

REMAKING THE MIND: REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING AND UNLEARNING

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My first encounter with the stories published in this book was via the collection *Stories of Resistance: Stories of Unlearning*, published around July 2002 on the Shikshantar Web site at http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/stories_resistance.html. My reflections in this brief set of notes refer to my reading those stories at that time and my reacting to them spontaneously immediately afterwards in an email to Manish Jain. I draw on that email as I am being asked to write a short note reflecting on the stories for inclusion in the book. In addition, I take the opportunity to include a few concerns that have been with me since I participated in the online segment of Shikshantar's recent (December 2002) Learning Societies Conference.

I think that *resistance* and *dissent* are the crucial concepts that come to mind in reflecting on the stories in this book. Next comes *perseverance*, effective resistance and dissent being contingent upon perseverance. There is every reason to nurture the capacity not to conform. Bringing this out in the stories of learning published in this book is an important initiative and an admirable effort on the part of Shikshantar. While the book's title emphasizes the idea of unlearning, I prefer to call these stories "stories of learning," considering that unlearning and learning are two sides of the same coin. They can't be separated from each other as unlearning is a necessary condition for true learning. One can't really learn without at the same time unlearning and one can't unlearn if no learning has taken place. In fact, that is what many of the stories tell the reader. Their authors wouldn't have been able to engage in creatively and critically looking back at their past as a way to move forward if there had been no prior learning for them. Learning is the process of continually remaking the mind and to remake it, the mind must first have been made. Making the mind is a process that involves nothing less than our entire material existence and how that interacts with the rest of the world. Or, to quote brain researcher Susan Greenfield (2000), mind is "the seething morass of cell circuitry that has been configured by personal experiences and is constantly being updated as we live out each moment" (p. 13). The crux of that definition is the word "updated." Updating is more than merely adding to. Updating also means modifying, throwing things out, rearranging things, making new connections, and doing so after carefully considering past experience and how that must be (re)evaluated in the light of new experience.

I am referencing the work of Susan Greenfield in the previous paragraph not only to clarify how I look at the continual remaking of the mind, but also as I feel it is important to recognize the materialness of our being. Much mischief has resulted from the negation of such recognition, leading to the invention of a concept of mind as a superior entity, equated with our thinking processes, allowing us to consider ourselves as separate from the material world, able to look at the world *objectively* and *neutrally* and thus also able to produce knowledge that could be assumed to have nothing to do with us as material beings, knowledge to which we could attribute a god-like status. I hold that point of view to be wrong and disrespectful of the beauty of who we are. I also hold it to be particularly

out of touch with major concerns that surround our existence at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Once the thinking process had been separated from the materialness of humans, it could itself be further fragmented. That is exactly the way thought processes started behaving since the invention of dualism and how they have impacted on the history of scientific and technological development for the past couple of hundred years. The resulting fragmentation of knowledge has both become an important basis for the advancement of science and for the human inability to live with science. In his collection of essays *Wholeness and the implicate order*, physicist David Bohm (1980) argued that the process of separation has gone too far and that it has become time to reconnect with ourselves and discipline our minds to see wholeness rather than wholes that are reconstituted from independent fragments. This requires having a world view that we probably all had when we began our lives, but subsequently were taught to lose.

Many of the stories in this book echo Bohm's proposal to restore wholeness as a mainstay for the functioning of our mind. These stories are, in my view, timely. The convulsion as well as the planetary extent of the potential impact of the problems humans have to deal with at this juncture in time are such that we all have to look upon ourselves as parts of larger wholes – historically and socially – and think of ourselves as contributing entities in a harmoniously self-organized social process, interacting constructively with the world around us.

Quite a few of the stories are critical of the schooling culture. I think that beyond schooling there are many other spaces of “learning,” if they may be called that, where one gets conditioned to conform, the media and organized work environments being among them. In addition, and while I recognize that the culture of schooling is perhaps most forcefully represented by the schools as we know them, I think that it is too easy a conclusion that we should simply do away with schools. I continue to ponder the question if all schools, by the very definition of their being an institutionalized effort at providing large numbers of people with opportunities to learn, are necessarily bad. Certainly, there are alternatives to the school. Some people have very successfully, and in a more wholesome way, learned at home the things for which others go to school. Considering that so many people don't have parents who introduce them to things like reading, what do we do? The story writers in this volume have highly developed linguistic abilities in various registers (creative writing, critical reading, etc.) and they owe, as often becomes clear from their stories, their resistance to those very abilities. Because of the importance for all people to have the same capacity to resist and dissent, we must find ways to develop that kind of “literacy,” as well as many other important human abilities, broadly. If we can shake the Education For All doldrums in the process, so much the better. There is, no doubt, a need for a better mix of self-organization and planned organization/institutionalization in the world of organized learning. Most complex systems in which humans participate, thrive on a wise mix of the two. With all the emphasis on centrally planned formal schooling (including the uncritical acceptance of the mainstream patterns on which schooling systems are being modeled around the world), many opportunities to create and develop the conditions of learning in other

spaces than the school remain unexplored and the process of developing those conditions remains in the hands of the few rather than in those of all.

Much needs to be changed. As I see it, there are some very problematic things in the established practice of schooling. One of them is the unforgivable lack of imagination that is involved in the repetitive and monotonous application, around the world, of what is basically a single recipe of dealing with human learning in the school setting. Another one is the way in which the schooling practice has contributed to the taken-for-granted fragmentation of knowledge and experience. Yet another problem is the emphasis in the schooling practice on the learning individual, often conceived of as standing in a competitive relationship with other learning individuals, rather than on learning as an essentially social and collaborative behavior. Perhaps the most serious problem with schooling as we know it is the monopolistic hold that the idea of schooling has acquired, over time, on people's thinking about learning, resulting in the generic perception that 'learning is what you do in school,' thus implying that learning is the result of instruction and nothing else.

If these stories can help correct some of these above flaws, they will have been well written.

References

Bohm, D. (1980). *Wholeness and the implicate order*. London: Routledge.

Greenfield, S. (2000). *The private life of the brain: Emotions, consciousness, and the secret of the self*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.