

I am a baby. All you need to do is allow me to learn



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WE are born to learn. Yet how often do we hear people say, "These students are not learning" or "This lot don't want to learn." I know many of you will not believe this but what follows are my thoughts in the three months before I was born.

The main thing on my mind is how will I learn to talk? I understand that I will be expected to learn the language of the country in which I am born. What will happen if I need to talk Chinese? Silly thoughts - but remember I am only a foetus.

As a clever little foetus I am also worried about what my parents and school will teach me. I know school will instruct me in the three 'rs, reading writing and arithmetic. I also know I will be speaking with a Geordie accent within two years.

I understand that my aspirations, my expectations and hopes for the future will mainly come from my Dad, Mam and school. The worrying bit is that I keep hearing my Dad say, "As long as he doesn't go down the pit and has clean hands. That's all that matters." Even in the womb I am beginning to think that being clever is not enough. I know I need to learn how to learn.

This may sound a bit gloomy but I also have grounds for optimism. I am part of the human race, the most intelligent species on the planet. My brain is the most complex organ in the entire universe. The magnitude of my brain is 'mind-blowing'. I have more neurons - the 'telephone wires' in the brain - than all the trees in all the forests of both North and South America combined. I have more synapses - potential neural connections - than all the leaves in all the forests right across the world!

Over millions of years of evolution, natural selection has favoured me. The fact that I will, hopefully, be around in the 21st century means that my predecessors have developed brains best able to adapt, in each generation, to their immediate environment, in other words, able to learn. That's what my ancestors were about - learning.

I know my brain has inherited all those useful adaptive systems - different forms of intelligences, preferences for seeing things in different ways, preferred learning styles,



inherited preferences; the ability to deal with wholes and parts simultaneously; to work collaboratively as well as independently, and so on. These predispositions combine in a particular way in my brain. My brain - the very mind that makes me distinctively human - has not changed in essential form in 30,000 years. 100,000 years ago, it seems the Waltons started to talk, and we have not stopped rabbiting on ever since! Our brains started to grow, and that in turn increased the size of our skulls.

Remember I have three months to go before I will be born. However, I am anxious. Every other mammal delivers its young with its brain virtually fully developed. If I had to wait until my brain is fully developed my mam will have to carry me for 27 months... and I would never get down the birth canal.

This is my biggest worry. My mam will deliver me (probably with great difficulty) at nine months with a brain only some 40% ready. In fact my brain will not stop fully developing until I am 25 years old. The good news is I needn't panic. Miraculously my brain will come equipped with a whole series of intellectual predispositions to learn incredibly rapidly from my environment.

At the moment my brain is most malleable to external influences.

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Even now I am able to distinguish my father's voice from my uncle's. When I arrive I will be ready for more stimulation and intellectual challenge. At minus three months I know that learning will be a consequence of thinking. Even babies know that simple and profound truth!

So the education system that I am about to enter will stimulate my thinking - not simply instruct. The right stimulation at the right time was critical to the survival of my ancestors. I need my thinking stimulated now and after I am born. I need to be taught how to learn! Remember if I don't use it I may lose it. My brain will eliminate connections that are seldom or never used.

Sadly I know that the education system and family I am being born into will not recognise the need to stimulate me intellectually before and after birth.

All my predispositions to learn with my miraculous brain will be limited to what you adults think I am capable of.

So, even though my genetic structure is encoded to respond to any one of the 3,000 and more languages currently spoken on the planet, I will struggle to pass O Level French.

If the big window of opportunity for acquiring language is during the first ten years of my life why will the education system invest more in my foreign language education after the age of 10 when many of my predispositions for learning have shut down? When I need small group interaction as an infant, they will put me in big groups and when as a Sixth Former I need to develop independence and operate in large and complex networks they put me in small groups?

I am a human baby. To frustrate my pre-disposition to learn is to destroy much of what it means for me to be human. Millions of babies agree. Is anyone listening?

Les Walton CBE (now all grown up) is chair of the Northern Education Trust.