

14 Personal epilogue

Towards the end of his degree course my youngest son telephoned and asked if he could use my computer to produce his dissertation. When he arrived it became apparent that he intended to write the dissertation, rather than simply transcribe it. For a number of years he had been surrounded by computers at home, but the limited exposure to school Acorn computers had produced an aversion that had lasted until that moment. I gave him a brief introduction to Microsoft Word and Windows 95.

His dissertation had to be bound and submitted by that Friday.

“Now’s the time.” he said. He’s a jazz musician. He thinks you can improvise everything.

Whilst we were at work he decided he couldn’t cope with my machine and so used his mother’s. He spent some time staring at the C-prompt, made a few phone calls and started work. He seemed satisfied with his progress until the following day, when he couldn’t find his work. He was reduced to writing notes with a pen and paper. He didn’t understand the concept of files and directory structures.

By the third day, however, he was making progress. By the fourth day he’d worked out the layout, inserted footnotes and references and completed it. A number of years’ ineffective teaching and failed learning at school had been transcended within a few days, simply because the task had to be completed.

When the words ‘education’ and ‘learning’ are used the assumption is that the transactions are mediated through the teacher to the learner. That’s certainly true in a structural sense, and I suppose that fact that we earn our living in the industry causes us to invest it with a certain significance. But learning doesn’t have to have anything to do with the education system: it’s just that education has hi-jacked the whole process, so that learning can only be legitimated through the educational structures - and only those structures that have been invested with status.

In the words of John Holt, “If schools had to teach kids to speak we’d have a lot of dumb kids ...”.

162 *Virtual Learning*

To paraphrase William Burroughs, any individual who can switch on - and switch off - a computer has control over their own learning. Add the Web to that, with email and web publishing facilities, and your circle is complete. What we have is a pattern of learning that is controlled by the learner.

The learning is determined by need; by interest. Successful patterns of past learning predicate new patterns: one connection leads to another.

The issue is not one of content, but of learning. Not what, but how. If the learning is not successful, then the machine or the program won't work. If you can't read and understand the instructions you've either had it, you guess or make a few calls. A flashing cursor, a ticking clock and approaching deadline are neutral. There's no such thing as failure: either something works, or it doesn't: if it doesn't you try something else.

At the end of this research 81% of students surveyed used 'their' PC to do work. Latest industry figures suggested that almost 70% of households with school-age children owned a PC. Once again, I reflect that if they were dependent upon institutionalised learning, then they'd either be working out LOGO routines, trying to cheat their way through CAL or CALL programs, working their way through unrelated office-type tasks, or sitting looking bored whilst somebody else sat at the keyboard and told them what was happening.

But they're not. They're using the things. They learned how to do it. They are using what they have learned to create new learning. That's the challenge. To understand HOW they learned, and map our own interpretation of learning patterns and teaching routines onto those.

The problem is that the conventional scales against which we can measure these are calibrated for the education system.

As a teacher, I often found myself looking in the wrong direction.

I often found myself looking for the wrong things.

It was only later that I saw what had gone on.

