

# SELF-EDUCATION

Maurice Gibbons and Gary Phillips worked together for three years developing Walkabout-Challenge-Self-Education concepts and practices characterized by a four-stage program: (1) influential parenthood, (2) initiative training for elementary school students, (3) challenge education for secondary students; and (4) self-education training and support services for adults. From those four they outline basic elements of programs designed to teach self-education, including visualization, learning-style, personal curriculum planning, risk experiences, and self-culture.<sup>1</sup>

“The most important frontier of education,” Gibbons and Phillips begin, “is the vast, undeveloped realm of human experience that lies outside the narrow boundaries of formal schooling,” a realm, they note, where the “great majority of people” live, adding that “less than one per cent of a person's life is spent in classrooms,” that “even the best educated adults have five decades or more still to live after they graduate,” a fact that “does not diminish ... the need for learning,” something that “if anything, it becomes greater, more urgent, during adult life.”<sup>2</sup> They wonder how can this “need”<sup>3</sup> be met, how the educational potential of the non-schooled be developed, answering “we have to teach people how to teach themselves, how to design and pursue their own learning.”<sup>4</sup>

“Self-education occurs outside of formal educational institutions, not inside them,”<sup>5</sup> Gibbons and Phillips assert, too sweepingly. Suggesting that “skills can be taught and practiced in schools,” they add that “teachers can gradually transfer the authority and responsibility for self-direction to students, and self-educational acts can be simulated.”<sup>6</sup> I wonder to what extent such “acts” can be self-directed when they are “simulated,” reiterating what they’ve already been taught. Certainly, Gibbons and Phillips seem right when they assert that “self-education can only truly occur when people are not compelled to learn and others are not obligated to teach them - especially not to teach them a particular subject-matter curriculum,”<sup>7</sup> that last phrase apparently gratuitous given that learning is always learning some subject, itself a sliver of a complicated conversation that constitutes curriculum. They affirm that “true self-education can only occur when a person chooses to learn what he can also decide not to learn,” that last phrase anticipating the concept of impotential.<sup>8</sup>

“The main purpose of schooling reflected in most curricula is the mastery of the disciplines of knowledge based on the decisions of experts or authorities,”<sup>9</sup> they continue, oversimplifying. In contrast, the “purposes of self-education arise from the needs, interests and aspirations of the individual,” a “desire to make their lives better.”<sup>10</sup> Because schooling is “obligatory” and “teach students what they are required to learn,” students “often completely separate schooling from their personal lives.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, “self-education reverses the process, making systematic study a part of life.”<sup>12</sup>

Alas, self-education is not free of “evaluation” in the Gibbons-Phillips scheme, if now “based on demonstration rather than written tests.”<sup>13</sup> All is not lost, however, as “an individual teacher or a group of teachers can teach for a future of self-education while working within existing curricula,” if “with some difficulty in a traditional setting.”<sup>14</sup> They ask parents to encourage “independence in their children,” elementary school teachers to cultivate “initiative in their students,” secondary teachers and university professors to challenge their students “to excel,” and members of communities to “support self-education among people of all ages.”<sup>15</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Self-education is an awfully broad category, including even self-directed learning, which could leave the curriculum unchanged. It could include also self-determination, a key concern for Indigenous scholars that is entirely absent here, as Indigenous concerns were at this time. To the extent Gibbons and Phillips endorse student interest – another amorphous concept - as the driver in self-education, they might have had Summerhill in mind, a school where apparently little happened unless generated by student interest (Neill 1960). Other instances of teaching organized around student interest also existed at that time: Dennison 1969, Herndon 1971, Holt 1969.

## REFERENCES

- Dennison, George, 1969. *The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School*. New York: Random House.
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- Neill, A.S. 1960. *Summerhill*. New York: Hart.

Pinar, William F. 2015. *Educational Experience as Lived*. New York: Routledge.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> This first paragraph is Anton Birioukov-Brant's abstract of the article; see Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 67.
- <sup>2</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 67-68.
- <sup>3</sup> "Need" has long been an amorphous concept in curriculum studies, as it is here. Is "need" self-generated and self-experienced? Or is a cover concept for the intentions of authorities, including teachers. Unless its meaning is specified, I recommend avoidance of the term.
- <sup>4</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 68. Is there a hint of self-contradiction here? I have argued that by definition teaching tends to undermine the capacity for self-directed study: Pinar 2015, 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 69. Learning on one's own can occur anywhere, including even especially within educational institutions.
- <sup>6</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 69.
- <sup>7</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 69.
- <sup>8</sup> See Lewis 2013.
- <sup>9</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 72.
- <sup>10</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 72. I could but won't quibble.
- <sup>11</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 72.
- <sup>12</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 72. "Systematic" is surely overstatement. I would also draw a distinction between "study" and "learning." One can study without mastering the topic, without learning it.
- <sup>13</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 79. Why doesn't a "written test" also represent a "demonstration"?
- <sup>14</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 81. See their Table 3 in the original article for their extension of "teaching self-education into total programs."
- <sup>15</sup> Gibbons and Phillips 1982, 81. Lofty aspirations are admirable but here education risks becoming eschatology.