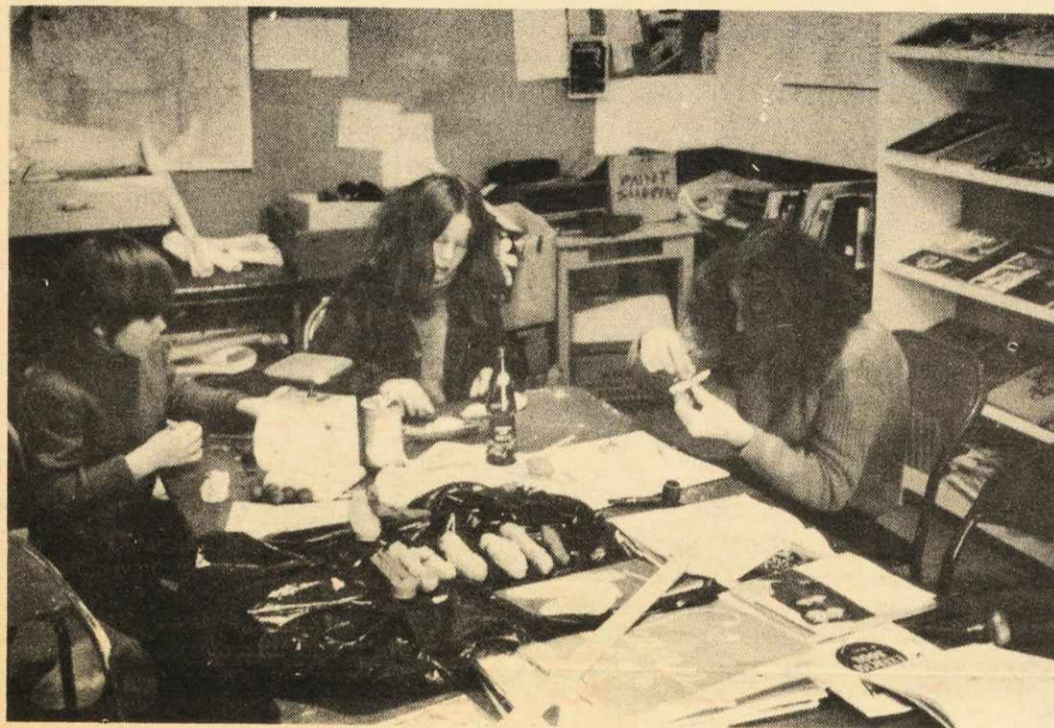


More student participation in education necessary



dick kennedy/ dal photo

Free schools not free yet

by Emmi Duffy

Go through the newspaper files and look for a complaint about the standard of teaching in any school, or try to find a criticism of one teacher on the grounds of his or her teaching. Chances are you won't find any.

Now go through the files again and look for a criticism of the state of school buildings. There are many.

As a result, the money is spent on new buildings and we reaffirm our preference for having children badly educated in good buildings rather than children well-educated in old buildings.

We have never bothered to measure education by quality; rather it is measured by the amount of time served. It's like a prison sentence — the longer you stay the more you "learn".

A few people are beginning to move away from this line of thinking, and their search for alternatives is being felt in education. The building is no longer important. The old Pilkington Glass building on Barrington, the basement of the Dalhousie Grad house on South Street, or the vestry of the Unitarian Church on Inglis Street will do. These are places where alternatives are being explored.

When we talk of alternatives, we are saying that the prevailing situation is not working. Basic values are no longer unquestionably accepted; a "counter culture" is emerging. The role of education in the maintenance of these values has been of utmost importance. Now new alternatives are emerging, and the results, as the name of one free school suggests, are new options in learning.

Free schools do not just happen. They are a reaction to the authoritarianism found in the status and role games people play.

"I am the teacher and you are the student. I have the right to stand up here and talk for fifty minutes and you have an obligation to sit quietly in your seat."

Free schools are also a reaction to the grading system where students are graded on their ability to "learn" what the teacher says they must "learn". Creativity is limited to assigned "creativity" projects. Manageable conformity is obtained by

killing creativity.

In any system in which total authority is given one individual over another, abuses must occur. In schools the authority is traditionally adult over student, and an emphasis is placed on rules and regulations.

Edgar Friedenberg, head of Dal's Department of Education, says the problem is that "children, adolescents and young people are low status. That's why school is layed on them in the first place".

"It is not the children who are disruptive, it is the formal classroom that is disruptive of childhood itself", writes Charles Silberman, author of "Crisis in the Classroom". The public schools in most traditional school systems are full of the crises Silberman describes. Children are boxed in and taught in ways that stifle the urge to learn.

Students at the East Coast Community School tend to confirm these statements.

Ten-year-old Cindy Maxwell explained: "They had certain times for everything. If I wanted to do math when it was time to do geography, I couldn't, and when it was time to do math, I wouldn't feel like it."

Chris Armstrong, 8 years old, wanted to do science while the teacher complained about his messy writing. He is currently writing the words to a musical score.

Wayne Shaw is 13 1/2. "I came because I was fed up with other schools. I tried this place and I haven't left since. At the last school I had a teacher who thought I wasn't any good in math so she put me in a low group which affected by french because it was a combined group."

Typically, a free school is a student-centred school where stress is laid on the individual's needs and interests. Choice and self-determination are essential ingredients in its educational philosophy. The environment is one where a wide variety of educational resources are made available and the student chooses what he will engage in. Freedom of choice is the basic ideal of the free school movement.

As Wayne put it: "You can do more or less what you want, how and when you want." The choice lies

with the individual. Students no longer want to be followers; they would rather learn about subjects that are relevant to them as individuals.

When freedom is granted to make decisions there is some fear that irresponsible decisions will be made but actually the opposite happens.

For example, students are free to take holidays whenever they wish but they usually end up choosing to stay. When you don't stay school ends at 3 o'clock then you find people staying after 6 o'clock. One person said she didn't stay home because she got lonely. "I like the people here". Contrast this to the student in the traditional school who is continually faking illness trying to get out of school. Also the free school draws on community resources, using the skills of people outside the school.

The most important thing the free school does is to give people a sense of self-worth. Dropouts who have come in as illiterates gain a tremendous amount of confidence in their own potential as they learn to read. A great deal of pleasure is also derived when they find they can write poetry and share their ideas with others.

As ideas are shared, a close feeling develops. People feel free to talk about hassles they're having. They say what they want and know that others will listen and take it seriously. Problems ranging from a need of medical attention to a place to stay are solved.

Perhaps it is too early to make criticisms. The free schools have not been in operation for very long. People are still in transition, coming away from the traditional system. It will take a while to work things out.

One of the things that needs to be worked out is the obsession with motivation. Motivation has filtered in from the traditional school's concept of education. The Teachers' College course on psychology is essential to learning. Experiments involving dirty tricks on rats such as wiring the floor of a maze show that anxiety can motivate learning.

Both John Shuh of New Options and John Ure of South End indicated the desirability of the self-motivated child. They spoke of "giving the individual a little bit of structure and gradually weaning him off it."

This preoccupation with motivation appears to be part of the idea that people should "win" their station in society by personal enterprise. Life is seen as a contest, a sporting event, in which many compete for a few recognized prizes. Education is valued as a means of getting ahead, scrambling up the ladder. In keeping with this preparation for a contest the schools place an emphasis on keeping everyone in the running until the final stages. In the public schools and high schools the assumption tends to be made that those who are learning satisfactorily need little special attention, while the

less successful require help to be sure that they remain in the contest able to compete for the final stakes.

The university itself is run like a true contest, standards being set competitively, students being forced to pass a series of trials each term and the remaining entrants winning the prize of graduation.

Some of the free school staff seemed almost apologetic about the fact that the students didn't seem to be doing anything constructive. I had the impression people were enjoying themselves sitting around talking in groups, reading, playing chess and listening to music. I was told this wasn't a typical day and asked not to judge by it.

Insistence on making constructive use of time is another carry-over from traditional schools where teachers make comments on report cards about slow starters, time wasters and day dreamers. But who is to say whether someone else's time is being wasted.

A dividing line between teacher and student remains, although people are making a conscious effort to break it down. The staff still looms as authoritarian, not in the sense that they are ordering people around but that they keep a record of each student, his problems, what he wants, why he came and doing things like arranging for physical examinations for him. People are still seeking direction from the staff. Until a breakaway from the traditional school's concepts comes the free school is not free.

As a former student of Halifax Open School, I would say that this school has a good basic framework which needs to be beefed up and enlarged upon. However, I would like to level a few constructive criticisms.

1.) The student of this school, at least at the university level, does not seem to get any basic sense of involvement, i.e. no real participation in the school itself. I realize that since the college level courses are taken by auditing Dal classes that it is difficult to involve the student at this level in the functioning of the school.

2.) The staff, though friendly, do not in my opinion hold up their end as far as counselling students and as far as what courses to take. Students are shown a timetable of Dal classes they can audit and told to pick something they like and go to it. No instructions, hints of orientation to the neophyte student are given. He is left to bungle his way into the university machine completely unguided. There is also a discouraging lack of communication between the free school and the course professors.

3.) The number of courses is too limited. N.S. Matrics woodworking, small gass engine (old motorbike) repairs and about ten varied Dal courses are offered (100 and 200 level).

— Charlie Moore

Student evaluation

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Discontent with the status quo and the resulting demand for a voice in his own education has made the student more visible today. Students frequently express dissatisfaction with their perceived status as "customers" of the colleges and universities, and are beginning to demand that they be elevated to the position of partners in the academic community. The students want to be consulted in matters which happen to be of considerable concern to them, namely, the quality of teaching.

Regarding the question of using student evaluation as a guideline in making decisions about promotion and tenure of faculty, one would hardly think the notion were so radical or extreme. On the contrary, most and indeed probably all institutes of higher education acknowledge that one of their major justifications for existence is the teaching of students. It follows, therefore, that a faculty member's effectiveness in the classroom should be a primary consideration in his retention, promotion, or advancement to tenure.

How are the decisions about an instructor's effectiveness in the classroom to be arrived at? Logically, it would seem that assessment by the students who are directly involved in the learning situation should be the primary source of information. However, the blunt truth happens to be that in making judgements about an instructor's ability, systematic student ratings are used rather rarely. Why?

Many educators argue against the use of systematic student ratings on the grounds that students cannot accurately assess teaching effectiveness. (It is indeed curious to note that the



Some members of East Coast Free School.

Steve Jones/ dal photo

very people who doubt the credibility of student input are the ones who do use 'informal student opinion' as a basis for judging an instructor's performance.) Informal opinion happens to be by definition a random process and hence an airy substance indeed.

Much of the opposition to student rating of courses appears to be motivated by a deep-seated and pervasive distrust of the student. He is defined as an incompetent judge, biased, immature and arbitrary. Let it be conceded that such criticisms may be justified by the attitudes of some of the students. However, to jump to the conclusion that all, or even most students are incompetent, glib, or vicious is to fall wide of the mark.

Those who have seriously examined the issue of student ratings are impressed with the merit of the case. For example, Professor Irwin Lehmann believes that "students are perceptive, and they become more so when they realize that their opinions are seriously regarded..."

Writing on the subject of "Evaluation of Teaching Performance: Issues and Possibilities", Dr. Gustand pointed out in 1966 that at present students "are virtually the only direct observers", and that they are reasonably competent. For, even if it may be true that students cannot accurately assess an instructor's mastery of his subject matter, they are perfectly capable of reporting whether the instructor is organized, interesting, and effective at communication.

It is sometimes argued that since many students would rather be entertained than educated, the use of student evaluation will lead the instructor to become a popularity seeker. Such apprehensions, however, are not supported by empirical evidence. Research reported by Dr. Rammers and others indicates that an instructor's popularity is probably not appreciably related to student rating of that teacher. Moreover, one should not automatically assume that a popular teacher is necessarily comprising himself or his subject (though jealous colleagues may declare this to be the case). That a student cannot learn by being delighted happens to be another one of those myths so prevalent in education.

Regarding the rating devices used it can be said that they are not perfect. However, given the

complexity of (teaching) behavior, rating forms will continue to be the type of instrument most widely used to evaluate teaching, until a more adequate replacement comes along. Besides, researchers are not entirely ignorant of the ways of these rating instruments, or of student raters. Over the years, some useful findings have emerged.

For instance, student ratings do not appear to be affected by such factors as class size, rater's sex, grade-point average, or sex of the instructor. Required classes are not rated more severely than elective ones. And, according to most studies, the grade which a student expects to receive in a course is not related to his rating of that course. Dr. Rammers sums up the situation as such: "If 25 or more students ratings are averaged, they are as reliable as the better educational and mental tests at present available." A study at the University of Michigan has indicated that there tends to be a consensus among students in their ratings of very good or very poor teachers, but less agreement about those in the middle range.

It is foolhardy to regard student evaluations as a panacea for all the ills of higher education, but it is equally rash to dismiss them out-of-hand. Obviously students are biased. But so are other groups that are called upon to judge teaching effectiveness. As an editorial (1965) in the "Columbia Daily Spectator" pointed out "Neither group is impartial, but the interaction of their different interests may well lead to fairer and more accurate evaluation..."

The view that students have no right to judge teaching is rapidly losing ground. As Charles Frankel puts it "students have a right to bring their interests and opinions to the attention of the college," and that to acknowledge this right is to recognize a legitimate claim.

Had the relationships between faculty and students in the recent past been more open, the present outcry against poor teaching might not be so vociferous. That something is very wrong with our undergraduate instruction seems indisputable. The urgency of the situation demands that we explore all relevant possibilities. The new student involvement in the educational process offers us an opportunity to come to grips with both matters of fact and of value in education.