

18. It's not what you learn, but the way that you learn it...

As a young teacher, I came across this learning league table from National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Main USA. It ranked a number of learning systems on the basis of how much the learners remembered.

	Average retention rate
Formal teaching	5%
Reading	10%
Audio-visual	20%
Demonstration	30%
Discussion Group	50%
Practice by doing	75%
Teaching others	90%
Immediate use of learning	90%

There is, of course, much more to learning than memorising, e.g. the questions of which system motivates learners best, and which produces deep learning rather than shallow learning.

I simply refused to believe the evidence about retention rates, however, and threw myself into a whole host of strategies to prove the figures wrong. The pre and post-test results I recorded showed again and again that the research was correct.

Yet the learning system still in most common use in schools and universities is formal crowd instruction. Enthusiasts for the crowd-instructor role tend to ignore the evidence about its levels of efficiency. The short-term recall of learners after formal instruction averages 10% with a usual range of 0% to 20%. The long term recall averages 5% with a usual range of 0% to 10%. This is why so much homework and revision work is needed to shore up the inefficiency of the learning method.

All this information helped set in motion a life-long interest in learning systems and led me to write a textbook, *A Sociology of Educating*, (third edition 1999). But it might easily have been entitled *The Study of Learning Systems*.

A first finding is that there exists a considerable variety of learning systems and each one produces different results. Bertrand Russell in *On Education* (p.28) states the consequence like this: "*We must have some concept of the kind of person we wish to produce before we can have any definite opinion as to the education which we consider best.*"

So, first decide your intentions, then choose an appropriate learning system. Thus, if we accept the view that the world's most pressing need is to produce **people who will do no harm**, to the environment, to each other or to themselves, and maybe even do a little good, then learning based on co-operation has to replace that based on competition.

I will illustrate something of the variety of learning systems from my own experience, firstly, from teacher training. When I began work in teacher training I was required to use formal, instructional methods. These were the same methods that had been used on me when I trained

to be a teacher, and the intention was to introduce two basic roles. The first was that of **crowd-control steward**, since a great deal of time is spent dealing with large groups of conscripted learners. Conscripted learners, like conscripted slaves, are not likely to be automatically pleased about their enforced activity, especially as they grow older, and therefore need marshalling. The other basic role was that of **crowd-instructor**.

There was some general dissatisfaction with this crowd instruction model at the time I moved from classrooms to begin teacher training in 1970. This led to some ideas in UK that schools should encourage a bit more participation, and even try more democratic modes of learning. I offered trainee teachers the chance to work in a different learning system, that of a democratic learning co-operative (DLC). They could plan the course, learn and teach it in ways they determined, and review progress as they went along. I would switch my role from 'the sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side'. For fifteen years, 1972-88, trainee teachers had this choice and each year, rather bravely I thought, opted for the DLC system.

I was joined in this work by Clive Harber, who was recruited by the University of Natal to help develop the new South African democratisation of schools policy, which was started under the Nelson Mandela government.

The contrast between the type of teachers produced under these two methods was dramatic. Some comments from the end-of-course evaluations written by the students using democratic methods are indicative:

"For the first time I became responsible for my own education which stimulated motivation and a desire to learn. Lack of motivation at school and even at university had been the main reason why I had not enjoyed study. I can honestly say that I have actually enjoyed attending seminars for the first time in my academic life..."

"There was intellectual enjoyment. Intellectual exploration became an exciting and satisfying end in its own right, rather than as a means to a boring and worthless end ..."

"The co-operative spent many hours in discussion and formulated opinions and views (often varying) in relation to our timetable of work. All the group members felt without any reservation whatsoever that the co-op was a new working experience which was stimulating, enjoyable and very worthwhile."

I was startled, but delighted, to find a considerable leap in standards when I used this approach in teacher education courses. So were the external examiners and inspectors who, never having encountered this approach, knew nothing of its theory or practice. As well as being more successful in the standard tasks of memorising and reproducing institutionally approved material, the students also increased standards in other respects. These included resourcefulness, flexibility, curiosity, skills in co-operative learning, readiness to unlearn, research techniques, enhanced personal confidence, and strong feelings of community and mutual support amongst the members of the learning co-operative.

Another illustration from my own experience is the contrast between school-based learning and home-based learning. The new initiatives in home-based education in UK began in 1977, so I began to research them, since they presented a holistic learning regime of a quite different kind to mass schooling. Until then, home-based education had been an option for rich families, with the most well-known case celebrated in the popular film, *The Sound Of*

Music cataloguing the experiences of the Von Trapp family. But now, home-based education began to be implemented by 'ordinary' families right across the social scale.

I found contrasts. Learners from home-based education usually achieved superior results in academic achievements, emotional intelligence, and social maturity. In addition, there were bonus skills of resourcefulness, flexibility, curiosity, skills in co-operative learning, readiness to unlearn, research techniques, enhanced personal confidence, and strong feelings of community amongst the members of the family. Interestingly, the results of the learning co-operatives and home-based education showed many similarities.

My own interest was stimulated by the experience of taking my student teachers into schools in the morning, and finding the creation of a lively interest in learning rather like toiling uphill, with the wind and rain in my face. We had some successes, but it was hard-going. In the afternoon, however, I could find myself working with a family or group of families with children of the same age as in the morning. But now it felt like striding downhill with the breeze on my back and the sun shining. It suddenly seemed to be easy-going creating a lively interest in learning. Over the years, I teased out the reasons for this contrast and set some of the results down in a book, *The Next Learning System: and why home-schoolers are trailblazers*.

How do you classify learning systems in a way that will show that the way you learn is a critical issue? None of the attempts I looked at seemed to be getting us very far. Here is the approach I developed which classified systems as Authoritarian, Autonomous and Democratic, along with a fourth category of Interactive:

The Authoritarian View of Education or "*You will do it our way*"

In **authoritarian education**, one person, or a small group of people, make and implement the decisions about what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, how to assess learning, and the learning environment. This is often decided before the learners are recruited as individuals or meet as a group. As an exclusive method, it is favoured by totalitarian regimes because it aims to produce the conformist, lockstep mentality.

The Autonomous View of Education or, "*I did it my way*"

Here, the decisions about learning are made by the individual learners. Each one manages and takes responsibility for his or her learning programmes. Individuals may seek advice or look for ideas about what to learn and how to learn it by research or by consulting others. They do not have to re-invent the culture, but interact with it. As an exclusive method it is favoured by liberal or libertarian regimes.

The Democratic View of Education, or "*We did it our way*"

In **democratic education**, the learners as a group have the power to make most, or even all, of the key decisions, since power is shared and not appropriated in advance by a minority of one or more. Democratic countries might be expected to favour this approach, but such educational practices are rare and often meet with sustained, hostile and irrational opposition.

The Interactive View of Education, or "*We did it in a variety of ways*"

Here, the authoritarian, democratic and autonomous approaches are used in a variety of patterns. They may be alternated, or revolved or used in some order of ranking. Thus in the last case of ranking, a learning co-operative may work with democratic methods as the major approach, but use autonomous methods when individuals are delegated to prepare learning experiences for the group, or authoritarian methods when the group decides this is appropriate for a particular task.

This classification helps demonstrate a key lesson from the study of learning systems - that HOW you learn is as important, if not more important than WHAT you learn. It's not just what you learn, but also the way that you learn it.

As an example, let us take literacy. It is assumed that literacy is automatically a good thing. But, learning literacy in a bully institution makes you a literate bully. Richard J. Prystowsky, in *Paths of Learning*, Autumn 1999, reminds us that at the Wannsee conference, January 20th 1942, high-ranking Nazis met to plan the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question', that is, for the destruction of European Jewry. Over half of the conference participants had PhDs - a cohort of highly literate bullies.

When someone proposes that literacy is the aim of the learning system, we need to ask, "what kind of literacy?" Are we to produce literate fascists, or literate totalitarians? Do we want literate democrats, or a literate minority composed of the greedy and super greedy? If we want literate male chauvinists, we need single sex institutions.

The attitudes and habits of mind absorbed along with a learning system have been referred to as the 'hidden curriculum'. More accurately, since they are not all that hidden, it is the 'unwritten curriculum'.

As governments world-wide bang the drum for more education, Don Glines of 'Educational Futures Projects', USA, introduces a sobering thought:

"...the majority of the dilemmas facing society have been perpetrated by the best traditional college graduates: environmental pollution; political ethics; have/have not gap; under-employment - (in fact) the sixty four micro-problems which equal our one macro-problem!"
If some of the highly literate are responsible for many of the major problems that now face the world, perhaps we need less 'education' and more 'wisdom'?

If you want to produce people with democratic habits, discipline and understanding, or self-directing and self-managing people, then you will need to adopt a learning system that will do this. Thus, a current mistake in UK is the citizenship initiative, believing that **preaching** the virtues of democracy from within an authoritarian learning system will do the trick. It fails to work, and can be counter-productive in producing cynicism. South Africa, in adopting various measures to democratise its schools, has displayed much more wisdom.

The US radical, Nat Needle writes a protest in response to President Clinton's call to US citizens to learn to be super-competitive in what will be the most ruthless century yet:

"... if the 21st century becomes the story of human beings around the world pitted against each other in a struggle for well-being, even survival, this will only be because we failed to imagine something better and insist on it for ourselves and our children.

"I don't care to motivate my children by telling them that they will have to be strong to survive the ruthless competition. I'd rather tell them that the world needs their wisdom, their talents, and their kindness, so much so that the possibilities for a life of service are without

limits of any kind. I'd like to share with them the open secret that this is the path to receiving what one needs in a lifetime, and to becoming strong." (AERO-Gramme, No. 25, Fall 1998)

But, you can only learn the habits and attitudes Needle prefers if you establish an appropriate learning system. We are a long way away from having such a system.

**By Roland Meighan, first published in Natural Parent, Sept/Oct 2000,
under the title 'What sort of children do we want?'**