

TEACHING FOR MASTERY - EDUCATION FOR MYSTERY

Education lacks the concept of teaching mastery. Today's educational goal is to teach specific facts, concepts and procedures. The focus of the experience is on achievement. The physical, emotional and perceptual stresses involved in the process of learning are considered unimportant and inconsequential. In a similar way, in our struggles for success, we tend to ignore quality of life and often sacrifice our health in the process. In mastery the process becomes as important as the achievement: how, as well as what one learns. Learning like a master becomes a visible goal.

A master is one who can accomplish his/her purpose with optimal expenditure of energy: not too much, not too little. He/she performs with confidence and clearness of mind. He/she acts with rhythm, ease, flow, awareness, control, organization, spontaneity, instinct, energy and breath. A master is always ready for the unexpected. If our teaching methods do not include the development of mastery at the earliest stages, when will it be learned? If our schools don't teach it, where is it to be learned?

Mastery should become the basic goal of early learning experiences. If skills and information are taught in a haphazard way, without paying attention to the psychological and perceptual aspects of a child, the creation of learning blocks is likely. We learn in the way that seems the most appropriate at the time. When stressed with conditions of sensory overload, we develop habits of paying attention which may be counterproductive to health, self-confidence, and further learning. One common example of a negative habit of attention is that we constrict our movement and our breathing in order to concentrate better. Were you breathing as you read this last paragraph? If stopping your breathing is part of your pattern of paying attention, you probably don't even know it. Bolts breathing, as it is called, is very common to our society. This habit is detrimental to health and to learning. Full, normal breathing is very important to life, yet this self-awareness was

not taught to us in school or at home. In fact, the present paradigm reinforces the habit of shallow, infrequent breathing. Rudolph Steiner felt that the goal of education was to teach children to breath.

Another example of a negative habit of attention is nearsightedness. The incidence of nearsightedness is highly correlated with academic success. Studies indicated that school stress is an important etiological factor in myopia development. When self-awareness is emphasized and achievement anxiety decreased, the incidence of myopia is significantly reduced. Teaching for the acquisition of skills of information alone imbeds such negative habits.

Teaching through mastery includes self-awareness as the core of the educational process. Many children I see in my practise of developmental optometry have given over their responsibility for self-awareness to their teachers, parents and peers. This is the ultimate in dependency behavior. It is saying: I don't trust what I hear, see or remember. When asked, for example, to "Count to ten and clap your hands just on the number five", many patients have no awareness whether they performed the act correctly. They answer, "I don't know- you tell me", as if it is not their business to know such things. Self-awareness is discouraged or ignored in the present system. Self-awareness is what should be taught as the first step in learning. It is the key to learning and health.

Through self-awareness comes self-confidence. Knowing that the environment will be handled successfully will create an opening of perceptual abilities. If we expect the environment to overwhelm us, our sensory integration will fragment, and our perceptual fields will shrink. Too often our children and ourselves habitually lack adequate confidence. We just manage to scrape through, breathless, nearly exhausted, our senses half dimmed, and not very motivated (except through masochism) to attempt a similar task in the near future. The development of self-confidence is much too important to be left to chance. In the paradigm of mastery as a teachable skill, appropriate self-confidence becomes an

educational goal.

Most of us are semi-shutdown in our senses. We lack optimal integration of the various sense modalities with each other and with movement. Many of us cannot see and move, or hear and see, simultaneously. Often we are not integrated across the two sides of our body. Recently I examined all the children from an entire school. I was shocked at the very apparent lack of performance on the twenty perceptual tests used as probes. I am not blaming this school for creating sensory-motor blocks in these children. I strongly emphasize, however, that it is within the responsibility of education to have as a priority goal the enhancement of perception and action. Educators should be concerned with developing sensory and motor ability rather than teaching specific information and reading in the early grades. The first three to six years should be designed to create a healthy, responsive, self-controlled perception-action system in each child.

Vision is a learned process. Visual skills can be trained properly in the context of mastery. If a child is taught to see twice as much, in half the time, with half the effort; imagine how quickly and easily he/she could be taught to master reading: not only the reading of books, but the reading of (and acting in) life. Through teaching the perceptual arts, the goals of mastery and education can best be realized. If the product of our education is to create self-confident, self-organized adults who are able to be equal to an environment which is surely going to become even more dynamic and chaotic than today's, we must pay attention to opening up these abilities rather than shutting them down. With mastery as a visible goal of behavior, we would not need programs for stress reduction. Stress related illness (an increasingly significant variable in the etiology of disease) would be nipped in the bud.

A master is always ready for the unexpected. He/she knows how to proceed through uncertainty. In the present paradigm to be uncertain is intolerable. Uncertainty puts us at a disadvantage, it makes us feel insecure. To be insecure means we've made a mistake. No one wants to be caught making a mistake, so when we feel

insecure we reach out for the nearest apparent security. We grab on for dear life even if security is not appropriate for the situation.

The present educational paradigm is rooted in the assumption that the only questions worth dealing with are ones for which we already know the answer. The present system lacks the appropriate models for dealing with unanswered or unanswerable questions. The world seems to be changing at an unprecedented rate. More knowledge has been accumulated in the past twenty-five years than in the history of the world until that time. What we learned as fact turns into fiction. We are taught theories as if they are facts, paradigms as if they were God-given, the only correct point of view. Old perspectives proposed by geniuses from the past, individuals who are smarter than most of us will ever be, are ridiculed as foolish. The present theory is the fact, the true knowledge. An atom is the smallest unit of matter; nothing can go faster than the speed of light; a Catholic can never be elected President; America is always on the side of justice; it can't happen here; etc., These were unshakable truths I learned in school which turned out to be merely opinion.

If the education only condones answerable questions, where can one learn to live with the uncertainties of the real world? Uncertainty is the rule. Insecurity is inescapable. The issue is not how we avoid insecurity, but how we learn to live most comfortably with insecurity.

Life is a mystery novel more than it is a recipe book. Education trains us for a recipe book life: get the proper ingredients, mix them using proper procedure, add appropriate energy, wait until the right time, and then success. Life is not a piece of cake, it is full of mystery. It requires feedback and feedforward, awareness and prediction. We must learn to troubleshoot and to expect surprises. Responsible education prepares us to learn and to survive in the real world. It does not fulfill its responsibility by sticking to a world-view that only allows for one world-view. We must educate our children to live with energy and ease in a world in which less and less is known about more and more: a world full of mystery.

Models and methods exist for teaching mystery and mastery. Aikido, an eastern martial art, is more than a set of techniques for self defence. The techniques are not the goal, but the means by which consciousness, energy and body-mind coordination are taught. The Don Juan books by Carlos Casteneda are a model as well as a metaphor for future education. The most practical methods I know come from the vision improvement approaches that I have been working with. Developmental optometry, especially the work of Robert Pepper, O.D., and the Bates system of vision improvement have explicit principles, activities and techniques designed to increase consciousness and ability without sacrificing health and ease.

In this paper on the future of education, I have presented two important aspects of educational responsibility which are generally overlooked. We have been focussed on the ends rather than the means. Our educational experiences prepared us to be the kind of adults we have become. The "New Age" paradigm shift comes partly as a reaction to the limits of the end-gaining paradigm. Whatever changes occur in the future of education, be they technological or social, if they do not include teaching for mastery and educating for mystery, they have missed the space ship.