

INSTRUCTIONAL theory relates directly to what we do in our classrooms, how we teach, how we arrange the environment for our learners, and how we try to improve instruction. At least it should—and the rest that follows is written in support of that assertion.

The Need for Theory

The very name of our organization, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, implies that each of us has an occupational interest in the improvement of instruction. All of us who teach strive for new and better ways to ensure more efficient and permanent learning for our students. We have a deep conviction that much of this efficiency and permanency depends on *how* we teach and the instruction we provide.

Yet, dark questions continually haunt us: Did I do too much of the talking to my class yesterday? If I clearly know the facts and my students don't, shouldn't I just *tell* them? How long will they remember and *know* after they have passed my tests? Does the "silent curriculum" I create while I teach contribute to their apparent lack of motivation? Could I behave somehow differently so they might become better motivated to learn? If so, how?

We are convinced we are good teachers by feedback from our students, their parents and friends, our colleagues, supervisors, and even test results. Still, our students could do better in many ways and that means *we* could do better.

So, at this point, most of us experiment. We change texts. We try a new grade-getting procedure. We try a new method we heard about at a conference or workshop. We try anything that sounds good and makes sense to us in our own situations. But our experimental efforts are almost pitiful in their randomness. And these efforts lead to organizational changes that follow cycles: we change from the self-contained classroom to departmentalization to team teaching. We ability group, nongrade, open the classroom, individualize, and return to the self-contained

The Theory

classroom. Somehow we take the right path now and then both as teachers and as school systems and so gradually we improve. But the many nonrewarding experiments get discouraging and we long for a road map so we might pursue our goal of improved instruction more efficiently. That road map can only be a theory of instruction.

This is not a new need. In 1961, George Beauchamp (1) argued for a systematic approach to test theoretical positions. Many others have stated the need, but perhaps the most compelling statement was Jerome Bruner's (2) argument that the educational system is the sole agent of evolution! If we accept that premise, then we *must* look to a theory of instruction to influence society toward what we believe it should become.

The Functions of a Theory

Any kind of a theory is simply a good guess or hypothesis that suggests relationships, consequences, or even "facts" still to be discovered. A good theory generates guesses that deserve testing, experimentation, verification, modification, or rejection. A theory reduces the randomness of such

Role of in Instruction

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experimental efforts. So if we define instruction as "the process of influencing learners toward some goal," a theory of instruction dictates the most logical experiments for improving instruction toward the given goal.

I have recently presented one such theory which I call the Referent Theory of Instruction (4), but others are needed and some are on the horizon. Proponents of the open classroom are nearing such a theory. The entire mishmash of writings in the area of performance based education might some day be synthesized into a valuable theory of instruction.

Generating Hypotheses

Some theories will be more helpful than others, but each should serve the primary purpose of reducing the randomness of teacher experimentation in the classroom but not the experimentation *per se*. The first function of a good theory of instruction is to generate testable hypotheses which *deserve* testing and thereby motivate increased experimentation focused on a single hypothesis.

In building the Referent Theory of Instruction, the following hypothesis emerged:

A good theory generates guesses that deserve testing, experimentation, verification, modification, or rejection. If we define instruction as "the process of influencing learners toward some goal," a theory of instruction dictates the most logical experiments for improving instruction toward the given goal.

Differences in teachers will explain a significant portion of learner differences in the "non-content" areas of improved self concept, desire for learning, and respect for others (4).

A good number of teachers have joined our effort to support, modify, or reject that hypothesis. Most of us believe the guess is correct and although designing and conducting reputable studies to support it is no easy task, our *direction* for effort, research, and experimentation is clear.

Several challengers have expended considerable energy attacking a different hypothesis which holds that only a small part, if

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any, of differences among scholastic achievement scores will be explained by differences in teachers. Finally, some bad procedures may be reduced or eliminated if all of us could become convinced of the veracity of a third hypothesis; namely, that attempts to evaluate teachers on the basis of scores from present-day achievement tests administered to their students are a waste of time.

Guiding Curriculum Change

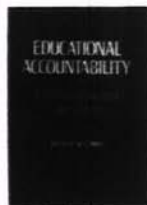
A good theory of instruction should also direct curriculum change within the schools. The lasting curriculum changes are those emerging from a strong theoretical base rather than from a general attitude of "any change is good." That strong base must be some sort of efficient packaging of what we know for sure, or at the least, those things we can count on for a few years.

Such a package would display all of the essential information and most of the important information we need when we consider

instructional improvement in an intelligent way. These pieces of information must be classified so that we can easily retrieve the elements which are relevant to our immediate concerns. Gordon Cawelti (3) has pointed out this need for identification of components of knowledge and suggested some elements within each component. Structuring this body of knowledge is no glamorous task, but it is the essential one behind any theory of instruction. Some things we know are *not* true will be so noted in the package and serve to reduce the number of experiments and studies predestined to repeat the same findings. Finally, the design of such a package must accommodate continuous modification of its contents as our knowledge and skills expand.

Curriculum development and actual curricular changes can be made most productively only in view of and in harmony with that universe of knowledge. Textbook companies, editors, and authors would surely welcome and utilize this discipline and thereby

A SEARCHING LOOK AT ACCOUNTABILITY



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provide their products with the authenticity often sensed by teachers as missing. Political considerations will undoubtedly continue to sway and control many curriculum changes, but a sound theory of instruction will serve as an effective filter through which many such pressures could be effectively strained.

In summary, I have argued that all of us who are involved in teaching, supervision, coordination, or direction of instruction and curriculum have a basic desire to improve the instructional programs of our country. Historically, our progress has been steady but tedious and slow. We repeat bandwagon cycles either needlessly or because of political pressures. The randomness of our experimentation and research can be drastically reduced if we are guided by a sound theory of instruction.

An instructional theory is a set of good guesses or hypotheses that reflect relationships and consequences. The hypotheses are generated from a sound knowledge base, prescribe effective instructional strategies, and motivate experimentation. An accept-

able theory of instruction must serve three basic functions:

1. Give direction to our instructional planning and conduct
2. Generate hypotheses that deserve testing, eventuating in verification, modification, or rejection
3. Guide curriculum change and development based on a relevant body of knowledge resulting in valuable and long-lasting curriculum changes.



Lacking fulfillment of these functions, too much of our instructional behavior, supervisory help, and general instructional research will remain random, without focus or direction. A sound theory of instruction can provide us the direction and focus for our efforts to improve instruction and to answer those dark questions which continually haunt us.

References

1. George A. Beauchamp. *Curriculum Theory*. Wilmette, Illinois: The Kagg Press, 1961. p. 119.
2. Jerome S. Bruner. *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968. p. 26.
3. Gordon Cawelti. "Components of a General Instructional Theory." *Educational Leadership* 31 (5): 427-30; February 1974.
4. Philip L. Hosford. *An Instructional Theory: A Beginning*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973. pp. 85-155. □

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