# Which Way for Learning?

Part 1: The Problem of Learning Systems, Home-based Education and Democracy. by Roland Meighan

#### Introduction

I read a survey a few weeks back on happiness at work. And the largest percentage of people who record happiness in their jobs are hairdressers. But the figure that took my eye was for schoolteachers. Only eight percent of teachers say that are happy in their work and find it enjoyable, fulfilling and satisfying. That leaves ninety-two percent who do not. If teachers are working in a learning system which makes them unhappy it is not likely to be very learner friendly. Then it crossed my mind that I rarely come across home educating families who are unhappy in what they are doing, not least because they devise a learner-friendly learning situation. Indeed, from time to time, I talk to youngsters who say things to their parents like 'I can honestly say that since I've been out of school for a year, life is now worth living'.

But happiness is sometimes frowned upon. People say that life cannot be all happiness. You need to toughen up! Get in there and work hard and take the knocks! But there is another survey that goes under the heading of 'well-being'. Well-being is probably a better term because it generates the feeling that,

generally speaking, smooth, your life is is heading in a positive generated in the ranks of the responses to happy all the time is

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taking the roughs with the worthwhile and the whole thing direction. 'Well-being' is certainly of home-based educators. So one people who say you cannot be that you *can* have well-being.

### Learning Systems.

Now I suggest you probably know more about learning systems than you think. Here is a starter list: playgroups, nursery, infants, junior, secondary school, further education college, traditional universities, the Open University, the University of the Third Age, early childhood 'natural learning' at home, home-based education, Scouts, Guides, Woodcraft Folk, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, the Public Library, learning clubs for Judo, Table Tennis, Tennis, Athletics, Dance, etc., Book Circles, learning co-operatives, community learning centres, the Army, Suicide Bombers' Camps, and Terrorist Schools. Then there are schools, varying from the Danish EFTA residential model, to the City as School 'school without walls' approach, to the Summerhill democratic version, to that of the even more democratic Sudbury Valley School, USA, to Canadian Cyberschools, to Virtual Schools to Flexi-colleges.

As a young teacher I was interested in learning systems because, having been not long out of school myself, I thought schooling was a poor learning institution. I thought it might be a good idea to try to do something about it as a teacher. I came across this table:

# 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%

(Learning league table: National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine USA.)

It was an attempt to rank a number of learning systems according to how much the learners remembered afterwards. I found similar work from Canada, from Australia and later, from the Open University information learning technology unit.

Right at the top of the list we see the average retention rate of formal learning is five percent! The immediate retention rate is greater. That tells you something about what is wrong with our mass

schooling system, because it relies a great deal on formal teaching and yet it is only five percent efficient.

Down in the middle of the list there is 'discussion group'. Another interpretation of that is 'purposive conversation'. Discussion groups or purposive conversation is the main stay of home-based education. Is it any good? Well, it gets a fifty percent rating. So home-based educators should be confident in their approach and if they have any arguments with local authorities, they can produce these figures showing purposive conversation with a fifty percent rating and the formal teaching system at only five percent.

The problem was how to classify these learning systems. Existing attempts appeared to be limited in scope, so I devised one that distinguished amongst authoritarian, autonomous, democratic and interactive systems.

The **authoritarian** view can be summed up in the phrase 'you will do it our way - or else we will find something nasty to do to you'. In authoritarian education, in its various forms, 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 all 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.

Another view is the **autonomous** approach to education, which can be summarized by the phrase, 'I did it my way'. This sounds rather self indulgent, so I am proposing that it is actually more about 'I did it my way because I planned it and directed it, but I didn't ignore sources of advice or information or databases or the internet or public libraries, all there to help me make good decisions. In the end, however, I took charge of it. I did it my way.'

The **democratic** view is a variation on that theme: 'we did it our way.' That is, we as a group decided to co-operate together, learn things together; we are all autonomous people but we still think there is some mileage in the idea of co-operating and doing things in learning co-operatives.'

The **interactive** way is 'we did it in a variety of ways'. That sounds like a neat solution - you just pick bits and pieces from all the other three. It is not simple to work out an interactive approach.

We need to start thinking

Perhaps the fundamental *position'*? If there is any default to?

about what we want learning systems to do

question is 'what is the default trouble or query what does it

In the past we have had who have tried to push people in the schooling system the authoritarian approach out

into a bit of participation, a bit of democracy, a bit of autonomy, a bit of self-direction. Fine, they are trying to move an authoritarian system in an interactive direction. What happens when there start to be questions?

What happens is that it defaults rapidly to 'you will do it our way or else'! And we have experienced that in my lifetime. In 1988, in the UK, the introduction of the second National Curriculum and the heavy testing and inspection regime pushed the learning system back a hundred years.

So, the important thing about an interactive system is where it starts. If you use the example of moving from the democratic system and say, 'we will incorporate autonomy and we will use some of the authoritarian forms, we will use teaching by invitation not by imposition'; you can see how you are on safer ground than trying to move from the authoritarian system outwards.

## Lessons from Looking at Learning Systems.

A number of things come out of my study of learning systems. First key lesson: there exists a variety of learning systems and each one produces different results. There are quite different mentalities that emerge from these systems.

We need to start thinking about what we want learning systems to do. Supposing we decide that we need people who:

- Do not do any harm to each other,
- Do no harm to the environment
- Do no harm to oneself,

and maybe even:

• Do a little good in the world if you can.

In order to achieve those things, you need people who are autonomous. You need people who are capable and confident researchers, democratically competent, in order to get anywhere near achieving those aims.

If those are our intentions, and I propose that they should be our intentions, we have to design a learning system that gives us a chance of achieving them. The present system does not. The mass coercive learning system called 'schooling' with endless uninvited teaching backed up by

punishment and produce those kinds of people who, generally coercive mentality. are ready to coerce They may bully with a people around, or being prepared to people.

"the 'final solution' was devised by the Nazis in a conference in which half the people who devised this genocide of supposed threatening groups in society, had PhDs." deterrents is not going to people. It is going to produce speaking, are used to the Being themselves coerced, they others if they get the chance. small 'b', which is just to push bully with a large 'B', which is inflict your power on other

The second key lesson is that how you learn is just as important as what you learn. Learning literacy in a coercive rather than a convivial institution makes you a literate bully! If you want people who are literate and democratic, you are going to have to do it a different way! The finger was put on this by that rather famous statement in a letter from a concentration camp survivor, who said "Reading, writing and arithmetic are important *only* if they serve to make our children more human", because in the concentration camp he had seen some very highly qualified people involved in some very inhumane activities.

In fact, the 'final solution' was devised by the Nazis in a conference in which half the people who devised this genocide of supposed threatening groups in society, had PhDs. Having a PhD does

not guarantee that you are a decent human being. *How* you learn is perhaps *more* important than *what* you learn.

The third key lesson from looking at learning systems is that if you choose to operate a mass coercive standardized learning system; you are going, inevitably, to stifle and limit a lot of achievement because you are trying to control people rather than educate them. Authoritarian systems are high on controlling people and low on educating them.

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