

An Overture

LEARNING TO MAKE RATIONAL VALUE JUDGMENTS

Our responsibility as teachers goes beyond imparting knowledge and integrating ideas from a variety of disciplines. Because value judgments are involved in using information to solve problems, we have not finished our task until we have trained our students to consider the social and ethical implications of the knowledge we impart. We must provide our students with opportunities to gain experience in making value judgments. Providing such opportunities does not mean that we, as teachers, should impose our values on our students. Rather, we should help our students to (i) understand the scientific knowledge pertaining to an issue, (ii) use that knowledge, as well as knowledge from other disciplines, to consider alternatives for resolving an issue, (iii) arrive at value judgments, conscious of having freely chosen from among alternatives, and (iv) act responsibly and in a manner consistent with their choices. Unless we carry out this procedure in virtually every learning situation, the forthcoming generation of society's leaders will be no better prepared to deal with problems than the present one is.

Evidence for the need to help students learn to make value judgments can be obtained from a consideration of the value-laden issues of contemporary problems and an evaluation of the quality of value judgments being made by individuals and institutions in our society. For most value-laden issues, we not only lack adequate methods for making choices; we also lack an adequate understanding of the alternatives and their consequences.

The quality of the value judgments we make is seriously impaired by both our lack of method and our lack of information. Value judgments are often based on emotion rather than rational consideration of what information is available. Our ineptness in making decisions that require value judgments leads us to delay any decision until the problem has reached crisis proportions. (If gasoline is rationed by the time you read this, the decision to ration will probably have been precipitated by a crisis.) Our ability to look ahead and plan for the future seems to be constrained by vested interests in the status quo, by short-sighted and self-serving goals, and by the limited use we have made of our creativity.

In my opinion, we have not made the appropriate choices and commitments because we have failed to give the necessary attention to learning how to make such choices and commitments. None of these problems will be solved until we have developed mechanisms within the institutions of our global so-

ciety to make rational value judgments based on all the pertinent information. Nor will solutions be permanent until we have developed mechanisms to maintain commitments to actions consistent with those judgments.

As educators, our major offense is that we are so bound by disciplinary traditions that we often fail to consider the social and ethical implications of the content of our discipline. Although we scientists can argue that the scientific method cannot be used to make value judgments, we must not use that argument to shirk our responsibility to help our students understand the implications of the science we help them learn. I believe a great source of hope is the ability of educators to rise to the challenge of learning for themselves some techniques for making value judgments and then teaching them to their students.

Raths et al. (1966) and Simon et al. (1972) have developed values clarification techniques for use in the classroom. They have isolated three components of the process through which values can be consciously formulated in a rational manner. The components are choosing, prizing, and acting. To formulate a clearly defined value, a person must first consider a variety of alternative choices, weigh the consequences of each choice, and then make a conscious choice among the alternatives. The strength of such a choice or value judgment can be assessed by the degree to which a person expresses pride in the choice and willingness to publicly affirm that choice. A further measure of the strength of the choice is the degree to which a person's actions consistently and repetitively support it.

The techniques of values clarification include writing and discussing reactions to brief statements involving value judgments and constructing values continuums by placing each person's position along a line from one extreme to the other. For examples of these and other techniques, see the references below.

Have you tried some of these techniques or others of your own design? If so, we would be happy to consider a manuscript from you for possible publication. If you haven't, wouldn't this be a good time to start?

REFERENCES

- RATHS, L. E., M. HARMIN, and S. B. SIMON. 1966. *Values and teaching: working with values in the classroom*. Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, Ohio.
- SIMON, S. B., L. W. HOWE, and H. KIRSCHENBAUM. 1972. *Values clarification: a handbook of practical strategies for teachers and students*. Hart Publishing Co., New York.

Joan G. Creager, editor