SELFDESIGN: AN INQUIRY INTO AUTHENTIC LEARNING AND CO-INSPIRATION

by

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Abstract

This thesis is the story of an educator and the unfolding narrative of SelfDesign, a way of thinking about learning and education. It documents and examines the development of SelfDesign as an emerging learning process and outlines its integral principles. I started SelfDesign in 1983 responding to the request of my five-year-old daughter, who, after two weeks in kindergarten, wanted to quit school so that she could learn the things she wanted to learn. Modeled on my insights of my daughter learning how to speak naturally, I designed an integral learning program based on choice, conversation, mutual respect, curiosity, discovery and enthusiasm.

Evolving beyond current assumptions about learning as an artifact of instruction, SelfDesign redefines learning as an ontological process of maturation and development, emerging through conversations and relationships. Based on twenty-five years of observing children learning in freedom beyond the paradigm of schooling, I realized that learning is an epistemological process integral to living and unfolding human potential as a learning organism. SelfDesign encourages introspective awareness and provides learners with methodologies, maps and models for designing their learning process. Every learner in SelfDesign creates an individual curriculum ensuring their right to design their own learning, and their learning arises from an innate sense of integrity. The program was called Wondertree (1983-2009 with a dozen young learners), then Virtual High (1993-1997 with 35 teenagers), and is now SelfDesign Learning Community (2002 - present with 1400 learners in a province-wide online program).

This thesis, relying on data from the interviews of 27 randomly selected SelfDesign graduates (average age 27.5), identifies themes that SelfDesign encourages: freedom, self-responsibility, learning how to learn, becoming known and seen as an integral individual, feeling empowered as the author and authority of one’s life, experiencing the synergistic effect of respect and love in a community, discovering the praxis of learning as living in co-inspiration, and discovering one’s purpose. The graduates share a sense that SelfDesigning is a transformational experience and an empowering process that has inspired each of them to become enthusiastic, authentic lifelong learners.
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In a Learner’s Words

“... I guess what I’m imagining is [laughs] is somebody who has seen, who has “peeked behind the curtain” so to say, would always have a different sort of perspective. And so for me, nothing was more important for me about my experience there than just that. Just the psychological change of “wait a minute, things don’t have to be this way that I was always told they were.” What could compare to that? What could be more significant? I mean it could be for somebody else, but for me that’s what I’ve always thought has been the most important thing, from the very start. Right from day one really, right from when we looked at each other, me and my friend Jesse just sort of started looking at each other like “what the heck, what’s going on, how could we be here, how could this be happening?” [laughs] . . . I think that probably was the only time that that kind of experience could have happened and have such an impact on me. I think that had I been younger, I would have thought, that’s just how things are. Like when you’re a child, whatever happens, is just the way the world is; you don’t question it. And maybe being an adult, maybe I would have been too settled in my ways or something, I wouldn’t have been able to really feel what was going on. Much like a lot of the adults who came through and who actually didn’t get it, you know who didn’t believe it, or they saw what we were doing and put it in their own pre-existing frame. But I think being a teenager where I was, it was sort of like, just at the moment when things could have calcified in a way, [laughs] this thing comes along and kind of shatters everything. ...” (Graduate of SelfDesign)
Introduction

“The human mind is the design that designs itself…”
David Perkins Ph.D.
Project Zero, Harvard University
(Rico, 2000, p. ix)

“The human being is the design that designs itself…”
Brent Cameron
SelfDesign

My daughter, by simply being, convinced me that we are whole integral human beings, and nothing less in any way. I saw her “beingness” as an intimate and integral relationship of her mind-body and her recursive connection with the world. My observations of her enthusiastic and joyous learning as a small child transformed my understanding about learning and what it is to be human. With these insights, coupled with my own rebellious history in education, I naively and innocently began creating a new paradigm for learning. Starting with my daughter in 1983, I worked to create a new model for learning based on natural learning. The program was named SelfDesign in 2002 and now, in 2009, it involves a hundred educators and works with approximately 1400 learners and their families throughout the province of BC. What started with a father’s love for his daughter has become my life’s
work and established my reputation as a “radical educator.” The work of SelfDesign has been experiential and inquiry based, rather than primarily theoretical or academic. The work is driven by my passion to understand the epistemology of how human beings learn. My observations and reflections on self-motivated learning have allowed me to inquire into the nature of learning as an intrinsic activity through the exploration of the new territory of subjective experience. New territory because our scientific culture looks outwards and explores objective reality, while this work explores the inner realms of images, thoughts and feelings.

SelfDesign is an innovation, based on the assumption that learning is able to exist on its own, independent of teaching. The purpose of this study is: to tell my story as an educator of the unfolding narrative of SelfDesign - including its iterations as Wondertree and Virtual High, and now the SelfDesign Learning Community; and to explore through interviews, the lifelong influence of SelfDesign on a group of graduates based on their experiences. Using the approach of appreciative inquiry the interviews were conducted using open ended questions that allowed the learners to freely express their own experiences and insights in this longitudinal study. The interview data were then organized in emerging categories following the practice of grounded theory. This thesis is an opportunity to assess whether my intentions in creating this innovative learning program actually achieved its long term results as reported freely by a diverse group of graduates. Although there were a few interesting interpretations of the program based on retrospection, the interviews generally confirmed that the various SelfDesign programs have had a transformational and positive influence on each learner.

This thesis is not a comparison to, or criticism of, public education, or a recommendation for change. What I set out to do over two decades ago was to meet the learning needs and interests of my own daughter in an optimum way, in a way that respected her natural unfolding development and unique interests as a legitimate human being. What the organization of SelfDesign focuses on is the same purpose of creating a meaningful context for self-initiated, self-responsible, self-designed learning, the fundamental right of
each individual. What SelfDesign presents is a choice, a unique model significantly different than most other educational systems today.

   There are two parallel tracks to the development and unfolding of SelfDesign. One track is its praxis, the evolving insights into the intuitive based nature of learning as demonstrated by the learners. The second track is the unfolding of both the models and the integral principles that are derived from the work of leading edge thinkers in human development who, as my mentors, have become fundamental to my understanding and ability to explain the nature of SelfDesign as praxis. I begin with my own story . . .
Chapter 1: Becoming a Radical Educator

My Personal Story - The Evolving of a Radical Educator

I had good parents by the social standards of the 1950s. My father was a principal of a local high school and my mother was a housewife and ex-nurse. We lived in a middle-class house in the security of modern thinking, arising from post-war urban lifestyles. There was always enough food and my parent’s focus was on material comfort. However, as an adult, I didn’t want to have any children, because I didn’t want anyone to go through the struggle that I had gone through as a child. I felt abandoned by my parents - emotionally abandoned. I felt isolated by the fact that during my entire childhood few, if any, adults had meaningful conversations with me. Neither of my parents nor any of my teachers ever interacted with me on a meaningful and engaging level. I was rarely asked how I was doing or what I cared about at home or at school. Because all those around me ignored my feelings, I slowly learned to abandon any feelings within me. I gradually grew numb, day-by-day and year-by-year. I learned that life was about doing what you are supposed to do and not at all about doing what you wanted to do. I learned that pleasure was something you had to sneak. The only glimmer of excitement came in sports and in scouts. My scoutmaster was my first mentor, someone who gave me a glimmer of an idea that life is an adventure and that hands-on learning can be fun. To this day, I am not sure how I escaped, or how or why as a young man that I got to peek behind the curtain of illusion. However, once I had, I was set free and with a newly revived passion for life, I became an enthusiast forever with my rediscovered child world-view.

I think what gave me the impetus to rebel was a double bind. My father was the absolute authority and I was wrong if I did not do things or think things exactly as he saw them. My father didn’t make me feel good about myself by the way he treated me with criticism and mistrust. However, in my core, I had a faint but innate sense of self-worth. My respect for him diminished year by year for not noticing my integrity. Although I had to learn to love myself later in life, I realized that to gain his acceptance I would have to give up on myself. As a teenager, I had to make a decision, agree with him and go against what I cared
about, or fight him and stand up for what I valued in life. It has been the theme of many books and movies, and it was the theme of my life. I chose to fight and to not succumb to his will. The result was a lifelong unresolved conflict with him, yet the beginnings of an opportunity for me to live beyond the limitations of authority and the norm.

The rebellious aspect in me grew and I began to question all authority. I remember during my fifth year of university, I realized that I had never failed a course and that I took courses out of obligation and finished them out of intimidation. I realized that my education did not have anything to do with a desire to learn or know. I decided that I would intentionally fail one course and chose one that was being taught by a particular professor who most students disliked. I carefully made sure that I would get an “F” and inadvertently discovered that “F” no longer stood for failure, it stood for freedom. It was a significant part of my journey home to integration and coherence within myself. A journey that took me a full ten years, and one that allowed me to respond entirely differently to my own daughter when she was born about ten years later. This rejection of authority pushed me toward innovation. Isaacson (2007) tells a similar story of how rebellion played a role in Einstein’s life as a “distracted” school kid.

His slow development was combined with a cheeky rebelliousness toward authority, which led one schoolmaster to send him packing and another to declare that he would never amount to much. These traits made Albert Einstein the patron saint of distracted schoolkids everywhere. But they also helped make him, or so he later surmised, the most creative scientific genius of modern times. His cocky contempt for authority led him to question received wisdom in ways that well-trained acolytes in the academy never contemplated. And as for his slow verbal development, he thought that it allowed him to observe with wonder the everyday phenomena that others took for granted. Instead of puzzling over mysterious things, he puzzled over the commonplace. (p. 3 - 4)
My ten-year journey of rediscovery included the reading of several books that radically changed my view on education. One of the first was Summerhill by A.S. Neil (1960). I realized that my school experience was not reality, but that it was just a monopolistic bias of educators working for a government establishment. I also read a book by John Holt, How Children Learn (1967) and realized that there could be a whole different way of designing an educational experience. Then I came across Alan Watts’ book with the following succinct title, The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who you Are (1972), and I realized that there was a way around the curtain, the veil of common understanding that was obscuring my perception. A series of a dozen more transformational experiences contributed to this period of my life, which allowed me to explore beyond the norms. For example, I had the opportunity to participate in three encounter groups, one at the University of Calgary, one at the University of British Columbia and one in California at the Esalen Institute. These three experiences turned me upside down and inside out and gave me a glimpse behind the curtain of my conscious mind into an integrated and holistic sense of self.

On the verge of my 62nd birthday, I can say that life is a chain of significant events, a few of them planned and intentional, yet many of them circumstantial. The links to my lifelong career as a radical educator came from a blending of two of the several joyful aspects of my youth. I was a boy scout and an athlete. The boy scout part connected me with nature, and as an athlete, I was totally focused on the challenge of playing the game well. One day my high school athletic coach asked me if I wanted to be a counselor at a camp for under-privileged children. After two summers working as a camp counselor, I got a job working with the City of Calgary recreation department, again as a youth leader at the local day camp. The other aspect that drew me into the people business came as a result of my involvement in Student Union activities at the University of Calgary where my involvement in the encounter group’s activities led me to a group of people starting a counseling centre. I got involved as a counselor at the Calgary Drug Centre. This opportunity to mix with people involved in questioning our society
and my experience of working in jails, psychiatric wards, and on the streets slowly shifted my academic interests from physics and math to sociology.

When I graduated with a degree in Sociology and I had “seen behind the curtain” several times in my life, I decided that I wanted to pursue a degree in education, specifically to become a change agent in the transformation of the education system. Upon graduating I worked in two public schools and was politely asked to move on by each principal as they and my teacher colleagues did not appreciate a rebellious free-thinker in the school. I worked in Calgary’s first “free” school in the early 1970’s that was run by a group of parents and educational professors and had an opportunity to actually try out the ideas of Neill and Holt in a different educational model.

I then moved out to British Columbia and the East Kootenays where I taught for two years in a local public school. I worked with a group of teenagers who had been unsuccessful in school and then, for one year, I took over the science program for grades 5 through 9. It was after this time that I had the opportunity to live in the forest in a teepee for one whole year and to participate in numerous sweat lodge ceremonies with a group of Native American friends. I then moved to Creston, B.C. where I worked in a public alternative school as a counselor. However, after these reasonably successful years in education, I realized that I could not be a radical and survive in public education because the system was too entrenched and I had no mandate to be an agent of change. I felt as though I was working against everyone in the system. Though the children were delighted with my open and unorthodox educational style, I disrupted more than transformed the system.

I decided that the best place for my independent and entrepreneurial spirit was in business for myself and I started out as a house builder. During this time, I began an intimate relationship with a woman that eventually resulted in a pregnancy. My partner and I decided to open a health food store and restaurant to support our new family. The opportunity to discover the dynamics in people’s health and to work with people who were motivated towards personal well-being gave me a whole new insight into how important self-motivation and open
relationships are. To open a business and then just wait until someone came in and asked for help was a liberating experience for me. It was an experience fundamentally different from my experience in education as either a student or an educator. It was truly transformational. I had discovered my own freedom and sense of self-determination and realized, that having done so, I had to work in a job whereby everyone else was also able to make choices about their lives for themselves. In deepening my understanding of business processes, I then engaged for several years founding and managing a reforestation supply business that brought forward my environmental understanding along with my understanding of health and wellness. All this laid the ground for the business aspects and ethical considerations that contributed to the next and my most life-transforming experience.

What started in 1983, quite naively and innocently as a father’s effort to advocate for and support the rights of his own daughter to design the course of her life in freedom and love, has become a significant educational paradigm. In 25 years, SelfDesign has grown from one child to approximately 1400 learners and a learning community of approximately 5000 individuals. Over the years we have received significant media attention and won several national, international, regional and local awards for our work.¹ Since 2006, there is growing interest from people around the world in response to the publication of SelfDesign: Nurturing Genius Through Natural Learning, a book I wrote with my partner River (Barbara) Meyer. I find the work more challenging and fascinating each year as it grows and attracts individuals and families who are eager to pioneer this new model for learning.


Wondertree started one September day in 1983 and gradually grew to six children in that first year with a program that operated out of the basement of our rented house. Housed in numerous locations, from house basements to church basements, Wondertree was essentially a group of young learners (elementary school age) who, over 8 years, met four days a week in Vancouver. Throughout this time frame, I worked with 10 to 12 learners on
average, many of whom stayed with me for 3 to 8 years. The idea of grades, testing and passing a year’s work was left behind with factory model assembly-line schooling. In our SelfDesign programs, children learned at their own pace and collaborated with other learners on projects that were often ongoing and developmental over many years. We were an ungraded, no curriculum, and unfunded experiment in learning; instead, the children’s curiosity influenced the emerging curriculum. I was their advocate for freedom and encouraged and guided their conversations into marvelous explorations of self and world. We pooled our funding from parent tuition and the children interviewed and hired many mentors to work with based on their common interests. Learning was an adventure; every day was filled with cooperation, laughter and excitement.

Wondertree Learning Centre still has a physical space in Vancouver and has been run by numerous understudy learning consultants since I left to start the Virtual High program in 1993. Wondertree was a prototype and a research centre that allowed me to discover and investigate the methodologies emerging from natural learning. Just as the Wright brothers’ plane proved the principles of flight, Wondertree, I believe, has proved the principles of natural learning. Their plane at Kitty Hawk, NC was a prototype that had to be transformed in order to
carry passengers and make significant contributions to our society. In the same way, the Wondertree Learning Centres, and there have been numerous attempts to start other centres around the country, have all struggled both financially and in drawing enough learners. It turns out that the Wondertree model was too small to be sustainable, an error on the opposite spectrum to the errors of public education with schools too big and impersonal as factory-like institutions. The Wondertree methodology, gradually developed by me over the years working with the children, was expanded in Virtual High and is now adapted to the online program we have come to call SelfDesign. The Wondertree Learning Centre gave up its school number as registered with the Independent Schools Act after 25 years, and it has now become part of our very successful and sustainable online province-wide learning community. In 2009 we have supported the development of seven learning centres or circles in various communities around the province of B.C.

Virtual High (1993 - 1997)

I stopped working directly with learners in the Wondertree program for two years between 1991 and 1993. I finished a software project that the Wondertree learners had developed for B.C. Hydro and I began planning for the creation of a high school with Michael Maser. I took a trip to Bali because a number of my mentors informed me that the Balinese are one of the most socially advanced cultures. One of the things that I wanted to experience was a culture that lived in synergy, a quality that I had first read about in the work of Ruth Benedict and that I had also experienced in Wondertree. My experience in Bali confirmed my insights into social synergy and I carefully worked with Michael to establish the high school experiment as a synergistic learning community.

In the spring of 1993 we advertised our idea for a high school to the city of Vancouver. We held an event at the Science World theatre and drew over 300 people. We received a $96,000 grant from the Vancouver Foundation and were offered a mansion to lease in Vancouver. By September 1993 we opened our doors with about 35 teenagers eager to do something entirely different than school. Most of the learners we enrolled in the program were dropouts, youth
largely bored with school. They did not want anything to do with school so we did not apply to
the Ministry for school status and did not plan to offer any prescribed courses. I introduced the
idea of consensus to the group and over the next year or so we discovered what it meant and
how to use it to create a synergistic community. Virtual High, operated over a period of 4 years,
meeting in a physical space in Vancouver.

The Virtual High experiment was the highlight of both Michael's and my educational
careers. Because our landlord decided to sell our building, coupled with the Ministry pulling
$55,000 of our already spent funding on a debatable ruling, we were unable to sustain the
experiment into its fifth year and we closed our doors. I remained as the principal of the ongoing
Wondertree Learning Centre with its small group of learners. I focused on writing a book about
my experiences in Wondertree and Virtual High and began to articulate the methodology that
seemed to have transformed so many people’s lives. I continued to be involved as a mentor to
the learners, learning consultants and parents in the program. I did not work much with the
learners yet focused on family counseling and training the learning consultants in that important
part of the work.

Figure 3. A photo of the teen group and learning consultants at Virtual High in 1995-96

5
During the last year or so of Virtual High, I began searching for a term to describe the kind of learning that I was witnessing in our two programs. Our organization had just sponsored Humberto Maturana to come to Vancouver and give a workshop, and I was reading his work at the time. The source for the word “SelfDesign” is the word “autopoiesis”, coined by Maturana and Varela (1980) in their book, Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living. The field of cybernetics went through three stages over its many years of development. From its mechanistic origins as self-control systems, psychologists developed theories for human behavior as Cybernetics I. The ideas evolved to the development of the understanding of human activities as self-management events in Cybernetics II. Finally, in third order cybernetics, the development of the idea of biological systems engaging in creative and self-determining forms of learning and living brought forth the term “autopoiesis” or self-creativity. From “poiesis” I eventually chose the word design as an overall description of the creative process. In the development of the idea of autopoiesis, Maturana and Varela (1992) proposed that, “living beings are autonomous unities” (p. 47). They explain further,

what defines them [living systems] as unities is their autopoietic organization, and it is in this autopoietic organization that they become real and specify themselves at the same time. . . . Living beings have an organization . . . as a system. . . . such that their only product is themselves . . . The being and doing, of an autopoietic unity are inseparable. (p. 48-49)

For the next six or seven years, I wrote and thought about my experiences with these children and youth and about the amazing learning processes that were a unique consequence of the freedom and respect that the children felt in our programs. I realized that the word SelfDesign was the best name for the praxis of self-initiated learning that informs the learner about themselves and their experience of the world. I wanted to understand more about what I was trying to comprehend as natural, authentic and integral learning systems and enrolled in the Ph.D. program at UBC in 2002 after I met Karen Meyer at the cybernetics conference called “Remaining Human” at UBC in 2001.
SelfDesign Learning Community (2002 - present)

In the spring of 2002 I was offered the opportunity to participate in a pilot program funded by the Independent Schools that would offer our organization a chance to run an online version of our programs throughout all of B.C. The pilot allowed us to start with 100 learners and design an online program for home learning families. Based on the learning methodologies and community dynamics developed in Wondertree and Virtual High, I envisioned how we could extend these relationships into an online community. During that summer I invited Michael Maser and Kathleen Forsythe to join me and we hired ten other educators and a technology person to launch the online SelfDesign Learning Community. I decided to actually use the term SelfDesign in an attempt to move the consideration of learning as a dynamic that is not place-based in terms of school or home but place in terms of an individual and interpersonal conversational and neurological event. All of the other online learning programs I’ve seen use technology to extend the metaphor of the classroom out into the community. Courses are taught using the Internet and tests are given online. Since our program is not about instruction and course delivery we designed software to bring people together in open conversations to create emerging discussions and learning opportunities. We followed the Wondertree and Virtual High models, allowing curiosity to influence learning in a natural way, then encouraged the parents and older learners to document their learning in weekly online journals. This Observing for Learning process encourages observation, reflection, awareness and conversation about learning as a process. SelfDesign Learning Community, as an online program, developed over the past 7 years continues to grow based on the interest of learners in British Columbia and abroad. The SelfDesign online program began in 2002 with 100 learners, ranging from elementary to high school age, and has grown to about 1400 learners.
The SelfDesign Learning Community is funded as an independent school by the BC Ministry of Education. From that perspective it is a school and by law, our program must meet the Ministry Guidelines for funded programs. However, from the point of view of the learner, the program is not a school. We are serving the needs of children for whom schooling has been a negative or undesirable experience, so in order to offer something significantly different, we intentionally design the learning experience so that it looks, sounds and feels totally different than schooling. For example, we have not called our physical facilities, such as The Wondertree Centre, a school. It is a Learning Centre. We do not call the adults who work in the program teachers, we call them Learning Consultants. We do not have classes or grades, the program is ungraded. There is no set curriculum that students must take. Each child is on his or her own individualized curriculum, designed in collaboration with a learning consultant, the learner and his or her family and mentors. Each learner is the designer and evaluator, in consultation with the learning consultant, of all his or her learning experiences. In the long run, in the big picture, our learners, for the most part, achieve equal or better results when compared to learners who learn through instruction in public education. This is based on the FSA testing results conducted by the Ministry across the province and on the results that
our students achieve when they return to a graded academic program. When parents and youth decided that their best path to university would be to go back and finish high school, then we were all pleasantly surprised with the top marks that virtually every learner achieved in their courses. Consistently, gifted and learning challenged students with poor grades coming into our programs, all found that after several years with us discovering how to become self-responsible learners, that they got excellent grades going back to school.

Though SelfDesign has been operating in one form or another for twenty-five years, during this time we have not been able to offer graduation certificates to our learners. (This changed February 1, 2009 with the merger of the International School of the Kootenays and the SelfDesign Learning Community. SelfDesign now offers K to 12 education and a Dogwood Graduation Certificate.)

Using the random selection of 27 graduates of SelfDesign as a representative sample of the learners in our programs, I generated the following snapshot of our graduates. With no graduation program, 65% of SelfDesign learners chose not to graduate. However, of this group, 59% went on to college and university without a grade 12 graduation certificate. Considering all 27 learners interviewed for this thesis, a total of 73% of these learners have had some post secondary education in colleges or universities, with most of them achieving one degree and several of them two degrees. Some of our learners chose to take university courses instead of finishing their high school. It is possible for learners to take a few distance education classes online, and then use the results of these to negotiate into a full time course in university. For every learner who has been accepted into college or university without high school graduation there is an interesting story to tell.

All of our graduates of Virtual High and SelfDesign Learning Community that were interviewed for this thesis were effectively considered dropouts from the school system because Virtual High was not a school and until only recently were we able to work with high school age learners in SelfDesign. From Virtual High, 35% of the learners went back to high school and graduated, and they all went on to university. The fact that almost 6 out of 10 of
our learners went on to university without high school graduation is quite remarkable.

Furthermore, considering that 7 out of 10 of all the learners interviewed for this thesis went on to university or college, the 3 out of 10 who didn’t go to university are actively engaged in their chosen professions, with most of that group engaged in professions that are related to the computer industry.


A brief chronology of my work with children and youth is as follows.

1983 - 1991 - founded and worked as the Learning Consultant with 10 to 12 learners who stayed with me year after year through this period in the Wondertree Learning Center.

1993 - 1997 - founded and worked as a Learning Consultant with about 30 to 35 teen-agers in a program called Virtual High.

1998 - 2002 - focused on writing my book and building a house and acting as the principal of the original Wondertree Learning Center with two learning consultants and about 20 to 25 learners.

2002 - present - founded and worked as the principal with a group of colleagues on creating a province-wide online learning program for home learning families. The program is called SelfDesign Learning Community and in 2002 we began with 100 learners and now (2009) have about 1400 learners in a K to 12 program.

As my personal narrative in this chapter shows, the stifling of my own authority and inner world of thoughts and feelings, along with the extreme boredom I experienced at school, provided me with the impetus to rediscover my lost childhood freedom before I went to school. I remember as a young adult of 20 actually articulating this search, which began a ten-year journey of self-discovery.

My unique rediscovery of my childhood worldview allowed me to support my daughter’s early learning with a shared perspective. When she made her request not to have to attend public school, it was a reasonably simple blend of my own dislike of schooling with my
experience of alternatives to create a new model. With a background that included education, holistic health, business, along with interest and experience in a variety of therapies for personal healing, I embarked on the adventure of my lifetime creating what has come to be known as SelfDesign.
Chapter 2: The Emerging of Integral Principles

Negative Emotions are Internal Ecological Indicators for Change

It is a well-known fact that the leaders in technological innovation in North America are largely a group of high school and university dropouts, with Steve Jobs and Bill Gates the most notable. With this in mind, maybe many of the 11,000 students who do not graduate every year from B.C. schools are a hidden resource, if viewed from a new perspective. Innovation implies going beyond convention and thinking outside the norm. By staying in school, our innovative youth are habitually learning to conform in order to graduate. Isn’t it ironic that our bright and talented young people need to leave school to get an education that is tuned to the information age and the real life opportunities available today?

In contrast, I think a traditional assumption is that the majority of high school dropouts have poor grades and are not doing well academically. However, in a recent Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded national study of 15,000 school dropouts, it was documented that eighty-eight percent of the youth that are dropping out of school have good grades. The three major reasons why these academically successful students dropped out was because they were bored, they were no longer willing to acquiesce to authoritarianism, and they were tired of being bullied by other students (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Jr., & Burke Morison, 2006). These results certainly align with the reasons that our SelfDesign graduates chose to leave public education and join our programs as will be documented later in this thesis. At this point I would like to tell the background stories behind two of the young people surveyed in this research to set the stage for understanding how our program, as a complete rethinking of how we learn, offers learners an entirely different learning opportunity. SelfDesign is a significantly different methodology based on a set of fundamentals that challenge the beliefs held in our culture today about schooling as a norm for learning.

One day in the spring of 2002, a father phoned me requesting a meeting with him and his son. Several days later, the father introduced me to the depressed and frustrated young man who, at the time, was in Grade 8. He hated school and he was obviously a very bright,
passionate and delightful young man. More than anything in the world, he did not want to spend another day in school where he reported that he literally felt tortured. His only thought was to dropout, yet this terrified both him and his success-focused father. I encouraged him to use his joy and his passion as a guide for living his life. I hinted that a life isn’t worth living in misery and that each day he could be living from his enthusiasm for life itself. He had never before had anyone acknowledge his happiness as a primary importance for living, and he burst into tears. We discussed what he would be doing if he lived each day doing what he really wanted to do, and they went home to talk together as a family.

Shortly after our meeting, the young man left school and took some time off. I suggested that he do nothing until he was really ready to live and learn from a sense of curiosity and purpose. He came to meet me again about six months later. He said that he was very concerned about world peace and that he wanted to devote his life to helping people in various countries to solve their differences peacefully. I let him know that I would certainly support these desires and asked him if he would be interested in taking a university course. He reminded me that he had dropped out of Grade 8, and I stated that it didn’t matter at all. I asked him to focus on what he would like to learn about. We searched courses and course descriptions on the Internet and he chose an online course in Political Science. Borrowing his amazed father’s credit card, we signed him up right there in my office. A couple of month’s later, I got a phone call, and he told me how much he loved the course, that he got an A and that he wanted to take two more courses right away. By the end of what would have been Grade 9, he had 2 university courses completed. By the end of what would have been Grade 10, he had finished first year university online. Using these marks, he enthusiastically talked his way into a local college at 14. By the end of that next year, instead of completing his Grade 11 year, he now had 2 years of university credit. Instead of Grade 12 he had three years equivalent of university credit. He then decided that he needed some practical experience and got a job with the US Embassy in Vancouver at the age of 17. After a very successful year in business, he was accepted into 4th year at Simon Fraser University. During
2008, he was offered a part time job organizing conferences at the Wosk Center For Dialogue in Vancouver while finishing his degree. In the fall of 2009, he moved to the UK to attend university there on a scholarship.

He might be a high school dropout but he adamantly proclaims himself to be a SelfDesigner. SelfDesign enrolled him in our program for his Grade 9 year. It was during this year he transformed himself in our program from being a passive consumer of education to being an active discoverer and creator of his own learning path. He did not continue with our program after Grade 9 because, with the constraints of the new Graduation program, SelfDesign was not allowed to work with Grade 10, 11 or 12 students, unless we did what every other school is doing - teach the courses. I remained his advisor, supporter and friend throughout this time in my ongoing role as advocate for the learning rights of our children and youth.

As of 2009, SelfDesign is able to offer courses and a graduation certificate because of its merger with the International School of the Kootenays in Nelson. They developed courses and offer them in a way that is consistent with SelfDesign methodology. Learners are free to choose to courses and design their own program, and in doing so each of their courses is funded towards their graduation.

Another enthusiastic self-declared SelfDesigner is on the Ministry’s books as a dropout. Her father, a friend and business colleague of mine at the time, phoned me and asked me if I would go into his daughter’s high school and get her out of there. This was her first year in Grade 10 in a big high school and she was becoming lost and overwhelmed by the machinery and inhumanity of a huge school. Her sense of oppression led to confusion as she was being attracted to a rather unsavory group of people who were getting into some serious trouble under the very noses of their overwhelmed teachers. I met her at the door of the high school at her father’s request and we invested the day in conversations about the meaning and purpose of life. She realized that her outrageous behaviors were part of a legitimate search for life’s meaning and yet that she was getting lost in the sub-culture associated with
the process. We began a conversation that continued for several years as she elaborated on her deep search for meaning and understanding. She was not able to officially join our SelfDesign program as a Grade 10 student, again due to the fact we had been unwilling to support compulsory courses. One of my colleagues and I personally mentored her over the next several years and helped her SelfDesign her own learning program. She began deep research into herself and her community and traveled to India as part of her global search for answers. She remained out of school until she was eighteen and was fully practicing SelfDesign - free to learn in the world and to realize one’s full potential in harmony with others. She decided she wanted to go to university and engaged in discussions with a local college. They asked her to do her GED, which she studied for during the next three weeks. She got very high marks and they accepted her into their program. Her father phoned me this summer in tears of excitement, a few minutes after he got a phone call from his daughter. She had just informed him that she got straight A’s in first year university including an A in university math based on only finishing Grade 9 math. He was so thankful that I had helped her shift from being a victim to being a force to be reckoned with.

These are just two typical stories from hundreds that we could tell about children and youth who, for a wide variety of reasons, have realized that schooling is a detriment to their wellbeing. Our program, founded by the dropping out of my own daughter after two weeks of kindergarten, has now supported several thousand young people who refuse to ignore their own passion for learning what they want to learn. This is not meant to be a criticism of the education system and the many dedicated teachers and students who make it work. It is however an acknowledgement that schooling does not work for everyone, and that our children and youth need a real choice to learn in ways that are outside of the current paradigm of instruction and courses. Beyond the relatively small percentage of students who drop out of school physically, are the majority of students who drop out emotionally and remain in school largely unengaged in the process. Parents and learners who have joined our program over the years have consistently commented on how much fear they experience stepping away from
the norm, yet the vast majority of them are transformed to new levels of satisfaction and realization by doing so.

Emerging Understanding as Integral Principles for a New Ontology of Learning

Looking back over the past 25 years, I can now begin to examine and articulate the integral assumptions or fundamental principles that are a key to the praxis of SelfDesign. These principles emerged from the praxis of the work through my constant observation and engagement in the lives of children, youth and parents involved in the work. Self-observation and introspection played a significant role in developing self-awareness as an epistemological process inherent in authentic learning. SelfDesign is a subjective process that exists in human experience. It lives in the intra- and inter-personal spaces of conversation whereby our threads of understanding become our stories and our constructed sense of our selves.

Figure 5. The spring of 1984 with the first six learners who joined Wondertree

Integral Principle #0 - Awareness Arising in Presence

Zero is the numerical reference point for a system, and it is the reference point, the still point at the essence of the human system. It is the centre of aliveness and awareness at the heart of human essence. If love is defined as the affinity of a being for a being, then this essential centre of human beingness is the source of love (Teilhard de Chardin, 1959). This affinity is further defined by Maturana and Bunnell (1999) as “seeing the other in legitimate co-
existence with oneself”. The self is defined not as the ego, which is the centre of consciousness, but as the harmony between the unconscious and conscious aspects of mind. The experience of zero is presence, the timeless now and here. The following map or model illustrates the SelfDesign ontocentric universe as an interpretation of Einstein’s (1920) statement that time and space are relative to the point of view of the observer.

![Diagram illustrating the integration of Harding’s (1961) and Satir’s (1991) work into the ontocentric model at the heart of the praxis of SelfDesign](image)

**Figure 6.** The integration of Harding’s (1961) and Satir’s (1991) work into the ontocentric model at the heart of the praxis of SelfDesign

We live in the present moment, yet modern rational thinking takes us out of the present into the future, the past and the disassociated. While it is important to develop our conscious mind to its fullest potential, it is important to rediscover our original or childlike worldview. The experience of presence is that aspect of being that experiences, from an unchanging essence, the flow of the world and its changes. In order to be in an open and fully connected relationship with a child, we need to be able to attune to this state, the original mind of the child. I propose that as observers, each one of us for ourselves, is at the center of the universe, an ontocentric universe. While the Big Bang is the center of the known universe, our awareness is the center of the experiential or ontologic universe. What we know is a construction of experiences into a conceptual abstract; what we know is an artifact of our imagination. What is, is what we
experience. What we experience is our perception and it is this perception that creates the existence of the universe. It is an epistemological error to confuse conceptions with perceptions and vice versa. Upon regaining my ability to experience myself at the center of a universe, I was able to observe my daughter at the center of her experience, and her experience at the center of her universe. I had lost this ability gradually during my schooling years and at the completion of university decided to find what I had lost without being aware of what I had lost or how to find it. Between the ages of 20 and 30, I was able to rediscover my centricity and return to the present moment and to experiencing myself at the center of the universe. This occurred during several transformative experiences that broke me through the thinking barrier and allowed me to rediscover the “original mind”, the preconscious state. There are many techniques related to yoga practice, meditation, tai chi, fasting, spiritual practice, drug experiences, etc. that provide paths back to this original state. Because I had rediscovered this state, I believe I was uniquely able to attune to my daughter’s worldview and to learn about how she learned as she learned. I did not know how to explain or talk about this state, nor how to readily and easily access this state until about 1985 when a colleague, Sean Mills, on SelfDesign’s not-for-profit society board, introduced me to his long time mentor and friend Douglas Harding.

From Harding’s work, SelfDesign had developed an entire set of subjective experiments, including those meant to bring the experiencer into an associated state and to dissolve any considerations other than the present moment. As adults, we live our lives overlooking this always accessible and unconscious glimpse of self as the invisible essence. In parenting and consultant workshops over the past 20 years, I have shared a glimpse into the forgotten and overlooked point of view with amazing results. Historically, when it is glimpsed and truly considered, it has been at the center of much deliberation by scientists, poets, mystics and philosophers over all of recorded history (Harding, 1996). Harding devoted his entire life to sharing his experience of enlightenment with others and verified that mystical and spiritual writing from all traditions seemed to collaborate his findings. The experience of embodiment and
presence is imperative in having one’s own universe, one’s own point of view, and I find it interesting that in our society this fundamental perspective has been lost through our current cultural perspective, part of which is a consequence of our modern education system.

As infants, we are all in the present moment, experiencing the world before language and time. We live in an infinite now in a sea of sensations without boundaries or distinctions. It is only through innumerable experiences and engaging interactions that we begin to construct a world of things, contexts and relationships. Names for meaningful things distinct from their meaningless contexts become the driving force of language when the child wants a glass of milk or a chance to touch the kitten. The pairing of name to object and the discovery of patterns of behavior that also can be named give us the basis of language. Our metaphoric experience in language forms the basis of our conscious understanding. The pairing of qualities of being to various experiences gives us the metaphors to understand the world. The simultaneous experience of filling a glass of water with the experience of up and down gives us the metaphor of more is up. The experience of friendship and safety with the closeness of another gives us the metaphor of close is warm (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Being present and aware in our selves, we become the author of our lives and experience a sense of integrity and authenticity in both living and learning, grounded in now and here. Living in our bodies and having adults acknowledge our inner realities through their attunement to our neurological process allows children to remain in a sense of presence. By creating relationships that allow a child to be the author, in collaboration and co-inspiration with others creates a sense of belonging that is imperative for a child to learn acceptance of self and others. We are born to breathe and be nourished; we are born for relationship and engagement so that the development of our bodies and our minds unfolds towards maturity and self-actualization as a natural progression.

**Integral Principle #1 - Human Essence is Positive and Optimum Relationship is Co-Inspirational**

Children are naturally joyful and happy as an indicator of their wellness and balance. Joy and happiness become directional as willful expressions of enthusiasm. Reciprocal and
recursive relationships that return joy and enthusiasm bring forth a sense of ongoing integral fulfillment. Respect for the presence of joy in children and all individuals becomes a guiding principle for the intentional praxis of being in relationship with a child as a nurturing act. Through this dynamic, we can ensure that there is a developing awareness that enthusiasm exists at the core of every individual as a quality of essential integrity.

After attending kindergarten for a couple weeks, my daughter told me that she did not want to go to school where her experience was that she could not do what she wanted to do when she wanted to do it. She was very frustrated and overwhelmed with the management of the class, when she just wanted to learn what she wanted to learn. In truth, I was not willing for my daughter to endure one minute of boredom in her life. I had already seen behind the curtain, seen the illusion and limitations of the rational mind with its denial of the body and its emotions. Postponing the reality of the emotionality of the moment for an illusion of the reality of the future can be an important skill to learn but not at the expense of the integrity of an individual. As I have mentioned earlier, because I had returned to the joyous moment of the child and realized that it is a sacred event, something to be honored, cherished, respected and sustained, I stepped forth as a father and educator to both acknowledge and ensure the legitimacy of my daughter's feelings.

**Integral Principle #2 - Modeling and Mimicry are Essential Survival Strategies**

Learning is a natural attribute inherent as a biological survival mechanism in the human species. Although learning is an attribute of many species, from what we can deduce, it is in one of the most advanced and sophisticated forms in humans. Our ability to mimic and create new dimensions of understanding through modeling is fundamental to language learning. We are designed to model and copy the behaviors, ideas, assumptions and presuppositions of significant others in our lives as children in order to learn the fundamental skills of the species. Model learning is natural and co-existent with curiosity and enthusiasm and together form the basis of authentic learning.
One of the most significant experiences of my life was bonding with my daughter. As an unbound 30-year-old male, I was transformed by my connection with my daughter. Without saying a word, I felt that she communicated more to me about the meaning and dimensions of life just by looking back into my eyes, without a word, without being able to think in English, just with her presence of being - she touched the essence of my being. Becoming attached or bonded as a conscious adult gave me the opportunity to both experience the process and observe and think about it at the same time. I knew nothing about the phenomenon at the time, yet over the past 30 years have focused much of my informal research on attachment literature and cognitive neuroscience that deals with bonding and its effects on the brain (Schore, 1994, Siegel, 2007). I think that bonding and attachment are primary mechanisms at the core of mimicry and modeling.

My observations of her engagement with the world caused me to rethink how we learn, realizing specifically that learning is not through instruction but engagement and involvement as a consequence of curiosity and enthusiasm to understand. I was further astounded because my daughter learned to talk through play, discovery, and mimicry, on her own terms, on her own agenda and as a natural consequence of living in the world and exploring through mimicry the linguistic realm of relationship with others. I came to realize that mimicry or modeling was at the heart of learning in a natural way. With the tools from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which I began studying in 1983, the year I started Wondertree, I began watching behaviors and listening to unconscious language patterns as insights into the structuring of understanding in relationship. NLP was created in the early 1970's by Dr. John Grinder, a linguistics professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz and Richard Bandler, a psychology student at the time. It is the study of subjective experience focusing on communication and the application of epistemological strategies in order to achieve personal change and excellence. Consequently I developed a deeper appreciation and awareness of unconscious process. By learning how to read surface structure behavior I learned how to attune to deep structure inner learning patterns and observed young people being influenced through their unconscious connection with others.
Integral Principle #3 - Learning is an Embodied Experience

The only subject is subjectivity. The idea that there are facts and a "real world" as objective and external aspects of reality is an idea based on some disembodied assumptions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The world is in my experience. There is a very thin veil between what is inside and what is imagined as outside. From the outside looking in, the veil is a curtain that becomes impossible to see behind; however from the inside looking out, the veil is the boundary between the integrated internal and external aspects of one’s experience. The metaset is the unconscious mind, the subset is the conscious mind and therefore the logic of the conscious mind cannot begin to understand the logic of the unconscious mind.

As a child I grew up with people who collectively ignored the inner world. The only thing that anyone paid attention to was the exterior, including what I looked like, my behaviors, what my actions looked like and how they affected others externally, rather than "on the inside". I was not asked what I felt, what I thought, what I cared about and most significantly what was important to me and what I wanted to learn or do. This confused me, as it seemed to me that the world was a kind of exterior wrapping or container for my inner world, and I spent my days watching the flow between the inner and the outer. However, after years and years with no one paying any attention to my inner world, I gradually joined the club and ignored my inner world too. As I mentioned in more detail in Chapter 1, it was finally when I graduated from university and realized that it had all been a mistake, that the inner world mattered, that I rejected my carefully planned and managed indoctrination and began my journey back inwards to rediscover my self again, to peek behind the curtain. I would like to think that this avoidance of our inner worlds was a condition of the times, the 50’s. However, even though I have engaged in many fields of understanding that involve access to our inner realms, the common condition in society seems to be to ignore our own and our children’s inner dimensions. When I start working with a new learners and begin asking questions about what they are experiencing inside, I still get the usual confused and bewildered looks that I got over 25 years ago. As an elder and mentor to
parents in my workshops today, I am showing them how to observe and engage in the inner world of their children. This process of attunement is having wonderful results for the parents as it opens up new realms for conversation and deep relationship.

My own daughter was accessible and transparent to me. She was wide open and our conversations traveled in and outside of both her and me. We shared our thoughts, our feelings, our insights and nuances of meaning together. We explored our inner pictures, our inner dialogues, and even our dreams together. I wanted her to keep her inner world alive and vibrant and for her to be able to live her life true to her feelings and her deep sense of herself. When I started Wondertree in 1983, I went in search of new technologies that could help me work with children on the inside with skill and training. I discovered the work of Dr. John Grinder who was lecturing in Vancouver on Neuro-Linguistic Programming. At the end of the evening I signed up for a 24-day practitioner training and began what was to become the foundation for my insights into human experience.

Over the 24 days of training, I learned how to read the subjective world of the other, how to read behaviors and language patterns to discern what was going on in the inner neurological realms of another person, and of course myself. I learned that the fundamental constructs or modalities of thinking are images, auditory and kinesthetic sensations that blend together in combinations and sequences to construct virtually all of our thinking and inner processing of reality. These insights allowed me to design conversations with my group of children so that I was able to understand their constructions of thought. I was therefore able to help them design optimal strategies for success on their own terms for anything that they were interested in learning and doing. Consequently, I was also able to help many children with so-called learning disabilities become aware of their own processes and to design ways of achieving results regardless of labels of exterior behaviors.

Integral Principle #4 - Learning Relationships are Mutually Chosen and Sustained

Learning relationships are optimal when they are like friendships that are mutually chosen and sustained. The paradigm of teaching is fraught with impositions. Neither teacher nor
student in the education system get to choose to be in relationship together. Classrooms and subjects are assigned. Everyone is subject to the authority of the education system. What is learned and how much time is spent on learning, where and how things are learned and the politics and dynamics of the relationship between teacher and student are all defined and controlled by others. In SelfDesign, both the learning consultant (new term for teacher) and the learner (new term for student) mutually choose to work together. In this relationship they collaborate on what is learned and how it is learned. The learning consultant is just that, a consultant to the learning of the learner. The consultant in effect comes alongside the learner and grows with and builds a relationship sustained on mutual ongoing agreements and by the consensual changes in those agreements.

The following terms illustrate that new names need to be applied to the entirely different roles and set of assumptions that these roles are based on. For example, we no longer refer to SelfDesign educators as teachers because they do not teach, they are more mentors or guides and act as consultants to the learning process that is interdependently generated and sustained by the learner on his or her own terms.

Paradigm Shifting - From Authoritarian Education to Authorship and Authentic Learning

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I did not come to these new concepts overnight, they evolved over many years of experimenting and thinking about what was emerging from relational dynamics inclusive of emotionality and whole-person collaboratively motivated efforts to design a new learning paradigm.

My experiment in natural learning was influenced by my experience in business and the freedom of people to enter into relationships freely for mutual purposes. Over the next 25 years my venture attracted parents and young children who had become disenfranchised by public education and who were looking for something different. At the end of the first year I had attracted six children from six different families and had such a positive experiment in learning happening that I decided to form a non-profit society and seriously engage in creating a new learning model. By September 1984, I had attracted 10 learners and had rented a house with a basement that was suitable to continue my work with these children. The learners and I were friends doing interesting things together. Each day we would come together and decide what we might want to learn and do that day, that week, that season. We hired mentors to work with us and we decided together what would be interesting and worthwhile to do. One of the fundamental conditions of SelfDesign is that both mentors and learners mutually choose to work with each other. Sometimes the learner and learning consultant/mentor relationship breaks down and we either work to mend it or we end it. Today we specifically train learning consultants to learn relational language, to learn negotiation strategies and to study the role of empowering and positive languaging to optimize the dynamic between them and the learner. Each consultant not only chooses how many learners to work with but also which families to work with. Agreement to work together is sacred and part of the magic of our work.

*Integral Principle #5 - Self-Initiated Learning*

Learning that is initiated and generated by a learner is uniquely different than learning that is expected and directed from the outside. I have consistently observed over many years with many learners that learning that is self-initiated is not entangled with learning difficulties or
learning disorders. I have observed that if a child is not neurologically or developmentally ready to read or engage in some specific learning task, then they demonstrate neurological deficiencies. It has been astounding to watch many learners achieve results on their own when experts could not help them. For example, a twelve-year old, who left school in grade three because no-one could help him learn to read was left alone to do what he loved until one day he decided that he needed to read in order to do more of the things that he loved. He became an avid reader and read most of the National Geographics in our library. Fifteen years later, he now writes technical manuals for the rest of the company he works with. With focused, self-motivated, and self-managed effort, learner after learner has accomplished learning tasks with excellence when the learning is selfdesigned and on their own terms.

My daughter was ten before she decided that she wanted to learn to read. Most of the other children who joined us at Wondertree had been to one or two grades of school before they switched to working with me and they had already learned to read. In those first few years, several children could read, but there were a few who had not learned to read yet, and therefore I was able to observe their self-initiated and self-sustained efforts to read. For example, upon deciding to learn to read, my daughter invested one month of effort, about an hour or so a day in reading. After a month of self-initiated and self-creative exploration of the reading process, she picked up a grade seven novel that her mother had just recently read to her, *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle, and began reading it. She became an avid reader from that moment on to the extent that two years later at the age of 12 she enrolled in a second year university English history course. Because she had not been taught to read by a teacher, she developed a natural strategy, which she described to me as transposing the visual external data on the page into internal images and movies - totally by-passing any auditory intermediate step. Reading, as taught in most schools translates external visual data to sounded out words, then to internal images. For example, Ilana explained that when she sees the sentence, “The cat ran into the house”, she would not read the words as in talking, but she reported that she would see a movie of a cat running into a house. I remember in
university, I was suffering from being a slow reader and took speed reading courses. They attempted to break me from the habit of reading words to adopt the practice of making movies and pictures directly from the text. I could not do it, yet recognized the strategy again when my daughter explained it to me. From the age of 10 to the age of 30 she has read an amazing number of books, she is a natural speed reader, she is an enthusiastic reader of science and philosophy, history and biographies and has a comprehensive understanding of many subjects through her extensive and varied reading praxis. She has mentioned to me that she has noticed that most of her adult friends who went to school are no longer enthusiastic life long learners, certainly not to the extent that she is.

The heart of the SelfDesign program is to work with a child’s natural enthusiasm and to support it so that it becomes a way of living in a deep and meaningful manner, lifelong. If I created a program on the assumptions of teaching, I would have supposed that my daughter couldn’t or wouldn’t learn to read without me teaching her. Based on good intentions I would have taken charge of her experience and she would have been put in the position of responding to my direction rather than to her own sensibilities and enthusiasm to understand. My daughter, by her elegant display of integrity as a natural learner, was the one who convinced me that my educational experience and training was inappropriate and destructive of natural self-initiated and self-motivated learning.

SelfDesign focuses on learning as opportunity and choice. The behavior of our learners is not in response to our expectations but is expressive to their innate curiosity. This is an extension of the difference between extrinsic motivation, the expectations of others, and intrinsic motivation, the personal desire and interest in learning and understanding. In terms of the politics of relationships, relationships can either have a controlling and managing dynamic or a nurturing and allowing dynamic. This idea will be developed later in this chapter. For now, and not to be developed within the scope of this thesis, these two dynamics are artifacts of how our left and right brain hemispheres function and see the world in unique and opposite ways. SelfDesign supports self-determined learners in pursuing their interests and dreams,
creating an environment for learners to find their voice, and tell their stories, amongst a caring community. Learning is a fundamental aspect of being human, and given the opportunity to learn about that which is truly of interest to someone, is most often an invitation, which unleashes passion, creativity, and motivation not typically seen in people who are expected to adjust to a “one-size-fits-all” solution to education.

**Integral Principle #6 - We Become Human Beings in Our Conversations and Languaging**

We arise as human beings in conversation. It is our connection with another and our languaging that creates our thought and our evolving sense of self and other. Our development towards maturity results as a consequence of the kind of conversations we have with others, the kinds of feelings that emerge and that we have within ourselves. Our inner conversations with ourselves are reflections of our relationships with others and ultimately determine how we are with ourselves as a measure of wellness and balance.

I did not want to predetermine what the children I worked with would learn, as I saw such rich learning emerging out of their curiosity and exploration of the world. I realized that each individual is a natural learning organism, and that each child is intimately aware of what they are learning and want to learn. I decided to enter into mutually chosen relationships around learning where each child was the creator, designer and decision maker about their own learning. In order to manage ongoing plans and ideas about learning, I would meet with the children each morning in a circle for a check in. We would have a chance to talk together and make plans for the day and week about the things that we wanted to do individually, in small groups, together with mentors and together on trips outside of our space. All our meetings were held in a circle modeling my experiences with Native Americans, Bahai’s and Quakers. Within the first year of working with the children in Wondertree, I built a 6-foot diameter table that we all sat around for our meetings. On this table I painted a mandala to represent, first the holistic nature of the self and second, to represent the archetypes of the human psyche as a kind of “polyphrenic” integration of parts or aspects echoing the use of the medicine wheel by many Native American peoples.
Integral Principle #7 - Using Rapport and Conversation to Engage in the Other’s World View

Maintaining rapport with learners is an integral part of sustaining egalitarian relationships. The unconscious mind seeks harmony with others and maintains connection by mirroring the postures, gestures, tones, tempos etc. of others. Our unconscious aspects of mind are connected at deep levels and so to optimize human relationships it is strategic to consciously maintain rapport with a learner in order to provide them with a sense of comfort and connection (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). Another aspect of rapport is entering the worldview of the other by listening below the language to identify the patterns of language construction on a psychological level. Working with the worldview of the other allows you to gain insights into the inner workings of the other, as achieved by Dr. Milton Erickson, upon whose work much of Neuro-Linguistic Programming is based (Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981).

Through the years at Wondertree, I was in ongoing mutually influencing conversations with a small group of children. Their worldview was playful and rich in fantasy and imagination. Life was an adventure in curiosity. Rather than interrupting this play in order to get them to learn, I joined them in their play. If the question came up, which it often did - “Would we like to read some books or go to the beach and play?” - we more often than not went to the beach. They loved having me in their world; it was rare for them to experience an adult playing
alongside them. They seemed to feel acknowledged, legitimized and respected because I took what they were interested in seriously. I found ways to explain and share a lot of ideas inside their world of play. One day Kathleen Forsythe spoke with me about conversation theory and how “we arise” in conversation. I realized then that our languaging together was creating the curriculum, that our conversation was what was alive and living in our relationships. With my ongoing training in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, I was able to gain significant insights into the neurological patterns of the learners I was working with and design unique learning and personal growth experiences within the play that we engaged in together.

Integral Principle #8 - Using Surface Structure to Access Deep Structure for Positive Change

Human behavior including language, postures, gestures, habits, actions, and facial expressions are surface structures that are indicators of deeper structures of neurological activity (Dilts, 1983). Attunement is the conscientious attending to the other, according to Daniel Siegel (2007), the process “focuses attention on the inner world of another” (p. xiii). The purpose of a SelfDesign mentor relationship then is for the mentor or guide to attune to the learner in such a way so they are working with both the inside and outside realms of the individual. Therefore what a person feels, what they are imagining, what they are saying to themselves, what their beliefs and assumptions are, are all part of the SelfDesign relational process. This is of course done with respect and permission. It is always the choice of the learner to be in control of their own life; however, in rapport the learning consultant can have significant influence on guiding the learner to become aware of their own inner processes and help them be able to optimally design these processes.

Many of the learners who came to work with me over the years joined our program because they were having difficulties in public education. These difficulties were for many different reasons as will be illustrated in excerpts from the interviews later in the thesis. However, because my work in SelfDesign was more informed by a therapeutic base than an educational base, I worked to transform these learning inabilities and dysfunctions into
successes. Many learners had been labeled as learning disabled or were diagnosed with learning difficulties and came with significant emotional negativity around specific learning subjects and experiences. I found that I was able to change these situations by working with the inner dimensions of the learners. If a child believed and demonstrated that they couldn’t read for example, I would observe their behavior, listen to their language patterns and observe their attempts at reading. I was able to, in the vast majority of cases, transform fears, doubts and inabilities into abilities. I was focusing on the learning process, and I could show a child how to learn so that they could then apply these skills to any subject they wanted.

Integral Principle #9 - A Synergistic Social Group is Transformative for Individuals

Synergy is a social quality whereby the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This is borrowed from physics and chemistry as a principle that also applies to society. Ruth Benedict noticed that some cultures “felt wonderful” as she lived with them doing her research and other cultures “felt negative”. She invested many years of thought and research to discover what the underlying conditions for these two overall effects were. She stated that a synergistic society was one where people were generous, where there was not an underlying current of fear or greed. In synergistic societies, a quality emerged in the whole community whereby everyone grew in better and more whole individuals as a result of the cultural climate of care and respect (Maslow, 1971, p. 199-210).

I had witnessed this kind of growth in the individuals in Wondertree that seemed to be due to the culture of trust and respect amongst this small group. In Wondertree, we had created a community of care. The language between the learners, and between the learners and me was respectful and positive. The few negative remarks that occasionally occurred became opportunities for healing and growth. For example, the positive feeling in the room was so remarkably different than the climate in classrooms that virtually all of the hundreds of people who came to visit and witness us at work spontaneously commented on this phenomenon. Our program was based on the wellness of families as achieved by Virginia Satir in her work in
family therapy. Wondertree was a family, we lived and learned together within a context of healthy and positive conversation that sustained and strengthened each individual. It was a great deal of work, catching every incident that was negative and working with it until we were able to develop positive conversation as a norm with the teenagers. The role of consensus gave a political dimension that increased the positive language patterns of the teenagers and each youth began to blossom within the context of a caring and positive community. Virtual High also became a synergistic learning community within a year of its start.

*Integral Principle #10 - Need for Acknowledgement and Focus on Self-Awareness*

Initially I observed that children learned naturally through modeling and curiosity. I noticed other kinds of learning too, including project based learning when individuals or groups decided to accomplish something and organized themselves until they accomplished the task. One of the initial discoveries in SelfDesign was how much learning was introspective, was focused really on interacting with the world to discover who we are as individuals. I found that children always want to be acknowledged and to find out about who they are and how they work. The most important subject of all is one’s self, and the most important question is who and what am I and how do I work. This art and science of introspection was certainly an ongoing and underlying theme to everything we did in our various SelfDesign programs.

When Michael Maser and I started our high school project based on the learning insights gained from Wondertree, we thought that we could develop some skills in entrepreneurship and technological expertise. Every learner had a laptop and we encouraged them to consider ways to discover what they might engage in as careers. However, the learners, fresh out of high school, seemed to have had no clue who they were as human beings. They had never had the opportunity in their homes or in their schools to really develop a deep sense of and awareness of what it is to be a human being. Experiences had been shallow and outward focused, as is the norm in our society. SelfDesign is about self-awareness and focusing on what is going on inside a person. Michael and I, as learning consultants, were constantly engaged in conversations with
the teens and in doing so were using intervention strategies to help the learners become aware of their own processes. For example, one of the first simple things we did was to invite the teens to try an experiment, to start using the word *and* instead of the word *but*. For some this was easy, for others it seemed impossible, and eventually everyone became aware of what this was about because the most argumentative and stubborn people were the last ones to give up the use of the word *but*. When someone uses the word but they are engaging in “either/or” and “right and wrong” thinking. But means, your statement is wrong, listen to mine, as it is right. However, if someone uses the word *and* in response to your statement, then they are introducing a new dimension of “win/win” or “both are right” kind of thinking. The word *and* lets the first speakers statement stand as true from their perspective and the second speaker is introducing another perspective with the word *and* that is equally true from another perspective. These and many other languaging insights empowered the learners to understand the deeper psychological insights available from observing their own language patterns.

The youth in the program shifted the focus of the program from learning entrepreneurship and technology to learning about themselves and discovering what it is to be an optimum human being. The teen learners wanted to know who they were, they wanted deep connection and acknowledgement from others and they wanted to learn how we work as human beings.

*Integral Principle # 11 - Our Identities Are Composites of Our Family and Social Experiences*

We are not individuals as much as we are members of families and communities. Our psychological condition is so entwined and shaped by our experience in family that we are more an assembly of parts, of integrated experiences and comments from others into a developing personality. We incorporate the conscious statements, but more so the hidden and unconscious patterns of our parents, grandparents, siblings and relatives into our psyche. Our teachers’ comments and attitudes towards us become part of our identity. The term *I* would be more appropriate as *we*.
There were many occasions throughout this work, when I would have a very deep and difficult situation with a learner. Many of the challenges could be handled in one or two conversations as is typical of “brief therapy” pioneered by Erickson that was modeled by Grinder and Bandler in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981). However, some problems for learners persisted which indicated to me that this was a matter of a family dynamic. For example, if a child had a fear that could not be changed in a few conversations then I assumed that it was a fear of one or both of the parents that was being modeled unconsciously by the learner. In situations like this I would begin work with the parent, or parents to help them resolve their fear, so that the child would then be free and no longer picking up the problem from the parent. I was able to successfully do this level of work in around one hundred families over the years and the patterns have been consistent. If I found that I was working with an unbonded learner for example, I would often discover that the mother herself was unbonded. I would then work with the mother to help her get a bonded connection and then help her bond with her child.

After focusing on family dynamics in several workshops, which I offered to parents and educators, I was regularly asked questions about parenting styles. In response, I drew up the following “Politics of Relationship” map (Figure 8), which was influenced by my many years of experience working with families using the fundamental approach of Virginia Satir (Satir, Banman, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991). It presents the five possible conditions in relational dynamics as distinct states within a complex of ongoing and changing situations. It is a map of a territory and therefore offers insights as generalizations to simplify and help clarify what are often overwhelming and complicated situations.
Figure 8. An illustration of the 5 possible political dynamics in a relationship

In the top position, each individual maintains his or her own sense of integrity yet shares an overlap that is created through shared agreements. The shared space “B” in the top set diagram is the space of shared agreements and is called the consensual domain. An operational assumption relating to agreements is that we do not take away choices from the other and work together to mutually increase our own choices. The next two situations down from this are ones of dominance, in this case dominance by either a parent or by a child. Each condition of dominance has its own emotional and behavioral attributes, and both illustrate the overstepping of the boundaries of another, thereby creating a condition of violation. Dominance is again often about limiting the choices of the other. The bottom two conditions are polar opposites, the left showing enmeshment and the right showing non-engagement. The five conditions are all created and maintained by how we use language to influence others. There are associated emotional states resulting from each political dynamic, and the shifting of the
four lower situations towards the top ideal is a question of learning and actively practicing impeccable language patterns of respect and clarity.

When we have no choices in our lives and are forced, no matter how gently or persuasively to conform to someone else’s will, we have an example of a form of oppression. A compulsory education system, no matter how well meaning or intentioned, has the psychological consequences of creating a deep sense of captivity and confinement at some level in the neurology of the learner. From my understanding of systems theory where the logic of a subset can not comprehend the logic of its metaset, it would make sense that it is impossible for people living inside this dominant paradigm to comprehend how a mutually respectful and egalitarian culture, as a more comprehensive mindset, would operate. Again, the difference that makes the difference is the quality of language and the unique state that respectful language emerges from.

Integral Principle # 12 - SelfDesigning is Creating or Authoring Your Own Life

Authentic learning is becoming the author or designer of your self and selfdesigning is the theme and self-descriptor of learners in the newly named SelfDesign Learning Community.

We have developed an understanding through experience to defer to the authority of the other who has more knowledge and position than we do, and to give our control over to them. We learn through years of school to listen to the authority of other, instead of our own inner voice. Consequently, we learn not to value our own thoughts, intuitions or feelings. Born as the authors or designers and creators of our own lives, we gradually, become the puppets of others, giving up our will to those in power. Through the dual extrinsic motivators of fear of failure and need for success, we create a society of externally focused yet inwardly bereft individuals. On the contrary, if instead we assume that human beings are designed to collaborate and cooperate and to realize their own and collective positive potential as a fundamental condition of their design, then we can create an entirely different kind of society based on the richness, integrity and sense of fulfillment of every individual in community. This
condition requires that we trust and acknowledge the inner integrity of design of the individual as a self-sustaining organism. Imagine the possibilities if we assume that a human being is designed to learn and designed to design itself through this learning in a way that actualizes our attributes as well as builds our sensibilities as compassionate human beings. If we align our educational process with these assumptions about our positive essential nature, then our politics of relationship will shift from obedience and dominance to nurturing and respect. We will include the body and the emotions in our intellectual processes as well as we allow for the authorship of every individual for him or herself. If everyone is the author or designer of their own life, and if we realize that we can best achieve our full integrity in meaningful relationship, then we create an authentic learning community whereby each individual matures and develops naturally within a context of well-being and fulfillment (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1969).

During the past twenty-five years, I have appreciated the ethic of ‘operate’ in cooperative learning and ‘labor’ in collaborative learning: however I would like to emphasize the transformative nature of SelfDesign which goes beyond doing into the domain of being. I have recently, through the influence of Kathleen Forsythe, realized that inspiration is at the heart of SelfDesign, and that the nature of “co-inspirational” relationships is essential to inspiration. SelfDesign, as a learning methodology, focuses on the quality of relationships that engender the optimum actualization of living as authentic human beings in harmony with each other and ourselves.

*Integral Principles # 13 - SelfDesign is a Creative Design Activity Towards Self-Actualization*

The focus of SelfDesign is the self-creation of one’s integral self as an optimum human being, a self-actualized individual. The embodiment and inclusion of the individual in the learning about the environment is fundamental to learning as a SelfDesign process. It is not so much that something *is* learned; it is more about *how* it is learned and why it is learned in terms of its relevancy and integration with an individual’s purpose.
It is imperative to keep in mind that we are integral in our environment and our interpersonal relationships so that in truth I really means we with a focus from self (Maturana & Varela, 1992). If we consider the human individual as a system, there are three distinct realms in which we all exist. There is the realm inside us within both our energetic and biological membrane, there is the realm outside ourselves that could be called the environment of self, and then there is the membrane that translates the inner to the outer and the outer to the inner. It is quite succinctly formulated by Buckminster Fuller as “Universe or system is towards one and minimum two” (1975, p. 83) and “Awareness = self + otherness” (1979, p.3). Our two hands can very nicely serve as indicators of this duality within an individual by having the right hand point away from the individual as system - radiation, and having the left hand point towards the individual as system - gravity. A human individual is a system - a living system. As a living system, its symmetry implies a dynamic of aliveness and intention of design, a design to be syntropic in an entropic universe (Fuller, 1992). Our left and right symmetry allows us to illustrate our fundamental “systemness” - in that energy either moves out from or towards a system, a system either expresses or radiates away from or attracts or gravitates towards something. This recursive loop seems to play a fundamental role in the development of human awareness.

Figure 9. Left hand pointing towards Self’s center and right hand pointing out away from center\textsuperscript{12}

Each one of us, for ourselves, is unique in the universe. All other systems or individuals are seen or experienced from the outside - we are only able to experience ourselves. We are the only one that tastes our food, sees images in our imagination and feels
our joy in the world. We are however profoundly tuned individuals, tuned to each other as social beings, so that empathetically we can feel another’s joy and sorrow. The idea of attunement, which is the ability of one individual to sense or see the internal world of another (Siegel, 2007), is essential to the balanced and integral development of an infant (Schore, 1994). I consider the condition of attunement and the idea of co-inspiration as fundamental in the mutual realization of optimum humanity and one’s sense of authenticity and fulfillment to be the heart of SelfDesign.

**Self-Actualization**

Abraham Maslow (1971) popularized the term self-actualization to represent the idea of the development of the full potential of the individual to the highest and most positive degree. Self-actualization could be considered the apex of evolution of individual consciousness. The development of an Individual’s consciousness could be seen in parallel to the evolutionary development of cultural or social consciousness towards its end point - integral consciousness (McIntosh, 2007). Integral consciousness and self-actualization are, in my perspective, equivalent goal points involving optimizing and realizing our ethnology and ontology respectively. The following mandala (Figure 10) is a SelfDesign representation of the fourteen criteria of a self-actualized person as drawn from Motivation and Personality (Maslow, 1954). To quote Maslow (1943) on the need for self-actualization.

> Even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization. (p. 37)
Figure 10. The 13 attributes of a self-actualized individual have been integrated into the SelfDesign Mandala.

Each of the qualities or characteristics Maslow identifies for self-actualized beings has been associated with the usual attributes on the twelve aspects of SelfDesign circle. One of the common themes of the learners and graduates of SelfDesign was certainly transformation. Transformation in the sense of significant and almost undefinable change, change in the subtle and deep contexts of one’s living. SelfDesign is not just at the level of ideas, it is about learning and making positive changes in our strategies at the level of beliefs, assumptions, suppositions, gestures, habits, attitudes, postures, internal dialogue, patterns of thinking and understanding. These changes and movement through developmental growth are not necessarily conscious, taking place not necessarily within the awareness of the individual, yet have a profound consequence for the individual and for others who are in relationship with this individual.

Operational Principle #1 - Orientation -Towards the Positive

In the limited scope of this thesis I am not going to account for the over fifty operational principles that SelfDesign incorporates into the technology or praxis of the learning consultants.
Besides the integral principles which frame the SelfDesign praxis, there are the actual strategies and interventions that influence the ways in which learning consultants guide the process of learning with their learners. I think that it is important to introduce two operational principles as examples of the kinds of operational principles that are fundamental to the methodology and praxis of SelfDesign.

While a consultant is engaged in relationship and conversation with a learner or parent, he or she would simultaneously be meta-observing the language patterns of the other and for example could ask the question, “Is this person living by going ‘towards the positive’ or by going ‘away from the negative’?” These distinctions are subtle and hidden within the language patterns of a person and require shifting perspectives to a meta or beyond level to get outside the normal constructs of the conversation. Does a person state what they want or what they don’t want? If someone brings a young learner to me to involve in our program, are they coming because they want the most positive experience for their child or are they coming because their child was bored in school. I have certainly observed over the years that people who live by going away from things that don’t work as a prime motivator are not living as meaningful or successful lives as those who are focused on the positive. This of course is a gross generalization, yet people who language the positive and state what they want in life and move towards those things tend to live in a different kind of world than those avoiding the negative. When I hear a parent or learner saying, “I don’t want my child (I don’t want) to be a poor speller”, I ask them what it is they do want. It is quite astounding how difficult it is for many people to frame the positive, some find it nearly impossible to verbalize or articulate their feelings and assumptions towards the positive. However, working in this way with learners and their families on all their language patterns and underlying principles is fundamental to the change work at the core of SelfDesign.
Operational Assumption #2 - Emotional Understanding and Responsibility

“Math is boring” is an epistemological error that many people make. I would occasionally hear this statement from both young learners whose parents asked me to counsel them, and from young learners who had joined our program. My responsibility as an educator is the happiness and well being of the people I am working with. This is my commitment and I attempt to use the tools I have learned and am willing to do what is necessary to achieve this with my learners. Of course, this is actually about helping an individual become fully responsible for their own life and learning the importance of how to do that.

If the young learner is in public school and I am hired to help them turn around their failure, then I address the situation differently than if the person chose to be in our program and is working directly with me. Ultimately, it is an epistemological question, and I engage in helping the learner understand how they work and then help them live in a manner so that they are happy and learning in a positive way each moment of their lives.

First of all, few people in this society know how to work with their emotions and even fewer know how emotions work. Let’s take an example of what I might say to a learner who is in public school and is failing math. He or she says, “Math is boring.” I ask them where this boring experience happens, and they reply in the classroom. Then I ask them where in the classroom and they usually, in some measure of confusion, state that the teacher is boring. I again ask them where this boring experience happens, where this experience of the teacher being boring actually happens. Again they state in math class. I question and guide them until they state that the boring event is actually a feeling and that it happens in their body. This is the opening, the moment of realization, and now we can begin the work of SelfDesign as we are now dealing with experiences in the body. I ask the learner to describe the feeling, is it warm, cold, dull, sharp, is it in their head, their stomach or chest etc. We focus on the feeling as a human experience.
My next direction is to initiate a discussion about the meaning of emotions and I mention that positive emotions are a signal to the rest of the body that what is going on is good and worthwhile and that he or she should do more of it. I then add that negative emotions like fear, pain, unhappiness, boredom, and confusion are indications that something should change and that the situation should stop. Once this is understood, I pose the question of what should stop, and suggest that we can either make changes outside our body or inside our body. I note that it is sometimes more appropriate to change the outside condition and sometimes the inside condition. For example, we need to reframe the sharp pain of a needle if we realize that the injection is going to help us get well. In another situation the sharp pain of a pointed object means that we should avoid it and get out of the way.

Math is boring and the teacher is boring are grammatical equations or metaphors where one is said to be another - like, the sky is blue. The teacher is being equated with and furthermore blamed for the learner’s discomfort as if there is a casual relationship as if the teacher is causing the boredom. This is the epistemological error, as if there is a direct connection between the external event, the teacher, and the internal emotion, boredom. Because this is an error, the act of blaming creates no results, resolution or change. When a person blames, it is the absence of taking responsibility. I investigate how we might be able to change the outside situation. Maybe the learner should quit school, maybe he or she should transfer to another math class with a better teacher, maybe he or she should drop math as it has nothing to do with his or her goals in life. I go over all possibilities. For example, I might hear, “I would love to drop out of school but my dad would kill me.” I, of course, need to go for epistemological accuracy of this statement and begin with “Well, why are you going to school, to please your dad and avoid death or punishment, or are you going because it meets your needs and your goals?” This of course leads to the fact that he or she is the author of his or her own life, that he or she is living as if he or she is controlled by others. No wonder he or she is unhappy and bored. I help the learner to realize that he or she is the one ultimately making the decisions for his or her own life. If dad is intimidating then he or she at some point
has agreed to let that happen. In a couple of my sessions I actually discovered that things were really not working at home and in one case the mother realized that she really didn’t want her daughter in her life and didn’t want to be responsible for her. We ended up creating a win/win situation where her daughter went to live with the mother’s sister who was delighted to have the teenager in her life. I am not focused on the details or the circumstances; I use these to determine how to achieve meaningfulness and happiness in one’s life, which is unique for each individual.

The learner is now working through the possibilities of changing the external situation. Does he or she go to school only to please his or her parents? Is there another math teacher? Can he or she transfer to another school, etc? If the outside world cannot be changed to achieve happiness, then we need to work on the inside world. I explain that in order to take responsibility for ourselves, we need to figure out how to be excited, engaged and find meaning in what we are doing every moment of our lives in every circumstance. The response is usually, “That is impossible.” I tell them how I learned to manage my emotions and that long ago I made a commitment to myself to never be bored again for another minute in my life. After wasting years in school, I made a commitment that I would never waste another minute of my precious time on this earth. I hated the boring experience; I had it for years in school before I learned what it meant and how to make the appropriate changes in my life. First of all, I either changed the outside circumstances until my feelings changed, or I changed the inside conditions, as appropriate, to achieve a positive condition.

To get back to math being boring, if there is no way to change the outside situation then I would suggest that the reality is that he or she is going to be sitting in math class again tomorrow. The experience out there is irrelevant: how we experience it inside is imperative. I pose the question, is there anyone in the class who finds math fascinating. There is usually at least one person that he or she knows who enjoys math and then my job is to work on not disqualifying this person as a "nerd,” etc. I give an example, I present the case that there is a book in front of two people, one person loves the book and the other person hates the book. I
ask if this is this about the book or is this about the people experiencing the book. In other words, “Where do emotions and experiences live?” The same is true for math; if someone can find it fascinating, then anyone can find it fascinating if they know how to do it. It then is not so much about math as it is about how you do math. How you do it gets back to why you do it. Most children experience math imposed on them and they do not appreciate the relevance to their lives. Regardless of all of that, if a person is going to sit in a math class day after day, year after year, then wouldn’t it be wonderful if they were making it the most exciting and relevant experience possible?

In conclusion, we have covered many of the integral principles and a couple of the operational principles that are fundamental to the praxis of SelfDesign. These principles, when incorporated into the beliefs, thinking, and habits of a learning consultant and parent are learned relationally by a learner over time. We believe that the sum of these principles constitutes a new paradigm for learning in that the worldview and beliefs that evolve construct a significantly different and unique understanding of who we are and how to be. Compared to their experience of themselves within the assumptions of our current cultural norms, a transformational shift occurs in individuals when these principles are incorporated in their worldview.
I intend to look at the question of learning as a living inquiry (Meyer, 2006; in press). Therefore, I will focus on learning as a fundamental ontological process. In contrast, in our schooled society, many people today see learning as a product of, and a response to, teaching. Learning has become a measurable and quantifiable quotient in the production of marketable citizens, the stated goal of our educational system. I will therefore continue to challenge the concept of learning as a consequence of schooling and teaching and connect the future of learning to its pre-industrial roots leap-frogging the period of schooling.

In this chapter, I develop a model of learning, called the SelfDesign Paragon, as a holistic and comprehensive integration of biological, sociological, neurological and ontological individual human experiences. To begin, I refer to the following definition of learning:

Learning is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes or values, through study, experience, or teaching, that causes a change of behavior that is persistent, measurable, and specified or allows an individual to formulate a new mental construct or revise a prior mental construct. (Learning, 2009)

Figure 11. Ilana Cameron playing the didgeridoo, exploring world music

Since study and teaching already have an overwhelming quantity of research investigating teaching and instruction, I want to focus on learning as a lifelong holistic
experience that is both deeper in human experience and more pervasive in our patterns of living. To start, let us look at some of the influences, which deepened my understanding of learning as this fundamental human activity.

In 1983, in an attempt to explain my sentiments for starting an innovative and independent learning program for my daughter, I stated that “curriculum is experience.” I realized that both schooling and home schooling were descriptions of place rather than event. I was influenced by Buckminster Fuller in his efforts to make all nouns into verbs and to transform the languaging of a materialistic universe into a dynamic of inter-relating energy events (Fuller, Agel, & Fiore, 1970). It was my daughter’s aliveness, her joy and her enthusiasm that inspired me to design a learning environment focused on her as an experiencing being. I asked the question, “What would it look like to create an environment as a set of relationships, that would optimally support natural learning emerging from curiosity and enthusiasm?” Curriculum as learning is neurological activity, resident within the experiences of each individual as legitimate and unique personal experiences and subjective events. I wanted to create a political dynamic that would honor and respect human integrity and acknowledge subjective experience as credible. I also wanted to acknowledge the will to learn as joyful discovery and the right of all children to determine their own learning paths.

Seven years later, I wrote my Master’s thesis as a chronology of the activities of the Wondertree Learning Centre, my personal experiment in enthusiasm based learning with about 10 to 12 learners in an ungraded, ongoing, open-ended learning environment. I had not found any educational theorists, with the exception of Carl Rogers (1969), who came close to describing what I was observing. I found that Rogers’ descriptions from the field of psychology and therapy confirmed my own discoveries. It is noteworthy that Neuro-Linguistic Programming, upon which my initial work was largely based, was also derived from the therapeutic work of Virginia Satir, family therapist and medical hypnotist, and psychiatrist Dr. Milton Erickson (Satir, Stachowiak, & Taschman, 1975; Erickson & Rossi, 1980). From Barrett-Lennard’s book (1998) outlining Carl Rogers’ books on education, including Freedom to Learn
(1969) and client-centered therapy, he quoted Rogers stating that the following conditions were imperative to learning in freedom:

We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning.

The structure and organization of the self appears to become more rigid under threat; to relax its boundaries when completely free from threat...The educational situation which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which 1) threat to the self of the learner is reduced to a minimum, and 2) differentiated perception of the field of experience is facilitated.

Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. (p. 184)

Figure 12. In Virtual High we created a Declaration of Learner’s Rights and Responsibilities

In the 90’s, Michael Maser and I initiated Virtual High, where we deepened our learning methodologies and initiated our ideas for creating a learning community for teen-aged learners. During this time, I learned about the constructivist theory of learning. It accurately
describes the kind of educational methodology that we were discovering in our observations of emerging learning in both Wondertree and Virtual High. The following definition of constructivist learning describes significant aspects of our methodology.

Constructivist learning, therefore, is a very personal endeavor, whereby internalized concepts, rules, and general principles may consequently be applied in a practical real-world context. According to Jerome Bruner and other constructivists, the teacher acts as a facilitator who encourages students to discover principles for themselves and to construct knowledge by working to solve realistic problems. Aspects of constructivism can be found in self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, situated cognition, and reflective practice. (Learning Theory, 2009)

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 13.** Children learn through experience and through their interpretation and representation of experience reflected by significant others¹⁵

The years 1986 through to 1996, the last four years of my work with Wondertree and the four years of my work with Virtual High, were the highlight of my educational research into SelfDesign. During this period, I read Gregory Bateson’s work, whose ideas I will incorporate next to tie learning to our neurological processes.

*The Neurological Roots of SelfDesign*

In this section, I would like to outline a simplistic yet comprehensive overview of learning as a basic neurological process. In *Mind and Nature* (1979) and *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*
(1972), Gregory Bateson wrote about four levels of learning: Learning 0, 1, 2, and 3. Learning 0 is a condition where there is no learning in an organism. Learning 1 is a simple choice made by an organism towards more positive conditions and away from negative conditions affecting the organism as a whole. Learning 2 is an awareness of the learning process, a meta-view whereby the organism is learning how to learn, and makes choices about learning patterns. Learning 3 is a mode of learning that is more comprehensive than we now understand; it is learning that is beyond our current capability to appreciate. This gives us four contexts to look at learning: 1) the ever present existence of being, 2) learning, 3) awareness of learning, and 4) a context for learning beyond our ability to understand it. Next, I will illustrate how these four conditions for learning influenced my recently developed SelfDesign Paragon for learning.

Figure 14. The SelfDesign Paragon superimposed with the 4 learning levels from Gregory Bateson’s thinking on learning as a biological process

In Bateson’s (1972, 1979) four learning levels, we can see connection and integration with the SelfDesign Paragon (see Figure 14). Learning 0, in both models is the state where
there is no learning, and no change. It is the ground of being out of which change is experienced. It is the ever-present sense of universal awareness within, beneath, and beyond both the conscious and unconscious processes involved in learning. Learning 1 in Bateson’s model is simple learning, making choices. This includes Learning Modes 1, 2 and 3 in the Paragon model. Modeling, enthusiasm-driven discovery learning, and rote learning are involved in making choices, first in the unconscious domain and then increasingly in the conscious domain in rote learning. Learning 2 in Bateson's model describes the process of learning how to learn, a meta-context of learning. In the Paragon, this meta-learning is involved in the domains of Learning Modes 4, 5 and 6. These more complex learning processes incorporate an awareness of our own learning patterns and strategies and involve making decisions and changes in these patterns. Learning 3 in Bateson’s model alludes to kinds of learning that are beyond our current understanding of learning as a process. In the Paragon, I have included Learning Modes 7 and 8 in this meta-learning category. In Virtual High and Wondertree, I observed inexplicable learning leaps and self-realizations that seemed to be a result of these interpersonal learning environments being rich with respect and trust. Borrowing from Ruth Benedict’s work, I began referring to Virtual High as a ‘synergistic’ learning community for personal transformation (Maslow, 1971). Learning Mode 8 in the Paragon model describes learning achievements that cannot be explained through sensory learning experience, and describes learning that is beyond intuition and introspection. This learning can only be explained as some kind of integration through an individual’s alignment of purpose, realization of integrity and congruence, power of presence and some kind of resonance with grace and inspiration.

The SelfDesign Paragon, shown in Figure 14, outlines ways of learning (and choosing) that work in harmony with our own natures as Bateson refers to. Using the SelfDesign Paragon, learning consultants can work with learners to design, manage, observe and evaluate the learning process. By respecting and understanding our most powerful and profound attribute, our ability to learn, we can remain in harmony with nature as we practice learning to live in
nature. The Paragon offers us a process for realizing our full potential as human beings on our own terms. Usually learning is qualified by what is learned or what subjects are studied. However, the focus of this work is on how we learn, and on what inner processes are engaged in expanding our depth and complexity of understanding.

Our abilities to learn, think, love, language, and use tools are particular attributes, which human beings have. Indeed, we have exceptional capacity to learn, and it is our ability to learn that transforms these very attributes and distinguishes us. When we understand that we understand, when we learn that we learn, when we name ourselves as “I” and appreciate our place at the center of the universe, then we transform our role in the world and emerge from the background of the unconscious interplay of the universe. The degree to which we can take a perspective on our process provides us with choices and understanding. The greater our flexibility to choose and the more we comprehend our circumstances, the more freedom we seem to have and the more we can enjoy being human and appreciate our attributes. Conversely, the more choice and freedom we have, the more responsibility we have to act in harmony with the ecological patterns within which we are interdependently connected. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson (1991) from his essay “A Sacred Unity”, we are free to choose and we can choose to work with nature or we can choose to work against it. It is when we choose to work against it that we always get into trouble. Let us now look at the act of SelfDesigning, our daily opportunity to act in congruence with nature.

**SelfDesigning**

Several years ago, I was asked by many of the consultants I was training at the time, to define more clearly the suite of activities I refer to in the praxis of SelfDesigning. They asked, “What do you mean by SelfDesign? What is it that people are doing when they are SelfDesigning? How do you think about learning when you encourage learners in a SelfDesign process?” That day, in response to their questions, I drew the first model of what is now called the SelfDesign Paragon. Let us first look at these terms specifically.
SelfDesign - a creative process whereby an individual influences the natural unfolding of his or her maturation and intelligence.

Paragon - a model of excellence and perfection.

The SelfDesign Paragon was a hand drawn flow diagram that I used for several years to explain the variety of learning activities engaged in by SelfDesign learners. When it came time to redesign the model for inclusion in the SelfDesign book, River Meyer, my editor and colleague, encouraged me to add the domain of bonding to the original cluster of observed learning domains. The zero in the center is consistent with several other SelfDesign models and now sets the standard for all SelfDesign models with learning on the wheel and stillness and no-change in the center. The Paragon illustrates a comprehensive variety of learning modes that occur in human behavior. Using this model we can understand, expand, and develop our strategies of learning to optimally inform our learning experience. The Paragon focuses on how we learn and not the specific skills or subject areas that we learn. The model applies to learning any content and it provides us with eight different ways to shape our learning strategies. Some strategies are better than others in specific situations, or better for different kinds of content. Some learners will find that one or another of these learning domains best suits their particular learning style. Choosing the optimum strategy is part of the learning about learning or meta-learning. Now that I have provided an introduction and overview of SelfDesigning, and before we look at the SelfDesign Paragon for learning more closely, let us look briefly at the developmental elements of learning.
Developmental Elements of Learning

The SelfDesign Paragon unfolds as a comprehensive model for holistic and lifelong learning. It is aligned with our authentic human nature and it evolves from the richness and rhythms of real life experience. While traditional schooling defaults to generally focus on basically one approach to learning (Learning Mode 3 of the Paragon - rote learning), the SelfDesign Paragon includes eight different learning methodologies, and tends not to focus on instruction. This model illustrates the multi-dimensionality and the complex tapestry of learning as an integral aspect of living. Certainly progressive educators and innovative educational programs include some of the “living as learning” ideas of the Paragon in their practice. While many people are aware of these learning ideas, the Paragon’s inclusion of all of them as a comprehensive model is significant. SelfDesign takes the processes shown in the Paragon out into the real world and into the depths of human experience, providing a model to develop a praxis of excellence as unique as each learner. With the Paragon, learners can be validated for the kinds of learning that emerge from natural curiosity and valuable human interaction. They begin to learn to observe their own process and develop strategies using the Paragon and the tools associated with it to design their learning throughout all aspects of their lives.

Using the SelfDesign Paragon, we can examine five different developmental elements within the eight domains of learning:

1. Learning as state
2. Learning as process
3. Learning as strategy
4. Learning as pattern
5. Learning as conversation

“Learning as state” starts in the center of the Paragon at zero. Our emotional state and our fundamental attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about who we are and how we feel
are central conditions for learning. Human beings in balance are predisposed to newness, and therefore to learning as we engage in novelty to create relationships and understanding.

Figure 16. From Neuro-Linguistic Programming, people tend to look up when visualizing (V), look to the side when accessing auditory memory (A), and look down when accessing feelings (K)\textsuperscript{18}

When I first began training in Neuro-Linguistic Programming in 1983 with Dr. John Grinder, I became aware of what I had been doing every day of my life, but in a new way. Grinder defined thinking as; a) making pictures in your mind, b) hearing language in your mind, and c) having feelings in your body. He suggested that thinking is the linking and interplay between V, A, K (visual, auditory and kinesthetic - see Figure 16) processes and that these three modalities were the foundational elements in the vast majority of thinking strategies (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Dilts, Grinder, Bandler, Cameron-Bandler, & Delozier, 1980). With the inclusion of kinesthetic sensation including emotions as part of how we think, I was able to transform the way I worked inside and was also able to work with my young learners in dynamic new ways. Emotions, as part of state, are fundamental in learning and thinking. For example, I worked with the numerous children (ages 6 to 14) who joined Wondertree and Virtual High after they dropped out of public education. One of the first issues that I dealt with was what the learners and their parents assumed were learning disabilities. If, for example, I was working with a child who had been diagnosed with dyslexia, I consistently
found it necessary to invest ninety percent of my energy working with the emotional upset that was involved in the so-called disability. Once I had shifted the emotional state of the learner from fear and anguish to curiosity and playfulness, then the learning strategies for reading or spelling were relatively simple, in that the basic strategies could be learned in an hour or two and practiced thereafter. Therefore, I have come to believe that emotional states are significant factors in learning, a reality that we incorporate wholeheartedly at SelfDesign.

Figure 17. Relationships that are in harmony tend to exist when body postures are in synch and rapport is an artifact of unconscious mirroring or modeling

“Learning as process” focuses on the first three domains of learning (1, 2, 3) in the Paragon. Learning as process involves the way in which we are designed as learners and how our neurology is predisposed to creating relationships and making distinctions and associations. In Learning Mode 1, our early experience of bonding sets the tone and ground for our sense of ourselves and others. It is the basis for modeling and for relationship. It establishes our individuality and our connection with the world. Learning Mode 2 is based on our natural enthusiasm and curiosity. Our fascination with newness allows for the growth and expansion of our intelligence. Our explorations become creative play, and we start to understand the dynamics of relationships throughout our experience. Learning Mode 3
explores the mapping of name to process, fundamental in language acquisition. Memorization of facts and figures through direct instruction resides in this mode, and is the core of traditional schooling methods as teachers are still being taught to deliver content. The acquisition of such knowledge is certainly an important learning process, yet it is only one-eighth of the entire complex.

“Learning as strategy” is represented by Learning Modes 4 and 5 as we develop a conscious perspective on learning and begin to design and modify the learning process. Setting goals and developing a sense of identity and character are second-level modifications, whereby we reflect on our process and begin to make choices according to evolving criteria. This is where the praxis of SelfDesign, as an art and science, begins to play a significant role in creating excellence. By observing our process and understanding our learning strategies, we can enhance our own methodologies.

“Learning as pattern” and “learning as conversation” are intimately involved in Learning Modes 6 and 7, mentoring and synergistic community. Our patterns of living can be modeled to perfection by working with mentors—those individuals already engaged in the praxis or practice of excellence. Working in group projects creates a synergistic energy that transforms the learner through the process itself.

Learning Mode 8, LifeQuest, is an integration of all learning modes in alignment with a learner’s unique sense of purpose. Being in touch with why we are here and how our deepest meaning arises as an expression of our humanity and our sense of fulfillment creates a kind of magic and sense of transformation towards self-realization or actualization.
Learning 0 - Presence - Now/here - Awareness - (No Learning)

This is the central state to all of the eight domains or modes of learning. Change takes place as an extension of a base state of no change. As we mentioned in describing the SelfDesign LifeSpiral, we exist in two realms simultaneously, presence and duration, no change and constant change, no-time and time. All the while our biological, sociological, psychological and spiritual influences are developing and changing, our ontological domain remains still and...
constant. This central state is imperative as a reference state for learning, and as a meta-state to learning, growth and change, as our learning can be deferred to this omnipresent reference state.

Learning 1 - Modeling

From the moment of our birth we seek connection. We need to engage in recursive conversations, responding to the responding of the other to our responding. With this circular feedback loop we engage automatically in mutually mirroring behavior. This unconscious connection between two people sets the condition for rapport and relationship. Dr. Allan Schore (1994) has done extensive research into the attachment or bonding needs of infants and the neurological development that takes place when a child is recursively engaged with his or her caregiver. He refers to unique development in the right pre-frontal lobe that has been shown to be the area of neurological activity relating to the sense of self and the ability to empathically connect with others.

The following information, relating to the premises of NLP, speaks to how meaning is communicated.

As early as the late 60’s and early 70’s, communication studies indicated that nonverbal behavior played an important role in communication: (Mehrabian, A and R. Ferris (1967), 'Inference of attitudes from non-verbal communication in two channels', The Journal of Counseling Psychology, 31, pp 248-52; Argyle, M, F. Alkema and R. Gilmour (1970), 'The communication of friendly and hostile attitudes by verbal and non-verbal signals', European Journal of Social Psychology, 1, pp 385-402; Birdwhistle, R (1970), 'Kinesics and Context', Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania). Researchers determined that just 7% of what we communicate is the result of the words that we say, or the content of our communication. 38% of our communication to others is a result of our verbal behavior, which includes tone of voice, timbre, tempo, and volume. 55% of our
communication to others is a result of our nonverbal communication, our body posture, breathing, skin color and our movement. The match between our verbal and non-verbal communication indicates the level of congruency. (Frost, 2009)

I adapted the illustration of Figure 19 from Tor Norretranders book *The User Illusion* as it provides further insight into how the preceding ideas are possible. This diagram shows the amazing quantitative difference between the conscious and unconscious processes in the human nervous system. The line at the bottom shows the rate of conscious process, which occurs at 16 bits per second. The input and response of the unconscious processes are the two triangular-shaped aspects of the diagram, operating at around $10^9$ bits per second. The difference of a billion times more information handled by the unconscious mind places the unconscious and conscious aspects of being human in a new light.

![Figure 19. The rates of information flow in the conscious and unconscious mind](image)

Much of our focus in SelfDesign is on the powerful role played by the unconscious processes in human learning. The role of the unconscious in modeling and mimicking is significant and is foundational to the process of natural learning. In the early years of my interest and exploration of learning, I noticed young learners' natural predisposition to model.
Engagement with nature is one of the ways both our imagination and understanding of the emerging patterns of life parallels our own personal development.

Our educational system focuses on conscious intelligence, the rational, linear and sequential kind of thinking that is associated with the left-hemisphere process. Whole-brain thinking, on the other hand, also involves the right hemisphere, the midbrain, the reptilian brain, and the prefrontal lobes. It is the left hemisphere that tends to isolate itself and, through the very act of using the left-brain function of language to name, calls the rest of the brain functions the unconscious processes. The “un-” part of “unconscious” suggests a “not,” a “less than,” and an exclusiveness that reduces the importance of all the remaining sections and functions of the brain. In SelfDesign, we choose to balance the conscious and unconscious processes and to integrate all the different areas of the brain in a kind of orchestration of thinking and understanding.

For example, applying stimulus response theory, when we first hear a new sound like the ring of a bell, we bring the sound into our conscious mind and focus our thoughts on its source and meaning. If it is a bell signaling lunch, prayer, or warning, we respond appropriately. However, if we discover that the sound has no consequence, we attach no meaning and over time come to ignore the bell. When it rings, we might focus our attention for a moment and then let it fade. If it rings on a regular basis for no discernible purpose, we will unconsciously hear the bell each time yet never let it rise to consciousness. Our unconscious
state contains the background of sounds and images that wash through us each day but do not receive the focus of our conscious mind.

Furthermore, we process information from our eyes in two different parts of the brain. The image focused directly on our retina is processed consciously, while the peripheral vision is processed deep in the unconscious mind. The Eastern terms for these two states are “hard eyes” and “soft eyes.” You can quite literally shift your mental state by shifting how you use your eyes. This shift can even aid in changing the kind of thinking needed for different situations or processes. The learners and I practiced experiencing this with juggling and with discussions in the analysis of figure and ground puzzles through shifting perception in order to understand the scene in different ways.

The following map (Figure 21) is an exploration of the dance between the conscious and unconscious mind in learning a skill or gaining a new understanding. We see four quadrants in this drawing, the top half representing the unconscious process and the bottom half the conscious process. The right side of the model represents lack of competence in a skill, while the left represents competence. Competence increases during the journey through that half, while lack of competence decreases.
Figure 21. Learning as the transition from unconscious-incompetent through to unconscious-competence or excellence

The four quadrants represent the four stages in learning anything, moving from ignorance to a state of excellence.

Let us consider learning to tie shoes as a simple example to illustrate this model. In the first quadrant, an infant is unaware of shoes or shoelaces. She experiences her mother doing something down at her feet several times each day, but she pays little attention to this activity. She is unaware of her own lack of competence. As the child matures, her attention begins to focus on her mother tying the shoes. She becomes conscious of the process, though she remains incompetent, in the sense that she can not do it as she is unaware of it. She is simply an observer of the process, but she has passed the threshold of awareness. Over time she begins to mimic the shoe tying but is unable to accomplish the task. At some point her mother likely breaks down the activity into smaller chunks, and the child begins to master aspects of this quite complicated process. With focus and attention, the child is eventually able to tie her shoes. Moving through the threshold of ability, she enters the third quadrant, conscious competence. She consciously ties her shoes regularly, and with each attempt her ability improves. One day the girl ties her shoes without paying any attention to what she is doing. Her mind is on something of greater importance. This is possible because her ability is now so practiced that it has moved from consciousness to the unconscious part of her brain. She has passed through the threshold of excellence into unconscious competence. ....

This phenomenon allows us to develop and expand our repertoire of abilities, with each new ability acting as a foundation for more. The model provides a collaborative, spiraling context in which we can notice our own development as experience moves us in and out of the conscious and unconscious process of our
ongoing learning. Once again the spiral emerges. When we end up back at the top of the wheel, we are not the same; we have incorporated an activity into our neurological bodies in a way that allows us to move on to new, higher levels of mastery. We move through the four learning quadrants, and the end of the process signals the beginning of a more complex one if we so choose. Learning spirals us from one beginning to the next. ....

When learning is integrated into understanding how we accomplish life tasks, we begin to see the relevance of learning as a tool to enhance our quality of life. Self-awareness and SelfDesign allow each one of us to unfold our infinite intelligence. (Cameron, 2006, p. 77-78)

Learning 2 - Curiosity and Enthusiasm

The second learning domain is an expression of curiosity and the will to learn. These conditions are fundamental to what we are as human beings. Happiness is an ontological condition of being human, experienced when we are well and maintaining some degree of comfort and balance in our environment. In our natural state of wellness, our system is in balance. In this state, human beings, as observed in all infants, turn with fascination and enthusiasm to experiment with and engage in relationships with everything in their sensory environment. Our neurological systems are predisposed to newness and to the opportunity to learn. The name of much of this activity is play. Children naturally engage in sensory experimentation almost every hour of their waking days. This kind of learning has no end, no goal.
Many parents approach me in frustration because they see that their children do not finish what they start. However, the goal of this kind of learning is not an end point, it is the satisfaction of curiosity. The moment a child’s curiosity is satisfied, he or she explores in another direction following some new fascination. The SelfDesign Paragon has been invaluable in explaining to parents that different kinds of learning have different attributes, and their expectation of the child’s finishing and achieving goals happens in Learning 5 rather than Learning 2.

Although Learning 2 is a phase especially important for young children, it is also a feature in lifelong learning. In many of the books I have researched on genius, the ability to keep childhood curiosity alive and well is at the heart of the creative energy experienced by geniuses who have achieved fame. For example, the following two quotes attest to the role of lifelong curiosity in the achievement of significant intelligence.

"To myself I am only a child playing on the beach, while vast oceans of truth lie undiscovered before me." Sir Isaac Newton

"I have no special gift. I am only passionately curious." Albert Einstein
Learning 3 - Rote Learning

Learning 3 is fundamentally the attaching of meaning in one-to-one correspondence and the creation of metaphor in the development of language. The sound *cat* and the letters C-A-T that are associated with first the experience of a cat (perception), and second with the image of a cat inside (conception), is an example of this domain of learning. It is how we learn to speak through the integration of Learning 1 and 2 into the labeling and associating in Learning 3. Perhaps because this learning is basic and is associated with behavioral demonstrations of inner process, this is the mode of learning that education has focused on.

If education were politically appropriate, I would be far less critical of it as a social institution. However, because children’s rights are denied in order to maintain authoritarian control of the process, I am convinced that much of educational practice serves the needs of management of adults, rather than fulfilling the needs of the children. Children love to learn, they do not need to be motivated. I have never met a child who is self-directed who has learning disabilities. In my experience, learning disabilities occur because of two conditions: a) children are asked to perform learning tasks before they are developmentally ready (neurological reason), and b) they are asked to perform tasks that are not relevant or meaningful to their lives and that they are not emotionally ready to experience (emotional reason). When children are interested in learning something and are neurologically and emotionally ready to learn a task, they do so in approximately one-tenth of the time compared to learning that is driven by coercive instruction. Consider the financial and efficiency implications for public education if they engaged in a shift in world-view.

One of the foremost computer innovators and pioneers was Allan Kay. He was a brilliant child and wrote the following about his experience in school.

By the time I got to school, I had already read a couple hundred books. I knew in the first grade that they were lying to me because I had already been exposed to other points of view. School is basically about one point of view -- the one the
teacher has or the textbooks have. They don't like the idea of having different points of view, so it was a battle. (Lazere & Sasha, 1995, p. 39)

As one of the inventors of the graphic interface and the Macintosh computer, Kay was asked by Scientific American in the early 90’s to write an article about technology and the future of education. He started the article with a quote from physicist Murray Gell-Mann: “Education today is like taking a child to the world’s greatest restaurant, and feeding them the menu.” (Kay, 1995)

![Image](image_url)

Figure 23. Learning about life rather than learning in living leads to confusion whereby the map is mistaken for the territory.

This is an example of the problem that occurs when we become seduced by the world of ideas, by illusions that are assumed to be real. Schooling teaches us to focus on the name for the thing, on others’ thoughts about us as our ideas about ourselves, and we become confused. We begin mistaking the map for the territory, something Korzybski (1962) warned us about doing. We mistake the word and the idea for the real object. For example, we might say to someone, showing them a picture, “This is my wife.” rather than, “This is a picture of my wife.” It is reported that when a man showed Picasso a picture of his wife, and said, “This is my wife”, Picasso replied, "Rather small, isn't she." The eating of a menu instead of the food and the map for the territory is absurd, yet it is done throughout classrooms in North America and in modern society as well.
Learning 4 - Epistemology and Identity

Learning 4 is the first domain of learning that engages meta-learning or learning about learning. This domain also includes the larger context of learning about how we work as human beings as an introspective process. I propose that a vast majority of neurological energy is expended on thinking about, being aware of, and attempting to understand and maintain our place in the world. In Learning 1 through 3 we are focused outwards, and although learning is an interactive and transformational process, the domain of Learning 4 brings awareness to what is happening inside as we engage with others and with the world. Although the SelfDesign Paragon is somewhat developmental starting at 1 and moving through to 8, learners are free to and do engage in virtually any mode at any age and in combination with other modes.

In Learning 4 we are learning about ourselves and about the consequences of our learning. For example, literacy has a shadow side. It changes the way we see and think about the world. Although we have new skills and access to new information, it is at the cost of a kind of thinking that directly connects us to our experience as real. Psychologist Sylvia Scribner, in a study of literacy amongst Kpelle tribes people in a Liberian village, discovered that Aristotelian syllogisms as a form of formal abstract logical thought were not possible for preliterate individuals. As an example:

“All Kpelle men are rice farmers.
Mr. Smith is not a rice farmer.
Is he a Kpelle man?”

The answer given by illiterate villagers consistently was, “I do not know because I do not know the man.” However, once these same villagers had learned to read, they could easily follow the logic embedded in the statements. Scribner’s conclusion is that “formal logical thought is not a natural or inevitable outcome of human mental development, but a cultural artifact acquired along with literacy” (Hunt, 1982, p. 27).
Incorporating the methodologies of SelfDesign and the Paragon in my conversations with learners, I use content as a reflective mirror to illustrate what is happening epistemologically within the person. In the sense that teaching is more about giving information and then testing to see if learners still have it, teachers “hand out fish”. In SelfDesigning, we are far more interested in empowering a learner with insights into how they learn, and therefore in “how to catch their own fish”.

**Learning 5 - Heuristic Learning**

The word heuristic is from Greek “heuriskein” meaning *to discover*. Its present day use and meaning imply a learning process that is based on a problem-solving methodology through experimentation and especially trial-and-error methods. Heuristic learning is initiated by setting a goal and then working towards that goal while constantly observing and evaluating our activities in terms of that goal. The science and art of project-planning with timelines, flowcharts, mind-maps, critical paths and milestones demonstrates the sophisticated adaptation of heuristic learning to business and professional activities (see Figure 24).

![Figure 24. Ilana Cameron building her island as part of a group project where each learner becomes an island ecosystem and interacts with other islands.](image-url)
For example, many of the teenagers in Virtual High were very focused on efficiency, excellence and achievement in terms of meeting their own criteria of accomplishment. They were very interested when I introduced the idea of well-formed outcomes. As a result of their numerous failures and struggles to finish projects they were very curious that there could actually be a formula for successful and efficient achievement of realizing their goals.

One of the first criteria for successful goal achievement is in fact the analysis of the goal as an actual authentic expression of one’s own personal desire and will. When they realized that it is much more difficult to achieve a goal when it is determined by another person rather than yourself, they felt a lot of clues fell into place. Also most of the learners had experienced procrastination in their lives and to discover that this is a state that is the result of imbalance, discovered by doing an internal ecology check (NLP technique) was a breakthrough for many of them. To explain, if someone sets a goal for themselves and discovers that they are often not on task, often doing things that interfere with the goal and find that often they are confused about whether or not they should work on their goal or not, then they are procrastinating. This state is the result of one part of them wanting a goal yet another part of them actually not wanting it, or understanding that if the other part gets the goal then they will lose out. In order for someone to stay on task and work clearly towards a goal, one has to check to see if all internal parts or aspects of their personality are all in alignment with the goal. Often learners had never had a clear indication of this idea of, or experience of one’s self as a collection of parts until they worked on unraveling something like self-sabotage, or procrastination. The intra-personal realm of understanding became a significant focus of the teenagers we worked with as they became more focused on achieving goals and working efficiently and authentically within.

Learning 6 - Mentoring

This learning domain is an extension and complex adaptation of Learning 1, modeling and mimicking. However, the sophistication of mentoring emerges around mutually chosen
and mutually acknowledged interest, fascination and devotion to some particular learning activity. Building on the natural design of human beings to model others as a fundamental learning design attribute, I encouraged the interface of mentors and learners in the Wondertree program, the Virtual High program and the SelfDesign Learning Community program. I held the space for mutual choosing of mentors and learners of each other, and I made the budget for hiring mentors available to the management and discretion of the learners (see Figure 25).

![Image](image1.png)

Figure 25. The learners in Wondertree worked with a university professor who kept an excellent journal and served as a model of excellence

Each season, I would introduce the learners to approximately ten mentors. In some cases there seemed too little attraction between some mentors and learners, while in others the engagement lasted for years through a mutual fascination that I called resonance. In my exploration of learning and intelligence, I was struck by the phenomenon that every genius I researched had been significantly influenced by a mentor and had had the time and opportunity to spend long periods of engaged time in this collaborative learning mode. In fulfillment of my original question about the design of an optimal learning environment, I then set the context for mentoring to be a profound learning opportunity for each learner.

One of the most popular mentors at Wondertree was Tamasine, a dancer and drama educator. Her ability to play with and model for each learner was astounding. The learners became
mirrors of her movements and intonations. Her ability to engage and involve the learners in drama and dance was fascinating. Children were almost hypnotized by the rapport that she was able to create in virtually every session. Her emotional impact and enthusiasm for living was expressed in her movements and voice and the children were entwined with her stories and drama activities. She pushed them past their boundaries without them even realizing it, as they were so engaged in her passion that their own enthusiasm conquered their fear and awkwardness. The role of the mentor to bridge past a learner’s blocks and fears is the essential aspect of the power of the mentor as a learning agent.

Relating back to the previous model of conscious/unconscious and competent/incompetent, the difficulty for many experts is that they no longer have conscious knowledge or understanding of their excellence. Therefore, it becomes a question of empowering the learners to ask questions in a way that deconstructs the strategies of excellence in the mentor. It is in this way that they can acquire the steps of their mentor’s strategies.

Learning 7 - Synergistic Learning

Between 1993 and 1997, Michael Maser and I worked with about thirty teenagers in Virtual High in an old mansion in Vancouver. The program was consensus-based and started out as a nine-to-five program, four days a week. We attracted learners who were disenfranchised by their public education experience for a variety of reasons. Soon the program was operating seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day as a consequence of the teenagers untapped desires to learn and to create their lives. My experiences and observations during this period were personally transformative, as well as foundational to the ideas of SelfDesign and the participation in learning communities.

This domain of learning is an extension of Learning 4, expanding intra-personal learning into the domain of interpersonal space. The optimization of communication patterns creates a condition for a quality of inter-relationship that becomes synergistic. When people are engaged in empowering, trusting, and open communication, with love as a fundamental interpersonal
experience, there is a mutual realization of growth for intelligence that magically emerges in the
context of the relationship dynamics. This is consistent with the ideas of Humberto Maturana
and Pille Bunnell (1999), who state that, “The only emotion that broadens vision and expands
intelligent behavior is love” (p. 62).

Learning 8 - LifeQuest

Magic and mystery create the condition for learning and transformation. This last
domain of learning creates possibilities for human potential beyond our current understanding.
Learning, after all, is towards the unknown, towards newness - never before comprehended or
understood.

There are two ideas that I weave together in this domain as a result of my observations
of my young learning friends over the past twenty years. I had the distinct opportunity to work
with many of them for around ten years, an opportunity not available to most any other
educational professional. I developed deep and long term relationships with the learners and
their families. I saw emerging patterns over these years, and in many of the young people I
witnessed their acquisition of understanding and knowledge. In many situations I was hard
pressed to account for how they had learned certain information. I questioned and observed; yet
I could not totally correlate sensory-based experiential learning with their leaps in
understanding.

One of the researchers that I have followed over the years is Rupert Sheldrake (1981,
1988). I have thought a great deal about his ideas of morphogenetic fields accounting for
unexplainable access to information. In the same way that a “primitive person” can look at a
radio and wonder how all those people could get into a small box, it is almost incomprehensible
to imagine fields of information flowing through the air, to be transduced by radio electronics into
intelligible information. Could there be a field of information, as Sheldrake proposes, generated
by collective human thought that is accessible to certain individuals under special conditions?
This field has been referred to by two other notable thinkers, Carl Jung (1953) in his description
of the Collective Unconscious and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1959) describing the noosphere. Without going deeply into this controversial theory, I propose two questions. Could it be possible that individuals are not just able to access information through their usual senses engaged in experiential learning? Could it be possible that their biological systems can transduce information from fields around the earth? The eighth mode of learning is open to possibilities and questions in appreciation of the remaining mysteries relating to the human mind and the universe.

In Joseph Chilton Pearce’s (2002) book, *The Biology of Transcendence*, he asks similar questions when he investigates the phenomenon of idiot savants. They have been extensively studied by scientists around the world. There are a number of individuals studied who, for example, cannot read, and although they can barely talk, they can quote extensive and comprehensive domains of knowledge. It is documented that there is no possible way they could have learned the information. To date, no one has postulated an adequate scientific explanation for this phenomena, yet again it points to morphogenetic fields as a possible solution.

The other topic of consideration for this domain of learning is the idea of entelechy. Entelechy is from Latin “entelechia” and Greek “entelecheia”, both of which are defined as complete and to have. Its modern definition is “a hypothetical agency not demonstrable by scientific methods that in some vitalist doctrines is considered an inherent regulating and directing force in the development and functioning of an organism” (Grotstein, 2001). When I talk about the unfolding of the genius within, the unfolding of one’s infinite intelligence, I am referring to the idea of entelechy. This is the ability of an acorn to become an oak tree, of a kitten to become a cat, and of a young infant to become a genius. The question again is, how can learning beyond sensory and experiential process occur in individuals, and how is the capacity of some individuals realized to such an extent that others cannot comprehend how various feats of intelligence are performed? This domain creates, if nothing else, the space for possibility.
Areas of Intelligence

We have just examined eight unique modes of learning within the SelfDesign Paragon, and I would like to distinguish between these modes of learning and any confusion with Howard Gardner’s (1993) notion of multiple intelligences. SelfDesign works with and incorporates multiple intelligences as one of the models we use to help us understand and map human learning. We include Gardner’s first seven intelligences and incorporate his eighth, naturalistic intelligence. SelfDesign also includes the three intelligences identified by Thomas Armstrong (1994) and others in the ongoing development and identification of multiple intelligences. To these eleven intelligences we add SelfDesign intelligence as a meta-intelligence whereby any individual through self-observation can design, manage and integrate the intelligences towards qualities of congruence and synergy. We organize these intelligences into a mandala (Figure 26) and at the time of writing this thesis, my colleagues and I are still in discussion as to the positions, the attributes and to the labeling of the multiple intelligences as intelligences.

Figure 26. The SelfDesign development and extension of Howard Gardner’s and Thomas Armstrong’s ideas of intelligences
In summary, we have covered the eight domains of learning around the hub of presence in the SelfDesign Paragon. This model attempts to integrate the various forms, domains, qualities, and diverse learning process available to any individual at any moment in time. Each of these domains contains their unique characteristics and strategies and is developed to varying degrees in each individual. They focus on short term learning strategies. These strategies all occur within larger patterns of living that map out stages in human maturation. The interplay between learning and development is complex and recursive. After providing this in depth look into the developmental aspects of learning, along with the notion of SelfDesigning and the various modes of learning available to the inquisitive mind, we will now look directly into the experiences of 27 SelfDesign learners as they recount their time in the programs and its effect on their lives since then.

Figure 27. Devon Girard joined Wondertree at age 10, leaving public school forever, and eventually becoming a Wondertree Board member
Chapter 4: Research into Graduate’s Experience of SelfDesign Programs

The small man
Builds cages for everyone
He
Knows.
While the sage,
Who has to duck his head
When the moon is low,
Keeps dropping keys all night long
For the
Beautiful
Rowdy
Prisoners. (Hafiz, 1999, p. 206)

Introduction

Not for a minute am I implying that I am a sage. For this thesis we interviewed 27 learners who participated in one or another of our SelfDesign programs over the past twenty-five years. According to them, I am not a sage either, but it seems that I am a dropper of keys and the enfranchiser of young spirits. SelfDesign is a program that encourages and invites people to be free, to realize their full potential as human beings in a spirit of love and respect. It is a program that has consistently acknowledged who people are in their integrity. The intention of our program has been for human transformation and for self-actualization. The experiment was to see if we could create a program to support self-aware and self-responsible individuals to learn through living and introspection. Our interviews of graduates gives an insight into the significant influence and long lasting effects our program has had on their lives.
Overview of the Study

For this thesis, Dr. Pille Bunnell and I interviewed 27 graduates from the three SelfDesign programs who have been out of our program for at least 2, and usually from 3 to 6 years over the past 25 years. (see Table 3 for learner demographics) The learners range in age from about eighteen to thirty-three years old and they have all told us how their experience in Wondertree, Virtual High and/or SelfDesign has affected their lives. Another criterion was that they had to have all worked more or less directly with me as the founder of the SelfDesign process. The vast majority of these interviews were done by Dr. Pille Bunnell. I personally participated in four of the interviews. Dr. Bunnell and Julie Robbins transcribed the interviews to create a total of 282 pages of transcripts. I read all the interviews and edited the text down to 132 pages of information that directly represented a full variety of experiences and ideas from the learners. What was taken out was descriptive and conversational material that did not directly represent statements specific to the question of the effect of our program on their lives. This sorted and correlated information was then further condensed and organized into emerging themes and topics. The overall topics are: a) reasons for leaving public education, b) overview of the programs, c) learning attributes, d) self-actualization, e) relationship and f) meta-perspectives.

Of the 27 learners in our study, only two had never been to school, and my daughter had been to school for only two weeks in kindergarten. In addition to this, of the 25 learners who had some sort of schooling experience, only 2 of them enjoyed school. These two individuals joined our program in grade 9 and 10 because they thought that it was going to be more relevant and exciting than their current public school experience. Therefore, out of our 27 learners surveyed, 23 of them did not enjoy school and essentially dropped-out, or as our Indian colleague, Manish Jain, prefers to say, they walked-away from the experience of schooling.
Before we discover how our three programs changed our learners’ lives, I would like to overview the previously presented reasons why these learners left public education. Echoing the Gates funded study on U.S. dropouts, these interviews highlight the stories about how school was not fully serving the learning needs of the learners. Many of them experienced psychological threats and intimidations from teachers and, in addition, physical threats from students. Many of them were bored; they were not engaged or challenged by the schooling environment. Of the learners who participated in this study, about one half of them started our program in the early grades and did high school in public school, while several never went back to school at all. The other half did public elementary school and then walked-away and joined our program either in Virtual High or in the SelfDesign Learning Community. Only two of the 27 learners were successful in public education and yet now all of them have accomplished either academic or life success in their own rights.

Overview of the Methodology

I developed some very general and open ended questions, eight in total that followed this format; “At the time, what did you think was important about the program or the experience?” and, “What influence has your experience with the program had on your life since then?” I did not have expectations or a theory about what we were looking for from the questions. Not unlike the integral principles, which are the foundation of SelfDesign itself, these arose out of our experience and praxis. With all the interviews completed, the audio recordings were then transcribed in entirety. I then went through each of the interviews one by one and selected short excerpts of material. Following the influence of grounded theory, I noted through reading these interviews that sets of topics began to emerge from the field of comments (Charmaz, 2006). Starting with the first one, I organized each quote into an appropriate category. Each subsequent interview was then read and material was put into existing categories or new categories were created if the material did not fit into any previous category. At the end of organizing the information from all 27 interviews I was able to see what
categories had emerged, which ones were common and which ones were unique to individual learners. At this point, I went through the data looking for common statements that could be used to say that there was a consensus or common observation or understanding about the program. I was then able to describe the overall learner’s response to the program and its effect on the learners with some accuracy. Although some of the material matched what I generally understood the program to have been about, I certainly saw that there were long-term effects from the program, which I had not predicted. The details of these observations are noted in the thesis.

The areas presented in this thesis were not predetermined and were created as an attempt to accurately represent the data expressed in the interviews. Because this work relates to all of the following research methodologies, action research, appreciative inquiry and living inquiry, Dr. Bunnell’s involvement as a parent of one of the learners, and my involvement as the ongoing learning consultant with all of these learners is included in the stories woven by the learners (Carson & Sumara, 1997). Appreciative Inquiry, with its positive-oriented search for the best in people parallels the very nature of the praxis of SelfDesign. “AI (Appreciative Inquiry) involves, in a central way, the art and science of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2009). Appreciative Inquiry’s focus on liberating the human spirit and constructing a better future tunes to the underlying methodology of SelfDesign (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2009). Certainly, in overviewing the interviews, 25 of the 27 interviews illustrated appreciation as a shared value from the SelfDesign programs. Two of the interviews had an undercurrent of “angst” in that both of the learners were aware of the positive effects of the program on their lives and were, in their own ways struggling to accept and to understand the process in terms of their own lives at the present time.

The variety of learner statements that created specific topics was then further organized into each section in the outline. While many of the comments focused on learning and the unique experiences each of them had in our programs, they also represented
consistent insights and opinions about the quality of those experiences even though none of the learners had spoken to each other and many of them were in different programs and eras and have never met. The fact that their statements echo the now developed theory or praxis of SelfDesign is interesting and important. When I began the work, I was experimental and explorative, as I did not have models and theories to follow. That the conclusive theory and the reports of our learners independently match is an important confirmation of the SelfDesign team’s intentions, conscious and unconscious.

To begin this research I generated a list of 47 learners that I worked with directly, for two years or more, over the past twenty-five years. Letters were sent to these learners inviting them to participate in a one-hour interview and share their experiences of SelfDesign and it’s long-term effects on their lives. All of the learners were between the ages of 18 and 33. Everyone we were able to reach (35) was interested and willing to take part in the study. We interviewed a random selection of the larger group that agreed to participate. Only two of the learners are from the most recent online province-wide SelfDesign Learning Community.

**Overview of the Survey**

Of the group of 27 surveyed, 11 participants are female and 16 are male. Ten participated in the elementary programs and 13 participated in the high school programs and four participated in both the elementary and the high school program. The average number of years that the learners participated in Wondertree, Virtual High and/or the SelfDesign Learning Community was 4.1 years with the most being 12 and the least being two. Of this group of 27 learners interviewed, ten of them were in single parent families, nine of them were in families that experienced a divorce or separation during or shortly after their involvement in our program, and eight families remained as two parent families.

The current average age of our survey group is 27.6 with the oldest being 33 and the youngest being 18. All of our learners are either in university or in the working world except
one who has just finished high school. All of them have been out of our program for more than 3 years. The actual range since leaving our program was from 3.5 years to 21 years, with the average number of years that our surveyed group has been out of our program is 11.5 years. Of this group 15 are in committed relationships and 12 are single. Of this group three have children and 24 do not have children at the time of this thesis (2009).

**Overview of the Interview Group**

The first column represents the number of learners that met the criteria of learners who had worked directly with me for two or more years in the program indicated. The second column represents the number of learners that we interviewed for this research. There were 47 learners that met the criteria of potential interviewees and we made an attempt to contact all of them. We were only able to reach 35 of the learners in the time frame allotted. Of these 35 we randomly chose 24 learners for interviews and then ended up interviewing 27 as 2 of us were interviewing and wanted to interview the maximum number of learners available in the time frame we set aside for interviews. These learners represent a reasonable cross section of the kinds of learners in our programs and illustrate a diversity of backgrounds and current life paths with a mix of learners who went on to university and those who didn’t.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Total Possible Interviews</th>
<th>Number of Interviews Conducted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wondertree Learning Centre</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wondertree &amp; Virtual High</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual High</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wondertree Learning Centre (later)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SelfDesign Learning Community</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 28. Number of learners available and interviewed and their corresponding areas of involvement in SelfDesign
2009 Occupations of the 27 Graduates ...

Wondertree Learning Center 1983 - 1990

1. **LB** - B.Ed. - mother and learning consultant for SelfDesign Learning Community
2. **EN** - computer graphic design - Electronic Arts (Australia)
3. **BT** - professional dancer with New York dance company - CedarCreek
4. **HD** - B.A. - youth counselor in Vancouver
5. **NK** - B.A. - M.A. - student and T.A. in Vancouver

Wondertree and Virtual High 1983 - 1997

7. **JD** - professional musician - web designer living in Creston, BC
8. **EH** - professional computer programmer living in Vancouver working for SelfDesign
9. **LN** - small business manager - computers - living in Prince Rupert
10. **LL** - sales clerk

Virtual High 1993 - 1997

11. **KC** - Ph.D. student - computer research living in Edinburgh, Scotland
12. **TT** - B.A. Honors - fine arts - business manager interior design in White Rock
13. **HE** - political activist - SFU student living in Vancouver
14. **SO** - B.Sc. - computer programmer for Microsoft living in Victoria
15. **LU** - computer game programmer, - M.Sc. student working Microsoft London, England
16. **LN2** - B.A. M.A. - carpenter - marketing living in Victoria
17. **KX** - professional film-maker living in Vancouver and working for SelfDesign
18. **LN** - B.Sc. M.Sc. - senior policy analyst living in BC
19. **SB** - B.A. political science - journalism - student living in Regina, Saskatchewan
20. **UC** - street magician and musician and living in Vancouver
21. **TU** - barista and flight school student and living in Vancouver

Wondertree Learning Center (later) 1993 - 2004

22. **FD** - high school student (graduated June 2009 now living in Vancouver)
23. **CL** - (B.Sc.) - college student in engineering going to UBC living in West Vancouver
24. **TW** - B.A. (M.A.) - student living in Toronto
25. **KF** - student and working in accounting living in Vancouver

SelfDesign Learning Community (online program) 2002 - 2009

26. **TZ** - (B.A. Honors) - student - political science M.A in England
27. **DC** - (B.Sc.) - student living in North Vancouver

**Interviewers**

PB - Pille Bunnell Ph.D.

BC - Brent Cameron

The learners responded to a set of general and open-ended questions asking about their experiences in our programs and about the influence our program has had on their lives. While the learners spoke at length about a variety of aspects regarding their involvement in SelfDesign, consistent, overarching themes emerged throughout. Reading through each interview, I organized each emerging theme under an appropriate heading. Overall I identified twenty themes that emerged from the interviews. While some responses like; reasons for leaving school, deschooling, and success in life were in response to the questions, the majority of the themes emerged as common attributes of learner experiences reported in response to the more open-ended general questions. It is interesting to see how profound the effect our programs had on their lives and how many of them said that our program had transformed their lives. Those interviewed focused on different learning attributes and the importance of relationships in SelfDesign, along with reflecting on the significance of self-responsibility and self-authority on the journey towards self-actualization and on the meta-perspectives provided through their experiences in this work. The following is the list of the themes that will be covered in the rest of this chapter:

- reasons for leaving schooling - unhappiness, boredom etc.
- what were the important aspects of SelfDesign
- freedom to design your own life
• choosing what to learn
• love of learning
• happiness - enthusiasm
• learning how to learn
• project based learning
• computer use
• holistic learning and critical thinking
• being respected
• self-esteem and self awareness
• self-responsibility and accountability
• transformative experiences
• relationships
• community - synergy and consensus
• transitions back to public school
• deschooling
• looking back - positive and negative aspects
• livelong learning
• success in life

Innovation Implies Stepping Outside of the Box - Reasons for Leaving Public Education

The stories of the youth involved in the SelfDesign programs (including Wondertree and Virtual High) begin with the decision to leave public education. Only 2 of the 27 learners left school feeling like it was a positive and supportive environment for them. LN2 stated “I was happy there . . . I was getting good grades, it was working for me” and LN added "I was a good student, and had a good future lying ahead of me, it wasn’t like I was doing badly at school or suffering under that system.” For a few learners like TT, choosing our program was a cognizant move into an educational environment which was more fitting of their preferences:
“I remember that [choosing to participate in Virtual High was] a very conscious choice . . . I had also been reading some other material about education and young people and home learning. And it really took me on a real shift in my thinking in terms of taking responsibility for my own life as an individual, instead of following a path that had been established without any involvement in it.” For others, the troubles the traditional schooling model caused in their lives became overwhelming or significant enough to be a reason to leave.

Un-happy in School

Some learners identified that they simply weren’t content at school. EH stated “I was unhappy at the elementary school I was attending” and LU stated a little more forcefully “I absolutely hated [the high school that I was in]”. DC and SB identified the environment and context to be lacking, which in turn affected their attitudes at school. DC “found it so boring. And there was quite a sense of rebellion about being there ... it was a very un-affirming atmosphere”. SB concurred, suggesting that while he got very good marks in school, he also got “in trouble a lot ... and it was not for fighting or anything like that, it was more for talking back, I guess, or kind of goofing around”. These students were not happy at school, and the school environment didn’t affirm their desires and needs.

BT had “trouble with the kids and just the set up, the structure of - like the environment” which HD described as a “sort of a foggy, fearful kind of place where I didn't feel like I was really engaged with any of the other students or the teacher” so he regularly “ended up sort of pretending to be sick so that I wouldn't have to go to school. I would play hooky every day”. The language used by HD to describe the school environment hints at what HH resented about public education in schools. He “didn't like what I saw as very authoritarian, disciplinarian approach. . .I didn't like the fact that an adult would punish a child unfairly and be able to get away with it.” While KC didn’t use the same ominous language regarding school, he found there was “no depth in school, everything was disjointed, no support to look
deeper or beyond” and as a result “I was basically on cruise control, doing as little as possible to get along, it didn’t feel like what learning should be about.”

The withdrawal of these learners from the school environment and the relationships they experienced there with staff and students were very significant for some of them. TZ observed that “I attended public school from kindergarten through to the middle of grade eight. ... I was in a gifted program. But by grade six ... I was deeply depressed, very frustrated and very stressed out.” Also describing his state at school as depressed and stressed, EN had the added burden of being “labeled as ‘learning disabled’ and it was very frustrating all the time.” This burden and the fact that “Despite it being elementary school, I was still laden down with work” led EN to have “feelings of hatred toward my teachers. I even felt suicidal for a bit”. The stress of school and what UC describes as “a lot of pressure on people, students” led him from what he calls a bad time to Virtual High, which he saw as “proposing something that sounded more in line with the values that I held . . . you know, be in control of your own life,” as opposed to doing “the same boring thing every day that you don’t like.” As shown, the public education system is quite detrimental for some learners. At the moment those who choose to leave the established system tend to be ostracized and characterized as ‘drop-outs’ with little to offer.

Deschooling and a New Relationship to Learning

Moving from a system that is controlled by an authority out there to a program where you are allowed to be the author of your own life, to be your own authority, requires a transition period. This transition is commonly referred to as deschooling and each person would take the time they needed, from a few weeks to up to a year to adjust to the opportunity to be self-responsible. SB stated, “I remember that being a recognized thing, actually, when people came to Virtual High straight from school, they would always talk about a period of deschooling” and long-time SelfDesigner JD commented “over time when I got used to seeing the signs of “deschooling” … that sometimes they just needed space to do nothing for a while,
and kind of like reset their internal clock so they could get used to being in a place where it was about self-motivation and self-observation as opposed to constant outside authority.” As this process unfolded, so did the learners themselves. SB rhapsodized, “people were growing, and would do it in their own time as they go through the process of de-schooling and realize it is up to them, and they start to take steps to see how far they can go in a self directed kind of way, after that period. ... Even now I’m just starting to take off in a lot of the ways that people would talk about back then. It showed me that I could . . . It really changes your perception of what’s possible, how far you can go.” It seems that once students had experienced the SelfDesign program, regardless of where they went afterwards, their perception of learning (at the very least) had changed. LN eloquently notes, “I have perfect confidence that if there is something I don’t know about, I could learn it. I think that some people in the more traditional public school system just think that once they’re out of school they’re done learning . . . To me, that’s one of the bests things I got was the whole concept of lifelong learning and all that kind of thing.”

Again, those who participated in SelfDesign just saw learning different thereafter. JD noted that in the program “There was so much more self – not self-grading – self-observation to say, “Hey, how did I do?” and it was just more of an experience than the end product. When I did go to a school for a couple of days. ... What I observed ... was so much about getting the grade or getting the test right.” SelfDesign fostered an interest and control over the learning process with LN suggesting, “I think though that Virtual High did help me step back and sort of own the process of learning.” TW added, “when you’re directing your own learning, you don't hang out at the back of the classroom, you don't slack because you're always learning and you're always kind of pushing yourself, well you're not even pushing yourself, but you're always kind of reaching and grasping and you're involved.”
Overview of the Programs - Freedom to Design Our Own Life

Learners who came to SelfDesign, including Wondertree and Virtual High, from the formal schooling system, found their new environment and their relationships there with others freeing. As opposed to a place where students felt depressed and stressed, JD described Wondertree as offering “just this amazing sense of community. So different from feeling like you’re going to a place and something is being done to you.” TZ agreed, saying, “you’re stuck in a box your entire life, and then there’s no box” and KC added “the focus became being part of a community and that was really what developed and what was interesting”. According to LB, students were “really encouraged to be who we are and to explore our own creativity, at our own learning pace”, which as SB notes “was very different from my experience in school which was where you just were forced to pursue even if you were not at all interested.”

SB also noted that there were a few frequently used mantras in the programs, including “Everything is Negotiable”, and as FD observed, “just having choice and having an option helped me immensely”. However, as TZ noted, the newfound freedom learners garnered in SelfDesign, also came with responsibility. And unlike some responsibilities, with the realization that there is no one to blame and only yourself to rely on, as TZ observed: “And to be honest, nobody could help me with that and it was nobody else’s business - it was my life, it is my life, and it was taking responsibility for something - my education, for my future . . . I don’t want to understate the difficulty of that realization.” While the learners became accustomed with the different privileges and responsibilities of SelfDesign, they discovered a learning environment and processes, which were decidedly different than what they experienced in public education. For example, NK noted that one of the “great things that Brent did with the program was make a sense of play ... as part of the actual curriculum”, a comment which seems a bit startling. With our over-scheduled and over-managed lives, we have all forgotten how to play. Our children are seldom involved in free play anymore as sports and recreation are scheduled and organized into team sports, which are taken very seriously.
Though the environment was more positive and fun for many of the learners compared to school, TT notes that “the amount of dialogue, the amount of exploring, and the amount of opportunity for accountability, and taking on projects and exploring things about oneself, ... And having that freedom presented to explore consensus models and the whole questioning of education and exploring, basically making it up as we go along” also distinguished the program significantly from what most of the students were accustomed to.

During “the Big Group Meetings” (Figure 29) described by LL as “sort of like a weekly bonding experience . . . I learned a lot about listening and evaluating myself, I guess, and being honest with myself about emotional things that are going on in my life and learning how to work through various things and help other people to work through theirs.” Along with that “essential self observation” inherent in the programs, KC also noted that “The fact that I had an office and a personal space was very new to me, we were also the first young people I knew who had laptop computers”.

![Figure 29. In Virtual High we had weekly “Big Group Meetings” based on consensus that became the heart of our learning community](image)

In SelfDesign programs students were encouraged to explore and play, they were free, they felt like they were part of a happy community, and they also used dialogue to achieve consensus and adhered to high levels of personal accountability. It is no surprise then that CL
asserted, “Well in just about every respect, it wasn't really school. I did a heck of a lot more than most people in elementary school do in their time.” The fact that these learners were stepping outside of what they often experienced as a predetermined and crushing public education system and into SelfDesign, the small and nurturing, learner-focused program was not lost on the participants. As LN saw it, “we were 30 students, but what we were doing as a school as an educational experiment. . . you know the first and only in the world that was doing what we were doing and therefore people would come to us because they found it interesting and worth emulating or studying -- so that idea that a small group of people could do something radically different and create ripples, I think was part, an inherent part, of the experience of being in Virtual High.”

**Choosing To Be There - Choosing What to Learn**

In this section on learning, the voices of the students clearly indicate again and again that they relished the freedom they experienced in SelfDesign. Having choice and exercising self-determination around learning was an enormous factor in their overall enjoyment of it. As SO asserts: “the most important thing was the freedom there and the ability to follow your interests and do what you wanted to do as opposed to being spoon fed you know, the standard high school curriculum. It was so amazing, its such a novel idea, I couldn’t really even believe that it could be possible to do that . . . that really changed my whole attitude to doing that work.” Indeed, LL’s language in discussing this indicates a parallel between public school, lack of choice, and depletion of a learner’s curiosity and interest. She observed that “people going through regular public school get less curious because they get it … sort of drained out of them. They’re being taught rather than choosing to learn. And it’s not necessarily their choice to be there. So I found that I wanted to learn, I wanted to be there.” BT echoes a similar idea, suggesting that because she attended Wondertree early in her life, “that curiosity wasn’t kind of killed out, I was excited to see what was going to happen.”
Exercising their own volition over a myriad of options led to engagement and an increased interest in learning and discovery for LL, BT and others.

Learners in the SelfDesign program knew they weren’t in a cookie-cutt program, where one model was supposed to be a right fit for everyone. Allowing for the natural unfolding of each individual and their interests in the SelfDesign environment, seems to signal to every learner that they are unique and gifted individuals with a definite and worthwhile place in the world. You can hear that in EN’s words, recalling “going to Wondertree was, I think for the first time I had the opportunity to sort of relax and develop kind of naturally or in an environment where I think you and other people were working quite closely with me to kind of figure out or experiment and find a style of teaching that suited the way I would think and the way my mind processed information (giggles) I guess.” This innovative approach, fundamentally based in “the idea that choice is something that students should possess and exercise. Not just something when it comes to sort of what to do with their lunch hour between classes, but academically, you know in terms of curriculum” or for that matter, even being in school itself, changed everything for the learners. “. . . Because I did make that choice, everything came naturally and easy” is how KF summarized this.

Freedom To Learn - Love of Learning

The importance of choice and freedom comes up repeatedly in the learners’ words about a love of learning. The experience of being included and consulted affected the learner and in itself became a highly motivating factor for the SelfDesigners. NK explained: “It's sort of the idea of education from below, rather than education from above, so this idea that there is a great deal of participation in the child’s choice of curriculum and choice of structure in the end, you really set your own pace, you set your own goals, you set your own sort of paths and direction. And it's not, of course, unsupervised, but I think that that for me that was the real key difference, that sort of, that set Wondertree apart from the kind of mainstream school system in the most important way.” Being consulted made the learners feel honored: “I think
that [being respected] was the most important thing for me . . . I found that in that program I 
was able to explore subjects which the mainstream schools didn’t even come up with”.

Learners were recognized as individuals in that the program “allowed you to [learn], on your 
own time, whenever you felt like it” according to CL, and, as BT remembers, “we could 
actually do whatever we wanted. As long as we were motivated and learning something.”

Significant, considering the number of students who came to SelfDesign programs 
labeled with some sort of learning disability, was the lack of focus on improving academic skills. 
LU enthused “They were not important! I still don’t consider them important within that 
context . . . I mean having the distinction of teaching somebody the academics, or teaching 
them to enjoy, or to want to learn things, such that later in their life they can go and pursue the 
academics if they so desire, it’s a no brainer which one you would want to teach people. I think 
that where there is enough desire ability will follow.” This same approach was especially used in 
an area of perennial concern for many parents and educators alike - students learning how to 
read - with similar results witnessed in every learner. When asked whether there was 
encouragement at SelfDesign for KF to learn to read better, she stated, “I think it just happened 
naturally, I was introduced to more interesting reading materials. And I think once I found 
something that I enjoyed reading - it just came naturally . . . I remember pretending to read by 
flipping pages in a book because I just wasn't interested. But ah, I actually think what really 
turned me on to reading was some of the role playing games we played at Wondertree.”

Because the reference point for learning in our culture is usually school, and because 
most students gleefully embrace any opportunity they can to escape the obligatory knowledge 
acquisition requirements a school enforces on them, many people lack faith in a person freely 
choosing to learn. Indeed the learners themselves often mirrored both the rebellion to forced 
learning, but also the excitement and commitment to the new territory, that being learning which 
is self-directed. TZ, in remembering his start with SelfDesign, stated, “I remember that quite 
distinctly, my first reaction was jubilation. All of a sudden I could do whatever I wanted, and this 
is a little bit tongue in cheek but just the realization that ‘Hey, you know what, I don’t have to
follow the rules anymore.’ But then my rationality kicked in, and I thought ‘I can actually do something with this opportunity’. And so, I'm still trying to answer that part of it and sort of testing, testing the rest of my boundaries, whether it's self-induced boundaries or not. ... I would say that at some point in the realization, there is also a rational part of me saying, ‘Oh my God, what's next? What can I do with this now that I have the space?’” Clearly, TZ felt not only the freedom of being a self-directed learner, but also the opportunity and responsibility it presents too. HE displays the appetite for learning he’s developed through SelfDesign saying: “Yeah, the love of learning I've already spoken to. Like in, in focusing on the process of learning I mean I've really become enamored with almost anything. I mean for me, I just love … I can't stop learning. At university now … I almost feel held back because its not a full process of just taking in everything that might relate in a dynamic model/network to a particular series of concepts being introduced, its about checking off a list, ... I skim through things and just pick out the most salient features and then reassemble them all myself” . . .

*Enthusiasm Based Learning - Happiness*

Apparent to the students was that there was no subject matter they had to learn, but they had to be willing to learn. To this distinction, the focus on enjoying the process of learning was also stressed, which contributed to the feelings of liberation for many learners. As HH sees it “I think that the public school system really wants there to be a separation between free time, where you're allowed to enjoy yourself, and play. When you're in a school where you're not enjoying yourself, you're just supposed to work. Brent absolutely broke down that artificial barrier and from this perspective, you should spend every moment of your life enjoying yourself . . . if you aren't doing something you love, find a way to make it fun.” Touching on the energy that having fun while learning provides for continued exploration and growth, along with that sense shown by other learners that one’s inherent curiosity and passion for learning is killed in the public school system, HE added, “It’s the genius that every child has in their own unstoppable, insatiable curiosity. It gets dumbed down in the production
model of teaching. Yeah that’s definitely, that’s definitely all Virtual High was — [it] resuscitated, that which was dying, and then gave me the tools to really have fun with it, to play with it for years and years and years without it getting boring.”

Learning How To Learn

In thinking back to learning how to learn through the SelfDesign program, LB came back to incorporating play into successful learning. She stated, “I just think I had this confidence that I was fully capable of absorbing information because we had done it quite playfully and out of interest rather than out of a sense of curriculum.” LN added that “another thing that I got that I think was really good was how to learn, and more than that the confidence that I can learn.” This again reiterates the importance of freedom, pleasure, and choice in fostering a learning environment where one is invited into the practice of learning as a process of rejuvenation.

The practice of learning how to learn was summarized by a few learners including LL who said “One thing that I often tell people when I’m trying to describe these schools is that I learned how to learn. So I learned how to go about saying, “OK I’m interested in this topic, now how do I go and find out about it? So I could go and look up a class that’s offered somewhere about this topic, or I could go… I mean now there’s the Internet so I’d just go online and find everything that I need to know on Wikipedia or Google or something. [chuckle] But I… yeah… I’m not afraid to go out and pursue my interests and learn about things.” EH added more detail, describing the praxis as “identifying an interest, or choosing some kind of direction, for study or effort, finding collaborators, moving forward together, overcoming learning curves, obstacles, shifting course based on new information: the whole adaptive life process. That’s what is similar, that’s what is consistent in my life now with what we were practicing there. And I honestly, I don’t expect that to stop.” EH also recognized that this particular skill, learning how to learn, was a fundament of Self Design. He recalled “there was a lot of practice, there was a lot of implementation . . . I mean that’s the meta-skill that Virtual
High put up front, that is barely given, that is barely acknowledged in … I’ve never heard of it [taught] in schools.”

Many learners recalled particular tools and techniques they employed to assist in their learning. “I felt quite empowered by how much I academically got out of the program, and I think it gave me a valuable set of tools to tackle any academic situation that could’ve been thrown at me afterwards. Some of the skills he provided us with, are some of the particular sort of techniques that I still use to this day in many ways, like using memory hooks” recalled NK. LN2 also recalled an impactful “course about different memory tricks and about how the mind remembers things, different ways we can remember” which vastly improved his test results, decreased his study time, and led to his music instructor asking him to share the techniques he learned through SelfDesign with other learners in the course. LU added “At one point Brent did a course in NLP, Neuro-Linguistic Programming . . . [I remember] setting up physical things as sort of tools that enable internal states, positive internal states, and as well as various ways of setting up rapport, trying to enable a positive communication with somebody.” Many students recalled the incorporation of NLP techniques in SelfDesign, which was specifically recalled by UC, “just being careful with one’s language can produce different effects…Maybe that’s not the lesson [Brent] was trying to teach but [chuckle] that’s the lesson that I picked up, and I think that was important, I’ve used that a lot. It’s also been useful for me not just for talking to people but more for analyzing what I see, and for interpreting what I hear.”

Besides the tools mentioned above, HE went into more detail regarding the overall methodology of imparting the practice of learning in SelfDesign. He said, “It really was the methods we were given. They talk about this in university now, wanting to teach more methods for learning, wanting to explore more ways of processing information, categorizing knowledge and research and what have you. But they don’t do it very well actually, and everyone kind of admits that at least in my department at SFU. But at Virtual High, I mean it was done very well, with Neuro-Linguistic Programming, with just all kinds of approaches to
the modalities of an individual’s optimal learning [strategies]. . . . And Brent ... I think did an amazingly elegant and insightful job teaching that kind of thing, from putting us ... in our own 3 and 4 and 5 dimensional models, constantly building these kinds of models around us whether it was on the tables, or, you know, on the ceiling in a circular calendar, you know, instead of a two dimensional calendar on a wall, having a systemic calendar in the sky. And putting us in our own models ... kind of dynamic systems and having us think through there. . . . Brent always focused a lot on that, ... he was interested in ... how we process things... . . . I mean for three years at least, in my experience, it is constantly VAK, Visual Auditory Kinesthetic, and then constantly you know ‘how did that look to you’ or ‘where are you in that thought?’.”

These tools which encouraged learners to adopt different perspectives and views to analyze issues and understand them more fully, prompted HH to offer “I think that Wondertree allowed me to grow and expand my imagination”, and in reference to the SelfDesign matrix in particular, she added that “you’ve got to create your own universe”. It seems that these imaginative, playful, and engaging methods of entering into subjects and learning more about them, prompted HH to liken learning like this to a child’s way of being, noting that “a child sees all of the possibilities and the magic in the universe.”

Figure 30. In the summer of 1993 I presented the second of 15 summer “Intensives” on SelfDesign for educators.23
Project-based Learning

Project-based learning was a focus for the students, as it was a way to become actively involved in learning about an issue and affecting change. EH rightfully recognized that when the Virtual High program was being run out of a large, old mansion in Vancouver, BC that “we had the project of living and learning in this house together and that involves scheduling, it involves accounting, it involves cleaning, so that was a project, also, right – the meta project. And it’s just such a good reflection of reality.” He also seems to benefit from bringing in the learning and processes of projects into his everyday life, noting, “There has been a continuous kind of projecting aspect to my life. This project or that project, or it’s a learning project, a healing project, or a work project, or a relationship project.”

Throughout their time in the SelfDesign program, several learners were awarded high praise for their work on some significant projects. JD recalls some of the projects and the experience of sharing them with others saying, “we had done projects that were involved in the world like making the Carmanah Valley computer program for Western Canada Wilderness Committee, or other projects, and . . . a group of us went to Turkey and presented at the NGO conference on Habitat for Humanity, [another group of us] went to Findhorn, Scotland to an international conference there. So it was an amazing experience because we went to these conferences and it was pretty unique that we were there that young with the kind of project that we were doing. And it was a phenomenal learning experience to take a project that was from our school and take it into the real world, you know with these conferences that were for adults.” LN concurred about the significance of working on various projects for the learners, adding “but what I gained more from Virtual High was an attitude of being able to create change, and knowing that I could do it” as projects put learners in direct contact with the world in which they were living and offered them an opportunity to engage and participate in very real and beneficial ways. Certainly a few public schools create relevant community based projects, yet few do so with such intensity and engagement of learners for periods of a year or longer so that the projects actually make a difference.
Students in the SelfDesign program were introduced to personal computers, before it was commonplace in our society for every home to have a one. While schools were taking students to computer labs for a couple of hours per week, Wondertree and Virtual High were using computers as tools, integrated into projects and learning ventures. The focus was to have a computer for each learner. As TT recalls, “My being introduced to computers was significant.” SO got his own computer while he was a Virtual High student and as he says “I spent lots of time playing around learning things, experimenting with things, and so I really got passionate about computers, definitely.” Not unlike other learners who participated in the SelfDesign program, he now has a degree in computer science and works in the computer industry. One learner, who also became engrossed in computers and their functionality while at Wondertree and then Virtual High, is still clearly following that passion and looking for ways to apply emerging technology to the SelfDesign program. He said, “I’m very excited about fusing … because I’m on the IT [Information Technology] side … about fusing the learning, like the open source learning community phenomenon with SelfDesign methodology. Cause I think the essence of what works in both of them is very similar. However in the software side it’s all about production and rational understanding, and on the SelfDesign side its very holistic, and I think one can… I think that the IT side can be of service to the other. And I think the distance education potential offered by software is really really crucial to the success of SelfDesign.”

Holistic Learning and Critical Thinking

While it may be clear to some simply by reading the learners responses to the interview questions that the ability to think about issues critically was a skill developed in our programming, some of the students explicitly articulated this. TZ said the following: “I think this program [SelfDesign] is necessary. I actually think it’s essential if we want to develop a society that actually has people who can think, who can think critically. I talked to my professors on a regular basis and their number one complaint is that the students can’t spell and they don’t
have critical writing skills.” The ability to thoroughly understand issues from multiple perspectives and determine how one feels about that particular issue along with articulating that to others is a skill which helped learners know themselves and in turn their communities better.

Being Respected

A major difference for learners between how we operated at SelfDesign and their previous experiences in the public school system was the way they were treated. CL said “[In Wondertree] there is a much more even plane between a teacher and student. [In public school I had] problems with my teachers ... I didn't really like being talked down to ... I loved being able to sit down with you [Brent] and Verena and we could talk about things, we could talk one-on-one. When we had our group things in the morning we would sit down and everybody just felt free ... The other thing was, I think that you guys were always honest with me and I think that I was always honest with you. There wasn't any feeling or need to lie to one another.” TT concurred saying “the most significant thing to me about the program is the willingness to take seriously a youth's decision”. LN2 suggested that “The fundamental philosophy is to reference inward rather than outward” which is supported by LL's perception that, “One thing I was thinking about was respect, definitely. That everybody not only tries to respect each other but does respect each other. ... When I was younger I had people comment about how I was comfortable talking to adults and not nervous of authority figures and that sort of thing. A lot of that was because we were not treated as kids, we were treated as equals. And I think that was true with all of Wondertree and Virtual High.”

Self-Esteem, Self-Awareness and Self-Expression

Self-esteem emerges from the experience of being loved and from what we love in the world. Whether it comes from inside out or from our engagement with some aspect of the world, it is our fascination, our passion for life that seems to be what life is and should be
about. TW’s ability to explore and follow her passion in SelfDesign was clearly instrumental in feeling good and confident in herself. She stated: “I remember meeting with the Minister of Education when I was about 11 years old because they wanted to cut off funding for the school, as always. I remember sitting down and talking with the guy, whatever his name was, and showing him the work that I had been doing and talked about the books I have been reading, and of course he had never read the books I was reading. And that was good. It was very validating for a child.” This dose of self-esteem through immersion in the SelfDesign philosophy, prompted to HD to recall “I think that [Wondertree] changed the way, I viewed myself. I remember before going to Wondertree, I really thought that I was stupid, and that I was really inferior to the other students in the classroom. I didn’t feel like I fit in at all, and then at Wondertree, because people were encouraged to follow their interests and encouraged to think about things, I finally felt that I wasn’t stupid and I think that had a pretty profound effect.” FD added, “I learned how to love myself and to accept others for who they are, not try to change them or make them like me” and HH who also felt like the gift of a “very very healthy self-confidence and a belief that I was special” was something every learner in SelfDesign received, feels that “if not for Wondertree I never would’ve thought it possible for me to be practicing this type of law I practice today.”

By becoming someone who is comfortable with oneself, we are inclined to reflect and become more self-aware - opening to how we feel and who we are in numerous situations. While concurrently validating each learner for who they were at wherever they were at in their lives, we also provided training for students to gain greater self-awareness. LN2 recalls training that involved “observing your own mind and your own patterns. Your way of thinking, your way of speaking, and learning about yourself and how important – how wonderful and useful that can be, more so than learning about a specific subject.” And while self-awareness was something we valued as important to cultivate in learners, our approach entailed living forth those values we upheld ourselves. As evidence, LU stated, “I don’t know if [self-awareness] was within [SelfDesign’s] ethos, but its certainly what I’ve gotten” and that this
was achieved by “teaching through example of reflection . . . through experience, not from any sort of instruction.” Through cultivating a strong sense of self-esteem and self-awareness, learners gained more and more confidence in expressing themselves. SB described his experience at Virtual High as an opportunity to “just kind of be myself and sort of learn much more about who I was I guess, than what I had been allowed to before. So the intangible side of it, like: speaking was one, and knowing what you do like and you know like how to believe in yourself, and things like that. Those were sort of the qualities that I really got then.” By learning more about himself and others, LN gained compassion and an effective mental space in which to operate: “I think that one of the most valuable things that I got, like one of the best things I got out of [Wondertree and Virtual High] was . . . how to express yourself and how to get along with other people but also sort of how to understand people better as well as how to express yourself and how to … have a positive outlook on things.”

Self-Responsibility - Accountability

To varying ways, learners in our programs came to the understanding that this is their life and that they are the author or ultimately the authentic learner. Some had a sense of self-responsibility at home and yet all of them lost that in school to some extent. Our program was designed to give back control of your own life to each learner. NK stated “I think my parents also sort of helped instill a great sense of responsibility in me . . . but also was very much cultivated in the Wondertree structure.” As BT saw it, “how I learned at Wondertree definitely helped because it helped force me to find out what it was that I was interested in and helped motivate myself. And it wasn't because I was trying to get a good grade or trying to get approval. It was because it was something that I wanted.” While some of the students took up this challenge of being responsible for themselves fairly easily, others needed guidance, time, and occasionally a little push. KX humorously recalled, “He [Brent] kicked me out of the program, so I had to really look at my motivations for being there . . . what I was going to do . . . From that point on I . . . started making changes . . . that was really the most fruitful
period, because – yeah my health got way better. I was able to participate better in the community.” While we don’t feel like we have agency over our lives when others are making decisions for us, “this thinking for yourself thing” as TW called it, was an essential understanding to cultivate, and invitation to extend, for each learner to grasp what was involved in being a SelfDesigner. The story below describes one such occasion during Virtual High when I used the opportunity in the circumstances to make the idea of self-authority as tangible as possible to the learners.

I remember sitting in a circle with thirty-five young people between the ages thirteen to seventeen. We were a couple of months into our new program called Virtual High. The youth were a combination of high-school dropouts (who chose to walk away from schooling for a wide variety of reasons), graduates of Wondertree, and a few home learners. The majority of the learners had come from public schooling and were somewhere between despondent and angry about their experience of public education. The three learning consultants who were working in the program had called the meeting with the intention of getting the community together to decide on some issues that were coming up for the group. Many of the new young people to the program were reluctantly defaulting to me, the older of the three learning consultants, as the authority.

Feeling the tension in the room, at one point I stood up and walked into the center of the room. I then walked up to every learner or small group of learners, and pointing at my own chest with my left hand said, “I am the authority here!” I said it in a loud and challenging voice. I confirmed the suspicions of many of the learners, that although this program was supposed to be student centered, that it was just another example of the adults being in charge. After I had directly stated my authority to each person in the room, I asked them if they noticed where I was pointing when I told them that I was the authority. They had not noticed, so I showed them specifically again, that I was pointing at myself. I emphasized the difference and gave them a chance to experience the difference between stating that, ‘I am the authority here’ and pointing at them rather than pointing at myself. I added, ‘If you want to know
anything about Brent Cameron, then please ask me because I am the authority here. If I want or need to know anything about you, then I will ask you because you are the authority there. We are each, for ourselves, our own authority, and none of us, especially me, have any authority over you or anyone else.’

Figure 31. The left hand pointing at the observer, to bring awareness of awareness in the moment

If this premise is true, then the only possible way for a group of authentic people, where each one of us is an author of our own lives, to get along together, is for us to listen, respect and to cooperate with each other. If we don’t all listen and respect each other, then we can always resort to the idea of a boss, an authority out there, telling us what to do. I personally do not want a boss, I do not want you to be my boss and I don’t want to be your boss, I have enough work to do just being responsible here for myself. This is just one example of many many social events that occurred in our learning community that helped to establish self-responsibility and authority of self as the core process in authentic learning towards a realization of self-actualization.

In time, the learners not only understood that this kind of agency over oneself and one’s actions was a necessary part of the program and their lives if they wanted to truly be the writers of the story-line that they were living. LN recalled in SelfDesign there was “a very strong sense of responsibility for self and that was … I mean that’s all about what Brent’s model is about. And I think that was definitely very influential for me . . . I have more of a
sense of responsibility for my own actions. I’m less likely to blame whatever ills are in my life on anybody else. I tend to do a little more self-reflection if things are not going well.” The more each of us lived in the realization and freedom of self-responsibility, the more we realized what it added to our lives. TT offered that his “sense was that the whole notion of accountability was brought up in Virtual High, which even though it existed in the public system, it was more the disciplinary function as opposed to the notion of accountability and responsibility and what can be gained from that. So I found the notion of accountability was a more positive, was focused with a more positive light in Virtual High than it was in the public programs.”

**Transformative Experience**

I think in large part because of this expectation of self-responsibility and accountability, that participation in the SelfDesign program became a significant and positive life-changing experience for many of the learners. The way we operated was monumental in terms of what it meant for the learners. UC explains “... the most important thing about my experience there was just the fact that it existed at all. Umm, and what I mean by that is... well, let me think how to put this... umm ... [thinks] Imagine that you were living in a house, and you lived in your house your whole childhood, and into your teens, and then all of a sudden one day someone said “hey, have you ever gone through this door?” and you open up that door and there is an entire extra wing in the house, that you had no idea existed. How shocking would that be, and how long would it take you to get over the mere fact that there was another wing in the house. I think that would be life changing [laughs]. All these rooms! All these things going on! ... the world we were told existed is not the world that actually is. As it turns out the world could be something so much bigger, and just that feeling!”

SO speaks directly about the transformative nature of the experience too, saying, “I think the most important thing was really the paradigm shift that took place for me, personally, when I started going there ... Hey, what do you want to do? You can do anything you want. And really try and find something you are passionate about and go for it. That was an amazing
liberating experience for me, and I think it really changed my personality a lot for the better. Really made me more optimistic and really opened my eyes to opportunities out there, in the world. UC concurred adding, “Just the psychological change of ‘wait a minute, things don’t have to be this way that I was always told they were.’ What could compare to that? What could be more significant? Self-fulfillment . . . “ Many learners, like LN2 realize that “my life would have been really, really different” if he hadn’t gone to Virtual High, because “everything in my life before that and after that is just so different that I … I just can’t imagine what would have happened if I hadn’t gone.” The experience of participating in SelfDesign, with its high degree of self-authority and self-fulfillment, opened the eyes of many of the learners to a different landscape for the remainder of their lives. It changed how they viewed engaging with the world and learning, and shifted their focus to that which was in the locus of their control. As LU stated, “I now buy into the Wondertree ideal that everyone is curious. . . . And the belief in life long learning is basically the belief that one can find fulfillment in any experience which one encounters.”

Relationships

Because of SelfDesign’s focus on the needs of the learner, and as a result providing a high degree of freedom, choice, and respect in our program and interactions, the relationships we had with one another regardless of our age differences, were authentic and open. Though learners who step outside of the public schooling system are frequently the recipients of concern by people who assume that schooling is the environment in which healthy socialization occurs, our learners do not agree that schooling and the relationships there foster that healthy way of relating to others. As TZ eloquently put it: “There's this false assumption that home schooled kids are socially awkward and that they don't know how to interact with people. ... The home schooled students, the alternative students [in SelfDesign] that didn't go to normal school; I found them to be actually better socialized than any other students. They could carry on an intelligent conversation with an adult. They weren't afraid of
adults, as they didn’t see adults as teachers, as officers. They can interact with younger people, because when you’re home schooled, you’re not just talking to kids your own age. You have the ability, you have the circumstances, you can interact with people outside your own age group. And I think that is a far better socialization tool than any school environment.”

A significant finding mentioned by all the learners was the nature of relationships and community that emerged as a parallel aspect of our programs; indeed several learners discussed our learning community when they talked about relationships. When asked what was important about the program at the time of his involvement, LU mentioned “The community. Entirely sort of the feeling of implicit trust among the people that were there.” Although the learners often referenced community in regards to relationships, first, here are their thoughts on relationship skills. As already mentioned in the section on learning how to learn, being able to assume different points of view and perspectives was a quality encouraged in and through our program. In discussing what he got from the program, KF said “I feel compassionate and ... I think I’m more aware of how other people feel than I would have been - and taking their opinions and being able to see the value in different opinions and different points of view.” KC really echoed the effort put into appreciating other’s views saying “We, as a community, didn’t bully one person into going with the majority, we actually sat and listened and decided to change the majority’s opinion. And learning that level of negotiation, and listening to other people, and actually figuring out what I want and what it is that they want, and actually figuring out a common path, was incredibly healthy thing for me to go through.” With another mention of our scheduled sharing times, KC added “the Big Group meetings gave us a chance to really talk about our issues, issues that were real to the members of the community, we got to identify our own problems and to find a way to solve them - we actually sought consensus whereby we really did go after making everybody happy. Not just having everybody acquiesce, but actually having it win-win, have everybody get what they wanted. And that was not easy a lot of the time.” LL mentioned here that while this doesn’t need to happen every time, that building consensus where people are genuinely
willing to do whatever is decided upon as a group is “respectful. It goes back to the whole respect issue”. Self-development and the realization of potential and balance or harmony within emerged in concert with the development of synergistic interpersonal and community relationships.

Community - Synergy and Consensus

The interdependent dynamic between intra- and inter- personal development cannot be emphasized enough in any of our programs. JD insightfully remarked “the reason I keep mentioning community is because that’s where the self-observation comes in. Because we were in relationships with each other that were quite rich, then it was a safe place for someone to say ‘Hey, something you were doing today was hard for me.’ So we would get feedback from each other and thus be able to learn about ourselves”. EH noted the correlation between his personal focus and what he manifested in community with others, both during Virtual High and since then. He said, “The context of consensus and positive intent at Virtual High in general really put the emphasis on cooperation and respect . . . I think that the whole skill set, the tools and the practice, has been so important in my work relationships and my personal relationships.” As people we need other people, not just in proximity but in deep deep engagement. If we never have it, we seem to live our life with some unknown longing, if we have it, we cherish it and seek it more. We are all here to be seen and heard, to be discovered and to discover, and this is something our program offers learners. Years after completing our program, and as a testament to this notion and practice of healthy relations, KC said “I base my current life in what I consider integrity in relationships; and that goes back to Virtual High.” Moreover, LN2 added, “I’m still happy to be in contact with a lot of friends from that time.”
Some students attended Wondertree or Virtual High, before returning or before beginning in the public school system. To say that there was a culture shock in that transition is not an exaggeration; however while some learners found the shift positive, others found public schooling more problematic for a variety of reasons. For LN, the loss of freedom and choice was what she noticed, saying “It was a bit of shock when I went back to high school because of the regimented-ness.” The differences for TW were much more negative on the whole, with her recalling “I found the whole school [experience] very violent and oppressive and rude. Girls were ashamed of their bodies, there were so many eating disorders. . . I felt that the relationship between students and teachers was really negative and that the teachers, in general, assumed that you were trying to get away with something. It was just very antagonistic.” While LB discovered some of these differences too, she detailed the process of changing over and being in public school, stating “I did notice when I went back to school for grades 6 and 7, I was sort of shocked between the separation between teachers and students in that personal way somehow. I was used to being treated as a valued member of a small group versus ‘a student’ who was not allowed in the staff room . . . I was quickly a leader in groups, and often the liaison with teachers because I was quite comfortable speaking with adults as real persons.” LB seemed to quickly parlay her confident and balanced relationships with adults at Wondertree, into a leadership role amongst her peers in public school.

KF was another learner who expressed a healthy self-esteem, which guided him well in his goals and reintegration at school. He said “I think one of the major things that helped me with my life was just being comfortable with who I am - as a person and not really worrying about fitting into certain molds. I think it helped me more, later on, when I went back to high school. Not really worrying about fitting into certain groups of people or peer pressure kind of thing. I was just able to be myself and I knew what I wanted to get, what I needed out of school.” Interesting to note is the academic ability level most students found themselves with once entering public school. SO noted, “I really surprised myself as to how easily I was able to
pick things up again . . . I did a math course and I did very, very well, and, you know, all the other subjects were easy to pick up again” and HH added “when I went back to public school, I was ahead of everybody in all of my subjects. So I guess that speaks for itself really”. While many of the learners had little problem fitting in either academically or socially after taking part in the SelfDesign program, for some there remained a noted difference. LL articulated “one main thing I notice is . . . the people who have been through schools like I have, or home schooling . . . tend to be more open minded . . . more willing to question things”.

While students who returned to public school found their way through this setting which was quite unlike our program, many held a deeper appreciation for personal relationships - both for their part in enriching the lives of the learners and for also co-inspiring them in their goals. HH fondly recalls, “When I went back into the public school system, I met some amazing mentors in the public system as well. People who I would keep in touch with for the rest of my life . . . You can find those amazing educators. The difference is that they’re constrained by the curriculum, they’re constrained by the limits placed on them by public school system and it is also very much the luck of the draw.” Others again discounted the focus on academics in schooling, and looked to what they saw as far more important life skills. KF said, “[school] it’s a way to keep kids busy ... I don't think you really learn anything. I missed, what, five years of core elementary, and I went to high school and I still graduated with honors and going on to post-secondary education ... I think it's more important to develop interpersonal relationships than it is the actual academics. “ KC also recalled that his experiences at Virtual High which fostered consensus building and self-responsibility, created a focus on relationships in his life, regardless of the setting. He said, “I have a goal out of an experience of deep and meaningful relationships. I also am aware that most of the people that I meet and work with have never had that in their lives, and therefore do not know or have a clue about what they are missing.” In again acknowledging some of the differences, particularly around relationships, between SelfDesign and the public school system, UC noted “for the duration of the time I was there they [learning consultants and mentors] were friends.
And you know having friends who were adults, is a good thing. I think its one of the ways that people learn to be adults, or should be, is by seeing what adults do. But, I think the fact that they were more in the friend mould than the authority mould, I think made it more possible to relate to them and to understand where they were coming from ... It would be difficult to consider any of the teachers that I had in my school experience as being friends, and certainly I never liked any of my teachers.” The agency each learner had over their own lives and the quality of the relationships they sustained while in SelfDesign, were often cherished memories the learners took with them while they navigated a notedly different model in public schools.

Looking Back - Positives And Negatives

As one would expect, the learners had much to say in terms of their overall experiences in our program. Some of the specific skills mentioned by the learners, like FD here, include: “I learned about myself. I learned to speak up. I learned to talk. I learned to accept others. I learned to accept who I am and I learned to love myself. So the things I learned that are life skills, that I learned from Wondertree are indispensable . . . the “I” statements and being respectful has just opened up an entire world for me.” CL, in discussing his parent's initial reticence regarding the program, said that once he started “showing more confidence, showing more willingness to just talk to them and to be vocal with them,” they began to see development and progression and their fears lessened. Interestingly, most of the skills that the learners mentioned are largely intangible, but absolutely pivotal for the person who has gained them. EN fondly remembered that, “the teachers there [in Wondertree] recognized my strengths, and kind of used my strengths as a way for fostering my learning, especially in areas that I'm quite weak . . . So kind of using my strengths as a way of learning stuff that I wasn't good at, or even keen at learning. I think I'm pretty lucky that my parents sent me to Wondertree. I think my experience in Wondertree was far richer and interesting than other kids of that age group going to regular public school.”
While I do not think that any of the learners who participated in our program wouldn’t agree that the program was rich and interesting, students were also able to identify academic skills and ideals that they felt did not receive enough focus at Wondertree or Virtual High. KF stated that “There were certain instances where ... like I’d want to learn math in particular, but the LC’s [learning consultants] weren’t able to teach it and I remember having to try to learn out of book and not actually be instructed on those things.” KX mentioned that “I had difficulty in post-secondary, with my writing skills. I didn’t have the rigorous academic life that, you know, other kids might have had . . . We never had to write essays. We never had to come up with a thesis statement, no debates” and LL has similar fears about a lack of writing skills stating “I don’t know how to write reports or anything like that because I’ve never needed to. So, sometimes I worry about it, if I was to go back to school, would I know how to write all these various papers.” Though not a similar academic skill per se compared to those already mentioned, HE lamented “we didn’t understand the way to, the alternative ways to, or at least I didn’t, to represent our progress or our work or the standards we achieved ... I think there wasn’t enough coherent focus on how to present and rationalize ourselves to the world as we kind of graduated, if you will, from Virtual High.” These thoughtful responses in identifying areas in our program that weren’t as good as they could be for learners, provides insight and guidance for our work in the future.

Another negative that CL identified was that Wondertree “was like a bit of a small island that you left and went from, you know, very very close friends, very close almost family like people you saw every day, that related to you in the same way compared to the real world where everybody is callus and cold to each other.” Indeed, after mentioning that he felt that remaining at public school would have led him into relations or choices that would not have been uplifting for him, UC said of the SelfDesign environment, “I can reasonably say that the culture, socially at Virtual High was ... a lot healthier in terms of ... fostering reasonably friendly healthy human interaction. I think there was, a pretty large . . . for lack of a better word, ‘hippie’ influence. But I think that’s a good thing, I think that the positive side of that is that there’s a
focus on loving warm human relationships, there’s a focus on relatively ... gentle interactions in politics and approaches to conflict.” While providing a warm and loving environment is something we will always strive for to kindle the best possible space in which to learn, it is a shame that this feels so different from what learners experience outside of SelfDesign.

As seen already, an area that the program excelled at in the minds of our learners, was the general environment and context to the learning. JD enthused “I remember how rich it was and think, ‘Wow, that was wonderful, I would love to go do that again, learn more!’” Signifying how unique and monumental it was, EH said, “For me the core difference, the core distinction, from school, was that this was, ‘this is real, this is your life.’” While again remarking, as we’ve heard from others over the relative unimportance of an academic focus, SO was happy that SelfDesign provided a place and space that he valued, saying, “if you can have the opportunity to do whatever you want and to explore topics that interest you as a child ... I think that’s a much better approach to be able to just experiment with things and follow your passions and find topics that you really enjoy, that’s a much better way to go about it, about learning.” Yet while appreciating how fruitful our learning environment was and how it changed her as a person, DC also acknowledged a major challenge to that progress. “My life is bigger and richer and kinder and more peaceful as a result of this program, absolutely ... [yet] the conditioning of needing these institutions or schools and careers or whatever is so powerful and so integral to the way our type of society is built, that regardless of the program that was offered to me in SelfDesign, I still felt that just the waves of, ‘what are you doing with your life’ type of thing. So ... [my feelings of legitimacy still has] to do with the fact that I can tell you that I’m going to ... University, even after this process of deconditioning and self-reflection that I have been through”.

While every learner perceived their time with SelfDesign and their paths into the future differently, it is clear that our program was instrumental at ‘the right time’ in the lives of many learners and continues to be an important part of their stories today. As UC put it, “I think that, more than anything else, [Virtual High] has made me a different person ... [Virtual High] came, of course, at a very sensitive time. I think teenage years are a very emotionally, you know
[laughs] … lets say “rich” [both laugh] … and wow, like, I think that probably the only time that that kind of experience could have happened and have such an impact on me … To answer the question in a simple way, nothing more important than the simple fact of [Virtual High] existing. That was the critical thing.” The programs based on the SelfDesign philosophy and framework have sought to engender lifelong learning. They focus on providing a supportive and caring environment based on freedom, choice, and self-responsibility to sustain a life of discovery, purpose, and passion. DC engaged with SelfDesign at a profound time in his life and allowed the process and intent of the program to fully support his being in the creation of a new path in life. He recalls, “This is where my biggest decision I ever made was that night in March or April, when I decided to heal. To add what SelfDesign offered me was basically like a venue for healing … [SelfDesign has] given me self-validation and it's given me space and time. I knew there were people who I could call and say I need some help with this. None of my friends in high school had that. It's interesting ... it's quite something, it's very profound.” Regardless of how learners got to SelfDesign, many of them echo SB’s sentiment: “I think that it was the ideas of [life long learning] that we were talking about all the time, and just keeping that natural spark of curiosity going – that what was encouraged in me in Virtual High, and its stuck with me all this time . . . even now I’m starting to achieve a lot of stuff that was sort of the idea from lessons back then.”

Lifelong Learning

Indeed a passion for learning and discovery is something which several learners mentioned as coming out of their time in the SelfDesign environment. LU stated, “The other thing [that is still important from Virtual High] is sort of the ideal of life long learning. I don’t know how much I was interested in learning before Virtual High … but I know that at this point, my taste in things, topics to learn more about is extremely wide compared to most people . . . I mean a lot of people seem to have the attitude that once you finish with school then you do your career. I’ve just gone back to school while still doing my career … and I personally
consider that an extreme positive and that attitude is born directly out of my reflections on Virtual High.” Learners have chosen to view their ability to learn new skills, information, and perspectives as integral to a life really worth living. The apathy apparent in many students attending public school is viewed as the recipe for nonfulfillment and resigning oneself to live in an impoverished state. TZ observes “In my personal experience in British Columbia, school is seen as a chore, it's seen as something nobody really wants to do, ... and the passion for learning is not there ... They just want to have a life, make it through ... The worst part of that is the lack of innovation. I think that's really the scary part. ... Everybody's more concerned about paying their taxes, paying off their mortgage and just making it through life, rather than making life ... living life to its fullest ... I think it's a direct consequence of this monopolistic education system that we do have that has managed, whether accidentally or purposely, to monopolize the way we teach and educate ... How do you reshape a society where everything is put into developing this education system. It's as monumental a change as we're going to have to do – what Thomas Friedman named the “Green Revolution”, we are going to have to get green or die it's as simple as that. ... I think the education revolution is going to have to be as radical.” SelfDesigners see good reason for a radical revolution in education; one that puts learners’ freedom, choice, and self-responsibility at the forefront of a life of learning, engaging, and evolving.

Success In Life

No learner went through the SelfDesign program without a greater sense of how to steer their own lives in the direction of their passion and choosing - that is what SelfDesign is all about! That said, as we have heard learners mention already, the supportive environment which fostered this intensely personal self-exploration and growth in SelfDesign is not what learners typically felt they encountered in ‘the outside world’. As a result, for some learners, part of their strategy for success in their lives involved figuring out the structure of those environments they wanted to participate in, whether it is public school or post secondary
learning options or the workplace and their inherent expectations, processes, and regulations. TT mentioned her strategy for getting into more formalized academics saying “it was structurally important for me to get a grip on how to deal with educational standards in terms of how present papers and information, and how to structure one’s thinking so that you can do better in a structured academic setting. So that was important for me and I had to just physically go and pick that up on my own because that wasn’t something I got from Virtual High.” In her pursuit of other academic training, LB came to a similar conclusion, but spoke specifically about the ‘softer’ skills learned at Wondertree which helped her transition. She said, “I’m really glad that I went into a really structured school system and just had to learn to deal with a larger system that was not all about me and my personal choice ... I had that freedom early on and then later I had to deal with those realities. I was perhaps a stronger more confident, less stressed person so that I knew that I could deal with this and know I was still me and was doing it for my own personal reasons and wasn’t going to be too harmed and I knew who I was and that at the end I would have what I wanted.”

While not speaking about a particular environment, FD again acknowledged the learning in SelfDesign, which has contributed importantly to the quality of her life, saying “I've never thought about where I would be without Wondertree because I know it would definitely not be a good place. I probably ... actually I don't know if I would be alive today if it weren't for some of the things I learned at Wondertree.” A consistent factor for all the learners in the survey is that our programs transformed them in terms of the quality of their lives. If their lives were good, then in our program, for the most part, they got better. If their lives were disastrous for any particular reason, then our program shifted their experience and quality of life significantly towards the positive.

When talking about success in life, some of the students mentioned particular skills or training they received in our programs, which contributed to their achievement later on in life. In discussing her current training to work closely with others, TW specifically mentioned, “the whole interpersonal aspect of Wondertree helped with that and conflict resolution training.”
recalling skills she learned in Wondertree and how they are applying to her current career choice as a teacher, LB said, “I was able to communicate with each kid and come to some sort of understanding with each kid ... But I think my early experience of treating people as people. I felt like a lot of discipline issues were avoided simply from insisting on a certain amount of respect but also from giving it. And also from really getting to know students and what was really important to them, and allowed me to plan lessons that way.” HH spoke about the ongoing challenge of creating a balance in her life, and of upholding a central principle in SelfDesign that seeking the pleasure in whatever we do makes it more enjoyable and compelling to us. She said, “it’s one thing to have mastered the technical expertise of your profession, and it’s another to be a fun person to be around. And I definitely try to create that play with my colleagues, absolutely.” While speaking of his current life and responsibilities at work, EN demonstrated his ability to problem solve and look for tools and technology to assist him where necessary. He offered, “My spelling is a little sketchy, but I just use spell checker, everyone knows my spelling is a little off so (laughs) no it’s pretty good.” We commonly looked at everyday situations as problems or riddles to delve into - sometimes easily solved and sometimes requiring the input and effort of many of us - and EN’s openness around finding solutions for things he wasn’t great at doing himself speaks of someone with the self-knowledge and confidence to identify personal barriers along with individuals and things which can help one overcome them.

It is possible and seemingly to our advantage to discover how to be the author of our own lives and in this how to engage with other authentic individuals. To become the author is to begin to appreciate that this entire unfolding creative universe is here in our present experience of it. These statements are intrinsic to the principles learned and held in our SelfDesign programs and are consistent with the comments made throughout the interviews with our graduate learners. “That you … consciously or unconsciously create the world around you; you choose the people that you associate with, you choose the environment that you’re in, indirectly or directly and I think the success you see in your life is often a reflection of your
own internal landscape. And… what else? That if your interactions are not working, that maybe you need to evaluate how you're interacting. Or try a different way. If you’re not communicating properly, try a different way” said LN. While most students were not so inclusive in their values statements, it is interesting to note the consistent similarities from this sample of what the learners remembered.

Many students touched on the importance of quality relationships in their lives. For LL, understandably, liking her co-workers was important. She said, “first I find something that I want to do that makes me happy and then make sure its something that makes a bit of money [laughs] on the side. [both laugh] … For me that’s important to work with people you enjoy working with.” EN was ready to “just to settle down. That's kind of what I'm working on now. Probably my long-term goal is to put my family first ... I think I was getting into a really bad cycle of neglecting my personal life. And these days, that's something I'm working on changing.” EN moved to Australia as an antidote to his workaholic tendencies and is content to get the job done rather than live the job as he had been doing all his life. It is great to hear of someone actively working to ensure that they keep the relationships they care about. BT is another example of someone who recently made a major move in her career to work with people and in an environment that was more stimulating and rewarding for her. She said, “I've had an opportunity to work with a lot of really amazing choreographers. It was one of the reasons I wanted to move somewhere like here and work with a company like this ... I want to go somewhere where I can work with a whole bunch of different people that are all going to come in and create new things all the time. I feel like it gives me more of an opportunity to see how different people create and how different minds work in terms of the art, and I knew that I'd be able to learn a lot more if I was able to work with more people in creation, which is pretty much what this company is”.

BT also spoke to how much she values past learning and experience stating “I'm just hoping that all of the things that I'm learning and experiencing now are kind of building a database in the back of my brain (laughs), and that at one point when retirement gets
closer ... that I'll have all of these tools, and all the stuff that I have learned and I'll just be able
to figure something out.” TU spoke about how important it was learn from the full scope of
experiences and people which we encounter. He said, “I do think that I have an improved
ability to learn skills and facts ... And also part of it ... [is] learning is viewed as a central
activity rather than specialized activity. So its something that sort of through being involved
with it, you become accustomed to the idea of learning from everything, rather than just

certain things.”

In a world of great uncertainty and change, I think it is really positive to see the
acceptance of this uncertainty by the SelfDesign learners, and their willingness to take part in
the emergent processes in which they situate themselves. Like a child arriving on a beach
with a pail of beach toys, DC was approaching learning and making decisions about future
learning options in much the same way. She said “I'm thinking well, where do I want to go and
what do I want to do and so I'm asking a lot of questions like, what are my larger interests,
and if I'm going to be working sometime soon besides the jobs I'm doing now, what is it that I
want to be doing, how do I want my education to play into that.” Furthermore, she attests once
again to the significance of having choices in her success, saying, “I think that's the reason of
my success. I mean, I am very successful in school now. The reason I'm able to do that is
because I am so clear that it is my choice to be there.” Indeed, DC now refers to herself as a
SelfDesigner, and is outwardly espousing the values and principles of our program, which are
now foundational in her life. In what is clearly an ongoing adventure for her, DC talks about
the practice of 'selfdesigning' saying “I'm working on it and am very clear that I'm working on it
and it's like a daily sort of a practice of really just massaging my mind back into what 's kind
here and what is it that I want to contribute here to my own fulfillment and that often includes
being in exciting relationships with other people.” Willing to collaborate with others in a spirit of
positive intent, so that she is directing herself towards that which will bring her fulfillment and
which is benevolent, is how this learner is now embodying our program.
HE expressed his ideas about SelfDesign, saying

It’s the genius that every child has in their own unstoppable, insatiable curiosity. It gets dumbed down in the production model of teaching. Yeah that’s definitely, that’s definitely all Virtual High was – [it] resuscitated, that which was dying, and then gave me the tools to really have fun with it, to play with it for years and years and years without it getting boring.

EH added more detail, describing the praxis as

identifying an interest, or choosing some kind of direction, for study or effort, finding collaborators, moving forward together, overcoming learning curves, obstacles, shifting course based on new information: the whole adaptive life process. That’s what is similar, that’s what is consistent in my life now with what we were practicing there. And I honestly, I don’t expect that to stop.

In this final chapter I summarize the research derived from the interviews of graduates of SelfDesign in relationship to the modes of learning conceptualized in Chapter 3. After reading and thinking about the graduate interviews, I find that they represent a particular kind of thinking, a kind of thinking that I was not aware of when I began the program 25 years ago. The SelfDesign Paragon is an attempt to articulate how human beings learn in natural and ontological ways along with how we can work with learning as a natural way of living. I would therefore like to speak to the comments and observations of the graduates of Wondertree, Virtual High and the SelfDesign Learning Community in terms of the eight learning modes of the SelfDesign Paragon introduced in Chapter 3. I think that this analysis will set the stage for the context of personal and cultural evolution towards more elegant solutions for living and learning in a global and ecological paradigm.
Learning and the SelfDesign Paragon

Many people are confused when, in telling them about SelfDesign, I state that we do not teach courses or curriculum. As a schooled society, often people can only imagine learning as a consequence of instruction. Our beliefs are formed after many years of personal experience, establishing this assumption as the norm of virtually all practice in education today. Many adults cannot seem to fathom that young children can make intelligent and informed decisions about their own education. While I agree that they can not appreciate an educated point of view, I also have come to understand that children can make these decisions, indeed they are the only one’s who can determine what is meaningful and interesting to them at the present moment in their lives. This respect of the rights of an individual to be self-determining is fundamental in the shift from thinking about education to thinking about learning as a legitimate maturational and developmental process. Learning is inevitable as the epistemological design of every human individual is for learning. It was sometime around 2003 when I actually articulated all of the modes of learning that I had witnessed over two decades of observations of human learning, and began to formulate them into a model, which is now called the SelfDesign Paragon. I would like to revisit the Paragon, this time including some of the comments from the graduates. Therefore, here is another look at the SelfDesign Paragon (Figure 32), more through the learner’s eyes than mine.
Learning Mode 1 - Modeling, Bonding

When I was working with the young children in the first few years of Wondertree, I was reasonably unaware of the importance of attachment and bonding. As a trained educator, my education focused on content delivery and not on learning as an epistemological process; therefore I was also not aware of the role of modeling in learning. However, as I watched the children’s unconscious predispositions to astutely imitate what they saw people around them doing, I began to pay attention to this fundamental condition for simple learning. In her interview, JD recalled, “And just how much fun we had together, and how explorative and in the world, you know visceral . . .” I would like to focus on the following words from that comment: fun, together, explorative, “in the world” and visceral. Now let’s consider this quote from Daniel Siegel (2007), “At least three flavors of cognitive representations have been described: symbolic linguistic (semantic, or words), symbolic prelinguistic (images, ideas, categories) and presymbolic
(sensations, notions)” (Child Development, ¶ 2). I believe that we have forgotten how integrated a child’s mind is with her body, how in touch she is with a synesthesia of visual, auditory and kinesthetic experiences.

The experience of the children in Wondertree in their formative years was immediate and whole body. We experienced the world and experienced ourselves experiencing the world. We talked about our experiences of the world, and the children became aware of the rich interplay of images, sounds and feelings entwined in each experience. I was increasingly aware of their fascinations, especially their interest with people in the world who were doing - in their experience - interesting things. I provided every opportunity for them to be in proximity with people doing fascinating things and further provided them with the opportunity to mimic and model their repertoire of behaviors by hiring these mentors to work with the children.

Even at an early age, children begin to associate these three levels with each other in what is called a dispositional representation (DR), which links memories for experiences with emotional states of mind present at the time of the event (see Damasio). Emotions can be conceptualized as being a part of a mental state determined by the physiological status of response of the body as registered in the brain as a representation called a somatic marker (SM). (Siegel, 2007, Child Development, ¶ 2).

Incorporating emotions into the fabric of thought kept the integrity of each learner’s full neurological processing. Learning was fun, and excitement was a marker for meaningful learning. Upon their request, I once provided the children with some math work, like they saw their older brothers and sisters doing in school. When I handed out the math papers, one boy looking down and seeing the paper in front of him full of numbers, burst into tears. I immediately rushed over, grabbed the paper, and tore it up into tiny pieces. I told him that his happiness was the most important thing in the world to me, and if math was going to upset him, that he didn’t have to do any math. The comfort and safety that this boy grew to appreciate in SelfDesign allowed his sense of curiosity and wellbeing to empower him to first
heal and then to eventually learn to read and do math - both on his own terms and on his own neurological development schedule. He is the learner EN in the interviews and today leads a team of artists for one of the largest electronic game companies in the world.

Having the curriculum emerge from the neurological realities of the learners seems backwards and inside out to the current way we have designed our education system. Education today is based on expectations and fitting into professionally determined and prescribed criteria. Schooling is interested in having the child fit the model, to make the territory fit the map. However, I think it is far more appropriate to use maps to understand the territory that the experiences and feelings of learners are genuine, real and legitimate. SelfDesign virtually comes to life and exists as a program when and if a child questions and is curious. The program is a result of the reality of enthusiasm and the consequent behaviors that result from a child being curious about his or her world. I think that SelfDesign demonstrates the possibility of organizing an educational model around natural learning. The process of an educational model based on learning looks, sounds and feels entirely different than a model organized around instruction and expectations. It is possible to extrapolate a structure for the day and the week out of children modeling and discovering. Natural learning is a deeper and richer experience when learners join small and intimate groups that have meaningful conversation as their organizing principle. The interviews reiterated that when, as children and youth, they realized that their voice, and even deeper than that - their desires, and even deeper than that - their beliefs, and even deeper than that - their sense of fulfillment as human beings, are all considered, respected, listened to and included in the community process, then a transformation occurs within each individual. The interviewees felt validated and acknowledged, they grew in the sense that their inner most neurological landscape and nuances of meaning were legitimate and worthwhile. I feel that it is from this seed of awareness that our learners unfolded their unique qualities as human beings. It was certainly a consensus view that the learners felt that we are relational beings and the quality and
quantity of our relational experiences are crucial to our development as whole and healthy human beings.

Throughout this thesis on SelfDesign I have referenced and drawn on the work of Daniel Siegel (2007) and Allan Schore (1994) and their insights into bonding and emotional engagement between a caregiver and a child. Although they are talking about bonding as a dynamic most often between a mother and infant, they do extrapolate this process into caregiver-child and adult-adult relationships. They see good parenting as paralleling the relational patterns and conversational style of good therapy (Siegel, 2007). While SelfDesign is not a therapeutic process, it certainly was derived from and borrows therapeutic processes and incorporates them into the learning process. While therapy is a special case relationship, I think that the principles and practice of appropriate language will naturally broaden the relational dynamic to include positive and engaging relationships. I don’t think that I ever did therapy with my learners throughout my years working with them, however I did incorporate therapeutic language and relational techniques to maximize the positive effects on growth within the context of my relationship with learners and their parents. Speaking more about creating a relational bond and its effects on development, Siegel (2007) offers the following: “Established via eye contact and the mutual attunement of states of mind between infant and caregiver, this alignment of mental states appears to be a central ingredient in secure attachments which facilitates healthy development-both neurologically and socially” (Child Development, ¶ 6). Moreover, in terms of it’s effects on an individual’s view of themselves and their lives: “Ten year olds who were avoidantly attached as infants have a significant lack of autobiographical narrative capacity (Siegel, 2007, Psychotherapy, ¶ 1).

Several of the interviewees mentioned that the adults involved in the SelfDesign work were excellent role models and friends. We worked specifically to bond with each learner and to attune to their worldview and they have consistently reported twenty years after the fact that these relationships were transformative. Reading the interviews has confirmed how our
engagement and involvement with the learners, especially in their teen years, has positively influenced their adult lives.

Figure 33. Each day, the learning community meets around the SelfDesign Mandala table to design, evaluate and manage their learning projects and experiences

Today’s classroom environment is more and more focused on instruction, and on getting children to absorb curriculum content. In SelfDesign, with this expectation held in consideration, we focus on the experience of the child and defer to the story that children tell consciously and unconsciously in order to connect and engage with them in the first step towards an emerging curriculum. I found that a surprising number of new children and teenagers, could not engage in a narrative about themselves in an engaging and interpersonally balanced way. I also saw this change significantly over time through involvement in our program and through ongoing engagement in conversation. The most pronounced change in our learners’ ability to engage in narrative about their own lives happened intensely and quickly in Virtual High. SelfDesign’s team of learning consultants all noticed how unable the teenagers were to express themselves coming from the public education system. Over the next few years, we watched them struggle and engage in intense dialogue with each other and with us. Now after reading their interviews, I am struck with their
excellent and developed communication and narrative skills, which many of them attributed to the experiences they had in SelfDesign.

Not knowing anything about conversational theory, systems theory or cybernetics when I started Wondertree, the idea that our praxis of SelfDesign was actually emerging out of our conversations was first pointed out to me by my colleague, Kathleen Forsythe, who was familiar with these areas of knowledge. The children and I began each day with a meeting around the large circular table in the middle of our learning center (Figure 33). Each day the children would gradually discover how to engage in meaningful conversation with others. The showing off, putting down, and needing attention kinds of motives that skew conversation away from meaningful, engaging interaction gradually dissipated into speaking and listening in empathy and care. With conversation as a bonding activity, much of the value of our program began to emerge and children became grounded and integrated first in their bodies, then in their ideas, and finally in their relationships.

*Learning Mode 2 - Enthusiastic Discovery*

I consider both boredom and enthusiasm to be indicators of human wellbeing. Just like a mother will use a thermometer to take the temperature of her child to see if he or she has a fever, we can read the degree of wellness by a child’s openness and engagement with newness. Curiosity is like happiness, it is a biological condition. When we are sick with a fever, we withdraw from the world and become apathetic because mental activity is overwhelming. When a child is bored, he or she shuts down to stimulus, and are stuck in the duration of time and disconnected to the richness of the moment. I assume that boredom results as a coping mechanism to an untenable situation, a situation of powerlessness whereby anyone is unable to generate out of his or her own will an act that is an expression of authentic inner needs.

I think that vast majority of schooling problems could be solved if children were trusted to choose to be in the classroom, choose their teacher, and have some collaborative
choice in what was being learned in that space. When I was a teacher in the public school system, I observed that most adult human activity in a typical school is invested in dealing with the behaviors that result from an inherent resistance to compulsory learning and the various ways that children consciously and unconscious attempt to sabotage or avoid imposed instruction. On the other hand, a child who chooses to engage in a learning activity out of their interest and agreement of value has an entirely different approach to learning as a legitimate and fascinating process. To quote two of our graduates, EH said,

the program on a whole I think was a really marvelous production. I think people brought their best. I think the learning consultants brought their best, and students … mostly we made the best of the opportunity and had lots of enthusiasm. So I think it was great.

JB concurred adding:

Also the enthusiasm of learning – not just the freedom. So there was a huge amount of enthusiasm as well, and that was very much lacking in my high school experience … and now working on my PhD … I think I’ve done very, very well, and its all because I’ve been allowed my enthusiasm to learn to come out.

According to the Gates funded research, boredom and authoritarianism were the two main reasons why children and youth dropped out of school in North America (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Jr., & Burke Morison, 2006). From the interviews, it was consistently the enthusiasm and egalitarian relationships that stood out in the minds of the graduates as the two most influential aspects of our program. I have personally heard from approximately ten university professors who have mentioned to me or the SelfDesign graduates directly, that they are exceptional students because they are self-motivated and self-initiating learners unlike any other students in their classes. In the case of JB for example, he did not graduate from high school and took a 2-year private computer course after Virtual High, and got a job in Scotland. After several years there he engaged in a 1-year course that gave earned him his undergraduate degree, however, during that year he was approached by his professors and
was invited into the Ph.D. program. This kind of story is more typical of our graduates than unusual.

*Learning Mode 3 - Rote Learning*

I am always questioned if the SelfDesign model covers the basics and how we ensure that children are exposed to all the standard subject areas so they know the range of what there is to learn about. I reply by stating that, although schooling exposes children and youth to all subjects quite well, in this process it manages to turn off and alienate about 50% of all students by grade 6 to about 80% of the learners by grade 12 (BC School Satisfaction Survey 2006-07, 2007). In schooling, although we expose and cover all subjects, we have not been successful qualitatively to empower and enthuse children at the same time, and often quite the contrary. However, SelfDesign encourages each learner to focus on what they love, on what fascinates them and allows them the support and opportunity to develop this area of their learning as far and as deep as they are interested. Initially, during this time, other subjects are usually ignored. However, after several years, a learner’s passion for learning and excellence in one or two particular areas starts to generalize to other areas of interest. Because we are project-based, a focused learning perspective broadens to cover the integration of several subject areas. By the time a SelfDesign learner is of high school age, they are more often than not focused and mature self-responsible learners with one or two highly developed skills and knowledge areas with a developing interest in virtually all areas of learning. SelfDesign learners are well suited to university and to earning a living because they are self-directed and self-motivated learners who have a love for learning and generally a well-developed sense of self-esteem. I think that this message is consistently made by virtually all of the learners in our interviews.

The following is an example of how a child comes to their own learning in their own time, as is encouraged. The fact that SelfDesign does not teach reading underscores my point. Let me refer to the words of one of our graduates who joined our program in grade 3, and in his mind effectively dropped out of school. He stayed with us for approximately seven years before
he began working in the computer-graphics industry. This individual just got married, bought a house and at thirty-three is a team leader in the computer graphics company he works for - one of the largest in the world. Our interchange went like this:

BC What was your experience in public school, up to Grade 3 when you left.

EN I think in public school I was kind of stressed all the time and I was labeled as learning disabled and it was very frustrating all the time. I think the way I think ... even to this day the way I think is maybe not quite the same as most people. I think even the teachers in the public school system found me quite frustrating to work with and trying to teach. ... Yeah I think wasn’t ready for learning to read for quite a while and that was very frustrating for my teachers. But I think naturally I just wasn’t ready. I tried really quite hard when I was about nine, eight years old, etc when I still in public school and they had tons of special teachers, teachers for kids with special needs were working on me and trying to get me to read and I just couldn’t do it and it was really frustrating and I think the more frustrated I got and the more I tried to do it, I just couldn’t.

BC So tell me about your experience then in Wondertree.

EN When I came to Wondertree, I think it was you, you tried to get me to try to learn how to read a page and I got really really frustrated again as I always did and I think you took the paper and and just tore it up. And I think that was ... it was completely unexpected, it was like wow I can’t believe my teacher will let me just not read. Instead I was allowed to take time to naturally start reading largely with my other classmates I think in Wondertree, but kind of learn at my own natural pace and instead of it being this painful, tortuous chore that I always had to do, instead it was quite exciting. And I think where it was kind of exciting is that we started reading things that we were interested in as opposed to something that people were trying to force us to read. It was because I got really excited about reading and I think with your help kind of mentally changed
my approach to reading from it being some really tortuous chore...it felt like
going to a boring lecture to something that was actually really fun and exciting
and I think when my attitude changed, it was something that was really fun and
exciting and not something I would always get in trouble for all the time
because I didn’t do a good job. So going to Wondertree was, I think for the first
time I had the opportunity to sort of relax and develop kind of naturally or in an
environment where I think you and other people were working quite closely
with me to kind of figure out or experiment and find a style of teaching that
suited the way I would think and the way my mind processed information
(giggles) I guess. And it’s funny I’m still that way a little bit, I still feel the way I
think is a little bit different, but I think fortunately at Wondertree initially that put
me on a path where you guys recognized my strengths, I believe, and foster
what I was good at. And fortunately I’ve been able to use that to make a living
and it’s helped me set up my own life and get married and have a good job
and all that stuff, have a home, etc.

I think this work presents a choice of whether we fit the child to the education system or
design an education system to the needs and interests and developmental realities of the child. These are really the two options in the dialectic of the learning politic. The only model I
experienced my entire life, until I read the book *Summerhill* (Neill, 1960) was to expect the child
to adapt to the design of the educational system. I’ve come to realize that the design of the
education system evolved and was institutionalized prior to the establishment of the fields of
developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience. Learning that the design of our
education system met the needs of bureaucracy and the social and economic needs of society
more than it actually met the learning needs of children, I decided to no longer participate in that
system whatsoever. Several years later as a father, when I had the choice of supporting the
system over my daughter, I faced the same choice and it became a simple one - design an
educational model to meet the enthusiasm and developmental needs of the child, my child. One
way to do that was to appreciate that learning is an artifact of development from infant through
to elder. I began an experiment, which constitutes an appreciation of learning as an
epistemological dynamic intimately coupled with living, living in an aware and evaluative way
that is moment by moment filled with choices and opportunities. Certainly we all can learn from
the experiences of our elders through modeling and teaching; however I think that it is now
possible to do so in such a way that it is not at the expense of the integrity of the child. To have
adult knowledge imposed on children rather than available to children to model speaks loudly to
me of two conditions, a lack of trust in the human spirit and a lack of understanding about the
epistemology of what it is to be human - which is that we are fundamentally learning organisms.

Learning Mode 4 - Identity, Maturation

In long and careful reflection on the learning modes demonstrated by the learners in
SelfDesign over many years, I realized that modeling and mimicry were key learning states
that I had never understood before. Now it is obvious and appreciated as the foundation to
natural learning and SelfDesign. The next learning mode that I identified is the kind of learning
that is reflective of self. In Learning Mode 3, children are learning about ideas and facts for
their own sake, for interest and service to their growth in understanding the world about them.
However, I noticed that much of the learning that the children were doing in Wondertree and
Virtual High was related to how, who, what and why we are individuals and human beings.
Much of their experimenting in the world was to find out about Self. I found this to be such a
healthy learning mode, and saw my role as learning consultant in acknowledgment and
deepening of self-awareness and introspection to make it much more congruent through
aligning the conscious and the unconscious processes. Using many of the tools of NLP, such
as reframing, meta-model analysis, and thinking strategies, I was able to encourage the
learners to notice how they learned. This self-observation was further developed in
conversation, providing perspective and the opportunity to develop one’s own story about
one’s own insights into self. The following excerpts from Daniel Siegel (2007) certainly
indicate the importance of narrative in the integration of emotional states as an essential aspect of developing intelligence as a process in maintaining healthy human development. Children's explicit memory for events is greatly enhanced if the content of their memory is discussed with parents (Nelson). This memory talk lets the child know that their experience of events is of interest to the parent and also serves as a cognitive reinforcer of items stored in memory. This, combined with the attachment findings, suggests that the parent's attunement with the memory system and the emotional state of the child appears to enhance the development of the capacity to tell stories about their life. Co-construction of narrative is a fundamental process, studied by anthropologists across all cultures, in which families join together in the telling of stories of daily life (Ochs and others). Many academicians have pointed to narrative as being crucial to a sense of self (Dennet, Stern and Kegan), thus raising the question of whether different attachment histories are associated with distinct internal sensations of self. (Siegel, 2007, Attachment Styles, ¶ 2 & 3).

Siegel is discussing the importance of sharing thoughts and memories within families, and in essence, our community at the learning centers became family for the learners too. Like many of the learners, HH said of her experiences at Wondertree, that “it was really a core group of people who went through - were all together each year so it did become a bit of a family” and in this atmosphere EC said “I learned about myself. I learned to speak up. I learned to talk. I learned to accept others. I learned to accept who I am and I learned to love myself. So the things I learned that are life skills that I learned from WT are indispensable.” LU added, “it was life --- not a “life-changing” experience, but a “life-making” experience.”

In SelfDesign, learners are specifically told that the program is about them, that they are the curriculum. I would often suggest to learners, “You are here to discover who you are and how you work!” This supports each learner in becoming self-observing, self-directing and ultimately, self-responsible as a SelfDesigner. Through this process of multiple perspectives on
one’s own internal process coupled with respectful and engaging relationships, each learner has ongoing opportunities to tell his or her story, to engage in a personal ongoing and interwoven narrative that develops in the context of the community. This self-reflective opportunity with open and respectful feedback from others provides an opportunity for growth through evaluation and critical analysis of what works co-inspirationally.

**Learning Mode 5 - Heuristic and Project-Based Learning**

Learners in SelfDesign engage in ongoing and real-world projects that integrate several subjects into a comprehensive experience. Because projects emerge out of interest and discovery, the motivation to start, sustain and finish a project comes from within, and aligns with the learning abilities and sensibilities of each learner. By learning through projects, learners engage in real world, integrated learning experiences that involve a complex of tasks and interactions with people. Goal setting and project management skills are acquired along the way in context with the success and failures involved in these experiences. Of these learning experiences, EH said:

> We were doing exciting, meaningful, and interesting projects. It was a stimulating environment. Brent introduced projects in a fair and open way at Virtual High, there were three times as many learners and learning consultants and three times as many things going on [compared to Wondertree] - in Virtual High projects mushroomed out of all sorts of discussion groups. ... The difference between Wondertree and Virtual High was that there were collaborators for a wider range of things, and also I was older and more interested in serious projects.

The heuristic style and project-based approach bring a degree of sophistication to the learning process and elements of *learning how to learn* become an emerging aspect of project planning and praxis with the heuristic aspects of self management and evaluation. SelfDesign learners are in the driver’s seat of their own lives. In the driver’s seat, one has to have first a purpose, second a destination or goal, and third a way and the ability of getting there. This all
brings reality to learning and provides any learner with the opportunity to evaluate how they are doing in terms of achieving their own goals. Failure and success are contingent on the goals set and the standards of excellence incorporated into the process by both the self-responsible learner and his or her mentor in collaboration.

_**Learning Mode 6 - Mentorship**_

In SelfDesign, mentors are chosen by learners and in turn mentors can choose to work with the learner. This reciprocal choosing is essential to establish a relationship based on agreements and mutually set and sustained goals and understandings. Here are several comments from our interviews that relate directly to the transformational nature of their relationships with mentors in our program.

**BC** *And then over the years what ... were there any turning points or breakthroughs?*

**EN** There are quite a few. I would say the mentorship program that you set up with Arthur Erickson, the architect. I would say that was a turning point. Of being exposed to a professional work environment . . . I think that kind of helped prepare me socially as well for working in a studio.

**LN2** I mean through the whole time I felt enthusiastic, like I was learning a lot and growing a lot, and it was just, it felt like every day was amazing, meeting amazing people, especially, and working with amazing people - the mentors there I mean and I absolutely loved it. ... the transformational part was the different style of learning and the opportunities of the mentoring that would come our way.

**UC** ... one of the things, I guess conceptually speaking that Virtual High had, was the idea of mentorship or having people who were modeling certain behaviors ... it was important to have people who I could relate to who were older, who were doing their thing and had their knowledge and you could talk to.

The synergistic dynamics in the mentor-learner relationship are mutually transforming. The opportunity to learn about learning in the conversational and modeling
dynamic is astounding when both participants of the dyad are in resonance and attunement with each other. Often the mentor’s excellence could be described as competent-unconscious and therefore the mentor is unable to actually articulate the how of their exceptional ability. A learner who has learned the tools of self-observation and who is able to distinguish the dynamics of their own internal strategies will be able to deconstruct the unconscious and implicit strategies of the mentor. This shared mutual interest brings energy to the mentor and understanding to the learner in such a way to create insights and breakthroughs through a synergistic effect.

Learning Mode 7 - Synergistic Community

From the inception of Wondertree, the circle was an intuitive model for me to enable everyone in having a front-row seat and insuring everyone, including the mentor/learning consultant, was equal in status. I started out in 1983 and again in 1993 with two very different groups of learners. The first group was a small group of children ages 6 to 13 (between 1983-90) who, in the beginning were really unable to either tell their story very well nor were they able to listen to the stories of others. It took many years to carefully design the space of listening so that speaking came from the heart and the integrity of each speaker. The symptoms of imbalance in children such as, showing off, domination or putting down others was consistently challenged, and deep and grounded communication was encouraged and coached. The children learned to modulate themselves and to tune to each other’s emotions. The day that one boy shared the experience of his father’s death the previous night is one example from many, whereby the kinds of conversations around the table grounded the group in our emotions and our reality as people.

In 1993, the second group was thirty-five teenagers in Virtual High, where only four people in this group had had the opportunity to mature through the learning circle of conversation in Wondertree. It was a significant challenge to bring this group of teenagers into one room for a meeting. I worked to negotiate a weekly meeting for one hour as an essential
highly recommended activity in a community of freedom and agreement. In our ongoing efforts to be consistent with our statements, we did not use the terms, have to, must or should for example, and in order to express significance we chose the term highly recommended. At first the meetings were painful, disruptive, rude, challenging, boring and chaotic. Most of the young people had never had a voice before and so it often came out loud, angry and volatile. In the open space of love created in the community and energized by both the learning consultants and the few learners who had been doing these learning circle conversations for years, we gradually created a space where the young people truly felt heard, and they began to feel acknowledged for who they are.

We began to feel the emergence of a sense of community. This attunement of the self to the group was transformational - and the meetings often lasted for hours. Although somewhat painful in duration, the process became fascinating and intriguing for virtually everyone. The occasional shouting and the frequent tears, from both joy and sadness were drawn into a ground of love and compassion, which was created and sustained by every member of the community within the political practice of consensus. Our longest and most transformative meeting lasted three full days, with everyone discovering new depths of what it is to be human. We were careful to design the process so that it held sacred the condition of respect and love - and that if we were able, within this context, to make a decision for action, then we had the confidence that it was a comprehensive and inclusive decision. I informally provided the twelve steps in a negotiation strategy as I incorporated them into challenging and difficult situations. We all clearly understood that a decision for action that did not take care of everyone in the community was a flawed decision.

From my learning in Bali in 1991, I grounded Wondertree and Virtual High in respect and consensus, and we discovered as a community the richness and importance of a politic of respect. I witnessed, as a consequence of this process, a synergistic effect. I can remember, in my schooling experience, how much emotional energy drained away through fear and insecurity, in my classmates and myself. It is considered a norm in our society because few of
us ever experience group behavior that is truly loving and respectful. However, year after year I
witnessed children taking chances, trying new things, risking because of the security of the
group. Individual intelligences seemed to merge and increase in ways that one could not predict
or imagine, yet seemed to exist as a direct consequence of the trust between the individuals. I
observed this over the eight years that I had worked with the younger children in Wondertree,
although not as intensely and profoundly as it happened in Virtual High. I saw it grow and
develop into a reasonably intricate and deeply felt process. Again, here is what the learners said
about our synergistic community:

PB Once it began, once you actually got going with Wondertree, did it turn out to
satisfy what you had wanted out of a school?

JD Oh, definitely. The feeling I had during it, and afterwards, was that it was a
community, like a small village or a family, and that we were creating it together,
and that it was ours. The sense of ownership . . . We cleaned the place ourselves
at the end of the week and … it was just this amazing sense of community.
And . . . just amazing what happens from relationships when you feel like you’re
in it together and creating it together. So different from feeling like you’re going to
a place and something is being done to you. Or it’s just the way it is, and you
have to live with it.

LN2 The experience of being in a community . . . The bad parts being that
meetings go on and on forever and you don’t always resolve any issues, and the
good parts being that you’re part of something greater and you felt you had a
personal responsibility in the context of a community.

KC Who would have thought teenagers could sit still for a couple of hours let
alone six; and yet we did and we talked about our issues and there would be a
moderator. The moderator would change; it wouldn’t be the same person; it
would be different each time and they would go to the board. Whoever had
issues would put up issues on the board, and we challenged each other on
coming to solutions on the community’s problems. Not only in a democratic way, we actually sought consensus whereby we really did go after making everybody happy. Not just having everybody acquiesce, but actually having it win-win, have everybody get what they wanted. And that was not easy a lot of the time.

Again, although the Big Group Meetings and Virtual High itself was not a therapeutic program or setting, I think that our experience in the learning community was therapeutic for all of us. I think that the first order of therapy is loving parenting and caring friendship. The opportunity to tell our stories and discuss our own opportunities to create our future as a community was transforming for everyone who participated in the process. With this in mind, the following quote illustrates the deep importance of coming into balance with one’s emotions and relationships through conversation that is rich in narrative and personal disclosure as well as honest feedback as reciprocation from the listeners.

Narratives are felt to both help make sense of the world and provide themes, which drive future action. The carrying out of these themes, called enactment, may shape a person’s style of behaving with others. Autobiographical narrative thus historically documents events, deriving meaning in an attempt to make sense out of them, and guides plans for future action. As such, narratives are simultaneously shaped by mental models and states of mind internally; externally, as a form of discourse, they are influenced by listener expectation. Views of thought as an internalized form of dialogue point to the notion that attachment histories devoid of discussions of the child’s internal state may lead to a paucity in autobiographical narrative capacity . . . The telling of stories may thus be a primary way in which we can linguistically communicate to others-and to ourselves-the contents of our minds. (Siegel, 2007, Narrative Memory, ¶ 4)

At one point, several of the young people challenged me in the middle of one of our whole community meetings. The feedback they gave me was that my occasional frustration and anger upset them and that they felt that although I was bringing them rich insights into their own
behavior, that I was not “walking my talk”. After initially trying to explain how frustrating a group of teenagers can be, I realized that it was true, I was getting angry more than I wanted to in my life. I realized that I had just ended a marriage, which was very frustrating, largely because I was discontent with how angry I felt in the relationship. In this meeting, I committed to the group that I would personally work on myself to resolve my anger. At the time, of course, I did not know how to achieve this, and internally set a one-year goal for myself, to find out about my anger and to do whatever it would take to resolve this condition. Many of the young people in Virtual High probably never realized that they were a catalyst that led to my personal transformation about a year later.

*Learning Mode 8 - LifeQuest*

In Wondertree, when the children were young, I was able to outrun all of them. I was therefore designated as the monster who would try to catch all the children hiding in the woods and take them to my dungeon to be eaten. After a few years of being a terrifying monster, I noticed that I was able to catch fewer and fewer children as they grew up and matured. Eventually when I could not catch anyone anymore, the game was no longer interesting and we started playing other games. This same thing happened intellectually - for many years I knew more about most things than most of the children. Then in Virtual High something astounding happened; each one of the youth left me standing in a dust cloud as they accelerated into various fields of knowledge and understanding. In our open learning environment, time after time the learners I had been working with for years demonstrated exceptional abilities in their fields of interest. Because they were learning on their own volition, they were exploring to the depths and outer reaches of their areas of study. In many cases I could not explain the leaps in understanding that emerged in them. The consistency of this exceeding in their particular fields of interest became an indicator to me for introducing the learner to new mentors and places like universities, which could engage these young people in furthering their endeavors. As SO mentions:
I think the most important thing was really the paradigm shift that took place for me, personally, when I started going there. ... That was an amazing liberating experience for me, and I think it really changed my personality a lot for the better. Really made me more optimistic and really opened my eyes to opportunities out there, in the world.”

These types of comments are typical to virtually all of the learners interviewed, stressing the very personal, transformational, emotional and subjectively real nature of the learning program. Young people who learned align with their integral aspects were able to make very positive and personally valuable discoveries about themselves and their unique abilities, that amounted to transformative leaps in understanding and ability. This is reflected in these comments by CL:

“I think Wondertree was very much so like the real world. I think the concept is very much like the real world. Perhaps not as filled with work, its filled more with opportunities to go and learn things but it's not this fantasy and fixed reality, that the education system is. So I'm happier being out of high school and into University and looking forward to getting out into the real world and finding the opportunities that will allow me to continue to follow my engineering pursuits in my discoveries of how the world works, since I suppose I can make it even a wee bit better.”

In Conclusion

In any research we hopefully know a lot more at the end than at the beginning. The beginning for me was about sixty-two years ago. In my lifelong learning process there have been a series of significant events and insights into the process of what it is to be human, with one of the most significant being the birth of my daughter and my ongoing relationship with her. It seems that my life has always been a quest for understanding, understanding the world out there and the one in here as a recursive conversation. In that dialectic search for meaning, I was able to use my intellect but discovered that it worked best and that it was true to who I am
when it was guided by feelings of love, respect, openness and happiness. I was an individual who had never bonded to another individual until I bonded with my daughter when I was 30 years old. As a consequence of investing my life in understanding what many people overlook, I have been able to uncover and make explicit some of the hidden aspects which, in my opinion, make life meaningful and worthwhile. The interviews with the 27 graduates were very confirming of my intuitions from occasional meetings with the graduates over the past 20 years. Their stories focusing on consensus, choice and freedom, project-based learning, self-responsibility and empowerment, community, discovery, and respect are consistent with my informal observations of this work over the years. The creation of the online SelfDesign Learning Community was done consciously and retrospectively based on our insights from Wondertree and Virtual High. The fact that the graduates interviewed, about half of whom have not been in ongoing touch with either the program or each other, have attributed such positive effects to SelfDesign is reassuring to the ongoing planning and development of the work. I can say with greater confidence that SelfDesign is a new model that is built on a new way of thinking about learning that was inspired by many individuals’ natural enthusiasm to learn and grow into the world.

It is apparent to me from reading the interviews that most learners experienced a personal transformation as a result of our program. Our program has always focused on learning process and the self-esteem and wellbeing of the learner rather than on curriculum or content. A conclusion from these interviews is that self-esteem and relationship skills seem to have supported our learners well in life as well as academically. It seems, as several learners mentioned directly, content is more or less irrelevant and that with self-responsibility and a positive attitude learners can focus on any content and achieve excellent results. Our graduates have been able to handle significant academic challenge with focus and hard work aided by their ability to create relationships with teachers and mentors. Having choices of what to learn in itself, seems to have transformed the learners. Further, the individual needs for recognition and engagement, which were fundamental aspects of our program, were
probably the single most empowering and transforming elements. Personal safety and a sense of wellbeing were essential for the learners to develop their enthusiasm for life and learning, and consequently these seemed to have had a lifelong influence on their success in whatever they have decided to do. The experience of being trusted and being believed also seems to have had a healing and transformative influence on many of the graduates. Being able to express themselves and direct their own learning, allowed each learner to find a way to be happy and successful in the world in a multitude of ways. They all seemed to appreciate the importance of being happy in whatever their chosen life’s work. While they appreciate achievement and material success, the learners interviewed seem to agree that their emotional wellbeing is of primary importance. Although not all the learners have chosen to go to university, my personal knowledge of these individuals is that they are bright and capable people focused on pursuits not aligned with or needing university attendance. They are incredibly knowledgeable, have a breadth of interests and are engaged in graduate level conversations and thinking on a regular basis. I am continually approached by people who have encountered our graduates in their lives and report to me that there is something special, something magical about how they shine as individuals.

It was certainly interesting to read the interviews and see the unique personalities of each learner coming through their current thinking and interests. It reinforces my understanding that our program really gave the power to the learners, and so must also give the credit of their success to their individual efforts as well. The work of James Hillman (1996) in *The Soul’s Code* ties in very nicely with the dancer, the lawyer, the graphic artist, the musician for example, who used the subjective technologies learned in the SelfDesign programs to focus their skills and abilities in the development of and in the bringing forth of their hidden inner sense of purpose and in the blossoming and unfolding of their inner gifts.

In my early ad hoc research into genius and fulfillment, that I began about the time that I started Wondertree, I found that the happiest and most interesting people were doing what they loved and had found a way to make a living at it. I am sure that this insight shaped my
own life and influenced the way that I influenced the learners that I worked with. It is interesting to hear their stories as they mature into their 30's and establish their life’s work and sense of life’s purpose - doing what they love and making a living at it.

The intensity of our programs created a unique alignment of commitment and passion and allowed for the existence of self-authority and encouraged individuals to think and evaluate for themselves. The interviews echoed self-authority or authentic living as each individual seemed to represent their own point of view clearly and strongly. Their stories also gave me a sense of the development of their compassion and empathy for others as they move through their lives. The development of Self is of an inclusive and loving Self.

The connection between cult and culture is interesting. During Virtual High (1993-1997) when we were getting regular media attention, I was once spontaneously challenged by a television interviewer for the national news. With the microphone and camera rolling she asked me to explain why we were not a cult. I am sure the question emerged from her experience over the day amongst the enthusiastic and focused activity of the group of teenagers. I had to think quickly, and said that if you appreciate that a cult is the brainwashing of a group of individuals to, without question, follow the dictates of a leader, then I think we can easily appreciate that our public schools would much more readily qualify within the definition of a cult than would Wondertree and Virtual High. Our learners have a deep and equal relationship with their leaders, who are an authority only of themselves. The very fact that all actions or decisions are generated by the community in consensus ensures that there is a collaborative and co-inspirational community process. I suggested that in our programs, we are experimenting with and establishing a new culture beyond the kinds of leadership and narrowness that exists in society today.

The obvious openness, humor and challenging thinking demonstrated in many of these interviews shows that these learners are thinking and questioning for themselves. Their sense of appreciation is clear and their awareness and open evaluation of the process with respect and intelligence is certainly the intention of the SelfDesign process.
With each year of involvement in our SelfDesign organization I am more convinced than ever, that the fundamental need of every individual for biological and psychological integrity is realized through an opportunity for choice and self-expression - a condition determined by self that aligns with one’s own sense of self-determination (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1962). A community process that allows for the maximum sense of selfdesign and opportunity within a context of meaningful and positive engagement creates a condition for synergy, whereby an individual seems to increase in self-worth and esteem as a function of inner and relational wellbeing. When the focus of human attention is not external on subjects and otherness, and turns inward to the condition of the only real subject in the universe - subjectivity - or one’s own experience of human experience, we have a transformation of the human condition. Self-observation and introspection as an ongoing process coexisting while we are doing any activity or studying any subject provides a dimension for growth of self that is unavailable when one is diminished to a singular perspective just doing the activity. Living with multiple perspectives while engaged in multiple neurological processes provides a composite of informing systems that, in synergism, produce a condition of wisdom. The polyphrenic and meta-perspective process developed in SelfDesign is one that emerged for virtually all of the learners as they modeled presence, introspection and engagement in their mentors.

In society today there is considerable interest in a seeking of enlightenment, which seems to be focused on the achievement of some imagined goal in the future. One of the fundamental aspects of SelfDesign is presence and the realization that one never will be in the future, that the future is just another now. With the attention on now, and the quality of being, our learners were able to appreciate a sense of enlightenment and fulfillment simply as a way of being present. The future goal disappears when past and future are imaginations in the present. The loss of self to a better future or the loss of self to a wounded past are transformed by being present through the integration of the other, past or future with the totality of this moment. We become here now and responsible as the experiencer of the
creator of this moment. In this aloneness of being at the center of the universe, we appreciate love as the cohesive force in the universe that exists in the gravity of attraction and the radiation of care when we meet another who we realize is also at the center of their universe. Everything else is different, the only thing we all ultimately have in common is our aliveness and our centricity. We are the design that designs itself, and to design is to be in touch with the mystery of the experience of the design.

Leaving the last word to two learners, LN said “That you …. consciously or unconsciously create the world around you; you choose the people that you associate with, you choose the environment that you’re in, indirectly or directly and I think the success you see in your life is often a reflection of your own internal landscape.” LU adds

I would say that’s sort of what being human is, that there are experiences that we find fulfilling for ourselves for some reason or another. And the belief in life long learning is basically the belief that one can find fulfillment in any experience that one encounters. ... the ideal of lifelong learning is mostly the belief that ... anyone can find something fulfilling in whatever they undertake.

Epilogue

For the first 25 years of its existence SelfDesign, in its various forms, was a lot about the work of one individual, me. However, over these past 5 years, with the expansion of our program from a few learners to 1400, we have now become a community of learning consultants whose collective integrity is creating the co-inspirational learning of many learners and families. The growth of this model over the past 25 years has itself been a fascinating experience, one that I never could have predicted or planned. The organization is true to the model of learning experienced by our learners, we are both walking our talk and talking our walk. The program and the organization are emerging in response to the growing desires of children to step into their own authority and design their own lives.
I was initially transformed by the birth of my daughter. This breakthrough for me personally was the beginning of an ongoing transformative process working in SelfDesign. Aligning with the definition of self, not as the ego but as the center of one’s whole being in harmony between the unconscious and conscious aspects of mind, I have grown considerably as a person who is a SelfDesigner. I am designing my self by working within the epistemological dimensions of my being, and through time I am achieving new harmonies and making more connections towards integrity. This maturation of self, this evolving and aligning with human nature is a lifelong process. It does not happen because you grow older, it happens as a consequence of a manner of living that allows for a natural unfolding of human potential. Over the years, I first worked with children, then teenagers, then parents and now I am working as a mentor to younger learning consultants and as a colleague to other elders in our community. It has been a very organic, emerging journey, one of discovery and challenge. The maps that I made to help me understand the newly discovered ontological territory are now serving as reflective surfaces for others to sustain and inform their own introspective journeys.

Over the years, the leaders of our community, our management team, our learning consultant community and parents, as well as our board are becoming increasingly inspired by the results of our work. We are hearing ongoing accounts of transformation and co-inspiration from every corner of our learning community.

The exciting and meaningful aspect of the work at this time for me is to see the ideas being incorporated into the lives of thousands of people learning, and becoming influential in the work of our many colleagues now working in SelfDesign. Recently I was nominated to give a TED talk, and as part of this nomination process I needed to submit references from people who know my work and who understand the impact of this work on society. I have written a great deal here in this thesis, and I have attempted to give voice to a representative group of learners who have graduated from the program. I am delighted to now share the insights of some significant thinkers whom I have the honor to know and work with in our efforts to make this a better planet for all our children.
Here is what some of my colleagues recently said about my work and the growing dimension of SelfDesign as a learning community.

Dr. Pille Bunnell, Ph.D.

Royal Roads University and LifeWorks Environmental Consulting - Vancouver, Canada

The core insight he [Brent] began with is simple; children (and adults) are capable of incredible learning when they are not constrained by formalizations and are treated with love and respect. Based on this core insight, one that resonates with all effective teachers, he has expanded its articulation so that in practice it inspires learners, mentors and teachers; and in description it inspires educators and public.

Brent has demonstrated that it is possible to generate a way of being and knowing that can lead to a sustainable earth. Such a future is based on the trust that individuals are fundamentally autonomous, ethical beings who enjoy working together.

One more thing I wish to add here; namely recently I had the task of doing extensive interviews as a 10 year retrospective with graduates from SelfDesign programs; adults now in their late 20’s and early 30’s. The over-riding theme in what they told me was that they learned to delight in learning, learned to be responsible in a way that was energizing to themselves, and learned to live as loving, caring and competent adults. All of the interviewees have achieved remarkable success in their adult lives. The SelfDesign approach works.

Implications to Future Work:

First, having achieved local success in the province of British Columbia, the global implications are becoming visible. The sustainability of our species depends on many changes, yet one of the fundamental ones that is critical is an attitude of care, responsibility, and vision in acceptance of difference. This, of course, is commonly espoused, but how is it to be achieved?

SelfDesign is one of the approaches that works.

Second, given that Self Design is now abundantly successful, Brent personally is, in my view, on the threshold of a new insights that will deepen and enrich this work. I predict that his work will now move from the social to the ecological; ecological in the sense of a connected
matrix across many localities of human/environment relations. It is an exciting time as it stirs hope in many who live with a deep misgiving of what we humans are doing to earth and ourselves.

Dr. Dan Janik MD, Ph.D (Ed)
Director of American Academic Studies
Intercultural Communications College - Hawaii

I recently had the opportunity to lecture at the University of Helsinki about the second learning pathway, and in preparation, asked Mr. Cameron how I might best demonstrate the process of paradigm shift, an integral part of enthusiasm-based second pathway learning. He could have simply referred me to his outstanding publication, "SelfDesign," but instead sat down with me and demonstrated a paradigm shift based on personal experience, which I was not only able to experience first hand, but to share with educators in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Norway and Denmark, across cultural and linguistic barriers. This is perhaps what makes Brent Cameron most unique among educators: he can vividly demonstrate at a personal, one-to-one level the unique facets and intricacies of second learning pathway education. As a former U. S. National Academy of Science/National Research Council research associate, I feel compelled to state that Mr. Cameron's work is fundamental Nobel-laureate level work that holds within it one of several key solutions to resolving the almost ubiquitous world-wide effects of directed, task-based or coercive first pathway learning.

Dr. David Marshak Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, College of Education, Seattle University and Lecturer, Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University

Brent Cameron is a profoundly insightful visionary who has manifested his insights in the world for more than 25 years. Cameron follows in the footsteps of early post-modern educators, Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, and A. S. Neill, and has evolved a coherent, comprehensive
approach to learner-centered education that is exactly right for the early 21st century. Through his personal engagement with teens and his inclusion of new technologies, Cameron has evolved the SelfDesign educational paradigm beyond Steiner, Montessori, and Neill in that it is more inclusive of the whole child, more internally consistent with its core values, and more adapted for the way we live today in increasingly post-modern societies.

It’s a breakthrough model that could only be enacted with the Web, and it’s a brilliant and currently unique manifestation of profoundly post-modern education, which is exactly what young people desperately need in the incredibly complex society in which we live today. Youths who are educated via SelfDesign will be far more able to act wisely, creatively, and constructively within the planetary culture that is being created in our time, with all of its incredible challenges and opportunities.

Mr. Cameron has a lot to offer in that he is a visionary thinker and doer. Yet in my experience of him personally he listens more than he talks. What comes to mind re pertinent anecdotes are both a couple of informal conversations over meals with small groups of folks and several official meetings. In all of these contexts what is striking to me in my memory is the quality of Brent’s listening. He’s focused, attentive, and engaged. He certainly does speak, and when he does it’s evident that he has carefully explored and considered the comments of everyone else at the table.

What’s evident in his bearing and behavior is that Brent is not focused in any way on himself. It’s not about him; it’s about the work, it’s about how the amazing potential of each and every human being to be gifted in her or his own way can be nurtured and supported.

Robert Greenleaf wrote about “servant leadership” some years ago. He said, “The servant-leader is servant first… It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.” Brent Cameron embodies that concept in that his dedication to his work over more than three decades is profoundly in service of the development of young people to their fullest potential.
Kathleen Forsythe  
*Vice Principal, Doctor of Knowledge Architecture*  
*SelfDesign Learning Community*

Brent has achieved a significant contribution to education in terms of developing an alternative approach that puts children at the centre of the learning process. Many schools say they do this and what happens is not much of a departure from the traditional teaching and learning model. Brent has developed an educational methodology and organizational structures and systems that are grounded in the passion of children learning. The methodology, SelfDesign, is something that can be learned and transferred to other educators and parents who want to support enthusiasm-based learning. Although this work has grown over the past 25 years in British Columbia, Brent is ready now to expand this approach outside our province to the U.S., other countries and other parts of Canada and to expand it for adults and children as a true ground for lifelong inquiry that arises from the natural way of learning.

He does not take no for an answer and challenges the system itself. He has successfully managed to have the SelfDesign program funded without succumbing to the usual government requirements that often stifle innovation. He has done this by challenging and redefining the requirements in terms of children learning so that the government representatives themselves were changed. On the way he has had SelfDesign win the Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence in 2006 even though it is a radically different program grounded in learning and not in teaching.

*Gabriele Rico, Ph.D.*  
*Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Creative Arts, and Humanities*  
*San Jose State University, San Jose, CA*

This experiment, simply put, is that learners learn most effectively when they are allowed to “self-design.” To put learners through the same hoops is stifling at best, crippling at worst.

Brain research of the past three decades is underscoring the fact that our brains have evolved
to be “self-designers.” David Perkins of Harvard University wrote in the 1980’s: “The human mind is the design that designs itself and continually redesigns itself.” All brain/mind research of the past 25 years confirms his statement. Our brains, given free rein, do not want to become idle. Brent’s work on the mind’s self-organization is far ahead of its time, even today as traditional ways of educating young minds still cling to some lock-step ideas of what learning is.

Brent has written a most significant book. This book is not based on ideas or visions only, but on the hard facts of practicing what he has been preaching, on experiment, on actually going out on a limb to show what young people can do when they are liberated from traditional paradigms of education. This paradigm was not wrong, or false; however, the transition from traditional ways to the use of the emerging technologies at this time in our history has highlighted Brent’s message. His message, his practices, are far more urgent today than when he envisioned them. They will reap enormous benefits in how our young enter the world as functional, choosing, flexible human beings.

Reverend Ariel Miller

President, BioRhythms Publishing - Austin, Texas

Knowing what I know about the power of modeling, my relationship with Brent Cameron fills me with great hope, seeing what he models to his organization, and what they in turn model to others. I am truly grateful that my destiny, seems to have intersected with his in some way, in a time where there can be nothing more vital or important happening on our planet, than for peace to be created within individual families, giving our young learners a reason to become passionate about their educational process and future, so that it can then be shared with the rest of the world. This is far more important, I think, than all of the awards and accolades, of which there have been many, that have bestowed upon Brent and SelfDesign.

I am so grateful I am wise enough to listen to my children, and honored their request for our family to join the SelfDesign global program, for this is when our life as a dynamic, joyous, loving, reverent family, truly began. I am completely committed to the work of SelfDesign,
because Brent is doing this work for all the right reasons. And he has created a company of profoundly caring people, all of which are SelfDesigning their lives as well, walking their talk, in complete transparency.

I have no doubt, we will be celebrating Brent Cameron’s name and life, for generations to come. And in many ways, because of the level of interest people now have in what he is doing, I believe he and SelfDesign are just getting started.
Endnotes

Chapter 1
1) 1989 - Northern Telecom National Award for Innovation in Education - the development of ‘Map of Distinctions” mind map of world-class mentors
1991 - Northern Telecom National Award for Innovation in Education - the development of the PowerSmart game for BC Hydro
1992 - Marshall McLuhan Distinguished Teacher Awards (Canada Shield) Award for the Wondertree Learning Centre
1997 - UNESCO award for VillageQuest at the Habitat II conference in Istanbul, Turkey
1998 - CMHC Award with Stanley King for the Sustainable Community Design of VillageQuest - South East False Creek Charette
2006- Prime Minister’s Awards for Teaching Excellence - Certificate of Achievement to Brent Cameron, Kathleen Forsythe and Michael Maser

2) Figure 2. Note. Photograph by Maureen Cameron. Used with permission.

3) Michael Maser M.A. B.A. B.Sc. B.Ed. - Program Director, SDLC (Co-founder, Virtual High and SDLC), journalist, researcher, former geologist
Michael met Brent in 1992 and they worked to create Virtual High between the years 1993 to 1997. Michael, Brent and Kathleen Forsythe worked together to start the SelfDesign Learning Community as a province wide online program starting in September 2002.

4) Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) professor of anthropology Columbia University She studied the American Indian and Japanese Culture. In the 1980’s I was reading The Farther Reaches of Human Nature by Abraham Maslow when I came across the work of Ruth Benedict. Maslow found out that he had the only copy of her talks and essays on Synergy as a attribute of certain cultures and not others. This essay helped me identify the synergistic nature of the Wondertree group, influenced my decision to go to Bali and informed my work with the teenagers in Virtual High

5) Figure 3. Note. Photograph by Michael Maser. Used with permission.

6) Kathleen Forsythe Ph.D. - Vice-Principal, SDLC, Co-founder of the SelfDesign Learning Community and Past President of the Wondertree Foundation (14 year duration); specialist, Knowledge Architecture
Kathleen and Brent first met in 1984 shortly after Brent had formed the Wondertree Education Society. Over the years Kathleen stayed in touch until she moved to Vancouver and joined the Wondertree Board. In the summer of 2002 Kathleen joined Brent and Michael Maser to create the SelfDesign Learning Community as an online learning program in the province of BC.

7) Figure 4. Note. Photograph by Josh Wright. Used with permission.

Chapter 2
8) Figure 5. Note. Photograph by Maureen Cameron. Used with permission.

9) I first met Douglas in 1985 at my friend Sean Mills’ home. Douglas was on a visit from Suffolk, England and was giving several workshops out of Sean’s home. After one evening with Douglas I realized that he had a way of showing people simply and clearly what I had been trying to explain for years. I invited Douglas to visit Vancouver about 12 times over the next 15 years and
introduced hundreds of people to his work. I have incorporated many of Douglas’ exercises into my work and use them in parenting and educator workshops.

10) Figure 6. Note. Illustration by Hanif Janmohamed. Used with permission.

11) I first met Virginia in Vancouver during a weekend workshop. I knew her work was at the basis of Neuro-Linguistic Programming and yet I had never read her books or studied her work directly until I met her in 1986. I did two workshops with her just before she died and then in 2004 I studied with John Banmen who had worked directly with Virginia. Satir was certainly influential in working with families rather than just the learners in our programs.

12) Figure 9. Note. Illustration by Naomi Gibb. Used with permission.

13) Figure 10. Note. Illustration by Hanif Janmohamed. Used with permission.

Chapter 3
14) Figure 12. Note. Photograph by Michael Maser. Used with permission.

15) Figure 13. Note. Photograph by Lia Meyer. Used with permission.

16) Figure 14. Note. Illustration by Hanif Janmohamed. Used with permission.

17) Figure 15. Note. Photograph by Tim Fitzgerald. Used with permission.

18) Figure 16. Note. Painting by Ilana Cameron. Used with permission.

19) Figure 18. Note. Illustration by Hanif Janmohamed. Used with permission.

20) Figure 20. Note. Photograph by Tim Fitzgerald. Used with permission.

21) Figure 26. Note. Illustration by Hanif Janmohamed. Used with permission.

Chapter 4
22) First coined in the alternative and free school movement, deschooling describes the behavior of new learners to alternative programs from more traditional programs. Typically when learners first encounter freedom after years of being told what to do and what to learn, they find themselves unsure what to do when it is up to them to decide for themselves. Deschooling often looks like confusion, boredom and laziness as learners make the shift from outer authority to inner authorship. If often takes learners up to a year before they become the initiators or authors of their own lives.

23) Figure 30. Note. Photograph by Michael Maser. Used with permission.

24) Figure 31. Note. Illustration by Naomi Gibb. Used with permission.

Chapter 5
25) Figure 32. Note. Illustration by Hanif Janmohamed. Used with permission.
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