

In Praise of the Hawthorne Effect

The Hawthorne Effect is a research problem that seems to have faded from prominence without having ever really been resolved. Twenty years ago, it rang a bell of sorts with most teachers and graduate students in education. Today it is a disappearing bit of esoterica. Before it escapes us altogether, however, perhaps we ought to look again and resurrect it.

For those too young to have caught it on the first round, the *Hawthorne Effect* (HE) is the term applied to an elusive phenomenon first encountered in an investigation on increasing worker productivity. The inquirers found increases to follow a number of improvements in working conditions and benefits (lighting, rest periods, wages). Not too surprising. But then they removed each of the benefits they had introduced, and production still continued upward. This puzzling result was dubbed the "Hawthorne Effect." Desmond Cook, probably the world's leading expert on HE, identifies it as the unanticipated beneficial effects in experiments of the subjects' knowledge that they are part of an experiment and the object of special attention.

Since HEs are uniformly beneficial (by definition) the uninformed might expect them to be welcomed as an added bonus. Not so. Researchers ever since have worried about how HE may be contaminating their experiments and confounding their conclusions. For the research community, HE has been an unmitigated bane—standing at best in relation to human behavior as the Heisenberg Principle stands in relation to the behavior of electrons. Researchers have ignored it at their peril. It comes back to haunt them, with skeptics dismissing their findings as the ubiquitous HE returned once more to confound the naive in the pursuit of knowledge.

It may be time, however, for dusting off HE and appraising it anew. Possibly it never was quite

the research contaminant supposed—and it just might recommend solutions for some of our other problems. Researchers have typically moved to outflank HE by keeping experimental subjects "disinterested" (e.g., by keeping them unaware that inquiry is in process). Yet "disinterest" has probably contaminated at least as many educational inquiries as HE. I can recall my own disappointments on a research team where some of the teachers responsible for carrying out an experimental program simply never bothered to do so—while others participated to varying extents and degrees of enthusiasm. Sir Josiah Stamp, a venerable sage, offered an early exposé of the fallacious linking of "disinterest" to dependable research: "The governments are very keen on amassing statistics. They collect them, add them, raise them to the Nth power, take the cube root and prepare wonderful diagrams. But you must never forget that every one of these figures comes in the first instance from the village watchman, who just puts down what he damn pleases."

A number of explanations have been advanced to account for HE, the "stealthy phenomenon." Cook found four approaches, attributing the baneful benefits to novelty, to motivational increases, to the special attention focused on the experimental subjects, and to sheer awareness of the existence of an experimental situation. There has been no resolution among the approaches and, for most, the HE remains a mysterious and elusive force.

Current difficulties suggest that maybe we have been trying to solve the wrong problem. Perhaps rather than trying to avoid the insidious bias of HE, we ought to be trying to cultivate it and make it grow! The idea is not entirely far-fetched—because insofar as the purpose of educational inquiry is the

improvement of practice, it may be HE itself which is our best bet, rather than all those independent variables it has obscured! Possibly what we most need to learn is precisely how to cultivate and sustain the heightened motivation, the benefits of novelty, and the excitement of pursuing something one feels is new and untried—or of involvement in something significant enough to attract sustained attention. Indeed, Cook's four proffered HE explanations can be viewed a veritable list of antidotes to the flattened affect of turned-off students and turned-off teachers!

Perhaps the key to reversing the widespread alienation in schools is precisely the kind of experimentation where all concerned are keenly aware of and excited about the adventures they are sharing. Possibly this is the way around the research problem, as well as around the lengthening list of instructional problems.

For the profs, it recommends that the secret of successful teacher education may lie not in those replicable treatments which begin on the drawing boards as independent variables and turn up eventually in lists of behavioral competences for certification. Perhaps the secret will be found to lie closer to the art than to the science of education, and to pertain to quite a different sort of esoterica: namely, how do we infect a classroom with excitement and promise? How do we offer the dignity and self-esteem that come with experiencing one's work as important? How do we protect enticing novelty from settling into dull routine? The Hawthorne Effect just might be the answer. Instead of denigrating it, we ought to be scheming how to bottle it for generous dispersal in every teacher education classroom in the country!

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