

# Education Revolution

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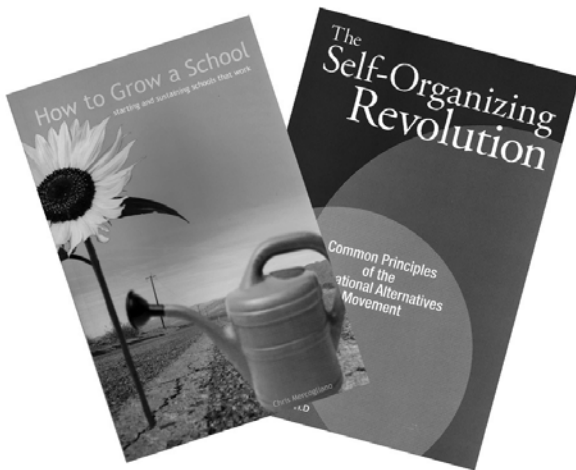
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## Structures for Autonomy:

# The Experience of Self Managed Learning College

BY IAN CUNNINGHAM

**T**oo often there is confusion about the difference between structure and control when talking about freedom or autonomy for learners. I want to say something about these ideas and to give examples from our practice at Self Managed Learning College. My case is that we (adults) should support young people to grow up to be autonomous human beings who can lead a good life (which includes moral, social and ecological dimensions) as created by themselves. We need to provide structures for autonomy. And good structures reduce control.

**The Taoists have a good take  
on appropriate structures.  
They ask, What is the value of a glass?  
It's an empty, rigid, transparent,  
resilient structure.**

The ideal of autonomy is espoused in the writings of many philosophers. Yet we know that educational practices can inhibit autonomous development (the “hidden curriculum” of schooling). The structures of schooling such as classrooms, timetables and lessons imposed by adults, rules imposed by adults and institutional buildings inhibit autonomy. They control young people.

However there are other structures in human life. In fact it's almost impossible to lead an unstructured life. We may have routines (structures) for starting the day – get up, shower, get dressed, have breakfast, etc. Other structures might be around work routines – daily travel, answering emails, attending meetings and so on.

The Taoists have a good take on appropriate structures. They ask, What is the value of a glass? It's an **empty, rigid, transparent, resilient structure**. Emptiness is important as

we can then choose to put into the glass water, milk, beer or juice. If the glass is full of, say, cement, it would be of no use as we could not put any liquid in it. So **emptiness** leads to usefulness. But we also need the glass to be **rigid** to hold the liquid. If it was made of paper the structure would collapse and the liquid would run out – usefulness needs appropriate rigidity.

**Transparency** is useful because the learner and others can then see what is in the glass – important so that appropriate support and challenge can be offered to the learner. Finally **resilience** is important. Thin glass is more resilient than thick glass in coping with temperature change (if you remember your science) – so thinness is useful. Thick structures (with too much structure) are not robust and therefore are not capable of dealing with difference. We need the minimum structure to achieve our aims. Thick structures with too many constraints don't cope well with difference. The value of our thin content-free structures is that we can use the same basic structures with 7 year olds and 70 year olds.

All these structural aspects feature in the way we approach assisting young people to develop as autonomous human beings who can lead a good life. And we view these structures as avoiding inappropriate controls. Structures that create bounded emptiness liberate young people: school structures control. So we should avoid control as much as possible while creating useful, liberating structures.

### SELF MANAGED LEARNING STRUCTURES

Self Managed Learning College runs a series of programs in England as well as supporting other organizations in Canada, Finland, Israel and Sweden. I will mention here the South Downs Learning Centre in Brighton.

This project is for 12 students aged 11-16 who choose not to go to school. The program runs Monday to Friday within the hours of 9.00 a.m. to 1 p.m. When students join they initially encounter three structures.

**1 Learning agreement.** Students are assisted to create their own learning goals and direction in life. They are asked to address five questions, namely:

- Where have I been – what has been my experience of life up to now?

- Where am I now – what kind of person am I, what do I care about, what interests me, what am I good at, etc?
- Where do I want to get to – what kind of life might I want to lead, what kind of work might I want to do, what goals for learning should I set myself now?
- How will I get to where I want to be – how will I learn what I want to learn?
- How will I know if I have arrived – how will I measure my progress and my development?

**2 Learning group.** A student joins a group with five others plus an adult (staff member) as the learning assistant. The group assists the person to create their learning agreement and to carry it out. Students can discuss anything they like in the group and ask for any help they need.

**3 Community meeting.** Each morning at 9 a.m. the community meets. At the start of the program this was to do things like agree on rules and ways of working (which can get modified at any time at any community meeting). The meeting is chaired in rotation by members of the community – adults or students. The person who chairs also has to manage the close down at the end of the morning – that is, organize everyone to clear up. By rotating the chair we ensure that power does not accumulate to one person. Anyone can raise anything they like in the community meetings and most days they are quite short.

After the Monday community meeting each learning group meets to think through what each student wants to put in their timetable for the week. So timetables exist and

are another structuring device. However, unlike most schools, the students create their own individual timetables and the staff (learning assistants) timetables follow the students. The community re-convenes to agree on resources (who is to use what room, which computers are to be booked to which students, and so on).

**The structures assist learners to manifest their autonomy-in-community. We become fully-functioning persons through relationships. So our model of autonomy-in-community is to avoid narrow individualism and instead to assist young people to use the community structures to further their relationships and their learning.**

All timetables are copied so that each student has their own copy and one copy of each is posted up so that everyone can see what everyone else is doing. Staff timetables are also posted up. Most of the staff time is spent working one-to-one or with small self-selected groups. Students also organize visits and other activities away from the Centre.

On Friday each learning group meets to review the week. Students consider how their learning and activities



Students at Self Managed Learning College

have worked out. Often they haven't stuck exactly to their timetables – sometimes for good reason, like wanting to spend more time on something. Sometimes it's because they had problems and these can be discussed. Each student in a learning group has their own time to talk and to raise what they like. One of our roles as learning assistants is to make certain that everyone has a fair share of the group's time.

In the Friday meeting each student has time to consider what they might want to do the same or differently next week. Most students vary their timetables from week to week as they change and develop. Also we encourage them to consider if they are on track with the learning goals that they have set for themselves. Naturally these goals might change and any learning agreement can be modified at any time. However the agreement is an agreement with the group so they need to come to the group to suggest any changes to their plans.

All these structures are designed give students as much freedom as possible. However we take the idea of community seriously and A S Neill's distinction between freedom and license is important. To paraphrase Neill, if you want to ride your bike and it doesn't get in the way of others, that's appropriate freedom; if you want to take someone else's bike without their permission and ride it into people, that's license and not appropriate. Basically it is about having agreed rules that indicate what is permitted and what is not. And, like other learning communities, we sometimes have to deal with rule-breaking.

## CONCLUSION

The structures I have mentioned are

- **Empty** – learning agreements, community meetings, learning groups, timetables are all filled up with what students want
- **Rigid** – they are fixed so students know where they stand
- **Transparent** – timetables are on show for all to see; staff are transparent in their views
- **Resilient** – the thin structures provide just enough support to learners without constraining them inappropriately.

The structures assist learners to manifest their autonomy-in-community. We become fully-functioning persons through relationships. So our model of autonomy-in-community is to avoid narrow individualism and instead to assist young people to use the community structures to further their relationships and their learning.

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