

A CRY FROM THE HEART

*When people are interested and motivated they learn. If they are not, they do not and nothing a teacher can do will change that: people **want** to learn. We have to allow them, and help them, to do so.*

We have to stop trying to tell people how, when and what to learn.

We have to be willing to give up control and to trust students.

We have to move from content-based teaching to helping people learn skills.

We have to move from a system of assessment based on criticism and failure to one based on encouragement praise and success.

This does not mean that we do away with structure: we need to learn discipline and social behaviour: it is the origin and the form of the structure that changes.

Let us beware of a situation in school where form becomes more important than content and procedure becomes more important than people: the obsessive need to control and assess and the sometimes deeply held belief that this is a *necessary* paradigm for education acts as a stranglehold on the classroom. It makes us forget the nature of the experience; education is not a train ride where we must ensure that everyone is in his or her place and change at the correct station. It is more like surfing: there are techniques and rules, but they have to be adapted to the conditions that are always changing - you have to feel the wave or you fall off.

Big business has already learnt that pyramidal structures are inefficient; that people are more motivated and productive when they are given autonomy and responsibility and when they work in small, democratic groups.

We have to stop trying to tell people how, when and what to learn:

Learning is not linear; people learn in different ways, at different times and at different speeds. What is more, now they come with very different levels of previous accomplishment.

“We cannot have real learning in school if we think it is our duty and our right to tell children what they must learn. We cannot know at any moment what particular bit of knowledge or understanding a child needs most, will most strengthen and best fit his model of reality. Only he can do this. He may not do it very well, but he can do it a hundred times better than we can. The most we can do is try to help, by letting him know roughly what is available and where he can look for it.”ⁱ

Nevertheless, we still insist on imposing sequential, hour-based, teacher-led curricula on students. We are not bolting together motorcars.

Our procedures of control and assessment encourage the student to view education as something boring, done to him or her, more or less against his or her will.

We have to encourage the students to take responsibility for their education and to support them in their efforts to do so.

I hear the reply that this is only possible with “motivated” students: but we all start off life as motivated students, with a love of learning; we are enquiring, questioning animals and enthusiastic learners. It is at school that most of us lose this enthusiasm. Given the right environment, we can soon find it again.

“The most common element with all kids is that they start off as enthusiastic learners, but by the time they have been in school for a few years they have stopped being enthusiastic about learning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We have to move from content-based teaching to helping people learn skills. Content changes fast in the modern world; what companies seek are employees who can learn and adapt. We will probably have to change our direction several times in the future to stay employed. The basic skills needed for any employment rest the same: listening: analysis: synthesis: communication: organisation: creativity and rigour.

The new technologies can help us to achieve these changes and they can create a new paradigm of education if we are not too afraid to let them. We are surrounded with a richness of readily available learning material in terms of books, films, television, CD's and Web sites.

This does not mean that we do away with any structure: we go to school for structure, guidance, encouragement, human interchange and example. We are social animals and we learn as social animals. Respect for others and your tools of work; being on time, not talking when others are presenting are social skills that need to be learnt. Neither does it mean that we no longer need teachers – it means that teachers are no longer just “content servers” but guides that help people learn; show them that it takes discipline and hard work, but that from this comes a satisfaction beyond the simple gratification advertising promises.

The student is empowered – he takes charge of his education; the teacher is a facilitator and guide. He helps the student learn how to learn: how to organise his time and find the information he needs. How to judge the quality of the content that he finds: how to organise, analyse and synthesise what he sees: how to make comparisons and links and how to draw conclusions. He raises the sights of the students and encourages him or her to do better. He provides support, encouragement and praise and he works alongside the student, enriching his own knowledge all the time and teaching by example.

We have to move from a system of assessment based on criticism and failure to one based on encouragement praise and success. A good critique of a student's work does not need the false absolute of a grade attached to it and motivated, engaged students don't need it. More energy is wasted in schools by students, teachers and administrators on grades *per se*, detached from any meaning that they might originally have had, than anything else. The grade becomes an end in itself; the human being takes second place.

*"We adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity of children by the things we do to them or make them do. We destroy this capacity above all by making them afraid, afraid of not doing what other people want, of not pleasing, of making mistakes, of failing, of being **wrong**. Thus we make them afraid to gamble, afraid to experiment, afraid to try the difficult and the unknown."ⁱⁱⁱ*

I believe these things because I have seen and experienced the transformation that can take place in a classroom when they are put into practice: I have seen surly, difficult and unresponsive students become animated and enthusiastic. I do not pretend that it is always easy – students have to learn this new approach as much as teachers and not everyone *wants* to learn, but then such students will not learn in the traditional situation anyway. When students come to the realisation that what they do is for themselves; that they are not judged or penalized, everything changes.

Let us erase fear from our schools; fear that student's won't learn: fear that we don't know enough as students or teachers: fear of being wrong. Let us make schools places of joy and magic.

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ⁱ 'How Children Fail', John Holt

ⁱⁱ *Idem*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Idem*