SELF-DIRECTED STUDENT GROUPS AND COLLEGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Studies conducted by the author are reported in which small self-directed groups of college students assumed the major responsibility for their learning in college courses. Other similar studies are reported and summarized. These studies all indicate that self-directed small group study does not result in any decrement in subject matter mastery in the college learning experience. Furthermore, a number of measurable benefits appear in terms of other desirable outcomes of the overall small-group experience. Such educational outcomes as interest in reading material related to the course and its assignments, quantity and quality of study invested in the courses, increased communicative and interpersonal skills, sense of responsibility for one's own growth and learning, greater enthusiasm for the small-group experience, improvement in critical thinking, greater awareness of applications of study material, and lasting curiosity aroused by the learning, all appear persistently in favor of the self-directed student groups. Observations of self-directed groups in action and some implications for policy decisions in higher education are given.

The small interactive human group has come into its own. We are realizing something of the power and the potential which lie in the resources of a small group of intelligent adults thrown into close, continuing encounter with one another. Developments in applied group dynamics, group therapy and the encounter culture have amply demonstrated the benefits people may derive from such small group experience—sometimes with a designated leader present and sometimes without a leader. The leaderless or self-directed group has shown its merit in a variety of settings, serving problem-solving, decision-making and personal growth ends, and the recent experimentation with self-directed therapy groups has presented a still further application of the best principles of the autonomous, small interactive group at work.

One of the most productive ends which the small interactive group serves is the enhancement of learning, especially in adult groups and in
higher education. When the searching and sharing activity of such a group is primarily self-directed, i.e., controlled and directed by the members themselves, the stage is well set for learning to occur. Recent experimentation in college learning has been concerned with this kind of instructorless or self-directed study group. The general picture presented by this form of study is that of a small group of college students, usually about a half-dozen, meeting together periodically and quite informally to explore and discuss subject matter in a course which has been designed and structured for self-directed study. Contact with the instructor during the course is limited. Typically, the general course of study or the body of material to which the group is to be exposed is outlined in some sort of course syllabus and includes a textbook or specified reading material.

The technique is not widely reported, despite the fact that educators, social psychologists, and group dynamicists in particular, have been pointing out for some time that growth and learning may be greatly enhanced and made more permanent through group interaction. It has been well established, for example, that definite benefits accrue from group discussion as opposed to formalized lecture instruction (Birney and McKeachie, 1955).

**Students Learn from Each Other**

Educators need to know more about how students learn *from each other* and from learning experiences in which they have an active part and assume responsibility for their learning. Some years ago Patton found that where students assumed responsibility for classroom experience (reading to be done, class procedure, written work and method of grading), as compared with a control group, they felt that the course was more valuable and they showed greater interest in the course content. Moreover, the degree to which the student accepted responsibility was positively correlated with gain in knowledge of the subject matter and gain in ability to apply the principles studied (Patton, 1955).

The small student group, studying quite independently of formalized instruction, can achieve objectives which cannot be achieved in larger groups or lecture settings. As Bruce Dearing says,

> ... small-group independent study seeks to capitalize on the gains that can be achieved from small-group process and interaction. In effect, small-group independent study seeks to place the student in a new kind of "environmental press" in learning. It is a "press" which, in the very nature of its situation, and the kind of responsibilities for learning it imposes on the student, seeks to involve the student in a more intimate and direct way with the materials to be learned, than might be the case were he only to hear or read about the subject (Baskin, 1965, ch. 3).