

The Land Is a Teacher

EVELYN ODOM AND IRWIN A. HAMMER

A trip on the land provides many thrilling and valuable learning experiences for students and teachers. Such a trip is described by Evelyn Odom, supervisor, Student Teaching, Western Washington College of Education, Bellingham, and Irwin A. Hammer, chairman, Department of Education and Psychology also at Western Washington College of Education.

EARLY ONE JULY MORNING in 1946 a caravan of workshop students and faculty members left Western Washington College of Education at Bellingham bound for the Skagit River Valley twenty-five miles distant. Many of the students were teachers in the elementary schools of this region who were interested in planning a science program much more closely related to life in the valley than any they had ever had before. Others were principals or prospective principals who needed help in recognizing the learning possibilities for the school inherent in a community.

The trip was not a sudden inspiration, but was the outgrowth of discussions of the previous week. The students attempting to plan the science program felt very greatly the limitations of their knowledge, but did not know how to go about broadening their backgrounds. They had no conception of the numbers and types of agencies able to help or of the value of the help that any agency might give. They did not know what degree of cooperativeness they would meet in their attempt to utilize the learning possibilities of the community in the school. Other students had not reached the level of thinking of this group; some were curious about the whole idea of the community, a concept to which they had only lately been exposed; some were frankly skeptical. But

all expressed willingness to learn more.

They had read, in the course of their study that "Learning should be organized in terms of undertakings which seem real and compelling and valuable to the learner, which engage his active purpose, which confront him with a significant challenge, and which lead to deeper and wider insights, more discriminating attitudes, and more adequate skills."¹ And some of them understood that if fundamental changes in organization and teaching were to take place at the elementary and secondary school levels, patterns of instruction at the college level as well, must be effected. Learners, they agreed, need to have a large part in selecting and planning the undertaking. In no way does this relieve the teacher of careful preplanning or responsible leadership. Fundamentally this involves a feeling of joint responsibility and acceptance of an undertaking which grows out of a discussion related to a definite concern about a real and significant challenge.

How shall children—or adults—approach the problem of finding and of defining a real and significant project in learning? It seems that a well-planned and guided exploration of a broad field or area of study would be the first step

¹ James Lockhart Mursell, *Successful Teaching: Its Psychological Principles*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1946. \$3), p. 37.

in such a process. The use of resource people, books, visual materials in the form of charts, graphic representations and pictures, and personal experiences should help in the selection of a challenging undertaking. The danger here is that all too often an exhaustive study is attempted before an undertaking is decided upon. A major part of the learning, then, is a problem of finding and defining what "one wants to discover and see."

Putting such an approach to learning into action was the purpose of the summer workshop group traveling to the Skagit Valley. Not only were the teachers in search of improved techniques of teaching and of contextual material closely related to the community life of their pupils, but they themselves were trying a new approach to learning.

Planning for Understanding

Prior to this trip, arrangements had been made with many individuals and agencies to help the students understand the conditions in the Skagit Valley. The planning engineer of the Skagit County Planning Commission had agreed to coordinate the whole trip. Working with him were men from the Soil Conservation Service and from the Forestry Department of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, each man a specialist in his own field, skilled in the techniques of studying a region and in working with communities in planning ways to meet their problems, and the possessor of a store of accurate and highly valuable data unobtainable elsewhere. The Skagit County Planning Commission, on the suggestion of its engineer, had invited the group to its

regular session to be held on the night of the trip.

Living Is Good for Some

The caravan first stopped on the flats or delta land of the Skagit. This delta, created by the Skagit as it slows down on its way to the sea, is an area of lush loamy soil that extends for miles on either side of the river. On this rich land farmers make good returns from peas grown for the local canneries or quick freeze plants, from seed crops of turnips, cabbages, and beets, from acres of choice bulbs, and from fields of strawberries and raspberries. On many acres, they grow hay or feed crops for the herds of dairy cattle that mark the countryside. Homes in this section are modern and comfortable, barns are large, and expensive farm machinery is much in evidence.

Awaiting the group at the flats were the planning engineer, and the representative from the Soil Conservation Service who immediately began explaining the problem of drainage in this area. He showed tide boxes built under specifications prepared by the Soil Conservation Service engineers working with Skagit Soil Conservation District, and he pointed out drainage ditches which made it possible for the farmers owning the land to grow cash crops worth three to four times the value of the pasturage grown on the same land under poor drainage conditions. He discussed the problems of dyking and explained that the farmers belong to a dyking district, independent of the Soil Conservation District, in which they are taxed to meet the cost of dyking. At various places on the flats, the engineer took deep borings of the soil to show

its composition and he explained the use of such borings along with other factors in helping to determine land classification.

Existence Is Poor for Others

From the flats the group went to the hill country where the houses were poor and the crops scanty. Farmers were clearing land, cutting trees, and grubbing out roots at a cost so great that, unless granted some lucky circumstance, they were likely never to be able to pay out. Borings of the soil this time revealed that much of it was hard pan and unfit for farming. The timber on many of these farms had been wastefully cut with no thought of a sustained yield. It was pointed out that the few farmers who were making an adequate living on their land were doing so by following a policy of selective timber cutting suggested by representatives of the Forestry Department and the Soil Conservation District.

After this trip the group went to a local hotel for lunch and for an hour's showing of kodachrome slides made by workers in the Soil Conservation District. These illustrated such items as the destructive work of the Skagit River, the irretrievable damage to the land resulting from poor logging practices, and fields before and after drainage. Students and instructors alike were amazed at the wealth of material available to schools—sets of slides, sixteen by twenty flat pictures in black and white, soil profile charts, classification maps, blueprints showing farm use plans worked out by the department for individual farmers at their request. They were further surprised when experts from the forestry and soil departments said they

would accompany school groups on trips or would come to the school to help whenever possible.

After lunch the group left the delta and started following the Skagit up its course. This river, which rises in the Cascade Mountains and flows west to Puget Sound, acts as a destructive force along the lower part of its course, undercutting its banks and undermining farm lands and often, in the course of a few years, swallowing huge chunks of rich soil. In the spring and early summer, swollen by melting snows from denuded hillsides and mountain slopes, it rushes down its channel escaping from its banks and flooding the nearby countryside. In an effort to control the river, army engineers had built live-willow mat revetments, but the river tore them out. At one place where the group stopped, a revetment which some of the group remembered seeing four years previously, had not only disappeared, but the river had cut away the banks for a distance of from ten to fifteen feet. The group also heard how rafts of logs towed by tugs tear away banks. They saw several old channels used by the Skagit at different times, sand bars built by it, and ox-bow lakes made by it.

Flood Havoc Observed

Leaving the Skagit, the group drove up into the foothills of the Cascades to see the havoc caused by a flash flood on Hanson Creek the preceding spring. This insignificant stream and ten others like it flow harmlessly along their steep gradients the greater part of the year, but in seasons of heavy rainfall they become great danger potentials. At such times, the volume of water in the stream is greatly increased by the rains that

drain off the hillsides denuded by logging operations. The swiftly flowing water carries along debris left by logging operations that has found its way into the stream, and piles it up forming dams. When the pressure behind the dam becomes too great it breaks. This is what had happened on Hanson Creek. A forty-foot wall of water had come rushing down the creek bed and within the space of two hours, had destroyed one man's home, had sent other families scurrying to escape its force, and had covered another man's pasture land with rocks and pebbles ruining it for future use.

Ways and Means Discussed

That night, the group went to a meeting of the Skagit County Planning Commission. This group, made up of a lawyer, county commissioner, representatives of the local government and the schools, and a goodly percentage of farmers and business men, together with its planning engineer, was working on the problem of securing federal aid for the valley's program of water control. Army engineers and members of the Soil Conservation Service and the Forestry Service were present to give valuable data and to answer questions. Many farmers came in during the course of the evening to hear what was being said and on occasion to speak to a point themselves. For two hours, discussion proceeded without noticeable slackening of interest on anyone's part and with some degree of progress made by the commission. The most interesting part of the evening's meeting was the gradual enlargement of everyone's concept of the value of the soil. This enlargement came about as individuals

attempted to answer questions concerning the wisdom of spending the money necessary to control the Skagit even though federal help could be secured. The group decided that in addition to its basic cost to a farmer, an acre of soil was worth the crops grown on it, worth the processing of the crops grown on it, worth the work of people who supplied goods and services to the farmer and the processors both in the present and in the future; in short, that an acre of land is invaluable, that it could not be replaced within the space of many generations, if ever, and that the community could not afford to let it disappear down the river.

After the meeting, the group, very much impressed, returned to Bellingham. The impact of the days' experiences continued to be strong. Every one had come to feel the importance of bringing into the local schools programs phases of the problems seen and heard about that day. Some individuals wanted help in making similar studies of their own regions and in learning the possibilities of these regions for their curricula. Teachers realized, too, that they must consider the social as well as scientific aspects of the situation. Everyone kept expressing amazement at the number of agencies working together on the problems of the valley, upon the great amount of resource material available, and the willingness of experts to help the schools in any way possible.

The Studies Continued

In the weeks following the trip, individuals began planning units of work dealing with various phases of the Skagit Valley situation. As part of their preparation they continued their study

of the region, securing help from county and federal agencies. In Mt. Vernon, one of the towns in Skagit County, they visited plants engaged in processing foods produced on the nearby farms. They read from government pamphlets, and farm and trade journals. To broaden their general background they read widely in the college library and viewed many films from the science department. They made many bibliog-

raphies of suitable material from books for children.

Not only had teachers become aware of the aspects of the community, but there was every reason to believe that in the future, the "stuff" of which the curriculum is made would be more vital to children. For it will be drawn in part from the land on which they live and from which they obtain their daily living.

The School Lunchroom—Workshop for Living

EPSIE YOUNG

Breaking bread together is a custom enjoyed by young and old. Transfer this custom to a school lunchroom and you have a purposeful area for learning, such as the one described here by Epsie Young, director, Elementary Education, Orange, Texas.

LUNCHROOMS as laboratories for learning! Laboratories just as truly as those in science, art, or home economics! School lunch service as an integral part of the overall instructional program! Today this is the thinking of children, parents, and teachers in the nine elementary schools of Orange, Texas.

This has not always been the case. Six years ago these same lunchrooms were—well, just lunchrooms,—providing very little opportunity for coordinated learning or teaching. Change took place when cooperative planning by the faculty and representative community groups became an actuality. There are no claims made for the perfection of the present program. Im-



*Photos courtesy Orange (Tex.) Public Schools
The young hostess presides*

provements are still on the docket. But Orange school officials do point with pride toward many of the present prac-

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