

A rose by any other name

IAN CARTWRIGHT'S CAMEL PHOTOGRAPHY



BY MIKE STEVENSON

ing systems which embody their beliefs. In ancient Greece, Plato told us to avoid compulsion and let learning take the form of play, while Socrates used questions rather than telling, to draw out his pupil's answers. More recently St. Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori and Dewy all contributed their thoughts and systems to our present understanding. Some thinkers and researchers were very influential. The Plowden Report which shaped several decades of English primary education drew heavily on the work of both Maria Montessori and the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. Maria Montessori advocated providing children with a variety of stimulating sensory materials and allowing them to progress at their own pace. Underlying her system was the belief that voluntary learning and an emphasis on children's natural creativity would increase their self-discipline and confidence. Today the Montessori Method is used and developed in those schools which bear her name and elements of her beliefs will be found underpinning the organisation of learning in many state primary schools.

More recently we have heard of Constructivist Teaching which asks us to place learning in authentic, real-world contexts and involve learners in co-operative social interactions with their peers. There have been various descriptions of learning styles which help teachers to understand that each pupil learns differently, and should therefore encounter teaching which provides opportunities for seeing, hearing, moving and touching, since some children learn better than others through, for example, seeing rather than hearing

Early in my career I was being watched while teaching by a dozen or so American teachers who were studying 'Progressive Primary Education in England'. At the end of my demonstration one of them came across and told me how pleased she was to see, for the first time, someone using the 'Kramer-Holsten Technique' with a whole class!

Hiding my total ignorance, I accepted her compliment gracefully and quietly resolved to look it up and discover what I had done! Somehow, over the last 30 years, I've never found the time, and a mystery it remains!

Throughout history, eminent people have considered what the purpose of education should be, and devised learn-

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experiences. The Kagan System which is currently attracting attention in some schools recognises these different intelligences, while encouraging co-operative learning, and the development of thinking skills through 'brain-friendly instruction'. The current focus on improving teaching has moved government departments to publish several analyses of good teaching so that teachers can measure their work against these models of good practice. Even if parents opt to support children with private tutors they will discover that several companies adhere to particular methods. For example The Kip McGrath Company emphasises motivation, positive, achievement, elimination of failure and the fun and reward of reaching goals. The Kumon Company stresses step by step progress; mastery through practice; individual work patterns; individual learning skills and parent/pupil involvement. Everyone seems to agree that a systematic approach to teaching and learning is a good thing. It is more difficult, however, to reach agreement about which system to adopt.

And not everything works! Some of us are old enough to remember the Initial Teaching Alphabet which was marketed as the Holy Grail for the teaching of reading, and in retrospect, proved to be considerably less than brilliant! Modern Maths, Team-teaching, Topic/Thematic work; Child-Centred Learning; Programmed Learning and many others were each supposed to be signposts pointing us to the Promised Land. The Government's Literacy and Numeracy Strategies finally took away the professional discretion of teachers by prescribing not only what they should teach but how

they should teach it. However, even the most devout supporters now find it difficult to explain why improvement in these two subjects was better in Wales, which chose not to implement the Strategies, than in England where they were imposed by law!

Certainly, learning is an incredibly complex process which is very difficult even to describe. Some things we can be sure of, however, and one of them is that all of us learn differently, and that any system which is going to succeed for most of us, must take account of our differences. As parents we don't need to become familiar with the complex technicalities of teaching and learning theory, but we might wish to satisfy our-

- They take care to put the planned work into a real world context within the pupils' experience.
- They use a wide variety of relevant and stimulating source materials.
- They make what is to be learned /achieved clear to all pupils.
- They expect a lot and insist that pupils do their best.
- They manage pupils' behaviour so that learning is possible for everyone.
- They help pupils to see the relevance and challenge of what is to be learned.
- They gain and sustain pupils' interest and enthusiasms.
- They organise and use a wide variety of learning activities – whole class/small group/pairs/oral/visual/ movement/ touching/writing/discussing etc.
- They extend and develop pupils' language particularly subject specialist language.
- They make the assessment criteria clear to all pupils.
- They summarise learning and achievement at lesson end and praise achievement.
- They base future planning on what has been achieved.
- They seek to inform and involve parents in supporting the planned learning.

selves that what is embraced by schools is suitable for our children. The real professional skill of teachers lies in designing learning experiences and teaching strategies appropriate to the children they teach, and this is a job best carried out by teachers in schools rather than by officers of central or local government telling teachers what to do and when to do it! Most good teachers seem to do something like this:

If your child's daily experience seems similar to this, then support that teacher for all you are worth! If not, you might want to ask questions to find out why not.

At the beginning of my career I worried when a teaching machine was delivered to the school. Before computers, this thing took pupils through a structured learning programme by asking them to press levers which dropped cards to reveal the next input or exercise. Rumour had it that anything could be learned this way, and at less cost than employing teachers! However, a more experienced colleague assured me that I might still manage to repay the mortgage by saying, "Remember, Mike, any teacher who can be replaced by a machine deserves to be!" So it is with any other approach to learning. The teacher remains the single, most important interpreter of any learning system. The best system in the hands of a poor teacher will not benefit anyone. Any system which helps teachers to understand better how pupils learn most effectively and to structure their teaching to help that happen is a useful tool. However, slavishly following any system simply because it happens to be there, will serve only to provide a sub-standard experience for pupils and further erode the professional skills of teachers. MD