

UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE
Eastern Cape Education Department
Distance Education Project

Core Education Studies Course
Helping Learners Learn
Umthamo 2

***Creating a Learner-centred
Environment***



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HELPING LEARNERS LEARN

Umthamo 2

Creating a learner-centred environment

Introduction



Lomthamo is the second in the 'Helping Learners Learn' strand. In lomthamo, we are going to look at 'learner-centredness'. As an introduction to the topic, read this extract from the book *'Teacher'*, by Sylvia Ashton-Warner*. She taught energetic first-graders in a Maori* school in New Zealand.

"From long sitting, watching and pondering ... I have found out the worst enemies to what we call teaching. There are two.

The first is the children's interest in each other. It plays the very devil with orthodox method. If only they'd stop talking to each other, playing with each other, fighting with each other and loving each other. This unseemly and unlawful communication! In self-defence I've got to use the damn thing. So I harness the communication*, since I can't control it, and base my method on it. They read in pairs, sentence and sentence about. There's no time for either to get bored. Each checks the other's mistakes and hurries him up if he's too slow, since after all his own turn depends on it. They teach each other their work in pairs, sitting cross-legged knee to knee on the mat, or on their tables, arguing with, correcting, abusing and smiling at each other. And between them all the time is this togetherness, so that learning is so mixed up with relationship that it becomes part of it. What an unsung creative medium is relationship!*

The other trouble with this New Race is their desire to make things. If only they'd sit like the white children with their hands still and wait until they're told to do something and how to do it. The way they draw bombers and make them with anything and roar around the room with them.*

Noise, noise, noise, yes. But if you don't like noise, don't be a teacher. Because children are noisy animals and these in particular, the young of a New Race, the noisiest I have ever known. But it is a natural noise, and therefore bearable. True, there is an occasional howl of rage, a shout of accusation, soprano crying and the sound of something falling, but there is also a voice raised in joy,

**We have ordered a copy of this book for each centre, so ask your Centre Coordinator about it. It is an inspiring story of a child-centred teacher.*

**Maori's are the people who lived in New Zealand before the white people came.*



**I harness the communication: I use it for a useful purpose, like a rider does with a wild horse.*

**White people in New Zealand called the Maori's 'the New Race'. They were not used to them.*

someone singing and the break, break, break of laughter. In any case it's all expulsion of energy and as such, a help. I let anything come ... within safety; but **I use it.**

I use everything. They write their own books every morning for a start, to read when reading time comes. And the reading time... ah well, this is getting into the matter of the method again, and I'll get myself miles from what I'm talking about...*

The spirit is so wild with the lid off. I'm still learning how to let it fly and yet to discipline it. It's got to be disciplined in a way that's hard to say. It still must have its range and its wing....it must still be free to dare the gale and sing, but it's got to come home at the right time and nest in the right place. For the spirit to live its freest, the mind must acknowledge discipline. In this room anyway. In this room there is an outer discipline as well as an inner. They've got to listen to me when I speak and obey what I speak. I can only say that I don't often speak. And that I carefully weigh when I speak. But the track between these two conditions, the spiritual freedom and the outer discipline, is narrower than any tightrope and seldom can I say that I have walked it."*

*You will also find an extract from her book, which tells about her method, in the box-file in your centre.

tightrope? A rope stretching between 2 places, high up, on which acrobats, in circuses, walk



Sylvia Ashton-Warner with some of her learners.



Journal write

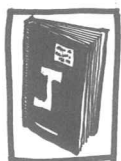
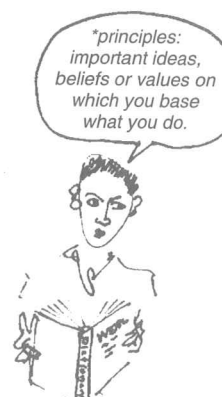
In your journal, write what you feel about the passage you have just read. What do you think about Sylvia Ashton-Warner's approach to teaching? Maybe you find it exciting and inspiring. Maybe you find it shocking – even a bit scary, perhaps!

Sylvia Ashton-Warner is using what the children bring – their interest in each other, their desire to make things, their noisiness, their energy. She is using all of this to help them to learn. This is just one of the things which is meant by **child-centredness** or **learner-centredness**. (Of course, you do not have to be exactly like Sylvia to be learner-centred. There are as many ways of being learner-centred as there are teachers. You will find your *own* way of being learner-centred.)

You will find that a lot of what we are talking about in Lomthamo is not completely new. Lomthamo will bring together many of the principles* you have been reading about in other imithamo. It will also bring together much of what you have been putting into practice in your classrooms.

In a number of the other strands you have been finding out how much young children know, and how much they can do. You have been allowing them to use that knowledge and those skills in order to learn more. You have explored ways of making the classroom and the school the kind of place that **supports** the learner's learning.

The kind of learning you have been researching is an exciting process **starting with the learner**. It is a process which involves the learner as much as possible. Because the learner is active and involved, s/he learns more effectively. This kind of learning and teaching is **'learner-centred'**.



Journal write

What thoughts, memories and experiences does the word 'learner-centred' bring to mind? Write about this in your journal. Also write about the feelings and expectations which you have as you start work on this umthamo.

Intended outcomes:

By the end of the umthamo, you will have:

- Thought about the differences between learner-centred lessons and teacher-centred lessons.
- Learned something about the history of the child-centred approach.
- Made decisions about your own practice based on these reflections.
- Planned and given a learner-centred lesson in one (or more) of a number of ways, and written a reflective report on it.



Unit 1: What is learner-centredness?

1.1 Good teaching



All the imithamo in this course are aimed towards developing your teaching skills. To start off lomthamo, we would like you to spend some time thinking about what “good teaching” is.



Activity 1.1: What is a good teacher?

1. In your journal, write your answers to the question “What is a good teacher?”
2. Now share your ideas with a partner, or in a small group at your face-to-face session. Try to reach consensus (agreement) on which are the **most important** characteristics of a good teacher. Make a list of not more than 5 points.

Keep your list of 5 characteristics in your concertina file, and look at it again when you have come to the end of the work in lomthamo.

Now let us look more closely at what is meant by the term ‘learner-centredness’. Read the 4 extracts below.



LEARNER-CENTRED AND TEACHER-CENTRED CLASSROOMS

Extract 1 (from Rogers, C. 1983. *Freedom to learn for the 80's*. Ohio: Merrill Press)

A small girl goes to school for the first time. The atmosphere is friendly and informal. Part of her fear and anxiety disappear as the teacher greets her warmly and introduces her to some of the other children.

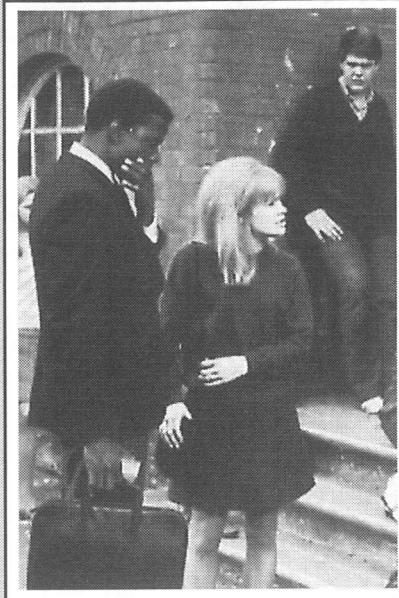
When it is time for school to begin, they sit in a circle with the teacher. She asks the children to tell of one thing they are interested in, one thing they like to do. The teacher's interest in each youngster is evident, and the little girl relaxes even more. This may be fun.

There are all kinds of interesting things in the room – books, maps, pictures, building blocks, crayons and paper, some toys – and soon the children are investigating their environment. Our small girl looks at a picture book of children in another country.

When the teacher calls them together again, she asks the girl if she could tell a little story. Our youngster starts to tell about going shopping with her mother. The teacher prints part of the story on the board and points out the words and letters. And so the day has begun.

Extract 2 (from Braithewaite, E.R. 1959. *To Sir, with love*. London: Heinemann Educational)

...there had occurred in me a new attitude, a concern to teach them for their own sakes, and a deep pleasure at every sign that I had succeeded. It was a delight to be with them, and more and more I had occasion to wonder at their generally adult view-point. I was learning a little more of them each day. Some of them would remain in the classroom during recess and we'd talk about many things.



They were mostly from large families and understood the need and importance of money; they even felt they should already be at work to help ease the financial strain on their parents, and to meet their own increasing demands for clothing, cosmetics, entertainment, etc. They spoke of overcrowding, marriage and children with casual familiarity; one girl had helped with the unexpected birth of her baby brother, and spoke of it with matronly concern.

The lessons were taking hold. I tried to relate everything academic to familiar things in their daily lives. Weights were related to foodstuffs and fuel, measurements to dress-lengths, linoleum and carpets; in this way they could see the point of it all, and were more prepared to pursue the more abstract concepts. In Geography and History we talked and read, and here I was in the very fortunate position of being able to illustrate from personal experiences. They eagerly participated, asking me questions with a keenness I had not suspected in them, and often the bell for recess, lunch or the end of the day would find us in the heat of some discussion, disinclined to leave off.

The Headmaster would occasionally drop in unexpectedly, and would sometimes find himself drawn into discussions on some point or other; he was pleased, and expressed his satisfaction with my efforts. On one such occasion I mentioned the idea of the visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Extract 3 (from Rogers, C. 1983. *Freedom to learn for the 80's*. Ohio: Merrill Press)

A small boy enters school, his first day. He is eager to go, because it is a step towards being grown up. He knows that big boys go to school. On the other hand, he is frightened. It is a strange new situation, full of fearsome possibilities. He has heard stories about school – about punishments, about exciting times, about report cards, about teachers, friendly and unfriendly. It is a scary uncertainty.

He is directed to his room. His teacher is businesslike. Here is his desk and chair, one in a straight row of desks and chairs. Here are his books, and pencils. The teacher greets the group with a smile but it seems forced. Then come the rules. He cannot leave his seat, even to go to the toilet, without first raising his hand and receiving permission. He is not to whisper or talk to his neighbours. He is to speak only when called upon. No one is to make unnecessary noise.

He thinks of yesterday. He was continually on the move, making as much noise as he pleased, shouting to his friends. School is so very different.

Then classes begin – the reading book, letters and words on the board. The teacher talks. One child is called upon and is praised for a correct response. He is called on. He makes a mistake. “Wrong! Who can give Johnny the right answer?” Hands go up, and he is soon corrected. He feels stupid. He leans over to tell his neighbour how he happened to make the mistake. He is reprimanded for talking. The teacher comes and stands by his seat to make clear that she is watching him, that he must abide by the rules.

Recess is fun – much shouting, running, some games – all too short.

Then the ordeal begins again. His body squirms, his mind wanders. Finally lunch. Not until they are all lined up in a perfectly straight row are they permitted to walk, silently, to the lunch room.

His educational career has commenced. He has already learned a great deal, though he could not put it into words.

Extract 4 Group work in the language classroom

(from ...ELTIC. 1996. *Activities for multilingual classrooms. Dite me tsa thuto activities book.*)

"I had serious problems with a Grade 9 class which did not want to take part in oral lessons. So I planned an activity involving register – the register the learners themselves use outside the school. I made the first few utterances in "tsotsi-taal" or slang as I entered the classroom. As they giggled with surprise and amusement, I explained the use of "register".*

Then I divided them into groups, and asked each group to give me a simple English sentence. Then they had to use the same sentence, but in a form firstly to suit their baby sister, then their mother/father, then their peers, and finally the principal of the school (using any language). Points were given to the groups that did well, so this motivated them to get involved constructively so as not to let the group down. I walked around checking on what was happening in the groups. I noticed that they were all actively participating and doing a lot of thinking and recalling of that which was already known to them.



Once all groups had prepared their different versions, I invited them to "perform" them for the class. There was lots of laughter as the learners recognised familiar styles of talking.

I then invited them to think about what had happened. I asked them some questions and we discussed them in the big group (the whole class). Discussing these questions helped the learners realise that there are many forms (registers) of language, as well as many languages. Each learner was competent in a number of forms. Some were also competent in a number of languages. They realised that one form (Standard English) seems to be regarded as "correct" at school, but that each of the forms is "correct", depending on where, and to whom, you are using it."

*register: different language styles used in different situations, and with different people.



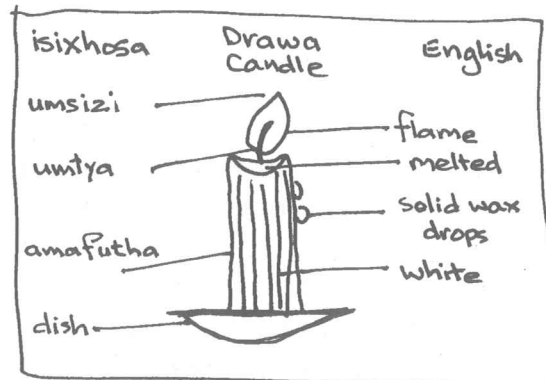


Activity 1.2: Learner-centred or teacher-centred?

In this activity, we give you a way to research what is happening in the classroom. We suggest that you note what the learners are doing, and what the teacher is doing. This will help you see whether the learners are at the centre of what is happening, and whether they are learning.

The lists in the margins show all the things the teacher does, and all the things the learners do, in the classroom situation described in *Extract 1* (page 5).

1. Read these 2 lists carefully. Is this lesson based mainly on the learners, their experience, interests and ideas? OR Is it based mainly on what the teacher wants? (i.e. Do you think it is **learner-centred** or **teacher-centred**?)
2. Now look at the other 3 extracts, and decide whether the lessons described in them are **learner-centred** or **teacher-centred**. You might want to make lists like those above to help you decide.



3. Think back to the lesson on the candle which you gave as part of 'Umthamo 11: Natural Science; What's happening here?'.

OR

Think back to the lesson on the intsonkotho which you gave as part of 'Umthamo 9: Language, Literacy and Communication: Whole Language'.

What did you (the teacher) do? What did the learners do? (Make lists, if it helps you.) Was the lesson **learner-centred** or **teacher-centred**?

4. Think back to a time when you learned something you have never forgotten. (It need not be a lesson you learned in school/ college.) What did the teacher do? Was there a teacher? What did you (the learner) do? Was the lesson **learner-centred** or **teacher-centred**?

What do the learners do?

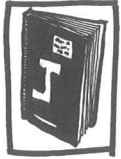
Sit in a circle with the teacher
Tell about things they are interested in, and like to do
Relax, start to have fun
Investigate an interesting environment
Look at picture books
Tell stories about themselves
Learn about words and letters from their own stories.

What does the teacher do?

Greets the learners warmly
Introduces learners to one another
Sits with learners in a circle
Asks what learners like
Takes an interest in each learner
Creates an interesting environment for the learners
Calls learners together and asks them to tell little stories
Prints parts of the stories on the board
Points to the words and letters



Reading 1 and Reading 2, on pages 28 to 35 of lomthamo give more detail about learner-centred and teacher-centred classrooms. Read the extracts carefully. Start with Reading 1. When you feel you have understood it, go on to Reading 2, if you are interested in knowing more.



Journal write

Now take out your journal. Write what you have learned about learner-centredness and teacher-centredness from the two readings. What do you think about what you have read? What do you feel about it?

Here are some of the things we have learned:

In **teacher-centred** classrooms, teachers make all the decisions about what is to be taught, and how it should be taught, referring mainly to the text-book and the syllabus. In other words, there is little focus on the learners' interests and needs, and what they bring with them to the classroom. Learners are seen as people who know very little, and who need to be filled with knowledge by the teacher. The teacher is seen as someone who knows everything. In most lessons, learners are expected to sit quietly while teachers instruct them. Learners are also expected to learn everything together, at much the same pace.

In **learner-centred** classrooms, the starting point is the learner. The way in which lessons are conducted may differ a lot from one teacher to another, but the principles remain the same:

- What is learned is related to the learners' lives, and what they already know (their prior knowledge).
- Learners, and the cultures and backgrounds they come from, are valued. They are encouraged to believe in themselves, and in their potential.
- Learners are actively engaged in learning, often working in groups, or on individual projects.
- Learners are given a chance to use their differing skills and abilities in different ways, and in co-operation with others.
- Learning does not all come from the teacher; learners are helped to find things out themselves, through reading, problem-solving, discovery.
- The environment in the classroom, and in the school, offers a variety of resources for learning, which the learners can use during class projects, or in their own time.
- Learners are involved in setting their own goals, and in evaluating what they have learned.
- Learners are seen as individuals, and expected to learn in different ways, and at different rates.



In **multigrade classrooms**, where teachers are dealing with learners from a number of grades at the same time, it is impossible to be teacher-centred all the time. If you are teacher-centred, a large number of the learners will be left out. This is why learner-centred methodologies are very useful in multigrade classrooms. And this is why *all* teachers can learn so much from the way good multigrade teachers work.



Activity 1.3: Learner-centredness in other imithamo

(This question should be dealt with in a Face-to-face session, each small group or pair dealing with a strand, or an umthamo.) Think about each of the 11 imithamo you have dealt with so far, and look at their outcomes. Think about the following questions, in relation to each:

- Does lomthamo deal with learner-centredness?
- What makes you answer “Yes” or “No”?

Make notes of your answers, so that you can report back to your fellow teacher-learners at the face-to-face session. You don’t need to write out your answers in full.

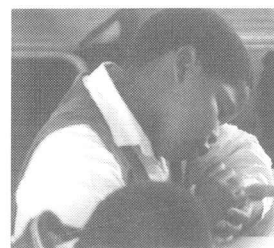
Here are 2 examples of the kinds of answers you might come up with:

Learning about Learning, Umthamo 1: What do we know about learning?

Yes, this umthamo does deal with learner-centredness. I answer ‘yes’ because this umthamo shows us how much small children know. It reminds us that they are learning all the time, building on ‘prior knowledge’. A learner-centred teacher will start with what the learner already knows, and use the learner’s natural learning talents.

Learning in the World, Umthamo 1: The Role of Education

No, this umthamo is not about learner-centredness. It helps us find out what different people think the aims of education are. Some aims seem more learner-centred than others. The umthamo does have learner-centred sides, though. For instance, it asks us to find out what the learners themselves think about the aims of education.



The Learner-centred classroom

A number of readings that you have been given describe learner-centred classrooms. Learning takes place in this kind of classroom even when a formally-planned lesson is not taking place. Learners are free to read books and other reading material. They observe and experiment with things. They make things. At times, they work independently, or in groups or pairs, at Activity Centres*. At times, the 'classroom' (i.e. the space where learners learn) extends outside its walls – into the garden, the school yard, the veld, the community. Community members (parents, grandparents, community members) may come into the classroom at certain times to share their knowledge and give assistance.

Activity Centres are areas of the classroom where learners are encouraged to learn a certain subject. (The background to pages 30 and 31 shows activity centres in a classroom.) At these areas learners find the materials needed for the activities of one subject with which they can work independently. Activity Centres can be a fixed feature in your classroom, changing the materials as needed from time to time. You can make activity centres for Languages, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, Geography and History and allow the different groups to rotate around them. Groups could consist of learners of the same grade, but also of different grades in certain subjects. (Multigrade Handbook)

Activity 1.4: What might you find in a learner-centred classroom?

1. Read Reading 1 (pages 29 to 31) carefully again. It describes a learner-centred classroom. Make a list of the kinds of things that the writer mentions which are in the classroom.
2. Think of other readings you have read (e.g. Extract 1 in this umthamo, readings in the last 'Learning about Learning' umthamo, readings from the Natural Science imithamo). What has been brought into classrooms in those readings? What has been made by learners in those lessons? Add to your list things which are not yet there.
3. Now think of lessons you have given during this course, and before you started the course. Think of your own classroom. What resources are in your classroom which learners can learn from, or which learners have made? Add to your list, if you have thought of extra items.



We will talk more about 'Resources for Learning' in the next umthamo in this strand.



Unit 2: Some history of learner-centredness



Read the reading below which tells some of the history of the learner-centred approach.

The idea of child-centred education is probably as old as time itself. The first Western philosopher to write about it, however, was a Frenchman called **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, who wrote a book called 'Emile' in 1762. This book was about the education of an imaginary young boy called Emile. Rousseau rejected schools. He believed that human beings were naturally good. Emile would be educated in a rural environment, far from the corrupting influences of the city. Emile's education would be individualised, especially designed to fit the natural stages of his development. It would follow his natural interests, the things he was ready to learn. He would learn by discovery as he interacted with the natural environment. Only after the age of 15 would he be exposed to book learning.



An article in the box file at your centre tells about Rousseau.

Rousseau's theories were very influential, and inspired educationists and philosophers who followed him. **Pestalozzi** was one of these. He had his own school, based on the ideas of Rousseau. He believed that children must learn by activity and doing. The life of the imagination should also be encouraged. Pestalozzi introduced picture books and even text books into his educational plans.

A contemporary of Pestalozzi, who later became even more influential, was **Froebel**. He believed that all that was learned should be part of a whole. Education should not be divided up into separate subjects and parts. This was the beginning of 'the integrated curriculum'. Education should aim at the unity of all things. Froebel focused on the importance of painting and other forms of art. He believed in the value of games and play in the development of the child. He introduced toys and teaching aids into the classroom.

The next great mind to join the cause of child-centred education was **John Dewey**, an American lecturer in Philosophy in the early 1900's. He was highly thought of as an intellectual, and gave respectability to the idea of learner-centredness.

Like Rousseau, he felt that much learning could take place in simple rural societies. However, he differed from Rousseau in an important way. He emphasised the fact that children are social beings. They learn largely through social interaction. American society consisted of people from every part of the world. Dewey was interested in welding them into one community. He was especially interested in the contribution that education could make to democracy.

He, and his follower, **Kilpatrick**, introduced project work in schools. Children worked together in groups, engaged in projects which related school to everyday life. They ran their own shops, made gardens, produced plays. Dewey's influence on education in America was great. His ideas spread across the globe, and were implemented as far away from home as Russia and China.

In the box file at your centre, you will find an article by Dewey on 'Education as Growth'.

In the period between the two great wars (1918 – 1939) interest in child-centredness grew. A movement called the **New Education Fellowship** was founded, made up of many different educationists, who were critical of traditional ways. Among the movements started in those days which still exist today were the **Rudolf Steiner** schools and **Montessori** schools. **A.S. Neill** was another unusual educationist whose school 'Summerhill' became very well known. His ideas were revolutionary. Young people had wide-ranging freedoms, and the school was governed democratically by all who belonged to it. A six-year old had the same vote as the Principal. All these new experiments helped people look again at assumptions about education that they had never questioned before.

It was in the 1960's, however, that child-centred education came of age. Two important reports came out in Scotland (**'Primary Education in Scotland'**, 1965) and in England (**'The Plowden Report: Children and their Primary Schools'**, 1967). Other European countries soon followed suit. The British reports brought child-centredness into the educational policy for all primary schools. They emphasised:

- The importance of catering for individual differences,
- The benefits of group methods, skillfully used,
- The importance of teaching attitudes and approaches to learning, as well as knowledge,
- Learning which involves discovery, activity and experience,
- An integrated curriculum, rather than separate subjects,
- Sensitivity to the felt needs and interests of the child,
- Understanding of the ways in which children grow and learn,
- An approach to education which treats children as children, and not as future adults,
- An approach which offers children choices,
- Schools should be places where children learn to live and develop as persons.

By the mid-1970's, a majority of primary teachers in the United Kingdom had absorbed child-centredness into their personal philosophy of education. A number of important writers took up the cause of child-centredness in the '60's and beyond. Three of these are: **John Holt** (Britain), **Carl Rogers** (America), and **Sylvia Ashton-Warner** (New Zealand).

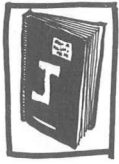
Since the '60's, critics of the child-centred approach have arisen in Britain, and certain practices have now been re-introduced which have moved the schools back in the direction of teacher-centredness. In the meantime, learner-centredness has been written into educational policy in South Africa.

One of the passages in the box file at your centre tells about Summerhill.

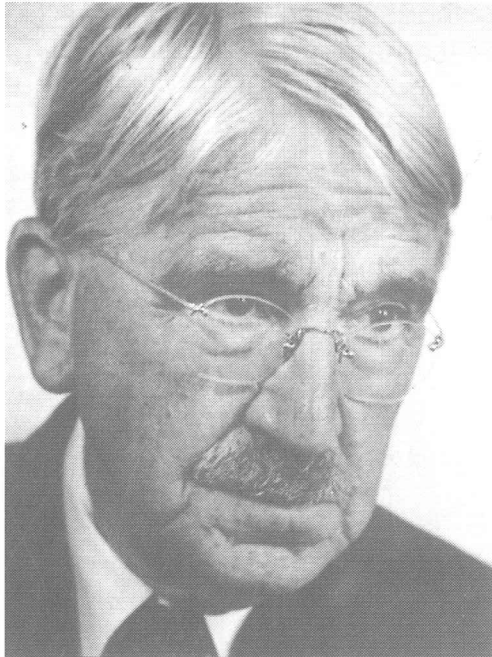
You have already read an extract from Ashton-Warner. In the box-file in your centre you will find another extract from her book. You will also find an article by Carl Rogers, and a summary of some of the ideas of John Holt.

The book 'Child-centred Education and its critics' gives the history of the rise of child-centredness. It also looks at the criticisms which have been made of child-centredness, to see whether they have validity. This book has been ordered for the centres.

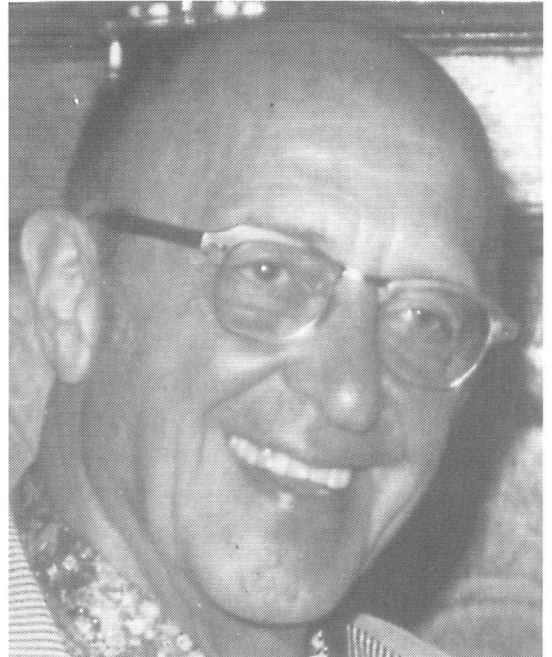
Read and Journal write



Your centre has a box file containing a number of readings on the child-centred educationists described above. Borrow one of these readings and read it. When you have finished reading the article, take out your journal. Write about the things that have impressed you in what you have read. Write also about the things that have shocked or surprised you. Record your feelings about what you have read. Perhaps there is something you have read that will change your classroom practice. Write about that too.



John Dewey



Carl Rogers



A.S. Neill and four Summerhill pupils



Unit 3: Different ways of being learner-centred

We have looked briefly at a number of writers and practitioners of 'learner-centredness'. Although they had much in common, they also differed greatly from one another. At times they criticised one another's approaches.

There are **many ways of being learner-centred**. A lesson can be learner-centred even if the children are sitting reasonably quietly in rows and listening to the teacher. A lesson where learners are sitting and doing tasks in groups could be teacher-centred. What matters is whether the learners are at the centre of the teaching or whether the teacher is teaching without much reference to the learners. It all depends on the attitude of the teacher, and the value, or importance, that the teacher gives to the learners.

If you look back at the extracts on pages 5 to 8, you can see a number of ways of being learner-centred. The teacher in Extract 1 deals with the children in one group. She asks each about her interests, and asks each to tell her own story. She also gives them time to explore their environment independently. The teacher in Extract 2 teaches the class as a whole. He tries to relate their learning to what they know, and shares experiences with them. The teacher in Extract 4 groups the learners, and draws on their own knowledge; their own language resources.

Think about your own teaching.

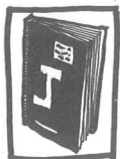
I am sure you can remember days when all that mattered to you was to get through the syllabus. You did not care much about how the learners felt, or whether they were learning. On that day, you were teacher-centred.

Think of those days when you were really in tune with your learners. You were aware of their feelings and their needs. You knew how much each one was understanding. You were able to respond to the needs of particular individuals. On that day, you were learner-centred. It doesn't matter that you were not using group work or activity methods. If you were focused on your learners, you were a learner-centred teacher.

Journal write

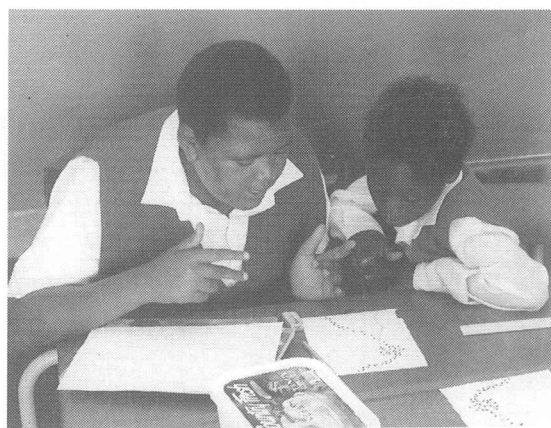
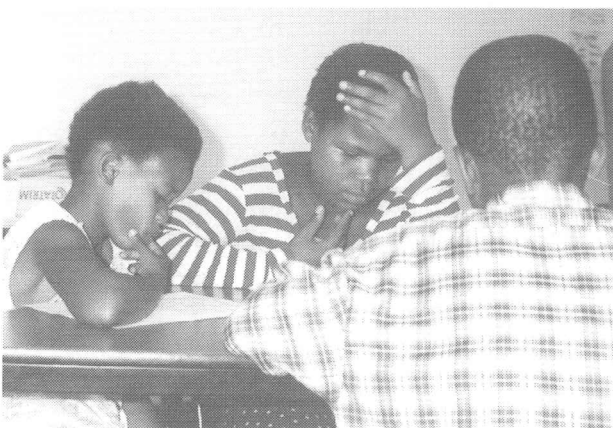
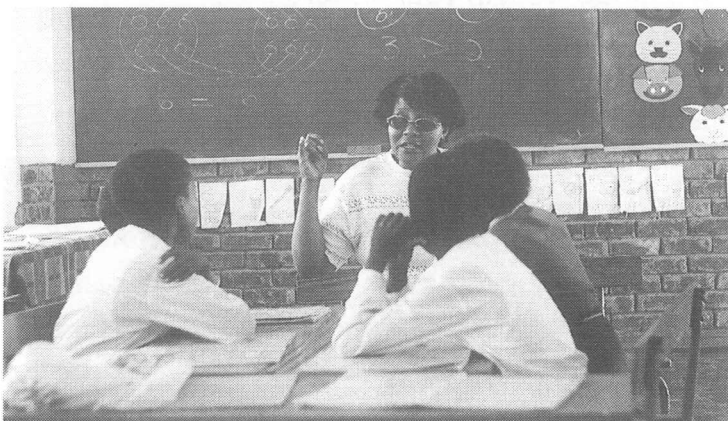
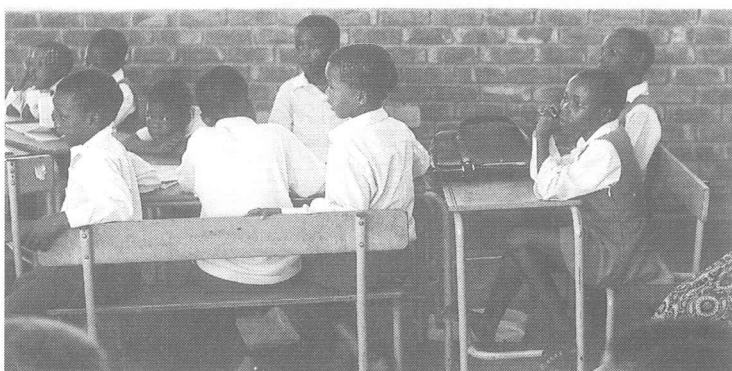
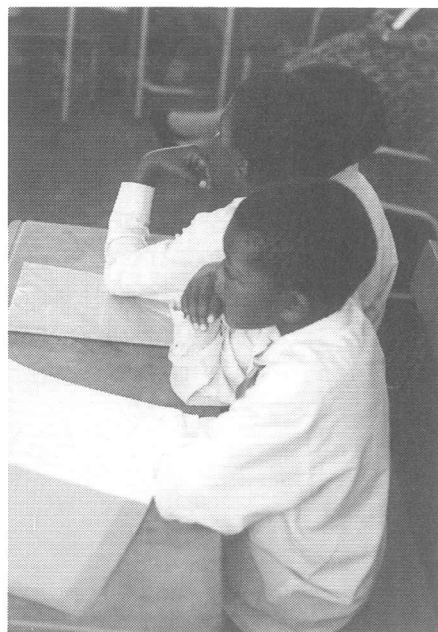
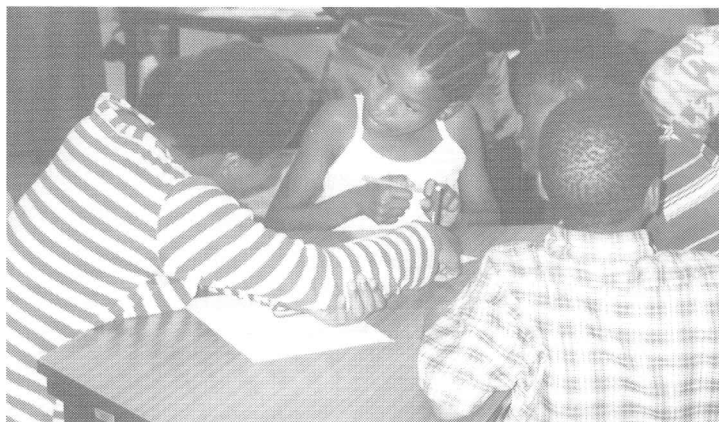
Write down your thoughts about your own lessons. When are you learner-centred? When are you teacher-centred? In what ways would you like to change?

Most of the time, you are probably partly learner-centred and partly teacher-centred in your lessons. It is important that you should move towards becoming more learner-centred.



Look at the pictures on this page.

Do you think that what is happening in each classroom is learner-centred or teacher-centred?



There are certain classroom practices which help you create a learner-centred environment. We are going to consider a number of these now. (Of course, these are not the *only* ways of being learner-centred.)

3.1 Group work

We discussed group work in the last 'Helping Learners Learn' umthamo, 'Classroom management: Group work'. Group work gives each learner an opportunity to be actively involved and to participate in the lesson. You will remember that this is the most important reason for using group work in your classroom. You will also remember that we noted the fact that grouping the learners in your class doesn't always result in true interactive group work.



We (the writers) know that you probably experienced some difficulties when you used group work in your classrooms.

- Maybe you (or other teachers in your school) were uncomfortable with the noise levels in the room when learners were working in groups.
- Maybe you found it difficult to create a truly interactive task.
- Maybe you found it hard to control the learners when they were in groups.
- Maybe you divided your learners into ability groups. Maybe you have found (as the 'Learning about Learning' umthamo suggested), that the learners in your 'weaker' group have started seeing themselves as stupid.
- Maybe, on the other hand, you mixed abilities in the groups, and certain learners dominated.

Activity 3.1: Overcoming difficulties

1. Make a list of the difficulties you experienced. (If you experienced none, congratulations! You can help other learners with the next part of the activity.)
2. Now think about ways of overcoming those difficulties next time you use group work. Write your ideas down.
3. Share your difficulties, and your solutions, with other teacher-learners at the face-to-face session.



3.2 Open-ended questions



Another way of being learner-centred is to ask open-ended questions. The next activity gives you a chance to think about different ways of questioning. In preparation for it, read **Extracts 5 and 6** below.

WAYS OF ASKING QUESTIONS

Extract 5

Teacher: (*writing the word "fungus" on the board*) A fungus is a plant that has no roots, stems, leaves or flowers. Class, what is a fungus?

Class: (*mumbles*) A fungus is a plant that has no (*mumble, mumble, mumble*)

Teacher: (*writes on the board "no roots, stems, leaves or flowers"*) A fungus is a plant that has no roots, stems, leaves or flowers. Class, what is a fungus?

Class: A fungus is a plant that has no roots, stems, leaves or flowers.

Teacher: Good. Lungi, what is a fungus?

Lungi: A fungus is a plant that has no roots, leaves, stems or flowers.

Teacher: Bread-mould is an example of a fungus. Class, give me an example of a fungus.

Class: Bread-mowed.

Teacher: No, bread-mould. Haven't you seen bread-mould growing on bread when it is old? Sandisile, have you seen bread-mould on bread?

Sandisile: Yes, ma'am.

Teacher: Sandisile, say "bread-mould".

Sandisile: Bread-mould.

Teacher: Class, say "Bread-mould". (*Writes "bread-mould" on the board.*)

Extract 6

Teacher: If we want to compare insects with humans, how might we go about it?

James: You could look at the shape and compare the two.

Teacher: Yes, any other ways?

Ann: You know what a person is like inside, you could dissect a butterfly or other insect and look at its inside.

Teacher: Fine, - anything else?

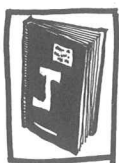
John: You could watch its life-style and compare it with your own – what it eats, where it lives and so on.

Teacher: Well, there are three suggestions. They all mean we have to observe something. Let's take the butterfly specimen and deduce from it what we can. Teresa, can you tell me something about this creature, something which makes it different from us?

Teresa: It's got wings.

Teacher: Fine, what might that tell you about its lifestyle?

(from Kerry, T. 1982. *Effective questioning*. Hampshire: Macmillan Education)



Journal write

Write in your journal, comparing the two teachers above. What do you think about these two teachers? How do you feel about the way they work?

Extract 5 gives examples of closed questions. *Extract 6* gives some examples of open-ended questions. Do you think the open-ended questions are more learner-centred than the closed questions? Why?

An open-ended question does not have only one answer, and even the teacher does not know all the possible answers to it. Closed questions, on the other hand, have a specific required answer. The answer could be “Yes” or “No”, or it could be the information the teacher has just given, e.g. “Bread-mould is an example of a fungus. Class, what is an example of a fungus?” Answer: “Bread-mould.”

Open-ended questions give learners an opportunity to use their minds, and to give their own ideas. The teacher who asks open-ended questions shows confidence that the learners have something to offer, and have minds that think. He also shows that he believes each learner has something different to offer, and that learners can learn from one another.

Closed questions indicate that the teacher has no confidence that the learners have ideas of their own. The teacher seems to believe that, unless she gives the learners the answers, they will have no answers.

Clearly, there are many things that young learners do not yet know. However, they have some experience, and they can do a lot. You proved that for yourselves in the first umthamo of ‘Learning about Learning’. They also have the ability to observe, and to learn from what they see. Maths and Science imithamo have made use of these abilities. A learner-centred teacher will make use of the young learner’s experience, knowledge and skills.



Activity 3.2: Ask your learners open-ended questions

Think about a lesson you are going to teach tomorrow. Make up 3 or 4 open-ended questions to use in that lesson. Remember, the questions must have a number of possible answers. Your learners should be able to answer them in ways that you have never thought of. They should be questions which allow each child to answer in his/her own way.

When you give this lesson, remember, or take notes of the answers which your learners give. After the lesson, write out the answers neatly on a sheet of paper. Put the sheet of paper in your concertina file. Share your answers with other teachers at the face-to-face session.





An optional activity

If you can, find a colleague to work with on this activity.

Think of a learner-centred way to teach the lesson on *fungi*, part of which is described in *Extract 5* (on page 19). We realise that many of you are not teaching at a Grade 7 level. However, you can offer ideas on how the topic could be approached in a learner-centred way. Write a description of the approach you suggest.

In the margin is an extract from the text-book on which the lesson was based.

What have we learnt?

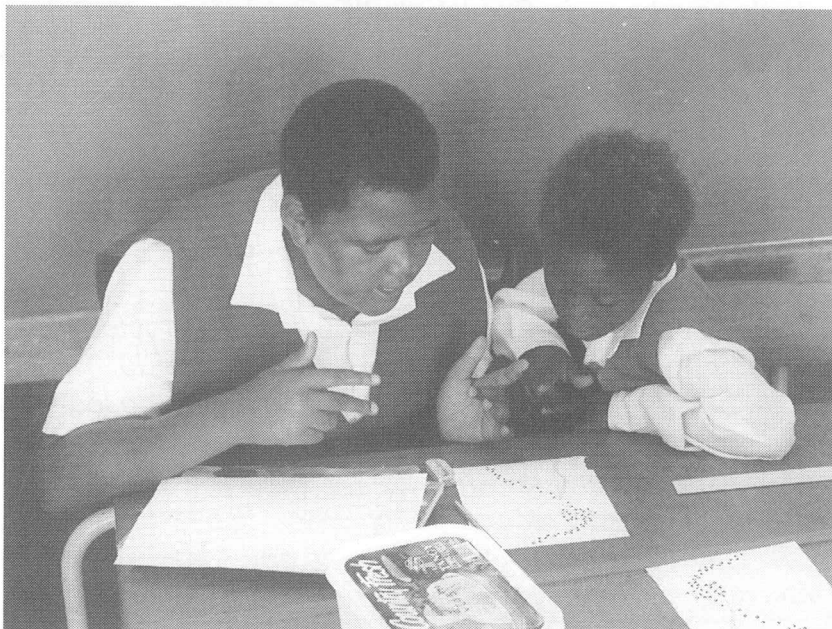
1. A fungus is a plant that has no roots, stems, leaves or flowers.
2. Bread mould consists of a number of fine greyish-white threads known as hyphae.
3. Fungi are not green.
4. They contain no chlorophyll.
5. They obtain food from other plants or animals.
6. Bread mould grows on old bread.
7. A mass of hyphae form a mycelium.
8. Some hyphae penetrate into the bread and absorb food.
9. Some hyphae grow upwards.
10. They are known as sporangiophores.
11. They bear sporangia.
12. Spores develop in the sporangia.
13. Spores divide and grow into new plants.

(Fourie, D.I., et al. 1985. *Exploring General Science 5*. Goodwood: Via Afrika Ltd.)

3.3 Peer learning

In the latest 'Learning about Learning' umthamo, the writers gave some attention to the question, "How do I cope with differences in ability in my classroom?" In order to be learner-centred, you have to have the interests of every learner in mind. You need to create an environment in your classroom in which it is possible for every learner to learn. This needs to happen in spite of the fact that some are younger than others, some quicker than others, some good at speaking, others good at writing, some shy, and others confident. This is quite a tall order!

The writers of 'Learning about Learning' have suggested peer learning as one way of coping. Read the description of peer learning (or peer tutoring) below, which is taken from the **Multigrade Handbook*. After the description of peer learning, you can read about some people who used it during our Multigrade research, how they used it, and what they experienced.



**This book is still in draft form. It is being developed by our project (The Fort Hare Distance Education Project). Once it is complete, we will put a copy in each Centre Library, where you can borrow it and learn from it. This handbook reports on other methodologies which can help teachers to be more learner-centred. Some of these are: Pair learning, Activity centres, and Project work. We will be discussing some of these in other imithamo.*

Do you teach a 'multigrade' class? If you would like to be part of our multigrade project, tell your Centre Co-ordinator. He or she will give your name to Adi Kwelemtini, our Schools Liaison officer.



Peer tutoring can take two forms:

- Older learners (higher grades) teach younger learners;
- Faster learners help slower learners (in the same grade).

Peer tutoring has the following advantages:

- It gives the educator time to deal with other problems;
- It is a way of multiplying skills and encourages brighter learners to exercise their gifts;
- Learners benefit by teaching something. They learn to understand it better themselves;
- Learners develop maturity as a result of responsibility placed upon them; and
- Slower learners feel freer to express their feelings than when an educator is present.

Peer tutoring is not restricted to information lessons, but it can also include practical skills such as ploughing in the vegetable garden and social behaviour such as road safety or first aid.

Things to watch out for in peer tutoring

- Educators must prepare the learners who are tutoring;
- Peer tutoring should not take too long, so that their own work doesn't suffer;
- Some tutors may feel superior. They must help others humbly and with respect; and
- Parents need to understand what is happening and must be informed of peer tutoring.

Teachers' experiences with peer tutoring

Ms Mapuma and Ms Ntoshe identified that they didn't have enough time for slower learners and decided to use peer teaching.

Ms Mapuma used it for the concept of communication (History), plurals in English and Dairy Cattle in Agriculture.

Ms Ntoshe applied it in the topics time (Mathematics, using clock faces, number cards and flash cards) and containers (English).

Some materials were obtained from the Inservice Centre (wall charts), others were made by the educators (number cards and flash cards).

They prepared the relevant materials and instructed the faster learners on what they were expected to do. They both, but also their colleagues, observed that the learners were not confident at first, but later the slower learners became freer than when the educator is around. The learners learned to respect each other. The faster learners worked hard to be chosen and so developed maturity and responsibility. (January 1999. G. Mathot for the DEP)



3.4 On-going classroom research: profiling the learner

In a number of other imithamo, you have carried out research. Here is a research idea which can help you to be more learner-centred.

In the first “Learning about Learning” umthamo, the idea was introduced of keeping a book, with a page (or 2, or 4 pages!) set aside for each learner, on which you note down special things you notice about that particular learner.

In the second “Learning about Learning” umthamo, you observed one particular learner who was struggling, and made detailed notes about this learner and your attitude towards her/him (The box in the margin reminds you of this activity.)

We can call this kind of activity “Profiling the Learner”. A “profile” is a picture of a person’s face, from the side. In other words, when you “profile” someone, you are building up a “word-picture” of this person.

“Profiling” your learners is a wonderful way of making sure that you remain learner-centred, focused on the learner as an individual. The pictures you build up can help you understand the learners, see where their strengths and talents lie, and what are the things that they find difficult. It can help you decide in what areas the learners need special attention, in what ways they could help other learners, or what special contributions they could make to lessons.

The kinds of things you might write down on these pages could include:

- What can this learner do well?
- What languages/ language varieties can s/he speak?
- What special talents has s/he shown?
- What things does s/he find difficult?
- When does s/he look unhappy/ uncomfortable?
- How does s/he relate to other learners?
- Are there any important things in the home background which impact on his/her learning?
- Does s/he have special experiences or contacts which could be resources for learning? (e.g. There might be someone in a particular learner’s family who is a craftsman or woman, making baskets, wheels, jerseys, pots, paintings, etc. The learner could tell what s/he has learned from this person, or invite the person to the class.)

Observing a Learner

First of all, think about your learners. Think of one of your learners who is struggling. Think of this learner’s problem.

Start by writing a brief description of your learner. Write down the sex, age, and a little bit about the height and physique of this person. If you know how many brothers and sisters the child has, include that information. If you know his or her position in the family (for example, fourth child of six children), include that, too. And if you know something about the family circumstances, which you can record briefly, and sensitively, do so.

After that, describe your learner’s problem. Think carefully about what it is that this learner struggles with. Why do you think this learner is struggling? What might be the cause? Then write down what you think in response to these questions.

For the last paragraph, write something about how you feel about this learner. What is your attitude towards this learner? What do you like? What do you find difficult?

Try to observe this learner at least two or three times a week. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you communicate with this person?
- How do the children communicate with this learner?
- Does this learner communicate with you? If so, how does he or she do so? If not, why do you think this is?
- What does this learner do well? What are his or her **strengths**?
- What does this learner seem to struggle with? What are his or her **weaknesses**?



The profile that you built up in the last 'Learning about Learning' umthamo ('Learning at School') was very detailed. You may not need to build such detailed profiles for every learner in your class. However, try to make sure that you observe every learner. We suggest that you carry a small note-book or piece of paper with you every day. Every day, try to write something down about 6-10 of your learners. Here are some examples:

"Xoliswa seemed to be taking the lead in her group today. Her confidence is growing."

"Simphiwe has been very quiet lately. Maybe he's depressed about something. Must try to find out why"

"Ayanda loves drawing. She drew a beautiful snake today, and seemed very happy about it."

At the end of the day transfer the comments into your book. Look at your book to see which learners have the fewest comments. Make a decision to observe them carefully and write something about them the following day.

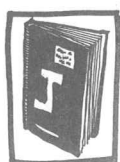
At certain times, you might decide to make a special study of a particular learner, as you did in the last 'Learning about Learning' umthamo. This might be because you want to understand why this learner is having difficulty with learning. It might also be because you feel your attitude towards a particular learner is negative. You may want to understand this learner better. Hopefully, this will help you to change your attitude.

As the year progresses, you will gradually build up a fuller picture of each learner. This "profile" helps you to plan in a way which addresses the needs of each of your learners. It also becomes part of the process of continuous assessment. It will enable you to report in a complete and thorough way, at short notice, to parents, or anyone else.



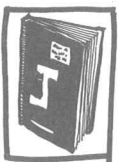
Activity 3.4: A 'Profile book'

Start a 'profile book' for your class, if you are a class teacher. If you are a subject teacher, start a 'profile book' for your register class. Bring it to your face-to-face session to share with other teacher-learners.



Journal write

How do you feel about this idea of "profiling" the learner? Does it seem like a lot of work? Does it seem like an impossible ideal? Do you feel it could help you in your teaching? Do you think it could help your learners in their learning? Write down your thoughts and feelings.



Key Activity (Part 1)

Questions about learner-centredness

1. (On your own) Think back over all that you have done in this umthamo. In your journal, write down some questions. These are questions which, from now on, you will use every day. You will ask yourself these questions when you reflect on what has happened in your classes. You will ask yourself these questions when you reflect on your Key Activity lesson (see below). The questions should help you decide how learner-centred you have been.

Here are two examples of the kind of questions we are thinking of:

- *Have I made my learners feel valued today?*
- *Have I provided for the differences between the learners in my class?*

Try to make up a set of questions which will help you reflect on your practice as fully as possible.

2. (At the face-to-face session) Share your questions with the members of your small group. Try to improve your set of questions by learning from one another. We suggest that each teacher-learner should end up with a set of about 6 or 8 questions.





Key Activity (Part 2)

Choose a lesson you are planning to give your learners some time next week, and plan to teach it **in a learner-centred way**. (This is something which you will be doing every day from now on!)

Make sure that you base what you teach on the learners' prior knowledge. However, make sure that this is a lesson in which ***your learners will learn something new***. Make sure, too, that you make this a lesson which is ***a new experience for you***, as well. (Please don't teach a revision lesson, or one you've taught many times before!)

Use any combination of management styles in your lesson (whole class, groups, pairs, or individual work).

Make sure you use *at least one* of the following:

- Open-ended questions;
- Group work;
- Peer learning

If you use group work, make sure that you give the learners a truly interactive task. The information about interactive tasks from the last 'Helping Learners Learn' umthamo is re-printed in the margin.

A. Write a plan for your lesson, under the headings suggested below.

PLAN

1. **Title of lesson**
2. **Grade and class**
3. **Outcomes** (The knowledge, skills or attitudes which you expect the learners to have by the end of the lesson)
4. **Stages of the lesson:** What will happen at each stage.
5. **Classroom management:** What classroom management style have you chosen for each stage, and why will this style lead to effective learning.
6. **Learner-centredness:** What will make the lesson learner-centred? (You may need to answer this for each stage.)

Setting up an interactive task

Types of activity which take advantage of the interactive and co-operative features of group work are tasks which involve and encourage one of the following:

- Discussion
- Problem-solving
- Drama and other creative projects where the pooling of "bright ideas" can help
- Field-work
- Experiments
- Project work

In an interactive task, group members work together co-operatively, each one making a contribution of his/her own towards the completion of the task. (Examples of interactive tasks are given in the group work umthamo, pages 17 & 18)

PTO for B



B. In your journal, write down your *feelings* before the lesson.

C. Once you have given the lesson, think about it, and write a reflective report. In this report, you will ask yourself the question, "Was my lesson learner-centred?" Use the questions you developed in Part 1 of the key activity (page 26) to structure your report. Write each question down, and then answer it with reference to the lesson.

We have used the two questions we suggested to write the beginning of a reflective report on the lesson in Extract 4 (page 8).

Reflective Report on Lesson on Register given to Grade 9

Have I made my learners feel valued today?

Yes, I think so. They were able to use their knowledge of the language used in the township. This made them feel that their knowledge was valuable. Most of them got a chance to 'perform'. They were applauded for this.

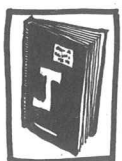
The only person who seemed to feel left out was Manuel. He is Portuguese, and does not live in the same area as the others. I think he felt rather worthless, because people didn't relate to his language. It often happens that he is left out. I must think of ways to 'value' him and his experience as well. He probably needs more individual attention than the others do.

Have I provided for the differences between the children in my class?

To a large extent, yes. Learners who are usually unwilling to take part, because they can't speak English well, could contribute. Shy people contributed. Learners with poor writing skills could show off their oral skills. Learners usually considered 'naughty' contributed. They could play a role by teaching the others 'tsotsi-taal'. Once again, the person I failed to provide for was Manuel.

(Remember, your report will answer more questions than this!)

D. Now write in your journal again. Write about your feelings after the lesson. Also write down *what you have learned* about learner-centredness through planning and giving this lesson. Don't forget to include any *questions or doubts* which you may have.



Conclusion



Now that we have almost completed the umthamo, we can go back to our ideas about what a good teacher is. Look at the list of characteristics which your group drew up. See whether you still agree with the points.

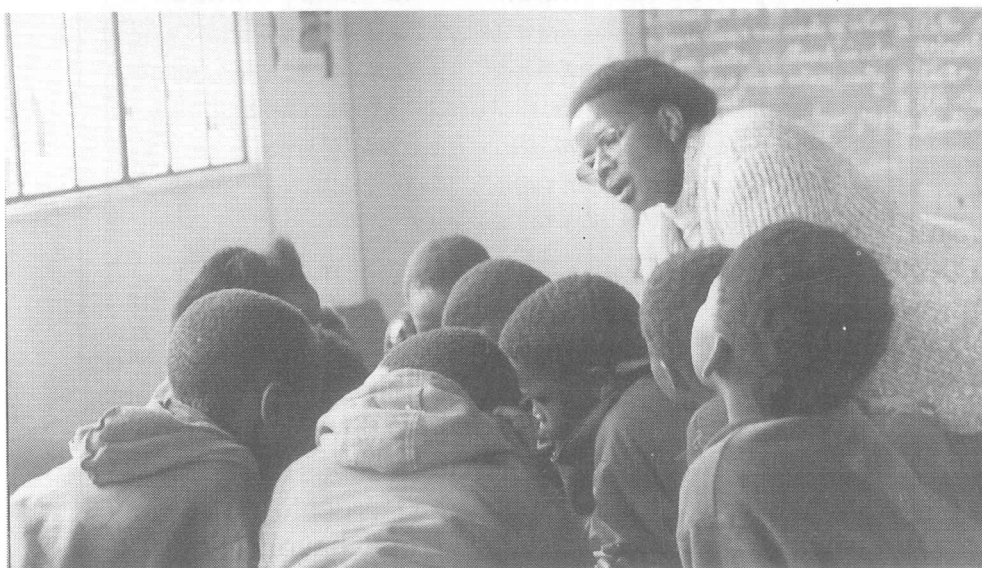
What we (the writers) would say is that a good teacher is one who enables learners to learn effectively. This usually means that the good teacher helps learners to “make sense of the world” for themselves, by helping them to relate new knowledge and concepts to what they already know. In order to do this successfully, the good teacher will need to genuinely care about each individual learner, and value him or her.

Another way of saying this is that a good teacher is “learner-centred”. Whatever she teaches, and however she teaches, her starting point is: “Where do these learners come from? What is important to them in their world? What do they already know? What makes sense to them? What do they need to know? How can I help them to link what they know to what they are going to learn? How can I help them discover things for themselves? How can I use their natural energy and curiosity? How can I help to build their confidence, and believe in their potential to learn and grow and do?”



Journal write

Think about your classroom, and your class. Write about them in your journal. Now that you have worked through lomthamo, what would you like *your* classroom to look like? What kinds of things will happen in *your* learner-centred classroom? Are you planning to make changes as a result of lomthamo? How do you feel about all this?





READING 1:

LEARNER-CENTREDNESS AND TEACHER-CENTREDNESS

(from Farrant, J.S. 1980. *Principles and Practice of Education*. Singapore: Longman)

Child-centred education

A number of misconceptions exist about the term **child-centred education**. Some people seem to think that it is a kind of child power movement where children virtually control what goes on in the schools. Others think of it as an over-sentimental attitude towards children that gives them unwarranted and damaging importance in the school. In fact, child-centred education is neither sentimental nor child-controlled. It is simply a realistic response to what we know about children, their development, interests and characteristics.

In a primary school where child-centred education is practised, you will notice that the classrooms have a lot of playthings in them and children have a good deal of choice over what they do at any particular time, though this does not mean they do as they please. They are free to move about their classrooms if they need to. There is quiet work going on in some rooms, but in others there is a buzz of activity. Most of the children are clearly enjoying themselves as they work on their own or in groups. No one is bored. The children are encouraged to think for themselves and express themselves in various ways. Some are telling other groups about something they have just discovered or explaining some difficulty that cropped up in the assignment they were set. Some are writing about things they have seen, while others are painting or making models of them. Others may be learning other ways of communicating, such as how to express through their bodies what they have in their minds.

The basic skills are not ignored. They are learned in contexts that are meaningful to the children. Instead of learning the rules of number by memorisation, they do so perhaps by running a market stall in the classroom where goods are displayed with written notices, quantities are weighed, volumes and lengths are measured, costs are calculated, money is paid and change is given. Children learn how to get on with one another, how to control their emotions, how to act as leaders and make decisions.

Children learn the meaning of time and how to tell it by doing jobs where time is important. They check on the clock to see if they have kept to the time or exceeded it.

In such a school, learning is going on all the time, some of it *directly* from the teacher or through the activities, and some of it *indirectly* from the classroom surroundings. Children do not have to wait until the teacher can attend to them; nor do they have to sit still if they finish their work before their companions, for if there are books to choose from or other assignments they can undertake. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly. A changing variety of things is always on display to stimulate their natural curiosity. Materials are readily available for them to experiment with and to exercise their imagination. There are growing plants and pets in the school for which each child learns to care and experience responsibility under adult supervision.

In child-centred education, teachers are certainly not sentimental about their pupils nor do they let them do as they like; but they do respect their pupils' individuality and try to enable each one to fulfil his potential. For their part, the children feel that what they are doing is important and worthwhile and gain a sense of satisfaction from all that they do in school.

Teacher-centred education

Teacher-centred education employs the teacher literally in the role of director of studies and works on the assumption that, in all matters of learning, "the teacher knows best". It focuses attention on what is taught rather than the child who is taught so that education is seen more as "working through the syllabus" than trying to help each child develop his potential. There is also an emphasis on teaching rather than on learning.

The main characteristics of teacher-centred education are that

- teachers act as essential links between the child and what he is learning
- teachers select what the children learn, the methods by which they learn and the pace at which they learn
- teachers see their role as communicating knowledge to their pupils as efficiently as possible
- teachers spend most of their time actually teaching
- pupils get the impression they can learn only when their teacher is present and teaching
- pupils tend to be regarded as more or less uniform groups of learners rather than as individuals with different gifts and needs

Unfortunately, many schools still practise teacher-centred education in the belief that child-centred education attributes to the child a position that is bad for discipline. Moreover, they claim that child-centred education lacks any commitment to serious learning and that its methods lead to chaos in the classroom. On the other hand they think that their own approach ensures that high educational standards are maintained.

Teacher-centred education assumes *formal* styles of education with instruction directed to the whole class. Children usually sit in regular rows, working at the same exercises at the same time. In sharp contrast, child-centred education encourages *informal* activities in the classroom with children exercising a good deal of choice in what they do and when they do it.

With good teachers, the contrast between the different approaches is more apparent than real, for they use something of both. Even where teachers use these contrasting approaches, it is not a case of teaching being strict in one and free-and-easy in the other, for both, in fact, are carefully structured. The teacher's control may be more obvious in the case of the teacher-centred approach; nevertheless, in child-centred education the teacher carefully plans the options so that they satisfy the immediate learning needs of each pupil. The real distinction lies rather, between whose interests are best served by what goes on in the classroom – the teacher's or the pupils'.



READING 2: CHILD-CENTRED EDUCATION

(adapted from Darling, John. 1994. *Child-centred Education and its critics*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.)

This chapter describes child-centred education in fairly common-sense school-related terms...

Suppose that a primary school is visited by someone whose only previous experience of primary education has been as a pupil in the 1950's or earlier. The first thing to surprise such a visitor would probably be the sound emerging from such a school. Primary education used to be conducted in silence: all that could be heard were teachers' voices. Today there are audible signs of activity and discussion. Entering a classroom, today's visitor sees that children are sitting round tables or have their desks pushed together in a way that makes conversation easier. The teacher recognises that people are naturally sociable. It is unnecessary, much of the time, to prevent learners from talking. The teacher may also view learner interaction as educational. People learn by 'working together'. Traditional forms of schooling tended to neglect this skill except on the games field.

There is a second way in which communication has become easier. Teachers are less likely to be *held in awe** by their pupils than they used to be. The barrier between teacher and learner is smaller. This means that learners are less reluctant to ask for help with difficulties. At the same time, they can make decisions and take initiatives on their own without fear of punishment. They do not need permission to move from their seats for *legitimate** purposes. For instance, they can get up to look for information from books in the class library. More generally, the absence of fear means that it is easier for the teacher to build good personal relationships with the pupils...

Child-centred (or 'progressive') educational theory has arisen from dissatisfaction with traditional practice. Before we can describe child-centred education effectively, we need to think about the traditional, subject-centred, teacher-directed approach to education. We need to look at it as it is seen by progressives themselves. In terms of curriculum content it involves the teaching of basic skills in language and mathematics. This is followed by instruction in a range of established school subjects. Mastery of factual information is emphasised. Traditional teaching methods involve the teacher giving information on the

*held in awe:
respected and
feared



*legitimate:
lawful, allowed



subject and instructing the whole class as once. Pupil motivation depends on competition, or else the willingness to do as they are told. Teachers make no effort to turn boring work into fun. Hard work and memorization are regarded as unavoidable. They are seen as a good preparation for adult life.

Child-centred educators criticise traditional education in many different ways. This means that no *definitive account** of child-centred education can be given. The outline which follows identifies some central, *recurring themes** in the alternative tradition. It shows the kind of ideas and arguments that a progressive educator might present.

As a starting point, progressives see themselves as appreciating children as individuals. They focus more on what each child already is than on what the child might become. This does not mean that they are not interested in the child's development. Indeed, quite the reverse. Children's development is seen as a gradual and 'natural' progression which is best aided by adults who have an appreciation of and a respect for the ways of children...

Further, progressives emphasise that it is in the nature of the child to be active. Traditionalists are seen either as being unaware of this central characteristic, or as preferring not to take it into account in their approach to education. This neglect can be seen in simple form in the insistence that children remain seated at their desks for most of the school day. More serious, perhaps, is the treatment of children as *mentally* inactive, as the passive (and often reluctant) recipients of knowledge provided by teachers.

The progressive view is that education should be designed to reflect the nature of the child. Importance is therefore attached to the study of children. The findings of educational psychology as well as common observations are seen as showing that children are intellectually curious, keen to find things out, and actively engaged in making sense of the world they live in. This picture explains why progressives prefer to think of education in terms of 'natural' development: the nature of the child, it seems, is geared towards learning.

Another side of this claim about children is that they are natural doers, makers and creators. Schools should cater for this by providing opportunities and materials for a range of physical activity and creative work. This has been

*definitive account:
description which
defines exactly what
it is like



*recurring themes:
they repeat
themselves again
and again



much taken to heart in primary schools in one obvious way: the provision for artwork. Displays of paintings in classrooms and corridors show the positive value attached to children's work. Child-centred teachers expect such painting to be 'spontaneous' rather than created by the conscious application of taught technique. This reflects their favourable estimation of each child's inherent talents, and their regard for the way the personality of each is expressed.

Child-centred education is not just a respecter of childhood, but a respecter of individual children and their differences. Diversity is welcomed as something that makes life richer: hence there is in progressivism a built-in suspicion of the kind of schooling which puts pressure on children to conform. Children should be allowed to 'be themselves'.

Where does all this leave the teacher? If all this developing, discovering and creating is going to take place anyway, are teachers still necessary? There are, at the very least, implications for teachers which point to the need for a change in style. Their job can no longer simply be one of imparting knowledge. If education is to be a response to the enquiring mind of the child, the teacher's role would be better understood as one of research consultant or manager of resources. In American terminology, the teacher becomes primarily a 'facilitator'. As with any kind of investigative learning, this approach requires that children be given considerable freedom and independence. Learning cannot be interpreted as 'finding out for oneself' if the learner is always confined to a desk or even to a classroom.

Some teachers feel that this idea does not match reality as they experience it. Many children in classrooms do not display eagerness to learn, not do they respond positively to the opportunities which teachers provide for them. Teachers often feel compelled to resort to a system of rewards and punishments to make learners work. Their experience convinces them that abandoning these strategies would lead to a situation where little of educational value occurred. Progressives offer two explanations of this situation.

Firstly, they claim that children become reluctant learners because of their experience of schooling. Child-centred pedagogy cannot easily be introduced with a class of children who have previously been exposed to tradi-

*inherent: born into the person



tional teaching. Children usually expect that they will receive instruction at school and that they will not be able to do as they please. Parents tell them this, and the whole image of school in our culture transmits this message. Once children see education as something other people do to them, they lose the ability to take any initiative or responsibility for their own learning.

Secondly, progressives explain that, in schools, there is a mismatch between what children want to find out and what teachers think they should learn. In particular, the kinds of things that children are naturally curious about do not usually fit easily into school subject categories. It is this lack of correspondence which accounts for children's low motivation. Under the influence of this idea, many primary schools moved some distance away from a subject-based curriculum. They abandoned timetabled periods with bells ringing every forty minutes. The primary curriculum became much more fluid and flexible. Enquiry-based learning crossed subject boundaries as learners became involved in 'project work'...

This is the practical vision of child-centred education. But underpinning this lies a set of ideas about the nature of children, the nature of knowledge and the nature of life itself. This is what justifies us in referring to a child-centred, or progressive, 'philosophy'. To acquire an adequate understanding of child-centred education, it will be necessary now to examine this philosophy and its development.

(The book, which we have ordered for Centre Libraries, goes on to do this.)



Summerhill, A.S. Neill's School

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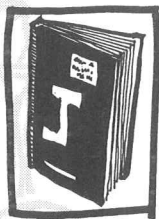
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Journal



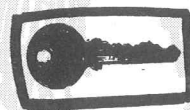
Thinking and
Reflecting



Written Report



Classroom or
School



Key Activity



Making materials



Reading and
Thinking



Discussion



Face-to-face
umkhwezeli

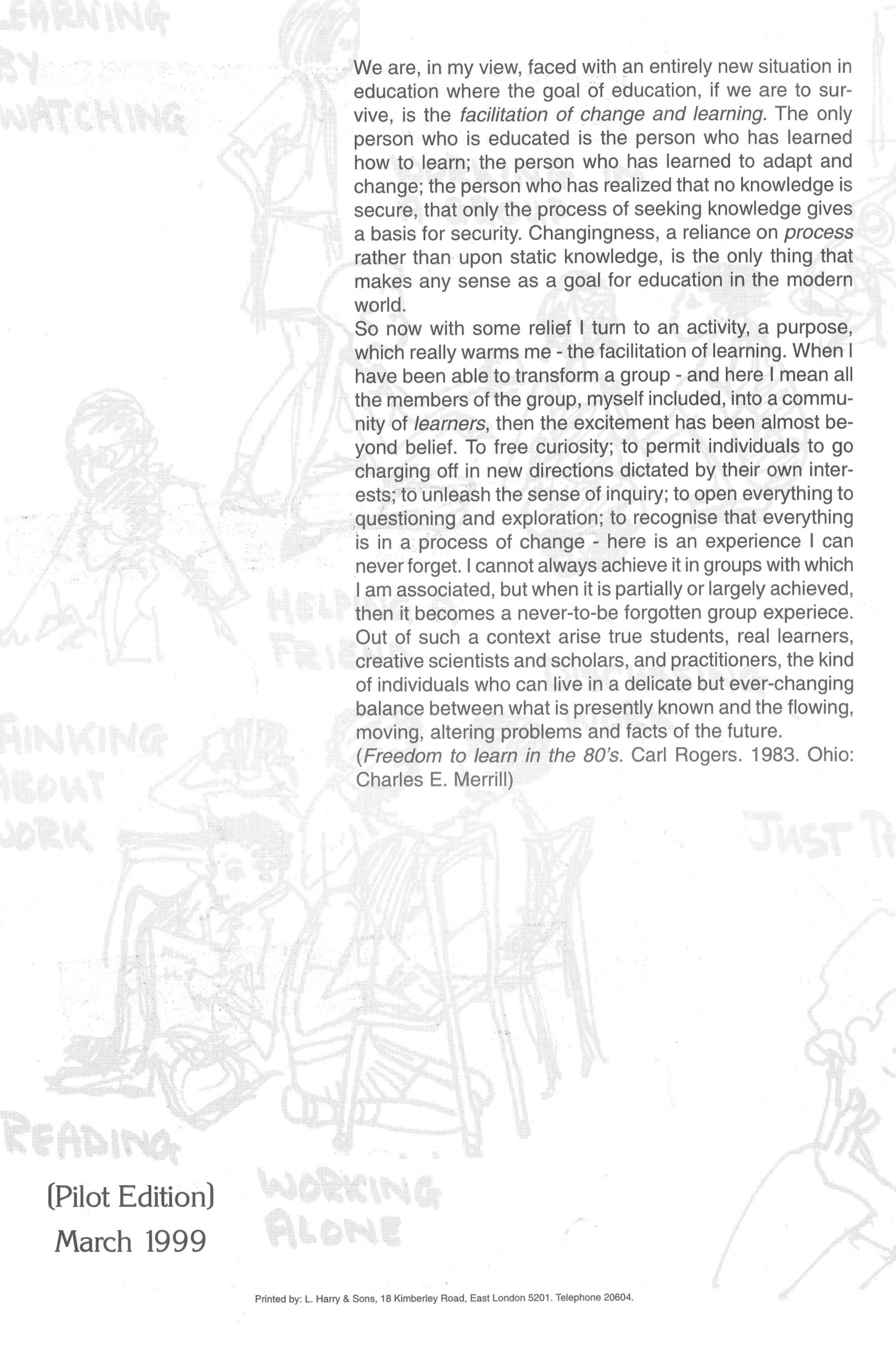


Concertina File
for Portfolio



Time



The background of the page features a faint, sketchy illustration of a classroom. In the upper left, a student is standing and looking towards the right. In the lower left, a student is sitting at a desk, looking down at a book. In the center, another student is sitting at a desk, looking towards the right. To the right of the center, a student is standing and looking towards the left. The text 'LEARNING BY WATCHING' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the top left. The text 'HELP FRIENDS' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the middle left. The text 'THINKING ABOUT WORK' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the lower left. The text 'READING' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the bottom left. The text 'WORKING ALONE' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the bottom center. The text 'JUST THINK' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the bottom right.

We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the *facilitation of change and learning*. The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned to adapt and change; the person who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on *process* rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world.

So now with some relief I turn to an activity, a purpose, which really warms me - the facilitation of learning. When I have been able to transform a group - and here I mean all the members of the group, myself included, into a community of *learners*, then the excitement has been almost beyond belief. To free curiosity; to permit individuals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests; to unleash the sense of inquiry; to open everything to questioning and exploration; to recognise that everything is in a process of change - here is an experience I can never forget. I cannot always achieve it in groups with which I am associated, but when it is partially or largely achieved, then it becomes a never-to-be forgotten group experience. Out of such a context arise true students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars, and practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate but ever-changing balance between what is presently known and the flowing, moving, altering problems and facts of the future.

(*Freedom to learn in the 80's*. Carl Rogers. 1983. Ohio: Charles E. Merrill)

(Pilot Edition)
March 1999

Finally, thanks to Ron Kahn of L. Harry and Sons (printers) for his patience, expertise and co-operation in helping us to turn this umthamo into a book.