

# **RelationaLearning™ Toward a Human Ecology in 21st Century Schools**

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## **Introduction: Making Schooling Relevant**

Life in the 21st century is being defined - and will continue to be defined - by rapid, pervasive change and increasing interconnectedness. This globalization is taking us to new opportunities - it is creating a new world - and at the same time old worlds are being left behind; depersonalization and a loss of the interpersonal are being experienced simultaneously. Because of this globalization, the relevance of the traditional school is function and its effectiveness is diminishing. In a global society, educators no longer have a monopoly on the transfer of information. We know that schools twenty years from now cannot resemble the schools of today and still expect to be relevant. Today's schools too often try to relate to a world that no longer exists. Schools have no choice but to change. Change is demanded in our understanding of what it means to be a teacher and a student. Change is demanded in our understanding of what learning might become and in our thinking about what education is needed. Change is demanded in how we define ourselves in a global context. Finally, change is required in the way we identify and, therefore, treat each other.

In this article we preview an approach that helps educators to re-contextualize education ecologically, i.e., *relating to the interrelationships of organisms and their environment* (Encarta World English Dictionary). The RelationaLearning™ model presented here will change the way we interact with each other in classrooms and schools. In ecological terms, the way we interact with each other determines what can be learned and how it can be learned. For us, the essence of learning in the 21st century will be a commitment to the idea that all elements of learning - philosophy, language and literature, history, art, music, mathematics and science - contribute to our presence in the world as personal, active subjects rather than as impersonal, passive objects. A sustainable human ecology in 21st century schools re-contextualizes education. It is not a matter of what is taught, or how it is taught, but the context in which learning occurs.

Learning in relationship requires that learning start with the learner and not the facts to be learnt. We should not facilitate learning practices that train people to accept and mimic roles that promise success in the world. We should create and maintain an environment that invites people to know themselves, one another, and the whole. This kind of learning both requires and creates community.

The new context of globalization requires a re-balancing of human ecology as an antidote to the isolation and depersonalization of both the global context and the current thrust of standards and testing and performance - objectified goals. Education must be re-balanced with an emphasis on the personal and the relational.

## **Rethinking the Context of Teaching and Learning**

*Schools too often are tedious and irrelevant to what students know and to what students bring, i.e., the global context.*

Each generation carries a new and a different knowing, as well as carrying forward cultural, traditional and religious knowledge. Each generation lives within an ever more expansive and unique confluence of time and events. Each generation is like another river flowing into the ocean of globalization. Our challenge as educators is to help the young see, define and articulate what their generation carries - what their generation's role is to become.

Today's youth comprise the most consciously global generation. They are born with a global perspective. The forces that have made this possible include TV, music videos (MTV) and the Internet. At a recent conference, we were in conversation with a Navajo educator who was describing her work in her community to preserve Navajo culture. She stated that for 500 years the Navajo have endured every hardship including relocation to uninhabitable lands, poverty, unemployment, and alcoholism. These things have been endured, but she stated that MTV is killing the culture. Many Navajo youth want to identify with the global youth culture. This is characteristic of young people today worldwide. They dress the same, listen to the same music, and see the same movies.

This generation is witnessing the revolution of cyberspace. Reality as we have known it is changing and altering so quickly that it is

impossible to predict what middle years students today will consider relevant even ten years from now. Children born in 2015 can expect to live 125 years. Children born in 2100 can expect to live 200 years. The world population is predicted to reach 12 billion by 2050. Massive social, ecological, spiritual and intellectual challenges are arising and intensifying. In the face of such immense and unknowable changes and outcomes, everything in education will have to be redefined, reevaluated and reconsidered.

A teacher of 30 years stated at a recent in-service, the problem is that whereas the students have changed, we have not changed. And we are very slow to recognize this. Teachers run the risk of becoming prison simple (a condition that afflicts guards at a penitentiary whereby they lose interest in life outside and fixate on what one inmate did or might do to another). Therefore, teachers need to come to the educational setting as whole, complete human beings who are not merely the dispensers of data. Teachers need to see themselves and their students differently in order to generate different outcomes. Education and all of its participants need to become multidimensional.

As we examine current efforts at educational reform, we are left with the impression of educators who are frantically rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. For us, these attempts at re-conceptualizing fall short because they do not address the students. They misunderstand the true nature of learning. They are not acknowledging how deeply and radically the world is changing. They take a fix-it approach that is piecemeal and doesn't address the whole person. They keep working with failed assumptions. They are still thinking in the box, not above and beyond the box, and they under-emphasize the power of the personal and relational in learning.

The following story of a recent school council retreat highlights the need to reconsider our approaches to educational reform. The members of this educational community had always viewed themselves as progressive. Numerous attempts were made to introduce new instruction, methodologies, timetables, as well as greater support for teaching and learning. However, at the retreat it became apparent that as people were talking about the reforms they had initiated, they were not addressing the real needs. They were feeling frustrated. They wanted their school to be more effective in dealing with their children, their future, and the issues. They were beginning to feel that the key to school improvement would be found, not in programs, not in structures, not in timetables, but in the quality of the relationships. They realized that all relationships were on the

table and would have to be reexamined - the relationship between students and teachers, parents and teachers, administrators and students - all of the relationships in their school community. The council members arrived at this understanding by default because all of their previous efforts had not changed their experience. They were still feeling hollow and dissatisfied. They realized that they needed to find new ways to interact with each other. Ultimately, they were sensing the need to reexamine certain fundamental questions: what is the nature of teaching and learning in a rapidly changing society? What does our school have to offer young people? And more radically, what do young people feel they have to offer our school and community? They were beginning to rethink the context of schooling. They were moving toward an ecology of schooling. Curriculum was no longer the subject. Everyone became the subject as well as every relationship in the school community. This is the foundation of RelationalLearning™: the world already is and will continue to go to a very different place than the assumptions upon which schools are currently built.

## **A Strategy for Learning in Relationship**

Once again, we agree with the school council that schools will only improve when they focus on their relationships. We cannot continue to make a commitment to educating the whole person while ignoring the relationships in which all learning occurs. While attempts are being made to address the social, physical and spiritual needs as well as the academic needs of learners, these efforts often result in more isolation. What is called for is a strategy to help us meet the articulated visions we have created to educate the whole person.

How do we improve our focus on relationships in educational settings? What is the strategy to make relationships the context for teaching and learning? We must move beyond the simplistic evaluation of relationships as good or bad. The RelationalLearning™ model outlined below suggests that all learning progresses through four levels of relationship. We are always in a relationship but the quality of that relationship and therefore the quality of learning varies greatly. As we move through each level, we can identify the added power that relationships can bring to our learning. The following diagram and chart describe these four levels.

### **Synopsis of the Four Phases**

### **Phase I: Recognition**

At the recognition level (the level at which most teaching currently occurs) content is explained through lecture or attained by reading or downloading information from a computer. At this level, the memorization of facts can and often does occur. This information is of little value, however, unless learning is advanced to another level by applying the learning to a project or a problem, and refining through interaction and interrelationship. If not taken to higher relational levels, the learner has simply obtained facts for forgetting.

### **Phase II: Understanding**

At the understanding level, the facts or concepts are tested through application, interaction and interrelationship. Facts are not simply for short-term memorization. They can now be understood as they relate to other facts and concepts as well as other human beings and the world at large. They are now making sense because they seem to be relevant, useful and of potential value to our lives.

### **Phase III: Valuing**

At the valuing level, we begin to incorporate the concepts acquired at recognition level and appreciated at understanding level with our personal, internal value structures. We are again testing; this time testing the fit of the new learning to the way we deal with our world and our everyday choices. We have now begun to discern the overall value of the learning to us personally and have begun to translate that learning outward. This level is significant because it is here that we begin to experience the connection of the learning to other human beings as well. We know that we do not live in isolation and we must integrate this learning with our lives and the lives of others. This is the level at which true human potential for RelationalLearning™ begins to emerge. Both students and teachers begin to have a different experience. Both parties are learning. This level represents the beginning of self-governance by the learner. This is the beginning of creativity and authenticity. This is the level at which the learner begins to decide what really matters.

### **Phase IV: Relating**

This level represents a call to the self, to find one's own place, way and meaning in relating to the world personally and collectively. At this level, the learner views any interaction in new ways with new options.

At the relating level, options are apparent and the learner is making beneficial choices for himself and others. At this level, everyone's experience is equally shared with others in meaningful, productive ways.

This is the highest level of learning and truly equates with RelationalLearning™. Unless learning is pursued to this level, it has not yet become completely assimilated in a way in which it can be fully utilized. At this level, it is now shared with others in meaningful, productive ways that can enhance the functioning of the learner and others and benefit the community. Finally, the learner is now part of a larger structure of personal freedom characterized by key elements from each phase: awareness, adaptability, interaction and interdependence.

For a full description of the model and its application, see *RelationalLearning™: Education for Mind, Body and Spirit* by Chambers-Otero, Otero, Sparks & Sparks, (Hawker Brownlow Education, 2000).

Seeing relationships as neither good nor bad, but as simply the context for learning, frees both the teacher and the learner from traditional roles that limit what can be gained from educational relationships. The diagram helps visualize the fact that we are always in a relationship and that the potential for these relationships is seldom realized. Our current methodologies are focused on recognition, awareness, understanding and adaptability, leaving the real potential for learning that our relationships hold untapped. The irony is that the society around us, as reflected in the process of globalization, calls for relationships conducted by self-regulating learners - by people who recognize the interdependent nature of all life. Yet schools are still operating at the level of recognition and understanding. It is no surprise that in countries around the world students benefit from schooling until the middle years when engagement, relevance, and enthusiasm drop dramatically. At this point in their lives, schools disconnect young people from what they need to be learning. Although well intentioned, our methods leave young people with few options for learning what they need to know to survive.

## **The Need for an Ecological Experience of Teaching and Learning**

During the Industrial Age, schools trained students to be good workers and much of what young people learned about the world came from the classroom. In the Information Age, students are likely to bring more knowledge to the classroom than they take from it. They should not be treated as passive recipients of data. RelationalLearning™ engages young people as whole, complete human beings and draws upon their experience in order to create a meaningful educational setting.

RelationalLearning™ instills an internalized model of learning that is more integrated with the whole person. It does not impose upon students as data-receptors but draws from them as vibrant, unique human beings. Whereas programmatic efforts tend to move in isolation, relationships, naturally, provide all of the conditions for an integrated approach.

Given the global context, what is needed more than ever is a return to education as an art. This is a commitment to attending and supporting learning as a birthright. Through our relationships, we learn who we are and what we might become. The artistic impulse makes us human. We are born to learn and we learn in relationship to our self and with others. This is not another methodology or curriculum teachers need to learn. It is simply focusing on learning as a natural process of being human.

This ecology of learning is born out in the experiences we all have had in school. A student will often forget the content of a class, but rarely his or her feelings about the class. The value of any educational experience is not solely dependent upon the teacher's mastery, skill, or expertise, but lies in the relationship between teacher and student - the ability of the teacher to engage the student in the learning process while conveying curriculum content. The art of education is a multidimensional act. It involves more than content. It involves mind, body and spirit. It involves more than one person. It is relational. Teachers can and do get it. When RelationalLearning™ focuses upon the quality of the relational dimension of learning; they immediately want to work to enhance their ability to move students from the recognition to the relational level of learning.

Often, in our workshops, we explore these experiences using the following inventory. It is a useful exercise at any age and allows people the opportunity to see for themselves the importance of relationships in learning.

### **RelationalLearning™ Experience Inventory**

As a student, you have had specific experiences that have influenced your life. Please fill in the following blanks with short simple sentences that reflect your true feelings and experiences in various school communities.

- 1. As a student, I often felt...
- 2. Sometimes, looking back over my life as a student, I can hardly believe I...
- 3. One of the things I had to do as a student to survive was...
- 4. School was not easy for me when I...
- 5. One of the things I had trouble accepting in school was...
- 6. One of the emotions I most often wish I could have expressed was...
- 7. If I were honest about my needs in school I would say that I needed...
- 8. The most frightening thing about school was...
- 9. The worst thing about school was...
- 10. The best thing about my school experience was...

The most powerful determinant in enhancing educational outcomes is the student's perception of the teacher's expectation. As a former student wrote, "Please tell Ms. Jenkins that I always felt that what I did in her class mattered personally to her. I felt that she wanted to help me to become a better writer and believed that I could become a better writer. Because of that faith and that attention, I felt I learned how to write in her class. She became the most important teacher in my high school experience."

*Definitions of literacy will have to be transformed.*

Literacy will no longer only be defined in terms of reading, writing, and numeracy. Because the content cannot be known for the future, what must be developed in addition to basic literacies, are processes, ways, and permission to think creatively - to explore that instinct to learn. The youth culture of today is a media generation; therefore, media and visual literacy will become an important component of learning. As we have indicated, the individual's relationship to the collective will be critical as reflected in the call for civic literacy. In some schools this has already resulted in a new three R's: respect, rights, and responsibilities as a focus for learning. Finally, young people will insist on learning more about the global society and will expect their schools to be places where youth and adults learn important global literacies.

For schools to be effective with today's young people, it will be crucial to have a sense of self and a sense of how to relate to 12 billion other selves. Ironically, to succeed in a global society, the personal and local must become the focus. The major challenge will be an examination and redefinition of the relationship between the individual and the collective - whether in nuclear family, community, politics, or religion.

We will see this in environmental, governmental and social programs. We must all examine, challenge, and create space around the question, who are we? We aren't being asked to give up who we are. We are being asked to transcend and expand into a global identification. One-dimensional, content driven, standards-based curricula are wholly missing what is happening today. Our task now becomes the redefining of education into a relational approach that begins to inform and prepare students for the multidimensional world young people already inhabit.

Relating school to what students already know is not a matter of introducing new programs or methods. It lies, rather, in the art of education. All art forms are essentially and fundamentally based upon relationships. A radical approach to school reform need not eliminate technology or any current practice. We are simply re-contextualizing the focus. We agree with the parents, school leaders, teachers and students at the retreat who believe that we have much to gain by looking at education as a series of ongoing relationships.

Students are already aware of their context. One of the reasons schools are losing some of the best and the brightest is that what students already know and carry as members of their generation is not being honored or engaged. It is often the case that students are already outside the box. Schools need to embrace the poets, artists and visionaries for they carry dreams, directions and insights into the future. Students need the arts as a way of learning how to think creatively and expressively, to learn who they are - to develop a sense of self. As well as every other sense of identity being challenged, the definition of what it means to be a human being is changing. This is the time for the highest potential and the darkest, most violent, alternatives. The call is for a more relational approach to education. An antidote for the tidal wave of change is the development of a sense of self. Only with a sense of self can one develop a conscious relationship to the whole and not be victim to this rapid, all pervasive, global transformation. Schools must learn how to relate to their students and how to engage their students.

## **Principles Behind Relational Learning™**

The basis of a pedagogy that focuses on relationships rests on the following beliefs.

- Education is an art. As we have indicated, it is at base a natural process that happens only in relationship.

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- Education is, therefore, not only what we teach but also how we engage each other.
- 
- Teaching, at heart, is a call not a role.
- 
- Learning does not happen in isolation. It is dialogical. We are all interdependent as learners.
- 
- The natural condition of human beings is learning. It is not a skill we acquire.
- 
- Learning is an innate function. It is not, primarily, a problem-solving activity.
- 
- Educational approaches must engage the whole being, not just the mind.

Guided by these beliefs, this relational approach requires a careful correlation and fusion of the variety of disciplines that comprise teaching and learning today. It also requires a positive and discerning attitude toward our educational outlook. This outlook includes:

- a learning approach where the learning process is controlled by the learner
- increasing the number of positive leadership options available to learners
- increasing the learner's sense of responsibility for the impact of their behavior, both locally and globally
- increasing learner's knowledge of and information about the state of the world
- increasing learner's problem solving skills and creativity
- seeing schools and organizations as learning communities where everyone (students, teachers, parents, administrators) is both a learner and a teacher.

## **Implications for Teaching and Learning**

Educational reform requires a shift in focus. *RelationaLearning™* is a framework that respects and honors what our mind, body and spirit bring to our learning. Where conventionally the subject has been the

*content to be learnt, students must now be the subject.* Those who hope to teach must first consider the learner, and then the learning. For years, one could truly say the focus was the content and school was the place where one learned English, math, and science. More recently, the focus of education has been placed, as it should, on the student. We hear repeatedly, we can't teach the subject, we must teach the student. If the context for teaching and learning is, now, each and every relationship, then the focus for education is not the subject, is not just the student, but also more simply the student's relationship to the subject, self and others.

The following quote is from a secondary student who describes his experience of a humanities class that is based upon this focus.

- *It was not any single fact that touched me. It was not any single novel. Nor was it even a concept. It was a complete outlook on life. I entered the class approaching it as such - a class. It wasn't until I realized the depth of the relationships that were being formed that I began gaining wonderful insights. Your course placed a spark within me. You realized the fuel that was there, and you only ignited it, but the effect is one that cannot be reversed.*

Yes, relationships now become the focus, but not all relationships can be addressed simultaneously. We believe that schools could see a different result in engagement - especially by middle years students - if five relationships were addressed. These relationships are:

- The student's relationship to self
- 
- The student's relationship to the subject
- 
- The student's relationship to the teacher
- 
- The student's relationship to other students
- 
- The student's relationship to the wider world

You will notice some omissions from this list, relationships that school leaders have considered important in the past. We believe that focusing on these five relationships will improve the quality of learning for all involved and address the disengagement, isolation and irrelevance that far too many young people experience in school.

When these relationships become the focus of teaching and learning, our ideas about success, results and assessment will change. For example, when a teacher is concerned about a student's relationship

to the subject, there is less interest in standards or rule-bound performance and more interest in the student's experience of the subject. Success is no longer an outcome but a condition for learning. Assessment is not done to anyone but is an ongoing aspect of the relationship and the learning process. Seeing relationships as the context for learning frees everyone involved from prescribed roles. As a result, in our work with engaging students the key questions become: Who are we? What is worth learning? How do we learn that? Utilizing RelationalLearning™, young people and adults can answer these questions together.

## **The Model Applied in Classrooms and Schools**

### *Using RelationalLearning™ as a Strategy for Student Engagement*

The utility of the approach has most recently been demonstrated in improving student engagement in the middle years of schooling. We have conducted numerous workshops with teachers, administrators and students in Victoria and South Australia. Recently, in professional development programs that were focused on engaging students in the middle years of schooling, teachers were beginning to realize - just as the school council recognized on their retreat - that each and every relationship in their classroom was the context for change, the place where teaching and learning would have to occur.

Student engagement, as seen through the five core relationships mentioned earlier, is redefined. Engaging students in their learning becomes a completely new event. The current application of student engagement consists of keeping students in school, keeping them quiet, keeping them behaved. Our workshops in Australia revealed that the deep structure of the current relationship between school and student is one of learning what is needed to get out - rather like an inmate's first and last concern when institutionalized. In RelationalLearning™, the student wants to get in to a teaching and learning process that engages body, mind and spirit. This approach expands and deepens the student's experience. The goal of education is no longer a simple matter of getting a diploma.

The key to effective change is the teacher's relationship with the students in the classroom. Until schools address this fact with the needed support and training, teachers will not be in a position to relate with young people in ways that are more attuned to the requirement of living in a global society and, thereby, more relevant and engaging for them. The critical issue in curricular reform is student engagement

with their learning.

RelationaLearning™ provides a framework that teachers can use in their own classrooms to start this process of reshaping the relationship between teacher and student from a power relationship where one controls the information that is put in front of the other, to a shared relationship where partners work together to unfold new knowledge.

### *RelationaLearning™ as a Strategy for Schooling*

New practices in professional development, school management and governance require consistent focus on relationship, which must permeate all teacher training, as well as teacher and administrative evaluation. Every one engaged in the educational process must seek to perform at the highest level of relationship.

The context of living has and continues to change so radically that schools can no longer only be about academic learning. In fact, with sufficient motivation and access to appropriate technology, students can become self-educated. Educational opportunity is now more prevalent outside the school walls than within. A new function of schooling is emerging as we all seek a new kind of relational as well as intellectual literacy. We need places where our relationships can serve as the context to explore the important questions of the 21st century, questions such as the relationship of the individual to the collective, the relative to the absolute, the personal to the impersonal, the natural and the artificial. RelationaLearning™ provides pedagogy where relationships are both the means and the ends.

The beauty of the RelationaLearning™ model is its simplicity. If the focus of teaching and learning is relational, learning will follow and be internalized and integrated in useful ways. If schools are functioning at the highest relational level, what outcomes may be anticipated? RelationaLearning™ develops authentic relationships that seek a new order of harmony and balance in the global context. The commitment to a global curriculum appears. And that global curriculum is interdependence. Our experience has been that this approach restores a sense of community in classrooms and schools that is equitable, inclusive and humane. The learning community is redefined and learning in school becomes vital, effective, engaging and relevant once again.