

LEARNING



BY
DAVID GRAHAM

F.U.N.E. Women's Catalogue

Learning is the process of building up redundancy in your brain-body's circuits about bits of information. This is true both for learning skills and learning broad intellectual generalizations.

Learning is the process of organizing and reorganizing what's already in your head—and giving it names. Also what's in your body. Learning is becoming conscious of your self.

Like sensing, learning occurs panoramically. Your ear lobe, your pancreas and your little finger, left hand, are all involved in learning. Your brain is only part of your learning system. You are a learning thing.

You can choose a great deal of what you will learn and what you won't learn. Then again, you won't have much choice about a lot of things you learn—and don't learn.

To some extent, those learning abilities you don't use will atrophy. Not much is known about the subject. The Hopi Indians of the Southwest believe you have a door at the top of your head which enables

you to communicate with God. But if you don't use it starting very young and keep using it, the door will close and you won't be able to open it again.

Learning is what you do for yourself. It's all up to you.

Information is free.

Schools

Much has been written about education and why schools aren't working any more. I would only be adding to the pollution problem by writing more about the standard educational issues.

We all know—or can find out if we look closely enough—that our educational system has pretty much collapsed, that the people in the system are becoming increasingly aware of the fact, that almost all efforts at “reform” have not worked and are not working, and that the educational system is having a crippling effect on *all* people who are involved in it.

One response to the "educational crisis" in the U.S. has been the creation of over 2,000 "free" schools. These schools are organized along radically different lines from the traditional school. There are usually no grades or credits, sometimes a different content, and a much more loosely defined distinction between teacher and student. Every large city, and many smaller ones, around the country now have free schools. Each year more and more young people are turning to them rather than face the boredom and tediousness of the regular school program. The public educational system sometimes welcomes free schools, sometimes opposes them.

Even with this tremendous growth rate . . . and every indication that it will continue . . . some people in the free school movement have begun to question what they're up to. Some have come to the conclusion that it is the idea of school itself that is bringing on the present crisis. They are talking seriously about the "de-schooling" of society.

The best explanation of this idea came from a friend of mine. He said that the more a free school becomes a good school, the less it becomes a school. And the more it becomes a community. I think he would add that there are very few of these around.

My own experience as a staff member and the director of a free school during the past year has made this pretty clear to me. I think I have a few insights as to why.

A major assumption of the education system is that people are sick. They need a tonic—called education. A walk-in clinic is created where the tonic gets administered. A patient's progress gets evaluated every so often, and when he's "well" (educated) he is released.



One of the neat things about the clinic is that most of the "therapists" don't even realize that they are therapists. Thus they also are patients receiving treatment. A nice circle game.

Most of the free schools have the same old assumption. They still think people need treatment. The only change is that they don't evaluate the patient's progress in the same way. And the chief effect of that change is to disorient people. They expect someone to tell them what to do. And no one does.

The few schools that are working toward community aren't having much success. One reason is obvious. It has to do with common assumptions. The word school implies a place where a lot of different things are going on—all supposed to be generating "learning". Quite often, so many things are going on that it's impossible to get an idea about what the group is doing, what it wants to do, or how it will grow. Many school groups have broken up over just this question.

At schools, NOTHING can happen because EVERYTHING can happen.

Many of us grew up with this attitude. School is a place where you go not to do anything. In the old system the avalanche of trivia makes the point. In the new one it's people's ideas about what they will do at school and about what the school will do for them.

Community: a group that shares a set of common assumptions. I don't see how that can happen in a school. Free or not.

Alternatives? There are some around.

One good idea: Learning centers could be established all over the country. Anyone would have access to them. They could be used to gather (and generate) information in any area. The necessary technology already exists . . . but technology alone isn't enough. Centers would have to be extensions of living communities, dealing with the things that are important to the communities. Ideally they would be located on a neighborhood scale.

Learning centers aren't just going to happen. Many current institutions would have to change. Family, government, business. . . .

A mother of five told me she liked the idea but that it would never work. Too many parents want to get rid of their children. This is a statement on the nuclear family.

One way of moving in a positive direction would be to establish sets of "institutes" (new word needed) organized along fairly specific lines. (e.g. man/man, man/society, etc.) These could replace free schools. They could be places where people would work together on interests vital to them.

Another short-term alternative would be to allow free travel to young people and set up hostels where travelers could stay.

I'm sure there are other possibilities.