THE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM LEARNING INITIATIVE

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Practical Wisdom- a Holistic approach to learning.

How do we, as human beings, learn? Is there more than one way? The term “holistic learning” is often used to describe Steiner pedagogy. What is meant by this? An implied meaning of the term “holistic” is that it is “healthier”, somehow better for us. If so, how do we know this to be true? If there are a variety of ways to learn and some are more successful, or better for us than others, how do we determine what “successful” or “healthy” learning is: how is learning evidenced?

An inherent theme of the above questions is methodology. The study of the phenomena of holistic learning does include observations of method, learning **how** we learn, but is not confined to these. Questions concerning content, **what** we learn, are important too and nestled neatly within these are questions of timing, **when** do we do what?

Then there is the very interesting question of how environmental contexts influence learning, i.e. **where** learning takes place. The contemporary convention of formal learning being classroom based would suggest that the optimum context for learning is indoors. If high value is placed on there being consistency in the level of demonstrated competency of students’ learning, especially in the formal, scholastic based subjects and a key strategy to achieve these predetermined outcomes is to make learning a highly structured affair where learning behaviours need to be optimised in a controlled environment, then perhaps “learning” is best contained indoors.

If this is so, then it follows that the more the focus of learning is narrowed on its outcome objectives; the more attention needs to be given to the control of those variables which influence learning behaviours connected with those outcomes. Developed, this becomes an increasingly mechanistic picture of learning, one where the disproportionate development of some of the parts has come to dominate, and thus obscure the whole: the antithesis of holistic education. It may well be that a mechanistic method will modify behaviour. In the extreme, institutes of behaviour management (where obedience is the lesson and dehumanisation a necessary method) such as prisons, the armed forces, concentration camps and slavery, provide ample proof of the "success" of this method. But are these examples of the culture of learning holistic education aspires to?

As a beginning teacher the control of the classroom behaviour of students is more often than not the prime focus, a strategy for survival. Establishing patterns of behaviour which embody vital human values such as respect, and cultivating a culture which supports learning, are primary tasks for an educator. However classroom behaviour is just one element of learning behaviour and learning is by no means guaranteed using mechanistic methods. This being the case, if a more holistic approach to education is to be developed, then the prime strategy of context, being indoors, needs to be reconsidered.

Ends, of necessity, have beginnings: to quote an old Maori proverb, "as the sapling is bent, so grows the tree". If we want to have confidence in there being consistency of outcome, especially outcomes which are legitimate and characterised by well-being, then a more holistic view needs must be established: a whole to part, part to whole view. This way, the "story" of learning has

integrity: a considered, balanced, "beginning, middle, end" character. As any experienced teacher knows, although having a student, bodily in the room, is a prerequisite to learning, it is no guarantee that learning will occur be they well behaved or not. One may have the best plans and learning programs in the world, a perfectly controlled environment, quiet and obedient students, but if the student is not engaged then what is it that they are learning? Is it something real, something tangible, and something that will make a positive difference to their lives?

Where does "real" learning occur? Surely it begins within the student: where the student is interested, where they are engaged, where they display a natural curiosity in the world. If theirs is a developing interest; where their love for it, knowledge about it and desire to master the skills associated with it, takes root and grows, then it is a manifest reality: it has a legitimate existence. Holistic learning is essentially a human event. The relationships of learning we have with the young human beings who stand before us, our understanding of **who** these people are and our connection with them is the foundation of our work.

To summarise so far; to build a living picture of the phenomena of holistic learning, not only does **how** and **what**, **when** and **where** need to be considered but so too **why** and **who**. In reverse order these give a ready checklist of the questions that need to be considered and answered when constructing a **holistic learning approach to learning.**

I would like to explore the term practical wisdom in light of the above. The etymology of these words is interesting; “fit for action” and “the property of being wise, a skilful seer”. By way of analogous illustration I would like to share three meetings I recently had on a trip to Thailand, which flesh-out these definitions.

The first was in a craft village where two of the craftswomen involved, took me through the process of creating an umbrella from bamboo and paper. The quite confidence, the effortless skill with which they worked was both breath-taking and deceiving in its apparent simplicity. I watched one craftswomen shape the radial umbrella spokes using a long-handled, razor-sharp knife. With two or three strokes of the knife she had shaped the spoke and with a deft flick, affected a joint split through the spoke at its narrowest edge (approx. 5 mm thick). She then drilled a hole through a bundle of these using a push-pull drill, with just two strokes. She allowed me to try out this process. It was not as simple as it looked! All of the above she did sitting cross-legged on a raised platform. This allowed her to use her whole body as needed ; her thigh, forearm, palm, fingers and thumb to work the knife and her toes to hold and steady the spoke; her hip, forearm and hands to hold and operate the drill. Clean smooth movements, no more, no less than what was required to affect the task. It took her, including the time to show me how to use the drill, about 5 minutes to shape, split and drill the set of spokes needed to make one umbrella.: such nimble cleverness!

The second meeting was with Chatchawan Thongdeelert. He is the Founder and Director of the Lanna Wisdom School located in the northern, cultural centre of Thailand, Chaingmai. The Lanna are the indigenous people of this region, renown throughout Thailand for their proud traditions as craftspeople. The school he has created ensures the continuance of these craft traditions, acting

as a process of cultural renewal, by connecting the young students of Chaingmai, with local master craftspeople. Students in the state schools in Chaingmai get to work alongside master craftspeople of a comprehensive range of local craft traditions, in a series of structured programs. In recent years these relationships have blossomed into apprenticeship schemes.

His explanation of how they are achieving cultural renewal and the task of the teacher in this process was very interesting. [Here I quote from notes of my conversation with him].

"There is an essential unity of the spiritual life of the school (Buddhist) and the developed understanding of our intimate connection with all living things; the birds, animals, plants and the raw elements of our world, and the way we use them in our work. How we play music, sing, and move as we weave, beat, carve etc. is infused with this understanding of the spiritual foundation of life: it transforms the work done.

The role of the teacher and the person of the teacher are to be upheld and respected when the teacher is understood to be the repository of the skills and conduit of the tradition of the craft they are imbued with. Each generation "hands it on" or "passes it forward" to ensure not only the continuance of the tradition of the skill but also the opportunity for its refinement and development in the lines of succeeding generations. If the skills are just copied the tradition becomes mechanistic. The skill tradition requires the living reality of the life of the person to be nurtured, grow and develop as a tradition of skill and the person needs the discipline of the craft tradition to be nurtured, grow and develop as a person.

It is necessary now, to document these skills as a kind of "seed bank". But "how" is vital. As an example here is an illustrated booklet of the story of the Hen and the Chickens (written in both

Thai and English). It is the story of the origins of constellation of Pleiades. The story is "told" as song and dance and as performance story-telling this needs to be recorded too."

The third meeting was with a blacksmith in a small village in Kanchanaburi district, in the South –west of Thailand. I was taken there by my host to use his workshop facilities to make equipment for the Pizza oven my host and I were constructing for his wedding. My meeting of this venerable master craftsman poignantly brought home to me the pathos many of these old craftsmen are now experiencing. It was such a privilege to work together, using in common our understanding of our craft to "converse". When we left my host informed me that the frail, serene, gentle man I had just met had no one to pass the tradition of his skills onto. He had had a son, whom he had trained, but he had died and there was no one else who was interested in learning his craft.

The Outdoor Classroom is a context and a methodology to develop practical wisdom using a holistic approach. It is founded on the Anthroposophical understanding of child development and how a human being is composed.

Therefore

- A working understanding of the 3 and 4-fold pictures of the human being,
- The relationship of sympathy / antipathy and how memory is formed and what its embodiment looks like
- The patterning of curricula based on the recapitulation of the development of human spiritual evolution / consciousness
- The patterning of curricula based on the learning / development generic to each subject (in this case technology)
- How to link curricula with child development

Being foundational the above form some of the conceptual ground upon which the Outdoor Classroom Learning Initiative is based, as well as the beginning shoots pathways of its development. These are not necessarily easy concepts to grasp, they grow with time. However, it seems to me, that the impacted nature of problems associated with contemporary educational method is such that a new way of perceiving, thinking and acting is required and the experience of a struggle is evidence of new ground being won.

By way of picture-building, consider the following as a seed concept of the full scope of the Outdoor Classroom;

> Imagine a circle: the round of the year, the unity of all things, form and formlessness, all in one.
>
> At the base of the circle let us imagine the Earth, on which we stand, the Mother of all things, the realm of growth and plenty: GARDENING.
>
> Above, in the human realm, we have the deeply imbued wisdom, encoded as muscular memory, of TRADITIONAL CRAFTS.
>
> To the left, gathered-in, is the meeting of Gardens and Craft: COOKING and the place of fire where food, storytelling, songs and chants emerge.
>
> To the right, reaching-out is the realm of adventure where the skills that travel with us have necessary realism as BUSH CRAFT in the wilderness of new discovery.

There is also the literal ground on which we stand, the “locus genii” that needs to be lived into and connected with, the organic reality of this work. Here is where the real work begins and how one goes about doing this; identifying resources, useful orientation processes etc. and how these perceptions / experiences are developed into craft- based learning programs which are sustainable and location-based is the vital and necessary first step in developing the Outdoor Classroom.

The patterning of curricula based on the learning / development generic to each subject (in our case technology)

Given the contemporary fixation on Literacy and Numeracy as being the prime skills to be learned at school and the legal necessity that the plotted achievement by students of these skills, as defined by the set of national standards, be publically reported, it is worthwhile examining to see how robust a definition of "core skills" they are.

The three "R's" (Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic) are popularly stated as the core work of teachers. In contemporary parlance the title has been condensed even further becoming "Literacy" and "Numeracy".

Where does technology fit into this picture? Being literate and numerate is of course vital and are skills fundamentally connected to our identity as human beings. However, as subjects, when stated in isolation like this, they seem to hold a ranking of importance which places them superior to all else. If this is what schooling is all about and it just so happens that you struggle acquiring these skills (and one could list a multitude of "conditions" and "special needs" that evidence the growing number of students for whom this is the case) and you are measured as "failing" in your attempt; then what do you do?

It is therefore important to provide some context to this claim (the 3r's as being the core work) so that the potential for learning is not hampered or distorted by such arbitrary value judgements. You may find the following quote of interest...

"Bruce Archer, a professor at the Royal College of Art, had an old great-aunt, who in the early nineteenth century, first wrote the catchy educational phrase that has come to be known as the three R's (reading, writing and 'rithmetic). This, his aunt maintained, was a misquotation of an earlier aphorism: "reading

(and writing), reckoning (and figuring), and wroughting (and wrighting)." A young person's experience with wroughting, or blacksmithing, was considered to be an important foundation in the development of thinking." [p.159 "Will-Developed Intelligence" by David Mitchell & Patricia Livingston. 1999]

There is a certain irony in the fact that literacy and numeracy, the use of symbols (script and numerals) to record, calculate and convey meaning is, in fact, a primary technology. When we learn to read and write and figure we are, indeed, replicating a core technology. In his Rhone-Poulenc Science prise-winning book "guns, germs and steel", Jared Diamond (chapter 12, "Blueprints and Borrowed Letters" p 195, 295) argues this case convincingly.

The etymology of "Technology"= "the systematic treating of ...an art, craft or technique". This being the case then most of schooling is "technology" based. Simply put, it is "the way we go about doing something".

But there is another condition which can intrude, an associative meaning of technique we need be wary of: "tedium".

Systematic treatment is an essential part of mastering a technique or skill. However, repetition devoid of meaning is tedium. The fusion of practise and meaning is more readily established when the process of learning approximates the generic sequence of development, the pathway, by which that technique or skill came into being. In my experience, students become "hooked" by this approach: it's like solving a mystery or entering into a grand story (which of course it is). It's very hard to "put down".

Under these circumstances learning isn't just copying something for it to be regurgitated. It follows the more organic pathway (think food); it is assimilated, digested, reconstituted (made one's own), the unnecessary or harmful eliminated: the good maintained, practised and practised to the point of reflex and then it is worthy of reproduction.

We could discuss how reading and writing are developed in Steiner Schools (actually, to be precise, writing and reading: we come at it through the will) could be taught this way and the importance of storytelling in the development of imagination and memory, but let's choose something else.

One of the key technologies associated with blacksmithing, is fire lighting: almost a forgotten art these days. To prepare high school students for fully fledged (at full flight) forge work, I begin with the 9 year olds, burning runes and Ogham alphabet forms, with a red-hot iron into shakes of wood (literacy and craft combined). This first taste is followed up in the next year with students making and using a fire-bow (fire by friction) and flint and steel (fire by spark) to create a glowing coal, discovering what materials perpetuate smouldering (in-depth examination of fungi and plants, thus making new and meaningful connections with their botany studies introduced that year), collecting tinder and making storage units to keep it dry, practising how to blow a fire into being and build it up with twigs etc. They also learn how to make a pit-forge and make charcoal. The following year, casting (usually arrow-heads) and extending into the next year, crushing copper ore and smelting it in the pit forge. There is then a year with a focus on the Fine Arts, including an environmental sculpture unit: learning to recompose the familiar in new and creative ways. The following year they learn the techniques of artistically shaping copper and finally, the year after that, the coal forge!

Each of these activities is linked with the sequence of main lessons in each of these classes and the developmental "gesture" for that age. As with a fractal mandible, the part and the whole are expressions of each other.

Warm regards

John Lawry – New Zealand

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Lawry:

Born 31.5.1950, in Auckland, New Zealand, a fifth generation South Pacific Celt (Cornish, Scottish and Irish), my life experience working as an artist / craftsman and educator are about equal; circa 20 years a-piece.

My formative years were occupied either by me helping my father (an architect) and grandfather(a carpenter) build our house, nurtured by my mother and grandmother's attentive care and their comprehensive self-sufficient skills (gardening, cooking, sewing, knitting, etc.) by which they made our house a home or playing in the bush where was born my life-long love of bush-craft. The rich colours of music-making and story-telling inter-weave these memories.

I trained and qualified as a teacher but chose to take a year in solitary retreat to focus on sculpture, poetry and Zen practise. Rather than immediately returning to teaching, the following years were occupied learning and practising craft. The craftspeople and media I worked alongside with were; leather, wood, pottery, weaving, basketry, paper-making and book-binding and many others. I also conducted adult-education classes including providing a master-craftsman studio experience in leatherwork for Technical College students.

Marriage and growing children provided the impetus to redirect and gain employment as a design consultant. I was subsequently employed as the warehouse and product manager for a company specializing in knitting yarns. I was fortunate enough to be able to transition from this job back into full-time teaching beginning with a two-year in-depth, in-service training as a Steiner teacher (under Carl Hoffman's mentorship).

I was a general class teacher for 16 years, taking one group of students from class1-7 (at Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School), and then (at Michael Park Steiner School) another three through the middle school. I also taught High School Fine Arts and Hard Materials Technology (woodwork, wrought-iron, copper, leatherwork and clay) during this time.

Five years ago a confluence of my life-long interest and engagement in craft and education occurred when, inspired by Bernard Graves, I began the process of establishing and developing the Outdoor Classroom program at Michael Park. This journey has included establishing comprehensive curriculum gardens, delivering and developing a craft / experiential skills based curriculum for classes 1-7 (and their integration into High School Technology programs), an intensive week-long, end of year Master class Craft program for the junior high school, establishing O.C. and Bush Craft teacher training courses at A.U.T (Auckland University of Technology) and Taruna (Anthroposophical Teacher Training), and consulting and developing programs with various interest groups and schools; Youth Horizons (who work with "Conduct Disorder" students), various home-schooling communities, permaculture initiatives such as Awhi Farm and Wildwood Farm, and, overseas, Orana Steiner School, Canberra, Australia. I have presented workshops and papers on the Outdoor Classroom at each Steiner Teacher Conference and Anthroposophical Conference for the last four years. I have also presented papers and workshops at the Natural Phenomena Conference 2014, the IDEC 2015.

John Lawry

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