

The Time of Our Lives

**Time is a valuable commodity to be
used reasonably and sensitively**

EDGAR DALE

THE OLD CHESTNUT about the county agent and the reluctant farmer, although blighted by overuse, does make a point. The county agent told the farmer that the new feeding method would put his hogs on the market in just half the present time. "What's time to a hog?" was the farmer's rejoinder. There was also the man sentenced to 10 years in prison who, when asked by the judge if he had anything to say, replied: "It seems to me, Judge, that you have been mighty generous with my time."

What's time to a young person in a youth program or to the agent supervising such a program? Are we being mighty generous with their time? Certainly we haven't rigorously studied the curriculum of Extension or our teaching methods to see whether we could achieve better results in less time. True, we've made some limited studies, starting as early as the 1918 Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, to deal with economy of time. But we have made few studies of school or college or Extension Service as a *system* for promoting learning.

We haven't adequately differentiated the varied kinds of learning we're trying to achieve. The new self-instructional materials are moving toward integrated learning systems and may lead to important savings of teacher and student (client) time. The biggest investment anyone makes is his investment of time and we should help clients manage this investment wisely.

Is there an overall approach that might be adopted so we could use our time more profitably, less wastefully? I suggest we think through systems of learning. Today we have too much patchwork, too many unintegrated bits and pieces of learning. We don't give

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our students enough guidance in developing a unified conceptual structure for their learning. Even the pearls of wisdom from teachers, and professors and Extension personnel may be badly strung. We don't achieve a seamless web of learning. Our knowledge isn't organized to bring it to bear on a new situation.

Further, we try to do too many different things. Students *almost* learn a principle and then the instructor moves hurriedly on to the next one. We planlessly pick up and lay down too many things. We lose our place in the book and in our job. We don't develop the learning momentum that builds the intensity of extended and sustained concentration out of which creative insights flow. Like Sisyphus, we roll the rock up the hill and let it roll back instead of pushing it beyond the top. The Eureka effect is often missed because of ineffective concentration on too many unrelated things. We cool off before we get hot. Thoreau said it well in *Walden*: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand. . . ."

We could save huge amounts of time if we sharpened our focus on the kinds of goals we think are worth spending our time on. We travel day by day in a verbal and social jungle without an adequate map. If you don't know where you're going, the chances of getting there are poor. And unfamiliar shortcuts may turn out to be the longest way home. Have we pledged our time to ends that now seem glitteringly golden but which in the long run may turn out to be dross? To map our lives requires a scrutiny of values. Do our high schools and colleges spend enough time helping students discover what is worth investing time in, worth prizing, honoring, valuing? Does Extension do the same for its clients?

Using Time More Wisely

When we feel guilty about how little we seem to accomplish, we often resolve to work harder. But we might first plan not to work harder but to work smarter. Here are some ways we can use our time to better advantage:

1. We can make better use of snippets of time by developing a life-long learning map for ourselves. Sir William Osler, Canadian-born physician who taught for many years at Johns Hopkins University, was not only a famous physician but was also an authority on Sir Thomas Browne, a seventeenth century writer. Osler developed a distinguished library on Browne and his works. He did it by habitually using the last 15 minutes of his day for reading. The habit became so firmly fixed that he couldn't go to sleep until he

had put in his 15 minutes of reading time.

In a letter to George Washington dated April 23, 1794, Jefferson notes that he is now back on his farm and cannot write his usual 10 or 12 letters a day but must postpone answering letters until there is a rainy day. Where did he find the time? He wrote to his daughter Patsy: "Determine never to be idle. . . . No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time who never loses any. It is wonderful how much may be done if we are always doing."

But Jefferson also took time for the reflection needed to precede doing. Dumas Malone reports that when Jefferson was in France he retired from time to time to a hermitage kept by lay brothers beyond the Bois de Boulogne above the town of Suresnes. Here he cut himself off from outside contacts until he caught up with his work. Walter Lippmann has said: "Every man whose business is to think knows that he must for part of the day create about himself a pool of silence."

Sinclair Lewis once spoke to a group of students in a writing class at Columbia University. He asked, "How many of you want to be writers?" They all raised their hands. Then he said, "Well, if you really want to be a writer, why aren't you home writing instead of listening to me?" When someone tells me that he wants to be a writer I ask, "Where are your rejection slips?"

2. We can develop a sense of time. Some persons excuse their late arrival by saying: "I have no sense of time." But they must certainly have a sense of time because they are always late, otherwise they would come early as often as they come late. Oscar Wilde says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "He was always late on principle, his principle being that punctuality is the thief of time." Ordinary courtesy would suggest that even if we are not able to save our time, we should not waste the other fellow's.

But there is one thing worse than being 30 minutes late. It's being a generation late. Our nation, and many of our educational institutions, even today are doing too much crisis thinking. We say glibly and hopefully: "Time is on our side." It isn't necessarily so. Time is on the side of those who use it. We keep greasing the squeaky wheel when we should be devising a better method of transportation. A nation whose leaders and citizens have a sense of time will project its thinking one or two generations into the future. We will learn to plant trees even though we know that we shall not sit in their shade.

3. We can become self-conscious about our own learning systems, our own ways of working more efficiently. We can perfect the science and art of learning how to learn. We take pride in playing a bridge hand well, or in getting good drives in golf, or in preparing

that recipe that wins high praise from the family. Why not a similar pride and satisfaction in being a highly competent learner?

Think of the enormous waste of time in writing and correcting spelling errors. Can't we engineer a learning plan which enables students to take pride in avoiding mistakes in using *affect* and *effect*, *principle* and *principal*, or such misspellings as *explanation*, *consensus*, *seperate*, *Artic*, *grammer*, *liason*, *annoint*? By the way, a principle is a rule. Both words end in *le*. If the meaning is "rule," write *principle*. Of course a few difficulties may still arise, as in interpreting the teacher's comment about her resignation: "It wasn't the low salary I object to; it was the principal."

4. We could save learning time if we had better filing and retrieval systems, both mental and physical. The number system, if mastered, enables us to file isolated, discrete facts in such a way that their isolation, discreteness, uniqueness are transformed into meaningful organization. When this happens, all number experiences can become grist to our intellectual mill. We then have a conceptual file, a way of classification.

5. Persons who aspire to continuous educational growth need good working tools. Certainly a professional needs a library, both for reference work and for the expanding of intellectual horizons. If you own books, you can underline key points, index these points at the back of the book, refresh yourself by rereading underlined material. The professional should have at his elbow a good dictionary, a set of encyclopedias, a thesaurus, a fact book, a stylebook, key books in the field of his specialty, suitable filing cabinets.

If you say that teachers (Extension personnel) cannot afford this, my reply is simple: "The professional teacher can afford it." Money invested in professional growth yields not only rich satisfaction but usually pays extra financial dividends as well.

6. We waste time by not reading or listening or viewing at full attention. A conversation or a panel discussion then becomes a series of interrupted monologues; we don't listen. A man got up in a Quaker meeting and said: "I am up here to speak and you are there to listen. And if you get through before I do, raise your hand."

What is your and my typical reaction to suggestions about the saving of time, the better organization of our lives? First is a sense of guilt about the way we do use time. Last year certainly scooted past, didn't it? But to raise the question of saving time is to confront oneself with the issue of purposes, values, commitments, dedication. Many of us are willing to listen to discussion about the *means* of saving time but shy away from thinking about the *ends* of saving time.

Conclusion

An excellent reason why we should invest our time to get greater dividends is to insure the survival of the open, flexible, democratic society. Today we hold this commitment either too lightly or too sentimentally. We must bring our commitments into sharper focus in all our life experiences—in the shop and in the home, in the graduate class as well as in the committee meeting, the workshop, the training meeting, the tour.

We must develop the means to reach our examined ends. This requires thought, and thought requires free time. Free time can be "brought" by better personal and social organization and by money, which represents time that someone has saved. In the struggle for the open democratic society we have more money than we have time.

We hear often about the revolution of rising expectations. But there is an even more important revolution that must precede and accompany it, the revolution of rising obligations. It is chiefly an internal revolution, not an external one. It is the revolution that comes when we respect ourselves, our time, and our important obligations. Indeed, the only time we can really control is our own. To learn how to use time with sensitivity and responsibility is a realistic definition of a liberal education.