

The Institute for Educational Studies

MONTESSORI TEACHING AND LEARNING By Philip Snow Gang:

There are two essential gifts from my teaching experiences with children:

First, given an opportunity to explore their passionate interests, young people will - experience a high degree of independence, become interested in areas of study they would normally be aloof to, cooperate willingly with others, and genuinely love school.

The second gift is that all subjects can be linked, interrelated and fused when the core theme that connects everything becomes the central story of the elementary years. For Montessori, this central theme was the story of evolution and humanity's role in the unfolding cosmos. These two gifts would later play a dominant role in the development of the content and process of our graduate program.

What are the elements of the Montessori approach that create a unique learning environment?

1. Liberty
2. Activity
3. Responsibility
4. Community
5. Love
6. Conscious evolution

Liberty

Liberty is the base of human experience. Without the freedom to explore, investigate and discover, early humans might have remained at the level of their mammalian cousins. Instead, they were privileged to learn by doing: to make mistakes and to improve upon their conditions. From an anthropological perspective, each human being recapitulates the life of the species. That is, we "experience" the same stages of development and their accompanying needs. Liberty is essential to learning.

Through free choice children express and strengthen their individuality, fostering the development of self-confidence and integrity. Freedom of choice reinforces the construction of a healthy and vibrant will as well as independent thinking. Montessori explains, *The child "constructs" his (or her) own will by a process of self education... developing the will by making decisions.*

Activity

Montessori believed that adolescents should experience the social significance of work in the community. She says *It is essential to understand the value of work in all its forms, be they manual or intellectual. Practical experience will cause the adolescent to understand that the two forms are complementary and they are equally essential in civilized existence.* Her learning strategies for all developmental stages call for the inclusion of purposeful activity -- activity which connects the intellect with real-to-life experiences.

The didactic materials that are found in Montessori environments are tools for reflective action. They are meaningful in that they draw the learner into relationship. They are not "tools for teaching" as much as they are experiences upon which one constructs personalized theory. Knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

Responsibility

The boundary of liberty is the domain of responsibility. Every human being needs opportunities to acquire social, physical and moral responsibility. As people move through different stages of development, responsibility expands in an ever-increasing circle, ultimately reaching what is universal responsibility. Article Seven of the Declaration of Human Responsibility for Peace and Sustainable Development states:

Of all living beings, human beings have the unique capacity to decide consciously whether to protect or harm the quality and conditions of life on Earth. In reflecting on the fact that they belong to the natural world and occupy a special position as participants in the evolution of natural processes, people can develop, on the basis of altruism, compassion and love, a sense of universal responsibility towards the world as an integral whole, towards the protection of nature and the promotion of the highest potential for change, with a view to creating these conditions which enable them to achieve the highest level of evolutionary potential.

In the Montessori learning environment responsibility is developed through experience and natural consequences. Children are provided opportunities through social life activity to align themselves with the highest values needed in a democratic society.

Community

Communion is a basic human need to belong. It is an act of sharing that creates a context for personal and group meaning. When the climate of educational institutions is adversarial it affects all personal dynamics -- between teachers and children, parents and teachers, teachers and administration and so on. Essential to a school's health is the development of an interdependent community.

No matter how much we may teach children about democracy, it is what they see and experience that leaves an indelible trace. A healthy community requires the nurturing of deep communication skills -- skills that honor people as individuals and ones that create a safe space for listening, hearing and honest dialogue. This became a primary emphasis of my work as a school director. Today, brain research suggests that group experiences can not only accelerate learning, but they create a more integrated context for deeper comprehension.

Love

Love is not only the attractive force that compels us to be with each other, it is a continuum of respect and reverence for life and the unfolding potential of humanity. Without love, learning is reduced to a method or a subject and the field of experience is limited. Universal love parallels universal responsibility. It emanates from a core understanding and visceral experience of evolution and of humanity's role in the natural order.

Montessori explains, *A teacher must not imagine she can prepare herself for this vocation simply by acquiring knowledge and culture. Above all else she must cultivate a proper attitude to the moral order.* In every school subject there is an activity of love. It is this spiritual component that differentiates a Montessori class from a class that uses montessori materials. The latter operates at the ordinary level of manipulation while the former leads to expanded awareness.

Conscious evolution

At the heart of the notion of conscious evolution is the idea of responsibility. It is recognition that *I am part of a larger wholeness of life -- a "great chain of being" as the Medieval scholars might put it -- and that the well-being of that wholeness is my responsibility too.*

This process begins early in life by creating an atmosphere of trust. Trust is the glue that empowers the young child to seek his or her own way in the world and to respect and trust others. Through exposure to the evolutionary cycle of the universe and life on Earth, elementary children discover the cosmic interdependencies that have given rise to conscious awareness and compassion. In a 1946 lecture Montessori proclaimed:

Cosmic charity is universal. It requires the lifelong dedication of each human to all humankind.... It lifts up the hearts of all people and helps civilization rise to higher levels as it ensures the existence of each and all.

The trees that purify the air, the herbs that capture vitamins from sunlight, the coral that filter the sea whose creatures would die if there were no such life forms to keep the water pure, the animals that populate the Earth are unconscious of their cosmic mission, but without them the harmony of creation would not exist and life would cease. This harmony, based on the needs of each and all, is of divine origin. That is why humans have no conception of it and perceive only their immediate needs. But if humans could raise their consciousness to a higher level we would awaken and be aware of the disinterested goodness and self sacrifice of our fellows.

If we educate children to see this, they will ready themselves to feel gratitude to all humankind. This is an affective aspect of our cosmic education

In the language of the current decade what we are addressing here is global-ecological awareness that provides learners with opportunities to make connections with nature. This sets a context for understanding humanity's responsibility for sustainable living.

This Montessori background firmly established itself in the seat of my conscious awareness. Working with children is not really different than working with adults. Although the principles may take on different forms, the same ones apply to all stages of development. - Philip Snow Gang