

# Learning Cooperatives Quarterly

The Newsletter of Life-Long Learning

Vol. 1 No. 2

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- being a member of an operating local learning community,
- exchanging information with other learning communities,
- working cooperatively with others on this list to promote LC,s
- reporting on active learning communities,
- developing information on LCs for the "Resources Section,"
- writing a "New Chapter" for the online book,
- contributing money to help this Coalition continue or operate.
- any thing else that will help bring LCs into operation.

## Deschooling Society/ Creating Learning Communities

By BILL ELLIS

Before I read of Ivan Illich's death, I had started to write a commentary on his contributions and the ideas in his book "Deschooling Society." Now that Ivan has passed on, I am driven to finish this piece.

I have felt that many home-schoolers, and even many Illich fans, miss the message he was trying to deliver. Perhaps my own interpretation is enhanced by the numerous opportunities I had to talk with him, to hear his lectures, and to visit with his "traveling crap game" that met in various universities around the globe. Or it may be that his way of developing an idea was to stimulate the listener's own thought, rather than to lay an idea out so clearly that everyone captured exactly the same message.

"Deschooling Society" was more about society than about schools. Society needs deschooling because it is a mimic of the school system that it engenders and that engenders it. In our current society, individuals are expected to work in dull and stultifying jobs for future rewards, as they are trained to do in schools. By deschooling, Illich did not mean taking schooling into the home, nor did he mean "free schools" in which curricula was set by the students. Schooling of any kind that limits a person's capacity and desire to self-learn at all times anywhere is detrimental to that person living a full life.

All life, according to Illich, should be "convivial." That is, it should be lived in joyous collaboration with friends and colleagues. Learning and work alike should be fun and fulfilling. They should be entered into as, and not differentiated from, play and recreation. A society that does not create that kind of convivial learning and living is not living up to, nor fulfilling the

potential of, humanity.

In later works, like "Tools for Conviviality" and "Shadow Work," Illich further developed his theme of living the good life. He took "good" in both of its connotations — good as in moral and good as in pleasing. "Vernacular" was the word Illich used to express the good life. The vernacular is the simple, the local, the communal. Every human and every community has its own natural concept of the vernacular. It is wrapped up in what it is to be a human. It is what a person can do themselves, in the place they are, at the time it is, without dependence on external assistance.

The bicycle was one hardware example Illich often used to exemplify the vernacular. The bicycle extends one's own capability and efforts for transportation. It needs no massive outside system beyond that under its operator's control. The automobile, on the other hand, is not only a complex apparatus requiring a complex outside system, but it also requires more work and effort than it produces in transportation. If you take into account all the hours you spend working to buy a car, to purchase gas and tires, to pay taxes for the road, to insure and license it, to clean up its pollution, and pay for all of the other costs, your rate of travel is less than that of a bicycle, and that doesn't count either the hours, the costs, or the frustration spent in traffic jams and accidents.

In "Medical Nemesis" Illich took the same concept to the medical system, showing that not only did the medical profession



not cure ills but it created them.

In every aspect of our lives, conviviality and the vernacular have been overwhelmed and diminished by what Illich called the "disabling professions." Lawyers have increased crime, economists have created scarcity and poverty, teachers have dumbed us down, the farming profession has increased world hunger. With this loss of the vernacular has come the loss of the family and the loss of community. The single goal of humans has become to "make it" by accumulating "things" in a materialistic global economy.

In one of his most recent essays, "The Cultivation of Conspiracy," Illich brought his concepts to a fitting climax. This essay was published in the book "The Challenge of Ivan Illich," a 2002 collection of essays by many of his colleagues, edited by Lee Honacki and Carl Mitcham.

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# Creating Learning Communities

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Illich discusses friendship in this powerful essay. The friendship he writes of is not just that of being kind and cooperative with your neighbors. It is a deeper 'conspiratio.'

As in much of his writing, Illich goes to great lengths to explore the original meaning of the word, and of ideas and actions related to the word. 'Conspiratio' is breathing together. But breathing is not merely expelling air. It is about the breath of life — the soul. 'Conspiratio' is the melding of one's inner being with other's. It is well exemplified by the wedding kiss that symbolizes, or more exactly is, the combining of two souls. The wedding kiss is more than the ceremony or the license of marriage. It is above physical love. It is the unification of two beings by breathing together. This 'conspiratio,' or wedding of souls, (although Illich, a former priest, doesn't use the word soul) is the root of the vernacular and of the convivial.

This exploration of Illich's concepts is meant only to put his book and the idea of deschooling society into context.

Homeschooling grew from the ideas of Illich, Holt and others. During the 1970s, a few courageous scattered families broke away from government schools and started homeschooling. By 1980, there were some 10,000 to 20,000 such families homeschooling alone. As the numbers grew, these scattered homeschool cells started linking up, establishing organizations to provide resources, and to take on special tasks like the legal defense of homeschooling. By 1990, the cells of homeschoolers had become a soup and ad hoc linking became normal. "Homeschool support groups" spontaneously self-organized in many communities and on the Internet. By 2000, there was almost no American community that did not have a homeschool support group.

But, in the practical day-to-day struggle to homeschool their own children many, if not most, early homeschoolers left behind the social idealism of Illich and Holt.

Their universal cry was for government to "just leave us alone." They argued that they have "parental rights" to raise their children as they wish. But as homeschooling is now becoming accepted by the mainstream, it is also looking again at its roots and recognizing that "homeschooling alone" is not enough.

If deschooling is going to serve all of society it must move beyond homeschooling. Fortunately, this new phase of deschooling society is happening. Conviviality and the vernacular are arising within homeschool support groups. Some of them are searching out new ways to organize. Some are considering how to extend the values of self-learning to all children and all adults. Others are filling in the gaps between the alternative education com-

munity and the broader progressive movement, while from the other side many progressives are recognizing that any social change will require a radically different learning system and a way of introducing future citizens into society.

In 1971, Ivan Illich's book "Deschooling Society" marked a radical shift in the way people thought about learning. His death in 2002 marks a time for a radical shift in the why, the how, and the what of learning. It is a time for all of us to throw off the remaining shackles of schools and all other disabling institutions and build our own lives, our communities, and a new world rooted in knowledge, self-learning and learning communities.

Ivan Illich's works are available on a number of websites. You can read or download "Deschooling Society" from:

[philosophy.la.psu.edu/illich/deschool/intro.html](http://philosophy.la.psu.edu/illich/deschool/intro.html)  
other websites include:  
<http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~ira/illich/>  
<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-illich.htm>  
<http://philosophy.la.psu.edu/illich/profile.html>

Illich wrote:

"Many students, especially those who are poor, intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the more treatment there

is, the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavour are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools, and other agencies in question."

Ivan Illich Deschooling Society (1973: 9)

*Bill Ellis is a physicist, futurist, farmer. His productive (moneymaking) years were spent in science policy with organizations such as the U.S. National Science Foundation, staff member of Congress, UNESCO and the World Bank. He and his wife left the rat race early and moved to the home he was born in in a remote rural New England town in the lakes, forests and mountains of Maine on the Canadian Border. Here they live, to a large extent, off the land. For nearly 30 years, he has volunteered with a number of alternative and transformational movements and currently for "A Coalition for Self-learning."*

## LIFE Fest 2003 is on the Way!

As LIFE of Florida moves into its second year, it continues to grow both in membership (now nearly 140, with twenty affiliate groups throughout the state) and in influence. In November, Home Education Magazine featured the story of LIFE Fest 2002, and how we pulled together – in inimitable grassroots fashion – a small but successful state gathering at no cost, in just two months.

Our website, [www.LIFEofFlorida.org](http://www.LIFEofFlorida.org), has become a fantastic and continually evolving resource for state home and alternative learners. We've recently added a "Private Schools for Homeschoolers" page, expanded and updated state legislative information, and feature the only comprehensive listing (that we know of!) of direct links to county school boards throughout the state.

Our biggest news, though, is that LIFE Fest 2003 is on the way, and promises to be a great event. LIFE Fest will be held

Saturday, March 22, from 10 AM to 4 PM, at the downtown branch of the Orlando Public Library, near food and parks (a big help for our frugal brown bag conference!), the history center and more. We have a great line up of speakers and presentations that includes J.C. Bowman, director of the Florida Department of Education's Office of Choice; Rosemary DuRocher of the Florida Virtual School; Susan Hubscher, of the Kennedy Space Center (who is also providing tickets to KSC as door prizes); engaging science teacher Doug Scull; children's history book author, Alan Kay; an introduction to Earth Scouts, children's programs and more.

We'll also have a wealth of information on an incredible variety of resources from across the state and the nation at our Information Buffet. Affiliates are welcome to set up information tables and while there will be no vendors, we'll happily set out any brochures, flyers or information about resources or products that are of interest to home learners. And all for the same low cost as last year: Absolutely Free!

For more information, contact Terri at [pubmail@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:pubmail@tampabay.rr.com).

## Our Mission

*The mission of the Learning Cooperatives Quarterly (LCQ) is to utilize the format of a newsletter as a means to inform and network between individuals, groups, and organizations seeking to create transformation and change in education and learning.*

*The basic premise of this change lies in the perception that we are progressing towards an eco-society, an evolutionarily new social order or Gaian culture, in which all members of that society have a voice in the formation and maintenance thereof. Through this developing social order, members seek to live in harmony with the world around them, decisions are made on local levels with the consensus of local individuals, and every individual has the right and responsibility to determine his/her own learning processes and vocations.*

*Learning in such a society occurs at all ages with students accepting responsibilities of a higher order, being problem solvers, participating in democratic discussions and cooperative processes, and initiating their own learning. In order to support this transformation and maintain such a social order, learning techniques that have successfully explored and developed new models of learning and new curriculum need to be encouraged and authors of yet unknown forms need to be given a voice.*

*As with all societies, parents, mentors, facilitators, and so forth, play a role in passing on the ethical, moral, and social foundations of the society. These may at times be unique to one group or another. LCQ does not promote or endorse any of these. In a free and open learning system, all options for learning and all information are available by choice of the learner. This also applies to articles and news briefs contained herein.*

*It is the foundation of Cooperative Community Life-Long Learning Centers and the Coalition for Self-Learning that the control of education needs to be returned to the individual learner with support from parents and the local community, and that these processes can best happen in the context of Learning Cooperatives, Learning Communities, and Learning Centers in collaboration with the individual as a self-directed learner.*

*In summary, it is the intent of LCQ to provide an outlet for authors to strategize, discuss, define and share about programs of learning that promote a transformation towards an evolutionarily new social order, an eco- or Gaian society, through new contexts in education and learning.*

*The following Editorial appeared in the SchoolReformers column written by David Kirkpatrick.*

## Deschooling

Government-owned and operated schools not only exist in all developed and developing nations, but are predominant. Only in the Netherlands do a majority of both elementary and secondary students attend nongovernmental schools. This creates enormous inertia and vested interests tending to maintain the system, although some chipping away at the monolith is beginning to take place.

In very general terms, those challenging government-dominated education are found in two broad categories: those who would modify or create alternatives to the system, and those who would abolish, or at least avoid, the system.

The most obvious example of the latter is the homeschooling movement of the past two decades, which has grown from an estimated 10-15,000 students in 1980 to 1,500,000 or more today. These numbers have long since achieved the critical-mass stage, producing support groups at the local, state and national levels.

There is a philosophical underpinning for “deschooling” — removing children from school and educating them in alternative settings — which might not have evolved except for the influence of three individuals who acted independently, but not in isolation: Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer and John Holt. The term itself perhaps first gained attention with Illich’s book, *Deschooling Society* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1970). Illich, in turn, was influenced by Reimer, whom he first met in 1958 and who awakened him to the negative aspects of schooling. Reimer published *An Essay on Alternatives in Education* (Cuernavaca, Mexico: Centro Intercultural de Documentacion, [CIDOC] 1971).

Holt was the only public school teacher of the three. He became a reformer who evolved into a deschooler as a result of his firsthand experiences with the system and its practitioners. The most prolific and successful writer of the three, his books include *How Children Fail*, *How Children Learn*, *Escape From Childhood*, *The Underachieving School* and *Teach Your Own* plus a newsletter, *Growing Without Schools*. Most importantly he inspired a movement which has continued since his death.

Holt is thus the best known of the three. Illich, whose book was famous during the 1970s is less well known today. Reimer, perhaps the original source of the deschooling or unschooling movement, died in 1998 and remains the least known of the trio. Using the Google internet search engine for each of the three will lead to original source material from them that is still as challenging as anything written since.

In the Introduction to *Deschooling Society*, Illich wrote, “Universal education

through schooling is not feasible. It would be no more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools.” The results of attempts to reform schooling in the past thirty years, including providing it with vastly greater sums of money, provide much credibility to that view.

As for the possibility of meaningful reform, Holt’s view was that “The schools are not going to be reformed from within; their serious reform is a political matter and will be accomplished, if at all, with votes ...” (P. 164, *Escape From Childhood*, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1974) Note the “if at all” qualification. Holt was overly optimistic in his predictions. In a September 30, 1971, letter he said, “Nothing in the future is certain, but one thing seems to me as certain as any, and that is that 25 or even 10 years from now

schools will not be anywhere as prominent in American life as they are now.” He lived long enough to realize that his 10 year projection was invalid and 28 years later his long-term prediction remains unrealized.

As the need for reform remains, so the effort continues, as indicated by a recent email from A Coalition for Self-Learning. Spontaneously organized on the Internet in 1999, the Coalition’s purpose, as its title implies, is to promote individually directed education. It published “*Creating Learning Communities*” in August of 2001 and followed with a *Guidebook* in November 2002, although its membership is still only a few hundred, few of whom have met face to face.

The first issue of its newsletter, “*Learning Cooperatives Quarterly*,” is available on its website, and may be downloaded and/or printed.

The Coalition’s General Coordinator is Bill Ellis, PO Box 567, Rangeley, ME 04970, tel. (207) 864-3784; email, [tranet@rangeley.org](mailto:tranet@rangeley.org). The group’s website is [www.CreatingLearningCommunities.org](http://www.CreatingLearningCommunities.org).

For those interested in going a step further and considering discontinuing the public system, there is the Alliance for Separation of School and State, 4578 N. First, #310, Fresno, CA 93726, tel. (559) 292-1776.

The founder/director is Marshall Fritz, whose email address is [marshall@sepschool.org](mailto:marshall@sepschool.org). The website, [www.sepschool.org](http://www.sepschool.org), is particularly interesting because to date more than 21,000 individuals have signed on to Marshall’s position and all of them are listed so you can see if any from your state or community are there.

As both of these efforts demonstrate, the Internet is proving to be a valuable — priceless — asset to challengers to the status quo in education, not to mention other fields.

John Holt was right; what the citizenry has in greater numbers than the establishment is votes.

What, to date, they haven’t had is the energy and will to organize and take advantage of that fact.

David W. Kirkpatrick  
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# LIGHThouse opens

By KRISTEN PEPPER

Many different strengths came together to fulfill an educational vision on October 2, 2002, when the LIGHThouse opened its doors in East Meadow, NY. The LIGHThouse is a Long Island homeschool resource center that serves members of Long Islanders Growing at Home Together (LIGHT). Every Wednesday and Friday, children of all ages come together to learn from other parents and each other. It is entirely a cooperative, volunteer effort that is truly building an educational community. The story behind its creation involves many groups of people, and many educational philosophies, all united under child-centered alternative learning.

Some resource centers evolve from one group of friends with similar philosophies. For the LIGHThouse, however, it was as though different forces, rather than individual people, put the resource center together. A group of families from the Long Island Action Group (LIAG) provided the drive. An established community of homeschoolers, LIGHT, provided the mass membership and defining structure. A group of parents of preschool homeschoolers within LIGHT provided the openness and enthusiasm. The Workmen's Circle, a group that is exploring alternative Jewish education, provided the actual location. Other groups that want to start an alternative learning center may also want to look for these same forces, even if it means looking outside their own group.

This developing community was created through a circuitous path, with many obstacles to overcome. A short chronology of the events that led up to the resource center will illustrate how all the needed elements came together, and what obstacles were in its path. It will also explain how one resource center can satisfy the needs of families with diverse learning philosophies. Most importantly, it will show how the community built by the LIGHThouse makes all the effort worthwhile.

The concept of a resource center started more than a year before the LIGHThouse opened. The seed for this center was planted on July 24, 2001, at a meeting of the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO). Parents who saw their children stagnating in public school joined a meeting with homeschooling parents and alternative educators. The LIAG was formed to explore the creation of a homeschool resource center or a child-centered democratic school. They also explored the possibility of starting a Sudbury school. The parents of public school children eventually became convinced that their children were natural learners with hid-

den talents waiting to be uncovered. The group did not grow quickly. It resolved into a few families and some educators.

During this period of discussion and preparation, the group took a major turn. Some of the parents with children in public schools started homeschooling. They became less comfortable with a democratic, child-centered approach and more concerned with ensuring their children kept up the learning pace of their public school friends. This is a common concern with new homeschooling parents, especially those who turn to homeschooling out of desperation, instead of being drawn to homeschooling with all their hearts.

The families in LIAG became members of LIGHT to get the support they could. LIGHT was already a community of homeschoolers meeting for special events. It no longer offered a resource center, though it had in the past. The LIAG families wanted even more support than LIGHT offered, no longer due to a desire to create a school, but now just due to their need to work in a closer knit community with a stronger support system.

As the LIAG members formed friendships with other LIGHT members, they spoke to them of their desire to create a resource center. As it turned out, LIGHT had just reached a stage in which it had a large mass of membership of 6-12 year olds that could use a resource center. Many of those families were also new to homeschooling, further adding to the need for more solid support. It also had a group of very active parents of preschool children under five. This group was actively community building, with events held at least once a week in different locations throughout Long Island. This group was very interested in the possibility of a resource center, because most members were still investigating exactly how they were going to homeschool. This made them very open to the idea of creating their own resource center.

The parents in the LIAG recognized that their own group was not growing quickly enough to support a center soon. A resource center needs

enough members to provide a mix of children every day. It also needs a large enough financial base to support renting some space. They also saw that they could not create a resource center outside of LIGHT, and just draw its members mostly from that community.

The parents in the LIAG had to decide whether to continue to grow their own group, or align with an existing group that already had the mass membership a resource center needed. This might also mean accepting the direction the new group chose. The families with children in the LIAG agreed to stop



working within their own group and start over completely within LIGHT.

The plans for a resource center started moving quickly after these families approached LIGHT directly. To help make a fresh start, a LIGHT leader facilitated a kickoff meeting. The group quickly defined their vision. They decided to look for a rented space with at least two rooms. A general discussion of finances resulted in deciding that members would pay some fee to cover rent. No teacher would be hired. They surveyed people for distance guidelines, to determine the best location radius for the people at the meeting. They also elected a core group to meet weekly in order to work out issues. Finally, they discussed what type of structure to set to each day. They basically agreed to a vague combination of a democratic school with optional classes held by parents or students.

The last major element fell into place when one of the members found a building to rent. She had been looking for a space for over a year, but this opportunity appeared just when the group was finally poised to start immediately. It was a Jewish cultural center that offered alternative Jewish education, and they were interested in helping another alternative learning group. This space was perfect, available with the right rooms in the right location at the right times. They agreed to charge a very reduced rent while the center began. There were two floors available. The bottom floor had a large room with a stage, plus a full kitchen. The top room had a foyer with two classrooms. The place was available Wednesdays, Fridays and some Saturdays, until 3:00.

Now that the groups had joined forces and found a viable location, they had to quick-

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This developing community was created through a circuitous path, with many obstacles to overcome.

# LIGHThouse opens

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ly learn to work well together, in spite of their different philosophies. Some were new, reluctant homeschoolers; some were unschoolers; some were working parents; and some had financial constraints. The resource center had to satisfy everyone's needs.

The group decided to start the first month with only the original ten families, so that they could work out basic issues. That was a very good idea, since ten families, who had mostly just met each other within the past year, provided more than enough issues. They opened the resource center on Wednesdays and Fridays for their families, and held meetings weekly. These meetings resolved a lot of small, easy-to-handle issues.

The group also became stuck on some big issues, such as whether to get insurance, the best method for setting rules, whether to allow non-members in the center, and whether to have a drop-off center. Making it through these issues was sometimes a painful challenge.

The insurance issue was not fully resolved. A rider to the building's insurance was purchased, and incorporation and full liability insurance is still being discussed. Until this issue is resolved, only LIGHT members are allowed to attend LIGHThouse activities. Allowing nonmembers in the center involved discussions on whether to hold parties, how to raise funds, and the desire to have a community of committed members. The group voted to allow nonmembers of the LIGHThouse to participate for a fee.

Some parents wanted a drop-off center, and others wanted every parent to have to stay with their children. A compromise was reached. Parents can leave their children with another adult designated to "babysit" them. This arrangement would be made between parents, and not be part of the LIGHThouse's responsibility. The LIGHThouse's requirement is that every child have either a parent, or a person that the parent has designated, responsible for their child at all times. The LIGHThouse, itself, is never responsible for a child. This rule will be open to change when the insurance issue is settled.

Determining the best method for setting rules brought out the differences in everyone's parenting and schooling styles. Unschoolers

wanted their children to be free to play and interact with other children. The more structured schoolers wanted their children to come to attend classes, with socialization and the possibility of some unrelated educational spark resulting from the interaction a secondary goal. This was resolved by setting a formal class schedule, but not insisting that children attend classes. Children were allowed to run

and play in some rooms, but not others.

After a month, with some issues still unresolved, the LIGHThouse opened to all LIGHT members. A grand opening party on October 24 introduced the LIGHThouse. Most new members came from the enthusiastic pre-school group. The little ones were always welcome, but Wednesday mornings were set as their special congregation time.

The center is currently running a few academic classes, such as science workshops, math, French, American history and reading. Most of these classes accommodate children of all ages, with older children helping younger children. The classes are short, and always include hands-on work. Holding an optional class with children of many different ages requires appealing to the student's interests and being flexible enough to accommodate all the students.

Students between the ages of 9-12 are teaching some of these classes. Having the children teach the classes works well for both structured schoolers and unschoolers. The children are naturally interested in what the older child has to say. The older child has a unique motivation to learn the subject matter well, and also gains public speaking, teaching and leadership skills.

The center also runs some great artistic classes, such as dance, yoga, and arts and crafts. These are often the classes that make the students ask to come to the resource center. These are all taught by people from the center who excel in the area they teach, which is great exposure to the subject for the students. In addition, there is a lot of free time for playing games and spontaneous activities.

The families involved are currently working very hard to make the center work, but also reaping enormous benefits. The children and parents together are forming a community. The parents get support through having other parents watch and teach their children. Children are forming friendships and learning from each other. Over the years to come, the LIGHThouse members hope that the community bond will continue to grow and become cement to form the base of the LIGHThouse.

Now that the groups had joined forces and found a viable location, they had to quickly learn to work well together, in spite of their different philosophies.



*Kristin Pepper is an adjunct professor of computer systems at Molloy College and Adelphi University and runs Octagon, a small computer consulting firm. She is one of the LIGHThouse founding members. She recently began homeschooling her 12- and 3-year-old girls.*

*This article reflects her view of the events that led up to the creation of the LIGHThouse.*

The LIGHThouse sells merchandise for fundraising at [www.cafeshops.com/lighthousestore](http://www.cafeshops.com/lighthousestore). By using Cafeshops.com, they were able to get a full line of merchandise online in just minutes.

# Co-ops Chart New Course for Education

By JEANNINE KENNEY

Last month, a new charter high school opened in Osseo, Minnesota. OK, maybe that's not big news in the world of education. But this is this is no ordinary school. The eight teachers who work there are members of EdVisions Cooperative. They and the other 117 teacher-owners of the co-op are putting a new twist on the charter school movement that has gained ground over the last decade. The teachers don't own the schools they work in, but their co-op contracts with charter schools to provide educational services. In essence, they own the learning program. And that seems to make all the difference.

"We wanted to see if educators would act differently if they were owners rather than employees," says Doug Thomas, former president of EdVisions Cooperative and now the director of the Gates-EdVisions Project of EdVisions Inc., a non-profit associated with the cooperative. "We wanted to know if, professionally, it would change how they think and act." The co-op, founded in 1994, is one of only two teacher-owned co-ops in the country, which provide educational services at 10 charter schools.

The charter school movement began in the early 1990s as states began to look at innovative approaches to education — approaches that would provide flexibility in learning programs and advance student achievement. Today, some 2,400 charter schools serve 250,000 children nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Thirty-eight states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have approved charter school legislation. And earlier this month, Education Secretary Rod Paige announced an unprecedented \$198 million in federal funding for 2003 to aid the development of charter schools.

Community groups, parents, teachers or universities can petition school boards to create new charter schools, which are often organized around a specialty (i.e., technology) or type of learning program. The schools are governed by the chartering organization, not the district school board, and receive public funding. But, in exchange for greater accountability, charter schools are subject to fewer regulations than traditional public schools and are more autonomous and independent. To receive federal funding, the chartering entity must be a non-profit and the school must be public and free to all students. Experts caution that charter schools should not be confused with the more controversial school vouchers programs where parents receive public funds to send their kids to private schools.

But the charter school movement has generated some controversy of its own since most chartering entities are allowed to contract with for-profit businesses, like publicly traded Edison Schools Inc., to run the school, hire the teachers, and deliver the educational services. In some high profile cases around the country,



that's exactly what has happened, producing headlines about financial mismanagement, charges of 'education for profit,' and criticism for poor student performance.

While EdVisions Cooperative is incorporated as a for-profit cooperative under Minnesota law, it turns the notion of corporate education on its head. The co-op and its 125 teacher-owners contract with nine charter schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin for a total of \$4.3 million. The co-op takes one percent of that to run the co-op; the remainder goes back to teacher-owners at individual schools to pay salaries, operating expenses and purchase supplies and technology.

Though the chartering entity decides what it will pay for the services in one lump sum, the co-op members at the individual schools decide what they will be paid and what they will spend on the learning program. That kind of decision-making "throws a wrench" into the argument of union groups concerned that charter schools may erode collective bargaining rights, Thomas says. That the EdVisions teacher-owners determine their salaries "baffles them," Thomas says of the unions. "It's so radical that it bumps up against traditional notions of exclusive bargaining rights."

## Ownership & Innovation

In many ways, says Ed Dirkswager of Minnesota's Center for Policy Studies and editor of the new book *Teachers as Owners: A Key to Revitalizing Education*, a teachers co-op is much like professional practice groups for lawyers, doctors and accountants. The fundamental idea, he says, is that if teachers can control their professional lives and be accountable for results, they'll offer better services. The co-ops not only offer some ability to determine what teachers will be paid, they also offer the opportunity for educators to innovate.

It was the desire to offer a specific type of innovative teaching program that led to the creation of the nation's only other teacher-owned co-op, IDEAL Cooperative in Milwaukee, Wis. According to John Parr, one

of the co-op's founders, IDEAL stands for "individualized, developmentally appropriate learning"—a flexible approach which allows students to move among different learning groups and grade levels depending on their knowledge and abilities in different subject areas.

The teachers who formed the co-op had previously taught at another public school using the IDEAL approach, until that school changed educational directions. The teachers and parents who didn't want to give up the individualized learning petitioned the Milwaukee Public School System (MPS) to form their own charter school-IDEAL Charter School (K-8). In forming the charter, the 10 co-op members and the parents also decided to limit attendance to no more than 300 students. "Any bigger than that," Parr says, "and you don't get to know the kids." That was important to the co-op owners and to the parents, who continue to play a key role in the school through the parent governing council that approves budgets proposed by the co-op. Limited school and class sizes are things you're less likely to see at a school operated by a for-profit company.

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"We wanted to see if educators would act differently if they were owners rather than employees."

— Doug Thomas

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Educational innovation was a key motivator for the teacher-founders of Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) — one of the state's first charter schools — who went on to create EdVisions Cooperative. The teachers at MNCS created a unique, ungraded, project-based learning program that has captured national attention. Students don't take classes. Instead, either individually or in groups, "the students choose topics, plan, research, and complete aca-

demie study via hands-on projects that produce tangible results," according to Dirkswager of the Center for Policy Studies. Students have personalized workstations, not traditional classrooms, and the school provides open space for project discussions. It provides one computer for every one and a half students—a resource decision the teacher-owners made. And there are no administrators; instead the school has a flat management system.

New Country received national media attention when one group project-known as the Ney Frog Project-discovered frogs with deformed legs in the state's wetlands and ponds. The finding launched an ocean of university and government research projects to determine the cause of the developmental deformities. Dirkswager says these are the educational innovations that arise when teachers literally own the educational process and their intellectual property.

Continued on next page

# Co-ops Chart New Course

## Continued from previous page Kinks in the System

EdVisions' Doug Thomas says that for the most part, the teacher-members have bought into the co-op concept. "About one-third of them really 'get' it," he says, "another one-third understand the co-op but don't really have time to participate." The remaining one-third still think much like employees, though they are owners. Still, he considers this to be a strong validation of the "teachers as owners" concept.

Though charter schools run by co-ops are highly flexible, the rigid educational and legal systems in which they operate still pose a few problems. Milwaukee's IDEAL Co-op has no principal; overall decisions on the budget and learning program are made by the teachers as group, with help from a parent governing council. But that is a hard concept for the traditional educational system to swallow. "MPS can't deal with a school without a principal," says Parr. So, the co-op assigns a "lead teacher" to interface with the school system even though that teacher is not a manager for the school.

IDEAL also can't set its own salaries for its teacher-owners as EdVisions does. To keep their pension benefits, state law requires the co-op's teachers to be "employees" of MPS. So while the teachers own their educational program and the co-op itself, they are still technically employees of the school system, not the co-op. But in Minnesota, where most of the EdVisions schools are located, the state teachers retirement association offers pension benefits to all licensed teachers working in public schools—allowing them to work for the co-op and still save for retirement.

And EdVisions Cooperative is changing its structure in January 2003 because laws relating to liability and unemployment withholding aren't flexible enough for this unique co-op application. Because EdVisions Cooperative is the sole contracting entity for several schools, liability for problems at one school will impose costs on all of the schools - increasing their cost of doing business. Likewise, a layoff or termination at one school will increase the unemployment compensation withholding rates for all the schools run by EdVisions.

To address the problem, the co-op members that teach at each of the nine schools will form individual cooperatives, with service provided by EdVisions—soon to be a co-op of co-ops.

Is the co-op model a trend for charter schools? It may be too soon to tell, but Dirkswager of the Center for Policy

Studies has high hopes. He believes the co-op model is highly adaptable to the charter school concept and can help resolve concerns about the for-profit motives of some charter school service providers. "To make a co-op work, you develop a culture where people understand there is accountability for their actions and that they are here for a higher purpose," Dirkswager contends. "Culture and leadership are the key to making [charter schools] work. And the co-op brings that to the table."

For more information on EdVisions, visit [www.edvisions.coop](http://www.edvisions.coop).

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*Prior to joining NCBA, Kenney served as a public affairs specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, as pesticide and food safety policy analyst for Consumer's Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, and for five years as a legislative assistant for Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin. While working in the Senate, Kenney specialized in food and agricultural policy, and other issues affecting the state.*

*Kenney began her career in Washington D.C. as an economist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research service and later joined the National Milk Producers Federation, an organization representing dairy cooperatives, where she served as an economist and legislative representative.*

*Kenney received her B.A. in economics and political science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1988. She later conducted graduate studies in agricultural economics at the same university.*

## In Brief ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

The Learning Cooperatives Quarterly received the following announcement of a new book written by a community of teachers, parents, and students in an innovative elementary school. It has just come out in paperback:

### "Learning Together: Children and Adults in a School Community,"

Barbara Rogoff, Carolyn Goodman Turkanis, & Leslee Bartlett. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

The central idea is that children (and adults) learn effectively when they are involved with others who share their interests, building understanding together. In such a community of learners, children contribute to planning learning activities, as do adults, and adults learn from their involvement with the children as well as fostering children's learning. Children (and adults) are motivated to be involved in learning for the sake of accomplishing meaningful, productive activities.

The principles of learning together are illustrated with observations in a public elementary school in which collaboration among children and between children and adults is central to the curriculum. (It is a public school in which parents spend 3 hours per week in instructional activities in the classroom.)

"Learning Together" was written collaboratively by teachers, parents, and students to inspire readers to consider their own ideas about how children and adults learn, and how their learning can be fostered, in ways adapted to the interests and resources of different communities. (Proceeds from the book go to the school.)

For information, look at Oxford's site:

<http://www.oup-usa.org/isbn/019509753X.html>

## Centre for Personalized Education Trust

The "Centre for Personalized Education Trust" website, managed by Roland Meighan, includes Creating Learning Communities among its links of interest — along with many other important sites. Check it out at: <http://www.gn.apc.org/c.person.ed>

### The following new chapter was recently added to Creating Learning Communities website:

"Knowledge as a Complex Evolutionary System: An Educational Imperative" by Derek Cabrera.

It can be read it at this link:

<http://www.CreatingLearningCommunities.org/book/additional/cabrera.htm>

# Learning systems: the good, the bad and the ugly ...

By ROLAND MEIGHAN

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon in May and I went down to the beach with my partner Janet to relax. A week-long festival and conference for home-based educating families was about to start and about 1500 people of all ages would be in attendance. My task was to start the conference with a keynote presentation on 'Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum' but I was not yet clear how to set the scene.

We gazed with interest at the scene in front of us. Two young surfers were developing their skills on their miniature surfboards on the incoming waves. Just beyond them two young canoeists were in action, too. Two younger children were enjoying jumping the waves as they petered out near the edge of the beach, the smaller one sensibly retreating if a slightly larger one came her way.

Three adults went in front of us and paused at a pictorial display on local fossils, enjoyed talking about it for a minute or two and then went on their way. Along the beach a young boy of about eleven years was working with what appeared to be his grandfather below the fossil cliff. Somebody else was reading a book, another reading a newspaper.

Other people of all ages were swimming, paddling and making sandcastles. Parents were on hand everywhere generally keeping a watchful eye but not interfering unduly. A rock pipit appeared close to us and we spent a little time observing it and talking about its appearance and behaviour.

Everyone seemed relaxed and happy and nobody was infringing the rights of others to be doing their thing; indeed, it was a miniature display of democracy in action as diversity and variety were cheerfully celebrated. It was also a demonstration of natural learning and the natural curriculum.

But then we began to speculate what a guardian of 'unnatural learning,' a school inspector perhaps, would have to say about the same scene.

Well, as regards the surfboarders, there was no sign of professional input. No trained teacher was present to set appropriate tasks, attainment targets and tests. The same applied to the canoeists who did not seem to be working to a graded plan of skill development.

The adults were rather casual about the fossil display and no follow-up work or consolidation appeared to be in evidence. The grandfather and child working by the fossil cliff were from quite different 'key-stages,' if key-stages had yet been devised for grandfathers. The book and newspaper readers seemed very casual and put down their book or newspaper whenever they felt like it. And

was the book on the approved list for study anyway? Next, a decent teacher would have had a rock pipit work-card for when the bird appeared so that appropriate written work could be undertaken.

So, out of the conversation with Janet, the beach scene could be seen as an interesting example of a learning system — natural learning in action. I had my introduction for the presentation: 'on the beach.'

My interest in learning systems began when, as a young teacher, I set out to make my classroom a learning laboratory and tried out a variety of learning systems. I found a learning league table from the National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Main USA. It was an attempt to rank a number of micro-learning systems on how much the learners remembered afterwards.

## Average Retention Rate

Formal teaching	5%
Reading	10%
Audio-visual	20%
Demonstration	30%
Discussion Group	50%
Practice by doing	75%
Teaching others	90%
Immediate use of learning	90%

Some key propositions have emerged from my life-long study of learning systems:

1. There exists a variety of learning systems, each producing different results.

When prompted, most people can list quite a few learning systems. Here is a list of some familiar ones: playgroups, nursery/kindergarden, junior school, high school, college, university, early childhood 'natural learning' at home (or on the beach), home-based education/homeschooling, Scouts, Guides, the Public Library, the Army, Suicide Bombers Camps, Terrorist Schools, Learning Clubs for Judo, Table Tennis, Tennis, Athletics, Dance, Book Circles, Learning Co-ops, Community Learning Centres, and schools-without-walls.

But first we must have a clear idea of

the kind of person we wish to produce before we can have any definite opinion as to the education which we consider best. So, first decide your intentions, then choose an appropriate learning system.

Those intending to produce terrorists must select a strict authoritarian system and a hate-filled curriculum.

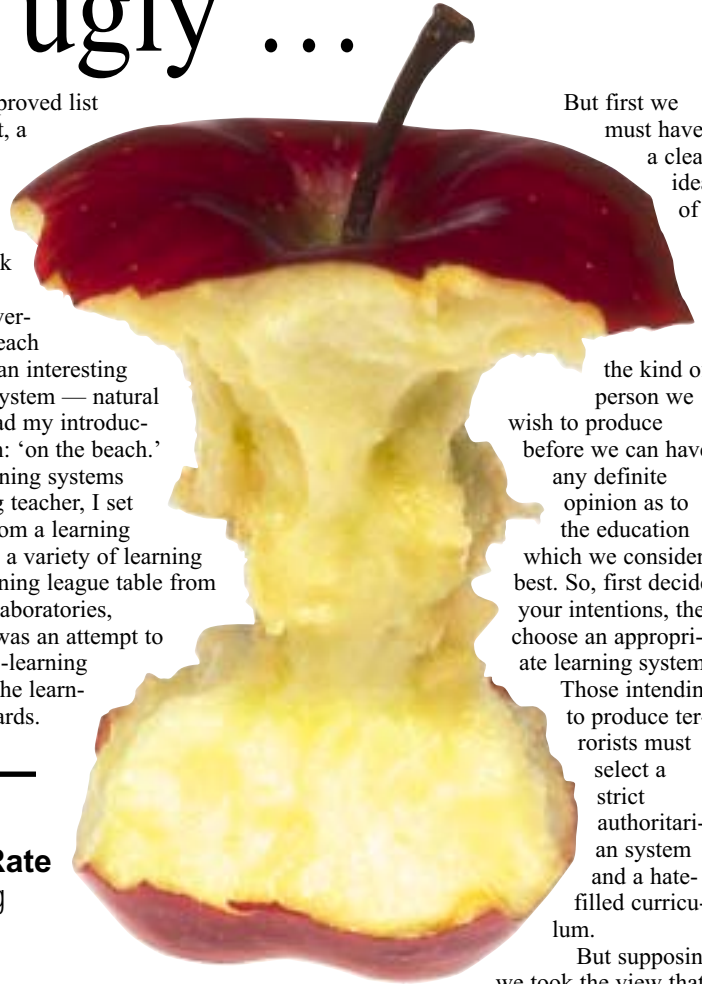
But supposing we took the view that the world's most pressing

need is to produce people who will do no harm, to the environment, to each other or to themselves, and maybe even do a little good. Any learning based on competition would have to be replaced by one based on co-operation.

The first learning system we encounter is the natural learning system of the home. Parents soon find out that young children are natural learners. They are like explorers or research scientists busily gathering information and making meaning out of the world. Most of this learning is not the result of teaching, but rather a constant and universal learning activity as natural as breathing. Our brains are programmed to learn unless discouraged. A healthy brain stimulates itself by interacting with what it finds interesting or challenging in the world around it. It learns from any mistakes and operates a self-correcting process.

We parents achieve the amazing feats of helping our children to talk, walk and make sense of the home and the environment in which it is set, by responding to this natural

Continued on next page



# Learning systems: the good, the bad & the ugly ...

Continued from previous page learning process. All this is achieved, with varying degrees of success, by us so-called amateurs — the parent or parents, and other caregivers such as grandparents. What we discover as parents is that, if supported and encouraged, children will not only begin to make sense of their world, but can also acquire the attitudes and skills necessary for successful learning throughout their lives.

But, this process of natural learning can be hindered or halted by insensitive adult interference. Sadly, the schools available to us, whether state or private, are often based on an impositional model which, sooner or later, causes children to lose confidence in their natural learning and its self-correcting features, and instead, learn to be dependent on others to ‘school’ their minds. In the process, one writer, E. T. Hall, concluded, “Schools have transformed learning from one of the most rewarding of all human activities into a painful, boring, dull, fragmenting, mind-shrinking, soul-shrivelling experience.”

A prize-winning New York teacher, John Taylor Gatto, describes this kind of schooling as training children “... to be obedient to a script written by remote strangers ... Education demands you write the script of your own life with the help of people who love or care about you.”

Until quite recently in human history, this natural curriculum was sufficient to keep most of us going throughout life. But then, about 150 years ago, an institution called the compulsory school was introduced. And suddenly, the natural curriculum was misplaced. The natural questions became replaced by an imposed curriculum based on THEIR questions, THEIR required answers, and THEIR required assessment. The message is dramatically changed: “Your experience, your concerns, your hopes, your fears, your desires, your interests, they count for nothing. What counts is what we are interested in, what we care about, and what we have decided you are to learn.” (John Holt, in

The Underachieving School, p. 161)

2. We need to classify learning systems to understand them better. John Holt proposed two categories. They were, ‘indoctrinators’ who worked ON children and ‘educators’ who worked WITH children. There are several ‘two category’ attempts of this kind to be found. They all help us make a start. Here is a more complex approach I developed which classified systems as Authoritarian, Autonomous and Democratic, along

with a fourth category of Interactive.

*The Authoritarian View of Education or “You will do it our way”*

In authoritarian education, in its various forms, one person, or a small group of people, make and implement the decisions about what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, how to assess learning, and the learning environment. All this is usually decided before the learners are recruited or met. As an exclusive method, it is favoured by totalitarian regimes because it aims to produce the conformist mentality.

*The Autonomous View of Education or “I did it my way”*

In autonomous education, the decisions about learning are made by the individual learners. Each one manages and takes responsibility for his or her learning programmes. Individuals may seek advice or look for ideas about what to learn and how to learn it by research or by consulting others. They do not have to reinvent the culture, but interact with it. As an exclusive method it is favoured by liberal or libertarian regimes to produce thinking individuals.

*The Democratic View of Education or “We did it our way”*

In democratic education, the learners as a group have the power to make most, or even all, of the key decisions...

In democratic education, the learners as a group have the power to make most, or even all, of the key decisions, since power is shared and not appropriated in advance by a minority of one or more. Democratic countries might be expected to favour this approach, but such educational practices are rare and often meet with sustained, hostile and irrational opposition.

*The Interactive View of Education or “We did it in a variety of ways”*

In the interactive approach to education, the authoritarian, democratic and autonomous ideologies are used in a variety of patterns. They may be alternated or revolved or used in some order of ranking.

3. A key lesson from the study of learning systems is that HOW you learn is as important as, if not more important than, WHAT you learn.

The manner of learning is as critical as the learning itself. Thus, it is assumed that literacy is automatically good. But, learning literacy in a bully institution makes you a literate bully.

As governments world-wide bang the drum for more education, Don Glines of ‘Educational Futures Projects,’ USA, introduces a sobering thought: “...the majority of the dilemmas facing society have been perpetrated by the best traditional college gradu-

ates: environmental pollution; political ethics; have/have not gap; underemployment — (in fact) the sixty-four micro-problems which equal our one macro-problem!”

So, if many of the high achievers are responsible for the various major problems of the world faces, perhaps we need less ‘competition’ and more ‘wisdom through co-operation?’

The US radical, Nat Needle wrote in response to President Clinton’s call to US citizens to prepare themselves to compete in the most ruthless century yet:

“... if the 21st century becomes the story of human beings around the world pitted against each other in a struggle for well-being, even survival, this will only be because we failed to imagine something better and insist on it for ourselves and our children.

“I don’t care to motivate my children by telling them that they will have to be strong to survive the ruthless competition. I’d rather tell them that the world needs their wisdom, their talents, and their kindness, so much so that the possibilities for a life of service are without limits of any kind.” (AERO-Gramme, No. 25, Fall 1998)

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## Publication Review

Building co-operative communities is what the Learning Cooperatives Quarterly is all about. An important resource for them is "Communities Journal of Cooperative Living" (Rt.1 Box 156, Routledge, MO 63563, USA; \$20 4 issues). "Communities" is primarily of, by, and for intentional communities. But its articles, and the books it publishes, are relevant to anyone attempting to create, form or maintain a community of any type. Its Fall/Winter 2002/2003 issue is mostly about the economics of communities. How do they support themselves and how do its members support themselves. The options are enlightening for any communal practitioner. The spring 2003 issue will concentrate of EcoVillages. Anyone wishing to input to it is invited to contact Communities Magazine, 52 Willow St., Marion NC 28752 USA, or [communities@ic.org](mailto:communities@ic.org)

## The Learning Network

The Learning Network, South Wales, is still at the planning stage with an initial investment of £9 million pounds from the National Assembly for Wales on the table.

We are developing a partnership of five local authorities, learning providers, including higher and further education, community education and other agencies involved in learning.

The network will create about 50 main community learning centres (Learning Action Centres) with many more 'satellites' and 'access points' in community centres, schools, libraries, museums, supermarkets, etc.

The network aims to be 'learner centred' with full learner representation on the partnership board and the Learners' Voice taken seriously throughout so that learning opportunities really are geared toward what people want and every effort is made to remove barriers to learning and increase motivation for learning in a range of settings.

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## GUIDELINES:

### ARTICLES

*Learning Cooperatives Quarterly invites readers to submit articles for publication.*

*Articles should cover any subject of interest to groups and individuals worldwide involved in or researching learning cooperatives, learning communities, learning centers and all issues relating to self-learning.*

*These articles should be no more than 2000 words and should be accompanied by a short biography of 40 words or less.*

*Learning Cooperatives Quarterly reserves the right to edit for reasons of clarity, but articles will not be edited for content without permission of the author. Please send articles through email to [marbleface@aol.com](mailto:marbleface@aol.com)*

### NEWS BRIEFS

*As part of LCQ's commitment to networking, we welcome short updates and informational news briefs from learning cooperatives, learning communities, and learning centers. We also encourage information concerning conferences or other*

*organizational functions and activities that might be of interest to our readers.*

*Please limit these entries to 400 words or less and include contact information.*

*Learning Cooperatives Quarterly reserves the right to edit for reasons of clarity. Please send news briefs through email to [marbleface@aol.com](mailto:marbleface@aol.com)*

*All material submitted to LCQ are the property of LCQ and may not be published without the editor's written permission.*

## Creating a Cooperative Learning Center

Homeschooling author Katharine Houk's book, "Creating a Cooperative Learning Center," (Longview Publishing, \$16.95) promotes itself somewhat verbosely as a "practical, realistic, yet inspirational guide for homeschoolers desiring a gathering place designed specifically to enhance the home education experience." While the writing is awkward at times, and some of the reflections by Learning Center members seem rather like space fillers, the book manages to live up to most of its promises. It provides comprehensive information and resources that should help make the transition from homeschool group to Learning Center both achievable and efficient.

It takes Houk a while to get to the point of the book, as she recounts the history of her own learning center; but once she gets to the heart of her mission, Houk's working outline for creating a viable community educational resource is interesting and eye-opening. Subtitled "An Idea Book for Homeschooling Families," the book is chock full of sample contracts, parent-student agreements, by-laws, registration forms and more.

Houk takes readers through the process of incorporation, program planning, registration issues, corporate structure, decision-making processes, legal considerations, financing and the variety of challenges facing any group of people trying to create a democratic school model in any community. Houk's candor throughout the book regarding the pitfalls of her efforts, as well as her triumphs, is both refreshing and helpful for its insights. I appreciated the honest assessments of growth issues and management problems and the creative solutions developed to address them. I especially valued Houk's treatment of the group's necessary dynamism and how it continues to adapt to meet changing needs.

"Change is the learning center's constant," observes Houk. "As a process rather than a thing, TALC (The Alternative Learning Center) looks different from one session to the next, and would look different in different environments. The evolving nature of TALC can be a major source of frustration to those who long to settle on the one right way to do it, yet if it becomes ossified, that would lead to a different set of problems."

Overall, "Creating a Cooperative Learning Center" is a handy reference and a good starting point for small groups considering upgrading to a community-based learning center. I'll certainly keep it on my bookshelf and refer to it often as we evaluate the growth and focus of our own local homeschool group.

*Terri Willingham and her husband Steve have homeschooled their three children for the past nine years. They live in Tampa, FL, where Terri writes a Home Learning column for the St. Petersburg Times, as well as a variety of articles for Home Education Magazine, Life Learning and other periodicals. Terri helps direct the state support and networking group, LIFE of Florida (<http://www.lifeofflorida.org>) for home and alternative learners in Florida, as well as a local LIFE chapter in Tampa. You can contact Terri at [pubmail@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:pubmail@tampabay.rr.com).*