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Educational Consumership and Tomorrow's Schools

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Unless those who hold that schools have value identify more effective ways of getting the best ideas into practice in the least wasteful time, the chances are that schools will not change at all, warns this thoughtful essayist. Every concerned educator, he suggests, must develop "the necessary skills and understandings to operate as a skilled consumer of proposed ideas for change in education." He offers practical guidelines.

educational consumership and tomorrow's schools

By John R. Dettre



Dr. Dettre is an associate professor of Educational Administration at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has also been a faculty member at North Texas State University, University of Kentucky, University of New Mexico and the SUNY (State University of New York) College at Buffalo, New York. Presently his work is focused on the development of practitioner-oriented programs for educators at graduate levels and the adaptation of basic constructs in Interpersonal Communications to the preparation of classroom teachers and administrators. His writings have appeared in a number of different educational journals, and he is the author of the book, *Decision Making in the Secondary School Classroom*, published by INTEXT. As both a program developer or producer from the college level and as a consumer of ideas while serving as a classroom teacher, principal, and superintendent, Dr. Dettre senses the real problems involved in translating the ideas from the one level into practical programs at the other level.

As we look ahead to developing "schools for tomorrow," we are confronted by a basic problem recently indicated by James Cass, Education Editor of the *Saturday Review/World* magazine, when he observed, "The creative involvement that goes into the development of new programs is seldom duplicated by those who would reproduce them."¹ Cass seems to suggest the existence of two different groups as well as two different tasks in the process of producing useful changes in education.

The purpose here is to identify and describe some of the activities in which those who would reproduce innovations must engage if the best innovations are to become meaningful parts of future programs. In essence, the focus of the thoughts that follow is on developing a kind of "educational consumership" in relation to proposed program innovations.

PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS²

In order to deal with the notion of "educational consumership," one must be willing to give some credence to a number of basic propositions related to the current process of bringing about educational change:

1. The actual development of ideas for change in education usually takes place away from the location where the ideas will need to be adopted and implemented. That is, ideas are the end product of the efforts in regional labs, federally funded study commissions, college and university research, foundation-supported research, etc.
2. Those doing the initiating and structuring of proposed innovations are seldom a part of the formal system wherein the ideas must be implemented. Those engaged in development are directly associated with other agencies involved in other pursuits of an educational nature.
3. The net result is the emergence and coexistence of two distinct but different groups involved in the total process of bringing innovations into actual use in education:
 - a. A **producer** group seeking to generate ideas leading to formal proposals designed to assist those at the operational levels in education in the pursuit of their goals.
 - b. A **consumer** group in search of ideas they can adopt and implement that will improve their ability to fulfill the expectations placed upon them by the supporting society.

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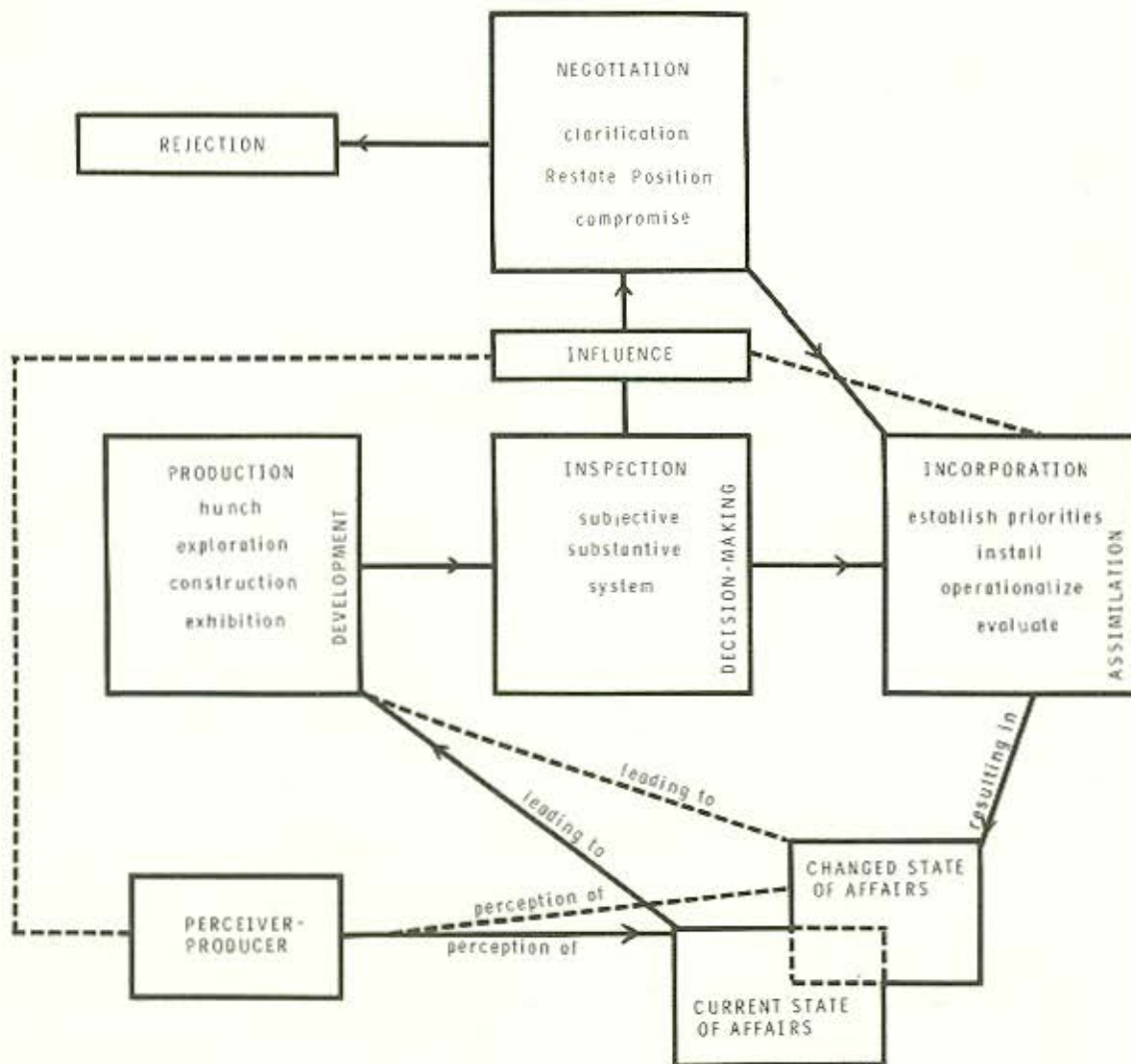
4. Given the existence of both groups within the total process of change in education and accepting their respective functions and accountability in relation to producing programmatic innovations, the responsibility and final accountability for success or failure of ideas falls squarely on the consumer group, for it is their ultimate decisions with relation to proposed innovations which will determine which innovations are selected for use in the schools.
5. Accepting the critical role and final accountability of the consumer group, it would seem to follow that more formal attention should be given to the development of skills and understanding needed by the consumers to insure that the most useful innovations are selected for inclusion in the on-going process of education at the operational level.
6. As such, the concern is with developing an improved "educational consumership" on the part of those being asked to select the "best" innovations from among numerous proposed innovations presented to them.

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE CONSUMERSHIP

One way to locate properly the activities involved in the achievement of changes in education is to visualize a simple model based on a kind of production-consumption cycle. Such a model is shown below.

As a process, the model suggests that change involves a series of steps or stages:

1. Someone perceives a discrepancy in some educational state of affairs presently in existence. (The discrepancy is identified as such because of a real or assumed difference between what one expects to be happening and what one believes is happening.)
2. The perceiver translates the discrepancy into a basis for developing some kind of response through a production process involving exploration and construction activities.
3. Having constructed and advertised the proposed idea, those who are asked to include it in their program go through a process of inspecting the proposal (including



Model of a production-consumption cycle

possibly negotiations with the producer) which will lead to a decision to accept the original proposal, to accept a modified version of it, or to reject it.

4. Given a decision to accept the original proposal or a modified version of the original, those needing to make the proposal operational are faced with the necessity of properly incorporating the innovation into their total program so as to maximize its potential without detracting from the productivity of other parts of the program already in operation.
5. The end result is a changed state of affairs wherein the original condition or activity is altered, modified, or even deleted with an acceptable substitution made.

In moving toward improved "educational consumership," the primary focus is on understanding those steps and stages involved in thoroughly inspecting a proposed change because the quality of the decision made will be directly proportional to the quality of the inspection made. And, while improved "consumership" is dependent on a better understanding of other parts of the change process, i.e., an understanding of what the producer group does in developing innovations that will be proposed to the consumers, the attention here will be restricted solely to the efforts of the consumers in inspecting proposed innovations.

The Consumer At Work

The work of the consumer begins when a proposed change is brought to his/her attention. For example, an idea proposed in a journal, a paper read at a meeting, a speech given in a workshop, a demonstration, or the presentation of an idea through the various printed media such as pamphlets, brochures, and circulars may serve to make the consumer aware of the existence of an idea. Assuming the medium used for dissemination has done its job—people are positively attracted toward an idea—it then becomes necessary for those considering the idea to inspect it.

In inspection, a consumer should plan to engage in three distinct phases and should understand that they occur in sequence. Inspection first involves a subjective consideration of the idea. This phase is followed by a form of substantive inspection. The final phase deals with situational factors. The consumer should understand that the inspection will not occur in isolation but will take place while varying kinds and degrees of influence are exerted. Some forms of influence will emanate from the task environment while others will come from the interpersonal environment that surrounds the inspector. For example, time available to give an idea serious consideration manifests itself as a kind of pressure, hence influence, as a part of the task environment. Or, in the case of the interpersonal environment, the congruence or lack of similarity of basic values among those individuals considering the proposal will serve as positive or negative kinds of influence. The consumer should be prepared to accept the presence of varying kinds of influence but should not permit them to become disruptive. Part of the potentially disruptive aspects of influence can be controlled by the kind of procedures and policies established for conducting the inspection of a proposal.

Subjective Inspection. Each of us responds to a proposal using self as a starting point. Such responses are wholly subjective, but they do occur and they occur first before we respond either to the substance of the proposal or the situation it affects. The following represent a kind of core of subjectivity that guide the first steps taken in inspecting a proposed innovation:

1. Affectivity, or the value systems, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions held by the inspector at the time he or she first encounters the proposal.
2. The experiences each inspecting individual has had with similar innovations in the past. (Bad experiences will produce negative feelings while good experiences will produce positive feelings.)
3. The level of skill development the inspector possesses in relation to the demands perceived in the innovation. (Unfortunately, the advanced publicity for an innovation may rely too heavily on sloganeering or "catch words" which belie the level of skill really needed by a consumer.)
4. The image the consumer has of the producer of the proposal.
5. The consumer's state of being at the time he first encounters the proposal.
6. The timing involved in terms of when the consumer first comes in contact with the proposal.
7. The setting or place wherein the consumer makes the initial contact with the innovation.
8. The complexity perceived in the innovation by the consumer. (In education, it is almost an axiom that the higher the degree of perceived complexity, hence perceived demands on the consumer, the lower the rate and number of approvals.)
9. The nature and quality of the information provided for the potential consumer at the time of initial contact. (Another axiom suggests that the more voluminous and the more abstract the quantity of information presented in support of a proposed innovation the lower the rate and number of adoptions.)

The consumer should realize that an initial response that is subjective is quite normal and, if understood for what it is, may promote a more objective inspection of a proposal in the next two phases. Conversely, an unwillingness to admit that one does engage in subjective treatments of proposals first tends to result in the creation of artificial rationales for dealing with a proposal and may generate all kinds of hidden agenda that serve to keep consumers from openly assessing proposals in terms of their stated substance, form, and direction.

Substantive Inspection. In conducting the substantive inspection of a proposal, the consumer should plan to engage in two different but related activities:

1. Examination:
 - a. The consumer should examine thoroughly the language used to define, delimit, and describe the proposal.

- b. The consumer should examine the general as well as the specific objectives indicated for the proposal.
 - c. The consumer should examine the precise nature of the data used to provide the rationale for the proposal.
 - d. The consumer should analyze and understand the nature of the process and steps provided for converting from the present state of affairs to the new position.
2. Estimation:
- a. The consumer must develop an overall estimate of the accuracy of the information presented.
 - b. The consumer must determine the real level of intelligence and skill required to deal fully with the proposal.
 - c. The consumer must be able to develop a preliminary estimate of the real potential of the proposal, given his or her set of circumstances.
 - d. The consumer must determine the relative kinds of certainty-uncertainty (risks) confronting those attempting to incorporate the proposal.

A proposal must be met head-on and it is the consumer's responsibility to insure that a proposal addresses itself to a number of things: (a) objectives, (b) verifiable data, (c) understandable language, (d) descriptions of steps to be taken in converting from the existing state of affairs to the substance of the proposal, (e) the risks involved, and (f) definitive descriptions of real skills and understandings required of those who would implement the proposal. All of this clearly implies that consumers cannot possibly hope to make a substantive inspection of a proposal in one or two short meetings after school, and the foregoing should serve to suggest that without the basic knowledge and skills implied in (a) through (f) above, there will not be a meaningful inspection of a proposal.

One final note on conducting the substantive inspection. While items (a) through (f) above should be provided for by the producers of proposals, the fact remains that some producers do not regard all of these areas as their responsibility. It behooves the consumer, therefore, to establish criteria for making such a thorough substantive inspection and to insist that the producer supply the necessary information. It is of little or no consolation to consumers to blame producers for omissions after a proposal has been approved and starts malfunctioning because of the omissions. After all, the supporting society does not hold the producer accountable in any direct sense. It is the consumer who must answer the question of why the omissions were not identified and corrected before final approval was given.

Situational Inspection. It is possible that in some cases the inspection may not proceed beyond a substantive inspection. A proposal, for example, may be judged as unacceptable because the goals are unclear or the processes to be employed are not identified so those implementing the proposal know what is needed in terms of training or experience. But if a proposal passes the first two phases, there still is a need for the consumer to look at a proposal from a situational point of

view. Reference here is to such things as the proposal in relation to:

- a. the actual numbers within the program that will be affected by the change;
- b. the space available to accommodate the proposed change as compared with the space required;
- c. the amount of money involved (initial investment in a proposal as well as costs to maintain the change) when comparing the proposed change and its costs with the costs for the continued operation of the present state of affairs; and/or
- d. the needed degree of interest or readiness required to make a proposed program operational as compared with the known state of interest and readiness present in the total body of involved consumers.

Each consumer finds himself/herself in a given setting. That setting will dictate certain kinds of reality that cannot be overlooked. There is only so much money and there are only so many people with so much training and experience in a given educational setting. There is a physical plant with only so much space arranged in certain, and often inflexible, ways that cannot be changed regardless of how exciting a proposal may seem. There are established laws and policies, rules and regulations, and not even the most ardent supporter of a proposal can ignore such reality in spite of subjective and substantive support for a proposed innovation.

Negotiating Changes In An Original Proposal

Seldom are proposals adopted as originally presented. Historically, some notable exceptions have occurred, as in the case of the proposals presented by Conant in and for secondary education in the previous decade. But usually the final form of an adopted proposal will vary from the original proposal and will reflect the use of a process of negotiations between producers and consumers. The consumer should understand that he/she has the right to seek an innovation that serves his/her purposes. The process of securing what is needed guarantees the consumer the right to seek, and obtain,

- 1. Additional details.
- 2. Redesigned relationships involving either internal or external criteria as applied.
- 3. Redesigned components in terms of either internal or external criteria.
- 4. Changes in symbolization if matters of communication are involved.
- 5. Statistical and graphical representations of any portion of a proposal where such data will improve understanding.
- 6. A precise accounting of the initiation and development of the proposal, including names, dates, places, amounts of money, etc.
- 7. Additional justification for the adoption of the proposal.
- 8. Descriptions of alternatives available in moving from the point of inception through to final implementation of the

proposal, including a "scenario" by the producer if the consumer feels such an accompanying document will help.

The producer, of course, is not obligated to make a proposal available indefinitely and can withdraw a proposed innovation whenever desired. But if the goal is to produce change for the betterment of programs in education, then the chances of adopting useful ideas seem infinitely better if consumers know both that compromise is possible and how to negotiate changes.

CONCLUSION

The ideas being proposed³ and the scenarios being written for tomorrow's schools (e.g., Frymier, "Schools for Tomorrow;"⁴ Hack, et al, *Educational Futurism: 1985*⁵) all seem exciting and worthy of consideration. And, left to their own devices, producers might carry the day, as it were, if they were able to dictate the innovations needed. However, the realities of educational change and programmatic innovations clearly point to the presence of an educational market place currently controlled by the consumers. Therefore, in the last analysis, it is the skills in analysis and selection of ideas possessed by the consumers that will determine tomorrow's programs.

Given current realities of the market place for educational ideas, one can either work to improve the level of skills in "consumership" on the part of educators or seek to change the nature of the educational marketplace and its handling of innovations. Of the two, the former seems more consistent with other efforts to upgrade the overall quality of practice in education.

Of course, there is still another alternative: allow matters to continue as they are. At least such an alternative has one redeeming feature in terms of solving the problems related to tomorrow's schools: There won't be any such schools as we might wish to know them. In their place we will get whatever the outcome of the confrontations between the educational reactionaries and the reformers dictate, that is, something that results from a kind of holy war between those wanting to get back to the "good old days" of highly structured education and those who wish to eliminate schools as we have known them and turn all the youth out to some kind of free school that apparently thrives on no structure at all. The only bulwark against both is an informed body of practitioners who know how to make changes in a planned and deliberate kind of way. Implicit in this approach will be the possession of the necessary skills and understandings to operate as a skilled consumer of proposed ideas for positive change in education.

FOOTNOTES

1. James Cass, "Teachers and Change," *Saturday Review/World*, vol. 1 (November 6, 1973), p. 53.
2. Ross Mooney, in *Research for Curriculum Improvement: 1957 Yearbook*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Education Association, 1957. (See Chapter Seven for detailed descriptions of tasks and functions of producers and consumers.)
3. Including those inherent in such works as Lewis Mumford's *Art and Technics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).
4. Jack R. Frymier, "Schools for Tomorrow." Unpublished paper. Reproduction of original draft.
5. Walter G. Hack, editor, *Educational Futurism: 1985*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1971.

an invitation to authors

A near-future issue of **Educational Considerations** will include articles pertinent to the theme of "How Colleges of Education and Their Alumni Can Help Each Other." Authors are invited to submit manuscripts on aspects of this topic by April 1, 1974. For length and other specifications, please refer to "Publication Information" on page one of this issue.