THE ESSENCE OF LEARNING

THE CHILD IS FATHER OF THE MAN: HOW HUMANS LEARN AND WHY

This is an impassioned autobiographical account of an individual’s commitment to understanding the essence of human learning. John Abbott’s lucid, informative, entertaining book charts a lifetime of diverse educational experience, offering a significant synthesis of new research into evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, systems thinking and communications technology. In it he advances the debate about the relationship between scientific discoveries of the human brain and an appropriate industrial model of education for the twenty-first century.

In addition to teaching and educational management, Abbott has been chairman of the Royal Geographical Society’s editorial Advisory Centre, and Director of Education 2000 with nine community-wide projects in the UK. Over the last six years, he has lectured around the world on new understandings about learning, and since 1996 he has lived in Washington DC. Abbott’s fascinating career has culminated in his presidency of the 21st Century Learning Initiative, a trans-national association of researchers and practitioners. This is an inspirational book in which the author carefully balances erudite argument challenging traditional approaches to learning and delightful anecdotal comment. His analysis of the educational developments and initiatives of the last thirty years are interspersed with personal recollections of unique journeys, in his early years as a young teacher and later with the lecture and fundraising trail necessary to promote an awareness of the 20th and 21st Century Learning Initiative.

The expository, chronological style is invigorating for the reader who takes the journey with the author. We move from the focus of the early chapters upon the secure, stimulating home as son of an Anglican priest, his childhood in Portsmouth to public school, then, to university life at Trinity College, Dublin. Abbott began his teaching career at Manchester Grammar School in 1965, as a Geography teacher, and then moved to Alleyne’s school, Stevenage, Hertfordshire. He speaks with genuine compassion and constructive understanding of the problems faced by teachers and management both within the independent and state sectors.

Inevitably, as Headmaster, Abbott became involved with the intricate machinations of local government. He vividly describes the delicate interplay between local and central government in determining educational policy and echoes the laments of many teachers caught in the straitjackets imposed upon the profession. The fruition of Abbott’s vision of information technology as a driving force in learning was realised in the creation of the Open Terminal Centre at Alleyne’s school in the form of a fully computerised classroom. Abbott recognised the rich resource of the community with its separate opportunities in helping young people to shape their personal visions and ambitions.

He subsequently became director of Education 2000 responsible for community-based projects throughout the UK. At this stage in the journey, Abbott’s interests stimulate national significance and financing becomes an imperative; here he meets the real world of political bargaining and the reader enjoys his energetic, yet frustrating, dealings with such figures as John Patten, Kenneth Clarke, Ron Dearing, John Major and others walking the corridors of Whitehall.

Abbott impressively applies theory to practice in his writing. He frequently cites the extensive writings of leading exponents in the field of human learning, such as Howard Gardner and John Brueer, to strengthen his convincing argument that initiatives and curricula need actively to encourage young people to handle in a holistic way the complex social, economic, technological and environmental issues that will be needed for success in the twenty-first century. He stresses the need for transferability of skills; the need for teachers to become reflective thinkers, and, in turn to make their students reflective. We need to create more experts and move away from specialists since it is the former who are able to grasp the holistic quality of human situations.

His views are rooted firmly in the view that educators, in the broadest sense of the word, need to respond positively to economic reality. The emphasis is upon those who can use their brains in an inclusive manner: problem-solving, creativity, adaptability, team-building, group intelligence, natural intelligence now gives businesses a competitive advantage. Schools must be ready, and willing, to respond to this shift from schooling to learning, and from predictability to creativity.

Abbott emerges as an innovative, inspired individual; this is not a book espousing mere rhetoric but rooted in reality as his professional efforts to advance policy are constantly set in relief against a background of warm, supportive family life with his wife Anne and sons Peter, Tom and David. The reader delights in his regular escapes to Shraw in County Galway, Ireland where he attains spiritual and physical solace.

This book will appeal to a wide readership: from those who enjoy the autobiographical genre to new teachers, experienced practitioners, administrators, politicians and those who believe that learning and community are the concepts that must steer future educational policy. The book concludes with salutary comments from Abbott’s son as he embarks upon a degree course at Cambridge: “Our parents’ generation is much to blame. They have failed to teach us to be inquisitive, have failed to teach us that sense of awe and wonder about the world around us…” Oasis says it in Listen Up: “I don’t believe in magic, life is automatic.” The reader joins with the author in his mission to address these failings. This is an immensely sensible book, which continues the debate about an appropriate industrial model of education for the future. The reader can only admire the author’s personal convictions, his respect for the young minds we are privileged to stimulate, and acknowledge teachers’ moral responsibility to encourage reflective thinking and learning.

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