

Reflections on my learning experience – a personal story

Inspired by the research performed by LDI on this subject, I have decided to put down what I have learned about learning in the course of my formal education as well as my experience in learning to live.

In retrospect, the term reports I received in high school are a source of great mirth to myself and my family. Although I seemed to perform at least at an average level in most subjects (with an inclination toward the languages and the arts) the comment on my reports for (then compulsory) sports always read: "Meira expresses no interest whatsoever in sporting activities". To this day, it surprises me that my gym teacher in fact even knew my name, since the number of times I actually showed up (armed with elaborate excuses why I was ab-so-lu-tely unable to participate in any strenuous activity) for the weekly ordeal must have been no more than ten. This all would probably be no cause for more than a casual snigger at the memory of my high school years, if it weren't for the fact that I now earn a part-time living managing a successful Gym. In my capacity as an instructor I teach an average of 13 classes per week, in addition to my private workouts, which occupy me for an additional 5 hours.

To me, this is just one of the areas of my life which supports my vision that conventional education does not necessarily lead to personal development, but may, in some cases, even stifle it.

As the child of expatriates, my formal education was very varied. I was eight years old when I finally went to a conventional school, having been educated by my parents (both teachers by profession and motivators by vocation) until that point. At my first school, I was immediately struck by the extent to which teachers expected students to assume and believe statements and theories, without being offered tangible proof or explanation. This posed an extreme contrast to the type of education I had received until that point.

Even as a child I was blessed with an inquisitive mind, and wanted to know reasons for just about everything. My father, a physicist, firmly believed in self-education even then. Learning did not, in his mind, start at 08.30 and end at 15.00. It is a continuous process. This is illustrated by one of my fondest memories: during a leisurely after dinner talk at the table (I must have been about nine or ten), I asked my father why it is that objects look different under water. Rather than expecting me to simply accept his explanation about the refraction of light, the dirty dishes were immediately pushed aside, the curtains closed and the lights switched off. My mother produced a glass container filled with water from the kitchen, and a flashlight. In order to make the light

clearly visible, a cigar was lit (still blissfully unaware of the dangers of smoking in those days, my father enjoyed a cigar now and then), and I was able to see, before my very own eyes, what happened to light when it passes through water. I never looked at objects in the swimming pool in the same way after that, and I never looked at the teachers at my school in the same way either. I began to distinguish two different types of teachers: those who merely teach and those who motivate. In my high school, the first category attempted to persuade us students to absorb information and regurgitate said information during exams, the latter stimulated us to discover this information on our own.

Unfortunately, the school system was such that it seemed practically impossible to excel in both the arts and the sciences. Timetables simply made choosing between either sciences or humanities a must. I thus opted for the humanities curriculum, thereby losing touch with my ability to grasp the exact sciences. In doing so, I subconsciously learned to believe that I was unable to understand the exact sciences. This led me to choose a university curriculum that supported this vision and I actually once switched from a study of Sociology to Spanish because I believed that I would never be able to pass the compulsory Statistics exam. Two years later, now successful in my study of Spanish, I went out of my way to take the optional course in Statistics, which had absolutely no bearing on my studies, just to prove my point. I had, by that time, discovered in a gradual way, that conventional education often leads us to base our perception of ourselves on our limitations, rather than on our possibilities. We tend to make choices, which we believe will lead to success through the shortest, and simplest route. Society rewards success and excellence, and punishes failure. Few or no points for trying.

We all wish to be rewarded. Hence we choose the path that is most likely to lead us to success and in doing so we limit ourselves. The whole thing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: do what you are good at, experience little resistance, receive a reward. Conclusion: resistance (effort) leads to not receiving the much-coveted reward.

And there I was, in 1993, freshly out of university, my diploma neatly ready to be presented at the many job interviews I would, no doubt have. Things did not go exactly as planned. Unemployment amongst graduates in The Netherlands in those days was at a record high, and the only graduates to have a vague chance at finding employment in any shape or form were those who graduated in the sciences.

While I applied for all sorts of jobs, I spent much of my time at the local Gym, where I rediscovered the benefits of sports for both physical and mental health. I also discovered that I was too shy and self-conscious to join in any of the group-classes such as aerobics, so I stuck to

my individual programme of weight training. During this time, I did, however, sometimes secretly wonder: “what would it be like to teach aerobics?”. A thought I never uttered out loud because I thought myself far too shy and insecure. Besides, if I was too terrified to join the relative anonymity of a group workout, how would I ever be able to actually *teach* a group?

My husband (who owned the Gym and was not yet my husband then but merely the object of my adoration) told me that if I wanted to be a sports instructor, I should become one. All I needed to do, in his words, was learn. Having dropped biology at a very early stage in school, I thought I would never be able to master the complex knowledge of anatomy required for such a profession, but driven by desire I began to learn. I asked questions and received answers from anyone who would listen. I spent many hours alone in the aerobics room, learning how to perform choreographies, discovering my physical strength and flexibility, and my inner power. I became enthusiastic and wanted to share! But all this time, I did not participate in a single group workout.

One year of daily hard work later, I joined my very first aerobics class... as the group teacher! No experience in my life has ever been as empowering as that moment. To discover that I could succeed at something I had always led myself to believe was totally impossible, filled me with pride and energy. Inspired, I began to master other related disciplines, and I now train people in some six areas of sports, as well as offering a nutritional programme for weight-loss and special programmes for pregnant women. An absolute failure in mathematics at school, I now plan and execute the financial management of our business, with success.

The discovery I made at school, that there are teachers and motivators, was expanded with the idea that we can be our own teacher and motivator, and that anyone can be a motivator or teacher to another person. In the abovementioned example, my husband was my motivator, and I was my own teacher. I now try to motivate others to learn about health. And I teach them that there are very few limits in what a person can achieve both physically and mentally..

I believe that I can become anything I want to. Even a pilot. All I need to do is learn to fly. So, when someone comes to me and says: “I want to lose 20 pounds and achieve a better health, how long will this take me?” all I ask is: “How hard are you willing to work?” Since I know from my own experience that when we reject the idea that we are limited, we can achieve anything we set our minds to; we can educate ourselves and others; motivate ourselves and others; and achieve greatness if we so desire.

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