

**TITLE: FREED TO LEARN: FIVE FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS IN
DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION**

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Schooling's profound affects last until the grave. It is not the facts of history or the figures of math or the concepts of science which last, as they disappear almost certainly after each test, but it is the emotional impacts of the experiences of school imprinted on the personality which extend themselves through a life-time. "Traditional Education" pays close attention to things like "competitiveness" or "instilling a common, core knowledge". But it pays no attention to the emotional impacts of children's experience of school, not a bit on how the organization of itself affects the emotional realms of its children, and not a bit at all on personality outcomes of thirteen to seventeen years of experience. Democratic Education, on the other hand, constructs its Free and Democratic Schools with the emotional being fully in mind. Indeed, the overarching goal of Democratic Education is the happy, healthy, well adjusted, self-directed, self-actualizing person. Democratic Education cultivates such outcomes by freeing the emotional predispositions of all children to be the natural inquirers they are born to be. In other words, Democratic Education frees children to learn.

Democratic Education (DE) institutionalizes five fundamental concepts to create the freedom to learn in every child and young adult: 1) DE is learning in a youngster's own way, in his own time and motivated by her own needs, 2) DE maintains that emotional readiness to accept a learning task comes well before the task, 3) DE maximizes choice in individual leaning activities while it minimizes or eliminates coercive structural relationships; 4) DE elevates "learning to learn" well above content mastery, and 5) DE creates community governance of the learning spaces. This paper briefly describes and gives structural examples of the implementation of each concept.

1) Learning in a youngster's own way: All children and young adults, all humans for that matter, are natural learners with different abilities, interests, temperaments, information receiving, processing and communicating styles and rates of emotional, cognitive and social development. Healthy growth-mental and physical, emotional and intellectual-requires formal learning to be driven by these native instincts and inherent differences, fully allowing each individual to grow in his and her own way and in his and her own time. Structurally, this is the multi-age, ungraded environment where progress in cognitive, emotional and social development and in acquisition of learning skills and subject content unfolds as organic growth in a youngster's maturation rather than through a lock step of grade level standards which must be met regardless of who a youngster is at the age he/she happens to be at the time.

2) Emotional readiness to accept a learning task comes well before the task: Any learning, John Holt states, first depends on how a youngster feels about herself,

empowered or powerless, competent or stupid. Compelling a task when someone feels powerless or stupid just frightens, discourages and deepens helplessness. Democratic Education environments concentrate on providing a time for emotional development first when youngsters come to feel safe in trusting their native leaning instincts and their unique ways of knowing. As well, DE provides those injured by their prior schooling, a time of healing, a time of taking off the pressure, of reassurance, as in time they will gain the energy and the courage to accept any task.

Free and self-organized play is *the* readiness activity in DE. Youngsters engage in whatever play the environment supports for as long as they wish. Indeed, DE environments provide areas intended to stimulate imaginative play as well as individual and group physical play. There would be lots of materials like Lincoln Logs and blocks, toys and puzzles, sand and water tables, costumes and theatrical makeup, paints and crayons, newsprint and paper, hammers, nails, saws and wood, etc. There would be performance spaces and child friendly kitchens and store/home props and appliances. There would also be indoor and outdoor playground equipment and open space. For the adolescents play can also be in wood or in metal or in performance with acting or music or in the arts with drawing, painting, sculpting. Or they too can take to the kitchen or the indoor/outdoor playground equipment and open space. Or, they can play in the outdoors, camping, hiking, backpacking, canoeing, rafting, skiing, biking, etc. Then, when in their own time they feel ready, each youngster will engage in whatever formal learning is chosen.

3) Maximizing choice while minimizing or eliminating coercive structural relationships: Youngsters learn, according to John Holt, through a slow process of inquiry where, by way of natural intuitive observation, they form extremely tentative hunches which are tested against experiences. Hunches become a bit stronger each time they are tested and confirmed by experience until the point where youngsters will say with conviction that they *know* that such and such is true. Compelled to constantly prove either they know or do not know youngsters stop trying to test, confirm and strengthen their faint hunches and just give up. This is also the case when youngsters are compelled to undertake objects of learning in which they have no interest or native inclination

Indeed, youngsters ought to be free to choose the objects of learning and how they learn what they have chosen. Freedom to choose that which affects the youngster individually, that which is of interest and inclination, is essential for only under this kind of freedom can the youngster grow through his natural learning instincts and his native differences in learning. Freedom to choose means doing what you like, so long as it doesn't interfere with the freedom of others. Between compelling someone to stop hitting classmates and compelling him to learn Geography and to learn Geography in a prescribed manner lies the meaning of freedom, paraphrasing A.S. Neil. Hitting classmates involves others, but learning Geography and the manner by which the subject is learned involves only the individual. The community has the right to restrain the antisocial individual because he is interfering with the rights of others, but the community has no right to compel an individual to learn Geography or compel the manner by which

Geography is learned, for learning Geography and the manner by which it is learned is a matter for the individual.

Within the school building maximizing choice and minimizing coercion is the Open Classroom where youngsters choose whatever activity they wish. It is also the Montessori Prepared Environment where, again, children are free to explore whatever they wish. It is also an Open School where sets of Open Classrooms are available each with a different purpose, such as Art, Music, Literacy, Math, Science, History, etc., wherein children can freely inquire after whatever objects of interest drive them. It is also eliminating the battery of tests and grades children must endure. If assessments must be used, then those which are either or both completely uninvasive and child constructed should be used. And their administration and marking ought to be solely by an authentic request of the youngster stating the wish to be evaluated rather than mandated, or even suggested, by an adult authority.

4) Elevating “learning to learn” well above content mastery: Content mastery focused learning cannot cultivate in youngsters the quick adaptability required of the wired life of the twenty-first century and beyond. Within an era of total social diffusion of information technologies and the information saturation these technologies’ have wrought, the ability or the desirability to store in one’s brain a set of Core Knowledge has become grossly irrelevant. Rather, the basic skills of learning itself, the abilities to define a question, to identify needed information to satisfy the question, to locate where and how to access the required information, to analyze the information according to the demands of the question, to synthesize the information with prior knowledge to create new knowledge to answer the question, then to generalize the new knowledge and the process itself across other questions, are the keys preparing youngsters for the quick adaptability necessary for life today and in the future. And these learning to learn skill sets are taken by Democratic Education to be the principal objectives of its education.

DE accomplishes these objectives by allowing the native inquiry instincts, the natural curiosity, by which youngsters learn to drive ever more complex questioning of ever more of the universe as youngsters mature. Thus, learning structures in DE develop and explore self-selected questions appropriate to the developmental stage of the student. So, the youngest work through their instinctive wonder to explore Montessori or other manipulatives and the oldest work through their passion to know to explore Project-Based research questions.

5) Creating community governance of the learning spaces: Children cannot be freed to learn, A.S. Neil suggests, unless they feel completely free to govern their learning environment. Freedom to govern, according to Neil, is the acceptance of equal rights for all members of the learning community, adults and children. And in equal rights, the community governs itself with both adult and child having the equal right to speak and to hear, to listen and to persuade within community forums, but with each only having a single vote on questions up for community decision. Indeed, in democratic schools, the community comes together in regular meetings of the whole, usually once a week, to decide school-wide policy and specific issues through a majority vote or a consensus

process. School-wide policy from daily attendance, projects and assignments, assessments and grades, graduation requirements and ceremonies, budget issues and learning material needs, expectant behaviors consistent and inconsistent with the norms of the community as well as the means by which inconsistent behaviors are resolved, to specific issues of hiring staff, accepting student admissions, and disciplining troublesome school-mates, are some of the subjects of community self-governance.

In sum it must be said that democratic learning communities abound with different ways of being Democratic. But, each community describing itself as Democratic or Free incorporates in their own way all five fundamental concepts within their structure and operation, true to the nature of this approach to serving the needs of the young. And these learning communities stretch from the United Kingdom with Summerhill, the grandfather of Free Schooling, across the Pond to Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, Liberty School in Maine, Uppattinas in Pennsylvania, to Albany Free School and Brooklyn Free School in New York. They go around the world to the School for Self-Determination in Moscow, Russia, and the Nahoon Montessori School in East London, South Africa. These few of note are only a small number of Democratic Education learning communities nationally and worldwide.

An argument can be made that Free and Democratic schools are not for everyone. Maybe that is true. But as Democratic Education starts with the native learning instincts of all humans, it is hard to ignore the universality Democratic Education has for growing every youngster in his and her own way and in his and her own time to be happy, healthy, well-adjusted, self-directed and self-actualizing...just the deep desires of all parent's for their children.

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