

Introduction

*E*ducation is not the filling of a bucket but the starting of a fire.

William Butler Yeats

Making Schooling Relevant

Life in the 21st century is being defined - and will continue to be defined - by rapid, pervasive change and increasing interconnectedness. This globalisation is taking us to new opportunities - it is creating a new world - and at the same time old worlds are being left behind; depersonalisation and a loss of the interpersonal are being experienced simultaneously. Because of this globalisation, the relevance of the traditional school's function and its effectiveness is diminishing. In a global society, educators no longer have a monopoly on the transfer of information.

We know that schools twenty years from now cannot resemble the schools of today and still expect to be relevant. Today's schools too often try to relate to a world that no longer exists. Schools have no choice but to change. Change is demanded in our understanding of what it means to be a teacher and a student. Change is demanded in our understanding of what learning might become and in our thinking about what education is needed. Change is demanded in how we define ourselves in a global context. Finally, change is required in the way we identify and, therefore, treat each other.

In this book we present an approach that helps educators to recontextualise education ecologically, i.e., *relating to the interrelationships of organisms and their environment* (*Encarta World English Dictionary*). The *RelationalLearning* model presented here will change the way we interact with each other in classrooms and schools. In ecological terms, the way we interact with each other determines what can be learnt and how it can be learnt. A sustainable human ecology in 21st century schools recontextualises education. We encourage educators to break out of the old dichotomy of content vs. process. It is not only a matter of what is taught, or how it is taught, but the relationship in which learning occurs. The new context of globalisation requires a re-balancing of human ecology as an antidote to the isolation and depersonalisation of both the global context and the current thrust of standards and testing and performance - objectified goals. Education must, again, place an emphasis

on the personal and the relational. We believe *RelationaLearning* offers an educational approach that brings the many functions of education back into balance.

Rethinking the Context of Teaching and Learning

Schools too often are tedious and irrelevant to what students already know. Students have an intelligence that is not being engaged by what they're being offered. This intelligence is of mind, body and spirit.

Each generation carries a new and a different knowing. Each generation also carries forward cultural, traditional and religious knowledge. Each generation lives within an ever more expansive and unique confluence of time and events. Each generation is like another river flowing into the ocean of globalisation. Our challenge as educators is to help the young see, define and articulate what their generation carries - what their generation's role is to become.

Today's youth comprise the most consciously global generation. They are born with a global perspective. The forces that have made this possible include TV, music videos (MTV) and the Internet. At a recent conference, we were in conversation with a Navajo educator who was describing her work in her community to preserve Navajo culture. She stated that for 500 years the Navajo have endured every hardship including relocation to uninhabitable lands, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism. These things have been endured, but she stated that MTV is killing the culture. Many Navajo youth want to identify with the global youth culture. This is characteristic of young people today worldwide. They dress the same, listen to the same music, see the same movies.

This generation is witnessing the revolution of cyberspace. Reality as we have known it is changing and altering so quickly that it is impossible to predict what middle years students today will consider relevant even ten years from now. Children born in 2015 can expect to live 125 years. Children born in 2100 can expect to live 200 years. The world population is predicted to reach 12 billion by 2050. Massive social, ecological, spiritual and intellectual challenges are arising and intensifying. In the face of such immense and unknowable changes and outcomes, everything in education will have to be redefined, reevaluated and reconsidered.

A teacher of 30 years stated at a recent in-service, "The problem is that whereas the students have changed, we have not changed. And we are very slow to recognise this". Teachers run the risk of becoming 'prison simple' (a condition that afflicts guards at a penitentiary whereby they lose interest in life 'outside' and fixate on what one inmate did or might do to another). Therefore, teachers need to come to the educational setting as whole, complete human beings who are not merely the dispensers of data. Teachers need to see themselves and their students differently in order to generate different outcomes. Education and all of its participants need to become multidimensional.

As we examine current efforts at educational reform, we are left with the impression of educators who are frantically rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. For us, these attempts at reconceptualising fall short because they do not address engagement; engagement of learner to self, to learner, to facilitator, to content. They misunderstand the true nature of learning. They are not acknowledging how deeply and radically the world is changing. They take a 'fix-it' approach which is piecemeal and doesn't address the whole person. They keep working with failed assumptions. They are still thinking in the box, not above and beyond the box, and they under-emphasise the power of the personal and relational in learning.

The following story of a recent school council retreat highlights the need to reconsider our approaches to educational reform. The members of this educational community had always viewed themselves as progressive. Numerous attempts were made to introduce new instruction, methodologies, timetables, as well as greater support for teaching and learning. However, at the retreat it became apparent that as people were talking about the reforms they had initiated, they were not addressing the real needs. They were feeling frustrated. They wanted their school to be more effective in dealing with their children, their future and their issues. They were beginning to feel that the key to school improvement would be found, not in programs, not in structures, not in timetables, but in the quality of the relationships. They realised that all relationships were on the table and would have to be reexamined - the relationship between students and teachers, parents and teachers, administrators and students - all of the relationships in their school community. The council members arrived at this understanding by default because all of their previous efforts had not changed their experience. They were still feeling hollow and dissatisfied. They realised that they needed to find new ways to interact with each other. Ultimately, they were sensing the need to reexamine certain fundamental questions: 'What is the nature of teaching and learning in a rapidly changing society?', 'What does our school have to offer young people?' and more radically, 'What do young people feel they have to offer our school and community?' Council members were beginning to rethink the context of schooling. They were moving toward an ecology of schooling. Curriculum was no longer the subject. Everyone became the subject as well as every relationship in the school community. This is the foundation of *RelationalLearning*.

RelationalLearning is not a new category or method. It is a radical new look at how relationships make learning possible. *RelationalLearning* does not see the student as a computer to be programmed, but as a marvellous blend of mind, body and spirit to be engaged. A century of dialogue will be a century that connects and reconnects. It will be a century that builds, restores and changes relationships. It will be a century that redefines the relationship between the individual and the collective at every level.

Chapter One:

All Learning Begins and Ends with the Self

*The teacher, if indeed wise, does not bid you to enter
the house of his wisdom, but leads you to
the threshold of your own mind.*

Kahlil Gibran

When Robinson Crusoe is shipwrecked on his desert island, he must devote every waking moment to addressing the question, 'How will I survive?' This quest lasts for years. He finds food and water, retrieves tools and weapons from the boat, surveys his surroundings, builds a fortress, finds a way to keep track of time, raises grain and goats, chronicles the seasons. His behaviour is understandable - and occasionally ingenious - but one-dimensional. Only after he discovers a human footprint in the sand does Crusoe blossom as a human being. At first, he is terrified; terrified of the human potential inherent in his discovery. But he later reflects, "How strange a chequer work of providence is the life of man! And by what secret differing springs are the affections hurry'd about as differing circumstance present!" When Crusoe finally meets Friday, the tone of the book shifts. Crusoe fills out and his fortunes change. With Friday's help, Crusoe is rescued, leaves his island peopled with mutineers and castaways, and later returns as the great colonist. Crusoe's relationship with Friday transforms his experience. "For I whose only affliction was, that I seem'd banished from human society, that I was alone, circumscrib'd by the boundless ocean, cut off from mankind; ...that to have seen one of my own species, would have seem'd to me a raising me from death to life, and the greatest blessing that heaven it self ... could bestow." For Crusoe, the footprint in the sand was the beginning of learning.

Only when Crusoe makes the human connection can he flourish individually and in relationship. Crusoe's initial sighting of the footprint in the sand - and his ensuing revelation - parallel the first step in *RelationaLearning*, which is recognition. In order for the *RelationaLearning* process to ignite, there must be a human link to provide the spark. It is the moment of recognition that fires the imagination. It is the moment of connection; it is the moment when Crusoe becomes self-reflective and examines what it means to be human.

So it is in *Relational Learning*. At its core, *Relational Learning* embraces the human connection; connection of self to self, of self to others, and of self to content. Indeed, personal, heartfelt connection is the soul of the *Relational Learning* model. It appears, then, that what has been overlooked in education is just this: the self-reflective, the human connection, and the personal experience of self that we observe in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. *Relational Learning* honours the human connection and the importance of linking learning to our relationships. The model helps us to see how these relational connections are made. The learning journey is a creative one which, through relationship, brings us all from alienation to affiliation and from relationship to self to relationship to the whole. Author David Denby suggests the exciting potential inherent in this type of learning journey. He chronicles the words of a former professor who, as a way-shower, gives his learners permission, time and space to develop internal connections to self and to enable them to begin to relate to the 'other'.

He looked at us, then turned back to the board, considering the initials DGSJ carefully, respectfully, rubbing his chin. "Don't Get Sucked In", he said at last. "Don't get sucked in by false ideas. You're not here for political reasons. You're here for very selfish reasons. You're here to build a self. You create a self; you don't inherit it. One way you create it is out of the past. Look, if you find the Iliad dull or invidious or a glorification of war, you're right. It's a poem in your mind; let it take shape in your mind.

David Denby - Does Homer Have Legs?

As Denby has indicated in his article, the examination of self must be at the front end of all learning. By connecting first with the self, by discovering a sameness between self and other, the learner spirals into a relationship with ideas that have previously seemed foreign. In order to move from simple recognition to a deeper understanding of, a valuing of, and - finally - a relating with a broader global perspective, the learner must first find a sameness, a connection which will ignite the learning process. And, as a result, learners are able to enhance and expand their learning. *Relational Learning*, then, enables the learner to relate to ideas and feelings that sometimes seem to be, as described by theologian Karl Barth, "wholly other".

The ability to conceive things as different than they are is a condition of human freedom. Those who lack that ability are prisoners of the present moment, of the present place. We must have the capacity to enter into other worlds - imaginatively - if we are to conceive and to create our own world... The study of difference, however, is meaningful only if there is also sameness. Whatever the differences in culture, history or literature, others are able to speak to us across