City as Classroom

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What's in a school?

Let us begin by wondering just what you are doing sitting there at your desk.
Here are some questions for you to explore. We suggest that you divide yourselves into research teams of not more than four people, and when you have worked out answers to the questions, present your findings to the other teams for general discussion.

The questions and experiments you will find in this book are all concerned with important, relatively unexplored areas of our social environment. The research you choose to do will be important and original. If you'd like to share your research with our team of three authors, send us a note in care of the publisher.

As students in a school, do you think you have come to work?

1. Is school supposed to be a place of work? Is the work done by the students, or the staff, or both? Look up the root meaning of the word 'school' *(schola* < *Greek* σχολή).
   When you are at school, are you separated from the community? If so, are you separated physically or in other ways?
   Does the community want you to be separated from the work force? Ask local leaders in business and education.
2. Could you join the work force before you reach school-leaving age? Contact local labor union leaders and ask for their opinion of the school-leaving age. Ask your teacher to explain the legislation governing school-leaving age in your area. Can you discover the reasons behind the legislation? Ask your vice-principal to explain the relation between school funding and school attendance.

Do you and your fellow students tend to regard the classroom as a kind of prison?

3. Do the days of your school life seem like 'doing time' until you are eligible for the labor market?
   Do you consider that real education is outside the classroom?
   Do you find that what you learn inside the classroom is as useful as what you learn outside the classroom?

How do classrooms affect your learning experience?

4. In order to discover what effect your present classroom has on your experience of learning, try holding a class in another room. For example, go to the teachers' lounge where you can arrange yourselves in a circle in comfortable chairs. Hold a regular class. Toward the end of the class period, take a few minutes to talk about the differences between your experience in the lounge and your experience in a regular classroom. Ask:
   - Was it easier in the lounge to grasp points presented by your teacher?
   - Did you enjoy your teacher's presentation more or less in the lounge?
   - Did you find it easier or harder to become involved in discussion with one another in the lounge?
   - Was it easier or harder to relate what you were learning to your own daily experience when you were out of your classroom?
   - Which of the two settings did you find the more comfortable?
   - Which of the two settings was the more congenial to learning?
   - Did your teacher find the different setting an advantage or a disadvantage?
   - Did your teacher find a change in the group's attitude either to students or to the subject?

• What differences did your teacher notice in responses from individual students and in the responsiveness of the class generally?

• How did the different setting and its effects change your learning experience?

Discuss the different meanings of 'noise' in the classroom and in the lounge. Is 'noise' in the classroom 'noise' in the lounge?

5. Ask your drama teacher how theater 'in the round' changes the relationship between audience and actors.

   Ask your teacher to discuss with you changes in the method of presentation for teaching 'in the round'. Ask whether the classroom has been placed in a new kind of 'round'.

   From the answers to these questions can you draw any conclusions about the sorts of activities that classrooms inhibit or exclude, the kinds of activities that they encourage?

Should all schools be closed?

Some educational theorists of this century argue that we are living today in a new kind of world: our community has become a storehouse of information of all kinds, and this information is easy to get. They argue that when schools were first established, there was not much information in the community, and schools were opened to provide knowledge and information. Your grandfather may have gone to the 'little red schoolhouse' that was common in Canada and in the United States. Such schools had a single teacher, and all grades were taught in one room. The school teacher, next to the preacher, was the best-educated person in the community. (Look at Oliver Goldsmith's poem, "The Deserted Village.") Outside the school, people toiled at the country tasks of plowing and sowing and harvesting. They were very active physically. School was a strong contrast to their work.

How has the relationship changed between work done in the community and work done in the schools?

6. Talk to your fathers about the sort of work they do in the daytime. How much of their time at work is spent looking at papers and books? Do they also bring their books and papers home? How many people do you know who work day in and day out with papers and books?
7. If much of the work done in our society deals with data and information of all sorts, how has this affected the school in which you are today? If the old contrast between physical work and study is diminishing in our everyday world, are schools becoming unnecessary? If all the information ever taught in school can be got instead from libraries, recordings, films, centers of instruction for every kind of skill, in-service training programs, adult programs for intensive language training, data banks of computerized information– if all these resources and many more are everywhere around us, then why should schools exist at all?

To what extent has the community taken over the function of schools?

8. If many people in the community work mainly at exchanging knowledge and information with one another, how does their activity differ from the work done in schools? Examine the phrase 'continuing education' which has become the new name for 'adult education'. Does this new name tell us that the work of the community has become a continuation of the work done in school? Or, vice versa, does schoolwork become part of the work of the community?

By talking to a variety of people, investigate what the community thinks school is for.

9. Ask your parents, your friends, three or four of your teachers, your principal, your local alderman or member of parliament, a business person, a lawyer, a garbage collector, a cab driver. Do their answers differ widely? When you have written down the answers you have collected, discuss the differences with your class. How do the answers group themselves? Do they imply basic notions or theories everybody takes for granted?
10. What did the designers of traditional schools intend when they put thirty or so desks in rows, facing the front of the room? Why is the blackboard at the front? Why is the teacher's desk at the front?
11. Are the assumptions about teaching and learning which are evident in the set-up of your classroom similar to the attitudes evident in the replies to the question, "What is school for?"
12. Can you find any relation between your experience of school and the answers of other people about its purpose? Have your fellow students as many different attitudes or ideas about the purpose of school as the adults you have interviewed?

If all the answers are available outside the classroom, is it good strategy to put the questions inside the classroom?

In their approach to problems, Orientals tend to ask first, "What is the question?" while Westerners tend to ask, "What is the answer?"

Of course, it is more difficult to learn to ask yourself productive questions than it is to look for answers to other people's questions, but learning to ask productive questions helps you to become self-reliant. I find that you do not have to wait until somebody else asks you a question in order to learn.

In the next chapter we shall be looking at the interplay of *figure* and *ground* as patterns in everyday life. We shall use these terms to describe the parts of any situation in order to observe, to analyse and to ask productive questions that will lead to learning.

> Education: "What remains when we have forgotten all that we have been taught."
>
> George Savile, Lord Halifax 1633–1695
> *Dictionary of Quotable Definitions*

Do you agree?

For Further Study:

Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. Illich supposes, naively, that because in our new world the 'answers' are outside the school, the schools should be closed. A productive question his theory raises is: Can we now put the questions inside the schools and begin a richer kind of education?

Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. New York: Random House, 1971. Some have mentioned that this book lives in the 'rear view mirror', and merely tells us that things are moving too fast. Toffler fails to see the opportunities for enriched understanding through pattern recognition in a speeded-up world.

Clocks

Suppose that, sometime between sundown and sunrise tomorrow *morn*ing, all ciocks, watches, chronometers and mechanical timepieces of every sort disappeared completely and forever. Immediately, of course, a number of expressions in every Western language would become senseless and useless. What other effects would there be?

How would the disappearance of clocks affect your routine activities?

1. What would happen to school routines? What would 'on time' mean to a student or to a class? Could computers be used in schools as clock-substitutes?
2. Would routines in and around your home be changed? If so, how? Would your study habits be in any way affected?

Would the loss of clocks affect social and recreational practices?

3. List any social conventions or procedures that would be affected and specify what changes would take place, if clocks disappeared.
4. How would the disappearance of clocks affect entertainment? What would happen to the organization of television and radio programs? Would programs continue 'as long as they should' or 'as long as they need to'? On what basis would advertisers be charged? How would disk jockeys be affected? Could *TV Guide* stay as it is? Would movie-editing and the spacing of ads be affected?
5. Would sports change if there were no timepieces? What would happen to our notion of sports records? What would constitute athletic achievement?

How would transportation and travel be affected by the removal of clocks?

6. How might motor traffic be regulated without the hour to mean kilometres per hour? Would speeding tickets become obsolete?
7. How could the railways or the airlines function? And what changes would they have to make, if they were to go on serving the public.

Would the arts be affected, if clocks were not available to measure time?

8. After you have interviewed a variety of people, try to assess extent to which the arts of painting, music, sculpture, poetry, architecture would be affected.

Clocks

> 'Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it... down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again."
>
> Lewis Carroll
> — *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Find out all you can about the history of timekeeping.

1. Find out about the Roman system of hours and 'watches'. It has been called the basis of our time system.

In the monasteries of the Middle Ages, periods of time were signaled by bells. Each bell indicated that a new period or interval was starting, and each period might be of a different length from all the others.

2. Read the description of bells and their social meanings in *The Waning of the Middle Ages* by I. Huizinga. Read Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "The Bells." List the kinds of bell sounds in your city today. Is there any legislation in your area governing bell-ringing?

Mechanical timepieces brought an end to variable measurements of time and to the 'suddenness' of recurring events: time became a gradual passing of moments which it connected.

3. When did clocks come into general use? What devices for timekeeping were used before clocks? What specific uses were made of hour-glasses?
4. Read about the history of clocks in Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* and study the figure/ground interplay between the various kinds of clocks (figure) and the communities (ground) they served. List the differences between visual and acoustic timemarkers.
5. At what period of our cultural history did people begin to wear timepieces? When were wristwatches invented?
6. When were time zones established? Who was responsible for their invention and adoption?
7. What is the process whereby astronomers regulate the world's watches? When was Greenwich Mean Time established and what is its significance to the world?

What concepts and notions of time has our culture evolved?

Our time-sense has been called the most sophisticated in the world; it takes our children longer to acquire the time-sense of our culture than it takes children of any other culture to acquire theirs.

8. Make a list of all the ways there are in our culture of measuring time. Include special methods used by scientists. What are the very latest developments? Keep a separate list for information you collect about time measurement in other cultures, particularly Asian and Oriental.
9. Make a list of the properties that people in our culture ascribe to time: for example, we think of time as 'flowing' in a direction. Add to your list as you do the experiments in this section.
10. Compile a list of all the usual and unusual 'time' expressions in our culture: "I haven't time." "Just a minute." "See here, now!" If you can, make a list of 'time' expressions used in other cultures. Do people of those cultures use expressions we don't? Do we use expressions they don't?

    Make a list of 'time' expressions that are no longer current and note the period in which they were used. You may get information from elderly people and from historical novels.

What properties belonging to our ideas of time become evident from your lists?

11. What sort of time is kept on a ship?
    What is the meaning of standard time to an orbiting astronaut? What is its meaning to an astronaut on the moon?

'Tis with our judgements as our watches, none go just alike, yet each believes his own.

Alexander Pope,
"Essay on criticism"

12. Suppose that there were no centralized time-keeping authority:
    what would happen to the notion of 'correct time'? (Remember that this was the situation until relatively recently.) Might people establish individual standards of timekeeping, as they do for clothing?
13. Some years ago, C. Northcote Parkinson formulated Parkinson's Law:
    "Work expands to fill the time available." This law involves two assumptions both of which should be reflected in your list of 'time' expressions: (1) that time is rigid or invariable, and (2) that it is a container. Do people unaccustomed to clocks or watches make either of these assumptions? If you cannot find any such people to interview, consult literature. Have people who don't relate to time through watches and clocks a sense that the reverse is true —that time expands or contracts to fit the available work? Have they a sense of time as a container, a big bucket that envelops all acts and experience? Where do nonusers of time-pieces get their 'time signals'?
14. By extending the principle of time measurement to the entire community, we have made the clock a kind of social tyrant. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" features the clock as a kind of mechanical fate, like the ancient Greek goddess, Tyche (Greek Τύχη), presiding over the time-kept city.
    What other references to time and its effects can you find in modern poetry, in modern art, modern music and in contemporary rock music?

How do clocks and watches affect their users?

15. Are there any character traits of compulsive watch-wearers that are not generally found among people who do not wear watches? Can it be fairly said that a person who wears a watch for use and not just for ornament makes the watch a part of himself or herself? Do watch-users relate to time differently from nonusers? Do the lives and personalities of people who habitually wear watches become well regulated?
16. To what kinds of people do clocks and watches seem unnecessary? To what kinds of people do they seem essential? Are these groups always consistent in their attitudes to timepieces and in their use of them?
    Ask some members of your class who are accustomed to wearing watches to lend them for a few days to members who are not in the habit of wearing watches, Ask the two groups to keep notes on their experience and report to the class on any changes in their sense of time and its rigidity or flexibility.

The rural railway station had two clocks—one at each end of the platform. The porter, asked why they always showed different times, replied: "But, sir, why should we have two clocks at all if they showed the same time?"

17. Is there any sort of decorum related to watches and clocks? Are there any situations that demand them more than others? Are there occasions when they must be ignored? Make a list of such occasions and situations, and see if any patterns appear.

A businessman dining with a friend, makes the gesture of removing his wristwatch and putting it face-down on the table, when he wishes to say dramatically, "My time is yours."

18. Under what sorts of circumstances does 'clock time' cease to be a serious preoccupation? What sorts of cultural pressure relegate watches to ornamental status? When a person uses a timepiece as jewelry, what does it indicate about his or her attitude to time? What is the difference between 'serious' and Mickey Mouse watches? What difference does each make to or in the user? Could an engineer or a scientist tolerate a precision, Mickey Mouse chronometer?
19. Suppose that it were the fashion for us to carry an alarm clock with us in a pouch or purse, or to wear two or three or four watches:
Would our relation to time be in any way changed? How? Ask three or four students to try doing one of these things for a week and to report to the class on their observations.

For Further Study:

Innis, Harold. *Changing Concepts of Time.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952.
A society that uses brick, stone or clay tablets for keeping its records has a totally different idea of time from a society in which paper is the material chiefly used for recording events. Mumford, Lewis. "The Mechanical Routine" in *Technics and Civilization.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934; 1963 (paperback). An analysis of the effects of arbitrary, clocked routines on the human psyche.

——. *Technics and Civilization.*
A study of the relationship between human artifacts and their effects on the course of civilization. Complete bibliographies.

Poulet, Georges. *Studies in Human Time.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins,1956.
In contrast to geological and biological time, human time has a special set of dimensions. At electric speeds, all time is present.

Light 123456789. Inhale. Exhale. Flick cigarette to right. Lean forward 12345678910. Smoke and exhale.