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Individualized Learning in the Introductory Social Science Course: Progress Report

by
Thomas H. Byers

One of the most difficult and frustrating problems which confronts teachers of college Social Science courses is, the problem of the reading gap.¹ This problem, which in all probability is not unique to the Social Sciences, has at least two facets. The first and most conspicuous facet of the problem is the obvious gap between the reading difficulty of college level social studies materials and the reading ability of the students. The second facet of the problem is the divergent levels of ability among students enrolled in the same course, thus complicating the task of adapting instruction to the reading level of the class. The research project described in this report represents the beginnings of an effort to meet head-on both facets of the reading gap problem.

The research project was made possible by a grant from the Research Development in Professional Education Project of the United States Office of Education.² To facilitate the organization and teaching of the experimental course which comprised the project the writer was released from one-third of his teaching load at Savannah State College, with that part of his salary for the quarter being paid by the Research Development Project. The project was designed to test two hypotheses: (1) that Social Science materials could be adapted to the reading levels of individual members of a Freshman level class without distorting the meaning of the basic concepts involved;³ and (2) that individualizing instruction would result in improving the students' reading skills as well as their understanding of society.

The course which was designed to test the above hypotheses was given the same number as the regular general education course at the freshman level, and one section of the regular course was set up as a control group. The randomness of the sample for both the experimental and the control groups was assumed, since the students in both groups were, for the most part, entering Freshmen, and all had registered originally for the regular general education course. The experimental group became the "guinea pigs" for the new course, Social Science 101: Contemporary Civilization, while the control group continued in the regular course, Social Science 101: Western Culture. Both groups were given the STEP Reading Test (Form A)⁴

¹Miriam Schleich and Sidney J. Rauch, "Combining A Program Of Reading Improvement With the Study Of History," (Mimeographed Article, Hofstra University).

²Project #7-D-D49, a cooperative project among Georgia Colleges under the general directorship of Dr. Ralph Lightsey at Georgia Southern College.

³See Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), ch. 3.

⁴Sequential Tests of Educational Progress (Published by the Cooperative Test Division, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N. J.)

and Social Studies Test (Form A) at the beginning of the term, and Form B of both tests at the end of the term.

The control group was taught the "traditional" Western Culture course in the "traditional" manner, i.e., with a heavy emphasis on lectures, with the few opportunities for discussion very seldom taken advantage of, and with no deliberate attempt to focus on improvement of reading and other study skills. The experimental course, on the other hand, began by deliberately focusing on reading skills, de-emphasized lectures, and strove continually for active involvement of students in reports and discussions. The remainder of this paper will present a summary sketch of the materials, the procedures, and the student activities of the experimental course, and conclude with an evaluation of the results in terms of the hypotheses which the research project was designed to test.

The general objectives of the course were listed in the first of the "learning packages" which the students were given. These objectives were of two kinds: those relating to the acquisition of information or knowledge; and those relating to the cultivation of essential study skills. Both the general objectives and the specific objectives (which were developed for each separate unit) were stated in behavioral terms, that is, in terms of what students *would be doing* when they were demonstrating the extent to which they had achieved the objectives.⁵ The knowledge objectives indicated that students should be able:

1. to demonstrate an understanding of how modern society operates;
2. to list and discuss intelligently those "universals" which are common to all societies and cultures;
3. to explain in broad outline those social and historical processes which are responsible for the present condition of society; and
4. to demonstrate an awareness of the interrelationship between society and the individual by discussing specific instances of society's effect upon the individual and the individual's effect upon society.

The objectives relating to study skills stated that students' would be expected to improve their abilities in the following areas:

1. in listening to oral presentations of information and to organize such information into meaningful patterns;
2. in grasping the central point, and the implicit or explicit assumptions of lectures and printed materials;
3. in communicating accurately and clearly, both verbally and in writing, the ideas which they acquired through listening and reading; and

⁵Robert F. Mager, *Preparing Instructional Objectives*. (Palo Alto, Calif.: Fearon Publishers, 1962).

4. in detecting unsound arguments and illogical statements, and in criticizing them constructively, using factually based arguments and logical reasoning.

These, then, were the general objectives of the experimental course, and an attempt was made to utilize them as guides to the selection of materials, the development of student activities, and the choice of instructional and evaluation procedures.

Since one of the hypotheses which the research project set out to test had to do with matching materials to the reading levels of the students, one of the first steps was that of locating materials on the same topics at several levels of reading difficulty. Because these materials had to be selected before the composition of the class was known, the assumption was made that the reading levels of those Freshmen who entered college at the beginning of the Spring Quarter would parallel roughly the levels of those who had entered earlier. Acting on this assumption, three reading levels were established: grade 12 and above; grade 10 through 12; and grades 6 through 9. The selection of materials was guided further by two additional assumptions: (1) that students at all levels could profit by learning materials which focused specifically on study skills; and (2) that programmed instructional materials would be suitable for students at all levels.

On the basis of the above considerations, together with the advice and counsel of the Director of the Reading Program at Savannah State, Mrs. Abbie Jordan, the following materials were selected for the course. First, *Man's Behavior*, by Jules Karlin, was chosen as the basic text. The reading level of this text was established at grades 10-11. In addition, it contained other features, such as italicized print for new concepts, bold faced headings for chapter sub-divisions, and study questions at the end of each chapter, which our reading consultant felt added to its usefulness. Other materials selected were: (1) *How To Study Workshop*, an inexpensive (25¢ ea.) pamphlet which contained lessons under the headings "Vocabulary Skills," "Assignment Skills," and "Organization Skills"; (2) *Anthropology In Today's World*, another inexpensive pamphlet; (3) *Understanding Other Cultures*, by Ina Corinne Brown; (4) Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*; and (5) four programmed texts in economics. Students were required to buy the basic text *only* with the other materials being provided out of funds made available from the research grant.

Student activities for the course, organized in relation to three, distinct units, were designed to facilitate improvement in reading and study skills as a means of helping along the acquisition of knowledge and increasing understanding of specific aspects of culture and society. In Unit I: Studying Man's Behavior, emphasis was placed upon making students aware of some of the important skills which would help them in studying man's behavior, and of the importance of improving these skills as a means of increasing their abilities to understand any materials they might read, for this course or for any other purpose. In addition, the first chapter of *Man's Behavior* was included in the assignment so that students might be studying man's behavior and

learning *how* to study at the same time. Students were encouraged to follow this pattern for succeeding units as well, even though the specific study skills assignments would not be a formal part of the units. Some of the activities included in this first unit were: (1) identifying *prefixes* and *suffixes*; (2) skimming; (3) making notes; (4) developing "leading questions" and finding "key answers," (5) summarizing and outlining. Activities (2) through (5) were performed with readings from Chapter I of *Man's Behavior*.

In Unit II: Society, Culture, and The Individual, the differential assignment based on student's reading levels was used for the first time. Three similar sets of activities were prepared, with the only difference being the reading material on which the student activities were to be based. Students were required to read their respective materials, and then to prepare oral and written reports based on the unit objectives. Those students who scored in the top group on the Reading Test were assigned *Patterns of Culture*; those who scored in the middle range were given *Understanding Other Cultures* as their assignment; and the lowest scoring group (which was the largest) used *Anthropology In Today's World*. The reading level of *Patterns of Culture* is Grades 13-15; that of *Understanding Other Cultures* 9-10; and *Anthropology In Today's World* 6-8. Since the oral and written reports were based on the unit objectives, these reports were used to evaluate the extent to which the objectives had been achieved.

Unit Two was used to introduce students to the concepts of culture and society, the way in which culture, society, and the individuals who make up society interact, and the manner in which the several dimensions of culture might be used in understanding, analyzing, and comparing different cultures. In contrast, Unit Three (and the units which will comprise the subject matter of Social Science 102) focused on one of the dimensions which all known cultures contain. For Unit III: The Economic Dimension of Culture, students used programmed texts to secure an understanding of how the free enterprise system works, of some of the special problems and modifications of the system as it operates in the economy of the United States, and how the free enterprise system compares with socialist and communist systems. Through individual reports and class discussion, students who had worked through different programs shared their knowledge and understanding with each other.

It will be seen from the above discussion that the evidence tends to support the validity of our first hypothesis. That is to say, that it was possible to adapt social studies materials to the differential reading levels of the students who comprised the social science class. The basic text, the materials selected for the unit on Culture, and the programmed material on Economics all provide examples of the fact that if one looks for such materials, they can be found. With respect to the second of the two hypotheses, however, the results were inconclusive. This hypothesis maintained that the individualizing of instruction would enable students to improve their reading abilities and their knowledge of society. In general, the students in the ex-

perimental class showed a slight gain in their reading scores and a slight loss in their social studies scores, while the control group showed a slight loss in reading, while remaining about the same in Social Studies. The mean scores for the two groups were as follows:

1. Experimental Group

Reading, Form A - 24.69
Reading, Form B - 26.19
Social Studies A - 23.75
Social Studies B - 21.62

2. Control Group

Reading, Form A - 30.38
Reading, Form B - 28.06
Social Studies A - 23.88
Social Studies B - 24.00

While the results of the experiment were not at all conclusive with respect to the second hypothesis, neither should they be considered discouraging. The experiment thus far has been based on only the first part of a two-part course. Moreover, the organization of this first course was heavily weighted toward establishing a sound foundation, both in terms of general study skills and of a conceptual framework for studying cultures, on which to build subsequent learning experiences. Thus, out of a projected five-dimensional scheme for studying cultures and societies only one dimension was included in the first course. When the other four dimensions—the political, the social, the religious, and the aesthetic—are rounded out in the second course, a completely different, and hopefully more positive, picture should emerge.