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Educator as Cultivator

Abstract

The article considers the integration of farming principles in the context of learning. The author offers a composite model of learning theory which is informed by a range of TA concepts. In proposing the concept of educator as cultivator the author considers implications for the educator in supporting the learner.

Introduction

Over the past five years I have experienced a significant personal transition. Having left London, where I, and my family, were born and bred, we moved to rural Suffolk. Although we had not planned to establish a smallholding, we now run livestock and allotments on twelve acres of land in the heart of an agricultural region.

Whilst I continue to practise as an educator both locally and further afield, I have become increasingly committed to the tasks of running the smallholding. We breed and raise cows, pigs and sheep for meat. We milk goats and run a range of poultry and grow fruit and vegetables. It is all based on a small-scale and we use natural feeds and organic pasture to raise the livestock.

When I first became involved in the world of the small-scale farmer I became immersed in the newness of the experience. I started to 'split' myself between travelling to do my professional work and my life as a farmer. It was as if I had two identities, distinct spheres of existence, comprising of separate skills, experience, areas of knowledge and understanding, and people.

A couple of years ago I began to notice connections between my two 'worlds'. These connections interlinked further until I could recognise an increasing integration between my role as educator and the life of the farmer. For many months now I have

lived this integrated experience and this article explores the two related themes of learning and cultivation.

This personal narrative incorporates a range of references to other's work that provides an underpinning framework for proposing the concept of the *educator as cultivator*. I will start by referring to Carl Rogers, the son of an agriculturalist. He writes here in a clinical context although I think his purpose applies as keenly to the educator;

...too many therapists think they can make something happen. Personally I like much better the approach of an agriculturalist or a farmer or a gardener: I can't make corn grow, but I can provide the right soil and plant it in the right area and see that it gets enough water; I can nurture it so that exciting things happen. I think that's the nature of therapy. It's so unfortunate that we've so long followed a medical model and not a growth model. A growth model is much more appropriate to most people, to most situations. (Rogers in Rogers & Russell, 2002, p. 259)

Through Eric Berne, TA practitioners have insights from a skilful and expert clinician. By implication he was brilliant at describing and identifying how and why clients experienced dysfunction – the primary purpose was to cure. Of course Berne recognised the capacity for growth in his reference to physis, (Berne, 1957) a concept that I will return to later. Berne's preoccupation though is script cure – making people better, freeing clients from script, and preferably as soon as possible. The farmer – and by extension, the educator – is primarily interested in growth. I believe this is a subtle and distinct difference that the educator as cultivator accounts for in their work.

Levels of competency and the role of the educator

This following section focuses on an extended account of my learning in relation to levels of competence. A year or so ago, I re-visited a model that will be familiar to many of us – Howells' levels of competency, (Howells, 1982). Petruska Clarkson also wrote and adapted Howells' earlier work and introduced some new features to the

model (Clarkson, 1994). In re-visiting the ideas I want to make some further observations.

In undertaking farming I have had to learn a great deal. Not only has there been the obvious business of acquiring knowledge, I have also needed to develop and practice new skills. When people visit the farm I am often asked how did I learn so much and I tell them the story of my neighbour, David. He was an old stockman who in effect provided me with an apprenticeship for three years and taught and showed me so much. I can do lots of things now that I could not have dreamed of doing when I lived back in London. I act as midwife to the ewes and cows at lambing and calving, I treat animals for lameness or illness, I can shear sheep, cleanly dispatch poultry and work my dog to manage the flock. I have skills enough to use my tractor, clear ditches, fell trees and erect fencing. And in the doing so have been acutely mindful of what it feels like to learn again.

I want to spend a few moments considering the implications for the educator when supporting learners through the stages of competence. I have also found it helpful to make links between the levels of discounting in identifying challenges for the learner.

<i>Level (Howells, 1982)</i>	<i>Clarkson's Categories (1994)</i>	<i>Level of Discount</i>	<i>Role of Educator as Cultivator</i>
Unconscious incompetence	The Fool	Existence	Recognise
Conscious Incompetence	The Apprentice	Significance	Reassure
Conscious Competence	The Master	Options	Reconnoitre
Unconscious Competence	The Mechanic	Personal capacity	Reflect

Table 1: Integrating ideas of Howells (1982), Clarkson (1994) and the role of educator as cultivator

If I think specifically about the task of gathering sheep, I can see very clearly the random, incoherent attempts at trying to get the animals into a small paddock in the early days. Sometimes they would come, and most of the time they would not. I would grasp at strategies with no wider understanding about why and how stock move as they do.

It took a particularly disastrous episode for me to **recognise** the necessary shift from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence. I ran around the field, increasingly working up the sheep which in turn became excited, scared and doubly cautious of a ranting owner. It was a moment of intense shame and anger where I recognised that I really was quite useless at the task. Additionally, in that moment, a rush of script beliefs about who I could be and accompanying doubts about my capability overwhelmed and immobilised me. This shift from the first to the second level is a critical one for the educator as cultivator to be aware. It is a point at which the learner is most liable to give up, either by turning in on themselves or on an external factor.

In my case I turned, upset and angry to my neighbour. At once he recognised the self-doubt and the threatened physis, (Berne, 1957) and swiftly responded with **reassurance**. He took me out again into the field, this time, walking slowly around the perimeter of the field gathering and calming the sheep quietly around him and then gently accompanied me as we walked them effortlessly into the pen. It is only in retrospect that I realised he was not only containing the sheep but my process too. It was only through his careful reassurance that I could accept – recognise – my incompetence, whilst simultaneously being certain again that I could become competent.

Nel Noddings has written extensively on the concept of care and intuition in education. She introduces the notion of **educational caritas** – love in education. She defines it thus;

First it is a desire to come into direct, undiluted contact with the human partner of the educational enterprise, to go beyond superficialities and become involved with the other person... Educational caritas may also involve a deep interest and even passionate commitment to the subject

matter being taught...[it is]love for the acts of teaching and learning... a drive that is at the very center of the interaction of love and education' (Noddings, 1984 p.157/58)

In his handling of my sense of failure and inadequacy David demonstrated educational *caritas*. Importantly, he would not declare himself a teacher – he had very little formal schooling himself and would be regarded as an uneducated man, but as I hope to argue later, the capacity to both learn and teach, is in us all and is an inevitable feature of what it is to be human.

I have found it important not to underestimate the challenge of moving toward conscious competence. For the learner it is an exhausting process. In deciding to learn how to gather sheep I experienced a rush of ideas, advice and information. On the one hand the task is to accommodate the new understanding whilst on the other, begin to practise it. Clarkson (1994) talks of the need for the learner to start by pretending that they are competent. There is a necessary clumsiness at the outset of this stage and a high level of self-consciousness. I got myself a shepherd's crook – I didn't know how to use it, but I knew that it is what competent shepherds have. I took the step of buying a sheepdog puppy and set out to learn how to train it.

The task of the educator at this level shifts to supporting the learner in reviewing options – or **reconnoitring** the possibilities for becoming increasingly competent. It is a stage where considerable energy is spent thinking about and rehearsing skills, routines and tasks. The stamina of the learner must be matched by the patience of the educator. One of the three important principles David taught me was to let things take their time. Seasons exist for a reason – to allow rest, recuperation, reproduction and re-growth. Equally, when people are growing through learning, it takes time and the pace is set by the learner, fuelled by curiosity and a desire to grow.

Soil, groundedness and the educator

Readers may be aware that the origins of the word education are from the Latin, *educare* meaning 'to lead out, (Oxford Concise Dictionary). Similarly, the definition of 'cultivate' includes to 'to promote the growth of something, to nurture; tend' (Webster's Dictionary). I see both meanings as integral to this stage in the learning process.

Now, a couple of years on – that’s a rotation through eight seasons – when I need to get the sheep in, I take my dog into the field and he brings them to me. He will work with me in getting them to the pen, or drive them into a new field. I barely think through what needs to happen – I just go out and do it. Occasionally there may be some upset and I have to remind myself of some aspect of herding that I have overlooked, but the experience of unconscious competence brings with it a groundedness that is absent earlier in the process.

I want to consider a little more about groundedness in the role of educator as cultivator. The second of the three underlying principles my neighbour taught me was to take account of the soil. Begin with the soil, was his advice, know your soil, respect and take care of it and the rest follows. The pasture remains rich, the stock grow well and replenish the soil. It begins – and ends – with the soil. I have been really inspired and moved by the work of Alistair McIntosh. He writes as an ecologist, Quaker, campaigner and historian. My favourite work is *Soil and Soul* (McIntosh, 2004), which provides a wonderful account of integrating the themes of soil, soul and society. McIntosh emphasises the importance of the soil in terms of grounding our human experience. Ignoring this aspect of our life results in alienation – a hollowing out of ourselves which results in an insatiable desire for commodity.

As an educator I have been interested in the implications of accounting for the soil in my work, which leads me to the importance of groundedness. Its equivalence is the latent potential of the learner; their insights, experience and intuition. The ‘soil’ also relates to my potency as educator in terms of expertise, knowledge and skill base. Steiner refers to this quality in his work on personal power, (Steiner, 1987) and refers to how the grounded individual knows how to take their place, within a group or situation – there is a surety in how they carry themselves. I think that being grounded in the learning relationship is a critical quality of the educator. For me it is part and parcel of containing an inherent tension – the certainty of change alongside the uncertainty that comes in trusting the co-creative potential of the learning process. In other words, we can be sure that transformation will happen, but be unclear quite how and when!

I see an important link between groundedness and physis. Berne illustrated physis by the aspirational arrow leading upwards, (Berne, 1957) I see the significance of the rootedness necessary for individuals to thrive. The base of Berne's arrow is the ground from which we emerge. It is from the ground – our heritage - that we derive the enduring capacity to flourish. This has been discussed elsewhere in relation to the inversion of the metaphor of the egostate diagram, placing the Child uppermost supported by the uplifting potency of Adult and Parent capacities, (Barrow, 2008).

Physis refers to the certainty of growth - we are destined to thrive. I suggest that learning is the most explicit display of human physis. Educators spend much of their time working with the raw desire of individuals and groups to accomplish, develop and flourish. Likewise, the farmer works with the essence of life forces, whether in agriculture or livestock. When learners have achieved the level of unconscious competence they are at their peak in terms of realising physis. For the educator it is an especially significant experience to enable and share. McIntosh describes something akin to this when he reflects on the power of sharing and creating personal narratives – both features of learning;

It means understanding one another not just on the surface, but from inside out. That means listening with an ear of love tuned to nothing less than beauty.... That is a thrilling place in which to be alive.' (McIntosh, p.46).

In the English language there is a term that has several meanings – 'husbandry'. Clearly this has a meaning that relates to the role of husband, but for my purposes there are two other meanings. One alternative meaning refers to the craft of taking care of livestock; animal husbandry. A second alternative means to manage resources sparingly. I see connections between the craft of taking care of, and the sparing management of resources with the core task of the cultivating educator, (Webster's Dictionary).

The third principle that David taught me as a smallholder was to act swiftly on the instinct that something may be amiss. Do not wait and wonder if something is wrong with the ewe, or cow. If the stockman has an inclination – intuitively a concern – then take action. Investigate and account for the issue, intervene and resolve it. So it is with the educator who notices the passive behaviours (Schiff, 1975), the reluctance to engage, the emergent disaffection or resistance in the learner. To discount the

initial signs of not OK-ness is to be remiss in our responsibility as educator and gives rise to the subjugation of physis.

Husbandry involves not only deploying specialist skills and applying knowledge. It is also an expression of the positive regard that the farmer has for his stock – it is the educator's equivalent of educational caritas. Educational husbandry requires the teacher to understand just when to fuel learning with questions and content and when the process demands that the teacher withdraws. For the most part people tend to learn most when teachers do less. Learning tends to happen naturally, instinctively and inevitably. Educators must take care not to get in its way. As with intensive farming practices, intrusive, utilitarian approaches tend to stifle rather than generate sustained learning. Short-lived examination improvements fall away to reveal extensive and long-term dissatisfaction with mass-schooling endeavours.

Being a frugal manager of resources is an aspect of educational work that can be subtly challenging and confronts the frame of reference of many who have experienced mass public schooling systems. Many educators will be convinced that it is the quality and quantity of curriculum and range of knowledge of the teacher that are the indicators of good practice. The educator as cultivator understands that it is the sparing management of resource in relation to the management of process that is imperative.

I have been especially challenged this past year in relation to how I see myself as an educator. When I undertook my CTA I developed a keen interest and commitment to radical models of education. The work of Paulo Freire, John Holt, Ivan Illich, Jack Mezirow informed my practice and this became further integrated into my training approach as a PTSTA. Freire's account of the 'banking model' of education underpinning oppressive capitalist systems, (1970) stands as a seminal text for those interested in radical approaches. Holt, (1976) and Illich (1971), both provide a highly critical commentary on the limitations of mass schooling systems, providing alternative community-based models of learning, whilst Mezirow's concept of transformational learning (2000) provides a thorough account of a specific approach to radical learning in the context of adult education. Each of these writers fuelled my interest in ways of making sense of learning that contrasted with more conventional, liberal-humanistic approaches that typified schooling. However, as I have developed

my role as a farmer I have begun to wonder whether there is something missing from radical theory. There is not enough attendance to physis, to the vitality that Noddings and Rogers capture in their work. In other words, there is not enough about life itself and the vitality that emerges through transformational learning.

Secondly, I notice that those who write so vehemently about the limitations of liberal models have also been beneficiaries of schooling systems underpinned by such theories. I myself have been a success of the liberal model and one of the potential pitfalls of radical approaches is for the educator to discount their own knowledge and expertise. The educator as cultivator is successful precisely because they own their experience and knowledge. This approach might arguably be best positioned within the humanistic tradition in which the role of education is to support the growth of the learner. However, I remain unconvinced that the cultivating educator is fully understood within a humanistic framework. Instead I suggest that the method of cultivating education intersects radical, humanistic and liberal models, as presented in Figure 1 below:

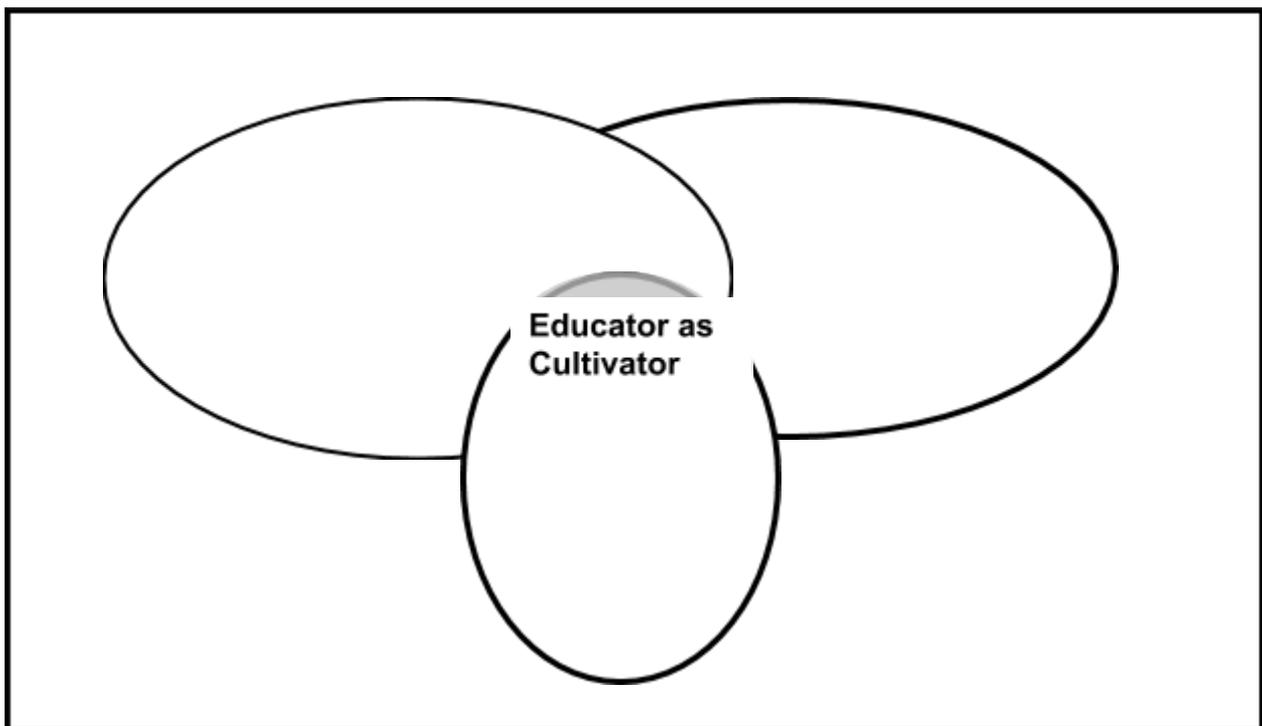


Fig. 1: Position of Educator as Cultivator in the context of learning theory

Furthermore, I present the set of ideas introduced within this paper which I think form the basis of a distinct method for understanding the educative process and to guide the practitioner in their craft.

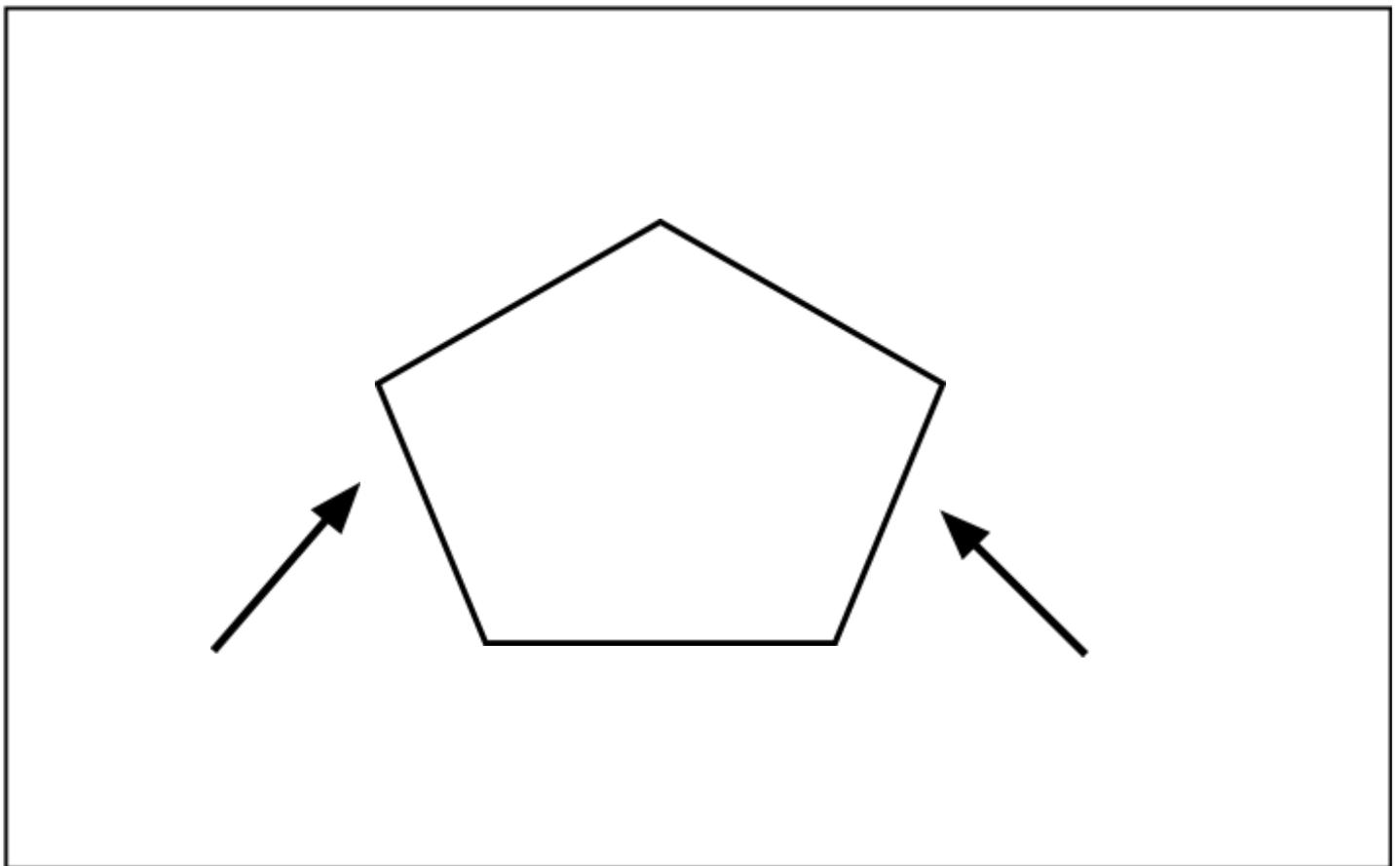


Figure 2: Key features of Educator as Cultivator

Finally, when I began to share my initial thoughts about the use of the farming metaphor in education, some colleagues were quick to point out that my smallholding efforts are to bring the livestock to the point of slaughter, which is surely quite contrary to the work of the educator. However, I don't believe that the metaphor is entirely invalid. My experience as a farmer has brought me into very close contact

with the cyclic nature of existence whether it be through the seasons or the process of birth, life and death. Nothing goes to waste; the livestock manure the soil before they become nourishment for the family, before we too will return to the soil.

Our endeavours as educators simply contribute the increasing collective desire to thrive which we benefit from directly through the successes of our students and which extends beyond the immediate parameters of our work and into the wider communities and society at large. This concept is understood more fully through the concept of the gift economy. As Trudi Newton explores elsewhere in this edition, human exchange is not only governed through financial transactions. The idea of gifting goods, insights and expertise has a long history in the development of communities. David's contribution to my growth as a farmer is a vivid illustration of the far-reaching and sustained impact of the initial gift, as described in Hyde's work on gift culture (Hyde, 2006).

My neighbour, David, died on the morning before we moved to the farm in which we now live. His handful of friends mourned his loss and looked on at how little he had left at the end of his life. His doctor commented on how he had expected David to die some four years previously and wondered how it was that he had lived so long. I knew then, as know today, that his capacity to thrive a little longer was inextricably linked to his role as a cultivating educator. Whilst his remaining associates experienced only his absence, I share Frankl's insight regarding the obscured gift that comes with loss;

Remember what I have said of life's transitoriness. In the past nothing is irrevocably lost but everything is irrevocably stored. People only see the stubble field of transitoriness but overlook the granaries of the past in which they have delivered and deposited and in which they have saved their harvest, (Frankl, 1946).

So, to echo both Rogers and Frankl, as a cultivating educator I cannot *make* people learn, or grow, but I can nurture them so that powerful growth may happen. And in doing so there is the possibility to contribute a little more to the harvest; a collective desire to thrive.

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