

# *a brief manifesto for learning*

essays and writings

# POWER

## *OPEN & CLOSED SYSTEMS*

A system, defined as a group of interacting units with a common purpose, is generally classified as either open or closed. Open systems refer to those that interact with other systems or the outside environment, whereas closed systems have relatively little interaction with anything outside of them.

The notion of open and closed systems can be used when looking at education. Growing up unschooled, interactions with my natural surroundings was the most important means for learning; whether it was my family, friends, or communities. In a certain way, traditional schooling functions as a closed system; the school structure being the one place where learning happens.

Is learning really something that happens only in school, though? If you think about the most valuable things you have learned throughout your childhood, what comes to mind? Your math skills? Or that one advice your grandfather gave you, which shapes who you are as a person now?

What if we look at education as an open system? Humans are fundamentally linked to their environment. Ignorance of that fact in various aspects of society creates tension, both within the individuals and their environment, as they seek space for existing but repressed interconnectedness.

My mother taught me to look at systems as consisting of two aspects: a fix and a flow. In education, this parallels with the form and the content. The form of an education system would be the ways in which learning is done; the how. The content relates to the disciplines that are being learned; the what.

In my own upbringing, the form was fixed externally since classes and activities were provided with specific teachers in a specific schedule, and the content was dependent on personal interests, therefore in constant flow. In other words, my siblings and I had a defined weekly schedule of courses, but the disciplines were fully based on our own preferences.

# PLAY

## *LET THE CHILDREN PLAY!*

But what is playing? When do and should children play? Are children the only ones who play? For what means do they play? How important is it in their upbringing? And later on, in adulthood?

We all experience childhood in fundamentally different ways; as different as we are from each other. Nevertheless, these individual experiences are also formed by as many similarities as we are all humans. One of them consists of an enormous amount of time spent (or the desire of) playing.

Engaging in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a “serious” or practical purpose, is one of the most common ways through which children express themselves. The act of playing is noted as a central tool for a child to make sense of the world around them. It is a safe-space where children can create an abstraction of reality, making up challenges and rules, which produces a deeper understanding of real-life complexities.

Playing can help develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally, and gain the self-confidence required to engage in new experiences and environments, later on in life.

# INDUSTRIALIZATION OF EDUCATION

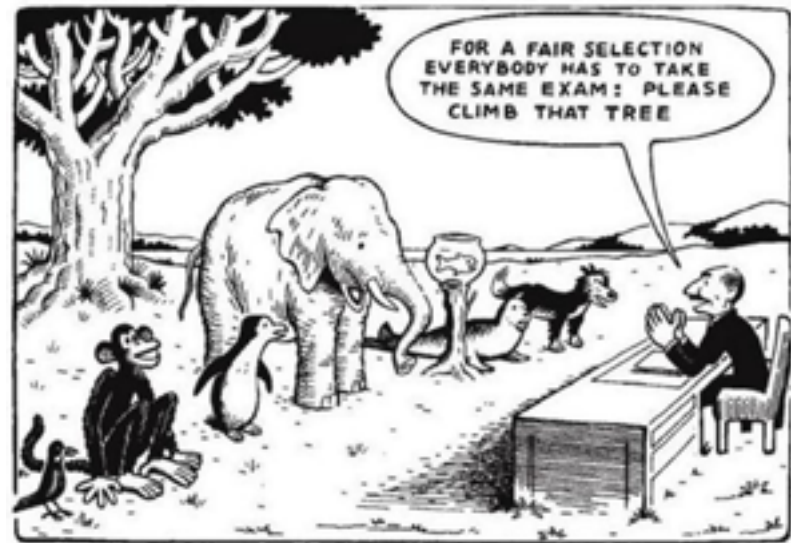
## *TRADITIONAL SCHOOLING IN A TRANSITIONING WORLD*

Childhood as we know it is a relatively recent invention. Ivan Illich explains in his book *Deschooling Society* (1971), how the whole notion of grouping people according to age rests on three unquestioned premises: children belong in school, children learn in school, children can be taught only in school. We tend to forget that our present concept of 'childhood' is a modern development. It is only since this century that children have their own kinds of clothes, games, and other distinctions from adults. Before, children were treated the same level as their parents, whether they were workers, peasants, or noblemen. It was the bourgeoisie who began treating children differently rather than just as smaller humans.

Afterwards, public systems of education came into being to meet the needs of industrialism, enabling a mass production of 'childhood' as we know it. That is why our education system is predicated on the idea of academic ability, or the most useful subjects for work. Making sure everyone had the same skills was also important in creating interchangeable workers, where none were irreplaceable, facilitating factories' power. Making people into 'just another brick in the wall'

In his TED talks, creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson champions a radical rethink of our school systems, to cultivate creativity and acknowledge multiple types of intelligence. He argues that our school system educates children to become good workers, rather than creative thinkers. Students with restless minds and bodies - far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity - are ignored or even stigmatized, with terrible consequences. "We are educating people out of their creativity," Robinson states.

# DIFFERENTIATION VS STANDARDIZATION



*VALUE & VARIETY OR STATUS & SYSTEMS?*

"Large scale education was not developed to motivate kids or to create scholars, but to churn out adults who worked well within the system."

Seth Godin, Stop Stealing Dreams

Intelligence is diverse, dynamic and distinct. How can one system, with an emphasis on specific skills, can be just for everyone?

I chose my university studies based on various reasons: I was interested in the school, the teachers, their way of teaching, the city... The reasons go on, but what they all have in common is that they were personal motives. Choosing university studies based on personal motives is frequent and even recommended, but looking back at the education systems beforehand, why is there less space for personalization?

Are children less distinct at early age? Are they less aware of their interests or aims? Isn't it children that know best what they want?

# RESPONSIBILITY & TRUST

*IN THE HANDS OF THE CHILDREN*

"Learning is not done to you. Learning is something you choose to do."

Seth Godin, Stop Stealing Dreams

What if education was about giving the power to the individual to shape one's world through making conscious decisions in learning? What if children thought of learning as their own responsibility?

Growing up unschooled, a sense of freedom brought with it an even greater sense of responsibility. It made me aware of the power to shape my life through my education. And so, at age 15, I began studying my photography in workshops with photographers, assisting galleries and exhibiting my own work. The same process happened with all four of my younger siblings, who each began professionalizing into a specific practice at around that age.

"It is not the teacher's proper task to be constantly testing and checking the understanding of the learner. That's the learner's task, and only the learner can do it. The teacher's job is to answer questions when learners ask them, or to try to help learners understand better when they ask for that help."

John Holt, How Children Fail

My main question is, then, why don't we trust children in their education? How does it make more sense to trust an external system which offers a packaged curriculum with no personal link to the child?

John Holt said often that children are far better at learning than we give them credit for. But, he acknowledges that "To trust children, we must first learn to trust ourselves... And most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted."

# LIFELONG LEARNING

## *WHAT IT IS REALLY ALL ABOUT*

“Of course, a child may not know what he may need to know in ten years (who does?), but he knows, and much better than anyone else, what he wants and needs to know right now, what his mind is ready and hungry for. If we help him, or just allow him, to learn that, he will remember it, use it, build on it. If we try to make him learn something else, that we think is more important, the chances are that he won’t learn it, or will learn very little of it, that he will soon forget most of what he learned, and what is worst of all, will before long lose most of his appetite for learning anything. Which is the opposite of what we need to do. Rather, we need to create constant appetite for learning through letting children learn whatever they are interested in at that moment.

What makes people smart, curious, alert, observant, competent, confident, resourceful, persistent – in the broadest and best sense, intelligent - is not having access to more and more learning places, resources, and specialists, but being able in their lives to do a wide variety of interesting things that matter, things that challenge their ingenuity, skill, and judgment, and that make an obvious difference in their lives and the lives of people around them.”

John Holt

How does one prepare for an unknown future? Rather than learn specific disciplines that might or might not be useful in the future, why isn't school teaching children how to learn? In today's fast-changing world driven by the exponential curve of technological innovation, formal education is no longer enough to adapt and thrive. Lifelong learning is an ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge, which allows to not only enhance social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, but also self-sustainability such as Illich strives for in his book *Deschooling Society*.

“Universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be no more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools. Neither new attitudes of teachers toward their pupils nor the proliferation of educational hardware or software (in classroom or bedroom), nor finally the attempt to expand the pedagogue’s responsibility until it engulfs his pupils’ lifetimes will deliver universal education.

The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring.”

Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society

During the last fifty years, constant scientific and technological innovation and change has had profound effects on how learning is understood. Learning can no longer be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired (workplace). Instead, learning can be seen as something that takes place on an ongoing basis from our daily interactions with others and with the world around us.

In Systems Analysis, it is argued that learning in disciplines makes us separate things into parts rather than experiencing life as a whole. Elon Musk founded his own school with a distinct methodology based on problem-solving. When starting with a need for a solution, the learner becomes aware of the situation in its entirety and all the tools available to solve the problem. Therefore, there is a reason for them to learn the skills. Indeed, how can one learn without a clear sense of the goal behind the learning?



# AUTODIDACTISM

## *SELF-TAUGHT LEARNERS, SELF-INITIATED ACTIVITIES*

Education without general guidance from teachers or institutions is possible. An autodidact is an individual who chooses their study subject, studying material, and studying rhythm. In addition or as an alternative to their formal studies, self-directed education supported by intentional social relations in fluid informal arrangements are a central solution for the future of learning.

“Learning that is initiated and generated by a learner is uniquely different than learning that is expected and directed from the outside. I have consistently observed over many years that learning that is self-initiated is not entangled with learning difficulties or learning disorders. I have observed that if children are not neurologically or developmentally ready to read or engage in some specific learning task, then they demonstrate neurological deficiencies. It has been astounding to watch many learners achieve results on their own when experts could not help them.”

Brent Cameron, Self Design

“People are centrally concerned with motivation — how to move themselves or others to act. Everywhere, parents, teachers, coaches, and managers struggle with how to motivate those that they mentor, and individuals struggle to find energy, mobilize effort and persist at the tasks of life and work. People are often moved by external factors such as reward systems, grades, evaluations, or the opinions they fear others might have of them. Yet, just as frequently, people are motivated from within, by interests, curiosity, care or abiding values. These intrinsic motivations are not necessarily externally rewarded or supported, but nonetheless they can sustain passions, creativity, and sustained efforts. Potential lies in the interplay between the two.”

Self Determination Theory

# INDIVIDUALISM IN INTERCONNECTEDNESS

*FROM INTERCHANGEABLE PARTS OF A SYSTEM TOWARDS A FUTURE OF UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS*

No matter how hard one might try, there is no real way to step out of society as a whole. Humanity is an interconnected system where each individual necessarily influences another, and their environment.

Even when living in a caravan far in the deeps of the wild, you need to get your gas from somewhere. What if our place in society and the way we choose to relate to others had more impact than we think?

The industrialization of education was made to create workers which are interchangeable in systems. This initiates a sense that they 'don't matter' and that they have no influence on others. This creates a desire and search for one's own meaning and mission in life, a desire to 'create work that matters' as Seth Godin describes the entrepreneurship wave. Through making themselves irreplaceable, people seek to reclaim their place in society. They become irreplaceable when no one else can do what they can.

However, the industrial education system attempts to standardize us all; to prepare us for life through giving us all more or less the same bases. Instead, this practically trains everyone to remain at the surface of a variety of topics.

"Human resources are like the earth's natural resources. They are highly diverse and often buried deep beneath the surface. They need to be discovered, refined and applied. Education often promotes a narrow view of ability, as do many corporate organizations. As a result, many people are unaware of the variety of their talents and depth of their potential."

Ken Robinson

As a society, we do not need people that are somewhat good at everything, we need individuals that are really good at something, so they can work together and can achieve greater depths.

# JULIA GAT

What is the essential nature of human interaction; with each other, their surroundings or the photographer? I observe this confrontation of people's different realities, all happening simultaneously. It is this certain chaotic harmony which captivates me. I am drawn to provocative freedom and heart-warming intimacy, especially in the family context.

Alternative education, such as unschooling, plays a significant role in my work, since I grew up in an environment where self-chosen activities are advocated as primary means for learning. Being a daughter of a painter and a choreographer, my observations stand between group dynamics and visual compositions.

Julia Gat (born '97 Israel) is a photographer based between Marseille (FR) and Rotterdam (NL). After being unschooled as a child, Julia studied Arts & Humanities at the Open University of the UK, before transferring to Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam. Her work won the 1st Prize of Festival Portrait(s) de Vichy in 2016 and has been shown at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris in 2017. In 2019, Julia has been selected finalist for the Residency BMW in Paris as well as Blurring the Lines contest in Rotterdam.

Her work has been exhibited in Europe and New York and published in PHOTO Magazine, Fisheye Magazine, iGNANT, L'Oeil de la Photographie, l'Insensé Photo and more. In addition, Julia is the founder of the curatorial project Family Business. Highlighting the context of her main photographic theme, family documentation, this project presents French, American and Israeli photographers. It has been exhibited in France and in New York in 2016.

# UNSCHOOLING

## *RADICAL (?) FREEDOM*

Unschooling is an educational philosophy that advocates learner-chosen activities as a primary means for learning. Unschoolers learn through their natural life experiences including play, household responsibilities, personal interests and curiosity, internships and work experience, travel, books, family, mentors, and social interaction.

Unschooling encourages exploration of activities initiated by the children themselves, believing that the more personal learning is the more meaningful, well-understood and therefore useful it is to the child. While courses may occasionally be taken, unschooling questions the usefulness of standard curricula, conventional grading methods, and other features of traditional schooling in the education of each unique child.

“We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions - if they have any - and helping them explore the things they are most interested in.

Why do people take or keep their children out of school? Mostly for three reasons: they think that raising their children is their business not the government's; they enjoy being with their children and watching and helping them learn, and don't want to give that up to others; they want to keep them from being hurt, mentally, physically, and spiritually.”

John Holt

John Holt was an American author and educator, a proponent of homeschooling and, specifically, the unschooling approach, and a pioneer in youth rights theory. John Holt's definition of unschooling is allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world as their parents can comfortably bear.

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