

15. 'Natural' Curriculum or National Curriculum?

'Natural' knowledge and a superstition called 'Subjects'

A curriculum can be defined, in simple terms, as 'a course of study'. Knowledge can be taken, for now, to be some kind of content that is the substance of a curriculum'.

The latest research on the brain tells us that babies 'hit the ground running' as active learners. Their brains are already programmed to begin their lifelong course of study by interacting with their environment - unlike a cow, say, that is programmed to work in set routines. Indeed, one definition of what it is to be human is given in the title of a John Holt book - we are human because we are *Learning All the Time*.

The 'natural' curriculum is the 'course of study' that humans develop as fast as physical and other conditions permit. So, babies accumulate knowledge through activities such as play, imitation, and interaction with any adults around. Play is best seen as children's work: one grandparent noted recently that her granddaughter, at the end of a refreshment and chat break, suddenly said, "I must get on with my play-work now."

The content of this natural curriculum is a set of existential questions. They include: Who am I? Who are you? Who are they? Where do we belong? Who gets what? How do we find out? Where are we going? How am I doing? Who decides what? It is a set of questions that stays with us permanently with the answers being reviewed constantly throughout our lives, as we assemble our tool-kit of knowledge. From time to time, we may engage with those attempts at systematic bodies of knowledge called subjects, to help provide some answers to these questions.

The question, 'Who am I?' will be redefined many times as a person passes through the roles of infant, child, adolescent, young adult, single person, couple, married person, parent, older person, and so on. When young children reach five, they are asking, on average, 30 questions an hour based on their natural curriculum. At this stage, one provisional answer to the question of 'how do we find out?' has been gained, by achieving competence in the mother tongue. Until quite recently in human history, this natural curriculum was sufficient to keep us going throughout life. But then

The story of the animals and the birds: The animals and birds decided to create a school. They devised subjects for study which were climbing, flying, running, swimming and digging. They could not agree on which was most important, so they said: "Everyone must do everything - in case they need these things in the future".

The rabbits were expert at running, but some nearly drowned in the swimming class. The experience shook their confidence and they could no longer run as well as before.

The eagles were terrific at flying, but very poor at digging and were assigned to extra digging classes. This took up more and more time, and some forgot how to fly well. And so on with the other animals and birds - moles became less confident at digging, otters at swimming.

The birds and animals no longer had the opportunity to shine in their best areas because they were all forced to do things that did not respect the natural curriculum.

The eagles got a bit fed-up with digging. They called a meeting of the birds.

"We need a curriculum suited to us birds," they said. All agreed.

"Nest building should be a core subject." All agreed.

The eagles spoke: "The best nests, 'real' or 'proper' nests, are made of twigs on high ledges, because they are the nests of us eagles - the 'high flyers', as you might say, with our 'high culture'."

Now eagles are big and powerful and liable to eat smaller birds, so that was somewhat reluctantly agreed.

So kingfishers and wrens and lapwings and swallows all tried to build nests of twigs on high ledges. It wasn't easy when you were used to holes in river banks, or weaving cocoon-like structures of grass and moss, or plastering mud under the eaves of houses.

What was needed was a stage of lower ledges - a kind of 'key stage one' of nest building.

"It might help," the eagles said, "if you wore our brown speckled uniform. Nobody seems to know why, but learning seems to go better if you wear a uniform. So, well done sparrows, you already have the right idea, but you kingfishers ... well, we love the gear, and all those nice bright colours ... but for learning, you will need to put on a brown speckled uniform." And so the experiment continued in brown speckled uniforms.

But, the swallows went south for the winter. In the rest periods they got to talking about the new birds curriculum. Nests on ledges were rather draughty. The ledges had got rather crowded and some bullying incidents had taken place. What was wrong with mud-plastered nests on the side of warm buildings, anyway?

The swallows resolved to be brave and confront the authority of the eagles:

"When we get back we shall demand the right to have a diversity of nest types again."

"Yes, and we shall demand the right to manage our own learning."

"And if we decide the best thing is learning in the family and not under the supervision of the eagles, we shall demand the right to resume the natural curriculum!"

It is about 150 years ago, since an institution called the compulsory school was introduced. And suddenly, the natural curriculum was displaced. The natural questions became replaced by an imposed curriculum based on THEIR questions, THEIR required answers, and THEIR required assessment. The message is dramatically changed: *"Your experience, your concerns, your hopes, your fears, your desires, your interests, they count for nothing. What counts is what we are interested in, what we care about, and what we have decided you are to learn."* John Holt, in *The Underachieving School*, p. 161)

In her study of children after one year of schooling, entitled *Rules Routines and Regimentation*, Ann Sherman found that this message was already being absorbed, but with

considerable reluctance. Children were aware of the 'hijacking' process, but felt powerless to do anything about it, and saw no alternative but to surrender to it. Ironically, this process is called giving young people their 'entitlement'.

What is achieved by this substitution of a false entitlement in place of the real one? Richmal Crompton's William was puzzled: *"When I ask my father anythin' about lessons he always says he's forgotten 'cause it's so long since he was at school, and then he says I gotter work hard at school so's I'll know a lot when I'm grown up. Doesn't seem sense to me. Learnin' a lot of stuff ... jus' to forget it, ..."*

In the textbook, *A Sociology of Educating*, I outlined three theories of knowledge. They were past-based, present-based and future-based. Subjects belong to the past-based category since they are relying on the arrangement of knowledge set up by our ancestors. They have **some** uses as part of the tool-kit of knowledge, but to overstress their importance is to indulge in a kind of ancestor-worship. The world of subjects is fragmented, but the world and human experience are holistic. There are no boxes in the real world separating History from Geography or Mathematics from Science or Chemistry from Physics. There are no such things as Biology, or Economics or Sociology out there. But because the world and human experience are vast, we choose, for convenience, to look sometimes at one part of reality, and to ask certain kinds of question about it. We may be thinking like a historian; if we look at another part, ask another question, we may be thinking like a biologist, or an economist, or a psychologist, or a philosopher. But these different ways of looking at reality can trap us into serious distortions. Subjects can easily become a superstition and be held up as **the** tool-kit rather than a useful part of it.

Present-based knowledge is much closer to the natural curriculum idea and addresses current topics such as the mass media, terrorism, fashion, poverty - the agenda of newspapers and television investigations. All these require integrated forms of knowledge and only draw on subject knowledge as appropriate.

Future-based knowledge is different again, and stresses the need to acquire the outlook and skills of the researcher. It starts with a realist appraisal of what we can know: *"We are all of us, no matter how hard we work, no matter how curious we are, condemned to grow relatively more ignorant every day we live, to know less and less of the sum of what is known. I expect to live my entire life in uncertainty, about as ignorant and uncertain and confused as I am now, and I have learned to live with this, not to worry about it. I have learned to swim in uncertainty the way a fish swims in water."* (John Holt, *The Underachieving School*, p.142 and 144)

It has become a commonplace to say that in the future, the key knowledge will be 'knowing how to learn' and also 'how to unlearn'. I think we can be more precise than this and say that the key knowledge, though not the only useful knowledge, is to be a confident and competent **researcher**. This requires knowing where information can be found, how to ask appropriate questions, how to check out good answers from bad answers, how to question the questions. The Internet and computers are valuable aids in this task of becoming a habitual researcher. Schools, with subject learning as their aim, are poor at this since success in school has come to mean remembering the answers to teachers' questions long enough to repeat them in tests.

John Holt tells us how he answered one young learner's question about how to learn history: *"I said, "I think you may be asking me two questions: one, how do I learn more about history,*

*and two, how do I get better grades in history class in school? The first thing to understand is that these are completely different and separate activities, having almost nothing to do with each other. If you want to learn more about how to find out about what things were like in the past, I can give you some hints about that. And if you want to find out how to get better grades in your History class, I can give you some hints about that. But they will not be the same hints" (preface to *Learning All the Time*)*

When people say that we should learn and memorise things that may be useful to us in the future, we should remember that this is the 'squirrels and nuts' theory of education. Squirrels collect nuts, bury them and then try to locate them later. Whether this works for squirrels, I cannot say. But as Richmal Crompton's William might say, 'it seems nutty to me' as the dominant idea on which to base a learning system.

George Bernard Shaw declared that "*what we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child.*" I take this as a plea to return to the learner-managed 'natural' curriculum, with personal learning plans supported by adults providing a catalogue of learning possibilities. Our society has been information-rich for many years now, and we have even more possibilities than before through computer access to a kaleidoscope of web-sites. We have the technology and know-how, we can rebuild the natural curriculum. It is time to move on from the superstition of subjects.

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