

**Foreword to *What Do I Do Monday?* by John Holt  
Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, Innovators in Education series, 1995**

*What Do I Do Monday?* is a rich harvest of possibilities, tumbling one after another onto the pages. I challenge any committed, caring, resourceful teacher to pick up this collection and not find something to try, not be able to say, “I could do that, or build on that idea, or adapt that one.” This is an encouraging book, a hopeful book, one of that says: There are so many things we can do. Some will seem easy, some will seem harder; do what feels possible to you, and then try something else.

The message contained within all these ideas is that children are good at learning. This was the message that audiences heard when they attended lectures given by John Holt, the quiet schoolteacher whose first book, *How Children Fail*, brought him to public attention and sent him on the lecture circuit during the late 1960s, giving hundreds of talks about making schools more humane, more flexible, more connected to the lives of children.

Teachers who read or heard Holt felt, as fellow teacher and writer James Herndon put it, that they “weren’t just crazy, because here was this guy who was able to articulate for us what we were thinking, and certainly *he* didn’t seem crazy.” Holt wrote and talked about what it was like when students didn’t learn what he was supposed to teach. HE described the strategies children use to determine what the teacher wants them to do. He argued that fear cripples learning, that children don’t need to be bribed or coerced in order to learn, and that learning should not be separate from the rest of life.

When teachers listened to Holt’s talks, or wrote him letters (as hundreds did), invariably they would say something like, “I understand what you’re saying, but what can I do about this in my own classroom? What can I do Monday?”

In an important sense, this question matched Holt’s perspective and fit his temperament, because he too was interested in practical change, in what each person could do to act on his or her beliefs. He too was not satisfied merely to hear, or to talk, about what a better world might be like. He wanted to think about how to work toward that goal, to map out a plan of action with others who had the same vision. After answering teachers’ questions hundreds of times, he wanted to write a book that would gather all his practical ideas, his answers, to the question “What do I do Monday?”, into one place.

The practical ideas offered in later chapters always stem from, or remind us of, the earlier chapters’ more general discussion of how children learn and how adults can best help them. Thus, having already established in the “Learning as Growth” chapter that it’s better not to teach disembodied skills, that “we should try to do in school as much as possible of what people are doing in the world,” Holt then opens his chapter on numbers by saying that “we should use numbers inside the classroom to do what people use

numbers to do outside the classroom – to measure, compare, analyze, predict.” The next few chapters are filled with example after example of how teachers might do this. The idea, which each example supports, is that learning does not have to be merely *preparation* for meaningful activities or real life.

In recommending ways that teachers could make their classrooms more open, flexible, and meaningful to the children, and in suggesting innovative writing and math projects that teachers might try, Holt knew that some would say right back to him, “But that’s not realistic,” or “I could never do that in my school.” Anticipating this kind of resistance, in the chapter called “The Tactics of Change” he wrote:

Of course we are all walled in by circumstances, in one way or another. But only by trying to push out against the walls can we be sure where they are. Most people, and again teachers in particular, have less freedom of choice and action than they would like. But they almost certainly have more freedom than they *think*. For every teacher, and there have been and will be plenty, who have been fired for innovating, or threatening and defying the system, there are thousands who with no risk at all could do much more innovating or freeing up in their classrooms than they have ever tried to do.

For many people, these are hard words to hear. It’s easier to believe that we *would* do better if only we could than to believe that nothing is stopping us except our own failure to act. But ultimately, of course, our hope lies within this latter thought. If we *can* do better, then, as Holt says at the end of the book, “The way to begin is – to begin.” In the final paragraph of the book, which we must remember was first published in 1970, Holt writes, “Every day’s headlines show more clearly that the old ways, the ‘tried and true’ ways, are simply and quite spectacularly not working. No point in arguing who’s to blame. The time has come to do something very different.”

Ultimately, Holt’s own questioning would take him even farther than he goes in this book, toward an examination of the broader issues of schooling and society and of the viability of the institution of schooling itself. But even when he himself began working on other fronts, he never stopped believing that teachers should try to push out those walls, test the limits, and do whatever they could to make classroom life better for children. When Holt first argued that the time had come to do something very different, people did make changes, but not enough to make this book unnecessary. Even within all the constraints that today’s teachers face, there is room for more innovation, more humaneness, more resourcefulness. There is room for many of the suggestions Holt offers, and for teachers to catch the spirit of the suggestions and come up with hundreds more of their own. As Holt says, this is not a book about blame. It is a book that says “things could be so much better than they are,” and it is also a book that helps us to make that happen.

SUSANNAH SHEFFER