

# Two Approaches to Planning

William Van Til

*The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young.*

*John Dewey, Experience and Education*

As a young teacher-to-be, I rejected "imposition from above and from outside." But how to proceed? I took two variant approaches to planning subject matter and methodology with high school students in the Ohio State University School. The first was in my first year of teaching at the University School; the second came nine years later. Each is described in greater detail in my autobiography, *My Way of Looking at It* (chapters 15 and 21).

## **Student-Determined Subject Matter**

After my liberal arts education at Columbia College, I taught for a year in a New York State reform school that had no books, no materials, no courses of study--but plenty of juvenile delinquents. So among my very first classes at the experimental University School was a two-hour block of time for teaching a dozen sophomore and junior boys whom the faculty perceived as "having problems." I began with extended self-introductions by both the boys and myself. Then, because I knew little more about education at the age of 23 than that learning must be based on the needs and interests of the learner, I asked flatly what they wanted to learn about. One boy assumed group leadership and spoke out to test me, "We want to learn all about crooks. Is that all right with you, Mr. Van Til?" His followers supported him. I was at a crossroad; I could stand pat or I could scuttle. I said, "What do you want to know about crooks?" The leader answered, "Where do the crooks live?" His followers had additional questions. Because I did know that teachers gave assignments, I told them to ask their parents that night where the crooks in Columbus lived.

The next morning, they reported that their parents didn't know where the crooks lived. Several students urged, "Let's ask the cops." Again I was at a crossroad. We were mobile because several had cars and we had two hours of class time. So we piled into cars and went to the police station. The desk sergeant showed us entries on the police blotter and took us on a tour of the cells. The following morning, the boys pointed out indignantly, "That dumb cop didn't tell us where the crooks lived; he just showed where crimes were committed. Doesn't anybody know?"

I did some homework and learned of several dissertations, which had been sponsored by a campus sociology professor, on the social problems of Columbus. As a class, we went to the university library and checked out several dissertations and other references on crime. The boys copied many of the maps and charts. But these were young

men of action. "Let's go see." We did. "Let's tell others" about these multiple problem areas. So they took many photographs of the Columbus areas in which most social problems concentrated.

Back at school the science teacher helped the students develop their pictures and taught them some science in the process. The fine arts teacher taught them about lettering and chart making. I helped with composition, reading difficulties and writing problems. When the maps and charts were completed, the question of where and how to display them arose. The University School librarian controlled the school's display cases and, as a condition of use, required the boys to include books on crime and reviews of the books. The boys rightly suspected me of plotting with the librarian. Yet they followed her instructions on how to use the Dewey decimal system. They withdrew relevant books on crime, read within the books, and prepared written reviews and summaries for the showcases.

When the exhibits went up, the boys got positive feedback from students, faculty, and even some parents. I felt encouraged as I reviewed in my mind the social science concepts, scientific generalizations, art experiences, substantial reading and writing of the past weeks, new interests developed by the boys, and their positive recognition by the school. The crime study readily led into a study of housing in Columbus and the nation. During one visit to a housing project, a well-informed African-American man was our guide. On the way back to school, one of my boys said, "You know why he's so smart? Because he's got white blood. Isn't that right, Mr. Van Til?" "Let's look it up," I said. During the next several weeks, we learned about race and racial relations in Columbus and the wider world.

### **Jointly Determined Subject Matter**

Nine years later, I taught my last classes at the University School. By then I had a master's degree in civic education from Columbia's Teachers College and was nearing my doctoral degree in curriculum at The Ohio State University after studying with OSU's stars Boyd H. Bode, Harold Alberty, H. Gordon Hullfish., and Louis Raths. I also had learned from my University School colleagues, including H. H. (Mike) Giles and Lou LaBrant. (Mike was once asked a hostile question by a conference attendant: "Mr. Giles, in the title of your book, *Teacher-Pupil Planning*, which is most important--teacher or pupil?" Without hesitation, Mike responded, "The hyphen.")

By then I had learned that in planning, teachers and students could jointly develop criteria by which the worth of proposed topics and problems could be judged. As a teacher, I could freely suggest and support criteria and content reflecting my philosophy of education. I believed in meeting the personal and social needs of learners, throwing light on social realities, and clarifying and advancing democratic values. Students would be heard and respected, their criteria considered, and their content proposals generally adopted.

In the nine hours weekly of the last core program I taught at the University School, the high school senior class with its team of teachers developed criteria to apply to proposed topics and problems of study. The senior class, graduating into a 1943 world

at war, chose to study the background of the current conflict, military service, civil defense, war industry, economics, and international organization for the coming postwar period.

Early in the ten weeks devoted to the topic and problem of postwar planning, they read books and pamphlets, listened to guest lecturers, and heard recordings. Then they developed a list of 91 possible postwar problems. Each student wrote an essay titled "What Am I Fighting For and Against?" They researched possible alternatives for the American economy, proposed international organizations, participated in heated panel discussions, and wrote their individual conclusions. For background, the brightest student read six scholarly books and seven pamphlets, while the slowest student read one entire pamphlet and excerpts from five others.

Committees were formed to present recommendations on the economy and on international organization to the class. The recommendations were voted on, and the agreed-upon proposals were sent to key members of the U.S. Congress and other influential people. Among the responses received was one from Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote, "The important thing is that those young people are learning to think constructively and, though many of them may think differently in a few years, they have the ability to grow."

### **Two Possible Approaches**

Over the many years that followed, I often have thought about which was the better of these two approaches to planning subject matter and methodology with high school students. What do you think about these two approaches to planning? How are they similar? How are they different? How can we best avoid "imposition from above and from outside"?

### Reference

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