

1987 - ESSAY - LEARNING: THE CENTRAL DYNAMIC OF A HUMAN - BEING by David Boulton

Why do we have such a limited conception of learning? Why is it not strikingly obvious to each of us that as human beings we are first and foremost learners? That we learned to walk, talk, think, know, relate to ourselves and to others? That consciously and unconsciously, everything about ourselves is either learned or regulated by learning?

Why don't we learn about the significance of learning in our lives? That when knowing isn't whole, nothing is as appropriate, intelligent or as minimally presumptuous as learning? That while we may not learn qualities like love, compassion, curiosity and intelligence, learning can inhibit them? That our innate capacities for learning are both *extended and constrained* by what and how we learn. That what we call "conditioning" is also learning - learning which acts to limit ongoing learning. And perhaps most importantly, **that not only do "I" learn, but that most of "I" is learned?**

Why isn't learning about ourselves - how we learn and have learned to be - as important as learning to do things in the world? That the way we learned emotions as children affects the way we breathe as adults? That the way we learned to walk and balance ourselves in gravity can affect how our feet tire, our backs hurt and our heads ache? That our conceptual dexterities can be constrained by how words were introduced to us? That the ways we learn to cope with fear and violence as children significantly affects the quality of our relationships throughout life? And just to be practical, that the future of our occupations are going to be more dependent on how well we can continue to learn than on anything we learned in the past? And.... and...???

Obviously, for each of us as human beings, the significance of learning is nothing short of awesome.

Yet, why is it not obvious to us as parents, teachers, business or social leaders that as stewards of individual development and social growth *we must* understand learning's deeper and broader significances? Why is it not CLEAR that understanding learning is not the same thing as understanding "what works" in instructing? **That learning is a living, dynamic, now-time process occurring within and significantly shaping our conscious and unconscious movements of attention?** That instructing is a method of structuring experiences, based on a statistical-average model that may or may not meaningfully engage any actual, individual, human being? That the difference between learning and instructing can unintentionally cause a child to learn not to learn - can cause deep insecurities and can undermine self esteem? **That facilitating learning is, I would argue, the sacred trust?**

What will the world be like in 15 years? What will our children need to know? What particular knowledge will be more important to them than an awakened capacity for learning? A capacity to learn whatever they need as they need it? What qualities of person will the businesses of the future need? It used to be, in slow changing environments, that the ideal situation for a business was to hire people who already *knew how to do the job*. As change becomes less predictable and less manageable - as required job competencies become less definable - isn't it obvious that businesses will need people who *can learn with the job*?

In our ever more complex world, what form of organizations can prosper amidst the rate of change? Innovative advantages are only as good as they are relevant today. Survival and prosperity grow from making right decisions today - yesterday's lethargic corporations are rapidly going extinct. Already many major companies are on their way to becoming "learning communities". They are developing learning-oriented relationships with customers, stockholders, management and employees. They have come to realize that if there is nothing to hide and fair value is being exchanged, then there is no better basis for relationships than mutual learning? Companies are learning that marketing is either facilitating learning or it's manipulating a buying behavior. And, that the latter is ultimately unhealthy to the real value exchange from which legitimate business can operate and sustain itself. **From the perspective of healthy business, the best employee is a learner and the best customer is a learner.**

And what of foundations, institutions, governments and social movements? Are they really any different? Unless their intent is to manipulate people with dogma, what is more important to their missions than learning

about facilitating social learning? What is an elected official, but an elected social learner? Isn't it their jobs to find out what is really going on and what can be done to enhance individual and social quality of life? What school can insure that their curriculum will prepare tomorrow's leaders for the swiftness of the ever-new complexities they will face daily? How can someone who was once an attorney or business person and is now newly elected to office come to understand the root causes of child abuse, welfare dependency, the ecological implications of factory X at location Y or the sweeping changes occurring in international relations? ***The most important characteristic of effective leaders is their ability to be active learners.***

And what of our myriad social problems - our collective insensitivities? Spend time with any child and you can't help but see how bright and sensitive he or she is. **Insensitivity is learned**. No one really believes there is a "gene" for discrimination (racial, gender, economic or national), such behaviors are clearly learned. How do we deal with the social implications of such behavior? In the past, our approach has been to develop a curriculum to deal with them. Develop anti-discrimination curriculums. Develop ecological curriculums and so on. But what if, rather than trying to use "strategic content instruction", we come to see that the root of such biases is a closed mind? Someone not open to learning. What if we turn it all inside-out and steward the development of people who are learners? What if we explicitly develop, as our first educational objective, the individual learning of being open to and sensitive to learning?

As learning's centrality to individual human life and social well being becomes more obvious, the questions asked here begin to do their work - they begin to shed light on the *obstacles to learning that we have learned*. The reason I propose these questions is that I feel understanding the obstacles to learning, in individuals and in organizations, is critical to the development of a learning-oriented society - the only kind of society that can be healthy amidst change. The only kind of society that can really be fair and democratic.

In its simplest form what I am driving at is this the past has been oriented towards placing value on what people know - the future will place value on people who can learn. I find the implications of this stunning, for the paradigm shift from **knower to learner** is both "practically" appropriate and deeply "profound". Moreover, it is simple: We are learners - Learning makes us who we are.

Let me now turn the tone of this article from one of inquiring into learning's significance to one of contrasting a sample of the Copernican-like differences between a "knower" based vs. "learner" based:

KNOWER

- * Learning is something kids do in school.
- * Teachers know and teach and students learn.
- * The goal of education is a knower with a particular corpus of knowledge, a particular range of skills and a particular way of behaving.
- * Learning is a process used to acquire knowledge, facts, skills and experience.
- * Remembering information and patterns in knowledge leads to passing examinations.
- * Relevancy is an external association in information and knowledge .
- * Uncertainty is a sign of insufficiency and causes dis-comfort.

LEARNER

- * Learning is something we all do every instant of our lives.
- * Facilitators of learning learn with and, at the same time, about learners.
- * The goal of education is a learner who understands how to relate to and learn from knowledge, other human beings and his or her self.
- * Knowledge, facts, skills and experience are used to enrich, extend and exercise our capacities for learning.
- * Realizing the relationships among meanings (their co-implications) in/forms the basis for "transference" in learning (the essence of mastery).
- * Relevancy is the process of meanings "re-implicating" into the flow of an *individual's* attention.
- * Self-honesty about uncertainty is a key to developing "critical thinking". Uncertainty is illuminative and leads to deeper understandings and insights.

The list could go on and on. **A learning orientation values provisionality and openness because learning can include knowledge but is not limited to the current version of it.** It not only values "what we know," it values learning "how we know." It has profound implications for our mental health for rather than rigidly identifying ourselves: "I am", we can have the attitude, "I learned....." and, "if it doesn't work for me now, I can learn to be otherwise." And again, it is so utterly practical - so appropriate an orientation to whatever is happening in our lives.

The term "educational crisis" is now firmly rooted in our national vocabulary. From presidential speeches to the daily news, the problems of education are being discussed and debated. But the issue underlying the issues is not education, it is learning. How we view the role of learning in human experience, in personal growth and development, in the family, on the job, in society and in the world is the real issue. For me, the real debate, playing itself out underneath the "crisis," is whether we as a people can learn and internalize a learning-orientation. If this crisis can cause us to re-orient ourselves to the realities of learning's significance, it will have fulfilled its real promise.

Learning is the meta-trend of our future.