

BOOK REVIEWS

Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom.

William Glasser. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

The Language of Choice Theory.

William Glasser & Carleen Glasser. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999.

Reviewed by **John M. Novak**, Brock University.

William Glasser has been around for a long time. For the last four decades he has been at the evolving forefront of the movement for therapeutic approaches to education. Starting out with a behavioural orientation in the 1960s, his first version of reality therapy was an intuitively rich but, by his own admission, a theoretically misguided perspective. At the end of that decade he applied this concept to creating "schools without failure" and gave new life to classroom meetings. In the 70s, with added enthusiasm, he extended his outlook and wrote about an identity society and the contentious concept of positive addictions as ways to move people towards pro-social behaviours. However, it was not until the 80s that he found a deeper theoretical orientation for his clinical intuitions. Disavowing his previous behaviourist perspective, he modified William Powers's (1973) cybernetic theory in order to develop a systematic perceptual approach to counselling (1981). This approach emphasized people's internal motivation and their desire to bring about a match between internal reference perceptions and external perceptions. Later that decade he applied this perceptual approach to education and management. In the early 90s he combined his perceptual approach with the born-again Deming movement and wrote about quality schools and teachers. Now, as that decade has come to an end, he has once again consolidated his theoretical work and become even more focused in its application.

Choice Theory and *The Language of Choice Theory* (written with his wife, Carleen Glasser) are Glasser's contributions to the new millennium. Both books are worth reading as they demonstrate the logic, insight, power, persistence, and subtlety of his efforts to remove external control psychology from our personal and professional relationships. Relying on the adage that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, this review will focus chiefly on the logic and applications of the first book and make only passing comments on the much shorter second book.

According to *Choice Theory*, if we wish to remedy the destructive effects of controlling others and allowing ourselves to be controlled, we need an alternative that enables people to make better choices. Better choices aim at

seeking happiness in satisfying relationships rather than merely grasping at pleasures that disregard our connections to others or trying to force others to behave in ways that we “know is best.” The logic of the choice approach is concisely summarized in ten axioms at the end of the book (p. 332-336). Each of these axioms deserves examination because they provide the rationale for working through the four relationships explored in the book: Adult-Adult Partnership, Parent-Child, Teacher-Student, and Manager-Employee.

The first axiom noted by Glasser is that each person only controls his or her own behaviour. Quite simply, if we are willing to suffer the consequences, others cannot make us do what we do not wish to do. This variation of Sartre’s notion that we are “condemned to be free” enables people to take responsibility for constructing positive possibilities in their lives.

Next, Glasser stresses that we can only give others information. How they use that information is their choice. This approach is not meant to be a heartless ignoring of responsibility. Rather, it shows people the constraints we are all under in working in a world with others who are responsible for their choices. Thus, he emphasizes the accuracy, creativity, and care needed in conveying information to others.

The third, fourth, and fifth axioms move people from the personal to the interpersonal realm and stress that all long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems that are experienced in the present. Glasser’s focus here is not to look deeply inside people for inner children or repressed urges but rather to examine the quality of their present connection with others. Since we cannot get out of the here and now, here is the place to begin to make improvements in the relational choices that now influence the quality of our lives.

Axioms six through ten return to the personal realm and emphasize the importance of satisfying generic needs for survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Ever the converted perceptualist with a persistent behaviourist upbringing, Glasser points out that every person has a unique picture of what will appease his or her needs and uses a total behaviour (acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology) to try to “get some satisfaction.” Although residing in California, he has not succumbed to the New Age notion that “We’ve got the whole world in our head.” More subtle, he contends that “all behaviour is chosen, but we have direct control over only the acting and thinking components. We can, however, control our feelings and physiology indirectly through how we choose to act and think” (p. 336).

Choice Theory is thus an attempt to develop a new psychology of personal freedom. It seeks to find ways of relating to others without criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, or bribing. Those in helping relationships find out what is in a person’s quality world and then try to

support it. This may involve helping people change what they want, what they are doing, or both. The goal of this therapeutic approach is “to help people to develop better relationships, which they can use to live more effective lives” (p. 110). Applied to marriage, Glasser contends that “choice theory does not guarantee a wonderful marriage: It guarantees a way to deal with the problems that will come up in the best marriages” (p. 175).

Of particular interest to educators will be the chapter on “Schooling, Education, and Quality Schools.” Here Glasser is critical of what he calls “schooling,” a process that uses the external control psychology of grades and threat of failure to get students to acquire knowledge and do and redo calculations. Glasser argues that this mindless and coercive approach is not working and often results in students removing “schoolwork and then school out of their quality worlds. Many will drop out of school into lives that include violence, crime, prison, drugs, and unloving sex” (p. 238). In contrast, he offers a system of education based on choice theory that emphasizes using knowledge and solving meaningful problems. This view of meaningful education is made real by Glasser’s depiction of a model quality elementary school and his description of actual projects to create coercion-free and failure-free quality schools. It is his contention that we have to change systems to work with a choice theory orientation rather than attempt to get students to conform to external control psychology. The latter is a losing and undemocratic project. The chapter ends with six specific criteria for a quality school which should stimulate conversation in schools and school councils. Graduate students looking for interesting research projects could explore the conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation of quality schools. There is much here that calls for extended examination.

If *Choice Theory* is about explaining the logic of Glasser’s approach to healthy relationships and competent functioning, *The Language of Choice Theory* is a feisty demonstration of the theory in practice. Using 49 examples and counter-examples of an external control approach and a choice theory alternative, the Glassers provide concrete applications that clearly show the difference. Consistently following the axioms of choice theory, this book offers practical applications in terms of relationships of parent to child, love and marriage, teacher to student, and manager to employee. If some of the external control quotations seem so natural and the choice theory alternatives seem unusual or unreal, it shows how deeply ingrained the former are and how difficult it may be to try to habitually use non-coercive language that attempts to work out differences in a fair and open manner. At the very least, the book will stimulate the interests of those who like to see what a theory looks like when it is applied to some of the most difficult and annoying everyday situations.

William Glasser has aged well. He has worked hard at developing a simple but exacting approach for fighting coercive relationships and creating more joyful and successful educational systems. If simplicity involves removing the unnecessary so the necessary may speak, his two new books necessarily speak to our educational hearts, heads, and hands. It is necessary that we take them to heart of our educational concerns.

References

- Glasser, W. (1981). *Stations of the mind: New directions for reality therapy*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Powers, W. (1973). *Behavior: The control of perception*. Chicago: Aldine.

The Disciplined Mind.

Howard Gardner. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1999.

Reviewed by **Ted McKeigan**, Graduate Student, Brock University.

What is true, beautiful, and good? Using the theory of evolution, the musical genius of Mozart, and the horrors of the Holocaust, Howard Gardner, in *The Disciplined Mind* successfully assists students' and teachers' cultural understanding of their educational process as it relates to truth, beauty, and goodness. He does this by emphasizing that we should teach less but in more depth. By probing important issues in depth, we will be teaching much more.

In pursuit of truth, Gardner links Darwin's development of systematic classification of living organisms to the understanding of topics that effect human beings today. In doing so, he manages to find common ground between the scientific and religious communities, despite the controversies surrounding the theory of evolution. He uses the power of music to depict the human condition in Mozart's work, "The Marriage of Figaro," in search of beauty as it appears in music and human relations. And, in pursuit of the good (and the ugly), Gardner uses the Holocaust and the atrocities associated with it, as a way to understand, not only the Holocaust, but also the human motivation behind such a horrific and elaborate endeavour.

Gardner walks a fine line between the age old rivals of traditional education and progressive education. He lauds John Dewey and his progressive stance toward a humanistic, connected educational curriculum, while, at the same time, supports the notion of national standards and a national curriculum - with limits! He does reject the preoccupation with standardized tests and feels that in the wrong hands, the results could be used to foster non-