Thomas starts the day just like any other child who sets the pace for his own learning. He wakes up with a grin on his face, eager to greet the day that stretches out before him — relatively unscheduled, yet full of learning opportunities just waiting to be discovered. Before he has even rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he is curiously inspecting the progress of the chemistry experiment he stayed up till late in the night concocting, then wanders into the kitchen to meet his family for a relaxed shared breakfast. They all pitch in to finish the chores around the home and garden they have created together, before Thomas and his mother head down to their local resources library to research the solar panel system they are considering, and to prepare for his science study group in the afternoon.

Children like Thomas who are learning naturally outside of the confines of the traditional schooling system are an emerging group drawing a great deal of interest from those seeking answers to the problems of today's society. These young people learn to interact with the whole world as their classroom, their parents and others serving as chosen guides, mentors and facilitators. Research proves these children are people who grow up to be independent thinkers who perform academically ahead of their schooled peers, with a solid sense of self esteem, a large percentage of whom go on to be self employed and lead fulfilling lives actively involved in their community. Some choose to attend OTEN (Open Training & Education Network) for their higher education or enroll in university as mature age students, while others prefer just to get on with following their interests into their chosen careers. The lives they go on to lead are as diverse as the learning paths they have chosen to take them there, but one thing they all have in common is a passion for lifelong learning.

With thought processes unfettered by seeking out only the 'right' predetermined answers, and free of the fear of being monitored, judged and tested throughout the process, self-directed learners are free to explore creative ways of problem solving and of finding information to answer the questions that are personally meaningful and relevant to their own lives and the world they live in. Parents of self-led learners discover time and again that children really don't need to be taught in order to learn; learning is a self-actualised process of creating skills, discovering knowledge, and satisfying one's own natural curiosity. As a way of learning, it is built on — and it teaches — the inherent right and responsibility of every individual to set her or his own standards and to live accordingly. And as a way of thinking, it instils and fosters respect for the dignity of each individual.

**Education shapes our future**

When we imagine the kind of future we would like our children and their children to live with, most often we imagine one in which we as humans have finally found ways to further the viability of our biosphere and to live in harmony with each other in a sustainable way. A crucial step for this to happen as a global society is that we must collectively learn to think in new ways, or we will not be able to transcend the interrelated set of global problems facing us today. In this age of information, an era of increasing unpredictability and accelerating change, learning how to learn, and how to fluidly adapt and transfer knowledge and skills to novel situations will become critical. The ability to process and source information is a far more important skill to be honing than rote memorisation of outdated facts and theories. More important perhaps is the ability to interact with other human beings with an implicit understanding and respect for our diversity, and to co-create sustainable possibilities for our evolving global society.

Most sociologists seem to agree that schooling plays a primary role in reinforcing the social and economic tone of a society. So what tone is being set by our schools today? Wendy Priesnitz illustrates in her book *Challenging Assumptions in Education*, that the system of education our children are being indoctrinated with today is fundamentally the same as it was 100 years ago, ever since it was designed to prepare factory workers for an industrial age culture that was oriented towards building and winning political and economic wars, teaching authoritarianism with unquestioned faith in the experts, through competition, self-repression, standardisation, and strict obedience to the clock. It's a billion dollar industry in and of itself, which by all accounts, is ineffective, outdated, disempowering to the individual, and what's more, unable even to produce a fully literate population after years of compulsory schooling.

"Let's face it," Priesnitz flatly points out. The majority of the problems facing society today — pollution, unethical politicians, poverty, unsafe cars, the list goes on — have been created or overseen by the best traditional college graduates. Whether these problems were created by design or accident, we cannot fix them by continuing the status quo. We need to create a society that chooses action over consumption, that favours relating to others over developing new weapons, that encourages cooperation over competition. And this just won't happen unless we de-institutionalise learning.

Priesnitz explores the main basic assumptions in education that are now being challenged if we are to revision a more sustainable approach to learning and living. Our fundamental assumption, that learning is something that can only happen in schools, is "like confusing spirituality with religious institutions, or wellness with hospitals". The fact is that children do not need to be taught in order to learn. She goes on to describe how institutionalised schooling shapes young people's attitudes towards themselves and the world they live in. From kindergarten, young people are robbed of their basic human rights and treated as legally minor. They are forced to attend an often unfriendly — sometimes thrashing — place where they are obliged to dismiss their own experiences, thoughts and opinions, substituting the opinions of a textbook author. They may learn about human rights in their social science classes, but are not allowed to experience — let alone practise — these vital components of good citizenship. Their experience is instead one of disempowerment, with teachers allowed to exercise a kind of power over their students that we only see matched by caregivers in institutions called jails.

Schools then measure a student's ability to regurgitate a prefabricated curriculum on an increasingly standardised scale, with no consideration given to the individual's aptitudes or developmental readiness. At the end of the school assembly line, with a large part of their lives already spent being processed for a life as producers and consumers, students with little authentic knowledge are bumped out into the adult world and suddenly expected to make mature decisions based on the distorted, disassociated information they have been drilled and indoctrinated with, largely from textbooks and TV. As author and schooling critic John Taylor Gatto explains, through this very process, we lose the power to think for ourselves. "Maybe that's why so few of us challenge the premises of nursing homes, television, day-care centres, schools and the global economy," suggests Priesnitz. These things are received ideas, not the result of individuals thinking about what would make their own lives — and those of their families and communities — better on a day-to-day basis.

The solution to this crisis of learning is to put learning back into the hands of the learner — AND to put the learner back into the community where they live. Priesnitz echoes the voices of countless other education revisionists and deschooling pioneers, from John Holt to Ivan Illich, in proposing that a more relevant public education system should be diverse enough to accommodate learners of all ages, interests, abilities and styles. It would put individuals in charge of their own learning agenda, beginning with identifying interests and provide the means to develop them. There could be community-based databases serving to connect those who want to share their knowledge and skills (with or without university degrees) with those who want to learn. Our communities are already so richly abundant with people whose skills, knowledge and talents could be shared.

The same databases could be used to co-ordinate volunteers and apprenticeships for community services.
and learning desired skills. Young Canadian entrepreneur Heidi Priesnitz describes the function of MAK, the Mentor Apprentice Exchange she initiated 8 years ago. ‘The appren-
tice offers hands-on assistance in exchange for the mentor’s skills and wisdom, which is an exciting and inexpensive way to learn. This barter can take place in any field of activity, between two people of any ages. It’s a holistic approach that allows for greater integration of business, education, and community.

Libraries are already ready-made learning centres that could expand and prosper. With a few modifications, they could provide the usual services of a library as well as that of a meeting space, office space, music hall, youth centre, arts centre, and free school all rolled into one. People would continue to come and go at will, whenever they find it neces-
sary, all day long. They would use computers to access infor-
mation, resource reference publications or simply relax and read, perhaps access points of view not carried by mainstream corporate media, host meetings or classes or guest speakers or participate/patronise art shows, craft sales and exhibits.

In fact, every aspect of the community can be involved — as it already is — as a real-life part of the self-learning pro-
gram; museums, parks, health clubs, shops, banks, businesses, town offices, farms, factories, even the streets and the environ-
ment itself. Learning becomes a service to the community as future citizens become involved in the local community, taking part in all kinds of community activities that are meaningful and relevant to their learning process. In the words of home-
schooling advocate and author Beverley Paine, ‘Self-directed learning builds community from the centre out, by nurturing the individual, the family and the community, and thus the world’.

Evolving movement

Around the world, self-directed learning movements are spontaneously self-organising with exciting innovations in the possibilities for creating learning communities. The Coalition for Self Learning is an ad hoc group of writers, innovative edu-
cators, homeschoolers, autodidacts, and educational pioneers with a common interest in the future of learning, which is giving voice to the enormous potential of these experimental models beginning to emerge, through their website and book called Creating Learning Communities (available free online at www.creatinglearningcommunities.org).

In the beginning, a only a couple of decades ago, self-
directed learning developed in autonomous family units, each one setting its own curriculum, and providing its own supplies and services. Homeschooling alone evolved into homeshoolers getting together to exchange information and provide support to one another through informal get-togethers or organised activities. These meetings give the kids a chance to meet other homeschoolers, and to join into study projects together. Groups started newsletters publicising activities and exchanging books, equipment and other materials; home based curricula and materials began being developed, along with organisations to help homeschoolers with legal and legislative matters.

Closely associated with the homeschooling movement are a broad variety of alternative schools that are moving in the direction of child-centred education. Alternative forms of alter-
native-based Montessori and Steiner schools, to free schools like those based on the Summerhill and Sudbury models, the explorations and experiments and informal forms of education have taken as many diverse turns as the people who have forged them. Some innovative educators have demonstrated that when we shed conventional assumptions, schools can become dynamic, exciting places of learning that are respon-
sive to students, families and communities and have explored with different ways of implementing school-based community learning centres.

Still others have explored learning in other community set-
tings, such as the emerging ‘virtual’ nature of the internet. An exciting new phase of homeschooling and self-learning has started to emerge in the last few years, primarily thus far in the US and the UK, as local homeschooling networks and self-
learners have started providing themselves with new forms of support programs. The Coalition for Self Learning is taking an active interest in developing these models, which are being called ‘cooperative community life-long learning centres’ — places where learning is respected as a fact of self-volution, which is integrated into community activities.

Learning centres

These learning centres are cooperatively organised by the member families they serve with parents pooling their talents, resources and expertise. They often provide mentoring as well as classes and workshops using all aspects of the community for education opportunities. Places like the Pathfinder Learning Centre in Amherst, Massachusetts, for homeschool-
teening teenagers, to the ‘Relational Education’ approach of the Community School in Camden, Maine, which has demon-
strated striking results with socially challenged individuals, these learning communities are presenting sustainable models for viable alternatives to institutionalised schooling.7

The North Star School & Homeschool Resource Centre outside Seattle is just one model of a democratically governed homeschool resource centre. The Centre provides a place for families to meet, share ideas and study together, with a food buying co-op and babysitting exchange available. Although there are no set hours or places they bring in outside instructors to teach specific classes based on the children’s interests. For the young children the ‘elective’ classes include things like paper making, mud making, clay, games, newspaper, paper-making, drawing, etc and by popular request, they also offer chemistry, geology, theme unit studies, writers’ workshop, drama, and community service projects which appeal to older students.

Some of the Coalition writers believe that community learning centres could replace schools as the primary educa-
tional institution in a truly democratic, collaborative, sustainable society. More specifically, many believe that diverse expres-
sions of open-ended, evolving, community-based education are replacing fixed and hierarchical school systems. CSL spokesperson Ron Miller reinforces the view that authentic communities are able to enhance their own development while at the same time enhancing that of each individual in the com-
munity, thereby promoting both freedom of personal choice and a sense of responsibility for the whole.

Evolving global society

Bill Ellis points out that the emergence of so many com-
munity-learning models reflects much more than a change in educational practices. It is a transformation of the whole mind-set of the value of knowledge, and the value of the person in society. ‘The theme of the learning community is fully integrated with the evolving paradigm we are witnessing in civil society, which is beginning to see human beings as interdependent entities, systems within systems in a grand and mysterious holonistic cosmos.’8

To illustrate, he points out how around the world grassroots organisations (GRs), sometimes called nongovernmental organisations or NGOs are prolifer-
ating and empowering people at the grassroots and promoting local community self-reliance. People everywhere are solving local problems with local skills and local resources, taking over where governments and ‘the market’ have failed.

In our food system organic gardening, community sup-
ported agriculture projects, farmers’ markets, and co-op food stores suggest that a new localised agriculture and food system is emerging. In hospitals, acupuncture, nutrition, mind-body healing, and a long list of alternative health concepts and prac-
tices are being accepted. In housing, intentional communities, co-housing, ecovillages, solar building and other technologies and techniques are gaining acceptance. In economics, local exchange and trading systems (LETS), socially responsible investing, local scrips, cooperatives, community land trusts, community owned corporations, peer lending, and credit unions are among the ideas taking root. Transformations in the ways we organise transportation, communications, religion and all other elements of society have similarly started creat-
ing a post-industrial world.

‘Networks of networks of cooperative community life-long learning centres could well become the foundation for this glo-
bal transformation to occur on an even larger scale,’ envisions Ellis. ‘If our future is to be based on mutual aid, belonging, caring, cooperation and community, our future citizens should start their lives belonging to caring, cooperative communities involved in mutual aid.’

We must first begin with trust and respect for our children, their learning process and their place in society. We can find ways to put the process of learning back into the hands of the learner, and the learner back into the community that they live in, knowing that they will grow into adults that live in the world as well as they have learned.

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References

1. CLC services lists resources for worldwide self-learning models, from programs like MAX, to Road Scholars’ real life expeditions that include academic studies while on the road, to the Internet Global Learning Village, to Transitioning which sup-
ports selflearners to immerse themselves in cultures and learning experiences abroad, etc.
2. Homeschool Support Groups and Resource Centres by Jerry Pinto, Chapter 20.
3. Community Life-Learning Centres by Wilson N. Ellis.

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By Anna Johns

Australia’s own home-based learning community has created a rich tapestry of grassroots networks of folks using getting on with the job of facilitating learning experiences for their children. Many of these communities have been growing together for years and often form small subgroups to maintain close contact, especially for mutual interest educational activities.

The majority of meetings occur in each other’s homes and hired local halls, or in public places like parks, museums and theatres, or through regular activities like ice skating, drama, and gymnastics. From musical performances and mini-Olympics days in Perth, to the bush camp activities like HEN in Victoria, each local community quite spontaneously develops its own culture and approach to how they go about extending their children’s learning in a family oriented way.

Many groups publish their own newsletters with a full listing of upcoming group activities, HEN in Victoria even publish their own magazine, Otherways. The National Home Education Association (HEA) lists local support groups, their newsletters, yahoo chat groups, and local contacts who are happy to help people with inquiries about homeschooling.

Some home-based learners collectively hire tutors to explore specific interests, ranging from musical instruments, to applied mathematics, to circus training! Quite often parents themselves take turns giving classes in exchange for money, barter, or no payment at all, and afterwards everyone enjoys the opportunity for the mothers and children alike to socialise and enjoy the interactions with peers of different ages.

Home-based learners are a creative, resourceful bunch in developing educational projects that inspire imagination and collaboration. One example is the Families Sharing Newsletter, each family on the chain is given a particular month to publish their own newsletter and send it to the other families on the chain. Some of the newsletters are just a couple of pages; others include articles from different members of the family with photos and diagrams; it is entirely up to each family to decide what to publish. Then there are those who are creating networks on the internet, like the online SA Network Library for people to exchange homeschooling books with one another, working in conjunction with the home-education-sa@yahoo.com.au email discussion list. We are just beginning to see ways that innovative homeschoolers are making use of internet technology — and mostly it’s the children themselves! (see E-mags listings below).

Other families get together and pool resources to go on camping trips and extended educational holidays together, such as visiting science expos or to join in interstate Lego competitions. Some homeschooling families literally use the world as their classrooms on the road (not being restricted by school holidays for adventure!) and are learning as they travel around Australia, while other families welcome travelling homeschoolers to visit them on their journeys (see www.australia.edu/stepppingstones).

Every year, camps are organised by State groups like HEN in Victoria or HEA nationally. The Nelson Camp is to be held in November; this is a popular gathering amongst homeschooling families who travel from all over Australia every year to share learning while adventuring. See www.heasn.au or for further information. Nelson Camps, or for camps organised by HEN in Victoria, www.home-ed.vic.edu.au. Recently ‘camp with wings’ has been initiated in Australia, based on the Teenage Liberation model by Grace Llewellyn, giving homeschooling learners the opportunity, in Grace’s words ‘to come together to change ourselves and the world, teach each other great things, and sleep under the moon.’ Contact Janine; campwithwings@hotmail.com

Child-centred opportunities at school

In almost every State of Australia there are progressive alternative schools like Steiner, Montessori, and Independent Schools. Co-operative Community schools like Malvern in Melbourne are largely child-centred and often allow free time for children to explore their own interests. In Queensland ‘Boscoobin’ is a democratic school modelled on the Sudbury Valley School, and there are also natural learning-type schools, like Brisbane Independent School, Pine Community School and Blackall Ranges.

In both Australia, places like the Ring Yankalla Area School Annex, offers part-time education to homeschooled students in a family-based atmosphere.

Some regular schools allow home educators to use their resources or come to certain classes upon request, but it depends on the school, and specifically, the inclinations of the headmaster and teachers involved.

Of course, there are no restrictions for homeschoolers to enter tertiary study institutions such as TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and University. There are ways of bypassing TEE scores (Tertiary Entrance Examination) such as Open Learning Australia, or OTEN (Open Training & Education Network) courses, the TAFE equivalent which are by correspondence (www.talenews.edu.au/oten) or by presenting an experience-based learning portfolio during an interview (62% of university entrances are gained by interview or mature age entry)! See www.heasn.au/stepppingstones.

Home-based learning resources

- Home Education Association Inc., www.heasn.au. National organisation supporting and encouraging ‘home ed’ by providing services, resources and networks, also legal guidelines for each state.
- HomeSchool Australia! www.beverleypane.com — All you need to know to get started, great articles, resources and books available by home-based learning author Beverley Pane.
- Australian Home Education www.eleanor.sparks.to — contains many resources and contacts, especially for Queensland. For homeschooling inquiries email Eleanor Sparks; homeschools@sparks.to
- Stepping Stones for Home Education www.australia.edu/stepppingstones — Australia’s own national home education magazine.
- Homeschool Australia e-Newsletter — A monthly, Australia-wide E-newsletter offering a free subscription with a blank email to: HomeschoolAustraliaNewsletter@subscribe.yahoo.com.au
- Unschool-Katzi www.unschoolKidz.beverleypane.com – A free E-zine publishing children’s stories, poems, art, reviews, puzzles, riddles, games and more, with printed version by post for $5.

Materials and support

- Golden Beetle Books www.users.bigpond.com/goldenbeetlebooks. Steiner homeschooling material
- Always Learning Books www.beverleypane.com — practical guides for natural learning approaches
- Aussie Homeschool Resources Messageboard, www.members.tripod.com.au/messagesboard.com.au — an online messageboard to sell, swap or buy mostly used resources, also there are educational books at www.webaby.com.au and through online support groups.
- Australian Homeschool support list, http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/australianhomeschool or email austalianhomeschool-subscribe@yahoo.com.au with the word subscribe in the body of the message.
- There are Yahoo homeschooling support groups for Christians, unschoolers, eclectics, Charlotte Mason followers, Waldorf homeschoolers, gifted, autistic, Muslims, Chinese, and more. Just type name on homepage www.groups.yahoo.com search command.
- The Home Educating pen pal network is organised by Belinda Moore and her homeschooing daughter Brittany — gayandbelinda@ozemail.com.au

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