Having your educational cake and eating it too: Behavior objectives for open educators

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Behavior Objectives for Open Educators

These are hard times for teachers, especially teachers of religion. The schools, as socializing agencies, are being called upon to respond to forces and trends which are challenging and disrupting established patterns in American society. Educators at every level are subjected to demands that they implement educational reforms which derive from apparently contradictory educational and philosophical positions. Two opposing trends which have gained substantial momentum and which are significant causes of the current confusion are: 1) the growing demand for an efficient technology of education, and 2) the increasing popularity of the open education movement.

In the pages which follow, I will explore the impact of these two trends on education in general and describe the dilemma they have created, a dilemma especially acute in the area of religious education. I will also suggest a framework which holds promise of reconciling and integrating the fundamental insights of these two approaches.

The Educational Technology-Behavioral Objectives Movement

Many critics of the schools argue that the precision and success of American science and technology are in marked contrast to the bumbling and failure of American education. Haphazard approaches to educational research have produced little solid knowledge about how learning does or can be made to occur. Educational research has been marked by weak scholarship rather than careful, controlled experimentation. These critics argue that if education is to emerge from this prescientific dark age, then vague educational goals and purposes must be replaced by precisely defined objectives; hit-and-miss programs must be supplanted by experimentally validated techniques and strategies.

An in-depth discussion of the infiltration of the technological "management by objectives" approach into all aspects of education is out of place here. I merely mention a few of the many indicators of its widespread presence and influence. Program-Planning-Budgeting-Systems, which focus on explictly stated performance objectives, currently dominate thinking about educational finance. Many state departments of education insist

that teacher training programs articulate in behavioral terms the competencies they aim to produce in prospective teachers. Educational agencies interested in federal funds are warned that proposals must include precise behavioral objectives and procedures for evaluation in terms of observable behaviors. Administrators are urged to set performance objectives for themselves, while teachers are cautioned that, once someone discovers how to do it, they will be evaluated and certified on the basis of the learning outcomes of their students rather than on the number of credits they have compiled at the local university. And most significant, of course, is the infiltration of behavioral objectives into classroom activities — through textbooks, programmed materials, individualized learning packages, and in other ways too numerous to list.

Holding all of these movements together is a commitment to objectives and outcomes — to a precise specification of what is to happen as a result of the materials and human resources combined and employed in a specified way. The cycle — precise objectives / carefully selected program / rigorous evaluation / feedback into the cycle — aims at applying the systems approach to educational operations at every level.

Proponents of the objectives movement hold forth the promise of a more effective and efficient educational system. Rigorous application of the scientific method to educational institutions will result not only in better immediate outcomes but will build into the educational system the capacity for continuous and carefully controlled improvement.

Open Educationists

I am sure that the above description has struck terror into the hearts of proponents of the other major popular movement in American education today. Open educationists view such a scientific approach to the educational process as bordering on unethical manipulation. The open educationist operates out of a perspective which recognizes the contributions of technology to society, but which simultaneously sees the individual as being lost or submerged in the relentless drive for greater efficiency. When they observe the technologists making massive inroads into the educational process and system, their trepidation greatly increases.

Where the educational technologists see the educational process as providing the appropriate reinforcing environment, open educationists place emphasis on the child as a "self-activated maker of meaning, as ac-

tive agent in his own learning process"[1]. They argue that the innate curiosity of the child should be allowed to explore an environment rich in people and things and events. There is no such thing as knowledge out there already structured and capable of being subdivided and sequenced and then marketed as *the* process through which every child must pass.

Open education advocates are sensitive to the fact that the medium is quite likely the message and they are insistent that the schools provide an environment where, to the degree that it is appropriate, the child's right and obligation to be responsible for his own acts are acknowledged. Rather than an educational system built on the technological model which aims at a massive social engineering, open educationists are individualists who emphasize the right of each learner to decide what he will do, and who he will become. It is the function of the teachers and system to accept rather than to prescribe what an individual will learn. Open educationists fear that society, perhaps unwittingly, is responding to Skinner's call to move beyond freedom and dignity. They realize that the schools are the battleground where the struggle will be won or lost.

Tension Between Contradictory Perspectives

You may regard this broad-stroke description as overly dramatic. Nevertheless, I think that there is ample evidence to show that at the heart of the anguish and confusion that schools and teachers are experiencing is the unresolved tension they feel between these two fundamentally contradictory perspectives. They are torn between the scientific managers who promise the dawning of a more rational and effective educational era and the open educationists whose approach emphasizes the uniqueness of every student and seeks to give full play to the highly personal inner drive for learning and "becoming." This tension affects educators in general, both public and private, but perhaps reaches its highest intensity when it begins to infect the teaching of religion.

The Advantages: Emphasis on Outcomes or Personal Search

Both the objectives approach and open education should have solid appeal to religion teachers. On the one hand, religion teachers have been especially sensitive (and exposed) to the criticism that they have failed to define clearly what they intend to accomplish or to supply any solid evi-

[1] Charles H. Rathbone, "The Open Classroom: Underlying Premises," *The Urban Review*, 5(1), p.4.

dence that they have produced the desired outcomes. At the heart of this lack of clarity has been the inability or reluctance of religion teachers to attempt a precise description of purposes. The behavioral objectives approach is one which is based first and foremost on a clear statement of the objectives of instruction. Built into an acceptable behavioral objective is a mechanism for evaluation of outcomes in terms of observable behavior. From the vantage point of a discipline that has moved rapidly through a variety of programs and approaches, few if any of which have been noted for either clear definition of aims or validated success, the purpose-centered rationale of the behavioral objectives approach promises an escape from the marshy ground of vague goals and purposes.

Religion teachers could read with interest the statement below which can be regarded as typical of the thinking that is taking place in many curriculum development circles.

> The analysis of learning in terms of changes in behavior has progressed remarkably in the past decade. The best instructional materials now on the market are a result of the careful delineation of the terminal behaviors, or specific objectives expected to be achieved by learners.[2]

Careful delineation of terminal behaviors is rapidly enveloping the other disciplines. What of religion? Will it be left behind while the other areas achieve new levels of sophistication and effectiveness? Should not the religious educator attempt to define the precise causal variables that will produce the knowledge and attitudes he wants? Should not the haphazard methods of the past be abandoned in favor of a more rational and validated approach? Some argue that unless religious education moves in this direction, it will condemn itself to stagnation in an educational yesteryear.

On the other hand, open education should have great appeal for the religious educator. It emphasizes personal search and discovery. It suggests a process of free though guided exploration in which knowledge and commitment are expected to develop gradually and naturally. The open classroom would provide an environment of freedom and warmth where the medium could reflect the message, where Christianity, for example, could be experienced rather than taught.

[2]R. W. Burns and G. O. Brooks, eds., "The Need for Curriculum Reform," in *Curriculum Design in a Changing Society*, R. W. Burns and G. O. Brooks, eds. (Educational Technology Publications, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p.16.

Instead of pumping religion into people, the innate natural curiosity of the child about God and religion could be allowed to unfold naturally through exposure to an environment rich in religious things — objects, people, events. Religious educators must look with envy at the open classrooms where respect for the individual and personal responsibility are underlying principles, realizing that if it is true that learning is individual in the other areas of the curriculum, then *a fortiori* religious education should reflect the same fundamental concern.

The Disadvantages: Manipulation or Even Vaguer Purposes

While both approaches have solid advantages, both also must appear to have substantial shortcomings to the religious educator. The danger of manipulation is seen lurking behind the objectives approach. There does seem to be something abhorrent about programming an environment to produce religious attitudes or behaviors, especially if the technology is effective and the reinforcing environment does in fact "shape" predetermined religious outcomes. Bloom remarked that fear of indoctrination or interference in a private domain has kept curriculum planners and teachers from greater exploration of the affective domain.[3] Teachers are uneasy when told that all objectives must be stated in terms of precisely defined observable behaviors. They wonder whether such a view of the educational process is not too rigid and mechanical, whether it would not discourage rather than stimulate creativity. The more nebulous (and what many consider more important) educational values, such as creativity and personal response or commitment, must be jammed and crammed into the behavioral objective box with the kind of violence that must make some teachers and planners feel like modern day Procrustes.

But in inspecting the arguments of the open education theories, the religion teacher must also experience reluctance and hesitation. Would not adoption of this approach once again expose the religion department or teacher to the recurrent charge that no substance is being taught or learned, that the content of the Christian message is being ignored or neglected? Would not the option for religious open education be an educational regression into the era of unclear purposes and even shakier programs?

In which direction should the religion teacher turn? In the following

[3]Benjamin S. Bloom, J. Thomas Hastings and George Madaus, *Handbook of Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning* (McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1971), pp.226-27.

pages I would like to suggest a way in which the substance and validity of both the objectives and open education movement could be preserved and integrated. I propose to outline briefly a way in which, being faithful to the basic insight of each (or faithful to neither?), a combination of these two approaches could provide a framework for a more suitable educational program than either theory could provide independently.

A compromise solution should incorporate three key elements: 1) respect for the free, personal character of religious commitment, 2) recognition of the need to define with greater clarity the purposes of religion programs, and 3) as in the other disciplines, communication of a solid core of scholarly content.

Eisner: Instructional and Expressive Objectives

Elliot Eisner, taking seriously the intuitive reluctance of many teachers to reduce the educational process to a mere shaping of behavior, has offered a solution which I think reconciles and combines the advantages of the behavioral objectives and open education movements. Eisner views the educational process as concentrating on two basic concerns: ". . . helping children to become skilled in the use of cultural tools already available and helping them to modify and expand these tools so that the culture remains viable."[4] Corresponding to these concerns, he distinguishes two types of educational objectives: instructional objectives and expressive objectives.

Instructional objectives are defined in a way which identifies them with the traditional behavioral objective. They specify a particular observable behavior that the student is expected to acquire. They are organized in the sequence which would be most effective and efficient in producing the desired complex terminal behavior. In their formulation, they provide the teacher with a precise evaluative measure since the statement of the objective is coincidental with the observable behavior expected.

Expressive objectives avoid a precise statement of anticipated student outcomes. "An expressive objective describes an educational encounter: It identifies a situation in which students are to work, a problem with which they are to cope, a task in which they are to engage; but it does not specify

[4]Elliot W. Eisner, "Instructional and Expressive Educational Objectives: Their Formulation and use in Curriculum," in *Instructional Objectives*, W.J. Popham *et al.* (Rand McNally, Chicago, 1969), p. 14.

what from that encounter, situation, problem, or task they are to learn. An expressive objective provides both the teacher and the student with an invitation to explore, defer, or focus on issues that are of particular interest to the inquirer."[5]

The following comparison illustrates the difference between the two kinds of objectives.

instructional objectives	*expressive objectives*
prescribed outcomes	evocative, invitational rather than prescriptive
carefully devised instructional sequence	spontaneous, unpredictable encounter
terminal behavior predetermined	outcomes open-ended
homogeneity, uniform response demanded	diversity, unique response encouraged
common standard of evaluation	evaluation on individual basis
emphasis: the objective	emphasis: the subjective

Both instructional and expressive objectives are vital to the educational process. As Eisner suggests, students should possess the knowledge, skills and competencies which are their cultural heritage. But if the process stops there, then the civilization stagnates. Those who would creatively advance the culture must be given the opportunity to move beyond what they have received to new levels of insight and discovery.

The Danger: Exclusive Emphasis on One Kind of Objective

The danger for teachers, and especially teachers of religion, has been to emphasize one type of objective to the exclusion of the other — to attempt to fit the entire educational process to the rigorous demands of the instructional objective model, or, conversely, to neglect systematic development of the foundational skills and knowledge from which creative and personal discovery must derive its stimulation and substance.

Evidence of the confusion that can develop from an exclusive emphasis on instructional or expressive objectives abounds in the area of religion teaching. For example, many teachers have argued that religion is not like

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

other subjects, that it must abandon formal content as it is normally understood and meet the students where they are at the particular moment. In the area of evaluation, they argue that ordinary evaluative measures cannot be applied. Religion is a subject whose intent is much too personal to be amenable to normal grading procedures. The pressures that are exerted on students in other disciplines are out of place. Student response cannot and should not be forced or coerced.

On the other side, teachers (some of them refugees from student disregard or faculty contempt arising from the approach described above) opt for the strict academic approach. Religion is a subject (and department) like any other in the school. There is a hard core of substance which students should know. Religion class is not a personal or group counseling session, but a forum for the presentation of information, for the analysis and discussion of issues. Evaluation should take the same form as it does in other disciplines.

Both positions fall short of the mark (and the needs of their students). In the first instance, instructional objectives are usually ignored and parents rightly complain that their children are not learning *anything*. In the second approach, attempts to deal with personal religious issues (expressive objectives) are likely to be excluded *a priori* lest the religion class lose the respectability it needs to be taken seriously by both students and other faculty members.

Eisner's distinction helps us to understand that both objective and subjective emphases are legitimate and important and that by distinguishing rather than confusing these objectives, a balanced program can be worked out.

Two Examples: The Church and Faith

Take, for example, the presentation of a course or unit on the Church. The teacher might present an overview of the Church as a scriptural, historical and contemporary phenomenon. There is a substantial body of knowledge and opinion which the student could be expected to know, understand, apply, evaluate and synthesize. This section of the course could be planned and treated as a series of instructional objectives. Relatively uniform outcomes for each student taking the course could be clearly specified and evaluation based on an objective testing of what the student knew and how he could use that knowledge.

As part of the same unit on the Church, the teacher might want his

students to explore in a more personal manner their own experience and relation to the Church as a community of believers. This section of the course might well follow chronologically the sequence described above. But its intent would be quite different: it would be an invitation rather than a prescription, and any evaluation that would be made would have to respect the personal freedom of the individual student and the validity of personal interpretation. There would be no anticipated uniform outcomes.

A unit on faith might be treated in a similar manner. There is something to know about faith, e.g., its scriptural foundation, its various meanings in the history of Christianity, the modern scientific challenges to traditional notions (instructional). This content should be known and understood. At the same time, the critical personal issue that faith is for so many young people should prompt the religion teacher to provide opportunities for a more intimate and personal exploration (expressive). Not only the evaluation, but also the whole atmosphere in which students and teacher interact when dealing with instrumental or expressive objectives should be different. And it should be clear to students that expectations differ substantially when dealing with one or the other.

Though more examples of this approach might be suggested, the value of applying this distinction to religious education should be clear. It provides a framework for separating educational objectives which, though often not recognized as such, are in fact substantially different and demand quite different treatment. The distinction between instructional and expressive objectives provides a conceptual framework for selecting the teaching and evaluative procedures that are appropriate when dealing with one category or the other.

Conclusion: A Valid Middle Ground

The behavioral objectives and open education movements attract attention and interest among teachers because, as I have tried to show, they both speak to the real concerns and problems faced by faculties in every school. Yet the apparently contradictory directions in which they would pull the teacher cause serious confusion. What I have tried to suggest is a valid middle ground where the advantages of both can be incorporated into an educational approach which, at the same time, points to the way out of some of the confusion currently hindering religious educators.

Application of the distinction between instructional and expressive objectives is such a middle course, including what I indicated were the im-

portant elements in any solution: a strong emphasis on educational purposes, an anxious concern for the freedom and personal character of individual religious response, and a strong emphasis on religious studies as an area worth serious academic concern. The error, in my opinion, would be to adopt an educational theory which went to either extreme and failed to incorporate the valid insights of the other position — either to adopt an unsophisticated behavioral objectives approach out of concern for systematic instruction and evaluation, or to overemphasize the open education rationale in order to avoid any hint of interference in the highly personal religious areas.

It is of vital importance for both teachers and students to be able to distinguish between instructional and expressive areas in order to avoid the confusion, resentment and harmful individual and religious consequences that can occur when, for example, instructional objectives teaching and evaluative methods are applied in an area that is more correctly expressive. The emerging concern for clear definition of purposes in religious education is a most positive development. But its proponents must avoid the pitfalls of the early and less sophisticated behavioral objectives models, and have the insight and patience to develop taxonomies of objectives appropriate to the delicate area of religious instruction.