

*Haj's agenda*

Haj Ross  
Linguistics / Poetics  
University of North Texas  
Texas Woman's University  
haj@unt.edu

The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking. And thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.

It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands warmly in need of freedom; without this, it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.

The really valuable thing is the Intuition. The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it Intuition or what you will, and the solution comes to you and you don't know how or why.

Albert Einstein

Abstract: I seek a profound change in the way we think, a change which must be accompanied by a change in the way we learn. My focus for learning is on Gregory Bateson's notion of deuterio-learning, or learning how to learn. The changes in thinking / learning are fusional, along many dimensions. I follow Morris Berman in his insistence that we need to fuse fact and value; I see such a blending as a part of an even greater flowing together. I suggest that we fuse science, art, religion and philosophy – that we treat them all as being ways of seeing or perhaps as being facets of one great nameless jewel. And that we replace the notion of teaching with the symmetrical concept of colearning – that we see everyone in the classroom as one kind of learner or another, with the differences between us being only those of levels of learning, along a hierarchy which starts like this: learning, teaching, teaching teachers, teaching teachers of teachers, . . . .

In such a vision, there is no place for grading, which I feel to be an obstruction to the deepest forms of learning, in which we find a blending of work and play. Finally, all of these views are rooted in a view of human existence that takes us to be a composite of mind, body, heart, and spirit, a composite done honor to by the Chinese word *xin*, or by the Japanese equivalent *kokoro*, but belied by the quadripartite lexical fissioning we encounter in English and other Western languages. My goal is a university for the *xin* / *kokoro*, not one like most present ones, which are concerned almost exclusively with mind. I seek a UNIVERSity, characterized by the proFUNdity of the colearning which happens there, learning which is entered into by integrated beings, which can be seen best by fusing the views offered by the four facets of spirit, mind, heart, and body.

The three Einstein quotes above are as good a place as anywhere else that I can think of to begin to try to ground my agenda – the “things to be done.”

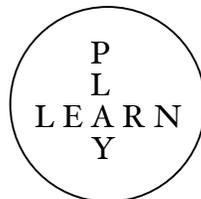
I am not alone in my belief that we are presently in a dark wood. I, with many others, feel that we are imprisoned in the kind of thinking that holds science to be the only way to truth, a stance that has been termed “scientism.” Science is one way,

but when we leave out of our science a feeling for beauty, a sense of wonder which is hardly separable from our own realization of the degree to which we are limited, and the deepest understanding that if our actions are not grounded in a transcendental order of being they cannot bring us to the peace which we need – when there are holes of this size in any science, all it can furnish us with is fact.

I find many of our institutions of higher learning to be thin, wan. From their names, we might expect that they would connect the learners within them to all of universe – but to our sorrow, we find that they concentrate so much on mind that they leave out the other three cardinal points of our being: heart, body, and spirit. The Chinese word *xin*, and its Japanese translation *kokoro*, denote that totality of our nature. I want most deeply to help coinvent a university for the *xin / kokoro*.

To do this, we will need to find a fusion of fact and value, as Morris Berman phrases it in his brilliant *The Reenchantment of the World*. And I hope that all of us will start looking for such a fusion fast. Our UNIVERSity must abandon the fostering of what Gregory Bateson calls, “proto-learning” (like learning chess, or Italian, or cooking) and move to ever-higher levels in Bateson’s hierarchy of orders of learning: deuterio-learning, which is learning how to learn, learning III, which is learning how to deuterio-learn, etc.

But how are we going to rev up our learning motors? My suggestion here, also unoriginal, is that we should model our learning environments after those of the most fearless and creative learners that we know of – our children. And from their mode of learning (natural learning, as I will refer to it), I have lifted two aspects. The first is the fusion into one verb of what we can only express as two:



The second aspect of natural learning which we must learn better than we have thus far is its collaborative nature. Just as shared play is funner, so is shared discovery more exciting, and I believe even deeper. If one can bring to one’s thinking these two traits – serious play, and total openness to collaborative thinking – then a kind of colearning becomes possible that I have shared the experience of with groups of people in various countries, and on various occasions.

Briefly, what happens is that the people who are gathered together for the purpose of learning more in some area fuse into a collective being, one which has its own goals, and its own way of communicating. Very often, it is not “the” teacher whose words are heard as being the most helpful and important. I will not soon forget being in such a class in a summer school at the University of Massachusetts in Boston – Mr. Long, a visitor from the People’s Republic, stood up and said what I had been trying to get across for quite some time – and said it indelibly, much better than I had been able to. We all applauded after he sat down. I believe that probably for most of us in that room, that phrasing of Mr. Long’s was a high point of our time together.

Teachers often talk of a class “jelling.” I think that what is meant by this expression is the emergence of what would scientifically be called the class identity, but what I would prefer to call the soul of the class. From the limited amount that I have seen, what helps to catalyze such events, such births, is a lot of listening on my part, and amounts of humility that are normally way beyond me. When I have been graced to participate as one voice in the chorus of voices which is how such collective beings talk to themselves, it has been an experience which I can only describe as soaring. I use such words as “soul” and “grace” (ill-)advisedly. I do not mean to put off people who have trouble with such words, but I find the usual workaday words with which one might describe these encounters (“inspiring,” “moving,” “deep,” etc.) not even close to being up to what those who have been participants feel.

I am sure that many will find that what I have written here is flaky, impractical, overly idealistic, a spaceshot, etc. Indeed, there are loud inner voices in me which yell such criticisms at me. I admit that I am flying blind. My only defense, if that is what I need, is that whatever intuitive sense (I usually call it my “nose”) has carried me to syntactic or poetic analyses that others have found useful feels like it has been involved in carrying me also to these admittedly revolutionary conclusions. And I have been heartened and encouraged beyond measure by the kind words of others who have also participated in these collective adventures aloft – my fellow colearners. Without their help and support, I would not dare to be saying this today.

The agenda which I argue for here is our birthright. We have, through carelessness, perhaps, let our educational system slide down to a point at which what I am advocating, and must advocate, seems unreachable. But I know it to be reachable, and can settle for nothing less. I feel we clip the wings of our children and their children if we do not restructure the ways we come together to learn so that what some of the classes who I have learned with is not exceptional, but simply to be expected.

He was taking a shower in his apartment. Suddenly his body turned light as a feather. His head lifted up off his shoulders, and he felt like the time he had planed in a sailboat. The boat had been traveling at normal speed, but the wind had been extremely high. Without warning the hull lifted out of the water and the drag instantly dropped to near zero and the boat began flying, as if some giant hand had grabbed the mast and flung the boat over the surface like a skimming stone.

He was planing. He sank down on the tiles, with the water pouring over his head, and saw his error as well as the entire solution to his problem. A mixture of particles was more fragile than a pure population; a mixture made the gravothermal catastrophe more likely to happen. The answer appeared in his mind as a beautiful curve and he tingled and shivered. It had to be right. He leaped out of the shower. Without bothering to get dressed, or even to dry off, he went to the kitchen table and got out his pages of calculations and a new pad of white paper and began writing. He lost track of time, he lost track of his body. He was completely outside of himself, outside of the world. Within two hours he had reworked his problem in complete quantitative detail. Shaking, he graphed the solution and it matched the arc in his mind. The equations, which over the last months had grown tired and suspicious, came to life, and they were right and they were graceful and they glistened like a moon over trees.

He never understood how he had found his mistake, but it wasn't by going from one equation to the next. Somehow, his subconscious mind had been studying the problem in its own slender way, spotted an error, and then danced to the answer. A year later, he decided that the problem was indeed trivial, as the fellow student had said. The sacrament of certainty was perhaps an illusion. But the sensation of planing, that swift soaring breath of discovery, was not an illusion. And for a while he, the discoverer, was the only person on earth who knew this new thing. He would soon get dressed and go to his office, he would take his results to Professor Jacoby and tell his colleagues, he would publish his results in the *Physical Review*. But for those few moments at his kitchen table, he was alone with his discovery, he knew something true that no one else knew, and he had vast power in the world.

From Alan Lightman, *Good Benito*, Warner Books, New York (1994)  
ISBN 0-446-67160-6

A present from Dorian Darrow  
June 15, 1997.

Some other resonances:

Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Ballantine, New York (1972)  
Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, Bantam, New York (1981)  
Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, Columbus, Ohio (1969)  
Háj Ross, "Network learning," *Diversity*, Volume 3, Summer 1995, pp. 27-38 (1995)