



How Will We Score When Red, White, and Blue Turn to Gray? The Ultimate Accountability

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Schools should prepare for the time when one sixth of all Americans will be 65 or older by finding ways for the generations to learn from one another.

ANYTOWN, U.S.A. The year 2001. The activities room of the nursing home is pleasant enough. It provides a place to go mornings and afternoons. John Peterson, retired 22 years from his job as a school administrator, concentrates on weaving his red, white, and blue potholder. Across the table sits Elizabeth Gordon, who taught in the same school system years ago. Her hand shakes as she patiently paints in the spaces on her canvas, number after number. Her brush, dripping purple, blurs the directive numbers into the background as it sways out of the lines.

What relevance does this have for today's classroom? Does it tell us something about the failure of our past assessment of today's needs? About our inadequate understanding of the potential of the human mind?

From the late 1970s, each day will bring an increase of 1,000 persons over the age of 65. By the year 2001, one in every six Americans will be past his/her 65th birthday. Most of these older Americans will collect Social Security. Only a small percentage of them will live in long-term facilities—five percent in the seventies. The rest will join the young in supermarket lines and require public transportation. The federal tax structure will strain to handle their special needs. Although traffic and supermarket lines will slow down, changes caused by this slower populace will gain speed.

Future Shock

The changes resulting from a graying population are part of that accelerating rate of spec-

tacular change envisioned by Alvin Toffler a decade ago. The shock of Toffler's world of the near future is out-of-date now. We have moved on to the challenges and struggle of coping with the faster flow of change. For some, this has meant disengagement in order to idle at their own speed. For others, it means a deeper commitment to the existing systems designed to preserve cultural and societal values, such as educational institutions. Traditionally, educators have focused on the young in order to prepare them for the world they would inherit. More recently, learning needs of the adult and elderly populations have been recognized and are being added to the burdens of the educational system. The demands are increasing, and costs are skyrocketing. At the same time, resources and public confidence are dwindling.

Lifelong Learning

A recent and emerging focus on lifelong learning could provide a touchstone in reaching out for sanity. There is within the lifelong learning construct potential for young and old to learn from each other in intergenerational settings involving all levels of the formal educational system. Most discussions of lifelong learning have concerned the further, usually higher, education of adults, as if it were only a new term for adult and continuing education. Lifelong education is for children and for all ages. It recognizes that the experiences of living are learning, that there are many styles of teaching and learning, and that there are many contents to a particular learner in a particular situation. Learning that ignores both youthfulness and aging as ongoing processes is flat, limited, and even stunted. Again, we cite the developmental deficiencies that have been too often explained away as normal to the process of physical aging. Behold today's nursing homes.

Rhythms of Learning

To learn is to remember. But it may also be necessary to forget, to let go, and to separate from one set of patterns in order to make way for new ideas. Jean Houston tells us that the mind has rhythms of awakening that alternate with rhythms of forgetting and even sleep. "While in

darkness, we grow and change and prepare for reawakening to new life forms."¹

Places and times for learning must provide for these rhythms if learning is to become more than mere programming of performance. Creating environments more responsive to our deeper needs, educators must explore the ecologies of inner and outer space. Teachers who talk about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable are dealing with a

¹ Jean Houston. "Holoverse: The Ecology of Inner Space." *Dromenon* 1 (1):4; June 1978.



banking approach to education. They see a student as an empty container waiting to be filled.² Is this the student who will spend old age making red, white, and blue potholders, or painting by numbers? This approach assumes the more a person is filled, the more that person knows. Gregory Bateson disagrees.

In a recent interview for *Psychology Today*, Daniel Goldman asked Bateson why we persist in bankrupt 19th century ways of thinking. Bateson answered, "Because they allow greed to take over. More is always better than less—that's the credo of greed. But it is never true biologically. There is always an optimum value beyond which anything is toxic, no matter what: oxygen, sleep, psychotherapy, philosophy. But we ignore these limits because greed has gotten out of hand. Biological variables always need equilibrium."³

Bateson focuses on patterns behind patterns and the relationship of the whole to its parts in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

The Body-Mind

In order to approach a sense of equilibrium, there needs to be a greater awareness of the body-mind. The work of Jean Houston and Robert Masters at The Foundation for Mind Research over the past 12 years emphasizes that the enormous latent capacities of the body-mind, which culture and education have distorted, inhibited, or altogether blocked, can be rehabilitated.

"The excesses of externalizing, objectifying consciousness necessitate finding new ways of realizing one's humanness, not the anti-ecological manipulation and exploitation of one's environment, but the developing, exploring and integrating of our inner capacities.

"In exploring . . . inner space, one discovers again and again . . . that the key to the depths lies in development and understanding of imagery." Jean Houston calls us to leave behind old patterns of human energy concerned with such things as consumption, control, aggrandizement, and manipulation to join the "evolution entering time, calling us to awaken to a citizenship in a universe larger than our aspirations and more complex and richer than all our dreams. It is the call to the larger circle, the dance of the larger life."⁴

Who will be the dancers? Who will teach the dance?

Young and Old Together

Curiously enough, the same elders who slow down supermarket lines and congest traffic patterns can provide the imagery necessary for the dance to begin. When the long-living are invited as teacher/learners to settings where the dignity of choice and self-expression are encouraged as a means of sharing with the young, lifelong learning becomes a dynamic design of exploration of the past, celebration of the present, and creation of the future together. The knowledge and experience of the old lend stability and continuity to the young. The explorations and the inventions of the young link the long-living learner to the future of a world he/she must someday let go. Learning to enter a new stage of growth comes with greater confidence when old and young entrust their values and imagery to one another. Within a framework of trust, the dance becomes lively as skills of a lifetime, such as lace making, creative writing, native language, wood-working, or stitchery are passed on.

Rhythms deeper than those of hand and mind are felt as the generations together, treasuring each other's knowledge and mystery, join the dance of new learning and new life.

² A. Abdel-Halim El-Mahdi and Najiba A. Al-Khodari. "Lifelong Education in a World Perspective." Istanbul, Turkey: Address at World Conference of World Council for Curriculum and Instruction, August 14-24, 1977.

³ Daniel Goldman. "Breaking Out of the Double Bind." *Psychology Today*, August 1978. An interview with Gregory Bateson.

⁴ Houston, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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