BECOMING A TEACHER

by Ian Brown

My motivation to become a teacher came partly from problems I had at school in Edinburgh. At the age of 11, I had to do what was called the 11 plus exam. At that time, 1958, there was in Britain a tripartite system of secondary education. The 11 plus examination determined whether a student was sent to a Grammar school, a Secondary Modern school, or a Trade school. A grammar school allowed the possibility of university. Secondary Modern made that unlikely and a trade school was expressly to prepare people for the job market by the age of 16. The private boarding school system (with its confusingly named 'public' schools) operated by different criteria.

I remember my mother being most concerned because I did poorly on the 11 plus exam. Even at this young age, I was being told that when it came to intelligence, I was not very bright. This imprinting continued throughout my secondary school education. Each class had two streams, an upper and a lower. I was always in the lower stream. This said, I did reasonably well in subjects that interested me, like English and Geography but struggled to understand Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry.

Somehow I scraped into University. There, I flourished. Within three years, I was being told that I was one of the brightest students and it was recommended that I apply to Graduate School. The question arises how was it possible that I could go from being considered 'not very bright' to 'very bright' within three years? Answering that question became a seminal interest for years to come.

At university, my interests were Sociology and Psychology. I wanted to learn about myself and about society. The first book to influence me strongly was Escape From Freedom by Erich Fromm. He differentiated between 'freedom **to**' and 'freedom **from**'. My secondary education had been at a boarding school which was authoritarian and gave few options in terms of freedom to make one's own choices. Rather, it encouraged conformity and loyalty to common values. University was different. I was free from the constraints of a boarding school and a strict parental code.

In my second year at University, I had the opportunity to see and hear the celebrated writer Arnold Koestler talk about his book The Act of Creation. His talk, and subsequent reading of his book helped me to start seeing the ways in which 'intelligence' could be inadequately and/or incorrectly assessed. Koestler's theory of creativity rested on what he called 'bisociation' which basically meant the ability to synthesize different strands of thought into new patterns. I became aware of how I had always shown good intuition and imagination but had found it hard to analyze one 'correct' answer. For example, I was no good at jigsaws or crosswords, whereas I was adequate at 'Scrabble' and relatively good at 'Pictionary'. I was much better at seeing the big picture than the specific details. If I was swamped by details, I couldn't see the underlying form, theme or meaning. Also text accompanied by images and diagrams greatly helped my comprehension.

Then I read a book entitled Lateral Thinking by the author Edward de Bono. In this book, the author distinguished between 'linear' and 'lateral' thinking. He pointed out that must of us are educated to think vertically or in a linear pattern, i.e. to go from one logical step to the next, moving all the time towards the one correct solution of our problem. Linear thinking is critical thinking. It is primarily concerned with judging the 'true value' of statements and seeking errors, whereas lateral thinking focuses more on the 'movement value' of statements and ideas. The person uses lateral thinking to move from one known idea to new ideas.

This distinction between 'linear' and 'lateral' thinking tied in with what I had gleaned from the psychologist J.P. Guildford who had done a psychometric study on the nature of intelligence. Guildford talked about the difference between 'convergent' and 'divergent' thinking. Convergent thinking referred to the ability to see the one correct answer to a problem as opposed to divergent thinking which had to do with the ability to see various different solutions to a problem.

As I digested what De Bono and Guildford were saying, it became clear to me that my strength was in lateral and divergent thinking. At the same time, I was gradually being made aware of how the educational process was primarily based on the ability to analyze the 'right' answer and further involved vast amounts of memorization with respect to these facts, whether the names of chemical elements, different mathematical equations or – for example in history - the names and dates of English monarchs. And in doing so, educational institutions were wrongly evaluating creative students as inadequate and hence 'lower stream'.

I was beginning to learn that I not 'dumb'. And I was beginning to be able to differentiate between various learning styles and see which ones suited me best. At the same time, I was learning about educational institutions that incorporated these styles. For example, at the opposite end of the spectrum to my own boarding school education, I read about Rudolph Steiner, Montessori and A. S. Neill's 'Summerhill'. The different philosophies of these schools were fascinating to me. Summerhill was a boarding school but also a 'free' school, one in which the curiosity of the student was what gave meaning to their motivation to learn. Steiner's 'Waldorf' schools had a holistic approach based on the need for creative play, moral growth and social consciousness. Montessori schools stressed a project-based methodology, one based on sensory experience and working at one's own pace.

I also read about Quaker schools in which the teacher's role was to make daily space for the student's 'inward journey'. And then there were Krishnamurti schools. Here is a quote from Krishnamurti himself: "Education in the modern world has been concerned with the cultivation not of intelligence, but of intellect, of memory and its skills. In this process, little occurs beyond passing information from the teacher to the taught." These observations resonated within me in a major way. Yes – the difference between 'intellect' and 'intelligence' was key, as was the distinction I had learned between 'instruction' versus 'education'. In the former, the teacher puts structure INto the student's mind. In the latter, the teacher 'leads out' the student's curiosity, interest and pre-existing knowledge. In fact, there are two different Latin roots of the word 'education': they are *educAre* (meaning 'to train' or 'mould') and *educEre* (meaning 'to lead out of').

And then in 1970, Ivan Illich published Deschooling Society. Let's do away with schools altogether, said Illich, and replace them with the means and resources for learning through the community and personal experiences of apprenticeships.

Ironically, 1970 was the year that I had educational experiences, both as a student and as a teacher, that were in stark contradiction to my growing interests and beliefs about what education *should* be. After gaining a B.A. in sociology, I was accepted for graduate studies at The London School of Economics (L,S.E.). In London, my first taste of teaching was tutoring a diplomat in the Japanese Embassy. All Mr. Yanagi wanted was conversation practice in English so it was an easy and enjoyable experience and, as I was discovering, being in the role of teacher also afforded opportunities to learn. For example, on my first day, Mr. Yanagi and I both stood momentarily at the doorway to the designated room. I assumed my elderly and distinguished 'student' would enter and I would follow, but Mr. Yanagi kept gesturing for me to precede him. That day I learned about the respect for teachers in Japanese culture. It didn't matter that I was only 23 and had little work experience of any kind; I was his *sensei* and so must be shown due respect and deference.

A few months later, I had my first classroom experience. Given that I had a degree, I was qualified to teach as a substitute in state schools. I desperately needed to earn some money, so I applied and was told to report to an elementary school in a low-income area. After the ambrosia of tutoring Mr. Yanagi, I was in for a shock. I was assigned to some 7 year-old special ed. kids who had been classified as 'behavior problems'. My head was full of all the wonderful 'alternative education' ideas I had been reading about. However, it didn't take long for me to realize that I had neither respect nor cooperation from my students. Just because I showed *them* respect and was flexible and friendly, didn't make up for my complete lack of experience and skill in how to deal with tough kids from immigrant families who were used to hard living and had already developed a self-image of being rebels, misfits and failures - to say nothing of being 'dumb'.

I empathized with them. I desperately wanted to help them. But in the end, they taught me more than I taught them. I learned that in the context of a traditional school, being able to inform and inspire was not going

to work without relevant material, firm and fair guidance within a structure that allowed the teacher to set boundaries and maintain order. Any progressive education would have to take place within a safe container. I already knew from my own experiences as a student that there was nothing worse than an insecure, frustrated teacher who was losing control of him or herself.

At the same time, I was losing control of my situation as a graduate student. All those wonderful ideas from Neill, Koestler, De Bono. Guildford, Illich and others were no more applicable at The London School of Economics than they had been at Kensal Rise Elementary School. The approach at graduate school was *very* analytical, intellectual, conceptual, cerebral, critical and uncreative. By the end of 1970, I had dropped out of the Masters program and my interest in the field of education had all but evaporated.

In 1972, I immigrated to Canada. I lived in Montreal and for several years, I did an assortment of low paying jobs. After a couple of years, I was asked to teach English to some francophone Hydro Quebec employees. This was a completely different kind of teaching experience. A small group of friendly, middle-aged men, reasonable motivated, and expecting little more than Mr. Yanagi, i.e. conversational practice. My self-confidence as a novice teacher gained some roots and began to grow. Around the same time, I was playing in a blues band. People were impressed with my piano playing and on occasion, I would be asked if I gave piano lessons. As all my jobs had been part time and temporary, I was always in need of extra income to pay my rent and bills. I decided to give it a try.

I had learned to play piano by ear. It was always a sideline. There was no particular method or practice routine, rather a playing for the enjoyment of it and a gradual exploration of the frontiers of the unknown. As I reflected on my self-learning process, I realized that I needed to fully understand one step or stage before being able to proceed. And then I found that the next step would naturally present itself at the appropriate time. As I progressed, I could begin to see the outlines of the path ahead more clearly. For a long time, I knew intuitively what I was doing but hadn't been able to conceptualize it. When I first gave lessons, I realized I needed to be able to verbally articulate in order to explain what I wanted the student to learn. It wasn't enough to just show, I had to back that up in oral and written form.

As I engaged in that process, I discovered that I was able to show and explain the basics of playing by ear simply and clearly. I advertised for students and soon had four or five regulars. All of them had the same story. They had (a) taken (or been made to take) lessons as a child, (b) had found them boring and/or had got tired of being corrected for playing the 'wrong' note, (c) had given up, (d) hadn't gone near a piano for years, (e) had eventually been motivated to try again. As oner student put it, "I just want to be able to play 'Happy Birthday to You' to my children without having to search for sheet music." I knew I had a method to demystify how to string basic chords together in a few useful and adaptable left and right-hand styles. The students were amazed and delighted at how quickly they could start having fun playing by ear. This experience reinforced the notion that I had the potential to be a really effective teacher, and in turn sharpened the focus of how to achieve that goal.

I was 29 years old when I made the commitment to return to University in order to take a one year Diploma in Education. On my first day as a student, something happened that made me realize how passionately I felt about taking this career path. I was in the Faculty of Education building at McGill University. At some point, 'nature called' and I sought out the washrooms. As I settled down on the toilet, I surveyed the graffiti on the walls. There, in large print, was the following quotation:

"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." (G. B. Shaw)

Yes indeed! That was the prevailing stereotype, wasn't it? The meek, bespectacled, boring workhorse - unambitious, uncreative, marking time until the long vacations; the taken-for-granted teacher, reflecting and reinforcing society's most conformist norms.

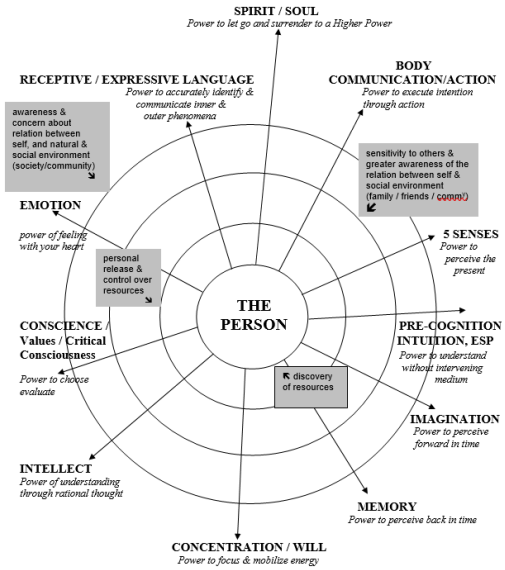
I admired George Bernard Shaw for his plays and his socialist values, but as I read this quote, I could feel my blood boil. No, Mr. Shaw, I *can* do other things but I choose to become a teacher because I believe society is in greater need of good educators than it is of writers or blues musicians or soldiers or businessmen.

It was during that year of 1975-76, that I knew I had made the right choice. I have only had two teachers in my lifetime that I considered really exceptional, to the point of being mentors. One of them was the Professor who taught 'Foundation Studies in Education' at McGill. His name was Norman Henchey. Everything about this educator was exemplary; his abilities to communicate, to present organized material, to demonstrate through his own teaching the very methods he wished to explain; his ability to motivate, to inspire, to act as a role model for the students. In every way, Professor Henchey was the exact opposite of G.B. Shaw's demeaning definition. His reading list alone illustrated a man who was both up to date, eclectic and could think outside the box. Who else would put Paulo Freire, Jonathon Kozol, Carlos Castaneda and Robert Pirsig side by side?! I would sit and watch in admiration as he demonstrated various methods of grouping the students, different uses of media (overhead projector, blackboard, flip chart, etc.), conscious or unconscious illustration of linear and lateral thinking, convergent and divergent production, critical and creative approaches to content material, and what he called 'oblique teaching'.

And then there were the assignments. Never before or since have I been asked to use a combination of logical deduction and imagination to project a future scenario with an open-ended instruction to '*Create a global event or situation at a future time of your choosing and explain how circumstances from the present led to that situation/event.*' Later, when he asked us to write a paper comparing two educators that we admired, I chose Paulo Freire (author of 'Pedagogy Of The Oppressed') and Don Juan, the shaman/guru/teacher of Carlos Castaneda's books.

But then it was time to put things into practice. I had expressed my interest in alternative education and felt fortunate when I was told that my practicum would be at The Alternative High School, recently renamed Moving In New Directions (MIND). The school had only been opened in September of 1975 and was an experiment in alternative education within the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal (PSBGM). The goal of the school was to foster student-centered learning and student empowerment with respect to administrative decisions. For example, students, staff and parents/guardians each had one vote. I was told that early community meetings had dealt with the use of recreational drugs at school (rejected), smoking during class (eventually banned on the third floor only), world poverty and debt (no resolution) and student apathy ("a surprisingly large meeting with no real solution").

In my Social Studies class at McGill, I had designed a Holistic Curriculum:



This fancy schema was all very well but how could I apply it in any way? At M.I.N.D., I had gained permission to teach a course entitled 'Teaching Social Studies Through Drama'. A couple of years earlier, I had read a book entitled Development Through Drama by Brian Way. I had been excited by the contents. It seemed a way to bring together various strands of my interests and experience, in particular social studies (sociology), drama and education. I had followed up on this in the summer of 1974 by taking a course on 'L'Expression Corporelle' ('Developmental Drama' was the equivalent in English) at Université de Montréal. The Professor tried to persuade me to do a Masters but by this point, I wanted to steer clear of post-graduate study – especially if presented in French!

The development of 'the whole person' – body, mind, emotions and spirit – was an ideal, one that was reflected in the Krishnamurti quote. The irony was that for all its elitism and poor assessment of the nature of 'intelligence', Sedbergh (the English boarding that I had attended) had been 'holistic' in the sense that it recognized and fostered an independent will and resilience of the body and the spirit. It provided lots of opportunity to have experiences that developed both competitive and cooperative skills. On the other hand, it did not foster either creative imagination or critical consciousness of how society really operates.

I believed in *the ideal* of intellectual, creative, physical, emotional, psychological, social, moral and spiritual development of the individual. My curriculum 'map' had been influenced by Sedbergh, Freire, Illich, Neill, Kozol, Brian Way and Norman Henchey. It had also grown out of my conviction that in order to truly understand something, there was no substitute for first-hand experience. My own grasp of 'Social Studies' had been forever changed by over five years of immersion in low-paying jobs – both manual and clerical, unemployment, relative poverty, as well as being an immigrant who didn't speak the first language of the culture (i.e. Quebec).

Specifically, at MIND, my goal was to get the students to choose a person of interest in the real world, go and interview them, do research about that person's social context, write a paper, and then return to class and be prepared to role play their 'character' in interactions with other student-characters. At the very least, I felt such a program was offering a multi-dimensional approach to 'social studies'.

My students were very different from the tough, lower-income seven year-olds that I had taught in London. Most of them were from liberal, middle-class homes. They were 'alternative' and 'special ed' by virtue of having been misfits in one way or another in the regular school system; too imaginative, too original, too rebellious perhaps. It seemed as if we might be a good 'fit'.

sweaty business teaching!

All in all, the experimental class worked out fairly well. I got good feedback from students and colleagues throughout. One student interviewed a homeless guy. With another, it was a First Nations woman who was very involved in the struggle for aboriginal rights. As I had hoped, meaning and motivation and knowledge accompanied the deepening stages of involvement. By the end of the school year, I was excited and feeling fulfilled. I had also been told that I would be hired, pending a decision about retirement from one of the regular staff.

It was only in August that I heard that the teacher in question had delayed plans to retire, and as a result, there was no longer an opening. It meant that I had to check out other teaching possibilities without delay. At the beginning of September 1976, I heard about an opening for a Special Ed. teacher at Laval Catholic High School. I applied, was interviewed and then offered a position by the Principal. This was my first full time job as a teacher.

Laval is north of Montreal and in order to get to the school, I had to take a long ride on the Metro and then catch a bus. At that time, Laval was a suburban tangle of shopping malls and high rise apartment buildings. Laval Catholic High School was a very large, featureless concrete building. After meeting the Principal, I talked to one of the special ed. teachers. I asked him where I could find the special ed. location. He said, "oh you mean the zoo … it's in the corner of the building, down there." Later that day, I got some advice from this same teacher. "They're a tough bunch, at least they think they're tough. Yeh, if you have any trouble with the animals, send 'em to the Principal." That was when I vowed to myself that no matter what happened in my classroom, I was *not* going to exercise that option.

Apart from my alternative education ideas, I was being influenced by two popular TV programs that were running at that time. One was 'Welcome Back Kotter' with John Travolta as 'Barbarino', leader of the 'sweat hogs'. The other one was 'Happy Days' with Henry Winkler as 'Fonzie'. The former show featured a special ed. class in an inner-city school. In both series, the dominant characters exhibited Italian accents and mannerisms à la Robert De Niro, Al Pacino or Joe Pesci. I loved the way that 'Mr. Kotter' won the respect and trust of his students. In one episode, while explaining Shakespeare's 'MacBeth', Kotter spies a student at the back of the classroom reading a Batman comic. Instead of berating him, Kotter tells the student that he too loved Batman stories and then, with pedagogical brilliance, says, 'you know, there's a lot of similarity between Batman and MacBeth. They both involve a struggle between good and evil. Batman has 'The Joker' and MacBeth has MacDuff and the three witches.' Needless to say, the student gets hooked on Shakespeare in no time. To me, this scene perfectly illustrated the point that you can teach *anything* to *anybody*, IF you know how.

That said, I was also aware that part of Kotter's influence was due to the fact that he had been a remedial student himself, was at home with 'jive talk', and knew all the tricks of the trade when it came to 'classroom management'. Conversely, I was an ex boarding schoolboy from a middle-class upbringing who couldn't engage in jive talk and who was still a greenhorn when it came to class (aka 'behaviour') management.

As I started at Laval Catholic High School, I was not supplied with any curriculum or materials, simply told that I was to help out with reading, writing and 'the arts'. I wasn't stupid. I knew that when I told my class that whatever happened in class was between me and them, that I would not be threatening them with visits to The Principal, it would be 'open season' for a while. And so it was. The boys tested me with various kinds of challenging behavior, while the girls would aim their acting-out hostilities at the boys while wheedling and flirting with me. By the end of the day, I was exhausted. I would count the days until the end of the week and wonder how I would survive the month. The long journey there and back didn't help either. I decided I needed a car and bought an old Ford Falcon. Some days, when the morning had been particularly stressful, I would go for a beer or two in my lunch break.

By Christmas, 1976, I had learned a few things: I had lowered my expectations in almost all areas of my 'holistic curriculum'. The individual differences were such that I was encouraging individualized learning as much as possible. The more motivation and interest a student showed, the more I wanted to focus on that student. The less motivation and interest a student showed, the more I *had to* focus on that student.

The boys (some of them)

The girls (2 of them)

There was one student, in particular, with whom I had a really good relationship, and conversely one with whom I had little or no rapport.

George Vila was the son of Argentinian immigrants. He was skinny, sensitive and somewhat uncoordinated. He was teased and bullied constantly by others. What was evident from early on was that George was very 'special'. He had one overriding interest and that was space exploration and within this field, his knowledge of facts and figures was astonishing. The Viking and Voyageur spacecraft were launched in the 1979's. George could tell you that the Titan missile had a diameter of 3.05 m, a length of 31.30 m and a launch weight of 149,700 kg. The missiles had a two-stage liquid propellant design and reached a speed of 25 times the speed of sound by the time the engines cut off. The thrust of the Titan rocket? 1,893.40 kN (kiloNewton). The distance from the earth to the moon? Easy – 384,400 kms. America's space station? Skylab, launched 14 May 1973. Flybys of other planets? Jupiter – 3rd. December 1973; Venus – 5th February 1974; Mercury – 29th March 1974. And so on. George wasn't interested in much else and had been assessed as 'retarded'. in fact George was autistic and like others with that condition, was brilliant in a finely focused area.

You'd think I could have invested in some underarm protection by now!

What occurred to me with George, was that if I could teach 'Social Studies Through Drama', and Kotter could teach Shakespeare vis Batman, I should be able to teach reading and writing through the prism of George's interest in space exploration.

The other vehicle for teaching George was that he *loved* impersonating the announcer at televised space rocket launches, namely Howard Cosell. I was good as impersonations in general and when George heard my impersonation of Ringo Starr, or Sylvester the cat, or especially Queen Elizabeth, he would start laughing hysterically. He (George/Howard Cosell) would conduct tape interviews with me (Ian/Queen E,/ Ringo, etc.). I would then use the taped recording as a means of helping him with aural comprehension and writing,

The student with whom I had the least rapport and the greatest challenges was Normand. It wasn't that I didn't empathize with him; in the first place, why on earth did his francophone parents place him in an anglophone school? Normand, unlike most of the special ed. students, was a native-born Quebecer. As a time when everyone was very much aware of the push to promote the French language and the Quebec culture, it seemed quite possible that the root of Norman's rebelliousness was that he resented being at an anglophone school.

Normand did not come to class regularly. Maybe he was taking advantage of my 'no Principal' vow. Or maybe he would have been the same with a 'tougher' teacher. Maybe it was good old testosterone-charged teenage hood. In any event, Normand was hard to deal with. I tried different methods to gain his respect and trust and to motivate him to get interested in learning, without much success. A situation like that does not involve just the teacher and the student; the other students pick up on the teacher's failure to make progress. I began to see Normand as the 'bad apple'.

At McGill, I had been told about 'learning contracts' as a means of holding the student accountable by reminding him that the contract had been co-written and signed. At the start of the second semester, I figured it was time to try out a learning contract with Normand. As I was typing it up, it occurred to me that the contract should have some 'teeth'. I wanted to stick to my 'no Principal' principal, so instead I wrote that if the student broke the contract by ignoring the contents, then as the teacher, I had the right to tell him not to come to class any more. I was pretty sure that, in fact, I did *not* have this right but in my mind, it made no sense to force a student to come to class if he clearly didn't want to. This was the public education system not a 'public school' like Sedbergh. At Sedbergh, there was no place for learning contracts or for students to skip class. It was an authoritarian system and students learned very quickly about all the many rules. Many of the rules seemed silly, some seemed too strict, but for the main part, if they were applied fairly then they were generally accepted and respected.

Laval Catholic High School was a typical North American High School – a multi-racial, heterogeneous mix of different ethnic groups and class backgrounds. Unlike boarding school (e.g. Sedbergh at that time) there were boys and girls and hence a vibrant flirtation scene, and from teachers, there was a far more liberal attitude toward students' behavior in general.

Back to Normand. Unfortunately, unlike the Kotter episode, this is a story without a meritorious pedagogical conclusion. The learning contract was duly co-written and co-signed. It seemed for a week or two that Normand was coming to class more regularly. But then, it was back to the old pattern. So I then gave him various reminders, including the bottom line. When that didn't make a difference, the day came when I told Normand that I no longer wanted him to come to my class. What a sad but empowering moment that was, however heretical! Not *'if you don't want to come to class, that's OK',* but an expression of *'if you don't want to keep to our contract, then **I** don't want **you** in **my** class'*. Normand was mad at me but did in fact return to class on occasion. And I let him stay. Sigh!

At the end of the year, I learned that my contract would not be renewed. I felt relieved. The experience had been stressful and although I had gained a lot of experience and had succeeded in some areas and with some students (i.e. George), overall I concluded: (1) that I still had a lot to learn. (2) that I did not want to teach in a High School. Given that I also did not want to teach in an Elementary School, what did that leave? The answer was what I had wanted all along – to teach literacy to adults like my hero, Paulo Freire.

It took a couple of years and moving to the west coast before my wish was granted (more or less).

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continued as 'Being A Teacher'