THE IMPROVEMENT OF INSTRUCTION

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In any program aimed at the improvement of instruction three major decisions must be made. First, those responsible for the instruction must determine what its purposes are. What changes should the course of study bring about in students? In what respects should they behave or act differently as a consequence of studying, say, agronomy. In many instances instructors have never thought carefully about the purposes of the courses they are teaching, and there is often fundamental disagreement among persons teaching the same subject.

The second decision that must be made if instruction is to be improved has to do with the learning experiences the students should have. If, for example, one of the objectives in elementary science is to bring about an understanding of the effect sunlight has upon plant growth, should we have the student (a) conduct various laboratory experiments, or (b) read certain references, or (c) observe a good demonstration, or (d) listen to a lecture, or (e) do all four? The answers to these questions regarding the relative effectiveness of this or that learning experience should be arrived at by methods other than discussion. Objective and straightforward experimental inquiries designed to solve such problems are rare but they can be made.

The third major consideration in a program of instructional improvement involves attempts to determine whether or not the behavior of the students has changed, whether or not they have learned, whether or not the instructional aims have been attained. An attack upon this problem of the evaluation or measurement of learning is frequently most fruitful of results so far as the improvement of the total instructional program is concerned. In other words, to start here usually leads to far reaching consequences.

STATING COURSE AIMS OR PURPOSES

I shall illustrate each of these three phases of an instructional improvement project by reference to the teaching of biology. As an instance of most effective thinking about the first instructional problem, an explicit statement of objectives or course purposes, the experience of a group of teachers of zoology at Ohio State University is instructive. For many years zoology had been taught without any serious attempt to make definite just what the course was supposed to do to students. The text was studied, a series of laboratory exercises was completed, a number of lectures given, and very sweeping assumptions were made regarding the value of these

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