
Redesigning the Future

Teaching Versus Learning

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I believe that the admission criteria employed by most institutions of higher learning are antithetical to their proclaimed objective of promoting *learning*, but they are compatible with their unproclaimed objective of promoting *teaching*. Learning and teaching are not the same thing. They are not even two aspects of the same thing: either can take place without the other, and usually does. Ivan Illich (1972), of the Center for International Documentation in Mexico, put it this way: "The pupil is . . . 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new" (p. 1).

Much of higher education is devoted to providing students with a vocabulary that enables them to speak authoritatively about subjects they do not understand. It also familiarizes students with robust principles that have been able to withstand large amounts of disconfirming evidence.

Institutions of higher learning are more concerned with the ability of students to be taught than their ability to learn. The product of teaching is not necessarily learning. Memorization, for example, is not learning. *To learn something is to increase one's ability to use that something effectively in the pursuit of one's objectives*. To a large extent, college and university admission processes are directed at selecting students who can regurgitate what they have been fed a short while after the feeding. The simple fact is that much, if not most, of what higher education expects of students can be done better by computers and audiovisual recorders. Computers can remember more and recall, compare, and calculate more quickly and precisely than human beings. In general, teachers are unaware of the fact that forgetting what is irrelevant is at least as important as remembering what is relevant.

Most colleges and universities treat students like raw material to be processed on a production line, each operation of which is precisely specified and

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scheduled. The processing is increasingly mechanized and automated, for example, in grading papers, registration, and even (computer-assisted) instruction. Reflect on the effect on a student's concept of *self* that results from being taught by a machine that has no self, or by a teacher who has been taught to behave like a machine.

The ability of college and university students to use effectively what they have been taught is, at most, a secondary consideration of these institutions. This is hardly surprising since many, if not most, of their professors are not capable of making effective use of what they teach. Many professors even take pride in its uselessness; this enables them to claim that their material is either "pure," "fundamental," or "basic." These terms are taken to be synonymous with "virtuous," rather than "of questionable value." There is also the incredible inference drawn by such faculty members from their attitude toward useless work that it is more difficult and requires a higher order of intelligence than doing something useful.

Those familiar with life in an institution of higher learning, who have reflected critically on it, know that the principal objective of these institutions is to promote neither teaching nor learning. It is *to maximize the quality of work life of the faculty*. Teaching is the price faculty members must pay to get the quality of work life they desire, a price that, like all prices, they try to minimize. The more elite an institution and its faculty, the less its faculty members teach. This strongly suggests that students learn most in institutions in which faculties teach least, and therefore, learning might be maximized where the faculty does *no* teaching. I believe that this is so: having to submit to teaching is a major obstruction to learning. We learned our first language well without having it taught to us, but look at what a mess teaching made of the ability of most of us to use a second language. In contrast to being taught, however, teaching itself is a very effective way of learning. No one in a class learns the subject being taught as well as the teacher. Therefore, it is students who should be doing the teaching. On the other hand, faculty members have generally demonstrated a greater ability to learn than to teach. For example, I was once asked to name the year in which I last taught a course on a subject that even existed when I was a university student. It was in 1951. Like most faculty members I am a much better learner than teacher.

And most of what I have learned I have learned either from my students or from trying to teach them.

REFERENCE

Illich, I. (1972). *Deschooling Society*, Harrow Books, New York.