WE KNOW WHERE TO START

principles of learning apply to disadvantaged

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Suddenly it's 1969 and our hesitant, halting and retarded efforts to include the black population in our Great Society have created a domestic crisis. The one-fifth of our population that we have attempted to entertain with baseball and dead-end jobs will no longer be denied opportunity.

On the one hand we are being pressured to pay a long overdue debt, and on the other hand we face an unequalled opportunity to make a contribution to civil peace, social progress and economic prosperity.

Regardless of our individual reasons or motivation, our objective is well defined. We as trainers are committed to preparing undereducated, unskilled, unemployed, poverty-stricken minority groups to be regular and productive workers.

Police records, aptitude tests, and high school diplomas are no longer being applied to our recruiting procedures. Because of governmental, industrial and individually inspired commitments, we are confronted with many illiterate, unskilled people who have long since succumbed to a life of poverty and despair.

Our objective, restated, is to break this pattern of failure and provide a recognizable avenue to success through employment.

LEARNING PRINCIPLES

In spite of these apparently overwhelming deterrents to our success, we do not approach the task totally without experience. Trainers have long recognized the conditions that must exist if behavior is to be changed. We realize that learning, or a change in behavior, does not occur by accident, and we have conducted extensive experiments to identify useful principles of learning.

These principles have been identified as follows:

1. Learning must satisfy a need.

2. Learning should be active.

3. Learning tasks should be arranged in a logical sequence.

4. Learning must be broken down into small steps.

5. Learning should include repetition.

6. Learning should include knowledge of results.

These principles have inspired such training techniques as programmed instruction, role play, discussions, simulations etc., with which we have had great industrial training success. And yet, when we are confronted with the most significant training challenge of the century, we have been inclined to ignore these principles. We have been joining with government and industry in a dialogue, the objective of which is to identify a panacea. Extended conversations have ensued regarding such topics as what we are going to call these people, how we can learn the language of the street, and how to teach Negro culture.

AVOID PROCRASTINATION

All of these conversations and conferences will undoubtedly result in a contribution to our objective, but we must not allow these activities to result in procrastination. We, as trainers, know many of the ground rules, as a result of our previous attempts to change behavior. We know where to start.

Perhaps, "what we know" is the most serious contributor to our indolence. Because we know some of the principles, we recognize the enormous amount of money, time and energy that making regular and productive workers will require. The awesome implications that we envision, as a result of applying these principles to our present objectives, are breathtaking and at times discouraging.

However, we must recognize that we know where to start, and then begin applying the principles that have made us successful in other training efforts.

LEARNING MUST SATISFY A NEED

All training must be recognized as job related by the disadvantaged employee. If, for example, one objective is to prepare an employee to count back change to a customer, we would be ill-advised to conduct math classes. Rather, we will be more successful if we promote the discovery of the principles of math by having the student actually make change in a simulated work situation.

In all cases, we will want to avoid imposing our own cultural standards on these people, unless these standards can be clearly related to job productivity. Trying to change language patterns, dress or mannerisms that do not relate to productivity will not satisfy a need, for the trainee, and will therefore result in failure.

LEARNING SHOULD BE ACTIVE

Involvement, through learning activities, is an unchallenged contributor to the learning process. With these trainees, all opportunities for activity must be utilized. Since the disadvantaged person does not communicate verbally to the extent that the middle class person does, we must concentrate on learning activities that involve all of the senses. With limited auditory discrimination and with a limited vocabulary the student may communicate on a non-verbal level at first.

For these and other culturally related reasons, on-the-job coaching and buddy programs will be a necessary part of the creative training program.

LEARNING TASKS SHOULD BE ARRANGED IN A LOGICAL SEQUENCE

Deciding on what is logical sequence is difficult because there is frequently more than one basis for this sequence. Our decisions relating to logi-

cal sequence are strongly dependent on our cultural, political and religious experiences.

We might, for example, find that the matriarchal nature of the Negro family will greatly influence the Negroes' concepts relative to authority. Attempts to change behavior relative to authority situations, which are based on logic inspired by white patriarchal assumptions, may fall short.

Therefore, it is not only imperative that we examine our material for sequencing on the basis of easy-hard and beginning-end considerations, but we must also identify the cultural influences affecting logical sequence.

LEARNING MUST BE BROKEN INTO SMALL STEPS

To meet this requirement we must recognize the level of readiness that most semi-illiterates bring to the work climate. There will be deficiencies in the auditory and visual discrimination skills; eye-hand coordination; the ability to name, recognize, and copy numbers and letters of the alphabet; the ability to pay attention and follow directions; and attitude toward learning.

One of our biggest problems will be finding the time required to break this process into the small steps that we can easily recognize as essential. Furthermore, we will probably find these levels of inadequacy sometimes personally disgusting. The seemingly unjustifiable demands that these programs will place on our time and tolerance will be trying to us and our other employees.

LEARNING SHOULD INCLUDE REPETITION

Forgetting begins to take place immediately after learning. For this rea-

son, in our established industrial training programs, we have built-in regular opportunities for active review. The need for review will be increased many fold, when we are working with the disadvantaged.

We must remember that the semi-illiterate has so much more to remember. Trainees, with whom we have dealt in the past, had only the specific job skills to learn. However, these disadvantaged trainees are being asked to simultaneously learn a language, job skills, social amenities, cultural nuances, etc.

Traditional testing and review systems will probably indicate failure, unless we can build into these systems an opportunity to review those more subtle skills and abilities that we frequently take for granted.

Simply stated, these trainees are learning more and, therefore, we must repeat more.

LEARNING SHOULD INCLUDE KNOWLEDGE OF RESULTS

When we take a test, we not only find out where we made our errors, but we, also, find out what we did right.

For the trainee who has a history of school failure, the opportunity to be right is essential. The value of the success experience, as typified in programmed instruction, must find its way into every program. "Learning from our errors" has no place in the training of the disadvantaged.

THE OBJECTIVE

We know where to start. If we combine a sense of concern, with a sensitive application of our regularly utilized skills and principles, we can make a major contribution to civil peace, social progress and economic prosperity.