

6. Learning systems

When I trained as a teacher I was introduced to two basic roles. One 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, and therefore need marshalling. As Colin Ward once explained, "*Much of our expenditure on teachers and plant is wasted by attempting to teach people what they do not want to learn in a situation that they would rather not be involved in*".

The other basic role was that of **crowd-instructor**. This is having a revival as the current officially favoured method of trying to achieve learning using the formal instruction of groups in classes of anything from 30 -50.

The most impressive crowd-instructor I witnessed personally was the head of the school in which I did my first teaching after college. He would take the whole school of 500 to 600 secondary pupils in the hall for two hours at a time for hymn-singing and mental arithmetic, armed only with a pianist and a cane, so that the staff could complete the end of term reports. Standing on the terraces at the West Bromwich Albion ground one Saturday, I was joined unexpectedly by the head, Harold Tyas. At half-time, I expressed my admiration for his performance as a formal teacher with the whole school as his class, and confessed I never saw the day when I could emulate his achievement. His response surprised me. He told me not to be impressed because he had grown to realise that his methods did not lead to any worthwhile education. He said that he appointed young teachers from college in the hope that they would find much better ways than his.

Enthusiasts for the crowd-instructor role ignore the evidence about its inefficiency. 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 %. As a young teacher, I simply refused to believe the evidence and threw myself into a whole host of strategies to prove the figures wrong. The pre and post-test results showed again and again that the research was correct. This set in motion my life-long interest in learning systems.

Three other learning systems get better results. These are not the only ones; there are other approaches that help us match the thirty different learning styles we have found in humans. Some promising new approaches are based on computer technology using interactive video and CD-ROM discs.

The first of the three is **purposive conversation** between two and up to eight people. This is one of the reasons that home-based education is so remarkably successful, in getting the learners, on average, two years ahead of their schooled counterparts and in some cases, up to ten years ahead. Between 40% and 60% of the time is spent in purposive conversation which replaces the inefficient crowd instruction method. We now know this after over 20 years of research in UK, USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

A second effective learning approach is that of **teaching something to someone else**. This is one of the reasons why people are so easily fooled by formal teaching methods. Because the teacher remembers up to 90% of the material, it is easy to assume that the learners do too. They do not. When they fail to do so, the disappointed teacher cannot face the idea that it is the method that is poor and is likely to blame the learners for being 'lazy' or 'stupid'. It is, of

course, the teacher who could be accused of being both lazy and stupid for not reading the research on learning. The explanation for the much-vaunted Pacific-rim results using formal methods, is in the small print: learners do two hours work with their parents before school and two or more afterwards, to shore up the inefficiency of the crowd instruction method. If they followed the example of home-schoolers and cut out the bit in the middle, they might do even better.

A third successful method is that of **learning co-operatives** using the discipline and skills of democratic pedagogy. I was startled to find a considerable leap in standards when I first 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 successful in the standard tasks of memorising and reproducing institutionally approved material, the students also developed bonus skills in resourcefulness, flexibility, curiosity, skill in learning, readiness to unlearn, research techniques and enhanced personal confidence.

They found that they annoyed their alienated fellow learners on other PGCE courses, by their enthusiasm and joy in learning. Colleagues were also known to comment sourly when the students from the learning co-operative attended any of their lecture sessions, that they "*asked an awful lot of questions*".

Home-schoolers exhibit the same extra bonus skills, and one reason is that the families too, operate as learning co-operatives for periods of time. When students from the learning co-operatives visited families educating at home, they immediately found common ground. So when the famous Harrison case was in court in 1981, they supported the family during the hearing and produced a simulation that they could use in classrooms based on it.

The next learning system, which is only a few years away, and indeed could be in place in months if we had a mind to do it, is unlikely to need either of the roles of crowd control steward or crowd instructor very much. We are, therefore, training teachers for an increasingly obsolete system and creating a cohort of new, young museum-pieces.

The obsolete teachers being produced, are, in the final analysis, being trained as **indoctrinators**. We need to move from working **ON** children, which is the approach of the indoctrinator, to working **WITH** children, which is the approach of the educator. It is time to ignore those who have enthusiasm for the domination-riddled approach of the massive and expensive apparatus of National Curriculum, testing systems and aggressive inspection. Instead, we must learn from the astonishing success of the home-schoolers, about how we might construct a more humane, dignified, and cheaper learning system. Along with this will go a different, enhanced and more professional and worthy role for teachers as learning coaches and consultants rather than crowd control stewards and crowd instructors - 'cops without uniforms', as the USA teacher John Holt used to put it.

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This piece was published in *Natural Parent* in June 1998, as the Roland Meighan column, entitled 'The cop without a uniform'.
