'Generalizing'

University researchers study learning disability

By Sandy Johnstone
Of the Emerald

The man stands helplessly in Safeway, staring at the array of items and the busy shoppers around him. He has always shopped at Albertson's before, and Safeway has everything arranged differently. He stands alone, confused and bewildered about how to begin his shopping.

The man is an example of someone who has trouble learning "generalization" — the ability to transfer learning of similar tasks in different situations.

The University Research Institute for the Study of Generalization with Severely Handicapped Students was created recently by a $1.5 million contract for the next five years. The professors and graduate students working for the institute will conduct research on generalization skills and the severely handicapped, who often have problems with generalization.

Robert Horner, one of the professers working within the institute, says the problem is that instructors can teach specific skills much better than generalized skills.

It's easy, for example, for a teacher to explain to severely handicapped students how to cross the street at one particular place. But when the students have to cross at a different intersection they may become confused.

Horner and his colleagues, who have been doing research in this area for more than two years, are searching for generalized rules that will allow teachers to teach handicapped students specific skills that can be translated into generalized skills and maintained for a long time.

For example, they have developed a method to teach severely handicapped students who are working for Tektronix to generalize about the skill.

The students crimp capacitators, but with about 400 different styles it is impractical to teach specific skills. Horner says that by selecting three capacitators, students are able to generalize about all 400.

"The same basic rules can be useful in teaching how to act in a grocery store," he says. "The advantage of our research is it will build rules that cut across different types of skills. It will develop something that can be used across the country."

The $1.5 million contract will allow the institute to widen the scope of their research. The institute's initial research will focus on the theoretical rules that can help teach generalization skills for a spectrum of needs.

"The first few years it will be very much 'real science' with controlled and systematic experiments," says Horner. "We have the research technology now that allows us to do research without making the situation so artificial that it is of no use to the individual student.

"We have a good idea of what will work, and we are mainly testing things," he says. "All teachers, to a large extent, do research to prove things they already know will work."

The project's second phase will apply the research in specific areas and make up packages, which explain how to teach generalization in specific areas such as telephone use, shopping or crossing streets, for teachers. They also will conduct long-term studies of individuals to see how the skills are learned and maintained during a five-year period.

The contract, which the Department of Education awarded to the University jointly with the University of California in Santa Barbara, specifies what is to be done with the money. Horner and his colleagues spent about three weeks, working 18-hour days, to prepare the contract proposal.

"It was a lot of work, but $1.5 million is a lot of money," he says.

Previous research showed they already had enough experience to "deliver the product." Four other groups were awarded similar contracts, and they will coordinate their activities closely over the five years.

One advantage the University had was the high quality of education for severely handicapped students already occurring within the Eugene-area school districts. For example, in the Lane Education Service District, students are integrated in the schools, and although they sometimes have different classrooms, they are mainstreamed with normal students as much as possible.

Horner says these advances in public education are necessary to dispel the myths about handicapped people.

"Parents, advocates and legislators have decided the values we hold for ourselves should apply to the handicapped," he says.

Photo by Bob Baker

Robert Horner is one of the University researchers studying the problems of 'generalization' among the severely handicapped.

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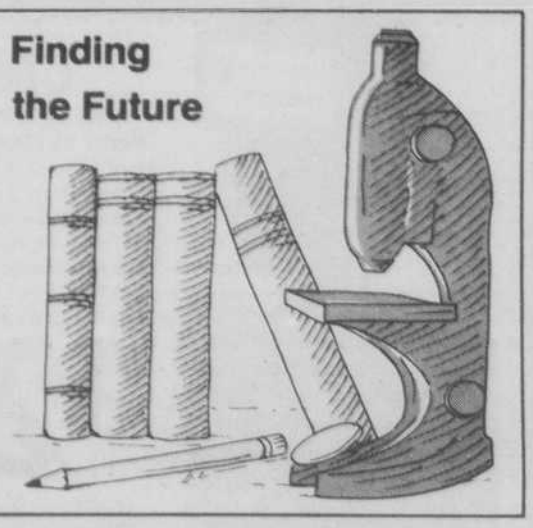

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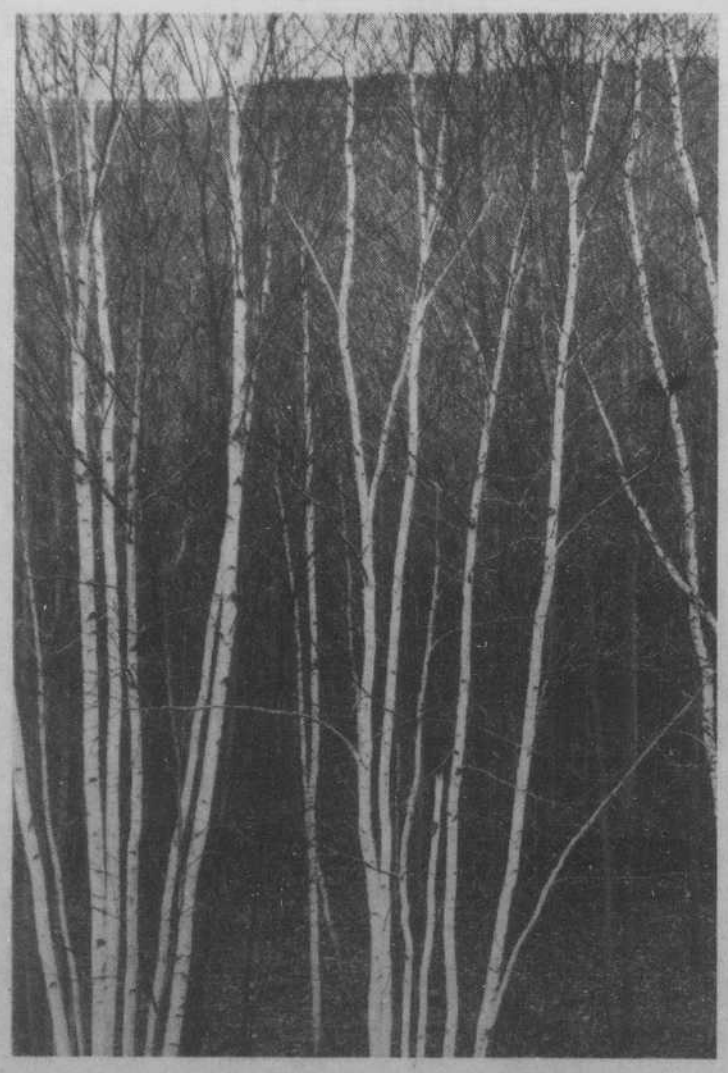

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