THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF FIELD EXPERIENCE EDUCATION: SOME APPLICATIONS TO THE LIBERAL ARTS

James E. Althof

ABSTRACT: This paper reviews some of the social-psychological factors which are important in the educational field-experience setting. The contributions of these important instructional stimuli are discussed and described. The effect that each has upon the experience and behavior of liberal arts college students is examined. Many of these elusive changes in students are considered important learning outcomes to the liberal arts academy. Much of the literature is condensed into a tentative list of constructs which comprises part of the instructional theory of field experience education. They are translated into concrete actions that a liberal arts academician can take. These steps will enhance and complete his or her delivery of the subject matter at hand by putting students in touch with the reality of it.

Research has shown that traditional academic programs, instead of enhancing students' developmental growth or encouraging creativity, tend to disassociate them from a dynamic understanding of the world as it exists (Feldman, 1969; Sibley, 1971; Stoll, 1970). Studies show that students educated in the traditional classroom curriculum actually demonstrate lower levels of insight and creative understanding than their non-college peers (Mol, 1971; Sibley, 1971). Didactic instruction conducted solely in an information assimilation mode tends not to challenge students' growth (Heath, 1968; Korn, 1968; Perry, 1970; Sanford, 1967).

One might consider the prophesy made by Woodrow Wilson in 1909 when he addressed himself to the relevance and impact of higher education: "So long as instruction and life do not merge in our colleges, so
long as what the under-graduates do and what they are taught occupy two separate air-tight compartments in their consciousness, so long will college be ineffectual” (1925, p. 113).

The point of view of this paper is that the introduction of well-designed experiential learning programs will in fact assure quality liberal arts learning outcomes. Well delivered experiential instruction is a framework which easily can support the concepts, principles, and knowledge revered by the liberal arts academy. Field experience education is an intriguing social-psychological situation put to educational use. That is, it is a phenomena in which experience and behavior are the results of social stimulus situations. To better understand the implications of this statement, we will explore the social psychology of field experience education in order to isolate the major factors which actually stimulate change valued by liberal arts educators.

There is one act of faith and belief that is a premise not to be debated here—that the liberal arts graduate must be a person who can better deal with the dynamics of reality and that the presence of this graduate will improve the quality of life for all of us. McLuhan has suggested that ultimately our instructional methods (media) will be our final message. Our graduates will remember the process of education we use, long after the content of our courses have been forgotten. Experiential education is a medium of action and doing, and even in its poorest, impure form, conveys a message of the dynamics of reality.

NATURE OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS

First we will look at what comprises an instructional system to allow us to identify the instructional methods we now use in the college setting and to compare them with less traditional methods such as experiential instruction. Then we will examine the educational results that we can achieve with experiential education.

Instructional Theory

Bruner (1966) has defined a “theory of instruction” as an optimum set of activities (a curriculum) organized by an outside agent (the instructor) for the purpose of bringing about learning. This is a general theoretical approach under which field experience instruction can comfortably be placed.

What then are the characteristics of an instructional theory? Bruner (1966) includes the following: