TOWARD A THEORY OF EXPERIENTIAL INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: Attention to experiential instruction is needed if the learning process is not to be left totally to chance. This paper proposes a theory of experiential instruction based on ideas of Jerome Bruner. Four general requirements of a theory of instruction (attention to the learner's predisposition to learning, appropriate structuring of knowledge, meaningful sequencing of concepts and timely feedback) are examined in light of the instructional role in experiential settings. The discussion concludes with a call for research and development to refine and improve the practice of experiential instruction.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that in experiential learning settings the instructional role changes from "dispensing knowledge" to "facilitating learning." But what are effective ways of carrying out this new instructional role? To what must the instructor attend as he or she assists students to learn through active doing? In this paper I would like to examine the theory of instruction described by Jerome Bruner in Toward a Theory of Instruction (1966; my discussion relies especially on Chapter Three "Notes on a Theory of Instruction") in light of...
requirements for a theory of experiential instruction. My purpose in
doing so is to stimulate instructors to think carefully about instruc-
tional processes appropriate to experiential courses. While I hope that
some of the suggestions contained in the following pages will have
practical value, I'm convinced that the best practices come from in-
structors' own imaginative responses to well-formulated questions. I
hope this paper helps sharpen the questions we ask.

CONDITIONS OF A THEORY OF INSTRUCTION

Bruner asserts that any theory of instruction must be
prescriptive: it should attempt to set forth the best means (p. 40) of
leading the learner to a body of desired knowledge. Such a theory
should set forth the conditions of instruction and predict consequences
of various options for fulfilling each condition. In Bruner's theory of
instruction, there are four major conditions (pp. 40-41):

1. A theory of instruction should specify the experiences which most
effectively implant in the individual a predisposition toward learn-
ing.
2. It should specify the ways in which a body of knowledge should be
structured so that it can most readily be grasped by the learner . . .
The merit of a structure depends upon its power for simplifying
information, for generating new propositions, and for increasing the
manipulability of a body of knowledge . . . . (Bruner's italics).
3. It should specify the most effective sequences in which to present
the materials to be learned.
4. It should specify the nature and pacing of rewards and punishments
in the process of learning and teaching.

In a "typical" course, an instructor might go about satisfying these
criteria of a theory of instruction in this fashion: First, to motivate
students the instructor describes course goals at a level that stimulates
the curiosity of the students who demonstrate their curiosity by enrol-
ing in the course, by attending, and by participating in the course.
Next, to structure a body of knowledge, the instructor might specify
the content of a series of lectures, questions for class discussion and
books that will be read and studied. Each choice the instructor makes
is an implicit statement about the structure of the knowledge that
the course is intended to convey. Third, the instructor might sequence
content in such a way (for example: temporally, from most simple