Self-DIRECTION in Learning As The Goal of Teaching
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"Are teachers really necessary?" seems to me to be another way of phrasing the question which has been placed before this symposium. Taking on exaggerated and distorted view of both the "student - centered" and "instructor - centered" approaches to college teaching, one might say that both of these approaches agree that the college teacher can be dispensed with: the student - centered approach would replace the teacher by a group therapist; the instructor - centered approach would replace the teacher by a phonograph record and an animated dummy.

Let me argue for a third approach, an approach which would also dispense with the teacher but fortunately for those who draw their salaries from teaching - more gradually and not completely. It would be convenient if one could find a descriptive label for the approach I would like to advocate here but I could find no neat, dignified phrase to sum it up. Maybe we can refer to it as the "vanishing act" - this phrase while not dignified has the advantage of conjuring up the picture of a magician at work. In view of the many obstacles to performing a "vanishing act" - not the least of which are student expectations that have been built up during their long tutelage in dependency roles in authoritarian educational cultures - this imagery is not inappropriate.

The basic goal of this approach is undoubtedly similar to most approaches to college teaching. It is to help the student to develop an interest in,
an understanding of, and a proficiency in the subject matter of the course which will persist and develop beyond the formal time limits of the course. Two things should be noted about this statement of the objective of college teaching. First of all, it is a limited objective oriented to a given subject matter rather than to the total personality of the student on to the development of general problem-solving techniques. Secondly, it assumes that the objective of a given course is not achieved if the interest, understanding, and proficiency is its subject matter dissipate shortly after its completion.

There has been, as far as I know, very little research on the effects of different types of teaching procedures on the attainment of the foregoing educational objective. Research on the effects of different approaches to colleges to teaching has been largely confined to effects which could be observed during the institutionally-defined time limits of the course. While there has been little direct research on the topic — and surely research is sorely needed if we are to have any sound basis for evaluating different approaches to teaching —-, there has been a good deal of relevant research on the conditions which are conducive to the development of passive — dependent attitudes as contrasted with those of initiative and independence. Research on the effects of different patterns of parent behavior by Baldwin, Kalhorn, and Breese, research on the effects of different types of leadership by Lewin, Lippitt, and White, etc. suggest that the inner direction which is conducive to the persistence of effort when external authority figures are absent is best developed under conditions which permit the individual to assume gradually increasing responsibilities for the decisions affecting his activities.

Analogously, one can assume that a persisting interest and understanding of a subject matter requires that the student be given an increasing responsi-
bility for self-direction in his educational activities. It is obvious that once the course (or the sequence of courses is ended) the student will have to assume this responsibility by himself. Unless he has been motivated and prepared for self-direction, the course will have little lasting value.

While I think the objective of teaching is to do away with teachers, it would be foolhardy to suggest that the means to the end is the same as the end. That is, it would be silly to assume that either self-direction will develop or that the self-direction which develops will be institutionally-approvable without active stimulation, orientation, guidance, and evaluation on the part of the teacher. There is evidence from many studies of child development as well as the group atmosphere studies that the lack of guidance or the premature thrusting of responsibility on the unprepared child or group is likely to be harmful to the development of initiative and independence. The implication of this evidence for college teaching seems to me to require a situational flexibility rather than a rigidly pre-ordained teaching procedure independently of the needs and experiences of the students.

Thus, students in an introductory course who have had no previous experience with a subject matter nor little experience with self-directed learning in an academic setting will have a greater need for orientation to the subject matter and for support in their self-directed activity than more advanced students. Similarly, there will usually be a greater need for instructors-leadership at the beginning of a course than at its end. There is evidence from a study of student preferences in an Eastern college that the teaching preferences of students take into account their own readiness. Thus, more advanced students, the more capable students, and the students who express particular interest in a course tend to have a greater preference for teaching methods which permit greater student participation in discussion and in directing the course.
So far, most of what I have said has ignored a fundamental aspect of the teaching situation in most colleges. Although the appropriate unit for evaluation must be each, separate student, a course is not simply a relation between separated students and a teacher. Teaching takes place in a group context in which there is interaction among students as well as between student and teacher. This obvious fact is often neglected in teaching and the neglect results in the loss of a key instrumentality for fostering conditions that are conducive to learning and to self-direction.

I would assert that a major potential educational influence in any course is the fact that a student is not merely taking the course by himself but is taking a course together with other students. The student exists in an educational culture and this culture will largely determine the extent and nature of his learnings. More specifically let me advance the hypothesis that the extent to which a cohesive student group develops in a course and the extent to which this group develops values which incorporate course objectives will be major influences on the fruitfulness of the course. When students have no cohesiveness in the classroom, discussion will be disorderly and without common purpose; and when they have no cohesiveness outside the classroom they will not provide the mutual inter-stimulation and mutual exchange which are conducive to motivation, effort, and learning. However, cohesiveness among students is not in and of itself an asset unless the cohesiveness is primarily with respect to the educational objectives of the course. In other words, this is not a question of cohesiveness for cohesiveness sake but rather a means of fostering an environment which is conducive to learning.

It is difficult to provide a simple picture of what a college course would look like if the notions I have been advocating would be followed. The picture would change depending such factors as: the number of students in the class,
the level and content of the course, the prior experiences of the students, the stage of development of the course, the institutional setting, the unique skills of the instructor, etc. Even so, let me attempt to convey some image of this approach.

The course, in its opening session, would start off with a statement by the instructor which would stress the collective, shared responsibility of the group (including the instructor) for the attainment of the educational objectives of the course, the educational objectives of the course as institutionally-defined would be outlined (students would be given an opportunity to indicate supplementary personal objectives), and the specialized responsibilities of the instructor and the students in relation to these objectives would be discussed. The role of the instructor would be defined as that of providing an initial orientation to the subject - matter, of serving as discussions expediter and coordinator of resource person, and of serving as the institutional representative with respect to such matters as student evaluation and providing class access to various facilities. The emphasis on institutional evaluation would be minimized by making grades simply "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" and by indicating that the group itself would have the opportunity, if it worked, to work out its own evaluations of the course and of its various members.

The instructor would, at the first session, hand out a list of topics to be discussed at subsequent class meetings. Each topic would have several basic questions subsumed under it to provide the bases for class discussion - of the sort that one might find on a probing essay type examination - and would be accompanied by an annotated bibliography of alternative basic and alternative supplementary readings. Each student or each sub-group of students (depending upon the size of the class) would be requested to select a question for specialized, intensive preparation (and as a basis for a term paper)
In an introductory course and in certain types of specialized course, the instructor would in the first several class sessions take an active role in placing the question for discussion in its context, establishing its general significance, and pointing out possible avenues for its discussion. After these introductory sessions have served their exemplor function, the primary roles of the instructor would simply be that of discussion expeditor-coordinator and of intellectual thorn. The student or sub-group that had assumed specialized responsibilities for a question would attempt to put the question in its context, point to its significance, etc. - the student would always have the freedom to reject the question as being insignificant and to select a question he believed to be more significant. He would, of course, have to justify his decision to the group.

To facilitate the development of a class cohesiveness, various procedures might be employed. This may involves simply giving each student an opportunity to communicate some information about themselves to the others, establishing a "first-name" atmosphere, encouraging sub-group study period, providing for extra-curricular meetings in informal settings, etc.

There are a number of problems which large class sizes introduce into the approach which I have outlined. There are some techniques for grappling with the problem of large sized classes which I could discuss but I am not convinced that as educators we should not always view large sized classes as an inappropriate setting for education.