

20. Learning centres instead of schools?

(Why not scrap schools and replace them with something more humane, more intelligent and more up-to-date?)

We have all just witnessed an astonishing event. We have gone into a new century with the same model of education with which we started the old century - the 'tell them and test them' model. It is rather like basing modern transport policy on the coach and horses. What makes it more astonishing is that the Chief Inspector of Schools at the start of the last century, Edmond Holmes, spent thirty years trying to make the model work efficiently, (including its payment by results approach now re-born as 'performance-related pay'). He eventually gave up and described this model as 'the tragedy of education' and declared his sense of shame for being a party to it.

The comment of Sir Christopher Ball in a recent edition of *Natural Parent*, takes up where Holmes left off: *"The nation (and its governments of either persuasion) seems to be intent on reinforcing a failing system at present ... It is no use tinkering with our 19th-century model of education. It needs to be completely re-thought and restructured. Gradual reform is unlikely to succeed. Radical change is needed."*

But not everyone is content to wait for governments to catch on and catch up. People at the grassroots, in a variety of countries, have been busy for the last twenty years or more. Two new books bear witness to this activity. The first is called *Creating a Cooperative Learning Centre, an idea-book for home schooling families*. It is written by Katherine Houk from Chatham, New York who is co-founder of the alternative learning centre, a co-operative which offers classes, workshops, field trips, and other adventures for families involved in home-based education. Her own children began to be educated at home in 1983. She is also involved in art and design, writing, and the ministry, especially interfaith work. Next, she is director of the *Alliance for Parental Involvement in Education*, (ALLPIE), a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing education information to families.

She tells the story of a centre she co-founded along with a few dedicated parents, now serving over 70 children. In the process, the author provides ideas you can apply to your own situation. *"Discover how you can create a gathering place for creative and joyful learning in your community, a place for people of all ages,"* declares the author.

The sequence of events follows a now familiar pattern. After an often lengthy period of heart-searching, debate and enquiry, a family decides that the best option available to them is to educate at home. Apprehensively, they join the ranks of those reluctant heretics the home-based educating families. Naturally, they have a concern about social life and social skills. So, first, they set out to find clubs and groups in the community to join, ranging from the Guides and Scouts to judo groups, choirs and craft groups.

Then they decide, often at the same time as searching for community groups, to make contact with other families who are educating at home, and see if they can do a few things together. If this is a success, the next stage is that these families may decide to meet on a more regular basis and rent premises for this to happen. In this way a co-operative learning centre is created.

Houk's book gives pages of practical advice to anyone wishing to follow the same path. There are sections on organisation and operation, laws and bylaws, contracts and agreements, finance, dealing with the press, planning the programme, and the strength and challenge of diversity.

In the UK too, groups have been developing the same kind of vision. Human Scale Education has supported the development of small parent run schools, known in the USA as charter schools. The newly-founded *Centre for Personalised Education Trust* has started work supporting, in particular, learning centres created by groups of home-educating families. A well established one is the *Otherwise Club* in London. Chris Shute reports, "*It meets twice a week in a sort of community hall in north London... The club is a support group for home-schooling families. It does not do their job for them, but it provides a context in which they can meet together, discuss their problems and allow their children to do a little learning in company with other youngsters who are also being educated at home,*" (in *Education Now News and Review Supplement*, Summer 2000)

A newcomer to the scene is the Learning Studio at Bishops Castle in Shropshire, which is part of the Living Village Trust development. Carole Salmon reports that "*the learning studio is already functioning on a small scale on the ground floor of a house that the Trust owns next to the site. We are hoping to have a purpose-built building within 18 months. The idea here is a centre for home-educated children to meet, play and learn together.*" (in *Natural Parent* Sept/Oct 2000, p.26)

The second book is entitled, *Creating Learning Communities: models, resources, and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning*. It is edited by Ron Miller of the Foundation for Educational Renewal Inc. USA. It is in all respects a contemporary book. First of all it was written and published on the Internet and may be inspected free at [www PathsofLearning.com](http://www.PathsofLearning.com). The writers met on the Internet on a list-serve, CCL-LLCs@onelist.com. The common interests of the writers were the future of learning and the potential impact on society of co-operative community lifelong learning centres. These are emerging particularly drawn from the rapidly growing home schooling movement. This social phenomena is spontaneously self-organising without leadership, without planning, without design and often without being noticed. All of the educators involved, whether home schoolers, autodidacts, co-operatives or futurists, are playing one role or another in trying to transform the learning system.

In the book, thirty leading innovators and writers tackle the issue of the next learning system to replace the dying mass, coercive schooling model. Contributors include Linda Dobson, Pat Farengo, Katherine Houk, Bill Ellis, Don Glines, Jerry Mintz, Ron Miller, and your columnist, Roland Meighan.

These writers are agreed that our common experience tells us that all is not well with society. Today's schools teach by the mode they use - hierarchy, self-interest, authoritarianism, patriarchy, competition, materialism, and survival of the fittest. Humanity looks set to destroy itself with this value system. And, increasing number of observers, including scientists, philosophers, historians, and artists, are starting to warn us, that if present trends continue, we are headed for an enormous cultural and ecological disaster.

Creating Learning Communities is a remarkable book that includes a number of inspiring case studies. There are also analyses of the age of information technology and its impact. A

key section looks at the philosophical roots of the next learning system. Finally there is a directory of information and contacts.

The book sets us a challenge. Emerging is a future in which all people will be able to learn what and when they want, regardless of age - a future where learning can be lifelong, where the old paradigms are set aside. We will be able to intellectually roam and seek out as much knowledge, information, and experience as we wish, where we can both learn and teach according to our curiosity, needs, and knowledge. In most segments of society we are some distance from this future, not least because schooling, based on the 'tell them and test them' ideology has dimmed our imagination. But here and there, in growing numbers, all around the world, people are actually living this future today.

Ron Miller draws distinctions between three general approaches. A transmission approach assumes that the primary purpose of education is to induct young people into the established values, beliefs, and accepted knowledge of the existing society. The transaction approach is more sensitive to the social context of learning. There is more room for individual differences, more respect for diverse understandings, and a concern that only a democratic community encourages dialogue and experimentation. The transformational approach is more radical and proposes that to educate the human being is not merely to make him a knowledgeable, productive member of society (transmission), or an active, engaged citizen (transaction), but also to encourage each person to discover a deeper meaning for his or her life.

Miller adds the fourth possibility, self direction. It is found well expressed in the writings of John Holt and AS.Neill. It holds that we are naturally learners, and if social institutions would stop cluttering our paths with various prejudices, agendas, and bad habits, young people would follow a natural curriculum and learn throughout their lives all that is necessary to experience meaningful and productive lives. Most, if not all, of the structures of schooling - grades, lesson plans, age groupings, teaching strategies, key stages and obsessive testing - are seen as irrelevant and counter-productive.

The writers in this book have little sympathy for the existing learning system of mass, coercive schooling. Some see it as obsolete. Well, perhaps spending time in a museum of education might not be all that harmful, you might argue, but some of the writers see mass schooling as actually counter-productive in producing a series of bad habits, ranging from intellectual, through emotional and psychological and political, to social. Others go further and see mass, coercive schooling as infringing three and sometimes four human rights One of these is conscription to an ageist institution. Such an imposition is justified by the dubious belief that being compelled to spend large amounts of time in the company of people chosen for you and of the same age and immaturity as yourself, will somehow turn you into a mature human being. What is really does is set up the context for the tyranny of the peer group with its pressure on the inmates to conform to whatever fads and fashions grip it at any particular time, whether it be expensive trainers or expensive drugs.

The writers in this book have found common cause through the internet. In their own communities they can often be rather lone voices for a more sane learning system. Now, they are able to avoid the gentle censorship of the media using the technique of regular omission from consideration through the spiking of letters and articles by newspaper and magazine editors. They can present their ideas direct to a world-wide audience. And curiously, some of

the writers now report that they are being asked by those formerly using 'deaf-ear' tactics, to write some pieces for them.

Creating Learning Communities edited by Ron Miller, (ISBN 1-885580-04-5) can be obtained from Educational Heretics Press, 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ at £19-50 p. & p. included)

Creating a Cooperative Learning Centre, an idea-book for home schooling families, by Katherine Houk, (ISBN 0-9636096-3-7) is available from H.E.R.O books, 58 Portland Road, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 5DL at £12-50

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