

LEARNING TO LEARN FROM CHILDREN
A TIME JOURNEY

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FORWARD

Our children will journey through their epoch into a new world. Many of the ways and shapes of life we have known will be preserved only as remembrance. The new era's dawn is heralded by both the darkness of our war-torn century and the evolution of the means of producing an ecologically based society. An economy of abundance is possible.

Will mankind reach this new social level? Will our children, after choosing what they can use from our tradition, make their way successfully into the next tradition? We can help our children build the next tradition: a tradition of change.

This book was written to express my comprehension of the way into the future. There are many ways. There are many aspects of each way, so we must look for what is common. It is clear to most of us that when change shakes the earth -- like an earthquake, only very strong and moving things survive. Children can be helped to survive by being taught the shapes of change itself. These are more solid. They do not change so quickly.

Is such teaching an abstract job that is best left to the experts? Not to my way of thinking. Each of us is the only expert that our children really know. But if we have forgotten our expertise, what then? During childhood we were experts at living with rapid change. Everyday we grew out of yesterday. Our shoes and ideas ceased to fit. With new words we created new ideas and habits -- almost every day. Many of us succeeded in the task of reconstructing our whole way of being when we went to school. It was expected. As we grew older, the purpose of education -- to teach us to live in the world of slow change -- had its effect. We gave up the techniques of rapid learning which are natural to children. In this way we graduated into the latest 'grown-up' way of living.

This book is about restoring the growth expertise of childhood to the high respect it needs in the time of renaissance, or perish. We show our respect when we work to learn from children their way of rapid learning and

the shapes of their growths' timing. Children will not teach us their way of learning to learn directly - not at first. We must learn by being more expert at making available the information they need, in the way they can use it and progress. We must also learn by looking backwards to our history. Has there been a change in how adults have been created out of children? Children will also gain insight as they study this history.

First we must see the process of learning and learning to learn, objectively. Then we can examine what has been considered so natural as to be beyond investigation. It is not long since the sexual nature of humans was considered so natural as to be beyond objective study and public knowledge. Now childhoods' learning skills, and the way children learn to learn need to be studied in a way that is objective and public and personal. This can serve to bond together a great deal of information that children and parents need to know about themselves. But how? Respect for children's learning capacity can no longer be neglected. The enormous amount children learn on their first journey into the world of breathing and air needs to be respected. What do we teach them that day? Do we control the child's pain and shock, or dismiss this as natural? What was natural yesterday is not natural today. We cannot allow childhoods' learning capacity to be wantonly wasted.

The tools of progress are waiting to be used. Books for common people, printed books, created a great educational advance. Books changed how we learned to learn: memorizing and story-telling ceased to be central to childhoods' learning.

In the past decades new educational tools and media, at least as important and powerful as books and print, have been invented and become popular. These new tools are misused. Why? Because a public vision of their human use has been lacking. The ingredients for creating this vision exist all around us. Gregory Bateson introduced us to the problem of how children learn to learn in different cultures; Anna Freud has taught us about the intimacies of children's development; many fine psychologists and educators have taught us how

children learn (both actively and passively) under the present conditions. The late Albert Sheflin, and Edward T. Hall have taught us about body and space languages that were hidden until they began their studies. Tinbergen and other ethologists have shown the effects of species learning -- the longer term learning necessary for species survival. Much has been written about our learning and our programming. But these descriptions are not focussed for public use.

Norbert Weiner and Warren S. McCulloch, particularly McCulloch, taught us that our human way of information processing -- our intelligence, was not holy. That was a shock. They, along with other cyberneticists, showed us that just as machines could be built to imitate our muscle actions, so to could machines be invented that could crudely imitate our memory, learning, decision and correction capacity. Machines could do jobs that if done by humans would require intelligence.

The information gathered about human learning has become useful in the context of these new tools. Suddenly, we need to go beyond what was natural before, or the technology changes will bring no benefit.

While visiting with Marshall McLuhan one day, and discussing and correlating some of the information mentioned above, he posed the question, "What is your vision of how modern technology can be used to create the advances in teaching that will allow children to gain and hold control over modern technology?" The message I present in this book is my answer to that question. It is not detailed in technical terms, that, to me, is secondary. It is detailed to be intimate and to affect the reader so that he/she can at first feel what I am saying, then intellectually grasp the arguments presented, and finally to use these new directions to see children and education in a new way.

My primary purpose is to implant in the reader the right questions, and the conviction that these questions are worth struggling with. The answers will show that the questions were needed.

New electronic sensors, micro-processors, media displays and interactive networks built from these basic units, will not disappear. They will become inexpensive and available. These tools are powerful. Will these systems be used only destructively? That is a political question. Pressure to stop destructiveness must come from parents, educators, scientists, and children. People of all kinds and all levels must react positively and not just complain. To do this, the public must have a vision of how the new technology can be used to help children to reach a qualitatively new level of development. Only a positive vision will allow us to replace the stagnant education that was natural and correct in the past.

I consider this book a beginning, one that will stimulate others to build a better vision of how we can help children to hold, and adults to regain the learning skills of childhood.

Much of this book is devoted to describing the need from birth to teach children the language of ecology, rather than the language of static, dead objects. That we must crawl forward, exploring as we go, need cause us no shame. The job is difficult.

This book is dedicated to the late Warren S. McCulloch, my beloved teacher. He gave me the courage to begin to say what I could not finish. Others will help, he assured me, if you can make the beginning clear.

I would especially like to thank my co-workers, Andrew Paynor, Judy Johnson, Linda Sivesind and Marie D. Smith, my editor at Doubleday. Without them, my message would have reached a much smaller circle of friends.

October 6, 1980.