

MORE NOTES ON FLYING BLIND

PREAMBLE

"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."

'How Children Fail': John Holt

I had a student in a Design History class; he had already taken the class twice with different teachers and each time failed. He made no effort – he wasn't interested. I approached him to see if there was something that we might do to make sure he did not fail a third time and I asked him what it would interest him to study. He talked animatedly and fluently for fifteen minutes on the interconnectedness between politics, economics, sociology, history and design; he drew maps, pictures and diagrams; we planned a project which he completed with an excellent grade. I experienced magic.

It is experience of rare moments of this magic transformation from boredom to animation, from mediocrity to excellence, not from anything I have done, but purely from people finding their own connection, has convinced me of the truth of what John Holt wrote back in the nineteen fifties. Most of the impassioned pleas for changes in education that I have read come from people who have experienced this split between the animation, excitement and industry that even the most unpromising student is capable when 'given their head' and what they often achieve within our carefully planned lessons.

It is an indomitable fact that you cannot teach something that a student does not want to learn and that the moment that a subject becomes necessary or interesting, or both, we learn amazingly fast. Being interested; understanding, means finding a connection; a spark, a link between our own notion of what the world is and what we are experiencing. If we do not find that link we have no motivation and become bored. It is a simple truth: education means

to lead out, not to stuff in.

The following argument suggests that the model of education that is implied, at least, by our present system is one that arose out of a nineteenth century world picture which, in turn, influenced the Modernist view of Absolute values and is inappropriate to a Post-Modern, Post-Structuralist / Deconstructionalist world where we have admitted at last, I think, what Taoist philosophy has always claimed and Alan Watts put so neatly:

"The greatest hindrance to objective knowledge is our own presence."

'Tao: The Watercourse Way': Alan Watts

Our scientific and logical methods, although not wishing to belittle their importance or achievements, are, after all, only tools and perhaps not the most appropriate ones to describe our relationship to life:

"We have been interfering with a complex system of relationships which we do not understand, and the more we study its details, the more it eludes us by revealing still more detail to study. As we try to comprehend and control the world it runs away from us."

ibid

Perhaps what science has taught us in the last hundred years is not to understand "but the limits of our power to understand" * as Graham Swift wrote about history. In this knowledge perhaps we can build a model that is living and moving – about relationship, not about fixity.

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Our school system bundles groups of people on to buses and takes them down a road from which they can glimpse occasional views of countryside which are pointed out to them as interesting and dumps them somewhere else. The inside of the bus is always much the same and the trips pretty standard. At the terminus they are allowed to get on to another bus if they can remember enough of the 'sights' that they passed on the way. Thus they become passive and begin to believe that this is what education is: day trips with guides.

Never are they allowed to get out and walk and experience the environment with their own senses— heaven knows where they might wander off to (probably not where we had decided that they should go) and, besides, it would take far too long for them to get anywhere! It is our greater experience that allows us to order and make sense of the terrain: the categories, the connections and the road system. Without such experience a student could wander round a meandering country lane thinking he was on a main route.

This model of education we have inherited is essentially Modernist and it is cracking at the edges under the weight of our late twentieth century electronic / communication 'revolution'. Yet what can we replace it with to avoid slipping into the vertiginous space of endless possibility, endless information, but no form or certainty or order?

Look at my students—

They have inherited unknowingly the tenets of Modernism and use a Modernist vocabulary, yet they are children of their own age; they do not believe in Absolutes. They have no hierarchy of information and the amount of information at their fingertips allows startling juxtapositions of ideas. They received their education not so much from school as from television and advertising and the astute ones know that bus is an outmoded form of

transport: they have matter displacement beams from Star Trek – with fax modem and a computer terminal they travel the world; China to the United States via Australia in seconds. A school child can have access to more information at the touch of a button than a scholar of the previous generation could probably lay his hands on in a lifetime.

The question is what do you do with all this information? What is its implication to systems of meaning?

What do you teach?

Neil Postman, Old Testament Prophet, cries of destruction:

“We are a culture consuming ourselves with information, and many of us do not even wonder how to control the process. We proceed under the assumption that information is our friend, believing that cultures may suffer grievously from a lack of information, which of course, they do. It is only now beginning to be understood that cultures may also suffer grievously from information glut, information without meaning, information without control mechanisms.”

Neil Postman: ‘Technopoly’

Children play Packman and prepare themselves for the monotonous life in front of a luminous screen and we are on our way to producing a society of machine junkies whose leisure will pass from television to the intense stimulation of never ending sex, violence and speed in a virtual half-life. This is the dark side, the offshoot of a new technology as slums and slaves were the offshoot of the Industrial Revolution.

William Morris might have done much to hinder the British progress towards standardization and efficient machine production with his idealism, but he did not stop it. We have to understand and harness this new power. We have to educate for it. So the question remains: what and how do you teach? In what does our culture reside?

We seem to be on the brink of new forms for ordering our world and one can feel the stirring of unease that goes with it. Some dig themselves into the

bounds of what they know while others feel the impatience of the early Modernists with procedures that appear outmoded. Nowhere is such behaviour so starkly seen as in education with its contradictory role of passing on the past and preparing for the future.

Education is not only about personal development, but also about social responsibility. As teachers we have a responsibility to society to pass on our world structure. Continuity of culture requires the initiation of our young into the mythologies, rituals and 'secrets' of our tribe. For example, students do not come to Art Center just to develop themselves but to be able to usefully take their place within an existing system that requires certain behaviour, procedures and skills – external requirements to which they must adapt (yet these themselves are changing with alarming speed). We are social animals that share social behaviour; if we all invented our own language there would be no communication. We require structure.

Structure requires administration: it orders, quantifies, assesses and rationalizes – all good, positive aims. You rationalize what a student needs to learn. You break it down into manageable stages. You see how one stage leads to the next. You assess and test to make sure each stage has been absorbed before going on to the next.

It is clear, reasonable and rational – no?

Yes, and that is exactly what is wrong with it. It implies a certainty in which we know longer believe and it does not take into account the fact that people are not clear, reasonable and rational and they do not learn in a linear way. No two people learn in the same way or at the same speed and the above model presumes that something exterior has been 'added on' like an extra program to a computer while the processor stays the same. This is not the case; when something is 'learnt' so it can be used, as opposed to memorised so that it can be repeated, it becomes part of the learners 'map' of the world – part of him or her. That person is changed.

In an attempt to fix the process we kill it. The human soul remains the same and moves slowly. It is through the soul and the entirety of human experience that we grow, change and are educated. The arrogance and defensiveness of hard won rationalism and modernist rectitude has, since the end of the Romantic era, poured bitter scorn on anything not involved in the dialectical monolith it has been at such pains to create. It denied mystery as the fundamental force of life and removed all the forms that man has always used to relate himself to the experience of life: myth, ritual and religion, with an indulgent pat on the head– “there, you are too old for such toys now; here’s a book of formulæ. You did not want to live in that messy, unpredictable forest; we will cut it down and give you a nice, constantly illuminated, concrete environment with a regulated temperature and if you miss the variety we have some cute electronic toys for you to play with.

We become dolphins in a swimming pool that we built ourselves, cut off from the ocean that formed us:

“We have replaced secret wisdom with information”.
Thomas Moore: ‘Care of the Soul’

And we confuse information with education. Like Mediæval scholars we see no reason to look beyond our own books for answers. To question the omnipotence of scientific explanation is a heresy equal to that of Galileo and the mixture of contempt, savagery and seriousness that all that is mystic is dealt with in our society shows how insecure we feel.

“In the days when an idea could be silenced by showing that it was contrary to religion, theology was the greatest single source of fallacies. Today, when any human thought can be discredited by branding it as unscientific, the power previously exercised by theology has passed over to science; hence science has become in its turn the greatest single source of error.”

M. Polani: Scientific Outlook, Its Sickness and Cure (‘Science’ 1957)

The truth is:

“Hitherto, Western science has stressed the attitude of objectivity – a cold, calculating and detached attitude through which it appears that natural phenomena, including the human organism, are nothing but mechanisms. But, as the word itself implies, a universe of mere objects is objectionable. We feel justified in exploiting it ruthlessly,

but now we are belatedly realizing that the ill-treatment of the environment is damage to ourselves – for the simple reason that subject and object cannot be separated, and that we and our surroundings are the process of a unified field, which is what the Chinese call Tao.”
Alan Watts: 'Tao: The Watercourse Way'

But we are afraid of not being in control.

We are afraid to trust people: administrators, politicians and bureaucrats take as their creed the fact that people must be organized and controlled externally 'for their own good'. They fear a mythical chaos – or a demise of their own usefulness and power.

We are afraid to trust children to do what comes most naturally – learn – and we conveniently ignore the fact that we forgot most of what we 'learnt' in school almost before we were through the gate. Yet we learnt what we needed for our survival quickly and efficiently.

Fear is exacerbated by a grading system.

Our emphasis on results, grades and judgements is like an evil thrall around the classroom. It is the immovable reality and brooding presence in the room which determines and shapes behaviour of student and teacher whatever they try to do. Students are great survivors, they are 'street wise' and they want to succeed. What they learn with amazing speed in Art Center is to satisfy the teachers; each day I see the concrete truth of what John Holt writes about young children:

“For children the central business of school is not learning, whatever this vague word means; it is getting the daily task done, or at least out of the way, with a minimum of effort and unpleasantness. Each task is an end in itself. The children don't care how they dispose of it.”

I think that the sense of overwhelming frustration that surfaces in me from time to time comes from the realization that there is very little one can do within the environment of a class that can override the powerful implicit messages created by a credit system based on grading. The reliance on, and acceptance of, this system is so deep-rooted in the education system and in our personal experience that it is very difficult to persuade people, even the students, to consider alternatives seriously.

There is too much fear.

It is the suspicion or fear that students will not work, will not 'learn' and improve that requires grades. Students who don't work require grades to prove that they are doing better than they really are or to remove responsibility for themselves to something external – a grade – which, eventually, can be put down to causes beyond their control: events that prevented proper attention, an unfair teacher. The grade becomes a release.

We need to break through strong and enduring prejudicial models about what happens in a classroom and what the rules are. We have to break the fear which holds so much sway over what happens:

"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."

'How Children Fail': John Holt

The student fear of ridicule and failure, the teacher fear of being caught out; not knowing the answer, of losing control, of not achieving results.

A classroom is a place of interactive process and no fixed model can take into account all the variables. Yet it is possible to have form without fixity; to quote Alan Watts again:

"Our organisms have ways of intelligent understanding beyond words and conscious attention, ways that can handle an unknown number of variables at the same time."

Alan Watts: 'Tao: The Watercourse Way'

For 'real learning' to take place the teacher has to use these ways of understanding and put himself in touch with the student's intelligence:

"it is (the teacher's) business to put himself into contact with the intelligence of his students, wherever and whatever that may be."

'How Children Fail': John Holt

Now this is a complicated matter since I cannot know where we are going.

Even if I think I perceive the student's goal, or the aim of the class is a specific skill such as the ability to depict a cube in correct perspective, picking the student up and carrying him to that destination or building a straight, undeviating and well-signposted road might not help that person if they do not have the time or the means to gather the experience to themselves and make it part of their own particular map of reality.

The 'long way round' requires a lot of patience, guess work and wrong turns. There is much waiting in laybies while students learn to use a map that you can see they are holding upside down. It takes much trust in ourselves and in the students.

Trust: letting go, giving up fear, reservation, conscious control; why is it so hard? I see my students hold on to their own blocks for dear life where a little confidence and trust in themselves would cast so many problems to one side. I see myself do the same thing. Having clawed our way out of superstition and fear by reason and knowing what dark depths are hidden within the human soul we are not comfortable with what we cannot rationalize or explain – even though although we know that rationality can have its own dangers and evil does not fall neatly into one camp; the 'Final Solution' was undertaken in the name of rationality and 'science'.

Letting go means cultivating total non-judgemental awareness at all levels of our being: total presence and absorption in a moment.

It means being open to experience without pigeon-holing it.

It means living with uncertainty, with success and failure, with love and with faith.

The difficulty is to give up a lifetime's habit of dialectic: subject / object antithesis. To let go of fear, desire and effort. To let the intellect take its rightful place and to stop its swaggering arrogance; to allow the continual shifting

movement of situation; to accept the mystery of life and to trust our instinct, our basic relation to life.

Education is about the assimilation of new experience to become part of the whole person. It is about a personal growth of mind, body, spirit and heart and, like life itself, it is eventually a mystery. It requires an involvement of the whole being of a teacher and an ability to trust the student as his own best teacher. It requires the involvement of the whole administrator to find, know and trust good teachers. It requires flexible, feeling human beings. It cannot be freeze-dried.

In short education is not where we generally look for it. It very seldom happens when, where and how you imagine and there is no formula: I am not proposing 'my' method as better than any other method. Methods lead to lack of thought and sterility. They make life less effort for teacher and student – they allow us to waver responsibility; to rest from the endless, difficult, unsatisfactory and emotional issue that is living and dealing with others.

Modernism, seeking Truth with single, unequivocal answers, has speeded time so that action has become more important than listening, grasping more important than accepting and recording more important than experiencing, whereas:

"Listening moles (sic) are alive, responsive, enjoying, giving, always curious, always learning, exploring the world with their whole beings."

'Duncton Found': William Horwood

Listening is not easy; to be always open takes a constant effort that not everyone is ready to make. Education should be open to anyone who wants it but it should be seen as a privilege: Buddhist monks, I am told, will sometimes sit at the top of a hill and throw rocks at ascending students enforcing the idea that only those who really want knowledge can attain it. To pretend otherwise is a lie; part of the 'satisfaction without effort' myth that advertising perpetrates. It is time that we admitted that education is a rare and dangerous and difficult privilege that implies responsibility that we do not all want.

Mostly we are satisfied with a ritual training for the rite of passage into adulthood. Those rocks are a warning as well as an intimidation.

I am not a believer in 'answers'. I believe that change comes from awareness. It is when we try to get it right that we get it most wrong; as Robert Hughes put it when writing about Modernist Architecture:

"..when men think in terms of abstract space rather than real place, of single rather than multiple meanings, and of political aspirations instead of human needs, they tend to produce miles of jerry-built nowhere.."

'The Shock of the New': Robert Hughes

I am certainly not advocating an abandonment of structured learning ; without structure my Industrial Design History student would not have been in the class at all. Nothing is more disciplined than the Zen arts, but that structure is a means and of no importance by itself. One of the frustrations of studying a Zen practice is that as soon as one focuses the intellect on the form one fails:

*"The wise person does not strive;
The ignorant man ties himself up...
If you work on your mind with mind,
How can you avoid an immense confusion"*

'Hsin-hsin Ming': attr. Seng-ts's

– it is a matter of the quality of one's awareness. In teaching it is only important that the form does not become more important than people. It should offer the parameters within which education can take place.

The computer and information 'superhighways' are bringing about change naturally despite ourselves – much in the way that printing changed society in ways beyond people's expectation. We can no longer control what and how people learn and it is no longer possible for one person to have a grasp of all the information of one subject; in the area of computing, at least, it is perfectly possible for the student to have more up-to-date information than the teacher. If we give up the notion of classroom teacher / student control and the one-way passage of knowledge this is not to be feared rather, the exponential development in human knowledge it allows is breathtakingly exciting.

What we need to provide is methodologies to prevent students drowning in a sea of possibilities: the more you have available, the more choices you have

to make to create something useful out of that choice. We cannot, to go back to the beginning, always know what is relevant to someone else. Nor can we predict with any certainty what is going to be useful into the next century and I do not think we need any longer to make the choice. Instead, we need to provide the thinking structures necessary to deal with this new 'information environment' and to be able to differentiate between structure and content (a skill I come across very rarely in students): creative thinking (mind-mapping, visualization techniques, spatial thinking and the creation of 'hyperlink' models) on one hand and critical discipline, logic and analysis on the other.

The model of thinking that a computer allows is much closer to the spatial, intuitive way in which the brain works than traditional essay form. Inter-active multimedia can replace much of the usual 'mundane' form of learning; students can move at their own speed and repeat what they don't understand. They can also gain access to the precise information they want rather than relying on the experience, likes, dislikes and point of view of one teacher and, through Internet and other sources, contact an immense range of expertise.

What we cannot replace are those qualities of true education that I have been touching on: Education happens one to one when one person touches another. Like any true relationship it requires "time, a certain vulnerability, and openness to being affected and changed" * on the part of both student and teacher (which is which?). All we need to do is to provide the time and space for it to happen and not to allow an obsession with administration to get in its way.

It is wisdom we need, not truth:

"Truth is not really a soul word; soul is after insight more than truth. Truth is a stopping point asking for commitment and defense. Insight is a fragment of awareness that invites further exploration. Intellect tends to enshrine its truth, while soul hopes that insights will keep coming until some degree of wisdom is achieved. Wisdom is the marriage of intellect's longing for truth and soul's acceptance of the labyrinthine nature of the human condition"

'Care of the Soul': Thomas Moore

No amount of information or technology can bring us wisdom or make us into better human beings. This takes time, awareness and openness to experience. Get out of the bus and travel on foot? – most of my students would think I was crazy.