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<p>THE RIGHT TO BE INTELLIGENT </p>

<p>Some educators are always looking for ways to get rich quick. They are like Wall Street speculators, searching for the cheap issue that will soar and split and soar again. Educators, that is -- not scholars or thinkers, but people whose work it is to see that others learn. For these educators, there is always the hope that someone will come up with the new idea that will transform education. Instead of being what it is now -- slow, difficult, expensive, and temporary -- learning will become quick, easy, cheap, and lasting. </p>

<p>These people are also driven by economic forces at the moment. As Lord Walter Perry, the great British educator who created the Open University, argues, the costs of education must be reduced, especially in the poor countries of the world. And the only way to reduce the cost is to reduce the time it takes to learn. </p>

<p>While we argue about whether the American is over-educated, and emphasize the non-economic benefits of education, the poor nations of the world struggle to achieve minimum levels of literacy. Even here, the educational system is under attack, especially for its failure to achieve the same quality of results for all of the people that is achieved for some of the people. Young people appear to be learning less well at the elementary and secondary levels, and there is a growing assumption that as a result they are graduating from college with a degree that represents much less learning than it did even a decade ago. </p>

<p>The poor countries have a population profile in which half of the population is under 15 years of age. Most of that population is migrating to the cities. The urban economy requires skills that the migrant population doesn't have. Social reality is unemployed masses crowded into unsanitary conditions with collapsing social structure and escalating rates of crime and disease, and a pervasive sense of despair and hopelessness. </p>

<p>Whether the educator faces the perplexing loss of motivation and performance in the United States or the massive poverty and ignorance in the Third World, certain difficult questions have to be answered, and soon: </p>

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<p>• Can we find better ways to educate the poor -- ways that will cost less in terms of time and money? </p>

<p>• Can we find ways to educate that work better that produce better citizens, more competent workers, more mature people? </p>

<p>• Is the science of education far enough advanced to know what works? Or are we wandering around in the dark? </p>

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<p>These questions and problems are on our minds, one way or the other, a great deal of the time these days. My own thinking was recently spurred during an international foundation meeting held in Caracas, Venezuela. It was during that conference that I became acquainted with Luis Alberto Machado, who is minister for the development of human intelligence in the government of Venezuela. This new ministry is unique in the world, and it was established just three years ago. </p>

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<p>• The ministry is the vision of Mr. Machado. Its mission and its policies are the product of an intensive decade of work, seeking to answer the kinds of questions I just asked a moment ago. Mr. Machado is convinced that there are answers that make sense to Venezuela, and perhaps to the rest of the world as well: </p>

<p>• He believes that there is a body of scientific knowledge about intelligence and learning that provides a basis for action. </p>

<p>• He believes that intelligence can be improved, that people at all ages and in all circumstances can be helped to think and act more effectively and to learn more efficiently. </p>

<p>• He believes that the development of intelligence can take place on a mass scale. </p>

<p>• And he believes that thinking ability and the ability to learn can be improved quickly, easily, painlessly, inexpensively. </p>

<p>• Most of all, he is convinced that in the effective application of scientific knowledge about intelligence, thinking, and learning lies the hope of the Third World. </p>

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<p>Machado's ministry has launched more than a dozen projects, working through other ministries and agencies of government. The most advanced project at the moment is the campaign to improve thinking skills. Machado called upon Edward De Bono, a British cognitive psychologist at Cambridge, to introduce his techniques of teaching thinking skills into three major areas of government: </p>

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<p>• In education, where 42,000 teachers have participated in De Bono's basic two-week course, and where a total of 100,000 will have been trained by the end of the year. In the new school year thinking skills will be taught to elementary school students one hour a day, five days a week. In time, these required courses will extend all the way up through the university: Machado believes that none of us reaches the point where he can't improve his ability to think. Machado also claims that as children learn how to think, they are stimulated by it, they become more self-confident, they find learning more interesting -- and their behavior improves. </p>

<p>• In the civil service, where thinking skills are being taught to bureaucrats, the blight of the bureaucracy is the unthinking and insensitive application of the rules. Machado believes that teaching bureaucrats to think is the best way to avoid strangulation by red tape. </p>

<p>• In the military, because modern weapons make the concentration of forces an easy target. Modern warfare, especially against guerilla forces of the type that have been so effective in Latin American and southeast Asia, requires the ability to see and understand the situation, to consider alternative and imaginative responses, to communicate effectively. In Venezuela, the Ministry of Defense is teaching thinking skills to privates and generals alike. </p>

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<p>Machado has enlisted the Ministry of Health in a project to introduce sensory

stimulation into a maternity hospital -- the third largest in the world -- because the medical staff agrees that infant learning begins at birth and can be enhanced by carefully stimulating all of the senses of the newborn child. Maternal and family education in these techniques is a part of this project, just as the spread of thinking skills into the home by way of the children is part of the other project. </p>

<p>Machado, and the president who appointed him, have overcome the initial ridicule and embarrassment prompted by the creation of this new ministry. Machado is making a serious effort to evaluate results -- in fact, he has retained a group of Harvard psychologists to work with his staff in fashioning scientifically acceptable procedures of evaluation. According to a recent Wall Street Journal article, the laughter about this idea has subsided. There is instead a growing sense of national pride in the boldness of Machado's undertaking. But we must ask: Is it a breakthrough? Or a shell game? </p>

<p>Let me offer another example. A man named Michel Thomas has established a language school in California, and is about to open another in Manhattan. Dr. Thomas' interests are in learning, but because he came to the United States from France after World War II, he became a language teacher. His laboratory for studying learning has been the way foreign languages are taught and learned. </p>

<p>Thomas bases his method on several principles, some formulated long ago. He borrowed from Comenius, the seventeenth century scholar, the principle that learning proceeds from the known to the unknown. That means he rejects the instant immersion idea that plunges the learner into the foreign language and cuts him off from his own. </p>

<p>Learning works best when students are relaxed, interested but not threatened. In Thomas' method, there is no pressure because the student learns at his own pace. </p>

<p>Learning is efficient only when understanding takes place; otherwise, there is only memorization. Rote memorization doesn't work without understanding because the memory has to be constantly refreshed. Rote learning of rules and vocabulary is a tiresome and boring chore that doesn't work. Learning will be lasting only when it is internalized, when understanding takes place. That's why it takes years to lose one's native language, and so little time to lose the memorized grasp of a foreign language. </p>

<p>Michel Thomas' method is quick: to move from a level of zero in comprehension to a two-level on the Foreign Service scale -where a three-level is considered acceptable for professional diplomatic work -- to move from knowing nothing to a notch below adequate professional ability, takes 10 days. Two five-day weeks, with no homework. At one-third the cost of the best known commercial language courses. With no further charge for maintenance of the skill -- ever. </p>

<p>Dr. Thomas' claims for revolutionizing language learning have yet to be demonstrated, at least in the scientifically acceptable terms that you and I usually expect. But his organization is under contract in Los Angeles to teach teachers in large numbers how to speak Spanish. He is also running a program to teach Spanish-speaking children to speak English, and his program includes children from inner-city slums. </p>

Quick, easy, painless, inexpensive, lasting. The promise of a breakthrough of major proportions in a field where even practitioners have proclaimed that learning a foreign language at home must be dull, grinding work. Like Machado, Thomas offers hope, and hope is a great motivator. And motivation is a powerful factor in learning. But is it a false hope? Or is it a breakthrough?

I am not an expert on either of these topics, and I am even less well informed about the third and last one I will mention. There is a new book -- published two years ago -- entitled Superlearning. It is a prime example of the hype that goes with many of the announcements of breakthroughs in teaching and learning. The book is a popular report of research and techniques of rapid learning. The techniques are associated with the name of a Bulgarian experimenter named Georgi Lozanov, who in turn draws on yoga techniques of rhythmic breathing combined with rhythmic spoken presentation of information over a background of slow movements of Baroque music.

"We can be so much more than we are," the authors say. We can learn better,

without stress, and "holistically". That means coordinating left brain analytic thinking and right brain creative thinking with bodily functions. "This system speeds up learning from five to fifty times, increases retention, requires virtually no effort on the part of the students, reaches retarded and

brilliant, young and old alike, and requires no specific equipment." As with Michel Thomas, it promises language learning in a matter of less than a month.

What Dr. Lozanov preaches is what Minister Machado believes: "Humans possess

vastly larger capabilities than they now use." This underdeveloped potential is what Machado argues condemns the people of the Third World to their economic poverty and physical suffering.

"Liberation", Machado says, means equipping the poor man to make his own way,

to think for himself, to act for himself. It is not a matter of overthrowing the elitist capitalistic structures of society to replace them with oppressive Marxist governments dominated by "vanguards" who claim to know what is best for

the people.

"Liberation" means liberating the person from ignorance, not simply by expanding his capacity to learn but also by strengthening his ability to use the knowledge he acquires. Dr. Lozanov, meet Dr. De Bono. Minister Machado, meet Mr. Thomas.

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These ideas are interesting. They are also on the edge of the shadowy world inhabited by many of the more disreputable hustlers of knowledge, the con men of mind and spirit and personality. It is a sideshow of mental freaks and weight-lifters, of shell games and halls of mirrors. It is natural to become suspicious, in fact, it is downright difficult not to be cynical as well as skeptical most of the time.

<p>However, cranks and crackpots and crazy inventors have done wondrous things -- they have made us fly, some of them, and sent us off our planet. Who is to say some of them won't make us multilingual and polymathic? </p>

<p>We also know, by observation, that things aren't working as well as they should be. The gap between rich and poor is growing. The world is running out of resources. Future shock is felt in a new field every day. We seem less able to learn quickly or efficiently enough to know what we should know in order to be responsible citizens. We need help. </p>

<p>At your daily working level, there are those depressing SAT scores, those blank looks, that preoccupation with immediate pleasure and reward and impatience with self-discipline and service. I have no time today to deal with the question of values, which is the current catch-all term for the deeper and more abiding purposes of education. </p>

<p>I borrowed the title of these remarks from an essay by Luis Alberto Machado. &quot;The right to be intelligent&quot; is a challenging thought, and a stimulating one. But it raises the questions &quot;Why?&quot; &quot;For what purpose?&quot; &quot;To what end?&quot; Without knowledge and the ability to think, we can't even enter the discussion of why we should learn, of what it's all for. </p>

<p>But wisdom? That's something else again. </p>