Pluralistic Learning as the Core of Democratic Education

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* Details about Yaacov Hecht can be found in the last page

Good evening everyone,

Before I begin my lecture I must apologize for my poor English and congratulate the organizers of this conference for being brave enough to choose me to open this conference. I believe this represents the pluralistic spirit of IDEC conferences. I also wish to thank all of you in advance for the great efforts you will have to put in order to understand my presentation tonight. In order to make it a bit easier for everyone I will do three things: Although I never read my lectures I will read most of this one and I hope it will work out. I will use a power point presentation to highlight central ideas, and every now and then I will leave the written text and speak freely to you so that I, too, will have some fun.

So, let's start.

I was five years old when I started to think about democratic education. The kindergarten teacher would lock me up in the store- room as a punishment for the "bad" things I did , and as I was sitting there I had a lot of time to think. I remember thinking that something was completely wrong about the way she behaved. I left high school when I was 16 and it was then that I really entered the world of education because every other person would ask me why I wasn't going to school. To be able to answer this question I had to start reading books and there I came across the ideas of Russo, Pasteluzi, Tolstoi, Dewee, Neal, Korzak, Rogers and others, who have all influenced my present outlook. In 1987 I founded the Hadera Democratic School, the first democratic school in Israel and headed it for 10 years. Later I founded the Institute for democratic education which is at the center of 22 democratic schools operating these days in Israel in which 4000 student learn.

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There are many democratic schools all over the world and each of them is different. But what we do have in common is the goal of respecting human rights in school using the following tools:

- A democratic community that has a parliament, judicial committees, executive committees etc.
- Pluralistic learning that allows students to choose their favorite subjects, and offers self-study programs etc.
- A dialogical relationship based on unique models of inter-relationship between adults and children.

It is very difficult to point at the most important factor in democratic education because every piece in this mosaic is important for the complete picture. Yet, I have chosen to speak tonight about pluralistic learning as the core of democratic education for two main reasons:

First, when I ask students in Israel and abroad what they see as the most important part in their democratic school they usually come up with a clear answer: it is the freedom to choose what, how and when to learn.

The second reason I chose this subject is that we, at the Institute for democratic education, initiate democratization processes in many schools and actually connect the ideas of democratic education with regular schools. Those schools find it quite easy to accept the idea of the parliament or the committees, for example, but the main difficulty is integrating the idea of freedom with the curriculum.

This is why it was our top priority to deepen our understanding of the learning process that takes place in democratic schools, and this evening I will present some of our conclusions and insights.

2

I have often thought of how I should call the learning process that takes place in the democratic school and I have eventually chosen the term Pluralistic Learning because it touches upon the very core of Democratic Education. ***This type of learning acknowledges the uniqueness of the student and is based on the equal right of every person to express this uniqueness.***

In spite of the fact that we are all humans and therefore share many common qualities we are all different.

Some people love pets and others cannot stand their company.

Some dream of working with children and others think it is a nightmare.

Some find it easier to study in the morning and others can only study at night.

Some use books as the main tool to study while others use books as a sleeping pill.

Every individual on this planet has a unique learning profile. The human diversity is one of the most beautiful things in our world. It is the fuel that runs our world.

An education system that does not acknowledge my uniqueness will not acknowledge me. It might acknowledge those like me but it is not interested in getting to know me.

It might acknowledge people my age, people who live in my area, people who buy in the same supermarket.

But I am not a copy or a reflection of the sum of qualities that resemble me.

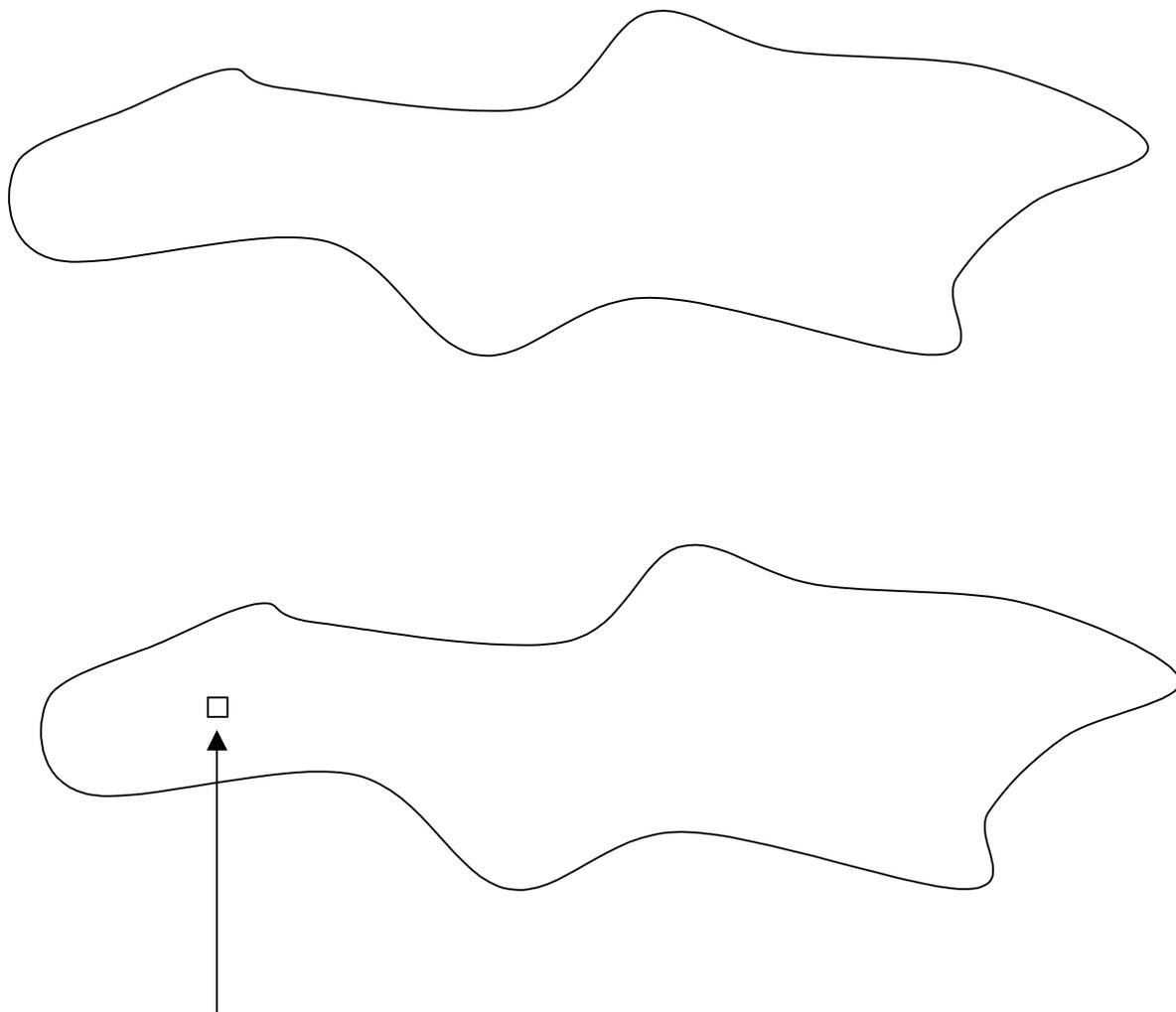***As a person I am made of a multi - cellular genetic code that has no human equivalent. Every person is an individual whose contribution to the world is unique.***

Before looking further into Pluralistic Learning I would like to clarify some relevant terms:

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The World and the "Square"-

This shape represents the world of knowledge.

"The Square" represents the knowledge, which is learnt in schools.

This square contains some knowledge of science, for example, yet, most scientific knowledge can be found beyond the limits of the "square". And so is the case with literature, art and all other school subjects. Entire worlds are missing in the square. Those who believe in the square see it as a magic entity, the starting point for everything in this world. But what is even more dangerous is the fact that they define the square as the only space where a person's time is "well spent". When a student is busy in "square" activities he is making the most of his time, but when he is acting outside the square he is actually "wasting his time".

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Time "well spent"

"wasted"Time
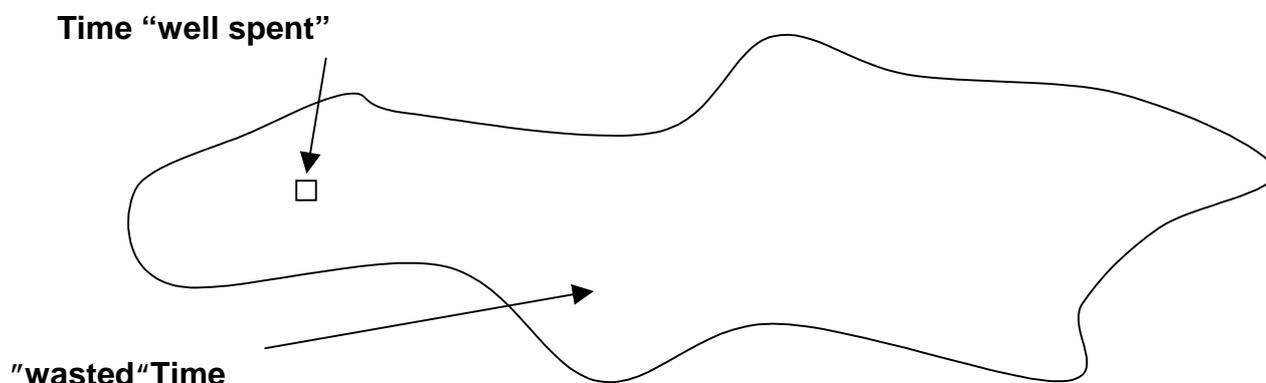
This is the reason why most children gather inside the limited space of the "square". This crowded space leads to disaster: here too, like in most other crowded places, people cannot see themselves or anyone else.

Inside the "square" we continually try to measure everyone with respect to the ideal concept of square, namely each person wants to be like the other. What we get is a *Gauss Curve.* Children are measured and classified according to clear criteria. A student is excellent, mediocre, or weak according to his or her proximity to the square.

Most of the people present here have probably been defined as mediocre, few have been excellent and a few others ", like myself, have been tagged "weak. Unfortunately, because the "square" is considered "an essential preparation for life" most of its graduates start to see their tag as real.

Many would say to me: "Sorry to wake you up but welcome to planet Earth. Time to land. Open your eyes and look around you. Soon enough you'll find out that most people are truly mediocre, only very few are brilliant and some are weak. Haven't you attended any of your statistics classes?"

SQUARACISTS

This is where, I believe, **the great "success" of the educational system lies. It has turned us into "squaracists", into people who are categorized according to the degree of their success within the world of the square.**

Those that did attend statistics classes are absolutely right but only when it comes to judging people on one particular scale – that of the square. But our view changes when we allow people to choose the areas they wish to develop. So let's consider the difference between the two kinds of learning: Learning in the square where time is "well spent" which I call "linear learning" and learning outside the square where time is "wasted" which I call "pluralistic learning".

Linear learning in the square is based on acquisition of absolute processed and edited and knowledge. One does not gain knowledge as a result of a personal quest. One is "given" knowledge by the educational authorities.

A

**Not Knowing**   **to**   **Knowing**
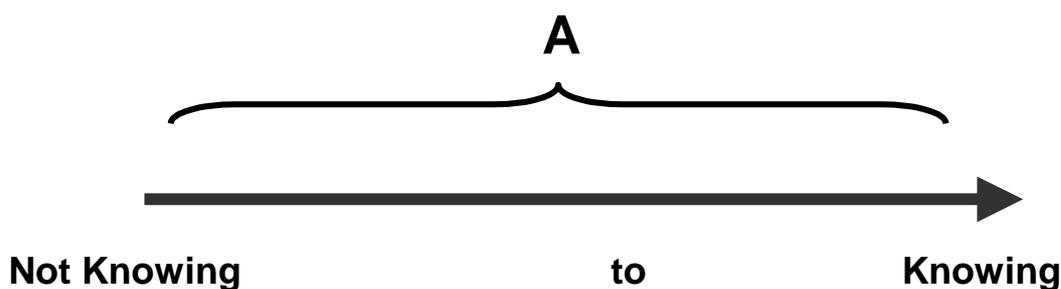
Knowledge is acquired step after step, namely, each piece of information serves as the basis for another. The journey in the conventional world of learning is one leading from ignorance to enlightenment; a journey from not knowing to knowing. A course one takes in order to please the authorities.

A   **B**   **C**   **D**   **E**

Not Knowing   **to**   **Knowing**
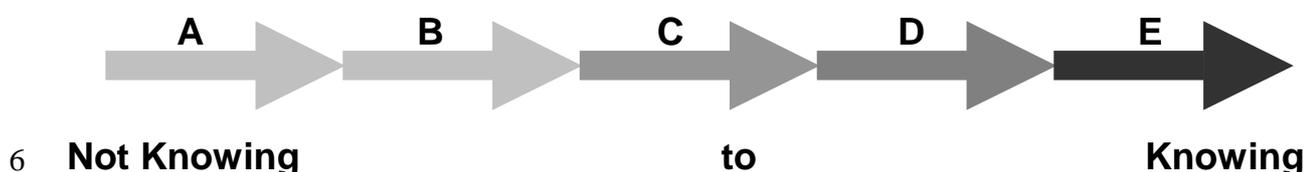
On the journey that takes place within the square students learn that:

1.   There is "correct" knowledge that is in the hands of the authorities.

2.   their personal quest is of no significance because it is not relevant to learning.

3.   their personal stand is not relevant and the correct knowledge that was discovered by very unique individuals lies in the hands of the right people.

4.   Any discovery that does not reconcile with "correct knowledge" is a mistake.

5.   One is expected to avoid making mistakes. Making mistakes takes off points from the learner's final score.

6.   It is highly important to prove that one has the right answer.

Not Knowing   **to**   **Knowing**
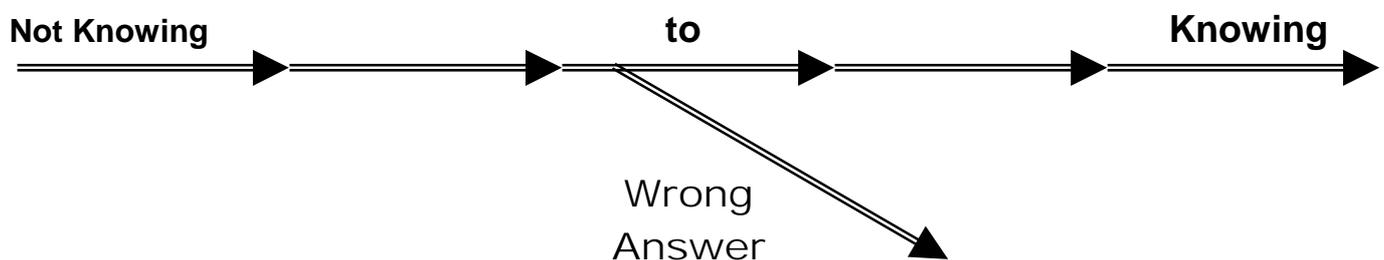
Wrong Answer

But when learners hear other answers that contradict their linear knowledge, the "wrong answer" light is turned on in their mind and they may even conclude that not only is the person's answer not relevant but so is the person himself.

I once came across students in our school who told me in a nasty tone: "We met conservative Jewish kids and you won't believe how stupid they are. They really believe God created the

world…" I asked them how **they** thought the world was created and they gave me a surprised look and said, "Come on Yakov, you know how. Every child has heard of the big bang!

"So, I said, "what's the difference between these conservative children and you? Like them you know how the world was created, and like them you know that any other answer is wrong and might even be dangerous".

You see, life, to most people in western society, resembles ***walking on a rope stretched over the abyss***. Being able to walk the rope from beginning to end means great success, and so people focus mainly on the danger of falling into the abyss.

The rope of our culture begins on the day of our birth and some say that even earlier, and this rope has many stations along the way. Reading and writing in first grade, for example, Matriculation exams between the age of 16-18, university when you are about 20, marriage, children, professional success, family and so on.

I do not underestimate those stations. I've visited some in the past, I am staying in some at present, and I intend to visit others in the future. But I call upon people to open their eyes and see that there is no abyss under the rope! And I would add -on and say that, actually, there is no rope!

For those who do wish to walk the imaginary rope I have some important information: First, some Technical details:

1.   Because it is very crowded on the rope, many unnecessary falling disasters happen.

2.   The stations of the rope are designed in a way that will not allow everyone to pass through. These traffic jams lead to the fall of almost everyone at one stage or another.

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3.   Professional frighteners are spread along the rope and remind everyone

of the danger of falling into the abyss.

And here are some reminders and recommendations for you:

1. There is plenty of space for everyone outside the rope.

2. We can always find or create interesting stations that will allow us to experience

fulfillment and success.

3.   To reach those stations we need the courage to search beyond the rope.

So now that we see what happens in the "square" let's look **at Pluralistic Learning, or in other words, learning in the area of "time wasting".**

But first, I have some questions:

How did we get to planet Earth? What happens after we die? Does God exist? I have a

clear answer to these questions but before I tell you, you must promise to keep it a secret**: I

do NOT know** the answers to these questions but I am sure that I *don't know it!*

And because these questions bother me I discuss them with many people who have not yet

convinced me that they know any better. Most of them, however, confuse belief and thoughts

with knowledge.

Of course I have many beliefs and ideas about life but it would be arrogant of me to think that

they are the absolute truth.

In their book The Unfinished Revolution, John Habbot and Terry Ran claim that 90% of what

we know today about brain research has been discovered in the last ten years. They assume,

therefore, that three years from now 90% of the knowledge in this field will be completely new.

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Believing that my thoughts are the ultimate truth is playing God, and I don't even know if there is any God.

This brings me to the concept of freedom – I cannot force my lack of knowledge on other people, and they can't force their lack of knowledge on me either.

You might claim that I encourage ignorance, for if we can never really know anything what's the point of learning?

I will try to clarify this idea. Say, Tom Hokings and I were invited to a quiz on astrophysics and the question posed was: How was planet Earth created? My answer would be that I don't know and that nobody else does. Hokings' answer would be similar to mine. The two of us would get all the points for this question.

So what use was in Hokings' extensive studies if any child can give this answer to almost any question? My answer is: Hokings lack of knowledge in Astrophysics is greater than mine simply because his extensive knowledge enables him to see how uncertain it is!

As many have said in the past, the more a person learns, the greater the knowledge he acquires, but also his or her awareness of his or her lack of knowledge. This situation is very common especially in processes of meaningful learning.

This spiral illustrates the connection between knowing and not knowing: At the beginning there is limited knowledge and so limited lack of knowledge.

not knowing   **knowing**
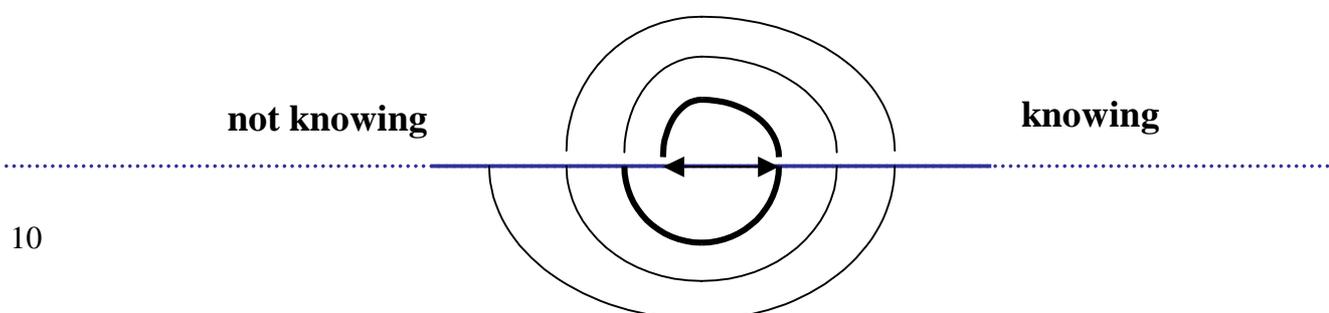
Later on, the greater the knowledge acquired the greater the person's awareness of his lack of knowledge.
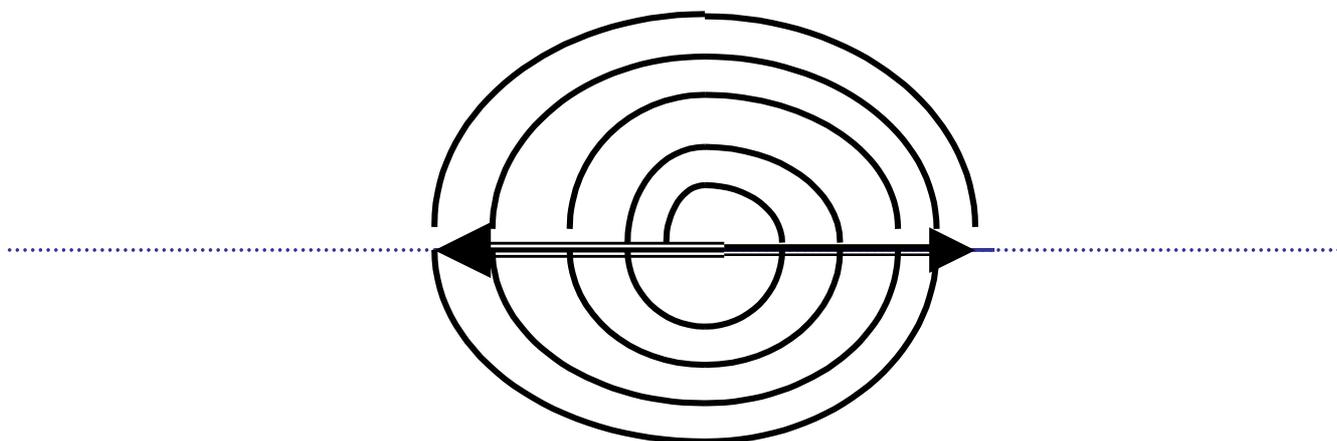
The spiral model shows that at every stage of a person's learning he or she are connected on one hand to their present ideas and on the other hand to questions and doubts that fuel their learning quest. Life that combines the world of knowing with the world of not knowing creates conditions that encourage growth:

Questions and doubts are not swept under the carpet because people are ashamed of them but are rather the engine that drives the learning quest in its highest levels. In this situation different opinions become learning opportunities rather than something frightening.

I will try to relate to the tension between knowing and not knowing from a different perspective. Let's make an experiment. Try to imagine a tree. See every detail of that tree. Do you have it?
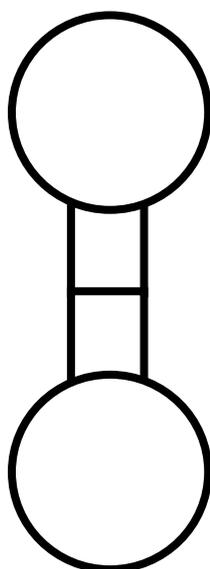
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..... I believe most of you have a trunk, branches and leaves. Something that looks

schematically like that:

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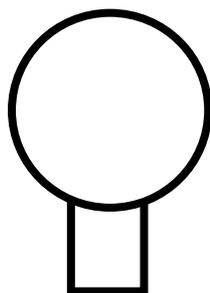
But this is only half a tree, the half that can be seen. The tree also has a root system. This tree is either cut or dead.

The following is a drawing of a live tree:

It represents the connection between knowing, which is the trunk and branches and not knowing, which is the root system. A rootless tree is a dead tree. Acquiring knowledge without connecting to the roots of not knowing (to questions, doubts and curiosity) is acquiring "dead knowledge".
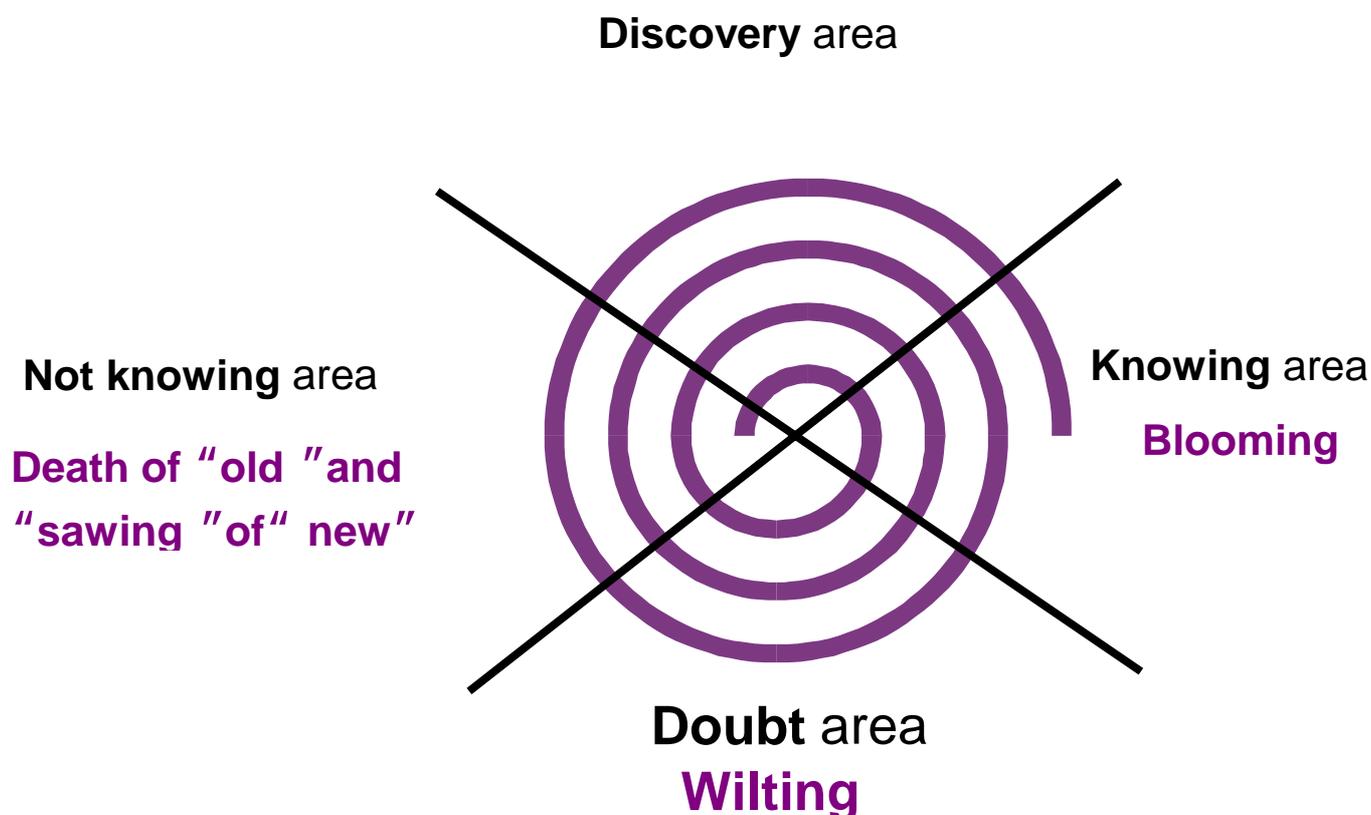
What happens when a child or an adult looks for a specific field of interest outside the square in the area of "time wasted"? Many times I have heard people claim that the life of children who study in a democratic school is simple and easy. Because these

children are not forced to study certain subjects, they choose what to study and how to study it and therefore their lives are much simpler compared with their peers in conventional schools. I believe the opposite is true. Searching for a field of interest is a very difficult task and the learning process that takes place outside the square requires great emotional strength.

For years I have tried to find out if there is a certain order in the process of learning in Democratic schools. Because of inherent differences between students, it is almost impossible, and only recently have I managed to come up with a model that illustrates what seems to be chaos in democratic schools. We don't all have to agree on this model but it can serve as a basis for an examination of the subject.

The spiral of the pluralistic learning

Discovery area

Not knowing area

Death of "old "and "sawing "of" new"

Knowing area

Blooming

Doubt area

Wilting

There are four Main Components to the spiral of pluralistic learning. We can begin our journey some place in the **area of "not knowing"**. Here I start to express interest in a certain subject and I move to a higher level of learning until I gain expertise in my field of study and I reach the area of "knowing". A person who reaches this stage feels that he has achieved something he had longed for over a long period of time. Not only has he "arrived" but he also feels "at home", a feeling that can be felt at the completion of a puzzle.

But the dangers arising at this stage are many- this stage may end up the process of learning rather than lead to the beginning of a new learning phase.

There are two main dangers: **The first** is "the trap of arrogance" which is rather common at this stage. Learners at this stage tend to avoid learning from others and rely only on their own experience, which in turn reduces the level of their learning.

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The second trap is "the safe island":

The learner has a respected position among his colleagues and receives many complements from his peers. His expertise enables him to get a good "pay" but he is no longer interested in his field. "The safe island" will nail the learner to his success, which is no longer his area of interest.

At this stage, learners feel that the perfect puzzle is beginning to break both in terms of their belief in their discoveries and their interest in the field. This stage requires that they give up justifying and defending the discoveries of the past and move to a situation of high attentiveness to various other approaches. They need to be brave enough to listen to the voices of doubts, to challenge the self- evident.

Learners enter a stage of deconstruction - the cracks of the puzzle widen up and the feeling of lack of certainty grows.

Learners who manage to overcome all the obstacles enter a learning process in **the "area of doubt".**

At first learners may feel bitterness, lack of trust and even anger. Gradually they realize it is the first step towards the beginning of a new path. At this stage, students in democratic schools report feelings of boredom, lack of interest in school's daily life and even depression. This stage resembles the final period of pregnancy that might sometimes be difficult to bear yet is indispensable.

There are two main traps at this stage:

1.	Avoidance- skipping the tensions and fears while giving up the "birth of self uniqueness".

2.	The chaos leads to "adoption" rather than "birth": Learners experience total helplessness and cannot find comfort in previous achievements. This helplessness does not

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allow the engine of creativity to start and the only life belt that can save him is the "adoption" of whatever can be adopted. This results in dependence upon external factors and in "locking up" the "unique self", namely learners growing disbelief in their abilities.

So now we get to **the area of discovery**, which is where sprouting and growth lead from the crisis of not knowing to the area of knowing. Now the pieces of the puzzle join to create a new puzzle. At this stage learners need no external support because their energies are at their best. He feels he is discovering new worlds almost every day…

We can actually see that in this process the spiral is growing, but what is the meaning of this growth? Or what is the aim of pluralistic learning?

First and foremost it is the empowerment of the individual- the student can study any subject. The more people are busy in subjects that interest them the greater their belief in themselves. Second, the growing capacity to respect oneself; others and humanity as a whole, and to see different opinions as opportunities for growth.

So here we must ask ourselves *how we know that pluralistic learning is indeed successful.*

Looking at students and teachers in the democratic school in Hadera one notices that a lot of group activities are organized in a spontaneous way for different purposes. A team of the video magazine, for example, the production of a play, organizing a summer camp and so on. Teachers get together and form teams for co-teaching certain courses, for instance. There are also mixed groups of teachers and students. The amount of spontaneous team activity in democratic schools is far bigger than what can be seen in any other educational system (including those that define "team work" as part of their agenda). We also realize that the

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longer the period one spends in the democratic school the greater is their involvement in spontaneous team - work.

When we have spontaneous team - work we know that pluralistic learning has succeeded. And why? When a person discovers his uniqueness it is actually only half of the way. Gradually he or she realizes that they live in a community of unique people. Because most of the challenges we are faced with are multi-dimensional it is easier to find people that will complement the missing parts and so create the "winning team" to accomplish whatever mission. Many students have pointed out that the most special thing about democratic schools is the rare collection of exceptional people who are talented in different areas. I believe the same is true for students who spend their time in conventional schools, only there they can not see each other due to the crowdedness of the square, and the intensive occupation in square activity trying to make the most of their time.

But do we want to keep it that way? Do we want only a small minority to enjoy the benefits of democratic education? Do we want this gap to grow even further?

Ecologists use the term "sustainability" to relate to the influence of our actions today on the future of this planet. I believe that, in the field of education, pluralistic learning complements the idea of sustainability. It is the idea of how our educational system guarantees the future existence of mankind.

September 11th opened the eyes of many to the threats that endanger our very existence. People have always fought each other using the most powerful weaponry they had. Assuming that our advanced technology will "improve" even further we realize that very soon it will be possible for almost any person to destroy the whole world. Some claim that this is already possible and others argue that it will still take 100 years or so. One way or another one thing is obvious: we are speedily running out of time!

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The important question today is how do we make sure mankind does not destroy himself?

I come from the Middle East, a region that systematically destroys itself and whose impact on the future of man is enormous. Many think that the Middle East conflict is between Israelis and Palestinians but I disagree. I argue that it is a clash between two points of view: between those who believe that human conflicts are an opportunity to deal with different points of view. That when resolved with tools of dialogue and peace will provide ample opportunities to grow. And other people who believe that conflicts serve as an opportunity to prove to the world that their way is "the only way" and that of course might makes right. These two categories cross borders and peoples and this is why you can find Arab and Jewish members in the peace camp and Arabs and Jews who believe in solving conflict by force in the other camp.

Conflicts between individuals, societies, countries, peoples and cultures are here to stay. But what is the meaning of conflicts to us as humans and how do we resolve them?

Pluralistic learning holds one of the keys to the future of mankind. Going back to ecology for a second, I'm sure we are all familiar with groups of people fighting for the protection of species of animals and plants that are about to disappear from the face of this planet thinking that these may hold the future solution to various problems. On the other hand, so many people are killed every day while trying to resolve human conflicts by force.

Pluralistic learning is an excellent vaccine that will stop this destruction.

A person who is raised on the concepts of pluralistic learning truly understands he is a unique human being who has a special contribution to make. He understands that like those rare species we are struggling to protect, every person around him is as unique as himself even if their hidden potential has not yet manifested itself.

I believe that every person on the face of the earth is here for a reason, that we're all pieces of one gigantic puzzle of the secret of life. Losing one-piece distances us away from the understanding of this secret.

Seeing different people, different societies, and different points of view as a source of growth will serve as the human vaccine that will guarantee the future of mankind.

I believe this is the golden hour of Democratic Education. I think the world is ready for us. We all work in our small communities to promote the ideas of Democratic Education but we must switch to the international channel now if we want to affect a real powerful change. IDEC has a central role in developing creative enterprises in the international sphere.

Just imagine what will happen if only 1 percent of the people in this world accept our philosophy, think about the transformation that will take place.

Together we can make it!!!

I want to wish us all a successful conference, and good night!

Mr. Yaacov Hecht

The founder of Hadera Democratic School in Israel - 1987.

The head of the school during the years 87 - 97.

Enterprise of the first IDEC international convention - 1992.

The founder and the head of The Institute For Democratic Education, 1995 - 2002.

The institute activities:

1. Establishment greenhouse to development of entrepreneur in the area of democratic education.

2. Support establishments of 22 Israeli Democratic Schools in which over 4000 students are educated. Build a program for democratization of more than 100 regular public schools.

3. Operator of programs for 4 cities - "The city as a Democratic Learning system".

4. Establisher and operator of an Academic Department of Democratic education located in "Hakibbutzim College" in Tel-Aviv.

5. The operator of one of the main programs for education for peace in Israel "Forum hawadi".