

Education in a Post-scarcity World

[Toby Russell](#), March 2009

“[B]y the late 1980s the **average** American child was more anxious than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.” [My emphasis.]
Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, from Jean Twenge.

“If children grew up according to early indications, we should have nothing but geniuses.”
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“Everybody is born a genius. Society de-geniuses them.”
Richard Buckminster Fuller

In this short article (one of seven satellite articles to [this one](#)), I briefly sketch out my thoughts on how education might look in a post-scarcity world. With the caveat that I am neither school teacher nor child psychologist, merely a parent, my efforts here really are little more than thinking-out-loud, though, as ever, written in the hope of stimulating further discussion and study. I will certainly be continuing my own studies in this area, and amending this article as my knowledge deepens. Its basic, non-controversial premise is that a healthy society needs healthy participants, and that there is no more important component than education in setting about this task.

The main issue with modern schooling is that it does not sufficiently encourage creativity and independence of thought; it is not sufficiently focused on education, concerning itself instead with conformity and preparing its charges for employment and the obedience employers expect. Of course, as John Taylor Gatto points out, [this is by design](#) and may well have been an appropriate arrangement 100 or 150 years ago, when we were under the heavy pressures of industrialisation, but we now have to do things differently. Society has changed, consequently its demands have too. We just have to recognise this.

Facing the coming challenges, preparing for a post-scarcity world, requires a radically different school design. The socioeconomic presumption of overriding scarcity fosters aggressive and competitive behaviours, rewarding the famous “kill, or be killed” attitude. We bring up our young to live (and hopefully thrive) in these conditions, and their training is tuned correspondingly. Abundance, on the other hand, requires of us [quite different behaviours](#): cooperation, independence, the maturity to deal with *true* freedom, a deep and proper sense of responsibility, etc. To raise our young to cope with such demands is no small task, and seems to me diametrically opposed to the way we do things now.

Currently, learning by rote predominates in a competitive atmosphere of winners and losers, falsely predicated on the (supposedly) necessarily scarce nature of “success.” More cynically, the system – particularly [consumerism](#) – requires a constant stream of new, insatiable consumers to keep things going. The preferred kind of consumer is one who does not think for her- or himself, who does not ask difficult questions, who is easy to manipulate (via advertising and propaganda), and who respects authority. Obedience and malleability are the desired qualities, the virtues of this new religion of Eternal Growth. Consequently, the educational process is designed to churn out exactly this type of human. After all, that's what society needs. Those who do not fit in, referred to as “failures,” can be dealt with at tax-payer expense:

“We pay [...] police and prisons to deal with crime, remedial teachers and educational psychologists to tackle educational problems, and social workers, drug rehabilitation units, psychiatric services and health promotion experts to deal with a host of other problems. These services are all expensive, and none of them are more than partially effective.” The Spirit Level, Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, p26.

Considering education's current remit, it can be no surprise that those who perform well in the early stages of their school life tend to be those who are malleable/obedient, and therefore easily encouraged to regurgitate – without information loss or corruption – that which they have been told to learn. Those who tend to struggle are the less malleable/obedient, who, for whatever reason, have a hard time

simply parroting what has been injected into them. Due to staffing shortages, school design generally, and the pressure of performing to preset standards and targets, teachers are more or less forced to let some of their more “difficult” students drift. In my eyes this is unacceptable. We cannot be sending large numbers of our young the clear message that they are useless before they have had a chance of proving themselves, for not fitting into a system that was not designed with their best interests at heart. Not only is this unethical and cruel, we cannot afford the lost potential, nor the [social costs of damaged lives](#). And yet as things stand, we can do nothing about this. Received wisdom has it that failure is “natural,” “success” rare, elusive, only for the lucky few etc. Is this really true?

What is needed is an educational process which, in a relaxed atmosphere, gently encourages a creative approach to problem-solving from the earliest possible moment on. It should not smother young, vulnerable minds in a barrage of rules and regulations, but allow *play*, that most natural of learning processes, full scope in early development – the most important stage. Education, generally, should have the primary goal of nurturing the early desire to *learn* all children have, of demonstrating that learning is what humans do, non-stop, that our lives are about learning to use that most complex of machines effectively and beneficially: ourselves. Under such an aegis we would produce young adults capable of fully independent study by the time they are seventeen/eighteen at the latest, at which point they would be offered what they need to further their interests and skills. Research in the early sixties by Dr Benjamin Bloom determined that potential for IQ-development stops at seventeen years. The most important years are from 0-4, and the scope to improve/develop IQ diminishes gradually until the eighteenth year. This makes sense, since the deeper into our lives we are, the less flexible we become, the more settled and established.

John Holt in “How Children Learn” is instructive on children's innate learning abilities, posing an interesting hypothetical (p84):

“Bill Hull once said to me, “If we taught children to speak, they'd never learn.” I thought at first he was joking. By now I realise it was a very important truth. Suppose we decided we had to “teach” children to speak. How would we go about it? First, some committee of experts would analyse speech and break it down into a number of separate “speech skills.” We would probably say that, since speech is made up of sounds, a child must be taught to make all the sounds of his language before he can be taught to speak the language itself. Doubtless we would list these sounds, easiest and commonest ones first, harder and rarer ones next. Then we would begin to teach infants these sounds, working our way down this list. Perhaps, in order not to “confuse” the child – “confuse” is an evil word to many educators – we would not let the child hear much ordinary speech, but would only expose him to the sounds we were trying to teach.”

We forget how hard it is to learn a new language, but children get this more or less down *before* they get to school, without the threat of punishment, and without a government approved timetable. They invent a trial and error process particular to themselves, sort order out of the seeming chaos of information around them, and succeed. This is no small achievement. To remind yourself just how enormous a challenge learning a language is, go to China or Vietnam and just listen, then try and repeat what's being said, try to sound exactly like the natives do.

No child is forced to learn, its natural curiosity and desire to be like the grown ups works on its own, from within. The less we interfere with this process, the more relaxed we are about it, the healthier the child's relationship with language will be. Schooling seems to have almost no faith in this palpable and self-evident truth, fearing chaos and ill-discipline should children be left to their own devices. For an idea of how insane this fear is, [please watch this short video](#), and/or read John Holt's books.

Sadly, a relevant education makes no real sense in today's world. It seems we first have to change society before we can change education. What would education in a society shaped along lines proposed by [The Venus Project](#) look like? I imagine an early environment – a pre-school, semi-domestic environment – in which the money-motive, the profit-motive, has no influence whatsoever. In that a post-scarcity world will need only a small fraction of the population to do regular “work,” there will be enormous resources, both human and infrastructure, available to parents, their children, and educators. This pre-school, semi-domestic environment might be similar to the communal, village life of more “primitive” cultures, where a mixture of parents, educators, and children of varying ages come together at their leisure, and safely stimulate the natural, insatiable curiosity of their children in

the healthiest and most creative ways available. There need be no grading, nor constant criticism and correction, just trust in children's inbuilt desire to grow up and become competent, and patience. Grass does not grow faster if you shout at it!

Furthermore, “school” would not be a must as it is today, and would therefore *have to* be a place children *want* to visit, being designed to encourage the natural curiosity evident in all humans. Gently, invisibly, children can with time be introduced toward more “academic” pursuits, and above all allowed to develop *at their own speed*, without any sense that, should they not be able to do X at year Y, they are therefore somehow deficient. Schooling would be a flexible process whose timetable would be determined by the individual. Self-confidence and self-love are attributes that must have high priority, since these are most important for a healthy, self-sufficient, and mature society.

If this all seems too open and undisciplined to you, try to remember that in a world of abundance and sustainability our priorities will be totally different. There will be no need to rush out as many consumers as possible, each eager to spend their slice of the purchasing-power-pie, obediently contributing to an ever ballooning GDP. With the focus on dignity, self-respect, sustainability and societal health, education would have an entirely different remit. Discipline is of course an important part of accomplishment, but surely a loving and relaxed approach is more effective in nurturing natural self-discipline, than a draconian, punishment-oriented one. It is the total health (physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual) of the child that should be our principle concern, rather than some ever-shifting idea of success “out there” that must be obtained for some misty set of reasons, that not obtaining this vague goal is somehow a failure. If all of us attain a healthy and rounded sense of our own power and creativity, we will discover that the pleasure of accomplishment is its own reward. *That* is success!

Humans are by nature creative, by which I do not mean that left to our own devices we would all become artists, but that we gain great satisfaction from solving problems using our powers of reason, imagination, determination etc. We enjoy experiencing our own potency and developing our own competence. I believe learning should be seen, generally, as learning to problem-solve; that is: the process by which we get from “ignorance” to the other side of a challenge. This journey should be undertaken in a way that is both satisfying and inventive, and which encourages individual development in both group and solo endeavours. This would not mean asking our young to reinvent every wheel, nor, perhaps, the abandonment of all rote-learning, but could easily be incorporated into the learning day to make school more stimulating and natural.

As McLuhan said: “All children are geniuses until they get to school.” To bring out this enormous potential – potential our current system purposefully fails to capture – we must teach children, through play, trust and fun, how to *enjoy* learning, deliberately point out that learning is itself a beneficial and inescapable part of being human, and that “failure” adds to our wisdom just as positively as “success.” Indeed, failure is an essential part of the learning process. These truths should be gently and consistently imparted in a relaxed atmosphere which places trust in natural processes right at the heart of the education paradigm, rather than the current atmosphere, so prevalent, of stress and anxiety, of ruthless competition over the scarce (and shrinking) chances of a decent future. We can all be successful, in the sense that we remain productively engaged in becoming the best we can be, throughout our lives.

“They took 321 high-caste and 321 low-caste 11-12-year-old-boys. [...] First the boys did the puzzles [unaware] of each other's caste. Under this condition, the low-cast [...] [did slightly better]. Then, the experiment was repeated, but this time each boy was asked to confirm [...] his name, village, father's and grandfather's name, and caste. After this public announcement [...] the performance of the low-caste boys dropped significantly.” The Spirit Level, Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, p113.

“We think in terms of getting a skill first, and then finding useful and interesting things to do with it. The sensible way, the best way, is to start with something worth doing, and then, moved by a strong desire to do it, get whatever skills are needed. If we begin by helping children feel that writing and reading are ways of talking to and reaching other people, we will not have to bribe and bully them into acquiring the skills, they will want them for what they do with them.” How Children Learn, Holt, 1967 p164.