is inappropriate.

In the fifth place, the teacher can organize learning so that there is sequence and integration. Any important change in behavior requires time. For example, real understanding comes from a series of efforts to compare and contrast and relate ideas. One advantage of an educational program over the incidental learning which comes from a movie or an occasional lecture is that the teacher is able to organize the activities so that there

will be repetition of the desired behavior, each successive repetition building on the one before it. This greatly increases the efficiency of learning.

Integration is relating what the individual is doing or thinking in one area of his life with what he is doing or thinking in another. Learning is more effective if you can connect the other areas of his life. This can be done by contrast as well as by comparison.

In the sixth place, the teacher can make a continuous or periodic appraisal of what is going on, a continuing assessment of whether the learning is really taking place. This makes possible the focusing of educational experience on the information the people need and for which they are ready. By conversation, by observation, by using a planning committee from the group, this continuous pulse taking is possible and practicable.

These six ways in which the teacher may play a role in learning suggest what we can do to improve our own teaching. We can formulate our goals more clearly in terms of the behavior we are trying to develop. We can stimulate people to try the kind of behavior that we seek to develop. We can help to guide the resulting behavior. We can help people to get satisfactions from desired behavior and dissatisfaction from undesirable behavior. We can organize educational experiences over time to get better sequence and integration. And, we can make continuous appraisal of the progress of the group so as to focus our efforts efficiently.