New Education for a New Century
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When we engage in a thoughtful analysis of the major changes in society over the last century we can’t help but notice an undeniable movement towards an integration of all fields of knowledge. From education to science and culture human society has gradually began to assume an increasingly global and holistic understanding of an intricately woven web of relationships between all building blocks of reality. The more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realize that they cannot be understood in isolation. As our society has began looking at the dilemmas it confronts in terms of their wider context within a globally interconnected Universe, the collective realm of our ideas has also began accepting the notion that in order to understand our reality we should seek to integrate the two types of knowledge – the subtle and the measurable, the limitless and the limited. This tacit movement of collective thought has challenged the core principles of conventional education, offering an alternative understanding of the essence of learning and teaching. The New Education, and Neo-Humanist education in specific, has broken away from the static conformist models, seeking to combine the lessons learnt from Nature with the intuitive realizations of the mind to form an organic and deeply authentic flow of ideas and values. And while the conventional formula has been focusing on the retention and testing of knowledge, the “new learning” concepts have instead chosen to explore the realm of participative communication, self-actualization, social engagement, and transformation of consciousness.

Countries like Haiti, where the mechanist model of formulaic education has had a devastating impact on human imagination and collective identity, offer numerous revelations regarding the importance of participatory education. The memory of one particular moment still stays with me now. I am in the middle of a group of peasants from Zoranje, a small village in the Northwest, extraordinarily poor even to Haitian standards. People sit on wobbly wooden benches, in a small cob-walled church that serves to house the local school. Looking around I have no hard time imagining a hundred and fifty students squeezed in the simmering hot space, repeating mindless memorizations. The space even now feels so small, and there are only thirty of us. The meeting is about to start, and the villagers diligently begin to line up their benches in lines in front of me. A woman brings me a chair, and places it in the front. Everyone enthusiastically urges me to take the seat of honor. I am about to present AMURT’s plans for the construction of the new school, and its philosophy of community participation. The pastor is standing next to me, clutching an ancient Bible in his calloused hands. And it is then when suddenly I feel my mind rising up to that space, you know, the one where you get a tingling sensation and you feel just… One. And the intention of the moment hits me like a bullet. “See the world in a grain of sand, and eternity in an hour. Everything can move between us. In dialogue each person is participating, partaking of the whole. Truth is what holds us all together, yet each must find it individually…” And I suddenly know, just plainly know… And I stand up, and exclaim, “A Circle… What about starting with a circle, and a silent contemplation?” At first there is a silence, as if I have proposed at a science conference that the Earth is actually flat, always has been, always will be. And then a woman laughs, and claps her hands, and the silence is suddenly filled with the excited whispering of a new beginning.

One of the most important challenges in front of educators would be to re-evaluate the way they view information and participation in the education process. As human thought has become increasingly literal over the centuries, its tendency to fragment knowledge and perception has also increased, and its capacity and willingness to fully participate in the process of perception has weakened. According to physicist and author David Bohm this fragmentation of the participatory process remains at the root of the crisis of perception so prevalent today. Meanwhile, modern science has developed an appreciation of the communication and participation patterns in nature and society that is radically different.
from the notions widely accepted only a few decades ago. The discovery that natural systems, rather than being rigid and stationary as previously conceived, are in fact dynamic, flexible, and self-organizing networks of autopoiesis, has forced us into re-examining our own patterns of relating to each other. The gradual discovery that the leading laws of Nature are not necessarily determined by competition and survival but by cooperation and communication amongst its various participants has helped us also redefine the way we view the process of thinking and learning. As Theodore Roszak puts it, “Information does not create ideas; ideas create information. Ideas are integrating patterns that derive not from information but from experience”. Modern science has gradually come to terms with the growing possibility that knowledge is not a fixed assembly of facts, but a web of interconnected direct experiences grounded in ever evolving layers of intuition. This New Science has given rise to series of progressive learning concepts, all built upon the notion that all meaningful knowledge is contextual knowledge, much of it being tacit and experiential. The shift has been away from information gathering and processing and towards relating all aspects of knowledge to each other in which the learner is an active participant and co-creator in a holistic process rather than a mere object in a linear one-way transfer of knowledge.

By now it is becoming painfully clear that the deep crisis of perception within our human civilization has been further exasperated by our inability to unsubscribe and disengage our collective and individual minds from an outdated and increasingly static worldview, and by our failure to study properly the evolution of consciousness within the framework of the larger macrocosm. Thus it is not at all surprising that the rigidity of the mechanist sets of assumptions about the world we live in has perpetuated educational systems that are tied to those same notions which Newton and Descartes held on to when they perceived the world as an empty space full of dead objects. It is only natural that the new paradigm shift transforming our civilization nowadays will seriously challenge the current worldview, reassessing the mechanisms which have turned the educational institutions all over the world into banking depositories of knowledge run as efficiently as a factory machines emphasizing linear productivity rather than creative self-transformation. The banking concept of knowledge so widely accepted in conventional schools is built upon the assumption that the learner (and not just the learner but also our species in general) exists “in” rather than “with” the rest of the world, assuming a pre-described place of limited potentiality for participatory engagement in the process of learning. The New Education will be of utmost importance for the radical transformation of our perceptions and relationships. In this struggle with existing deeply ingrained values and concepts the educator will have to shed off her or his neutrality, and go against the grain of conformity which has been resisting for decades the long-overdue restructuring of education.

Observe Gaia with careful attention and you will discover that a web of dynamic patterns of participation and cooperation lies in the foundation of all its various adaptations. Nothing seems to be stationary, and everything seems to be moving and adapting to each other and to the constantly changing environmental conditions. The seeming effortlessness in nature conceals a continuous and never-ending effort to redefine and reinvent itself. It is very likely that our only hope for survival as species might be found in our ability to learn and adjust our way of life to the wider web of natural interactions. As such the educators have the unique and hugely important task of teaching and themselves learning how to adjusting the flow of their own minds and that of their students with the subtle flow of their natural surrounding. This might require us to learn to regularly go out of our comfort zone, peeling off layers of deeply set identities, and rediscovering who we really are in the larger context of life, and why we are really here. This contextual learning will inevitably propel us all on the path of self-discovery, and towards a new way of relating to each other as equal participants in the process of creation. As Lyall Watson says, “We begin to realize that our universe is in a sense brought into being by the participation of those involved in it. It is a dance, for participation is its organizing principle.” One has to only observe a chaotic system in Nature in order to be able to envision a new system of learning where all relationships are based on the notion of balanced participation, with an exchange of energy that is open, fluid and transparent.

Take for example the concept of flow, which reflects the discovery that all systems in Nature are not rigidly defined and static but openly chaotic and constantly adjusting. In conventional education the concept of mental flow is largely ignored, and learning is conceived as a linear information exchange happening primarily on the level of the conscious mind. While this is the layer of mind most easily manipulated and identified with, the science of Bio-psychology increasingly proves that in actuality it is the subconscious layer of the mind that is acting like a sponge, absorbing and integrating this information. The impressive results of various experiments with the layers of consciousness, such as the so called Super-learning method in which I participated as a youth growing up in Bulgaria, exhibit the tremendous possibilities which education has once it begins exploring the domain of our tacit mental flow. Education is a subtle and integrated process which will have to seek the full engagement of the mind and imagination of both teacher and learner if
it is to succeed in imparting a lasting positive impact on the individual and society. One of the arguments that can be made has been that the conventional system of education, together with its numerous NCLB (“No Child Left Behind”) strategies, has only managed to further imprison the learners’ minds in the rigid mechanics of informational fragmentation and controlled transfer. By adopting this rather formulaic view of learning the conventional schools have been stifling the creative desires of their learners for decades, effectively blocking the immense potential for radical transformation of society and reinforcing conformist patterns of thinking within the framework of the materialist culture. The only alternative to this self-perpetuating cycle of mediocrity is to create, nurture, and spread out a subtle flow of learning which is contagiously inspiring and engaging, lovingly humble yet courageous, dynamic yet peaceful. Thus the New Education will have to focus on creating a flow which allows the learners to access the various layers of the mind to not just become more learnt, but also to actualize a sense of joy and deeply shared meaning of life.

**Instilling a sense of love, joy and fulfillment might well become the most important tenets of the New Education.**

Our individual happiness is not an isolated endeavor that can exist out of alignment with its broader context, and it is dependent on the balance of our mind. As cosmologist Brian Swimme puts it, “Isolation and alienation are profoundly false states of mind. Our natural state is intimacy with the encompassing community, forming deeply bonded relationships with all living and non-living components of life”. The educators who sincerely care for the transformation of their students will have to put together their energy in inventing new cultural forms for “initiating themselves into an ecstatic sense of involvement (with the world), learning how to read the universe so that one can enter and inhabit it as a communion event”. This profound reorientation of our focus will require us to infuse all of our institutions and relationships with love, respect and patience for each other and for all living and non-living entities along the principles of biophilia (affinity) with all things natural. Such a radical shifting of priorities will result out of a deep personal and collective transformation of consciousness, a metanoia, an integrative transformation of one’s whole being.

**Education of course is not an isolated process unaffected by the larger environment.**

The exploitation in the consumer society is a subvert one - by diverting the unit minds to crude things the culture of consumption perpetuates a never-ending cycle of brief gratifications and long-spanning frustrations which affect especially the young. One of the greatest thinkers of this century, the founder of Neo-Humanistic education, P.R. Sarkar, has emphasized that it has become imperative for us to radically transform ourselves and our entire culture through a shared yet personalized and authentic system of intuitional values and practices aimed at imperceptibly diverting our individual and collective mind from crude attractions to subtle explorations. There is a growing need for a practical yet spiritually grounded approach to education, one that is deeply steeped in a constant adjustment to the demands of the surrounding reality, yet driven by an inner search for deeper meaning and authentic identity. Thus the need for Neo-Humanist educators to come together and contribute in a coordinated manner to the transformation of our educational and social structures in an ever growing dynamic and socially engaged way has never been as acute as it is nowadays. In this struggle of ideas Neo-Humanist Education will have to focus on building bridges and developing partnerships, using its expansionist spiritual ideology as a spring board to spread its sublime approach to child-focused learning all over the world. Ultimately, the resulting transformation will bring us all closer to the intimate realization that “we are not humans capable of having spiritual experiences, but spirits having human experiences”, as one bumper sticker proudly proclaimed from a rusty bus I recently traveled on in the NW of Haiti. The New Education will have to be able to nurture in the learner this very inquisitiveness about the spiritual essence of existence, maintaining a fragile balance in what might be the most important endeavor for the newly elevated mind. Losing the link between the physical, mental, and spiritual essences of life will contribute to the further fragmentation and disconnection of our society and our lives.

**While the focus of the conventional education models is the assimilation of previously existing knowledge, the New Education seeks out the awakening of a thirst for knowledge within the context of a vast cosmic pattern of experiences.**

This genuine search has to bring joy and satisfaction to the learner; moreover, it has to begin with the premise that each learning revelation and experience actually has the goal of nurturing happiness and contentment regardless of all circumstances and outcome. The purpose of education then might be to give the mind a sense of magnanimity, mental balance, and unbeatable positive outlook and optimism infusing the learners with a motivation to not merely excel and succeed in all endeavors, but more importantly to seek their full potentials while helping others do the same in a cooperative and caring manner, while at the same time appreciating the larger Cosmological context. The process of actively experiencing and celebrating this vast cosmic dimension is inherently joyful, as the learner pursues learning so that she/he can know one self not as a mean speck but as the infinite Supreme Entity, and slowly begin appreciating others as oneself. The primary challenge in front of both educators and learners is to nurture the continuously growing awareness that we are important yet humble participants in a great cosmic drama of interwoven
immensity and simplicity. As Brian Swimme puts it, “This process of cosmological initiation has the power to transform the pain of loneliness and isolation by the joy of bonding with the cosmic dimension of our existence”. Unless we learn to get in touch with and to nurture such a cosmological awareness our civilization might risk collapsing further into fragments of a shrunken and distorted view of reality.

The shift towards participatory learning affects not merely the sharing of common meanings but also the participation in a process of shifting consciousness. The New Education is not to be driven by the external expressions of linear one-dimensional knowledge, but by the limitless thirst for subtle self-knowledge. This constitutes a significant part of the concept of sentient education – the concentration of the mind towards a deeply intuitive, creative, and liberating search for higher and subtler layers of consciousness. Any pseudo culture attempt to divert the mind from this introspective search, then, becomes a force countering the deeply transformative mental introversival flow. Thus, it will be naive to consider changing education out of the context of the wider culture where this education process takes place. An actively engaged experiential dialogue addressing the question of what constitutes culture and whether we should take for granted everything that this culture offers is an important part of education. Thus the New Education, and more specifically Neo-Humanistic educators, will have to nurture in the learner the realization that it is not the culture that should impact the thinking perspective of the self, but the opposite – the self should carefully screen and analyze the environment, seek to recognize and nurture the sentient within and without, and take a meaningful action to impact society in a positive way, playing a small but important role in its radical transformation.

The circle of sharing in Zoranje was only the first in a series of “crop-circle” phenomenon gradually transforming the area of Anse Rouge, where AMURT has been implementing an integrated community development program since 2004. Because of the strong grassroots support and popularity of the organization the local communities have began accepting the progressive ideas behind all of its initiatives with an open heart and mind. It has become a lot more customary now for both grown-ups and children to leave space in their programs and meetings for quiet reflection, circular dialogue, shared meaning, and social engagement. Series of programs started by the newly founded CENEOH (Centre Education Néo - Humaniste) have began offering month-long and weekly courses on school management, Montessori and NHE teaching methods, yoga and karate, and participatory approach of education. Art is beginning to appear on the once blank walls of the participating schools, and the creative flow of music and dance brought laughter and excitement within the inauguration program for the newly constructed and brightly painted Zoranje school. Its director, who has just graduated from the latest month-long practicum on participative education, summed up the experience of the group by saying, “This new method of teaching and learning should be experienced by all. It puts the teacher together with the student, it melts the rigidity of our classrooms, it creates a dialogue and an opportunity for change not just for students, but also for the professors and the parents. My excitement and impatience to begin changing the ambience in our classrooms go beyond measure. For the first time I feel empowered to become an agent of transformation, which is what each teacher should become”. The excited whisper of change is transforming our human society all over the world, giving us a glimpse of a new beginning, bright and hopeful for all. This beginning will help us regain our humanity by transforming our young, through learning together with them how to experience once again the connectedness with the spiritual source of the entire web of life.