

Chapter 3

Yeah, Sure! Developing My Own Learning Agency (A Craft of Learning?)

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Learner Agency

learning literacy

Having written a novel examining how I discovered my learning agency and my personal heutagogy, I thought my learning agency came from the choices I made as a teenager concerning music I listened to during the Sixties, starting with The Beatles, and the friends and conversations it engendered. Since then, I've examined more closely how I discovered learning agency and have realised there were many implicit contextual factors which were less about choice and more about circumstance. I identified three that happened when I was "accidentally" home-schooled. Firstly, my mother became a librarian when I was seven years old and for two years I had to read in a library for an extra hour a day. Secondly, my father undertook a teacher-training course when I was ten years old and used me to test textbooks designed for fifteen-year-olds. Thirdly, in the twelve-months before I started secondary school, my family lived in four different houses, and I went to three different schools, which encouraged me to take my own decisions on how to be responsible for my own learning. Cumulatively, it seems I had developed a personal "craft of learning" before I entered formalised secondary education and The Beatles arrived. This chapter explores my personal journey and the factors that have influenced my discovery of learning agency.

Towards a personal (self-determined) literacy

My father was in the British Army and my family were forever moving. When I arrived as a boarder at my eleventh and final school in 1967, Archbishop Holgates Grammar School in York (founded 1473), I was just 16 years old, and I had lived for 8 years in the UK and 8 years abroad. As a permanent outsider, and so never naturally a part of any local community, I always loved school, as it helped me fit in. Ironically, I would later become Head of Community Programmes for the UK Department of Education implementing interest-driven learning in digital community centres from 2000-05, which was how I discovered the concept of heutagogy. Wherever my latest school happened to be, I learnt how to become accepted by the new, local community by saying "yeah, sure" to whatever I was asked to do and engaging with whatever was valued there, from a mix derived from sport, culture, context and (sometimes) even learning. Surprisingly, it turned out that the criteria for successfully fitting in at any new school and community were always subtly different to my previous experiences. In the spring of 1958, when I was aged 7, we moved to a British Army Camp at Herford near Dortmund in Germany and, starting in the summer term, my younger brother and I were once again the new kids at yet another school – and to further complicate things, we had arrived at the wrong time of the school year.

The subtle difference in 1958 was that my Mum took over running the camp lending library as they were short of staff. I went to her library after school everyday before I could go home. Having done well at reading in my previous school in the UK as a six-year old, when the task was to read a very short book such as *Janet and John* within the time frame of a single class, I had a very limited view of what reading meant. With an extra 75 minutes available to me every day, I eventually discovered for myself what might be called long-form reading, where you return to the same book the following day and pick up the narrative wherever you have left off. I eventually discovered Scheherazade and the *1001 Nights*, which combined long-form and short-form storytelling in a thrilling and telling manner. As these daily visits to the library went on for well over two years, I became habituated to long-form reading and was always searching out books whose narrative would be patiently waiting for me to resume the following day. I learnt to judge a book by feeling the width, to mashup my metaphors.

I was developing my own reading literacy, which could also be described as a self-determined learning literacy, as I could read whatever I wanted to, within the range made available by the local library in a British Army Camp in the late 1950s, my choice wasn't being formally restricted. I didn't realise it then, but I had begun to understand "agency" in terms of choosing the books I wanted to read, rather than just reading books I was assigned to work through. My novel about heutagogy, *63/68 A Visceral History* (Garnett, 2018) was a first attempt to explain my personal heutagogy with a set of stories based on my learning experiences beyond the classroom. However, in the novel I linked my learning to the stimulus given to me by the Beatles, and all the wonderful pop music that we experienced in England in the Sixties. Between 1962 and 1972, I was an obsessive pop music fan and became extremely knowledgeable about everything related to pop, rock, psychedelic, underground, and progressive music (and belatedly jazz once I decided to become a drummer). This novelistic first attempt at reflecting upon and understanding my own experience might be more accurately defined as rhizomatic learning (Cormier, 2008). However, it does not address how I discovered my own learning agency' as Stewart Hase (Blaschke, Kenyon & Hase, 2014) calls it, which is slightly different to marking out a territory that I am interested in and becoming a very knowledgeable autodidact.

I now realise that I had become a "self-determined" learner before I heard *Please Please Me* by The Beatles in January 1963 and was influenced by the subsequent cultural influences that I document in the novel. My agency had more to do with constant change in my life context and forever being required to adapt to it with each new school. My first secondary school was not my second school but my ninth. My younger brother later said that he was terrified by this unending churn and turmoil. However, I had learnt to be adaptable and responsive, probably because my practice in dealing with change was a few schools ahead of him, and I offered up the version of me that best suited the new context. I learnt to present the version of me that the school demanded. This self-determined, yet random use of a library, which Rose Luckin (2010) would later describe as an "ecology of resources," would ultimately culminate in my rich and ripe use of "random walks" in the library at the University of Kent on my Masters degree in 1977 after I had been inspired by Paul Feyerabend's (1975) book *Against Method*, a book which could be more positively summarised as arguing that each of us should work out our own method, whilst also being confident in the method that we have learnt to devise for ourselves.

Towards a personal (self-determined) numeracy

Just as accidentally fortuitous for me in developing my own learning agency was a family move back to the UK from Germany in 1960. My father was assigned to a one-year teacher training course so he could learn how to teach the Army Certificate of Education to Army apprentices, as well as lower ranks wanting promotion. Whilst they would be tested on those ACE examinations from the age of 16 onwards, I was only nine years old that winter when my father started trying out the course materials on me. I was really lucky that he did. He tried a few different sets of materials, especially "programmed learning" books on military history, but the one that made a difference to my subsequent formal education was a marvelous large-size picture book called *Mathematics for the Million* by the brilliant Lancelot Hogben (1960). The book was designed as a self-study guide for the working-classes by a Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University so that they could overthrow the British Establishment. However, although the Professor was a

Communist, the book was an approved British Army textbook and was considered the "Mathematics for Dummies" of its time.

What the book did brilliantly well was to illustrate mathematical concepts by using their practical application, a topic I formally studied later as Applied Mathematics at A-Level. Whether the materials were age-appropriate or not, they made sense to me as a 9-year old. I still remember being asked in a Mathematics class at grammar school about four years later if anyone knew the Pythagoras Theorem and being very surprised that I was the only one who raised my hand. On being asked what it was, I gave the well-known rubric, and also mentioned that it was used in building the Pyramids, which was how I recalled the formula. To this day, every time I mention Pythagoras I still recall the image from the book of the Pyramids being built, and so I can both work out the theorem from first principles, as well as recite the rubric.

What *Mathematics for the Million* did for me at age 9 was to clearly illustrate the practical application of a whole range of mathematical formulae. I didn't meet them for the first time as abstract symbols chalked on a board, but as illustrations, in both senses of the word, that I could always recall visually. Mathematics always made sense to me because of this visual understanding of any formula. Recalling mathematical concepts was a breeze: unlike being mistaken for a natural whizz at mathematics for all of my secondary education.

11-plus and all that (ambushed by tests)

Comedian Lenny Henry (2019) gained a Ph.D late in life but, in his autobiography recalled that he had absolutely no preparation for the 11-plus, the signature English exam taken at the end of Primary School and used to determine who was placed onto a successful secondary education pathway. Unlike Henry, I breezed through the 11-plus. Not only had I already worked through lots of math formulae and a whole bunch of other puzzles that developed my problem-solving thinking, but Buckinghamshire County Council allowed 10- -year olds to sit the 11-plus a year early as preparation for the actual exam a year later. In 1962, the 11-plus didn't feel like a "test" or an examination but just some more of the fun I had learned to have from playing around with ideas and solving puzzles. I also created and solved my own puzzles, mostly as games (such as the algorithm-based cricket game I devised and described in 63/68). Lenny Henry, and millions of others finishing primary school in the UK, were given a high-stakes, and potentially life-defining, examination, for which their primary schooling had not prepared them. I got lucky. I'd serendipitously worked out how to pass the 11-plus, whilst playing around in my free time at home.

Change the context, change the boy: Four houses in 12 months

In September 1961, I started my final year of primary school in Radnage. We lived in a thatched cottage in this small village in Buckinghamshire that would have previously been the living quarters of rural farming people. The accidental home schooling that I'd been given by my parents over the previous three years meant I was well-skilled in entertaining myself through reading, solving problems, playing outside, and playing games or sport. (For example, I organised a "run the world" day at the Radnage primary school in the summer where the whole school went running). In this way, I was always stretching and developing my brain both at school and in my free time. Then three months later in November 1961, my family moved to Harrogate because my father was now a qualified and trained teacher and was taking up a role at the local Army Apprentice College in northern Yorkshire (we were forever moving between the North and the South of England).

We moved into a two-up, two-down terraced working-class house (with outdoor toilet) near to Grove Road School that we could walk to in a couple of minutes, as we did in Radnage. It was already my eighth school, and we suddenly played a lot of football in the playground and after school on Harrogate's famous Stray (public park). I created a whole school project to draw a map of the world for the assembly hall. My Mum created a fuss that my Dad was now an Army Officer yet we were living in a tiny house just like the one she had grown up in her mining village. So, three months later in January 1962, our family of four moved into an Upstairs Downstairs 5-bedroom Victorian mansion in keeping with our new posh social status, but on the other side of town to our new primary school. Another three months later, my parents

bought a solidly middle-class, semi-detached house on the other side of Harrogate, and we began a long daily walk back to Grove Road school.

At this point, I had passed the 11-plus and went to Harrogate Grammar School, situated next to the West End Avenue house where I had previously lived, but now over two miles and a free bus ride away. I was now travelling to my 3rd school in 12 months (and my ninth school in total) from my 4th dwelling in that time period. As each house reflected a different element of the acutely defined British class system, I've never really been troubled by class ever since. Nor was I impressed that my posh new school was rugby playing. Consequently, I set up a Saturday football league, created my own team called Bilton Dynamos, and happily ignored the elitist preferences of this Grammar School. It was yet another school that I had just been parked in, for who knew how long? I continued to follow my own well-developed learning interests and went off to the library in town every Saturday, after playing football in my own league, in order to choose more books that fed my curiosity because they both interested and extended me.

This is not the "Homework" we are looking for

Having aced the previous two years of study at primary school, largely because I was simultaneously being home schooled, I felt that I was a good, dutiful and hard-working learner because I was deeply absorbed in learning whatever pleased me. However, I started being given homework, to which my learned response was: "No thanks, I'm already doing lots of work at home." I rarely troubled myself with this "homework" set by school, whilst exercising my mind in many and varied ways. For example, Chapter 13 in *63/68* (Do You Want To Know A Secret) is about a games network that my friends and I set up in 1963. In six different houses and garages, we 12-year olds would simultaneously play Diplomacy, Risk, Monopoly, Go, Totopoly, Cluedo and some games of Cards such as Cribbage, in order that the longer form games (such as Risk and Monopoly) could be left in open play until we could finally finish them. However, when I was caned in January 1963 for not submitting the homework that I had been set by the grammar school, I realised that homework is not learning that you choose to do at home, but compulsory written activities that must be submitted in order to avoid punishment. Inspired by fear, I began to complete this kind of compulsory work at home (not called "home learning" I now notice) in order to avoid further physical pain and, of course, social humiliation or even notoriety. This enforced but nuanced attention to addressing formal learning demands would yet again be disturbed by my next two new schools and their subtly differing requirement – requirements I worked around.

Incidentally, I heard my beloved Beatles for the first time in January 1963, immediately after being caned by the headmaster for not doing homework. This began my pursuit of informal learning and building informal learning communities around shared interests concerning popular music throughout the Sixties. Having just completed an online blog project in 2019 concerning the Abbey Road album, I realised that The Beatles' first UK number one single happened just after I was punished for being a bad little child at school. Not only that, their last contemporary number one single in the UK, *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, was topping the UK record charts as I was sitting my last A-level exam, immediately prior to leaving school. In essence, the Beatles sound tracked my schooling. Perhaps it was unsurprising then that my time listening to the Beatles in the Sixties was the original metaphor with which I described how I developed my learning agency. It isn't entirely inaccurate though, since sharing my love of popular music was how I kept my learning agency alive as a teenager – after having been accidentally home schooled into a love of reading (especially long books) and problem-solving. Both these capabilities continue to motivate my interest in everything in the world and in learning. My love of The Beatles, and their 21st century remastering projects, continues and is often how I interest people in my more theoretical work on learning and heutagogy. Indeed, I am usually introduced as a Beatles expert rather than an educational expert: it both humanises my expertise and helps with making friends.

My personal learning literacy: A "craft of learning"

Now in the 21st century, looking back, I would say that my formal, structured, secondary school education occurred in parallel with my creative, informal learning, which was driven by interests I shared with my friends. However, as a teenager I also continued to read broadly and avidly beyond the requirements of school: *Plato's Republic*, *Einstein and*

Relativity Theory, James Joyce and the very long read that is *The Lord of The Rings*. My formal education was framed by the subject-based curriculum, which in the UK we foolishly narrowed down to three subjects to study between the ages of 16 and 18: mine being Mathematics, Further Mathematics and Physics. Meanwhile, through personal choice I developed a Folksonomy, or my self-determined learning curriculum. In creating this curriculum, I drew on topics of interest to me concerning not only music but popular culture as a whole, including poetry, films, and theatre (I also wrote and directed amateur plays then). I also explored fashion and designing my own clothes, which is how young people usually signify their emerging social and cultural agency to their "elders and betters". Unless we go to art college, there is no formal curriculum for this kind of cultural learning, which we all engage with especially in our teenage years.

Our human curiosity and diversity usually finds original ways to signify itself. In the Covid-19 lockdown nearly everyone engaging in a web conference or being interviewed by the broadcast media has chosen to represent themselves with an arrangement of objects by which to signify their interests: books, paintings, musical instruments, prints, posters and, for the more digitally literate, latest recording technologies. No one in the UK has chosen to represent themselves with educational qualifications framed prominently on their walls at home: we bury that educational trauma. Education disenfranchises our learning by disabling our learning agency. As the jazz musician Wynton Marsalis said recently about jazz critics, "they're our enemy" and he urges musicians to "develop an independent sense of integrity" (Baldwin, 2020). Curiously, we represent our individual character culturally whilst being told that we have to represent our social value educationally. This has developed into a disastrous human asymmetry of "learning" formal education.

How can educationalists help develop learning agency?

As someone who was accidentally home schooled, I recognize that this bequeathed me with two essential qualities that fostered my learning agency before I reached the more formalized period of education at a secondary school. These were, firstly, my curiosity and the freedom to follow the interests that emerged (described in more detail in 63/68): this informal learning enabled me to create my own folksonomy of learning interests. Secondly, I had unwittingly developed a learning literacy based on both the literacy and numeracy skills my parents had inculcated in me, and the attendant problem-solving abilities it had engendered, which meant I could cope with the formal subject-based educational taxonomies of secondary school once I was forced to. Arguably, these three – my personal literacy, numeracy and problem-solving abilities – represent a craft of learning developed over many years of learning by and for myself.

Educators, who by necessity are delivering education within the formal taxonomies of subject-based learning, should endeavour to open out their subject to the interests of their learners in various ways that they can think of. Not least, this can be done by creating assessment opportunities that are negotiated, individually with all learners. This is an educational process that I call "brokering" (Jennings, 2010), which is based on teachers balancing between the formal requirements of the education system and the personal agency of each learner. Whilst teachers are developing their own craft of teaching (Ecclesfield and Garnett, 2010), they can help learners develop their personal craft of learning. After all, learning is a process of asking questions, whereas education is a system of delivering answers.

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