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Why did Humans Still Learn Chiefly via Face-to-Face Communication?

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Having written last month about the power of Continuity, my next discussion-point reverts to an issue within Education that is much influenced by Continuity. And that is the question of why face-to-face group teaching is not only surviving, in this time of technological alternatives, but remains essential. *So why do humans still learn chiefly from face-to-face live communication?*

Of course, it's fine to agree that there is ample scope for learning via the wonders of advanced technology. The chances of television in its early days taking over from face-to-face teaching were never very great. That outcome is contrary to the predictions of some behaviourist psychologists such as B.F. Skinner (1904-90). He argued in the 1960s that the box would provide individualised tuition for students to proceed at their own individualised pace. There is much to be said for his concern for not pushing ahead until the student has understood. And much to be said for his opposition to teaching by flogging.

Yet, crucially, he was wrong about the quick switch to technology. Early television lacked interactivity. It was fine for conveying news in small bites or drama in big bites. The hard graft of day-in-day-out learning, however, proved to be very boring to pupils when seated alone in front of an inanimate box, which competed against the distractions of everyday life. Distance learning works at its best for the very highly motivated. And even then educational packages via TV have had to be gracefully standardised for mass delivery.

Today, the small screen and the web together have much greater educational potential. They allow scope not only for individual views to be debated interactively by peers and by tutors but also for students to pursue their own enquiries and research leads. The whole experience can be much more exciting. A cornucopia of information (and misinformation) awaits – with the potential for bewilderment but also endless stimulation.

So what remains so important about face-to-face education? Why does it survive, indeed predominate, all round the world?

An obvious answer is that it stems from our need, as part of a gregarious species, to be with other humans. Children reared in isolation from normal human contact are severely damaged. And this gregariousness applies to humans across the board – not just in education. But the question can be pushed further: why do we still rely on face-to-face communication when we humans have also invented distance communication systems – and worked hard to make those distance communication systems user-friendly for human requirements?

There are three big reasons: firstly, face-to-face teaching allows for improvisation and adaptation on the part of the teacher, with a speaker's normal range of hesitations, repetitions, emphasis, perhaps humour, and personal style. That fluctuating flow of information and advice encourages listeners to concentrate and to co-think alongside. At the same time, the teachers' presentations are subtly but definitely influenced by the response or lack of response of the students. As a result, teaching is a performance art, which is always in process of adaptation. It doesn't always work perfectly, needless to say. But face-to-face

allows for responsiveness. [One implication of this comment is that teaching at all levels should preferably be conveyed with a free flow of words, rather than via reading from a prepared text.]

A second important reason, closely related to the first, is that humans also interact via an even older form of communication. In the course of human evolution, a primordial reliance upon facial expressions, gestures, body language, and sounds of all kinds long preceded speech. And, while the power of words has become hugely important, notably aided by its collateral influence when translated into written words, the old ways have not disappeared. Instead, they co-exist.

So students are also learning, not just from the teachers' flow of words but also from their entire bearing, as well as from their facial expressions and gestures, which accompany speech in rich counter-point. Of course, expressions and gestures can also be seen via some modes of electronic communication: but stylistic conventions have to be learned to suit different media. No wild gesturing (or even minor gesturing) on TV, for example. Look how the news-anchors rely upon facial expressions but firmly control their hands. [Again, another implication of this comment is teachers need social respect to do their jobs well. Otherwise, they may appear socially undermined in front of their students and their students' families. Education is supposed to convey the confident message *Knowledge is Power!* But brow-beaten teachers convey the opposite impression. Thus politicians who loosely criticise 'bad' teachers tend to exacerbate the pedagogic problems which they claim to be trying to cure.]

And there is one third important point about the face-to-face encounter which applies particularly to education. The need for regular meetings of tutors and students means regular timetabling, at meetings where students learn from each other. Regular timetabling and unfolding programmes of study together help to prevent learning becoming bitty and fragmented. The regular timetabling of learning fits into a weekly rhythm, which fits into an annual cycle, which fits into an evolving lifetime.

Face-to-face teaching on a regular basis achieves its impact, not just for individuals but for social groups. We gesture; we talk; we observe one another doing the same; and together we gain access to the accumulating and ever-expanding stock of knowledge that has been created over the generations. More specifically, we began with gesture; then proceeded to talk; then to write; and now to invent and use machines. But it's ultra-human to add the new ways without discarding the old. Indeed, far from discarding, the new communication systems enhance and still depend upon the old ones.