

# Alternative approaches to education:

Tolstoy's thinking on teaching and learning and its relevance for today

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I reflect upon the educational writings and teaching experiences of the 19th-Century Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy is known to have attached much importance to his own writing on education, even more than to the literary creations for which he is best remembered. His writings on education have much to contribute to our present-day understanding of the learning process and cover such issues as, 'learner autonomy', 'motivation', 'relationship' and 'student voice'. Tolstoy's teaching experience was with multiethnic peasant children in his schools in Yasnaya Polyana. I intend to illustrate that the themes and issues that arose from his experiences in the 1860s can still find resonance with students and teachers in the 21st century.

## INTRODUCTION

Some may wonder at the relevance of Leo Tolstoy's experience of teaching and his thoughts on education for today's 'modern age'. Writing in the mid-19th Century, Tolstoy wrestles with the challenges faced by all teachers who wish to inspire their students in the learning process, and, in doing so, he captures both the joys and frustrations of this process. Tolstoy had immense respect for the individual and the learning journey travelled by both student and teacher. He readily understood the historical, political and cultural influences upon those who aspired to teach, but in particular he observed and noted in great detail the learning experiences of his own

students. From observations from within his schools in Yasnaya Polyana and his visits to schools across Europe he developed his own unique thinking on education. His ideas became influential in schools throughout the world. At the beginning of the 20th Century his influence extended as far as Spain, Argentina, America, Canada, Britain, and even Japan where the writer Nakazato Kaizan made his estate into a mini Yasnaya Polyana in order to closely emulate Tolstoy's methods Yegorov (1994 9ff.).

## IMPORTANCE OF AN 'AUTONOMOUS SPIRIT'

Tolstoy's approach was successful in engaging with and educating the

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- FREE SCHOOLS
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- RELATIONSHIPS

multiethnic peasant children of Yasnaya Polyana. One of Tolstoy's daughters recalled that his approach to teaching was 'simple and straightforward'. 'Through personal charm, the power of his creative spirit, he soon produced an atmosphere of contentment, almost of enthusiasm, among the children and some of the teachers' (Tolstoy 1954 110).

For Tolstoy (1972) the key need was to foster an autonomous spirit within the learner, which was of paramount importance to counter the influences of the controlling 'state'. Max Stirner (1845) referred to these influences as 'wheels in the head'. 'Only by owning your own thoughts, values, beliefs, and ideas can you truly own yourself and

truly be free' (Smith 1983: 92). Tolstoy firmly believed that children should be encouraged and inspired to ask questions about every aspect of life, including those concerning the purpose of education. He sought to make distinctions between 'culture', 'education', 'instruction' and 'teaching'. He regarded 'culture' as being the sum total of all the social forces acting upon an individual, with 'teaching' and 'instruction' facilitating, not dictating, these. 'Culture' was seen as shaping and influencing the self-directed learning journey (Lucas 1979: 8ff.).

## PERSONALISED CURRICULUM

Tolstoy's personalised curriculum becomes a 'path of thought', an 'interaction between the flow of external sources and the actively mediating consciousness of the living learner' (Pillalamarri 2015: 67). Compulsory 'education' in which curriculum content is narrowly fixed and decided by others was to be avoided at all costs. Where 'teaching' and 'instruction' are free from compulsion they contribute to and support 'culture', thereby leaving individuals free to decide for themselves (Spring 2006: 49ff.). Children within a traditional school context have little influence or control over curriculum content. As Lucas (1979: 8ff.) states, 'Neither in capitalist nor communist countries can we afford to allow children to learn what they wish to learn. We insist that they must prepare for a useful function in society.'

However, if learning is to be effective the voices of those 'being educated' need to be recognised and heeded. Tolstoy believed that 'The transmission of culture would have to occur in a spirit of "non-interference", one in which the learner could discover meaning and truth independently of all external influences' (Murphy 1992: 84). The teacher's role was to encourage a 'love of learning', to communicate and model their subject expertise in a sensitively exercised manner so as not to impinge upon the freedom of

the learner. 'If you wish to educate the students by science, love your science and know it, and the students will love both you and the science and you will educate them' (Tolstoy 1972: 148). However, the students always have the freedom to exercise their autonomy, 'To listen or not to listen to the teacher, to imbibe or not to imbibe his educational influence' (p. 149).

## INTERESTS OF THE LEARNER PARAMOUNT

The interest and motivation of the learner always needs to be paramount and laid alongside those who would decide upon curriculum content. Listening to the views of those 'being educated' gives the teacher insight into student need and thinking in the learning process. Tolstoy would not have been happy with a school system that imposed curriculum content, pace of learning, and success criteria. In the schools of Yasnaya Polyana, educational content was interpreted and delivered by intuitive teachers who were chosen for their sensitivity to the culture and experiences of the children, trained and skilled in motivating individuals, and mindful of the individual potential of each child. For Tolstoy, the ultimate aim of education was to 'foster individual freedom' and communicate 'eternal truths' of a spiritual nature, including 'that the meaning of every man's life lies only in the store of love within him' (Murphy 1992: 82ff.). He advocated a 'new' approach to teaching and learning that respected each student and focused upon individual need. In his school magazine during the winter of 1862, Tolstoy wrote, 'The only true method of teaching is the one that satisfies the pupils' (Tolstoy 1954: 137). Tolstoy carefully selected his teaching staff and cautioned that if choice of method rested solely with the teacher alone it had less chance of being conducive to the learner's needs. 'A teacher is always involuntarily moved to choose a method of teaching most convenient for him. The more convenient it is for him the more difficult it is for the

pupils' (Tolstoy 1954: 137). The guiding principle was always the learner's needs. Tolstoy further expanded upon his pedagogical method in his reading primer written to engage the many different ethnicities that constituted the peasant population of Yasnaya Polyana. Whatever the material being taught or explained, it had to have the dual function of being 'comprehensible' and 'interesting' for each child. The learning environment also received attention. In order to encourage engagement and interest, it needed to be both familiar and comfortable. The emotional context was similarly noted, and in particular the student should not feel embarrassment before his teachers or peers, nor fear punishment for bad work or for failure to understand. 'The mind of man can operate only when it is not oppressed by external influences' (Tolstoy 1954: 199).

## 'THE ONE AND ONLY CRITERION OF EDUCATION'

Freedom in school and in education was central to Tolstoy's conception of teaching and learning; he called it 'the one and only criterion of education' (Yegorov 1994: 4). Students were not to be coerced or forced to learn. Rather the motivation to learn was seen as a natural part of the human condition which could be fostered and encouraged through a sensitive respect for the child's own natural independent efforts to engage with the world around them in an autonomous manner. Above the door in his schools in Yasnaya Polyana were the words, 'Come and Go Freely' (Lucas 1979: 92). Tolstoy's concept of the school also extended to encouraging parents and the local community to set up and run local schools for themselves and to decide both content and activities. He encountered many difficulties with government officialdom and parents who wanted a more 'traditional' approach to the education of their children. His 'new' methods attracted supporters and detractors in equal numbers. His accounts of establishing a different type

of school (Tolstoy 1972: 60ff.) are not unlike the experiences, 150 years later in England, of those who would seek to establish a 'Free School' or 'alternative approach' to education. Tolstoy felt that education was too important to be left to the auspices of civil servants and needed to be more responsive to local community needs (Yegorov 1994: 2). Initially his biggest challenge came from working with the children he sought to educate. The children of Yasnaya Polyana were of different ages, motivations and abilities and spoke different dialects. In his research he looked for inspiration elsewhere in Russia for a fresh approach to teaching and learning, and then travelled throughout Europe asking the same question in each European country he visited: 'How do you know what to teach and how to teach?' (Lucas 1979: 17). He was not impressed with what he found on his 'grand tour' of schools in France, Germany and England. He recognised in his tours of European schools and his own experiences of teaching peasant children that the process of schooling itself was capable of creating unnatural barriers to learning by divorcing students from the 'natural nurturing environments of the home or farm' (Moulin 2011: 162). By forcing students into the 'unnatural' learning environment of the classroom,



Tolstoy 1895, C/o Wikimedia Commons Free Repository

the school system found itself having to impose an equally unnatural discipline upon students which required the use of coercion to force them to attend and learn. Tolstoy, however, advocated the need for learning to be 'student-centred' and related closely to the life of the society around them (Murphy 1992). He felt that a child's 'natural equilibrium' and 'innate sense of goodness, truth and beauty', became unbalanced through the process of coercion, effectively undermining the basic motivational drivers that led students to 'individual enquiry and discovery', 'curiosity and interest'. (Moulin 2011:169)

### 'HOW TO MAKE THOUGHTS FLOW FLUENTLY'

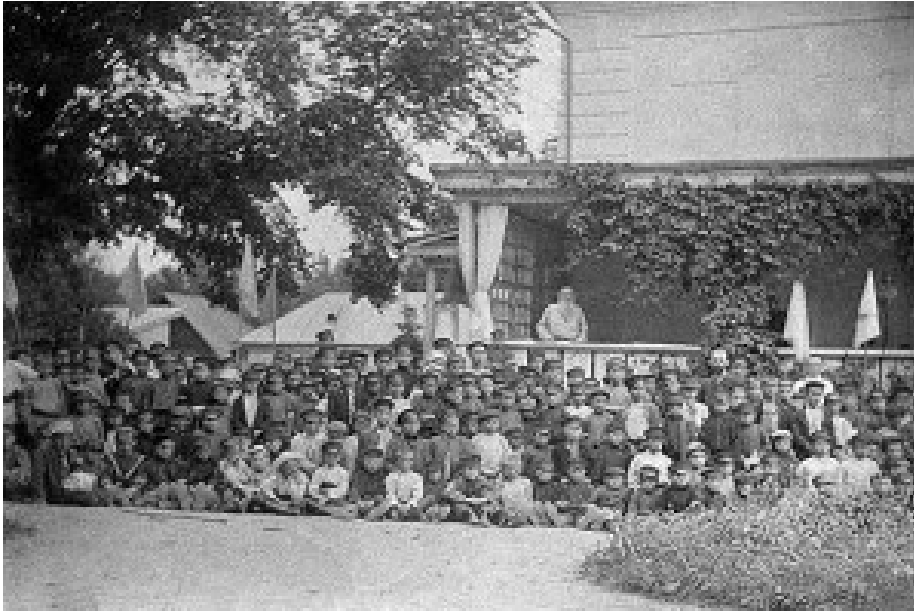
During his tour of European schools Tolstoy was reported by a German schoolmaster as saying that he wanted to know more about how to engage more fully with students and as having 'pondered a good deal how to make thoughts flow fluently' (Lucas 1979: 88). Tolstoy recognised the importance of developing imagination in every area of learning whilst not neglecting the need for students to develop and master technical skills (Murphy 1992: 261). This approach was exemplified several generations later in the practice and writings of David Holbrook (1964), who taught students who were difficult to engage in the learning process. Holbrook promoted the use of what he called, 'imaginative English in the context of affectionate sympathy, in the context of teaching-as-an-art' (p. 9). This approach specifically took account of a student's individual personality and innate need to engage in imaginative work. Holbrook, like Tolstoy, recognised the unique individuality of each and every learner and the need for them to 'think freely'. Tolstoy looked to the arts to stimulate, nourish and facilitate learning and was aware of the different cultures and creeds that animated the peasantry of Yasnaya Polyana. Matlaw (1967). Tolstoy developed his own learning materials,

taking inspiration from art, music, religion and literature, to 'creatively inspire' the imagination of his students. In doing so he engaged with them in their own unique learning journey whilst providing them with the skills and understanding to become autonomous motivated learners recognising the 'interrelatedness of all facets of human culture' (Murphy 1992: 50).

### 'KNOW HOW KNOWLEDGE'

Tolstoy rejected the fixed or prescribed curriculum, and over-reliance on teacher-led didactic methods. He felt that a fixed curriculum 'divorced knowledge from its meaning - giving roots in individual experience' and 'set limits' to what could be learnt about a subject. What was actually taught was still the domain of the teacher; however, the student had the ultimate freedom to decide upon the level of their engagement and whether, and to what extent, they pursued their learning journey (Tolstoy 1972: 233ff.). Learning needed to be both meaningful and relevant to the student and the society in which they lived. Tolstoy regarded pedagogy as something that should be based upon 'human values and feelings' rather than theoretical assumptions (Moulin 2011: 182). His pedagogy saw teaching as an 'art' and was centred upon intuitive, 'know how knowledge', rather than the 'know that knowledge' much later to be discussed by Gilbert Ryle (1970: 26ff), and adapted by Thomas & Loxley (2001: 12ff.) in the context of special education. The educator had a responsibility to 'guide and direct' the student's search for truth in a spirit of freedom whilst ensuring that whatever is taught is done so, 'charged with a love of learning' Murphy (1992: 85).

Tolstoy's concept of 'school' was far from one that simply described the institution. He wrote, 'I understand not the house in which the instruction is given, not the teachers, not the pupils, not a certain tendency of instruction, but in the general



*Tolstoy's house/school at Yasnaya Polyana c/o Wikipedia*

sense, the conscious activity of him who gives culture upon those who receive it' Tolstoy (1972: 143). Education becomes a 'journey' or 'process' of discovery which, undertaken alongside teachers who have a love for their subject, becomes a 'truly influential' experience charged with a 'love of learning'. Tolstoy (1972: 149).

Students' emotional wellbeing was clearly important to Tolstoy, as shown in the advice given to his own student teachers (Murphy 1992: 67). He insisted that the material studied needed to be comprehensible and interesting; distraction kept to a minimum; the student should not be embarrassed before his teachers or comrades; and the student should not be working under fear of punishment. (Tolstoy 1954: 199).

Tolstoy was very much aware of the importance of ensuring that the educational experiences provided by his teachers in Yasnaya Polyana needed to be seen and experienced by students as relevant and interesting. Only in this way could teachers hope to retain the motivation of students who every morning walked beneath the signs that bade them to 'Come and Go Freely'. At the centre of the school's concerns had to be the needs of the student, and not the needs of itself as an institution or the delivery of an outside imposed curriculum.

Recent research by Augustine & Brahme (2014) into an alternative education project, 'Kanavu' (literally dream), managed by tribal youth in Cheengode village, Wayanad, in Kerala, India, reflects many of the ideas Tolstoy advocated. Kanavu is focused upon supporting children and young people who have 'dropped out' of, or refuse to attend, government schools. Manghu, a student at Kanavu, poses questions that speak to all learners and educators across the world. 'Why cannot schools be places where learning is fun? And if the schools out there [government schools] cannot have fun while learning, is our learning at our own pace and having fun wrong? What are schools for then?' (Augustine & Brahme 2014: 2).

Kanavu provides a learning environment that is sympathetic to the needs, goals and aspirations of the young people who felt 'humiliation, fear and frustration' (Augustine & Brahme: 11) in their experience of mainstream government schools. At Kanavu they were able to exercise autonomy over what and how they learnt, and the curriculum was seen as being pertinent to their needs. There are no exams; teachers and locals provide tuition in a range of different subjects and cultural traditions, with further and higher studies being facilitated through distance learning and organised trips. The

emphasis is upon 'self-sufficiency', and the motivation comes from the natural inclination of young people to learn and develop. Young people learn and work alongside their peers and adults, making very little distinction between 'education and life' (p. 13). The question of 'syllabus or curriculum' becomes almost irrelevant to their thinking, and every student is encouraged to 'discover his or her own interests and goals in life and studies what s/he believes will help attain them' (p. 14). Learning is not 'time-limited' and students work at a pace that is comfortable for them in mixed age groups where older students assist younger students as required. Emphasis is placed upon 'peer-guided work' and active engagement with the local environment and available technology.

'Our culture has a different way of learning ... We teach them how to cope with studies and also lessons from our culture that they are not taught in [government] school' (Augustine & Brahme: 18). One of the instructors, Manglu, poses the question, 'Does education happen only in schools?', implying that equating education only with institutional schooling creates a false dichotomy between the 'real world' and the world of the school. At Kanavu, these two worlds are much closer for students than they were when they attended the mainstream provisions.

Tolstoy's ideals can also be recognised in 'Indigo House', an alternative education provision in Queensland, Australia, where students are able to be in control and have a voice in the content and pace of their own learning. Both Kanavu and Indigo identify and locate problems of student engagement in the creation of 'cultural barriers' which prevent students from comfortably engaging with mainstream curriculum content, teachers and school organisation. Keddie (2013: 59) draws from the autobiographical studies of Moreton-Robinson (2013: 341ff.) the idea of 'relationality' to explore what she describes as the 'relationality of epistemology', a concept which would



have been recognised by Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana. It describes a feeling of 'kindredness' with others who are similar to oneself, and the importance of this process to the definition of 'self' and is 'learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation, and social memory' (pp. 59ff.). When a student finds themselves at odds with the educational system it can be destructive to their sense of self, leading to disengagement and non-participation. A school board member of Indigo House talks of state-run mainstream schooling: 'Something is happening with our system and it's not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids but also the white kids in schools. It's just the institutions and what they're doing in the institutions is not suiting them' (Keddie 2013: 63). Another speaks of mainstream schooling having a 'lack of understanding and knowledge of their [students'] home life, where they come from that lets them down ... It's not understanding where they come from and not putting that into perspective before they make judgements ... I think that's what a lot of people ... a lot of teachers don't understand' (Keddie 2013: 63).

Tolstoy would have recognised, too, the disaffection of a student in a London secondary school in 2013, who declared that the large, formal classroom situation caused her frustration and annoyance, forcing her to wait for help or making her too frightened or embarrassed to ask for help in front of peers (Robertson 2015). One of the formative observations made by Tolstoy on his tour of European schools was of children sitting for hours doing things that they could learn more simply and quickly outside the school context (Tolstoy 1954: 123). He would have recognised too the importance of ensuring that students did not 'lose face' or appear silly in the eyes of peers.

Tolstoy put great store on getting to know students well. He would have agreed with Carnie (2003: 174), who quotes Sizer (1996) as stating, 'I cannot teach well a student whom I do not know.' This can be

problematic in a large modern timetabled classroom environment. Getting to know a student well enough to be able to meet their learning needs effectively, and being flexible enough to tailor individual support to facilitate student interests, is often impractical.

### AUTHENTIC LEARNING ALONGSIDE ADULTS

One of the similarities between 'student voice' in a London secondary school and Tolstoy's students was the need for students to be doing something 'real' in their community. Students wanted to learn and earn alongside adults in meaningful and worthwhile work or training. Learning and contributing to work outside school gave Tolstoy's students a real role in their community, whereas students in the London learning support unit often refused even to partake in time-limited 'pretend' work experience opportunities. Marshak (2011) refers back to the work of Mead (1970) to highlight the need of young people to be engaged in 'authentic' learning alongside adults in 'real' occupations and roles. Mead discusses three cultural paradigms or models to explain cultural changes over the last few centuries in how Western societies view and regard young people. Prior to the 20th Century children mostly learnt from their parents and other adults in what was termed a 'post-figurative' era. Since the 1950s, however, Mead asserts that we have moved to a 'co-figurative' society in which both children and adults learn from their peers. Adults and children now inhabit different cultural worlds and, as a result, have become more estranged from each other. The solution is to move to what Mead describes as a more 'pre-figurative' society, one in which children learn alongside and from their parents and other adults in meaningful social employments. Working and learning together becomes a reciprocal process allowing adults to learn from children, children to learn from adults, and, importantly, allowing children an 'authentic voice' to participate with and influence adults.

Many of the challenges that Tolstoy sought to address in his own teaching experiences in Yasnaya Polyana continue to be with us more than 150 years later. They are themes and issues which span historical, cultural and ethnic divides and which continue to fuel debates concerning the purpose of education and what constitutes effective teaching and learning. For Tolstoy human intuition was the most important guide for all those who would profess to teach, and the building of rapport with the learner was key to enabling a student to progress in their learning, 'a concept simultaneously embracing interpersonal authenticity and pedagogic efficacy' (Murphy 1992: 52). The placing of the relationship between learner and teacher at the centre of the process of effective learning and wellbeing is also amply documented by Riel (2006). A learning relationship characterised by mutual trust, reciprocity, shared responsibility, agreed goals and 'shared interest' is one that will more readily facilitate learning. Such a relationship will be one regarded today as 'emotionally literate' and include 'warmth, trust, closeness, respect, care and support' (Street 2003). It is these values and skills applied to the teacher/learner process that improve the learning experiences for students. They are common factors in the successful engagement of all students. When students are asked what sort of a teacher they want, student voice tells us that teachers who extend and facilitate to their students 'interest, confidence, freedom from worry, a warm and a patient teacher', are what is most valued (Thomas & Loxley 2001: 26).

### 'IF RAPPORT IS LOST, ALL IS LOST'

To have teachers who love their subject areas and learning is important, but to be really effective they need much more besides. They need to understand the importance of building relationships with all students, will greet, smile at and notice students; respond to misdemeanour with reason rather than punishment; take a

personal interest in students; be available and approachable; even-handed and respectful; have a good sense of fun and humour; listen and encourage autonomy (Roffey 2011: 26). The ability to build rapport is vital to any relationship (Griffin and Tyrell 2004: 398ff.), and particularly important between teacher and learner as it 'can lead to feelings of security that empower children' (Roffey 2011: 26).

Tolstoy, like many teachers, recognised that barriers to effective learning are created by insensitive institutions that ignore the fact that 'The mind of man can operate only when it is not oppressed by external influences' (Tolstoy 1954: 199; Murphy 1992). Moulin (2011: 183) describes Tolstoy's understanding of student voice as profound, leading him to recognise that the learner brought both 'insight and intuitive knowledge' to the learning situation, which gave the learner an important role in defining what, when and how they learnt.

The last words rest with Tolstoy himself: 'The best teacher will be he who has at his tongue's end the explanation of what it is that is bothering the pupil. These explanations give the teacher the knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods, the ability of

inventing new methods, and, above all, not a blind adherence to one method, but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and that the best method would be the one which would answer best to all the possible difficulties incurred by a pupil, that is not a method, but an art and talent.' Tolstoy (1972: 58)



Tolstoy avec ses petits-enfants, C/o Wikimedia Commons Free Repository

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