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A NEW LOOK AT TEACHING KEYS

PHILLIP GRANT

Teaching taxonomy, classification, and keys to students is sometimes a slow and fruitless process. It seems



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that there is a fear and dislike of the whole idea of taxonomy among beginning students. I feel this is largely due to the fact that they are pushed into the system of classification and the use of keys without really understanding them. In most cases students are taught the principal behind keys and how to use a key by having the instructor run through several specimens in the key with them. The students are then put more or less on their own. This may be fine for the above average student but I wonder if the below average and average students can grasp it that rapidly.

In this paper I would like to propose a way for students to learn how keys are made up and how to use them without having to jump into the middle of a complicated system, and without having to learn the difficult terminology that may be above their level. In this system the students make up their own keys using simple things around them. Nails or screws seem to be about the best and easiest to use.

Distribute to every one or two students about fifteen or twenty assorted nails and a ruler. The nails may vary as to length, diameter, color, head or headlessness etc. A wood screw may be added to give more of a variety. Have each nail or screw numbered so the student can refer to the easily. One of the best ways to number them is to write the number on a tag and tie this tag to the nail.

Now have the students construct a set of instructions that could be given to another person with a set of nails, minus the numbers, so this person could pick out the same types of nails as in the original set and assign the same numbers to them as in the original set. After they have completed this, have them discuss the different ways various members of the class approached the problem. Also discuss why some ways are better than others. If the students have not mentioned the dichotomous key, bring it up and discuss why it would or would not be a good way to set up a key. After the class has decided on the best method have them make up another key putting it on the chalk board as they proceed.

When the students understand the best way to make a key and why, give them a set of different twigs with a few leaves on them. These twigs should also be numbered as the nails were. Have the students make up a key for these twigs using the best form arrived at with the nails. After they have completed this, have them compare their key to that of a pub-

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lished key containing the twigs that they have. Check and record the different characteristics by the author of the published key to that of the student's key. It would also be helpful to have several keys by different authors for the students to compare and see how they differ. The student should now be ready to be given an unknown twig or leaf to be keyed out. The key should be one of the less complicated keys. A key that is limited to

certain types of plants or a specific season is usually the best to use.

This system is not intended to make the student an expert with a key right away, but it should give him a basic understanding of how keys are made up and how to use them. It should also sharpen their ability to see differences in things around them that at first glance look the same.

"SOMEBODY ELSE"

There's a clever young fellow named SOMEBODY ELSE.

There is nothing this fellow can't do.

He's busy from morning 'til way late at night,

Just substituting for you.

You're asked to do this or asked to do that,

And what is your ready reply?

Get SOMEBODY ELSE, Mister Chairman,

He'll do it much better than I.

There's so much to do in our service,

So much and the workers so few,

And SOMEBODY ELSE is getting weary and worn,

Just substituting for you.

So, next time you're asked to do something worthwhile,

Just give them the honest reply,

If SOMEBODY ELSE can give time and support,

You can bet your last dime,

So can I.