

# GERM - educational reform

## GERM

GERM is a group of students and professors interested in making the learning experience at Dalhousie a more exciting and vital part of campus life. We grapple with questions of relevance, of methodological ideas and of strategy.

GERM's most important function is to come up with ideas on methods of teaching university courses - especially in undergrad Arts and Science, and to see these methods used at Dalhousie.

Our office (216 SUB) is open 11:30 - 2:30 on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We have brainstorming sessions Thursday evenings at 6:00.

Please come if you have any ideas.

The Sociology 100 situation was thrown into the open earlier this year. Over 500 students were in one class, listening to one man. At times, students were invited to participate in the class, shouting words and ideas. Still, at least 400 students could not take part because of time, the size of the room, the number of students and the inhibitions trained into us throughout public school. No one knew what the goals of the class were and nobody was quite sure what was being accomplished. Some left classes sure what was being accomplished. Some left classes disgusted, some elated. A great debate arose on whether anything was being learned at all.

An atypical situation at Dal? Sit in on psychology 100, poli sci 100, economics 100, history 100 or any other first year class and find out. Most of them progress more definitely and logically than sociology 100 but they share two basic problems: most students are restricted to silent note taking or day dreaming and haphazard, minimal study at home and in most cases students have no more than a very vague knowledge of what the course will cover - what its objectives are. They are given a block (1 of 5) of seven months of lectures in a specialized field hardly knowing what to expect.

Imagine a "typical" first year Arts student. In most cases 1) he has no idea what he wants to specialize in (who knows what sociology is?) and 2) he has been boxed in, talked to, disciplined, ordered about, pushed into mark-seeking in high school, and he is perhaps a little excited and apprehensive about the prospects of the free and stimulating atmosphere of university - "where education really is the goal" after all.

Instead of a free and stimulating atmosphere, freshmen are forced

into five classes of formal, usually boring lectures on five narrow fields which they know little about. The only new freedom is to skip classes - the only new stimulation is in social life.

Indications of the failure of the first year of Dalhousie's present Arts and Science curriculum and teaching arrangements are plain in the high failure rate, the slouched postures and disinterested looks of note takers, the small amount of time spent on course work by unmotivated students (unmotivated about their courses at least) and the confusion or cynicism over what value a given course has other than a credit.

Relevance of course material and of course structure (method of teaching) are interlocked with personal motivation as the main areas where solutions must be tried in terms of a new undergraduate program. Most first year classes now seem designed to do two things: give the student a knowledge of the basic facts so that he can continue studies in that discipline, and give the student a general view, that particular discipline's perspective on the world. The overall Arts and Science program is intended to give the student a smattering of knowledge in several divergent fields, with enough specialized knowledge in one to enable him to find a job.

Courses delivered "en bloc", restricted to one field and selected cafeteria style along with a number of other unrelated courses is too restrictive and inadequate, especially at the start of a "liberal education". The goals of a university education must coincide with the goals of the students involved, as well as society. Therefore, the first year program at Dalhousie must accomplish at least two things:

1) It should allow and encourage maximum flexibility so that the student can have contact with as many different disciplines as possible, and see them in an integrated and related way. This would enable him to study subjects in depth as they become interesting to him. This would require special teaching methods and organization in order to work effectively.

2) It should also involve several kinds of learning situations rather than just lectures. It should equip the student with skills to take full advantage of situations and to enable him to study in or out of the university with maximum effectiveness. Since it is not done in the high school, we should learn at university how to verbally express ideas floating around in our heads; how to listen to other people's ideas and assimilate and use them; how to find out what other people's ideas are (what kind of questions to ask to induce the desire to answer; how to find information we want on certain subjects in magazines, books, microfilms, etc.; how to present this information coherently and succinctly, verbally or in writing. The answer is not to have another course with a \$10 text book on "How to..."

Essentially we are here to acquire knowledge, to improve our thinking processes and to be able to use both. "Use" means in part relating these ideas to other humans. Acquisition only comes through communication with other people.

Our ideas involve an attempt to make learning more alive and interesting. GERM is caught up in trying to find answers to this problem - we want to find structures which will realize these goals.

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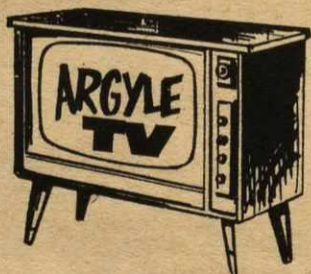
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