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FLEXIBILITY: A KEY ELEMENT FOR READING AND STUDY SKILLS SPECIALISTS

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The term flexibility is difficult to define. A person's definition of flexibility, like many other concepts, depends on a particular orientation or perspective of the world. If flexibility means adapting to change, then most people are flexible in some way. Through science we have developed technology, and our technology forces us to be flexible. About 97% of all the scientists who have ever lived are alive now, and they produce many changes (Toynbee, 1971). Our knowledge of the world is expanding at an incredible speed. Fourteen years ago George Arnstein said our scientific knowledge doubles approximately every eight years (Arnstein, 1966). Today knowledge is sought at accelerated rates through structured, complex, interrelated systems.

Educators should understand and respect the need for a flexible approach in many areas. "Tolstoy's observation, in the opening lines of Anna Karenina, that all happy families are alike and all unhappy families different, seems no less true of species. Those which survive share a common trait: they are able to adapt to changing circumstances" (Callahan, 1973, p. 86).

In the classroom it is important for teachers and students to adapt to each other. Teachers need to understand that they have the responsibility to facilitate this process. Some time ago R. D. Laing said, "A child born today in the United Kingdom stands a ten times greater chance of being admitted to a mental hospital than to a university, and about one fifth of mental hospital admissions are diagnosed schizophrenic. This can be taken as an indication that we are driving our children mad more effectively than we are genuinely educating them. Perhaps it is our way of educating them that is driving them mad" (Laing, 1967, p. 104). Laing may have taken liberties

with formal logic, but his message has implications for teachers. We have considerable influence, and we need to be able to adapt to student needs.

It is important to foster traits that promote a range of ability. Most teachers have to be quite flexible in order to keep their students' interest and at the same time transmit knowledge. Within higher education, professors must be involved in research, information, character building, and numerous administrative chores. A good researcher embraces qualities such as boldness, originality, incisiveness, and common sense. The ability to transmit knowledge is needed to fulfill the informational function. As more pressure of an administrative nature arises, the character-development function may well be neglected.

In the early 1960s Robert Knapp prophetically identified certain trends in our system of higher education:

1. Character building more passive with emphasis now on the good example;

2. Rise in professional societies and identification, producing conflict of loyalty and division within disciplines;

3. Rise in academic freedom, starting in 1915 with the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure;

4. Importance of research and publication as the marks of professional success and as the avenue to promotion and advancement;

5. Ph.D. as the union card to teach and a growing bureaucratization of college teaching;

6. Decline in the professor's influence in the management of institutional affairs;

7. Fewer Ph.D. programs developing teacher skills, and decline in enthusiasm to teach (Knapp, 1962).

Reading and study skills teachers must be involved to some degree in research and character building as well as the mechanics of teaching corrective or developmental reading. The business of transmitting knowledge on the remedial level is a major concern. This is a complex and difficult job, because students usually do not understand their obligations to the educational process. Remedial students need patience and considerable help from accepting teachers.

Every teacher must be flexible in addition to being knowledgeable in their content area. It is also necessary for educators to instruct their students to be flexible. Gibson and Levin (1975), in a most

comprehensive and scholarly work on the psychology of reading, argue throughout their volume that flexibility of reading style is of the greatest importance. They content that the reader's purpose, the author's intention, and the style of the text are factors to be adjusted to. Furthermore, they point to the fact that many educators have emphasized that variability in rate is not the cause of flexibility in reading styles, but a result of mature reading skill. The mature person is relatively flexible like the mature reader or the mature teacher.

Terry Johnson (1973) explains that the goal in reading is not speed but flexibility and selectivity. Johnson said:

> In recent years there has been a flurry of interest in "speed" or "quick" reading. This interest has been primarily at the secondary and adult level, but suggestions for its use have trickled into the junior school. A desire for greater speed of reading can lead to a great deal of misapplied effort. It is as nonsensical to claim a reading speed of 900 words per minute as it is to claim a running speed of 15 m.p.h. I can run at 6 m.p.h. I can also run at 15 m.p.h., but not for very long. The speed at which I run depends on what I want to do. If I have lost my watch I am going to go very slowly and retrace my steps if I feel it is necessary. A similar situation applies in reading. If I wish to decide whether a textbook on reading instruction is worth reading I will skim through it at a rate which is equivalent to about 2000 words per minute. If I wish to read a legal document concerning the sale of my house I will read it at about 50 words per minute and read and re-read certain sections silently and aloud until I am certain of the intent of the agreement (Johnson, 1973, p. 135).

Since the 1920s notable progress has been made in the identification, diagnosis, treatment, and appraisal of reading disabilities; yet many instructional problems remain. In the general area of study skills considerable efforts have been made to channel high-risk students into programs that will enable them to succeed in higher education. Many of these programs have been developed in two-year colleges within the last 15 to 20 years. Although there are numerous programs in operation, it is often difficult to get a consensus regarding the approach that needs to be taken. Reading, as an example, is a difficult skill to master. There are many theoretical approaches regarding the reading process, and these notions are not easy to comprehend.

Our scientific attempts to organize knowledge provide us with definitions that may confuse and make

matters more complicated. Reading has been defined as a processing skill of symbolic reasoning sustained by the inter-facilitation of an intricate hierarchy of substrata factors that have been mobilized as a psychological working system and pressed into service in accordance with the purpose of the reader (Barzun, 1964). This definition may be quite difficult to understand and even more difficult to explain.

Within the study of reading behavior we have such terms as comprehension, a complex process that is not completely understood, but is generally accepted to be the outcome of a number of component skills. It is thought that these component skills (such as automatic word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, prior word knowledge, and organizational skills) should be taught to improve comprehension. It has also been suggested that these component skills be taught concurrently, not sequentially (Jund, 1978). There are varied approaches within the delivery area. Methodology may be a factor that is related to individual style or personality of teacher and student.

To illustrate a flexible approach to the general area of reading and study skills in higher education, the research of Martha Maxwell must be explained. Early in the 1960s Maxwell accomplished some research with a pre-college summer program at the University of Maryland. This research gives emphasis to the term flexibility when applying remedial strategies. In the summer of 1961 a program was designed to enable low-achieving applicants to test their ability to perform college work. Students whose high school averages were below C and who scored in the bottom 30% of University of Maryland freshman norms (American Council of Education Psychological Test, Cooperative English or Cooperative Algebra) were required to attend a special six-week, pre-college, summer session in order to qualify for continued enrollment. This program was designed to maximize the student's chances for academic success. All students were required to enroll in freshman English and to elect either mathematics, sociology, or American government. Academic success was defined as passing both courses and achieving at least a grade of C in one of them. A battery of reading and study skills tests were administered at the beginning and end of the summer session. An individual program was prepared for each student indicating a starting level and the sequence of activities to follow in order to improve upon their weakest area. All students were required to attend the first reading and study skills laboratory; however, subsequent attendance was voluntary. If the student chose to attend the reading and study skills laboratory, he or she

was required to work on his or her weakest area for one week, after which the person could work with any of the skills or materials. Three hundred fifty-six students registered for the program and 176 attained grades enabling them to continue.

Maxwell (1963) found the academically successful students made significantly higher initial scores than the failing students on reading rate, vocabulary, and comprehension tests. Both groups (failing and passing) showed significant improvement in vocabulary and study skills habits and attitudes. Student reaction to the program was highly favorable as revealed by a questionnaire administered with the post-tests. The successful students were found to be more flexible in their use of the laboratory materials and worked on more varied skills than did the failing students.

Some professionals might criticize this approach by Maxwell as being too flexible--implying that all under-prepared students should be forced to participate in all aspects of the program. This is a major problem. If students accept the fact that they need help and are willing to attend remedial classes and work, the instructor's job may be somewhat mechanical. This does not usually happen.

Dealing with students who do not understand their problem(s) requires patience and flexibility when attempting to use acquired knowledge. Imposing structure is challenging for all concerned. "Every animal species inhabits a homemade universe, hollowed out of the real world by means of its organs of perception and its intellectual faculties" (Huxley, 1937, p. 295). Reading and study skills teachers are attempting to re-structure the "real world" for their students. This is a difficult task.

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