

THE ART OF LEARNING:

a curriculum proposal

Paul Herder and Louisa Simons

CONTENTS: THE ART OF LEARNING

INTRODUCTION	3
A CURRICULUM PROPOSAL	
OVERVIEW	4
THE CORE OF THE CURRICULUM	
INQUIRY	5
THINKING	6
CREATIVITY	7
HOW DO WE EDUCATE?	
THE LEARNING/TEACHING ENVIRONMENT	9
SHARED PRIORITIES FOR TEACHERS	9
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR STUDENTS?	10
CORE COURSE: A PROPOSED OUTLINE	12
THE FIRST PART	13
THE SECOND PART	14
THE THIRD PART	15
GLOSSARY	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY	18
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	20

INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century comes to a close educators are generally recognizing the profound inadequacy of the profession to meet the growing number of challenges facing the world today. Educational literature is filled with statements as to what is wrong with modern education as well as declarations of what needs to be done.

Seeing the need for change is obviously a step in the right direction, but evidently significant change must occur at a deep fundamental level. Normally we tend to meet educational inadequacies with idealistic calls to foster, for example, more sensitivity, or less intolerance, ignoring the arduous but necessary work of inquiring into the very source of the problem itself.

It is our proposal that the source of the problem lies not only in the ideas that make up the content of our thought but more importantly in the process of thought itself. This does not mean solely the study of abstract theories but rather places a strong emphasis on the individual activity of on-going direct self-exploration on the part of both educators and students. This sustained inquiry moves through all the modes of learning and forms of creative expression.

Inquiring into the structure and content of thought in relation to itself, the body, feelings, perception and the imagination, constitutes the ground of our proposal.

A CURRICULUM PROPOSAL

OVERVIEW

The following is an attempt to express what we see as the core of the curriculum. We have organized the learning around three fundamental notions: inquiry, thinking and creativity. We have created these categories for organizational purposes only; in other words they are not meant to represent any set pedagogical progression. In actual practice we envision them as naturally flowing in and out of each other.

It is essential to state at the very outset that the ideas expressed here are meant to exist in the overall context of self-initiated learning. (pp.9-10) That is, although the content of a course may be established as a formal requirement (e.g. Proficiency Certificate) the direction of the educational experience will originate in the students themselves as far as this is possible. Although we offer a kind of approach which is based upon our experiences and interests as educators, there is in practice very little prescriptive content. What content we do offer at this level is meant to provide provocative starting points and not dogma.

It needs to be stated clearly that the meaning of this approach to education lies in THE ACTIVITY OF LEARNING ITSELF. We regard the nurturing of a life-long process of sustained inquiry coupled with creative development as central to our work.

THE CORE OF THE CURRICULUM

INQUIRY

Traditional education is primarily concerned with the acquisition of knowledge or information, much of which is disconnected and irrelevant to the difficulties and profound challenges that face young people today. Many young people complete their secondary education and are utterly unprepared to make some of the most important decisions of their lives - decisions which include further education, career, marriage and lifestyle. Simply offering more information is not enough.

It is our experience that young people have many unanswered questions about themselves, the world and their place within it. They often feel that they are unable to come to terms with their questions and that there is no time, space, or supportive environment in which they can begin to explore them. We feel that it is essential to provide such an environment. Furthermore these questions might naturally become the starting point for developing an understanding of the dynamic process of inquiry which we feel is fundamental to the art of living.

By inquiry we mean several things. We call one aspect of inquiry discovering the 'right question'. Often our inability to explore something occurs because we do not have the question that points us in the appropriate direction. Another aspect of this inquiry is seeing the importance of staying with the question and uncovering the assumptions behind our mental, emotional and even physical responses.

We are also vitally concerned with the process of inquiry itself, not engaging in it simply to find answers. Very often the thoughts and beliefs that are most important to us are resistant to conscious examination. Being sensitive to and understanding any resistance is part of the ongoing exploration. While the process of inquiry is by its very nature a personal venture, it can also be facilitated within a supportive, collective context.

THINKING

Some progressive educational programs have introduced courses in 'critical thinking'. While these courses acknowledge the importance of scrutinizing various opinions and current events, they by and large fail to actively address more fundamental questions about the nature of consciousness and the activity of thought itself. Central to our approach to education is understanding this activity and its relationship to how we establish, among other things, who we are, where we belong and what we should do. As educators we consider an important focus of inquiry to involve giving sustained attention to not only what we think, the content of our thought, but also to how we think, our own processes of thought and how these things deeply affect our experience of ourselves and the world.

In a general sense thinking is characterized by the activities of memory. We all have particular memories about past instances which we can recall, but memory is also more than this. By formal and informal means a person grows up absorbing various ways of thinking and acting. In this way memory provides us with a hidden infrastructure of ideas and beliefs which directly influences our feelings and actions.

Ordinarily, these patterns of thought and action become fixed and can to a large degree inhibit the freedom necessary for the discovery of new and appropriate ways of living. Awareness of what and how we think can begin to open a student up to alternatives and possibilities previously unknown to him or her in virtually any aspect of life. Such an awareness is seen as necessary to begin to inquire into that which may lie beyond the limitations of thought.

Inquiry into thinking requires paying close attention to our 'default' behavioral responses. As much of our daily life involves interaction with other people, the ways in which thought affects relationship is an important area of learning. Our living closely together necessitates a shared intention to communicate openly. In a supportive atmosphere we can begin to uncover any blocks that restrict rational and effective communication. In seeing the importance of actively learning about relationship we create the opportunity to understand what it means to live and work together intelligently.

CREATIVITY

In education creativity is ordinarily thought of as belonging almost exclusively to the domains of the visual and performing arts. It is not often associated with the fields of mathematics and science, for example. Our understanding of creativity connotes a much broader appreciation. We see creativity as a natural human potential that can be realized in any activity of life. This potential is most commonly impeded by various factors including: an individual's and society's rigidly held opinions and beliefs, traditional methods of learning that emphasize reward and punishment, dependence on

authority and experts – derived from the attribution of great value to fixed knowledge and techniques.

It is important to bring about the conditions necessary for creativity to flower in the student and the educator. Fundamental to this is the exploration of what causes the non-creative in ourselves, the habitual patterns of thinking and acting that can rarely respond adequately to the new and unforeseen challenges that we continuously encounter. This is true in political, economic, social and interpersonal areas.

Inquiring with the intellect is not the only avenue for exploring what it means to be creative. It is our experience that the creative process is to a significant degree a somatic one, one in which the physical body expresses what is known in those portions of the brain that operate non-verbally and that rely upon image and gesture to convey their knowledge. When this kind of knowledge interacts with the conscious intellect, potential for genuine creative expression arises. Kinesthetic, visual and audial activities can reveal many things about our limitations as well as our potentials for learning, problem-solving, expressing and reflecting.

Through skillfully designed creative encounters we can allow ourselves to fully experience the tension, the doubts and uncertainties associated with stepping away from the comfort of our beliefs and opinions. We can begin to see these uncertainties as the starting point from which new and authentic possibilities may arise.

HOW DO WE EDUCATE?

We feel it is important not to lay down any strict methodology but rather to elucidate our priorities as educators. Out of these shared priorities the practical aspects of classroom procedure will naturally emerge. Fundamental to our approach is the ability to create the conditions necessary for optimum learning for both students and educators. Our ideal school aims to provide a context which ensures maximum autonomy for the teacher in the classroom as well as offering the students an environment where they are truly free to learn.

THE LEARNING/TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

Very often by the time students have completed their secondary education they have come to associate learning with stressful, austere and inhospitable conditions. Our experience and research show that it is important to create as far as possible a supportive, stimulating and comfortable learning environment. Learning is seen as a whole body process and if there is undue tension then spontaneous, effective learning is greatly impeded. Learning is also enhanced in an environment where there is ample time and space to probe and explore without extraneous pressures. Leisure is seen as a valid part of educational activity.

SHARED PRIORITIES FOR TEACHERS

As teachers we are involved in the process of inquiry with our students. We see ourselves as helping to facilitate this inquiry by exposing students to a wide variety of carefully chosen provocative material rather than by imposing any specific paradigm. However,

any set course of study will by its very nature have some defining parameters. Within the widest parameters of the course requirements the inquiry is free to go in any appropriate direction. Although teachers provide stimulating material, the students' interests and insights are integral to the direction and content of the coursework. The teacher is active in keeping the discussion and/or activities relevant and focused.

Another function of the teacher is to draw attention to the nature of the connections between ideas during the course of study. This might include the relationship between notions found in distinct disciplines or between opinions expressed during a class or group discussion. In order that the students become more aware of their own learning process they are periodically encouraged to reflect upon the course their learning has taken.

An atmosphere of autonomy in the classroom is incompatible with any encouragement of personal competition or any subtle or overt use of reward or punishment, whether it be for the sake of motivation, control, or for any other reason. Should such behavior arise it is vital that both students and teacher are free to acknowledge it. Perhaps this behavior would provide fertile ground for exploration. Thus we feel the teacher is primarily responsible for the integrity of the learning process and must ensure that it is not jeopardized, especially by his or her own reactions.

It is widely acknowledged in modern education that students learn in a variety of ways. Traditional transmission of information is effective for only a small proportion of learners. Therefore teachers must be aware of the other ways in which material can be presented to students. Teachers will design their courses in order

to fully integrate the visual, auidial and kinesthetic modes, thus ensuring that the specific learning styles of their students are catered for. Classroom practice will include a balance of individual, pair, small group and large group work. We envision flexibility within the organization of the learning/teaching structure to allow space for guest speakers, specialty workshops and field trips.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR STUDENTS?

Rather than talking about student outcomes, such as formal achievements, we prefer to consider that our students upon leaving us will have the potential to enjoy a life-long process of discovery and learning. This is facilitated by seeing how to approach life's challenges intelligently and seeing the ongoing opportunities for creative response that these present. One of these pressing challenges will be to discover what they truly love to do with their lives.

Through engagement in many of the day to day operations of the school, from the academic to the domestic, students prepare themselves for an independent adult life. This could be further enhanced by their being directly involved in a variety of activities within the local community. Throughout these daily activities students will be helped to begin to understand the importance of open communication so necessary for harmonious living and working together.

CORE COURSE: A PROPOSED OUTLINE

As we are concerning ourselves with fundamental inquiry a core course must involve exploration into basic, perennial questions, such as 'What is happiness?' 'What is truth?' We call these questions 'ultimate questions'. Since many students at the post-secondary age are looking seriously at what they truly want to do with their lives, an essential ultimate question would be 'Who am I?' The core course is designed to inquire into this question. Of course, other ultimate questions may arise during this investigation. These questions will offer other possible directions for subsequent inquiry.

Although there are many valid starting points from which to approach ultimate questions, the teacher is responsible for presenting, in whatever appropriate form, proposals based upon what he or she views as insights connected with the topic. These insights are meant to be starting points for sustained inquiry, and although they may involve different levels of abstraction they are meaningful only insofar as they bear directly on the student's experience and daily life. Students are encouraged to present material of this nature during any part of the course.

The core course consists of three parts.

The first part establishes:

- a) the inward direction of inquiry
- b) the reasons for this direction of inquiry
- c) the nature of the process of inquiry itself.

For example, if we take the ultimate question 'Who am I?' the teacher may begin by asking, 'Where does our sense of who we are come from?' The responses to such a question often contain valid points but normally exist without the students being aware of how they have come to hold such views, the assumptions behind them, whether they conflict with other opinions or beliefs they may have, and other things of this nature. In beginning to look into these opinions and beliefs a causal link is established between what we think and our attitudes and behavior. (a)

Going further we can begin to ponder how thought might be structured. The time may be ripe for the teacher to offer a proposal. In light of the question 'Who am I?' the teacher might propose: 'Our sense of ourselves may come primarily from thought, which is basically the response of memory'. Through careful consideration of this proposal and its implications, point (b) is established.

If the direction of inquiry is going towards our thinking then it seems imperative to look into how we can learn about ourselves and our thought. Discussions on self-awareness and experimentation involving this kind of observation can be proposed. The process of self-observation is vital to this type of inquiry and needs to be continually monitored throughout the course. (c)

The second part looks at:

- a) memory and the process of conditioning
- b) the activity of memory and its influence on feelings, the body, perception and imagination
- c) the process of self-identity.

By now students have begun to sense the importance of looking at thought and its influence in their lives as well as in the course of human history. They are now ready to explore in more depth the process of thought as primarily the response of memory. The teacher, having worked intensely with the students, can now tailor his or her proposals and questions to meet the specific interests of the group. As each group will bring its own unique field of interests and working dynamic it is impossible to predict or prescribe exactly what these proposals might be. It is vital that the group explores the major processes by which thought is conditioned and how that conditioning reappears later on. They can explore their own conditioning resulting from biological, socio-cultural and personal sources. (a)

It is also important that students examine the often subtle and far-ranging effects of this activity of memory. Students can begin, for example, to question how memory might be influencing their feelings and perceptions. (b)

They would then find it exciting to return to the original ultimate question 'Who am I?', and view it from a very different and more in-depth perspective. (c)

The third part explores the following observations and questions:

- a) Throughout the ages people have asserted through religion and other means that there is a sacred dimension to existence.
How can we find out about this for ourselves?
- b) In what ways have people attempted to express this dimension creatively?
- c) Where does all of this leave us?

Having looked into the activity of thought and its effects the students should now be well prepared to begin to explore the question 'Who am I?' in relation to the totality of humanity, nature and the cosmos. This means that they should now have the capacity to look objectively at the assumptions prevalent in this field and perhaps address these larger questions in a new spirit of openness. (a)

A very interesting way to approach these questions would be to look at the various creative forms in which people throughout history and around the world have attempted to express something inexpressible. For example, myth, sacred dance, art and drama etc, are rich resources for exploring traditional and non-traditional pathways to the sacred. (b)

In drawing the course to a close it will become evident that any provisional conclusions reached may serve as catalysts for further inquiry. Students will be encouraged to reflect on their movement through the course and on the ways this experience has or has not affected their lives. (c)

GLOSSARY

Even among those of us who are very familiar with words commonly used in our Curriculum Proposal, understandings sometimes occur. In order to minimize the potential for confusion we list here some of the words we feel need to be defined according to the way in which they are used within our text. This is not meant to be a comprehensive glossary, and will be updated as we progress.

auditory/audial

As a learning mode refers to the preference for hearing presentations or talking out problems.

consciousness

Refers to the totality of what a person knows, including mental, bodily and environmental conditions. Not to be confused with awareness, which signifies a certain watchfulness that is able to respond to subtle sensory impressions.

course description

A skeletal overview of the content of the course of teaching/learning, with proposals as to possible methodology.

curriculum

The organization of all the teacher/learning experience which take place under the guidance of teachers in the school (or, if planned, outside the school).

kinesthetic

To do with movement, active, action oriented.

Continued...

matrix

The educational philosophy which underlies the curriculum, creating the unifying factor between staff, students and activities. It should provide the rationale, coherence and integrity of the curriculum, and will be constantly under review.

paradigm

A model representing the key interrelationships between specific concepts or between those within one dynamic concept.

somatic

Pertaining to the physical body.

syllabus

A sequenced list of topics, language items and/or activities to be engaged in during the teaching/learning process. Course books and texts are included.

thought

The active response of memory in all aspects of life including the production, communication, innovation and application of knowledge. Thought signifies not only the content of the intellect but also an individual's emotions, feeling, perception, body chemistry and imagination.

visual

As a learning mode refers to the preference for visualizing information through pictures or words.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is intended to provide a general overview of the books and articles that have helped shape the ideas expressed in this curriculum.

The educational writings of philosopher J. Krishnamurti have been seminal in the development of our educational approach. In particular, EDUCATION AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE; THIS MATTER OF CULTURE; LETTERS TO THE SCHOOLS; THE IMPOSSIBLE QUESTION.

The philosopher/physicist Professor David Bohm, whose life and work explored the nature of thought and its relationship to social and environmental problems, has been greatly influential. Essential works include: THOUGHT AS A SYSTEM; CHANGING CONSCIOUSNESS (with Mark Edwards); SCIENCE, ORDER AND CREATIVITY (with David Peat); WHOLENESS AND THE IMPLICATE ORDER; THE ENDING OF TIME (with J. Krishnamurti).

The authors acknowledge the influence of the idea expressed and put into practice by educational pioneers such as Dewey, Montessori and Steiner. In the contemporary context, we acknowledge the work and writings of: Peter Abbs (University of Sussex); Walter Lipman, PHILOSOPHY IN THE CLASSROOM; Colin Rose, ACCELERATED LEARNING; Steven C. Clem and Z. Vance Wilson (National Association of Independent Schools, USA); Howard Gardner (Harvard University), FRAMES OF MIND : THE THEORY OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES.

Many artists, psychologists and philosophers have written on the phenomenon of creativity. We have found the following particularly formative: Betty Edwards, DRAWING ON THE ARTIST WITHIN and DRAWING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE BRAIN; Rollo May, THE COURAGE TO CREATE; Marion Milner, ON NOT BEING ABLE TO PAINT; Jean Houston, THE POSSIBLE HUMAN; Robert McKim (Stanford University), EXPERIENCES IN VISUAL THINKING.

Continued...

Writers in the general scientific category who have provided original and provocative input include: Colin Blakemore, *THE MIND MACHINE*; Jacob Bronowski, *THE ORIGINS OF KNOWLEDGE AND IMAGINATION*; Marvin Minsky (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), *THE SOCIETY OF MIND*; Bill McKibben, *THE END OF NATURE*.

In the field of anthropology two authors stand out. The first is Edward Hall, *BEYOND CULTURE, THE SILENT LANGUAGE*. The second is Jean Liedloff, *THE CONTINUUM CONCEPT*. In the related field of sociobiology two particular works have been especially informative: Claire Fisher's *THE ANATOMY OF LOVE*, and Jared Diamond's *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD CHIMPANZEE*.

In the world of psychology we must acknowledge the giants Freud and Jung. Especially Jung's *MAN AND HIS SYMBOLS*. In contemporary psychology the work of Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich, *NEW WORLD, NEW MIND*, and Arno Gruen, *THE BETRAYAL OF THE SELF*, contributed to our thinking.

In the arena of cognitive research we are indebted to Jerome Bruner (Harvard University), John Berger, *WAYS OF SEEING*, and Ernest H. Gombrich, *ART AND ILLUSION*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The preparation and publishing of this paper was proposed by, and made possible thanks to the generous support of, the AG Educational Trust, Buchillon, Switzerland.

Paul Herder
Louisa Simons
April 1993
Buchillon
Switzerland