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Piagetian Programs in Higher Education: Prologue

Robert Fuller
rfuller@neb.rr.com

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Prologue

How can my college teaching be made more effective? A few years ago, several of us at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln were struggling with that question. During that time the work of Piaget and the studies of the reasoning skills of American college students were brought to our attention. From those results the ADAPT program was developed.

We came to believe that the reasoning skills typically used by many college students are not appropriate for college courses. College students need a learning environment that encourages them to develop their reasoning abilities as well as master course content. Because we believed that advanced reasoning skills were common to all disciplines, we sought to formulate a program that encourages students to use their reasoning skills in one discipline as well as another.

The ADAPT program was a Piagetian-based, multidisciplinary freshman program. This program included courses in anthropology, economics, English, history, mathematics, and physics. This program was designed to be a complete freshman year program of 30 semester credit hours at the University of Nebraska. Each student was required to take all of the ADAPT courses. Each student had about twenty class hours each week as well as a one-hour seminar. The model of ADAPT existed for two years, 1975-77. Then the program was reduced to nine semester credit hours for the two semesters of the freshman year. It continued in that format for 20 years, ceasing to exist after 1997.

The ADAPT classes were based upon a learning cycle model that begins with the student's exploration of a variety of concrete experiences. From these experiences the students are helped to define words and invent concepts. Then the invented concepts are applied to a variety of other experiences. Experiences, rather than textbooks, form the central core of the ADAPT curriculum.

The ADAPT classes stressed the importance of learning from other students. Many small group learning activities were carried out in the ADAPT program. The students have close contact with their peers and with their professors.

The ADAPT course content was determined as much by its usefulness in promoting reasoning as by its importance in the content scheme of the discipline. The content of the various courses was coordinated so as to reinforce the important reasoning skills used in each discipline.

This was a new experience for most of us. We were free from the content imperatives of our discipline. We are trying to coordinate our content with the content to be covered in other disciplines. We were selecting content on the basis of its importance in furthering the cognitive development of the students. We were centering our courses upon personal, concrete experiences, rather than upon textual material. We have learned much in this process. This booklet is our attempt to share with you what we have learned from the ADAPT program.

Since we began the ADAPT project in 1975, we have worked with others who have similar interests. We have included a section of this book that describes their efforts at Piagetian-based programs.

I served as the editor and proofreader of this book. So the authors of the individual chapters have only limited liability for what you read herein. The content is theirs. The form has been shaped by me.

We gratefully acknowledge the help of Marilyn T. McDowell who typed and retyped various portions of this book. She also collected the information from all the contributors.

Robert G. Fuller