

# NEEDED:

## New External Symbols of Learning

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OVER many years of work with parents, teachers and students of all ages, I have been impressed by two important characteristics of education in schools. These are (a) its ineffectiveness in helping pupils and teachers solve their personal problems of living and (b) its effectiveness in disparaging their experience and themselves.

The reason for this is that present education expects each student (a) to accumulate fixed ends rather than to develop a flexible process of learning, and (b) to acquire subject knowledge rather than to increase his own self-maturity. And this goes on in spite of the fact that from kindergarten to graduate school the educational question is not whether students should study English, mathematics, science and the humanities, but how to convert these growing years of their lives into a maturing experience.

Yet the pressure on learners for this traditional miseducation seems to be increasing. The evidence is found in the external symbols of learning which control the progress of pupils throughout the system.

### **Old External Symbols of Learning**

The present age-old symbols of learning inherited from a class-conscious school operating in a relatively unchanging environment relate to fixed knowledge in subjects determined in advance and controlled in the present by adults. The learner is always searching for the behaviors and the level of performance in each which are acceptable to these outside people.

Consider such basic evidence as the scope and sequence of the curriculum; the classification schemes for intellectual segregation; the yearly requirements for promotion; the tests used to determine the marks or grades; the essentials for graduation from high school; the conditions for admission to college and the prescriptions for college degrees. A successful performer meets these external adult demands at each level, an unsuccessful one is rejected by many and varied but not so subtle excuses.

What kind of people does this system develop? The successful ones have been described to me by parents and students as "conforming, regimented, systematized computer types of selves from whom most inherited creativeness, inventiveness, originality have been squeezed out." The rejected ones have been designated by teachers as "nonconformers who are either troublemakers and aggressively rebellious or withdrawn into themselves with a don't care or what is the use attitude." Thus the system limits the development of all pupils by forcing them into different types of defense mechanisms for self-preservation.

Why should this be so? Adults who support the present symbols are unwilling to face themselves.

Qualitative learning environment in home or school is determined by the quality of the selves of the adults. Each self is composed of certain basic tendencies to action laid down in early childhood. Some are unconscious, emotionally sealed and nonmodifiable. Others are conscious, open-ended and flexible. The former represent various degrees of immaturity, usually expressed by adults as parental demands on children or as childhood refusals to consider suggestions from others.

Present symbols are an excellent illustration of how adults introject into children the unconscious demands of their own childhood. And the more frightened they are by the uncertainties of present living, the greater is the pressure which they put on children for even more unconscious behavior than their own. Thus does the system perpetuate itself.

### **Old Symbols Inadequate**

There is one comprehensive reason why old symbols are inadequate for the present generation. They produce immature people, when mature people are so desperately needed to develop a better world. Evidence to support this seems to be increasing, so two less frequently used reasons will be cited.

First, present symbols deal primarily with the *mental* component of the self and are based largely on book learning which is logically organized, secondhand experience. But growth of the self toward maturity is a function of the wholeness of life which is controlled by and emanates from direct firsthand experience in responsible relationship to others. Emphasis on fixed knowledge prevents the growth of emotional wholeness by restricting the preconscious aspect of experience and thus produces what Kubie calls the "neurotic distortion of the creative process." It also supports the erroneous assumption that erudition or scholarship leads to the self-maturity necessary to act wisely in the everyday affairs of living.

Second, present symbols ignore the fact that the control of learning always rests with the learner. The central factor in determining the quality of what he selects from an experience is the *process* which is emotionally based in his feeling tone growing out of compatibility with or rejection by others. Present symbols do not produce the empathy necessary to free creativeness in the learning process for either pupils or teachers so the relationship deteriorates into an externally man-

aged teaching situation. Even so the pupil controls what he learns, which is how to become immature.

### Some Desirable New Symbols

New symbols should be based upon a few fundamental principles inherent in maturing. First, each learner should be helped to improve *his* choices or self-selections in his experiences according to his perceptions and meanings. He develops himself through his choices, so is responsible for the kind of self he becomes. His choices are made unconsciously or consciously, emotionally or deliberately. They are based on narrow or wide perception of his environment, on shallow or deep understanding of himself, on distrust of or empathy with people. But whatever the circumstances, he makes the choice. New symbols should show how well he examines his choices and pragmatically assesses their effect on himself and others.

Second, each learner should be helped to understand his inherited life and learning process through which he develops himself to maturity. He is born with this process operating on the autonomic level. He must emerge it emotionally as a prerequisite for using it successfully on a higher level of deliberative action. Qualitative thinking rests upon emotional readiness for the preconscious creation of those analogical insights and meanings necessary for his emergence into maturity.

Third, each learner should be helped to improve his self-understanding by building quality in his firsthand experiences in everyday living. So he must be open to his past experiences and search constantly for many and varied new ones. From birth each person is exposed to firsthand and secondhand experiences. The difference lies in the quality of communication among the people involved. In the former, communication can be free, open, direct and examined as a transaction among the participants. In the latter, communication is incomplete because some controlled factor limits the freedom of interaction. Reading a book is secondhand experience due to limited communication with the author. But face-to-face relationships of children with parents and teachers may also have limited learning quality since the adults may operate on fixed unconscious responses not open to examination by themselves or others.

Children develop self-understanding in their experiences by what I have called the 3E technique, which is Expression, Examination and Evaluation. Children are free to *express* their inner feelings and meanings in many media. The teacher helps them *examine* their reasons underlying these self-selections without passing judgment on their choices. The children are led to *evaluate* the effect of such choices on themselves and others now and in the future.

This qualitative understanding best takes place in common group situations in which each child can benefit from the friendly but critical examination of his behavior by others. Thus he frees himself from passive submissions to his unconscious patterns and releases the creativeness of his growing self.

## A Closer Look

I am sure many readers believe that this discussion based upon principles is too general and therefore unusable. What they really mean is that they have great difficulty in using principles since their selves have been organized for so many years around autonomic specifics that they now find it difficult to mature themselves. To help them I will suggest a few more specific external symbols.

These symbols are designed to bring into clearer focus some desirable characteristics of the process of human relations which operates in all life situations. For the quality of this process affects the quality of the learning of all persons engaged therein. New symbols must identify a higher quality of behavior in human relations than now exists. To this end I suggest the following:

Learners of all ages should (a) be outgoing toward new and varied experiences; (b) express themselves in many media; (c) examine critically their self-selections to determine the growth effect upon themselves and others; (d) show empathy toward people whatever their individual differences; (e) recognize reality from unreality; (f) be receptive, flexible to new ideas in all areas of human experience; (g) be able to work with others to plan a program of living to meet common needs; (h) understand themselves and others—strengths and limitations—well enough to plan a life program for their best development; (i) refine, as the need arises, such specific skills as are necessary to fulfill themselves.

In this discussion, I have tried to follow the approach generally used in psychotherapy which has three clearly-defined aspects. First, survey the existing situation to obtain an accurate diagnosis of the illness. Second, locate the dominant factors in past experience which cause the disability. Third, help the client, here the reader, reactivate his normal learning process with which to recreate himself.

The dominant old symbols which prevent pupils and teachers from normal growth produce the illness. The new symbols, inherent in their life process, should help them reactivate themselves toward higher self-maturity. The need for such redirection of education in schools is great. The time to begin is now. To delay is to prevent the present generation of pupils and teachers from developing the maturity necessary for resolving wisely with others the human problems of their troubled world. ❧

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