

**Holt's Theories in the 1970's Ironically
Become Predictions For The Next Century**

Kevin C. Costley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education
Arkansas Tech University
Russellville, Arkansas
kcostley@atu.edu

Publication Date: April 5, 2011

Dr. Kevin C. Costley teaches fulltime at Arkansas Tech University; Russellville, Arkansas. His areas of expertise are in curriculum development, diversity, developmental psychology, and assessment, social & historical factors of education, developmentally appropriate practice, assessment, evaluating research. Costley is also an exclusive piano music composer of children's literature.

Holt's Theories in the 1970's Ironically Become Predictions For The Next Century

John Holt was a revolutionary thinker and theories of the middle 60's concerning schools, teaching, and learning. His thoughts were often controversial among some educators and parents; however, he did have a way of bringing up vital issues in education and making people *think*.

Holt painted a somewhat dismal picture of American classrooms and how teachers often killed out creativity intentionally with their students. He also brought up other alarming issues of the time advocating for better and more humane practices in teaching children, beginning with young children.

He spent much time observing 'what' goes on in American classrooms. In a highly detailed manner, he recorded daily student-teacher interactions resulting in rich descriptive narratives of student and teacher behaviors.

Children Are Naturally Curious

The current day researcher and author focused on concepts of learning and how children learn best. Believing children are naturally curious and have a natural desire to make sense out of their world (everything in their surrounding environment); they have their own natural learning styles. Basically, children with age-appropriate stimulation, could, according to Holt, learn on independently on their own. The advocate stated that the child wants to "...find out how things work, gain competence and control over himself and his environment, do what he can see other people doing. He is open, receptive, and perceptive." Children take in everything around them and record it in their computer-like minds.

Adults tend to under-estimate children and their capacity to think, feel, and interpret those events which occur in their world. However, quite to the contrary, Holt believed that children observe the world *closely* and *sharply*, trying to take it all in.

Children Naturally Want To Experiment With Their World

Children naturally feel the need to experiment. Holt described the child as one who does not merely observe the world around him, but “tastes it, touches it, hefts it, bends it, breaks it; to find out how reality works, he works on it.” While experimenting, he is patient and is willing to wait for meanings concerning new confusing situations. Based on Holt’s observations, one might conclude that it is possible that the quality of ‘impatience’ is learned later on in life.

Schools Do Not Give Children Enough Time to Experiment

Holt believed that school does not give much time and opportunity for this kind of thinking and learning. Children are conditioned to seek out only *right answers*. Little emphasis is given to creative thought which ultimately uses intelligence. In his daily observations, Holt saw that creativity was deliberately being stamped out of American public schools. Holt believed that it was imperative that schools needed to change and this alteration may seem impossible to many people, yet possible change could occur where children were allowed and actually encouraged to be creative. Yet, Holt conceded that this kind of change would not happen overnight or in a year’s time.

Change Is All About Teachers’ Attitudes

Holt believed that *change* must first begin with the teachers’ attitudes toward children in general and attitudes toward *how children learn best*. The change must begin first with the teacher’s attitudes toward children in general, and attitude toward how children learn best. If he/she continues to regard children as inferior beings, disregards mutual respect and chooses to

play the primary role of as the only dispenser of information, classroom procedures will not change significantly. Dull, repetitive shallow, surface learning of facts and facts alone will continue. And more, a good deal of these facts will become irrelevant in the near future.

Even though many teachers choose to ignore that children can learn beyond mere basic facts, they also can learn independently. Youngsters learn best out of interest and curiosity, not to please adults in authority. To instill responsibility, Holt firmly believed that students should be in more control of their own learning. They should be given a greater role in decision making, deciding what they need and want to learn and what method would best suit individual tastes.

Children Should Be Allowed to Explore Their Worlds

Holt advocated strongly children should be allowed to learn by discovery. Each child should be “free to explore and make sense of that culture in his own way.” Teachers often react defensively when confronted with the statement, “Children should be allowed to decide what they want to learn. Children should have a greater role in self-education.” Holt then said that teachers, then reply, “aren’t there certain things that everyone ought to know, and isn’t it our job, therefore to make sure that children know them?”

Holt Questions What Is Essential To Learn

Holt readily agrees that there are pieces of knowledge and particular skills that may be useful and convenient for everyone, but not entirely *essential*. Uneducated individuals seem to make it through life without satisfactory competency in basic computational skills and communication skills. It is possible for some that these individuals survive with less ease in life due to their lack of certain knowledge and skills, but they make it through life at a basic level, one way or another.

What teachers place priority in the curriculum today may not be worth knowing as an adult due to the uncertainty of knowledge itself. "...knowledge changes, becomes useless, out of date, or downright false." Certain concepts become outmoded, including educational terminology.

Are Children The Best Judge of What They Need to Learn?

Holt believed the child is the best judge of what he should learn. He feels the things we actually *need to learn* are those we *most want to learn*. “

Curiosity is hardly ever idle. What we want to know, we want to know for a reason.” When children learn while highly motivated and curious, they learn not only rapidly but also permanently. Holt downplayed habits of drilling information into children’s minds. He maintained the belief that teaching a concept one time is sufficient. To explain further, once a child realizes he needs to learn something, he will learn it thoroughly and never really forget it.

Holt suggested that teachers “bring as much of the world as we can into the school and the classroom; give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way.” That’s when real and lasting learning occurs! Holt admitted that *getting out of the way* was the hardest part for teachers to do.

Holt grounded his philosophies on the following belief: we simply cannot force children to learn, but can play upon their natural curiosity to learn. The rest is up to the children.

Concluding Analysis for Today’s American Classrooms

In Holt’s days in the 1960’s and 1970’s, John Holt had a rather non-traditional approach and non-popular approach to learning and proceeding. Holt did not recommend that teachers

abandon all traditional instruction and classroom procedures, yet he cautioned teachers that creativity was being stamped out implicitly and/or explicitly in the public schools. What Holt saw were teachers, for the most part, taught on lower levels of the Bloom's Taxonomy and primarily focused on drill, and repetition; thus, this practice discouraged children from asking questions, much less than climbing to higher levels of thought.

John Holt believed that children could think on higher levels of thought. Education was being dumb-downed by some repetitive, traditional assignments. Holt believed that traditional education was not natural; children were curious and they needed many opportunities to explore and have self-initiated activities and more ownership over their own learning. Children should be encouraged to choose what they think is important to learn. They should have some choices with the curriculum. Their feedback and choices are important for teachers to hear. What they crave is essentially what they need to learn. Holt believed that traditional curriculum and teacher training was not sensitive to student's needs and individual learning styles. In today's first of the 21st century, Holt's ideas would be called, "developmentally appropriate practice."

Holt also rejected the traditional teacher who essentially put children in their place. Children were seen as inferior to adults: he believed children overall were not treated with the respect and dignity they deserved. Holt knew this attitude would not change overnight.

Holt knew that teachers in his day would resist asking students what they thought was important for them to learn. Holt believed that teachers purposely failed to get to know their students well. In doing so, they remained the sole authority of the classroom. Thus, mutual respect did not occur in the classrooms where he observed. Holt believed that knowing students better would make for better teaching and ultimate learning.

One of Holt's ideas had to do with what students thought they should learn. He believed that what children wanted to learn where what they should learn. These concepts would be learned well and remembered well in life. He believed students' preferences were ignored in the classrooms where he observed

Times Have Changed in Today's American Classrooms

In the past decade or so, many improvements, even during this assessment-driven era have improved in public schools and teaching. Although standardized tests are the driven mandate of the day in American schools, teachers are being urged to teach not only on the knowledge level, yet on higher levels of thought, where student are taught to think independently, creatively, and critically about the mandated content. In the areas of benchmark high stakes tests mandated by *No Child Left Behind*, some open response items require students to think and write to higher levels of thought. Pre-service teachers in colleges and universities are also focusing on higher levels of thought in lesson planning, curriculum/lesson alignment, and assessment procedures. The trend in the past decade has been to move students toward comprehension, application, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation in their thinking and processing skills.

Although Holt might readily admit that teachers are the most qualified to assess students for learning outcomes, one facet today in assessment is "satisfaction assessment." Students are asked what they liked about a unit, a project, a lesson, an activity, and/or an assessment. Their opinions are important in the teacher reflection on future planning of lessons. Students are now respectfully asked for constructive input and helpful criticism of the work they do in class. As teachers see Holt's philosophies slowly unfold, the most effective teachers value the opinions of their students for future improvement of teaching. The best teachers are not personally or

professionally threatened by constructive input from students. They wholeheartedly welcome this type of input. A community learning environment occurs with this type of mutual respect.

The writer of this article believes that in some aspects after Holt's 1985 death, John Holt would be pleased with some changes in education. Not all areas Holt advocated for changes have improved, yet over the past few decades, there have been *vast improvements* in many areas addressed in Holt's writings. Without knowing it, Holt was rather *physhic* in what he believed education should become for young children. Times have definitely changed for the better!