

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS REGARDING THE PROJECTS

Subject Matter and Duration

Twelve projects were related to the subject's full-time work. Of these, five involved learning some important aspect of a *new* job. One of these five subjects learned the practical aspects of operating a school library, another learned about procedures and tactics in division courts, and a third learned about printing and editorial work. The other two were both beginning careers as social workers; one learned about psychoanalytic theory and the other about child psychiatry.

Three of the job-related projects arose because of a desire to pass a test or examination. One of these was a professional examination dealing with law as it applies to financial institutions, another was a civil service upgrading examination dealing with local social welfare acts and procedures, and the third was an automobile driving test that was taken because a driver's licence was required by a new job. Three other projects involved learning something in order to carry out a specific assignment at work: one lawyer learned about airplane crash law in order to deal with a new legal case; one man produced a radio program and discussion pamphlet dealing with health services in Canada; and the third man designed a new type of tape recorder for measuring certain factors in an antisubmarine projectile when it is blasted off.

The other two job-related projects began after the subject had gradually become aware of a major problem on the job. One man learned about possible solutions for dealing in the schools with culturally disadvantaged adolescents. The other person learned about the organization and family patterns of the Indian tribe with which she was working.

Four men gained certain knowledge and skills in order to save money by doing something for themselves. One of these men learned how to wire his basement, another learned how to landscape his new suburban home, and a third learned how to pack and move his furniture to another city without hiring movers. The fourth man learned to operate several data-processing machines so that he would not have to pay an operator. In these four self-teaching projects it was difficult to distinguish "getting the job done" and learning how to do it. Each of these men found that learning and action were intertwined: he learned in order to decide what step to take next (or how to take it), took that step, and then began learning about the following step.

Three women and two men learned about caring for a first baby. In addition to learning how to care for the physical health of infants, these young parents also mentioned learning about the psychological and emotional development of children and about suitable toys.

Nine other self-teachers tried to improve their effectiveness in something that was not related to a full-time career outside the home. One of these was faced with teaching adults for the first time, another with being a committee chairman for the first time, and two with the desire to invest some recently acquired

money intelligently in the stock market. One woman increased her reading speed. One man learned about ham radio equipment in order to make a wise purchase, and another learned how to operate a small business as a hobby. Two women improved their cooking skills and learned new recipes, one because she was moving from her parents' home to an apartment.

Three subjects learned about a certain area of knowledge primarily for the sake of the knowledge itself rather than for any immediate or practical reason. Two of these people learned about certain African countries and the other learned about some college-level economics. Four subjects learned a new sport or game (golf, tennis, skiing, bridge) and two learned a new musical instrument (guitar, recorder); these six people learned primarily for the sake of mastering a new skill which would provide pleasure in both the present and the future.

The length of time from the beginning of each project until the end (or until the interview if the project was still continuing) ranged from two weeks to three years. The median was 6 months.

Frequency of Self-teaching

Apart from choosing college graduates, almost no attempt was made to select interviewees who were especially likely to have engaged in self-teaching during the previous year. Of all the adults with whom an interview was begun, however, 95% had in fact conducted at least one self-teaching project lasting at least six hours during the previous year. Interviews were successfully completed with forty of these adults.

Two subjects had engaged in an acceptable (but very large) project, but were not interviewed successfully. Each of these two men was very talkative during the interview and did not permit the interviewer to structure the discussion very much. Consequently, the interviewer did not attempt to introduce the questionnaires into the conversation, and no data from these two subjects have been included in the study.

Of the forty-four subjects with whom an interview was started, only two could not recall teaching themselves during the previous year. Both of these subjects were men in middle-level executive positions. One of these men was very talkative and rambling, and probably did not grasp the interviewer's purpose and instructions. The other man could think of only one example of his learning, and that example did not involve learning established knowledge. He had merely done a certain part of his job, and had learned by experience (or casual "trial and error") how to do it more successfully.

In summary, forty-two of the forty-four adults with whom an interview was begun had conducted at least one or two self-teaching projects during the previous year. Data were obtained from only forty adults, however, because interviews with two of the forty-two adults were not completed successfully.

The Self-teacher's Perception of His Own Learning

Despite this high incidence of self-teaching, a very large number of the subjects, when told that the interviewer was interested in how adults learn, immediately responded that recently they had not learned very much. Frequently a

self-deprecating statement accompanied the response. After the interviewer explained that any subject matter could be included (and after he encouraged, waited or probed), each of the forty subjects did recall one or several self-teaching projects. Even then, however, several subjects made deprecatory statements about the particular project chosen for the interview; they said, for example, that they "really didn't learn much" or "really didn't become very good at it." It seemed to the interviewer that some subjects compared the amount learned during their recent project to some vague but very high standard, or to what was learned during an undergraduate course.

A large number of subjects also said that their method or procedure for learning was different from the usual or ideal pattern. A few subjects pointed out that their self-teaching differed from their method of study as an undergraduate; most subjects, however, could not define the usual or ideal pattern.

The writer was surprised that so many college graduates felt strongly (and with concern) that their current learning was somehow inferior in amount, quality, and method to the learning of most adults and to their own learning while a full-time student. As most interviews progressed it became evident that the subject had greatly underestimated his own learning. In almost every interview, the amount learned, the amount of time spent, the variety of methods, and the number of assistants turned out to be much greater than had been apparent near the beginning of the interview.

Comparison with a National Survey

The findings noted so far in this chapter may illuminate certain findings in the Johnstone and Rivera study, conducted in the United States in 1962. This study measured the number of individuals who, during a 12-month period, had learned "some new subject or skill by means of independent study strictly on his or her own."¹ Probably this type of measure had never before been extracted from a national sample of the American population. Even in this pioneering survey, it was from the beginning regarded as a residual category of educational activity.² No doubt the inclusion of a question about self-teaching both reflected and encouraged the trend to study *all* an adult's learning, not merely attendance at educational programs provided by institutions or private instructors.

The survey found that the phenomenon of self-education or independent study is common among adults. Almost 8% of the sample (this percentage represents almost nine million adults in the total United States population) reported carrying on at least one major self-education project during the year.³

Of all adults who reported at least one major educational activity during the year, 25% reported only self-education projects, and an additional 13% reported

¹Johnstone and Rivera, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²*Ibid.*, p. 37.

³*Ibid.*, p. 34.

at least one self-education project plus at least one course. The remainder, 62% reported only instruction by others.¹

The interview question on which these statistics were based was worded as follows: "During the past twelve months, has any adult living here been engaged in learning some new subject or skill by means of independent study strictly on his or her own? How about yourself? How about _____?"² The interviewers were not instructed to ask any additional questions before accepting and recording a response of "yes" or "no." No attempt was made to apply, or to explain to the interviewee, any criteria for deciding whether a particular example of learning should be included or not.³

The incidence of self-teaching reported in this survey might well have been greater if the interviewers had explained the question, encouraged the respondent to consider various possible examples of his self-teaching, and probed into the meaning of his responses instead of merely asking the one blunt question. Indeed, an interesting but probably not especially useful piece of research would be to ask this question bluntly, then explain and probe in order to test the accuracy of the initial response: how many interviewees would change their response after they understood the question better or considered it more carefully?

Although a larger incidence of self-instruction among adults might have been found with different questions or a different technique, the report expressed surprise with what the study did find. The report stated that the incidence was "much greater than we had anticipated" and suggested that "the category may well represent the most overlooked avenue of activity in the whole field of adult education."⁴

Two findings in the present study of self-teaching suggest that perhaps the Johnstone self-education figure is a gross underestimate. First, the interviewer found that a fairly large amount of encouragement, probing, or waiting was necessary before most adults could identify one self-teaching project. It seemed difficult to explain the phenomenon to the adult, and he in turn did not easily and quickly recall his own projects (as he might have recalled the courses or conferences he had recently attended because these are probably more clearly defined in his mind). Indeed, a large proportion of interviewees who did eventually recall one or more projects responded to the initial question with a negative or self-deprecating statement.

The other finding was that 95% of all the adults with whom an interview was begun had conducted at least one self-teaching project during the previous year. Although the subjects were not chosen by some highly rigorous procedure to be a representative sample of all college graduates living in Metropolitan Toronto, they did in fact seem to be fairly typical graduates.

¹Based on *ibid.*, p. 38.

²*Ibid.*, p. 30.

³Interview with John W. C. Johnstone, August 17, 1964.

⁴Johnstone and Rivera, *op. cit.*, p. 37.