

THE ROEPER SCHOOL ARCHIVES

“Open Education – Open Program and Commitment”

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ABSTRACT

Founder George A. Roeper proposes a curriculum that would call upon students to make their own choices and commitments to their course work. Roeper discusses what he sees as the reason for the necessity for this sort of responsibility and moral obligation.

OPEN EDUCATION – OPEN PROGRAM AND COMMITMENT

by George A. Roeper

Learning to make decisions is today one of the most important educational tasks. Never before in history was man exposed to so many changes, new knowledge, new power constellations, new standards and values, new beliefs and rapidly changing conflicts in our society. To do things the way they were done in the past, will not help our youngsters for the future. He needs to learn the process of decision-making, the process of arriving at a judgment and he needs models in the person of teachers and for that matter parents, who do not operate with a double standard, who are not suspicious of the youngster's intentions, who instead trust them, let them learn from mistakes, learn from seeing the problems in our society firsthand.

Youth is today faced by a world which is self-destructive; by war, by killing, by violence, by a technology which pollutes, by a technology which brings the ecology out of balance. Youth is facing a future which is shocking. The education I have received has not protected us and them from this development. Our accumulated knowledge, our skills, our information, has not prevented these destructive events. Our society was and is technology-oriented, science-oriented, living-standard-oriented, success- and competition-oriented, hierarchically oriented and not humanity-oriented. We became that way because decisions were made at the top and we did not question decisions. We did not question what technology might do to us, we accepted the rat race for a higher living standard without question, we accepted that power and war should rule the world. We did not question what kind of a world we were led into. In school, we did not learn to judge and evaluate the world around us. The learning of history in my school time always stopped 30 to 50 years earlier and we did not learn how to observe and to evaluate political, social and economic events of our own time. I believe that is the reason why we were caught unaware by the present upheavals in our society, by the human conflicts of race, by our helplessness in the face of rapid change, and by our ineptness to handle international political problems.

I would not like to see our youth caught unaware. I like to see youth make a difference in the future. I believe they will make a difference if they learn early how choices are made, how decisions are arrived at, how judgments are made and valued.

One of the many ways to accomplish this educational process is to spend more time on how to solve our internal school problems. (Discuss at length the topic David Jaffe presented to us on Community versus Individualism.) We should discuss the meaning of a traditional curriculum and new future-oriented curricula. Another way is to get acquainted with the world of the inner city which seems so far removed from us. Another timely educational process is the learning and experiencing of human and racial awareness. We need exposure to experiences of human interaction, cooperation and consideration for each other which you had on those Spring trips. Everybody described these experiences as the most valuable ones. This kind of education must have a place and be given time in our educational program. Those are some of the ways which hopefully will help our youth to take the future into their own hands. It ought to be our educational task to relate education to the present and the future, to the world around us and to do this in a humanistic way. We should not do that for our youth, they themselves have to be part of the process and form and build and structure their own future. They cannot do this without learning how to make decisions and be committed to it.

Making decisions necessitates to have choices and options to make decisions about. Therefore, we offer a free choice of courses. Students should plan their own learning. There will be many offerings, many courses and of different lengths of time.

7th & 8th graders will have to take courses in 2 or 3 required departments, for example, in English and math as required subject, and they will choose courses in science, social studies or fine arts.

For 9th through 12th grades, if a student chooses to prepare for college he or she will discuss with the counselor and college advisor what courses to take and need to be taken. If parents wish to be consulted in the choice, they should express their wishes to the student or counselor. For example, for college entrance four credit units in English are required. This makes it automatic that youngsters take English every year. The graduation and college entrance requirements limit the free choice of subject matter somewhat, but with a greater

variety of courses within a department and with interdisciplinary courses, we certainly open up the program considerably and give students a wider range of choices.

The procedure looks like this: Students make a list of new courses they would like to be taught. Teachers make for each department a list of courses. Teachers will examine the student's list of requested new courses and if they feel they can teach these courses, they will be added to their own list of course offerings. The student will then in consultation with the counselor, list his choices on a so-called Course Preference Sheet. Once this is collated, Dr. Cost, Mr. Morrow, and two students among our computer experts, Vinay Reddy and Michael Kahl, will with the help of our computer terminals, work out a schedule. It is not likely that every student can have all subjects he has chosen, there will have to be a compensatory give and take. But with Independent Study, Work-Study program and a flexible schedule and mini-courses, we hope to accommodate the needs and wishes of each individual student.

It is of importance that the student can make the choice. And it is the significant feature of the whole approach and I will try to explain why it is so.

Making a choice, having an option, means making a commitment. If a student chooses a subject and contracts with a teacher to be taught on the subject, he makes a commitment to learn it.

The freedom of choice is not release from commitment.

In the past, practically all commitments were made for the student: What to learn, how to learn, and at what hour to learn and then it is checked upon and evaluated by somebody else's standards. Commitments which are made for the child by a parent, school or teacher are not genuine commitments. A commitment can only come from the person who makes it and cannot be done for another person. A commitment made for somebody else turns into an imposition. Because commitments were imposed in conventional schools and not student-initiated, the educators invented all kinds of designs to make the child committed by having marks, stars, honor rolls, etc. Commitment is a pledge that a person can make only for himself. He cannot pledge for somebody else, nor can he be expected to obey somebody else's pledge.

Commitment asks for self-imposed assignment. Commitment is putting a task into one's own hands, a task entered into with a free will. It is an obligation to fulfill a self-chosen task. A free choice is a free commitment one becomes bound to. Why does certain learning work beautifully, such as driver's training? It is because the youngster wants it, he made his commitment for it, sees the need for it and does everything he can to accomplish it. No marks, stars or honor rolls are necessary.

A commitment asks for a self-imposed control from within a person, while a commitment made for a child sets up a control from outside the child.

In other words: if students make a choice in learning, they also make a commitment. Free choice and commitment are inseparable. Choice in itself is of not much benefit. Choice with commitment to implementation makes choice meaningful. If parents make the decision to have a baby, the parents also make the commitment to rear and feed the child. The decision to have the child is inseparable from the commitment to bring up the child.

If the adult makes the choice for a job and decides to take the job, along with it goes the commitment to do the job, to do it well and completely. The commitment is inescapable once a decision is made.

We expect the results in productivity to be far greater if students make choices and consequently commit themselves. We expect motivation to be much more apparent on that basis. We have seen how productivity goes up and discipline problems disappear in those courses which are voluntary.

I would consider the commitment which results from a decision, a moral obligation. Just like rearing a baby, which is the result of deciding to have one, becomes a moral obligation. The student is committed to find the time for the course, to work for it, to do it well once he has chosen the course. A commitment becomes a moral obligation for the student himself and he is committed to the teacher he has contracted to learn from. That is the reasons why the commitment would also involve mandatory attendance in class if the student wants to pass or to get a letter grade for the course.

It is hard for the student to feel a moral obligation toward a commitment which he did not make and which was made for him. It is difficult for a teacher to hold the student morally responsible for a commitment the student did not make. But the moment the student makes a choice, he is morally committed and it is the teacher's task to help the student to stick to it. This is where character education has a place and important. It leads to recognizing that freedom is responsibility.

A decade or two ago, it was said, "All the child wants is love and attention". This is made fun of today, particularly by children. Today, if parents truly love their children and are considerate to them, but find them nevertheless rebellious and contrary, it is because youngsters today want to be trusted and be able to make decisions. Instead of the "love and attention" phrase, a new one seems to take its place: "all the child wants is to be trusted and to decide on options he can choose from to fit his needs".

I believe youngsters can be trusted far more than we believed in the past. I believe we can have trust in their ability to make good judgments and I think they are able to make wise decisions to a greater degree than we thought possible before. I find this confirmed again and again in my talks with the students, at faculty meetings and other occasions. What is difficult for the parents and teacher to accept is that youngsters want to invade an area of decision-making which teachers and parents thought to be their prerogative. To a degree, it still is, depending on the age, but less so than it used to be. We must also realize that youth of today are far more sophisticated at a younger age than they used to be.

I would like to conclude with a quote by Ewald B. Nyquist, President of the University of New York and Commissioner of Education for the State of New York, who writes in an article on "The Concept of Open Education":

"School must be a place to prepare young people to take their place in society – not a place where they are isolated from the main currents of life. This can be done by making education at every age level person-centered, idea-centered, experience-centered, problem-oriented, and inter-disciplinary with the community and other institutions a part of the process. This is in contrast to the prevalent educational

experience with its information-gathering, fact-centered, course-centered, subject-centered, grade-getting, and bell-interrupted activity.”