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Mastery Learning Lecture and Responses

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To his own proposal Den Besten responded by saying it is a "burden of responsibility to which civilization at its current level of sophistication is totally incapable of responding."

Den Besten underscored the fact that he was not speaking for the medical profession at large nor for his University as he gave his views.

Concluding his presentation, the speaker referred to the NASA program. He said we could, with financial hardship to the nation and to welfare programs, send astronauts to

distant planets in a few years. But, in his opinion, that would put the priorities for the nation out of perspective. The same is true, he said, for medical science. If all cancer-related illness could be eliminated, we would add only six years to the average life span of the American. If we eliminated the problem of "hardening of the arteries," we would add another seven years. But for what, the speaker asks. We would only extend old age and probably find that by extending it that there are other physical malfunctions which would become medical priorities.

MASTERY LEARNING LECTURE AND RESPONSES

Dr. James Block of the University of California at Santa Barbara was the featured lecturer. The occasion was one of several faculty development seminars this year sponsored by CMA, Colleges of Mid-America. Dordt is a member college.

Dr. Block lectured on "Mastery Learning" as it applies to methodology in teaching at elementary and secondary levels. Taking off from the work of John Carroll and Benjamin Bloom, Block made the following proposal:

"Using appropriate instructional methods, it is possible to reduce differences (among children in the classroom) to zero." He contends that the "sacred cow of individual differences is due to HOW we teach."

Block's view is that children have very diverse differences in personality and learning facility, but that does not mean one is more educable than another. He said, "We create individual differences and then find a scapegoat by saying these differences are in the individual." Block holds adamantly that all children can learn, that all will learn, and that the grading curve is a manufactured system of evaluation that produces differences that do not exist. "Environment and the genetic background," said the speaker, may not be blamed for "individual differences."

To accomplish mastery, it is necessary to teach with specific objectives clearly defined. A course, in this system, is broken into small parts, the parts are sequenced, and then the teaching occurs. The original instruction must be developed so as to be optimal. Short diagnostic tests are then administered, followed by corrective teaching that is used to bring mastery of objectives to completion for students who need such additional instruction. Now everybody is ready for the next unit of learning.

To reach optimal effectiveness in original instruction, Block proposes a variety of teaching techniques: group activity in diads and triads, alternate textbooks, workbooks, programmed teaching material, audio-visual presentations, academic games and puzzles, and "affective techniques." Whatever works is to be used, in Block's opinion, to gain complete mastery of objectives by the whole class. He contends that the lecture-discussion method of teaching, since it uses the "verbal-abstract technique," is good for only about one-third of any class.

Dr. Block spoke briefly about societal goals for education by way of critiquing present goals. "We should not," he said, "train for a specific career, but rather for life." He went on to say: "Education today is not to be equated with putting people on the labor market."

Faculty Responses

Following are faculty responses excerpted from several evaluations.

"... in spite of Block's frame of reference, with which I disagree antithetically, (I feel an affinity) with his insight into something normative for the educative process."

"Perhaps the Christian community has been too quick to pigeonhole this response (that children can and will learn) as a theological neglect of the doctrine of total depravity, and in doing so has missed the far more serious implication..., that of a positivistic pragmatism."

"... the very 'created-ness' of man necessitates his attempts to explore, understand, and operate successfully within God's creation. He does this, however, in response to God--either in obedience to Him or in disobedience. Except for man's redemption in Christ, man because of the Fall cannot of himself respond in obedience to God, but this does not negate his his 'created-ness.' Dr. Block's assumptions demand consideration."

"Presenting mastery-learning techniques as though they were totally objective and empirically tested may be misleading because the fulcrum of mastery learning is the educator's professional but subjective judgment about what constitutes the essentials of what is mastered and in what sequence."

"I believe that a maturational bias on the part of teachers has been and is an excuse for poor teaching techniques as has the over-interpreted IQ score. Emphasis on mastery learning may be a response to this."

"I have real reservations about Block's first assumption, -i.e., every student can learn.... I certainly challenge the second assumption, that all will learn. This is a matter of volition which can't be programmed.... The students who have to take required courses, who go through the motions, jump through the hoops, or what you will, are often content just to get by with a C."

"I feel that my course cannot be distilled into little two-week behavioral units--and there lies my disagreement with mastery learning--its view of education as being skills-oriented, and its view of the child in behavioristic terms."

A gifted scholar and dynamic lecturer, Dr. Block makes a convincing presentation. He makes it perfectly clear that he is a behaviorist in his psychological point of view, and a pragmatist in the application of his methods. This ideological framework does not prevent Block, however, from making some very appropriate and meaningful evaluations of much present-day education. He demonstrates a keen insight into some aspects of the educative process.

REPORT ON SPIRITUAL EMPHASIS WEEK

For many years there has been a "Spiritual Emphasis Week" at Dordt College. This may appear to be a contradiction in terms. Can an institution embrace the Calvinistic World and Life View, which claims that all of life is religion and that in Christ all things cohere, and still call for a week in which the spiritual

is emphasized? Although the faculty and students at Dordt College are striving for and have to some degree attained a Christ-centered education, there is room for a spiritual emphasis week, and it is good for us to have this week. Although we believe that God upholds the universe and that the Bible speaks to us