BOTANY TEACHING: THE PROGRESS REPORT METHOD

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A non-lecture type course was devised after investigating related systems. PSI at Georgetown University, modular work at Purdue, College IV of Grand Valley State College, Allentown, Michigan, and work at South Dakota State University, Brookings.

The course was designed with the following objectives in mind:

1. To recognize the diversity of student backgrounds.
2. To permit the student to use his time most effectively.
3. To involve the student more actively in his own education.
4. To give the student greater freedom in managing his own personal schedule.

The course was divided into twenty units, each with a guide sheet suggesting readings, films, tapes, problems, etc. The class meets formally once per week (Monday, 8:30) to maintain some continuity for the group. Laboratory hours are rather conventional, but a student might choose to use only a part of the regular lab time, returning later in the day or in the evening. Students are encouraged to use the lab as a center for study. In addition to the usual lab equipment, a Caramate sound-slide projector, a film-loop projector and a cassette player were provided. The audio equipment could be used for group listening but alternatively with a D.I.L.* board and cordless headsets** which permitted use without disturbing others. One corner of the room was provided with ceramic mugs, a hot pot and materials for coffee, Russian tea and hot chocolate.

When a student feels he has completed the work of a unit, he requests a Progress Report which is a ten question multiple choice quiz. The words "test" and "quiz" are deliberately avoided as the instrument is a teaching rather than an evaluative device. The Progress Report answers are indicated on a "Rapid Rater,"*** a device which involves a stylus with which the student perforates an answer sheet to indicate his choice. The "Rapid Rater" informs the student immediately as to whether he has answered each question correctly or not. If not, he tries again until he selects the correct answer before going on to the next question. The Rater has psychological merit, with positive reinforcement for a correct answer or an immediate indication of error (and its subsequent correction) if the answer is incorrect. Achievement of 80% permits the student to go on to the next unit; a lower score is followed by more study and an alternative form of the Progress Report. Completion is reported by placing the date on a wall chart which has suggested "target dates" for the units. No record of the grade is made; no penalty is imposed for an unsatisfactory report.
Grading is based on three conventional class tests, three lab practicals and a final examination.

Students feel they work very hard, although in hours it approximates the 13 hours per week which is expected of them. Reactions generally have been favorable to the system, although it is evident that the majority of students would not want to take more than one course at a time under this or a similar system; they like the freedom but still lack confidence in their ability to manage their own time. Students feel they have a more meaningful one-to-one contact with the instructor than under a conventional system. They appreciate the change of pace, the variety of materials and the sense of personal accomplishment which they derive.

The method takes a great deal of time of the instructor; clerical and secretarial help is essential. It has become necessary to restrict the hours at which the student may request Progress Reports as they can disrupt the instructor's time greatly. No matched control group has been involved, but students appear to do equally well under this system and the more conventional presentation.

* D.I.L. board by Murdock, used with Audiotronics ATC 148 cassette player

** CH-4 cordless phones by Murdock (from Century Communications Corp., Minneapolis)

*** Research Media, Inc., 4 Midland Avenue, Hicksville, New York 11801

A letter from our Program Chairman...

December 28, 1979

Seasons Greetings to all you folks out there in Scienceland from your 1980 AMCBT Program Chairman. My wife and I are "high" in the Colorado Rockies celebrating our "honeymoon".

Rest assured, your Chairman is actively pursuing the most qualified of individuals to provide for your academic expansion and educational entertainment at the fall meeting. A grizzly has already consented to discuss the topic of "how to bear with poor administrators" and a local taxidermist will show us "how to mount department heads".