Student-Faculty Interaction and the Organization of the University

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After learning is defined as a two-way process involving the mutual engagement of complete persons, the structural inhibitions on this kind of educational process are described in an analysis of the large university as a mass organization. The strains inherent in faculty and student roles are outlined and a number of adaptive identities are posited that could be enacted to reduce them. The effects of these processes on learning are delineated and organizational changes are suggested to resolve or minimize the problems raised.

The events of the 1960s represented by student demonstrations led to questions being raised about the nature of education and how effectively colleges and universities were educating their students. The purpose of the present paper is to explore the problem of undergraduate education at large publicly supported universities in terms of the social organization of these institutions and its effect upon student-faculty relationships.

In the course of this paper, we discuss the university as an example of mass society, the problems of fulfilling role obligations for faculty and students, the organization of the university, and the subcultures of faculty and students to show how faculty-student relationships are impeded. Our basic contention is that the formal organization of the university and the classroom creates strong pressures for social distance between the faculty and the students. That is, the structure of the institution breeds impersonality, lack of mutual awareness, and lack of communication. Because of the structure and the resulting social distance, stereotypes and negative images develop that increase the social distance and lack of involvement. In addition, within this structure, separate faculty and student subcultures develop that are premised upon a lack of involvement with each other and that lead to the formation of rationalizations and justifications for pursuing this very course of action. Thus, both structurally and culturally, factors exist that impede the educational process because they inhibit the development of meaningful faculty-student relationships, meaningful in the sense that the goal is intellectual development, and the means are an active two-way communication process involving complete persons. In conclusion, we offer some changes, which derive from our theory, to resolve or minimize the problems we cite.

Western society, according to Max Weber, has had a penchant for creating formal organizations to achieve social ends. These formal organizations, Weber pointed out, are the most efficient and rational forms of organization to deal with large numbers of products and men. Weber, however, while recognizing the advantage of formal organization, was also cognizant of its disadvantages. He feared that these organizations would severely limit individualism, liberty, and creativity (Gerth & Mills, 1958, pp.70-74).

The problems that derive from formal organization are clearly apparent when we examine higher
education. In formalizing the educational process, we have created organizations that can process large numbers of individuals but in doing so we have transformed the traditional ideas of education. As many sociologists have pointed out, formal organizations contain within themselves, as a function of their organization, certain latent consequences that disrupt, distort, challenge, and change the achievement of stated goals (Blau, 1955; Merton, 1936; Selznick, 1949). In the current context, the basic issue is whether education can be accomplished at large universities where there is a minimum of faculty-student interaction.

This issue seems to imply that a definition of education can be made and that as a consequence of this definition faculty-student interaction is seen as a basic component of the meaning and process of education. Unfortunately these implications frequently go unstated. We cannot offer a precise definition of education. All we can do is indicate what we think education is and some of the characteristics that we think education does possess. These indications, however, should provide some orientation to the kinds of structures and relationships that facilitate education.

Education as an end product has always been difficult to define. In our minds, however, education is not, as some think, the transmission and accretion of general knowledge. It is not the accumulation of specialized information designed to pragmatically prepare individuals for slots in the economy of the society. It is not the inculcation and/or transformation of given value systems or cultural orientations. Finally, it is not a purely individual enterprise whereby, out of sheer curiosity, abstract symbols are manipulated to solve theoretical problems.

Education probably contains some aspects of all of the above but it is our belief that it, more basically, means an attitudinal disposition and a process whereby the individual trains and disciplines his faculties to understand the world around him. It is the creation and utilization of a perspective that is premised on skepticism and doubt and the constant search for ultimate and correct solutions. It is a process of mind that matches a constantly changing environment. This changing environment therefore calls for a tolerance of ambiguous and undefined situations while at the same time pressing for their understanding. It requires constant appraisals of the environment and constant questioning of self and others. Education is a process of giving of one's self and not merely taking from others but interacting with others actively to develop and test one's own assumptions, observations, and conclusions (Blumer, 1969; Dewey, 1916, 1922; Mead, 1934).

Education then is maximally facilitated by situations that are conducive to diversity, open conflict, activity, mutual respect for participants, relationship to and immersion in reality, and the free flow of communication. Education is hindered by homogeneity, consensus, passivity, great social distance between participants, isolation from reality, and the blockage of communication. In order to develop one's faculties to learn, the individual needs a diversity of perspectives to challenge single solutions. He needs the existence of open and accepted conflict to express his doubts, his questions, and his proposed solutions. He needs the acceptance of his participation in order to have the motivation and freedom to question and to create. Above all he needs the free flow of communication to have the opportunity to initiate, question, and respond in order to experience thought and its positive consequences (Hall, 1966).

Education, then, following from the previous statements, requires the establishment of interactions and relationships that facilitate the development of thought. It now becomes obvious why the existence and nature of faculty-student relationships are so basic to education. When they occur it is possible for the participants to recognize each other as motivated for the same ends. They can treat each other as real persons rather than social objects. They feel free to challenge, to question, to criticize, and to initiate. They have the opportunity to become involved and to communicate. Education is a dialogue between persons in close touch with each other.

The problem, as we observe in the course of this paper, is that requirements for the kind of education we define and the means to achieve that education are relatively absent in large universities. As Clark (1962, p.283) notes:

"In schools and colleges where personal contact is weak and membership lacks excitement, we may expect that broad effects of education on the mind and character of students will be weak. There is little doubt that historical facts, technical data, and even broad concepts can be taught in the mass by highly impersonal means —the lecture hall of a thousand students. But there