

# **The Influence of Nature on Learning: A Year to Be Free**

**(Report from Field Studies in Fosen, Norway)**

**2004**

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## **Abstract**

*This institutional ethnography provides an holistic description and compelling story of a different way of learning. It creates insights and understanding about learning that is not possible in the confines of school systems governed by global economics. How do the instructors, headmaster, and students at Fosen Folkschool in Norway teach/learn in a non-academic residential school? Their way of learning helps explain the complex territory between the instincts and tendencies that govern our learning when it is unfettered by institutional standards, and the norms/values which characterize what is thought, within the formal learning system, to constitute effective teaching/learning.*

## **Introduction**

There are two kinds of skills that are often brought into play when human beings learn. One is perceptual and motor skill, the other is discursive skill. We use perceptual and motor skill to solve problems, we use signs and symbols to interact with others in the social world. The curriculum approach used in formal learning institutions extols the virtues of sign and symbol useage in the pursuit of knowledge. The importance of experience is overlooked and often detached from the learning process as if understanding could be achieved without it.

Research (Harre and Gillett, 1994) questions the logic behind this separation of learning through experience versus discursive learning. Harre and Gillett describe the natural instinct to learn as starting with the senses, especially the sense of touch. People need to have a 'sense of physical location' when they learn. What much educational research fails to address is a fundamental issue in formal education institutions: how do

people learn when experience [doing] intervenes, when it precedes or replaces knowledge acquisition?

This ethnography is unique in that it documents what happens to young adults when their learning is undertaken in a non-academic and non-competitive environment, which contrasts to today's formal institutional settings. Examples of human learning that are reported in the educational literature too often take place in formal learning institutions, e.g., schools, colleges, universities. The learning reported on here is that of people in a folk school in Norway, a one year residential program where high school graduates pursue their goals and dreams away from the comforts of home and the academic culture of the secondary school. The result is a new and fresh understanding of 'technical learning and thinking' (TLT), as told by students, instructors, and the author. The case helps articulate what it means to be a self sufficient learner as a human being. It also helps put the program and personal status problems faced by teachers into a new perspective, one that looks critically at the institution in which the curriculum is taught. Is assimilation into adult life through academic achievement really beneficial to all young people?

### Author's Reflection

*For years my disappointment with formal learning in schools was centred on the fact that schools prolonged adolescence, unnecessarily I thought. This was confirmed for me when I studied the sociology of education as a doctoral candidate. Now, years later, my disappointment centres on the actual program we offer our adolescents while they are being confined in schools. It seems natural to me that a significant part of that learning should be preparing them for adulthood and for living in some tangible way. The academic curriculum students currently contend with in North America is very university-centred, in fact, singularly so. If you try to follow some other avenue you risk being labelled a low achiever or outsider who doesn't fit. Subjects like music, drama, art, technical and family studies, and physical education are accorded a complementary rather than central role in curriculum and policy terms. The program hierarchy in schools is such an everyday part of its history it goes unnoticed as an equity issue. Students are shunted in and out of courses like sheep in a merry-go-round attempt to broaden their perspectives and give the appearance of equality between book learning and practical endeavors, between contemplation and real life. Yet their perspectives are not broadened. Instead they come to know about standardization, group and institutional conformity, and book literacy. They miss what it means to learn through experience, for oneself. This is the nature and*

*game of the comprehensive secondary school. The difficulty lies with what is prescribed by education authorities as necessary requirements for graduation and entrance to college or university. By the time students schedule their college or university preparation courses, there is little time left to accommodate other programs and ways of learning that may or may not be natural for them and that may meet a fundamental personal need.*

I arrived at Fosen Folk School two weeks after the students. It was mid-September. The weather had been beautiful. The journal entry which follows (Signe) and the survey response from Turid convey something unique about Fosen. This is definitely not your typical school. On my first full day there [a Saturday] I joined the students on a hike to the top of the local mountain, a fifteen hundred metre climb, complete with lunch, bag-pipe playing, and a determined student with a prosthetic leg. Dewey (1938) would have enjoyed these excerpts as testimony to his experiential philosophy – Education is not a preparation for life, it is life itself. Signe is one of many students who got an abrupt introduction to ‘life’ at Fosen in those early weeks. “No academic expectations here”, I remember many students telling me. No courses on living and learning about life. This is life. No simulations. Imagine the panic when the students in the boat in which Signe was travelling, realized that they faced a life threatening situation. They had no experience on the North Sea. They had no experience to assure them that this boat could and would withstand the winds and waves. They had only themselves on which to rely for their comfort and safety. These inexperienced students had to stay focused and steadfast in their first adventure of many with mother nature as the teacher. Here is Signe’s journal entry. All names are pseudonyms.

*Rolling against the wind on the fjord. One boat, five persons, no teacher. We’re all pretty exhausted. Some of us have got big blisters on our hands after hours of rowing. But we can’t stop to rest, we have got no time to argue about the job we’re doing. We’ve just got to continue steering straight. On to the waves which are growing bigger all the time. We can’t stop until we’ve made it to the nearest harbour. It’s our second week at Fosen Folk School.*

*The year here at Fosen is about being nobody but yourself. Perhaps having a fresh start without all the emotional luggage we tend to collect throughout the years. It’s about drifting into this small society which is so intense that you sometimes completely forget the outside world. A society where age, sex, and cultural differences are less important, where we try to always see people as individuals.*

*We learn to know each other like we have never known anyone before. Spending days and nights together at the school, on a sailboat, in the barn. This makes the good times better, but also the bad times worse. Whatever we get into, we're in it together, at least for this one year. I can allow myself to spend an entire day trying to learn how to do a knot. If I've got three hours of spare time in the afternoon, I might choose to spend them carrying hay bales at the school farm, before learning to play a new song on guitar by one of the other students. In the night I might drift into sleep by a fire in a cozy, hot gamme [outdoor tepee] and wake up freezing at 6 am in the morning. Folk school is not fun all day long. But everyday I get to feel that I'm really alive.*

Signe had obviously been emotionally moved by her first boating experience. From my perspective she was a bright young woman who wanted to be challenged but had no idea this kind of challenge would be waiting. It was my introduction to a different kind of culture and view of learning, in this instance 'learning for life', learning to be self-directed. I could only imagine what was going through the minds of these young adults. Twelve years of schooling did not prepare any of them for this situation. Only an experienced sailor or instructor would know what to expect and to be prepared for. This was life on the sea. This was life in a natural environment. This was learning in a folk school, I was to discover as a visiting ethnographer. The questions in my mind were numerous. What was the point of the boating story? Where were they going/coming from? Was an instructor along? How many students were in that boat? I would have the answers soon enough.

How many times do young people say, the ones who breeze through high school and the ones who struggle "I just want to take a year off". This ethnography is for those young adults. It provides an inside look at a form of education that stands in direct defiance of the rush to education and economic supremacy by nations. It heralds the importance of human development in a most basic way and at a most fundamental time – young adulthood when values and wisdom are nurtured. The underlying line of inquiry that emerges from the study is captured in the question. What purpose does the predominant knowledge-oriented curriculum tradition in our schools serve? This report and its analysis of this question criss-crosses the assumptions and premises behind today's change in the education industry and put that change in a larger and critical perspective.

The knowledge-oriented tradition as currently legitimized in North American schools enjoys a favoured position because few options to such learning are understood to exist. No words exist to formulate an

apposition because as one interviewee put it: “we don’t have the experiences from which to make sense of the words”. The little known institution along the coast of Norway, Fosen Folkehøgskole, is but one example of many in the Scandinavian countries that speak to a fundamental issue. What experiences are of most value to young adults as they contemplate their lives and livelihoods. The school is one of ninety-two such institutions that have served Norwegian and international students for over 150 years.

Grundtvig (1789-1872) is credited with developing the philosophy and setting the stage for a unique kind of learning (Borish, 1991). Called ‘Schools for Life’, the folk schools don’t denounce the importance of knowledge, they just place experience before it as the foundation upon which to learn and to practice democracy in a society. The predominant view that experience is but a complement or adjunct to the more important academic curriculum that pursues the acquisition of ‘knowledge’, is challenged.

## **Research Methodology**

The methods used in this case study are part of the qualitative research tradition. Life history (Cole, 1991) and narrative reflection (Greenfield, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988) are techniques used in ethnographic studies. The researcher maintains a passive role but probes the student’s or teacher’s behaviours, spoken words, and writings. The report or account is one that tries to make sense of some phenomenon. In this case, learning through experience rather than through books. It analyzes the ‘critical incidents’ which influence the writer and the subject. It invites all parties to engage in an autobiographical process where one reflects on one’s own enculturation.

To be an ethnographer the researcher must go to the site or institution in order to observe behaviour in a natural setting, just as an anthropologist who wants to learn about other cultures would do. The term ethnography is most often associated with such observation, or the ‘ethnographic account’, i.e., the documentation. Common techniques associated with data gathering are interview, documentary analysis, life history, investigator field notes, and participant observation. The end product is a rich description and interpretation of the institution, sub-culture, and group being studied. The following statement by Wolcott (1988) captures the essence of what an ethnographer does and how he/she thinks.

To the group being studied, the ethnographer tries harder to know more about the cultural system he or she is studying than any individual who is a natural participant in it, at once advantaged by the outsider's broad and analytical perspective but, by reason of that detachment, unlikely ever totally to comprehend the insider's point of view. (p. 189)

Resolving this tension is the essence of ethnographic work, according to Wolcott. "Successful ethnographers resolve the tension between involvement and detachment; others go home early" (p. 189). Wolcott defines ethnography as describing a 'way of life' of some identifiable group. To be successful, he argues, requires a willingness to be part of the culture and have a martian detachment at the same time. The research in this case did involve total immersion for a period of six weeks. It also involved the reflections of the author, before, during, and following the experience. Interviews, participant journal entries, and author narrative combine to create the documentation.

The interview data are developed as life-history storytelling. In life-story research (Cole, 1991) the conversation between the investigator and the interviewee is usually dominated by the participant who is asked to freely recall and reflect on his or her life experiences. The researcher, Cole asserts, maintains a passive role, merely probing these recollections and reflections. The purity of such accounts can range from strictly autobiographical to what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) call 'collaborative stories'. "And in our story telling, the stories of our participants merged with our own to create new stories, ones that we have labelled 'collaborative stories'." (p. 12). In this case study the research took as its focus the reflective career autobiography as a means of making sense of the culture shifts we all have to undertake in education. It made use of the personal writing of a subject or subjects in another country context that was in so many ways atypical but which in many ways would be acknowledged as universal by most educators. The analysis uses 'critical incidents' (Tripp, 1993) which influenced the participant.

Three themes emerged and are traced in the following written account of the Fosen Case Study. The first is the value of experience as opposed to, or in contrast to, knowledge as the real precursor to learner understanding. What is the role of experience in learning and how does 'learning by doing' actually happen. The second is a more complete understanding of life long learning and how the Nordic people, the inventors of lifelong learning, define and practice it. Finally, the third theme emerges from the social life students' experienced. What happens

to young adults when the stressors of academic achievement are replaced by dealing with real consequences.

## **John**

The following excerpt from the Rektor of the school (school principal) when asked about a turning point in his career conveys what it means to be human, to be technical. John was my point of contact for visiting Fosen, as such I felt a kinship to him. He had taken my request to visit the school to his staff of nine instructors and formally sought permission to allow a guest from abroad. They must have agreed to accommodate me although some were more cordial than others over the six week stay. On several occasions when I had specific questions or needs I would seek out John. He was a warm human being. If there was some flattery in having a professor visit he didn't make much of it. Of all the staff he was the only one who lived away from the campus (two kilometres). Often I would see him driving up to the campus in his weather beaten Volvo.

*If there has been a turning point it must have been when I graduated from secondary school. At age of 19 I decided to spend a year at a practical school in a class that worked with building furniture (mobelsnekker). Through that year I got to know the inside of a real handcraft with its standards and qualities. It was very meaningful and from that time I have had this tendency to look upon all things in life the way a carpenter does, which I think is a very useful perspective, because it is both realistic (the chair has to be stable) and aesthetic (a beautiful chair is lovely to own). It responds to all sides of the personality in a way that theoretic subjects often lose.*

*So when I treat my wife in a carpenter's way or make my lyrics [when playing the piano] the same way or if I run this school according to carpentry standards I think the results often become successful. Besides, my dream is, when I am to retire as an old man, I want to be living as a happy carpenter. In fact this thought helps me going good through my days as a headmaster.*

This excerpt is telling. It is one of the few written accounts from an experienced educator, one formally trained, where his social and technical thinking (STT), was admittedly more important in his career than any other institutionalized learning. It was refreshing to also read about theories he felt contributed to his development as a human being and educator.

*As a teacher student (1979 – 1982) I got to know names as Paulo Freire and Celestin Freinet and their thinking. I have always meant that schools should be the property of the people and I am very critical to the fact that schools, as other common goods in society, now are made objects exposed to competition between deliverers. There are values in society so important that they should not be measured in money.*

*I also have become more and more aware of the way the students' total health situation interferes with their ability to learn and grow. Normally we tend to think that personal development goes on only for the first 15-20 years in life, but it seems as if the whole society now is realizing that learning goes on for the whole life. In Norway we talk a lot of lifelong learning, which has become a priority field in education politics. I myself would like to add that this isn't just about lifelong learning but just as well about life-wide and life-deep learning. Let's make education three dimensional!*

In response to how the folk school meets the needs of young adults he was equally compelling in his writing and beliefs.

*These human qualities [persistence, life skills, sense of purpose] are in my opinion very important to all people and cultures that intend to survive. Today's young people may have to struggle not against nature or to provide themselves with food and clothes, but rather against the commercialised and meaningless reality of today, and also the great information flood that every day reminds us that some catastrophe is waiting to fall over our heads one day soon. My hope and belief is that people who get the chance to spend some time training up their practical skills, will be more able to find a way through any problem they have to face on their way through life. That is why Fosen is absolutely needed as a school to our students.*

My notes from a brief interview show that John had been teaching in a folk school for fourteen years, six of which had been as Rektor. His speciality is woodworking although he also leads the morning singing sessions with the piano. More philosophy awaited me from Walter, a former Rektor at Fosen. He is considered its visionary.

Walter had been retired for several years. When he heard [word travels fast when a stranger arrives in a small community] that I was a visiting professor he expressed an interest in being a part of my research. That interest was genuine. We met for an hour in the student lounge. In spite of our cultural differences we found much in common. We shared stories

about the value of life and work experience and about formal learning institutions. I wanted to know more about the nature of the instructors in folk schools? What about the modesty I was witnessing, and the soft spoken nature of almost everyone. What was the source of this modesty?

The question turned out to be an important one as it opened up a discussion about how people learn. Walter, like the instructors at Fosen, believed their job was to instil a broader perspective (life learning) in students than that given in regular school. He introduced me to several Norwegian concepts, one of which was 'Vok'. Apparently in 1976 the law in Norway changed and education was provided free to all adult people (lov – law om voksenopplaring). In North America the parallel would be to make adult education tuition free to all adults. Walter started his career at Fosen in 1978. He felt he was part of a new effort in Norway to humanize and democratize the formal education system for young adults.

'Learning for life' was the phrase he used to describe the movement. It meant several things – one was learning with and from other people. The boat-building program, was one example he cited. The school wanted to revive the original Viking boat construction designs and skills from ten centuries earlier. Part of passing along that culture included how skills and knowledge were passed on. In this case, as with all other subjects in the school, that method involved giving youth answers only when they were ready for them. First hand experience was the bedrock of their learning philosophy at Fosen. Knowledge and wisdom followed. To re-establish the dying boat building history they found the last person known to apprentice under a master boat builder (of original Viking boats) in remote northern Norway and hired him to come and live in their community. Part of the philosophy for learning was that young people should learn to stay focused on the problem at hand. To do this the students who enrol in boat-building must build a boat while they are in the program.

I inquired about certification and training of teachers in folk schools. There were no credentials initially, now there are. Above all else work experience is important, and teacher education. At Fosen the preference is to find teachers who have experience in their field, whether it be boat-building, sailing, woodworking, natural life, farming. The word pedagogy came up. Walter felt that the language for pedagogikk was unemotional and empty. Why is it that we teach like we do in regular schools? Why don't we try something else? He eschewed 'model thinking'. To help explain the Fosen approach he referred to the concept of a Kibutz in Israel. The term means 'learning on the farm'. You must

have both theory and practice to get respect. Another example he mentioned is captured in the fine art of music instrument building. To build the finest violin possible the artisan must be one with his tools and know the physics of sound. It is the same experiential learning view. A person must be capable of technical thinking and learning.

He described another key principle called ‘Variety and Time ‘ (Mangfold og Tid). Part of this perspective is to never strive to be something special or at least to think of yourself as something special. This helped to explain the modesty I was witnessing around the school. No one here is trying to upstage anyone else or to be special. They try to be themselves.

Walter described schools as unhistorical. I asked what he meant. “They have no respect for local history,” he said. I knew what he meant now. The widespread use of a prescribed and standardized curriculum requires schools to adopt a curriculum that looks at regional and national histories rather than local ones. This is very true in most history courses in North American schools. Folk schools don’t have to adopt a standardized curriculum, as such the important history and culture associated with boat-building in Norway can be preserved and celebrated. Youth can learn about their history first hand through intimate experience. Part of the pedagogy associated with the Fosen learning philosophy includes using pictures as well as experience rather than words. In Nordic mythology local history is told poetically using dialogue and narrative. In science, students have to start with the tree first then its name. This is what fits human nature best. He felt that teaching science out of a textbook was a less than useful strategy for helping young people learn about science concepts, laws, etc. The student needs to ‘experience’ the phenomena before he or she can digest and understand the words that label or describe it. Walter referred to a former Norwegian Minister of Education (Godmund Hernes), who in 1995, told an international gathering that the greatest contribution Norwegians have made to the world of pedagogical thought is the Folk School. I now know where the modesty comes from and how it fits.

## **Morgan**

Morgan was the natural life instructor at Fosen. He offered to have me join him for coffee at noon (this usually means something more than coffee in Norway – this time it was waffles with sour cream and fresh strawberries plus coffee). The interview was in his apartment adjacent to the school premises.

In addition to explaining some Norwegian terms and filling out my interview sheet he expanded on his philosophy as an instructor. He described his method of instructing by using the concept of a continuum. On the one end of the continuum he is someone who gives a lot of direction and information [like a dictator – his words]. On the other end he is someone who gives little information to the students. He describes this end of the continuum as ‘veiledning’. The closest word for us in English is ‘facilitator’ but he tells me that this is still not quite right. At the veiledning end of the continuum the students are completely self-directed. He is available to them but only when they have questions and even then in a limited or special way. I probed about this only to uncover an old maxim that a colleague taught me years ago. Apparently as an instructor, Morton only responds to the students questions when he feels they are ‘adequatio’ or ready. He mentions that the signal for this is when students ask the good question. Morton tells me his philosophy is to always seek the veiledning end of the continuum.

I am reminded of my discussion with Elmer [boat building instructor] and how he watched the students shape the five pieces of the boat keel for the original Viking boat. What is this I am witnessing? Is it self-directed learning? Project learning? Do we have words for it in our North American schools? He [Morton] brings out a page of paper on which is typed a poem in Norwegian, by Hans Borli, dated 1969. I had it translated two weeks later while on my journey from Norway to Denmark.

*You and the tree, a brotherhood/sisterhood  
Deep as the soil  
In the rush of sap  
Under the bark  
Your (own) dream rising  
Dizzy, hesitating  
In winding stairways of darkness  
Up to the face of god  
You stand there in Spring Wind  
With ear pressed against rugged bark*

*And suddenly  
You know whether it is you  
You realize that you see the tree and the tree sees you*

My notes refer to the ‘veiledning’ concept but also to a point that Morton made about admission to a folk school. There are no admissions criteria, no sorting of files and people. It is a first come first serve admissions policy. As such, students decide. No meritocracy here, just self-selection. My notes from the interview itself start with some demographic information. Morton had been teaching for five years plus two years with handicapped youth. He worked in the logging industry for one year and came from a farming family. His formal preparation for teaching in a folk school consisted of a short program (one year) that granted him a teacher certificate. For a short time he taught skiing in a gymnasium [high school]. His postsecondary education included one year of study in geography and two in outdoor life. Referring to life at Fosen Morton used the words ‘Fosen is distinctive’. “It is very stimulating to teach here – they know what they are doing. Folk schools are rebels [in the Norwegian education system] in a positive sense, especially Fosen. The main goal for students in most folk schools is recreation. At Fosen it is more meaningful.” In describing his philosophy of teaching he referred to an exercise that he does with his students each year, early on. He takes them into the countryside as a group and sends them out to find a tree. They are instructed to sit beside the tree for twenty minutes, feel the bark of the tree, get in touch with it. He then asks them to return to a point some metres from their respective tree, blind folds them and sends them out to find their tree. With great satisfaction he asks me what percentage of the students do I think actually find the same tree. A very high percentage, he tells me. The point of the exercise is to help students make a connection to nature, to get their own personal relationship with nature. “It’s not about being better in that relationship than others” he reiterated [part of his philosophy that learning must be done in a non-competitive environment, unlike most schools]. “Nature is not to be challenged, but respected”. It turns out that this is the philosophy adopted by not only Morton but the former Rektor Walter Larsen [see notes from interview with Walter]. That philosophy is that any teaching should start with an experience, followed by book learning. This allows the student to be ready or adequate and thereby motivated for the information that follows, i.e., to know something about the subject personally before words are put to it. Referring to the students who come to Fosen, Morton repeated a common refrain “I can see that the students are bored from competition in schools [regular schools]”.

I inquired about working and learning in institutional settings

*A difficult question, he smiled. Mainly, its how our society has come to be competitive in all ways. There are few arenas where you do things that can't be compared to others. These arenas are extremely valuable. 'Nature life' is one of them. I'm also convinced that we are losing many old techniques today, because we are so extremely focused on the future. I think that's a big mistake. In my subject I can do something about it. By learning about ancient techniques, I hope the students can see how complex and advanced they were.*

Of the five students who responded to a journal writing request Turid's reflections may be the most typical. They are particularly important to what may be a widespread young adult perspective today.

*When I was in the secondary school I was sick and tired of studies and books, so my aim or thought was to try folkehogskole, and when I decided I only had Fosen in my head. I know many that have gone to Fosen and they spoke with giant good feelings about it. The Fosen school is very well known in the surrounding area where I live. My two sisters graduated in agriculture and they are happy I choose this school. As a student in Ph. Ed, running, etc. I felt I had to get away from the pressure of training. Last year I had problems with a bad infection. This school does not focus so much on training and that makes me feel good, and I enjoy trips, hiking, and sailing. When I choose this school I knew fellow students would enjoy a different life – they dress differently (funny) and nobody would say anything bad about it - rather they make fun of it. I also enjoy what this school gives - the culture and tradition with instruction. We learn not to take anything for granted. If a boat is to be built, one has to go in the forest and fall trees, so most of the teaching is practical. This is good for those who don't like theory. They get to be good at something. This school also aims at ecological thinking. For example, using ecologic food with the aim of a strong economy. There is practically nothing I don't like at Fosen school, but as a county member at Norsk Malungdom (organization which preserves norsken traditional language), I get upset that the school curriculum does not emphasize my Trondheim dialect. It is much closer to my norsk than book script. My norsk has just as much culture and tradition as building a boat and I hope that the school will adopt it. I find that many of my fellow students are not very ecological. That bothers me but hopefully, that will change.*

*I have been at this school only one month but I know when I leave next Spring, I will miss this school very much.*

*Sincerely, Turid*

This testimony is particularly germane in the context of curriculum priorities in secondary schools. The pressure to prepare for some unknown knowledge discipline places undue pressure on young people before they know who they are and what they want to become. An interview with the school nurse confirmed this need for self analysis and accomplishment.

The meeting with Marit [school nurse] took place in her office at the local health clinic/hospital (about one-half kilometre from the Folkschool). I had telephoned a few days earlier to make an appointment.

*Marit sees students from the school but only on a part time basis. There is the odd student injury to deal with (Ellen sprained her ankle, for example) but most of her visits are from the younger students who are away from home for the first time and feeling homesick or lost. This counselling function seemed to be something with which she was comfortable. I had noticed a good deal of boy/girl cuddling in the time I had been at the school and wondered if showing such affection in public was considered cool/normal behaviour in Norway among adolescents. Marit characterized such behaviour as quite normal, even to the extent of sexual involvement providing the participants were over eighteen years of age. Apparently the law in Norway is that when a person reaches age 18 they are considered a mature adult in Norwegian society and are then responsible for their own actions. I asked her to characterize the young students at Fosen. "They are scattered in their thinking. They don't know where they are going because they don't know where they have been or who they are, what they believe in for sure". In referring to the regular schools in Norway she told me about a god-child of her own who had difficulty adjusting to life in school. He excelled at sports but couldn't see any relevance in school learning. "They [schools] teach us a lot of things but who is going to teach us to live?" she asked. Her god-child wanted a practical education. About the folk schools she commented: "It allows these 'adults-in-transition' to develop questions from a range of areas, work interests, personal morals, social relations) they had not thought of as yet. It gives the students a year in which to grow outside of their usual home surroundings and support network. For the first time in their life no academic expectations removes an important and nagging stressor." According to Marit, the result is*

*that they have more time to think about problems. Because of the life and human-centred curriculum at the school and the many experiential projects/workshops they build self-esteem and self-confidence, in terms of social and physical skills.*

*At a second interview three weeks later, I told Marit about the increased number of boy/girl attachments I was witnessing. The incidents of cuddling and overt affection were more numerous and a distinct feature of student socialization, especially in and around the school in the evenings. I wondered if the rather widespread show of affection among couples was a social phenomenon that was a part of 'learning about life' or, was this just normal young adult behaviour? Often enough the girls seemed to be the initiators in the showing of affection – something I did not expect. I did see an informal structure of life at the school which seemed normal and even refreshing but was this part of an actual social structure/cult? Marit assured me that it would be perfectly normal for two students to sleep together - the only indiscretion would be if someone over eighteen years of age slept with someone under eighteen (five of fifty-six students were under eighteen years of age).*

## **Roald and Tore**

“For the first time in my life I feel free”

I was quite emotional the day I left Fosen. My reflections mirror those from the beginning of this collaborated story. How can life in schools, or the absence of it as John and Walter would say, not be analyzed through students' stories? The following thoughts were documented while on the Ferry from Fosen to Trondheim.

*The road sloped gently down towards the village of Vanviken. Roald [Fosen student] is his usual self, full of the wisdom that made our discussions special. “For the first time in my life I feel free,” he said. More wisdom, I thought.*

As I write I am not sure what I said to Roald. How is an ethnographer supposed to keep track of conversational material on the one hand and record and reflect on the moment too. To do the three things at the same time is complex. I must have told him I liked those words because I remembered to write them in my journal while on the ferry. I also probably listened because during all of our conversations over the six weeks I found his thoughts and actions to be mature beyond his years. I

must try to capture that sensibility in words and to tell Roald's story. But first the 'free' part and why these words in the sub-title.

In addition to requesting journal entries from students at Fosen two students expressed special interest in my research and asked if they could write to me. The following letters are included for their richness and authenticity.

#### a) Roald's Letter

My introduction to Roald was on my first trip with the student group at Fosen. Fosen is located in a small community known as Rissa, population 2000. Picture a small rural town nestled among rolling farmlands, and surrounded by north sea fjords (gentle-sloped ones). While this might sound isolated, it isn't when you live here. The Norwegian people are sure-footed (physically active in the outdoors), sure-minded (self-assured and practical), and hospitable when they befriend you.

Roald climbed up a 1500 meter (4500 feet) local mountain with all the other students, a little behind but not far. He did so with one prosthetic leg. I didn't really meet Roald that day but noted that he made the trip successfully and without any help from fellow students or instructors. In fact, I was struck by how aloof the instructor was that day, about all the students. He was responsible for leading the expedition but didn't make any special attempts to help specific students. It was clear that each student was responsible for his or her own actions. Even when three of the slower students asked permission to return to the school from the first rest point, he didn't seem bothered or disappointed. When I asked him about that conversation he simply said it was their loss. I was concerned about the possibility of others taking the path of least resistance (no pun intended) and returning to the comforts of the school and the valley floor. I later learned that this decision was part of a school-wide, perhaps even a society-wide, philosophy. The students are adults and are responsible for their own actions. No hand holding here.

I soon came to know of Roald's adulthood during many moments in the student lounge when students would socialize, be themselves. Roald wasn't interested in small talk among peers, and outward showing of affections between boys and girls (something Tore's letters convey later). He enjoyed being by himself or with friends in situations where he could learn or be challenged intellectually. He would play contract bridge with a group of us, or chess, or spend time in the wood shop, carving.

It was several weeks after I had left Fosen that I wrote to him and asked if he would consider telling me the circumstances about his leg. This is his letter. He titled it himself 'I got adult too fast'.

*My name is Roald. I am today a 19 year old boy. I come from a place called Eide in nordmore in Norway. At the time I am going on the boat builder line at Fosen Folkehogskole in Rissa. What I am going to tell now, it is a time period from my life, which have made a big and heavy marks through my growing up. This happened when I was a child and have affected as a human being and have been a big part in founding my life. And showed me a brutal and fast way from being a child to be an adult. Everything happened in a flash. It is in oktober 1996, it is a Sunday. In only a few hours at the night I have got a big hump just under my left knee. I went to the doctor on Monday. He thinks it is only a football knee. Two weeks later in the start of November I still got the hump. I get sent to Molde hospital for x-ray and doctor examination. At the x-rays photos could we see clearly that something is wrong. Better machine is required. The day after I am sent with plane to R.I.T. (Regional hospital of Trondheim). I got examined and get the diagnosis bone cancer. My life is turned upside down. I got a 70 percent chance of surviving. At the photos I had taken you could see that it was only a few millimeters left of the bone. If it had broken the cancer would have spread it self to the rest of the body. And my chance of survival had gotten much lower. I never forget the last step I went, heavy and endless long just at the limit. Just one more step I went and maybe I haven't been here today. For several months I went through a living hell of pains. I got weekly heavy doses with cell poison and had several operations. I had to amputate my leg just over the knee. But with good support from family and friends I made it.*

*In June 1997 I was written out of the hospital. I had won over the cancer. The years that came after are years filled with big pains and training. For years after I have been at hospital inspections. Still going. Because of this illness I lost many important year of my childhood. 'I got adult too fast'. This have marked my life situation in later year, I am holding my self up by telling my self. "Levva Livet". (Live life). You only live life one time it is precious. (dyrebart).*

Roald's maturity had come, in part, through a life threatening and unusual medical problem. Subsequently, he had chosen to follow an interest in boat building at Fosen. His letter and wisdom provides evidence for use in a case study about Fosen as an institution. It helps give perspective on the relative value of institutionalized learning versus life and work

experience. But, why would an experience like this be thought of as 'being free'? Free from what? Free from the cancer? Or, free from the stifling existence of student life in a secondary school? Roald had freed himself from two very significant and equally crucial life changing experiences. John's point about life-wide and life-deep learning is quite right, the 'life' in lifelong learning is just as important as the 'long'.

Tore's letter, along with Marit's interview, helps to clarify the social relations theme. She was another student I didn't get to know for a few days. I hadn't noticed her at all on the mountain climbing expedition. One evening I was trying to play (on one of the school's two pianos) the melody of a tune that was ingrained into my head during my upbringing in a Canadian-Norwegian home. It was a Norwegian song that my dad used to sing with his friends whenever we were hunting or fishing. As I was picking out the tune on one of the pianos Tore came into the room. She had heard the tune, even though I was barely touching the keys. "I know that song", she said. I was flattered and encouraged. From that moment on Tore and I were friends. When ever she played the piano her style somehow suited the instrument and showed both her musicality and personality. She would often play classical music while others read or carved. What is a girl with this talent doing at a folk school, I wondered?

For weeks she would ask me why I was there. Are you going to start a folkschool in North America, she asked? She offered to keep a journal, something I had asked all the students to do. Like Roald, she was comfortable speaking in English and seemed mature beyond her years. After leaving Fosen I had asked her to write and she did. In this instance the letters address my hunch that students can and do learn more about life and themselves at a non-academic school. I was particularly interested in the outward affection that was so evident among many couples in the school. Tore will write to me about girl-boy social behaviour, I hoped. I had referred in my letter requesting journals from students, to what I called 'social relations'.

## b) Tore's Letters

*I think it is difficult to say something about this subject [social relations], because I have not noticed anything particular, but I'm not really a good observer either. So I have just written something short and general. Hope you can use it.*

*You said in your last email that budding relationships seemed necessary for the girls, but I didn't notice that....it was four girls who seemed a bit 'flirty' (they still are), but otherwise it seemed just as necessary for the boys. I don't know why they act like that, but I don't think it is because they are afraid to be left out or to test their femaleness, they have a lot of self-confidence and they are all very independent. I think they just like boys.*

*In the beginning there were many couples, but now there is just two, they have been together since you were here. I do not know why there were so many couples in the beginning. Maybe because most people in my age want a boy/girlfriend. And since we live so close and got to know each other so fast it was easier to get one. In the beginning I was looking for a potential boyfriend too, but now I know that none of these are my type.*

*II We are starting to get much close contact here, but that started just after Christmas. Me, two other girls and one boy use to lie in a pile and just strike each other (no sexual feelings involved). We have figured out that people need close contact. More and more people are joining us, both boys and girls. Giving each other massages is getting more common too. But not boys to boys. When it comes to cuddling they keep distance, unless there are girls involved. It took a long time before I saw anyone give each other a hug, and now we can lie on top of each other in a big pile and just lie there for hours. We are all like a big family and the relationship between boys and girls is like between brothers and sisters (except when they are in love or have been to the pub)*

*Sometimes some people gather and sleep close to a boy those nights. So do I. We have talked about it and figured out that we like it because it feels safe. In the beginning it was a bit exciting too because they were boys, but not anymore. That excitement is gone because we have gotten used to these boys, now we just look at them as friends. Now it is just safe and cosy. It seems like they think that too. After I came here I have gotten a more relaxed relationship to boys, not just these boys, but also strangers. It is not scary to make contact or talk to a boy anymore.*

*Sincerely, Tore*

Analyzing social behaviour is not something with which this author is comfortable. I can't help but wonder how much of the student desire to be free, in Norway or elsewhere, has to do with a rebellion against institutionalized learning and on a societal acceptance of institutional solutions to individual, family, and community problems (leave it to or

rely on the expert – a kind of abandonment of emotional and self sufficiency - an oblivion).

This case study aims to improve understanding of learning through experience [of technical learning and thinking], and how it impacts on human learning. How does such learning/thinking empower and liberate people? How does it enhance or restrict individual growth? The case puts institutionalized learning into a fresh perspective. How much formalized learning should young people be expected to endure, from society's viewpoint? What is the role of experience among the young? Could school systems ever embrace a model of learning that valued experience as well as knowledge? Could they ever understand the influence of nature on learning?

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