Learning is different from Being Taught: Teaching is actually 'guiding' someone towards their own particular Learning: A short essay.

I was once a secondary school teacher and I was also involved – at the same time - with 'Education Otherwise' – an organization supporting people who wanted to educate their children at home. The title of one of its first publications was: '*The Only Interruption in My Education Was When I Went to School".* For some reason – probably slightly too radical for most people – I really liked that statement, even though I had 'trained' as a teacher (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education)!

Personal Aside:

In the early 1970s, my wide and I were both school-teachers and also strong advocates for 'progressive education' – having (both) 'suffered' from inadequate (though very different) educational backgrounds. We therefore wanted our first child to go to Summerhill School – in Leiston, Suffolk: set up by a 'radical' *'Dominie' [Scottish School Teacher]*, A.S. Neill, whose school was considered as one of the most 'progressive' schools in the UK, if not the world, from the 1920's onwards.

We actually managed to move from a secure base in Newcastle to Leiston in order to send our him to **Summerhill School**, as I had somehow 'managed' to get a teaching job in the local comprehensive school (even though I was still in my probationary year as a teacher). So we sold our newly-bought and decorated terraced town-house in 'trendy' Jesmond, in order to move to a semi-detached house in a rural backwater in Suffolk.

However, it just didn't work out – for him – as he was the only boy in a class of predominantly 5-6 year-old girls and all that **he** wanted to do was to play with the other boys (who all happened to be 7-8 year-olds, and who didn't want to play with him). So, he came back each day from this 'ideal' school, frustrated and angry – every single day. It just didn't work: and so we eventually "de-schooled' him from this most liberal school in the country (if not the world) and joined 'Education Otherwise'.

So, what is Education?

Learning can happen anywhere, at any time, in any way, and from anybody, and also in many different forms: for example, a child 'learns' not to touch 'hot' objects, usually 'not from its

mother's instruction, *"Don't Touch!",* but from the actual experience of touching something that is hot: he or she then associates the concept of 'hot' with the experience of 'pain': *Ouch!*

Obviously, experience itself is not enough: you don't allow children to get hit by a car in order to teach them to look both ways when crossing a road: you would need to stimulate their imagination sufficiently as to the consequences of being hit by a car, so that they 'get it'. The same applies when 'teaching' them about the dangers of sticking a knitting needle into an electric socket: (electric sockets should – of course – be blocked in any household with young children as a safety precaution): but then – how do they actually learn?

Children are naturally incredibly inquisitive and will learn something (anything) all the time – whether you like it or not; whether it is positive or negative: they just learn – all the time: what works and what doesn't. They will learn what you don't want them to learn (perhaps that adults are fallible, or they argue), as well as the things that you want them to learn – reading, writing, manners, safety, etc. They are like educational sponges, or even whirlpools, or even black holes as they suck in everything! They will learn; they have to learn; they are biologically, psychologically 'programmed' to learn – from what ever is around them; positive or negative; good or bad; necessary or irrelevant; 'educational' or otherwise!

So ... and this is the point that I am trying to make ... the essence of 'teaching' a child is to find a way to 'guide' their learning – in a way that is 'appropriate' for the child. You may know everything there is to know about the particular 'subject' – be it Maths, Geography, Economics, Food Hygiene, or Psychology; but – unless you know something about the 'subject' (the person that you have to teach) – then your knowledge is purely academic and potentially useless.

In order to 'teach' something to someone, you have to: **(a)** connect with the 'subject' – the person – in order to help them to learn anything about the 'subject' – the knowledge; and then (and only then) **(b)** find a way to interest the 'subject [the pupil] in the 'subject' [the topic]. You need to be able to interest them and to help them to – actually – **want to learn** [despite the split infinitive] the intricacies of grammar, mathematics, economics, physics, or whatever. If you can do that, then they will probably outstrip you of your knowledge and you may end up having to learn from them! That is education!

So, how do children and adolescents actually learn? What is it that you want them to learn? What do they need to learn? How can they learn? These are the 'real' questions.

This last question is most important: if a child is absorbed in something (even a TV programme or a computer game), then this is not the right time for them to 'learn' (or to be

taught) – say – quadratic equations. As a teacher, you really have to – you can only – find a way to stimulate the child's natural, built-in inquisitorial instinct: because their basic survival instinct is to 'learn'. If they don't learn – anything – then they won't survive. They know that instinctively. So, what are the factors in their environment that are impinging on this survival technique?

There is an old maxim: *"You can give a man a fish; or you can teach him how to fish"*. The latter option is – obviously – more desirable, as well as being sustainable: but you also have to get the person interested in fishing. If the 'person' involved is more orientated to discovering how to 'survive' in the school system of [say] Delhi, or on the streets of (say) Minnesota, then 'fishing' is – really and truly – of no great interest or usefulness. "Street-Cred"; or how to make a 'buck' or rupee; or knife fighting; or (preferably) a self-defence martial art (like Aikido); may be of greater interest – because of its immediate usefulness: quadratic equations, or French verbs, or the kings and queens of England, just don't "cut the mustard". What do they *need* to learn – right now? Once you can 'get' this, then you can start to teach (or guide) them towards what they might need to learn, and then towards what you might 'think' that they need to know.

And – once that person's interest is captured – then anything is possible – as long as the person involved can connect with it- and as long as you can stay connected with the person. If they cannot 'connect' with your 'subject', then you don't stand a chance as a teacher: and if you cannot 'connect' with them, then you might as well save your skills and expertise (as well as your breath). Your job – as a teacher – is to connect with **your** pupils. If you can't, then you are an irrelevance in their lives, amongst many others. OIf you can … then anything is possible.

Their interest can (only) be 'triggered' – often by presenting them with a 'paradox', or a 'conundrum', or a problem that they cannot solve, or because of an incentive they really want. But this 'problem' needs to be something that really interests them: and so, you have to 'learn' some thing(s) about the 'pupil', before you can become their 'teacher'. As a potter, you have to work with the raw clay that is on the wheel; as a carpenter, you have to work 'with' the grain of the wood, not against it. As a teacher, you have to 'capture' their interest.

Teaching is an Art, or a Craft – for some, it is a Vocation: otherwise, it is a form of indoctrination. Unfortunately, more and more, this latter definition is paramount. *"Society 'dictates' that 'every child' should be able to …".* You are – in essence – 'force-feeding' the pupil with what 'Others' dictate the child 'should' learn: so you will end up with *pâté-de-foie-gras*: – a delicable dish, but at what cost?

The child's interest can only be 'captured'; otherwise it can be suppressed sufficiently so that they are not interested in 'learning' anything (except perhaps how to get to the next level of the computer game, or how to get the best out of the 'Benefit System', or what they can do to make you shut up 'bugging them'). However, it can also be stimulated by following their own lines of enquiry: *"You say that you like cars! Do you know how they actually work?"*

The best teacher is the teacher (or guide) that leads from behind: *"There is something that might interest you over 'There'; or there is 'This' and 'That' and 'The Other' that might benefit you at some point in time 'here'."*

The 'pupil' will then choose to learn, and the job of the 'teacher' is then to keep – at least one step – ahead of the pupil, until the point in time when the 'pupil' overtakes the 'teacher' and the roles can then become reversed: now that is 'Education'!

Having once been a school teacher, I later became a psychotherapist and counsellor: the roles are not completely different: psychotherapy and counselling are a form of emotional (re-)education. As a member of these latter professions, I discovered that most of the (patient/client) people's problems are … not because they are deficient in any way … but because they have become overwhelmed and have lost touch with their natural abilities to 'cope'. They are not 'bad' or 'wrong'; but 'bad' or 'wrong' things have happened to them: they have become overwhelmed; they don't know what to do.

The first and most important thing I can say is that: *"There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Bad things have happened to you, or around you. You just need to (re-)find, 'What Works For You'."*

This affirmation is very similar to (not unlike) the 'teacher's' affirmation, *"What interests you? Let's start there."* Let us – please – as teachers, step back. Let us – please – as teachers, say – *"What interests you?' 'What do you want to learn?" "How can I help you?"*

If we start from this position, then we stand a real chance of actually being able to help – and educate – others.