

ITSCOOL: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SCHOOL



A new model for education based on research into values, the positive effect of autonomy on intrinsic motivation and the vital importance of social networks and connectedness in schooling

The traditional school system is based on a model of external control: fixed subject hours, presence sheets, evaluation, and assessment which maintains a teacher-imposed, performance-based structure held in place by the extrinsic motivation of reward and punishment. It imposes how, when and what a student learns: limited and controlled content is delivered from a teacher to a captive audience. Over fifty years of research and thousands of articles have consistently drawn conclusions that learning is more efficient when self-regulated and based on intrinsic motivation (White, 1958, Harter 1978, Ames, 1992 and Deci & Ryan 2000, among hundreds of others). Thus an ongoing dialectical situation always exists between the desire for a regulated and controlled system and the fundamental need to create engaged, creative and questioning individuals.

Social changes due to new technology have destabilized the school structure: now content is no longer attached to time or place and the distinction of work and leisure is blurred. Infinite content is now available anywhere at anytime. This new facility of access also means that “we don’t want other people making our choices for us anymore” (Leonhard, 2009): we want to listen to music, watch films and chat – and learn – at anytime and anywhere. Students no longer wish to submit to an outside authority and they have many more sophisticated forms of distraction and groups vying for their attention.

The research I conducted for my master's degree, “Only a tool” (Pulfrey, 2008) revealed that the new conditions created by technology have the potential to satisfy the three needs for intrinsic motivation as defined by Deci and Ryan (2009): autonomy, belonging (relatedness) and competence. But, as my research has revealed, this does not happen within the traditional structure of hierarchy and control of the school system. In the classroom the student is quickly absorbed in working/playing with the computer in the spirit of intrinsic motivation as defined by Deci and Ryan (2000, p.235): “*people freely engaging in activities that they find interesting that provide novelty and optimal challenge*”, with a new focus of attention other than the teacher, thus disrupting the traditional classroom dynamic. The relationship with the tool, almost human, is deeply diverting on one level: it is absorbing and entertaining. However, while new technology provides infinite potential for learning and exchange that is exciting and motivating to discover, it offers a flood of content, without order or hierarchy, and the constant temptation of distraction. Technology in itself does not provide structure, rigour or discipline and the student requires help in creating structure that will create the sense of competence necessary for the initial motivation to be sustained. For this they need they need a ‘travel guide’. Systems of *control* create another level of stress, conflict of interests, and avoidance behaviour in the student Higgins (1997), whereas *structure* helps the student create meaningful form.

These structures are particularly important since human consciousness creates stability out of the constant flux of experience through narrative that reflects shared cultural values. The confrontation with technology involves dealing with the one of the characteristics of Post-Modern society; the detachment of information, and experience, from the specific cultural context that gave rise to it is. As Jameson (1991) points out, post-modern culture is a “culture of quotations”, losing its sense of

history and sense of a unified culture which is replaced by endless choice and random, or individual, juxtaposition of experience. Without a coherent, cultural narrative, we experience a sense of instability and insecurity. The ability to be able to understand the relationship between information, perception and structure: the *context* of understanding can help develop respect, tolerance and provide tenable cultural values for the future.

Our social education and sense of belonging also requires human interaction to acquire the sense of relatedness necessary for autonomy. The interviews I conducted showed how the absorption associated with computer use tends to isolate each student in their own world, diminishing the sense of relatedness, despite the enormous possibility of communication via social sites such as Facebook and chatting software. Thus real physical interaction and exchange become of paramount importance to create a dynamic of engaged learning and community when using the computer.

Most uses of technology in schools try to apply the traditional paradigm of power and control and content based, teacher-led learning which create the same resistances in many students that school has always produced. I believe that we need to take teaching out of *content* into *process*. As Matthew Taylor (2009) of the RSA states:

"In a world of ubiquitous information, teachers are no longer simply the gatekeepers of knowledge. Their task is more to enable young people to understand how knowledge works, how to use it: to build a deeper understanding and feel for subjects. How to consume knowledge critically and to manipulate it effectively."

Within this new landscape, the role of the teacher changes; to provide *the structures* within the random conjunction of information that will lead to *sense-making*: to create maps and to provide routes that allow the student to explore meaningfully and to provide the skills that allow the student to *engage and evaluate* information: to allow him to disengage from the immediate and to perceive relations that are the fabric of human knowledge. It also requires the creation of situations that encourage meaningful discourse and exchange between students

This requires a totally new school model in which content, exercises and necessary skills can be engaged through online resources while presence is used for the essential social interaction and exchange, that is the basis of human society and learning, and that is being lost through excessive absorption with the screen. In my teaching, I have designed a system that tries to create this structure and have been using it for many years with my students with positive results and wish now to develop this on a larger scale and to demonstrate that this new approach can provide a viable and workable alternative to the current school model.

This model is based on research into values, the positive effect of autonomy on intrinsic motivation and the vital importance of social networks and connectedness (see Johnson, Johnson, Stanne, 2000). More details on our theoretical model can be obtained on request.

This model attempts:

1. To take learning away from content into process and thinking skills.
2. To guide, select and create circumstances through which students engage topics in an in-depth way and address issues so that they come to a deep understanding.
3. To create links: making the connections that create coherence.

The techniques used are:

1. Students working in self-organised teams, requiring organisation and collaboration to solve problems.
2. The use of projects (where possible with real clients) with deadlines
3. Structure is provided by a "Why, What, How" guide:
 - Why? The relevance to the student of this area of study.
 - What? A mind map of what is involved.
 - How? Links to resources: our own and existing on the Web.
4. Web 3 technologies are used to create dynamic interchange (Wiki's, Blogs, Twitter etc.)
5. Material is presented by way of podcasts and on-line tutorials.
6. Workshops with professionals from the outside world are organised.
7. Frequent sessions of exchange and the presentation of results are held.
8. Students learn to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their own, and their peer's work in an equitable, improvement-focused climate of mutual respect.

We believe the form is applicable to all subject areas, but would initially develop projects in the areas that we already teach: Cross Media Communication and Design, Video and Motion, Psychology and Business and Project Management.

What is required to test and develop this model beyond the scope possible within the context of my own classes in a traditional educational institution is the opportunity to create courses that allows groups of students to be immersed entirely in the approach for three-month periods.

We initially see the potential to set up a course of study offered with the *Ecole Supérieure* program of ERACOM where we already work. This method is perhaps particularly suited to a group that is combining study with working since much content acquisition can be undertaken as "distance learning" However, to demonstrate that the approach can be effective across a wide-range of age and ability levels would require access to a cross-section of students from different age-groups and institutional backgrounds.

Ideally we would like to put in place a practical research project within a higher education structure through which the results could be scientifically monitored and perhaps used to build towards a Doctorate thesis. Setting up a pilot study within an independent teaching environment is desirable so that a clear distinction of method and values can be delineated without confusion of influences in the testing.

Practical requirements differ little from those currently available in schools and universities: the setting up the classroom environment and having access to computer and software facilities.

The Project Team:

The originators of this project combine a wide variety of experience:

Phillip Pulfrey: 30 years of teaching experience, ten years of research into the role of technology in education, including a Masters degree at the University of London, and twenty years of teaching New Media design.

Caroline Pulfrey: 20 years of teaching experience, has just completed her Doctorate in Social Psychology, researching issues of student motivation and has an advanced knowledge of quantitative research methods.

It is becoming ever more clear that there is an urgent need to rethink our educational system. As the RSA Charter for education states¹:

"The world is changing rapidly. The globalised economy creates opportunity, challenge and unpredictability. The great challenges of sustainability and the shifting demographics of our population will require new thinking, and collective action. As we increase our understanding of human intelligence and behaviour, we know more about how we can learn effectively, and the value of learning throughout life. Meanwhile, young people bring with them the expectation not just to sit and listen, but to participate, to interact, and to shape.

The last ten years have seen the standard in education improve, the quality of teachers at all levels get better, and investment in buildings, IT and resources. However, in our changing context the old models of education born of the industrial age make little sense. If we want to help our young people to become the adults they will need to be to thrive in the 21st century, we need not just to adapt, but to transform."

Our daily experience in the classroom, and a vast body of research, leaves us convinced that this model, having at its heart student autonomy, shared experience and interaction, well-structured, multi-discipline projects, ongoing mentor support of the individual and improvement-focused assessment, really works and provides a viable alternative to the present system that is not just an adaptation, but a real transformation.

¹ <http://www.thersa.org/projects/education/education-campaign/education-for-the-21st-century-a-charter>

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