

Power Teaching and Efficient Learning

By Grant Coulson

I first came in contact with the combination of behaviour analysis and teaching through a student of Ogden Lindsley, the originator of Precision Teaching. I was the director of a small drug rehabilitation centre in Oshawa where one of our projects was convincing our late teen and young adult clients to upgrade their education.

Pauline was in her early twenties and tried hard but was functionally-illiterate. Eric told me to do a few one-minute timings on what he called “tool” skills, such as writing the letters of the alphabet, the four basic arithmetic functions and reading a passage aloud. I was then to plot the results on the Standard Behaviour Chart. After three months, at 23 minutes a day, Pauline went from being tested at grade two to grade eight. It worked! I published these results in “Exceptional Children in Canada” and, surprisingly, did not get one inquiry. More importantly, Pauline became functionally-literate and numerate. Her “motivation”, which in behaviour analysis terms is a program — not a student — variable, was so great that she worked at this project seven days a week and would have done much more than 23 minutes a day had we allowed her to. Progress shown on daily charts has that effect. Motivation is a variable we change by good programming and not a name we bestow on students we like. As usual, the social services have reversed cause and effect when they talk about mysterious, “internal” causation outside the realm of the program.

About the same time, I learned about the Direct Instruction procedures developed by Siegfried Engelmann and Carl Bereiter. These techniques produced far and away the most impressive gains in the large-scale Follow Through experiment carried out in the early 70s in the U.S. with 75,000 at-risk students. Direct instruction was pitted against 19 other methods, most of which are still used and all of which, except Behaviour Analysis in certain areas, failed to perform better than Direct Instruction. I began putting Precision Teaching and Direct Instruction together. Precision teachers find the program evaluation debate currently going on in Ontario extremely amusing. The government proposes to test students several times in 12 years. Precision Teaching tests teaching several times an hour. Testing students versus testing teaching is an important distinction.

In the summer of 1994, I spent five weeks at Morningside Academy in Seattle. Morningside has been running since 1981, serving the so-called attention-deficit-disordered (ADD) and learning-disabled. Kent Johnson, the founder, obtains two or three years’ growth per year in the basic academic areas for these supposedly-difficult students using Power

Teaching. One of the Morningside students went from “learning-disabled” to state mathematics champion. One of the impressive things about Morningside is the attention that these “attention-disordered” children pay to their work. I was in a classroom for an hour and a half as an observer. There were 16 students and about as many teachers who were learning Morningside teaching methods. The room was noisy, mostly from the adults, although there was some Direct Instruction choral responding going on. I observed the students, who were working in five different groups, mainly on their own, to see how much time was wasted. The only non-academic behaviour I saw was a 14-year-old boy trying to attract a girl’s attention for about 20 seconds. When she told him to go away, he went back to work. All of these students had been labeled ADD (with- and without-hyperactivity, of course) and so on. Perhaps their eight weeks of summer school allowed them to shed their neurological disability in some magical way.

Power Teaching depends on two concepts largely ignored by other techniques. The first is requiring fluency, accuracy and speed in tool, basic and component skills before moving on in the curriculum. The second concept is Opportunity to Respond. Students learn by doing, and the more opportunities to respond they have, the more they learn. This combination consistently produces faster results than any other method, yet attracts little attention. Perhaps people in the social services have an “attention deficit”, although most are without activity, hyper or otherwise. One of my students was in grade eight and having trouble with mathematics. Naturally, she had been labeled “learning-disabled”. The only “hole” in her mathematics that I found was her skill in multiplying and dividing the large, single-digit numbers. Once this minor fault was corrected, she started doing well in mathematics. In our last session, she asked, “Why did they call me learning-disabled?” I said, “Because they’re teaching-disabled”.

The social services, of which teaching is a part, have always been subject to fads because they are still in the pre-scientific stage of development. Whole language, for example, was widely-accepted before the data dictated acceptance, and naturally a disaster ensued. Steven Stahl, who has published two review articles on whole language, concluded that whole language instruction is as effective as instruction using basal readers, although direct instruction is superior to both. To do as well as basal readers, which have not changed for well over a century, is not a proud boast. The whole language debacle is a classic example of what happens when methods are chosen “theory-down” rather than “data-up”. There is a better way.

Science in the social services always leads practice by several decades. It’s time practice caught up, but it will not until we choose methods

rationally on the basis of results and not by whether we “feel good” about them based on some intuitive, and often mistaken, notion of how children learn.

(Grant Coulson salvages children in Milton, Ontario, and may be reached at 905-876-2552. He is the author of Power Teaching: How to Find Someone to Teach Your Child When the Education System has Failed.)