

# Envisioning Learning Societies Across Multiple Dimensions

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The development of learning societies is the issue of issues of the 21st century. Every social issue — such as poverty, peace, justice, development, the environment — will necessarily require collective learning for solution. The better we understand the process of collective learning the more able will we be to address our collective problems. Collective learning about collective learning is high-order learning and should be our first priority.

The collective meta-cognitive task will be aided by clarification of concepts and terms about the learning society and collective learning. The phrase “learning society” is used differently by different thinkers. In a related domain, the term “organizational learning” has been defined in so many different ways that discussion sometimes becomes blurred as different participants think they are talking about the same thing when they are not.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to avoid confounding different conceptions of learning societies, it would help to identify characteristics or dimensions that distinguish varieties of learning societies. Here I will suggest two such dimensions.

## CONCEPTIONS OF A LEARNING SOCIETY ON THE INDIVIDUAL—SUPRA-INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION

One dimension by which conceptions of the learning society may be classified is by the degree to which a learning society refers to learning that involves a) changes in individuals, and b) changes in something supra-individual. When we speak of “learning” we are usually referring to individual learning, a change in what I called the “individual lesson set,” a change in a learner’s personal knowledge, behaviors, thinking, and feeling. Most of the discussion of the learning society refers to the expansion of such individual learning. Typically it envisions a society in which members are literate, numerate, and actively engaged in learning throughout their lives. Most people would agree with the value of such a learning society, one in which learners are actively engaged in improving their individual lesson sets.

Learners, however, are not isolated; they are social. Learners compare their lessons, and as more and more individuals change their individual lesson sets there is the possibility of changing something supra-individual<sup>2</sup>, of changing what I call the “shared lesson set.” By “shared lesson set” I mean the learnings a group shares – its shared knowledge and shared ways of acting, thinking, feeling, and communicating. It includes shared technologies, social structures, mores and worldviews. This shared lesson set is the result of individual learnings, but is supra-individual. It is supra-individual in that it takes on a life of its own, is institutionalized as an on-going feature of the group, is taught to new members, and organizes and forms the action and thoughts of its members.<sup>3</sup> For example, when Copernicus developed his theory that the earth revolved around the sun, there was a change in his individual lesson set, but not of society’s. By now, however, his view is taught to almost all young learners and shapes the way they frame their views of reality. When Alexander Graham Bell developed the idea of the telephone, he had expanded his individual lesson set but not the societal shared lesson set. By now, however, the telephone system is embedded in much of the world’s shared lesson set and channels the way people communicate. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 19th century saw the inconsistencies between the principles of the United States Constitution and the denial of voting rights to women, her individual lesson set changed, but not her society’s. It took sixty years before many individuals’ learning

culminated in societal learning, a change in something supra-individual, an amended United States Constitution that henceforth guaranteed women the right to vote.

The shared lesson set houses the activity of individual learners, just as a termite mound houses the lives of dozens of generations of individual termites. But just as the mound is the product of countless individuals' efforts, so is a society's shared lesson set. The relationship between the individual and the shared lesson set is bi-directional. The individual is largely formed by his or her shared lesson set, but the shared lesson set is also the product of the thinking of individual learners. There is an ongoing dialectic of individual learners and shared lesson sets. As individual learners find ways of improving the existing shared lesson set to better fit changing environment realities, or of improving the shared lesson set's internal coherence, at some point those individual learnings become institutionalized in the shared lesson set. At that point we can say that something supra-individual has changed. When the dialectic of individual learners, shared lesson sets, and environing realities gives rise to an improvement in the shared lesson set, we can say collective learning has been achieved.

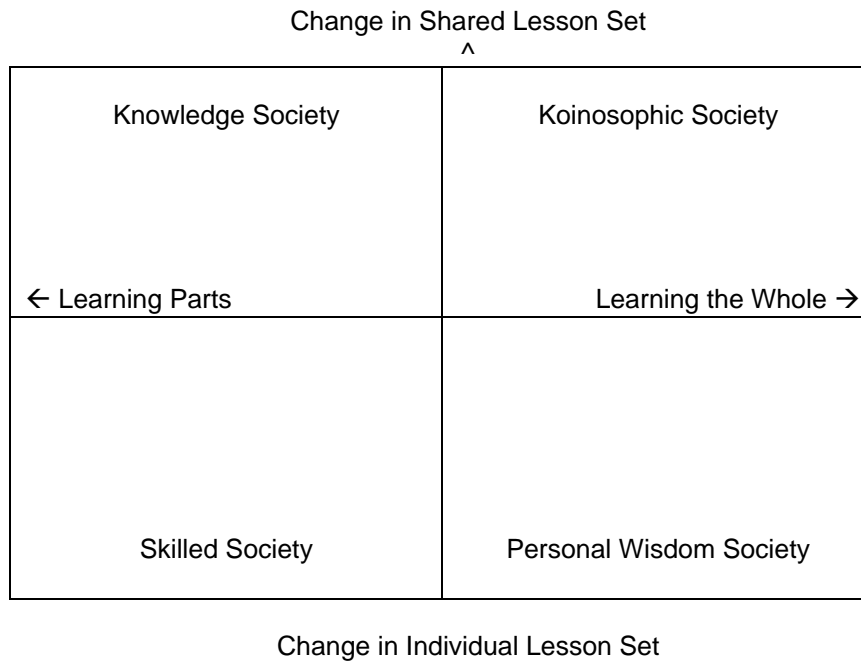
So, there is a second way of thinking of the "learning society," as one that is marked by change in not just individual lesson sets, but also in a society's shared lesson set. This way of conceiving of the learning society is not common, but in my view deserves more attention.

#### **CONCEPTIONS OF THE LEARNING SOCIETY ON THE PARTS-WHOLE DIMENSION**

A second dimension that may be used to characterize views of a "learning society" is scope — the degree to which the learning that occurs in a learning society tends to focus on parts or on wholes: a) on fragments of knowledge, or b) on knowledge of the Whole. One common vision of a "learning society" is of one rich with learning about specialized topics, about genes and jeans, quarks and quirks, ozone and e-zines, bits and bots. Today, learners are increasingly rewarded for adding specialized knowledge. This specialization and the proliferation of electronic information are producing an exponential growth in knowledge that offers the prospect of better products, better health, and better lives.

This proliferation of fragmentary learnings may lead some, however, to be anxious about a world in which "the center cannot hold." They may wish for a different sort of learning society, one with emphasis on the integration of the parts into a coherent whole. An emphasis on the whole is akin to an emphasis on wisdom. Wisdom requires both experience and reflection on it. It searches for underlying principles that give value and direction in a wide range of environments in time and space. It is concerned with ends as well as means. My own sense is, however, that the conception of the learning society as a wise society is often orphaned in favor of the seemingly more promising child, instrumental learning about parts.

**Four categories of learning societies.**



The two dimensions can be put on two axes and combined as shown in Figure 1 to suggest four categories of learning societies. In the lower left quadrant is the sort of learning society in which the emphasis is on individual learning of specialized fragments of knowledge. I call it the “skilled society.” Learners improve their “individual lesson sets” by gaining the skills of literacy, numeracy, and of technical or specialized vocations. It is a society of traditional basic education, technical schools, and doctoral dissertations in narrow fields.

In the lower right quadrant is the learning society whose emphasis is on personal learning of the whole. It strives for enriched individual lesson sets that integrate specialized knowledge domains into a personal sense of the whole. It is the society of the “integrated day” curriculum, the liberal arts, monastic and religious education, leadership training for CEOs, and the personal development workshops. I call this the “Personal Wisdom Society.”

In the upper left quadrant is the society whose emphasis is on expanding society’s shared lesson set about specialized domains. It is the society of science, technical research and development, specialized journals, academic disciplines, the Internet, intellectual capital (Stewart, 1999), and the International Monetary Fund.

The final quadrant’s emphasis is on maturing society’s shared lesson set to yield a coherent sense of the whole. It seeks to integrate the disparate knowledge contained in its members’ individual lesson sets, to reflect self-critically on diverse experiences and search for unifying principles that give guidance over time and in a wide variety of circumstances. It is a society that grows in collective wisdom. I call this the “koinosophic society,” coined from the Greek “koinos,” or “common,” and “Sophia,” for “wisdom.”

Ultimate wisdom would be knowledge of the Whole. But that is beyond the practical expectation of an individual. Hence the need for sharing our individual wisdom. Wisdom depends on experience, but each person’s experience is limited. To increase our range of experience, we must share. Wisdom requires reflection, but each individual’s reflections are constrained by his/her existing lesson set. Collective reflection can help transcend those

constraints. Wisdom’s knowledge is textured and complex, able to fit in a wide range of environments; collective lesson-sets are more textured than individuals’ lesson sets. Wisdom gives birth to compassion, and that is called forth when all can voice their stories and listen to those of others. Wisdom finds principles undergirding particulars, and those principles grow more universal as they are tested by more particulars. No individual can be expected to find wisdom’s guidance alone; individuals need the wisdom distilled from generations. A koinosophic society increases its wisdom by the continual reflection on and integration of its shared lesson set.

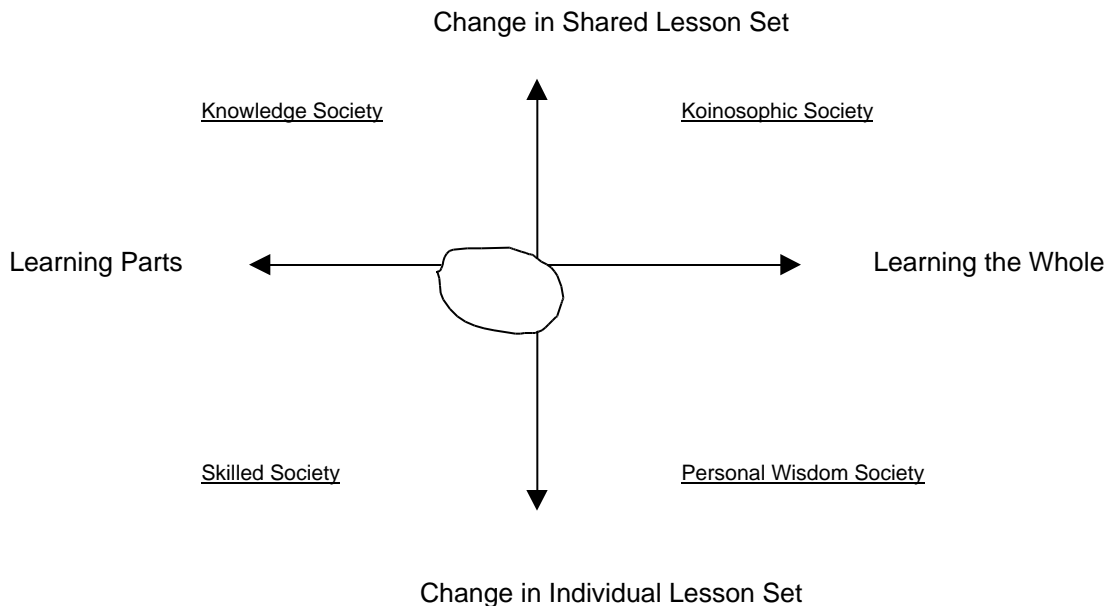
The koinosophic society should not be understood to exist independent of the other forms of learning society. It functions on the lessons of the skilled society, calls on the insights of the personal wisdom society, and benefits from the efficacy of the knowledge society. What the koinosophic society does is to integrate those into a more meaningful whole.

**YOUR VISION OF A LEARNING SOCIETY IN 2000 AND 2100**

The four categories of learning society I have described are of course just ideal types. A real society is likely to incorporate elements of each. But the difference in emphasis between different actual societies differs substantially. And there is likely to be substantial difference in emphasis among those of us discussing what a learning society should look like.

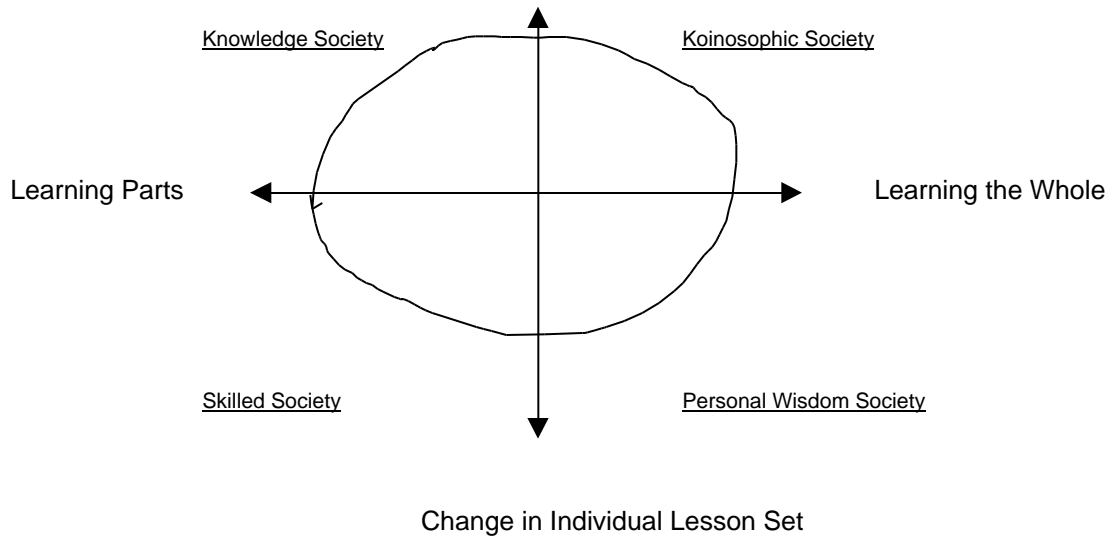
We can use the two-dimensional grid to outline the relative amount of space given to the four quadrants. For example, in Figure 2, I have charted a rough outline of what I see as the relative emphasis given the four quadrants by the current global society taken as a whole. (I am certain others would draw a different configuration.) Learning is limited and weighted toward individual skills. In figure 3, I have outlined the relative emphasis I would like to see the world achieve by the year 2100, with expanded collective learning.

**Figure 2 – The global learning society in 2000:**



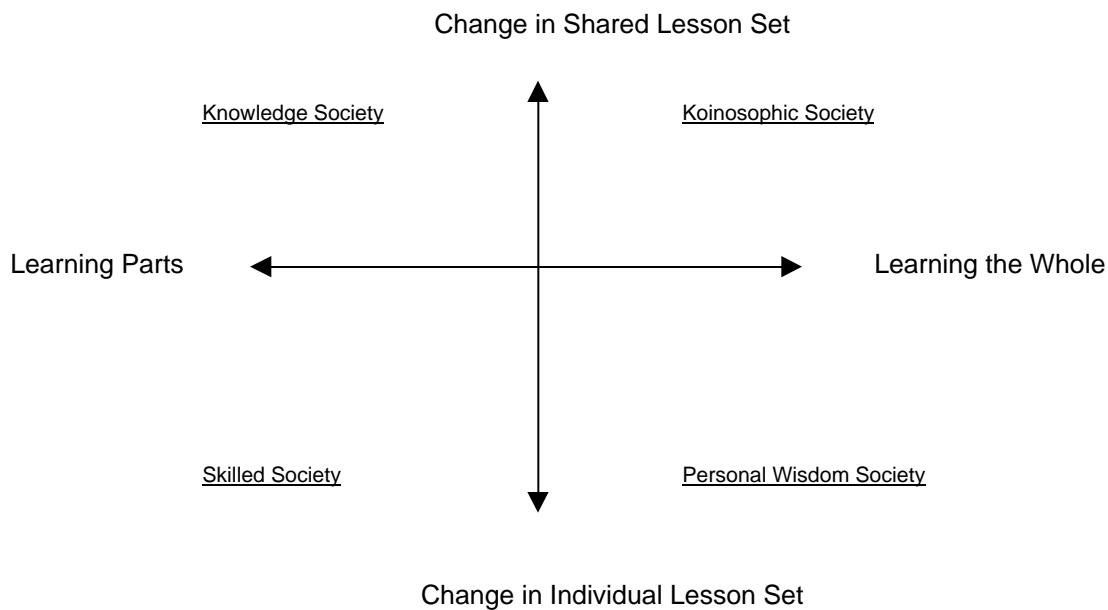
**Figure 3– My global learning society in 2100:**

Change in Shared Lesson Set



You might find it helpful to sketch similar outlines on Figure 4. First, be clear about what “society” you are describing. This scheme can apply to groups as small as families and as large as the world. You might, for example, focus on your community as a learning society. Second, draw an outline of where that society currently fits on the grid. How much or little of each of the four quadrants is included? Third, draw an outline of your learning society as you would like it to be in the year 2100. To what extent would it include elements of the four societies? Fourth, what do the differences in the two configurations suggest needs to be done to achieve your desired society?

**Figure 4– Draw your learning society, in 2000 and 2100**



**SOME ELEMENTS IN MY OWN VISION OF A LEARNING SOCIETY**

As the differences between Figures 2 and 3 suggest, I would like to see a learning society that expands learning in all quadrants, and moves from primary emphasis on individual learning of skills to a more equal balance of all forms of learning, including koinosophy. I feel that the prevailing emphasis on individual learning ignores the nascent opportunities for collective learning. And the prevailing emphasis on specialized knowledge leaves us with a shortage of

people and tools for seeing the whole, for integrating the proliferating parts. As individuals and societies, we have been getting smarter fast. Now we need to grow wise.

There can be many strategies for moving toward a wise society. Clearly, the nature of education would need to be recast. Classrooms will need to shift from teacher-centered, prescriptive, factory schooling to participatory learning communities, with more emphasis on diversity, integration, reflection, innovation, pro-action, co-action, and dialogue. And clearly the exponential growth in communications can be used to integrate the chaotic growth of fragmentary knowledge. But here I have space to describe only one strategy – an increased use of skilled dialogue.

Thinkers from Socrates to David Bohm<sup>4</sup> have recognized the value of dialogue in furthering wisdom. Yet it is remarkable how infrequently it is used well, if at all. In the United States’ “argument culture,” (Tannen, 1998) habits are adversarial, encouraging debate rather than dialogue. But in debate, learning is limited. The assumption is that there is one right answer – mine – foreclosing exploration of new options. The tone is win-lose, in a cycle of attack and defense that is toxic to mutual learning. People speak but do not listen, missing the potential in the others’ ideas.

In contrast, dialogue gives birth to learning, both individual and collective. Participants listen empathetically to others’ experience and views, expanding their own individual understandings. They suspend allegiance to their own assumptions and narrow views, in order to develop a more satisfactory view of the whole. In a group engaged in real dialogue, you can almost see an idea being passed from one learner to the next, each adding her own fingerprints to the clay, until a new supra-individual lesson emerges, sculpted not just by individuals but by the whole.

But good dialogue needs careful nurturing. One organization that nurtures dialogue among small groups of citizens is the Study Circles Resource Center. SCRC has developed guidelines that help small groups of community members engage in fruitful face-to-face dialogue, and has a staff expert in training citizens to be organizers and impartial facilitators. SCRC publishes study guides on such topics as racism, violence, education, youth, and urban sprawl. Groups of about eight to twelve community members use these guides for a series of usually four, two-hour sessions. The meetings are led by peers. The process uncovers areas of agreement and common concern. In the first session, participants generate their own rules of dialogic participation and listen to one another’s experiences around the focal topic. The second session typically assesses the roots of the problem. The third generates options. And the last looks for action steps for addressing the problem.

In the decade of its work, SCRC has facilitated the participation of tens of thousands of citizens in such study circles. Participants repeatedly describe the process as superior to existing modes of public debate, not only for the wiser results but also for the sense of community the process engenders. So helpful is the process that more than 120 communities, from a small town in Arkansas to Los Angeles, have been using it for community-wide programs. In these programs, a representative portion of the area’s population participate in the small-group study circles, leading toward a sense of the wishes of the community as a whole and to appropriate change in public policy. And in many communities, the process is becoming a habit, used to address a series of community issues. As this process of deliberative, dialogic democracy becomes a lasting component of a community’s shared lesson set, the community as a whole can be said to have learned

But success with study circles doesn't happen by chance. It takes work, support and learning. SCRC itself is an organization, which is constantly learning what works and what does not. It has distilled its lessons in a set of best practices and guidelines for community organizers. While SCRC's efforts have been entirely within the United States, I believe many of its principles may be used fruitfully elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that dialogue does not require literacy, though it may foster it in meaningful ways.<sup>6</sup> (For more information about study circles, you can visit <http://www.studyircles.org> or write SCRC at Pomfret, Connecticut, USA, 06258.)

Study circles alone, however, will not assure a koinosopic learning society, because societal learning is necessarily nested. Individual learners participate in many levels of 'societies' — family, school, community, work, nation, etc. An individual cannot tolerate too much dissonance between the shared lesson sets of the various groups in which he participates. If a person tries to import a dialogic process learned in a study circle to an inhospitable work setting, he is likely to give up and return to old habits. This may be one reason for the limited success of efforts at "organizational learning." Some compatibility needs to emerge among the shared lesson sets of different levels of social organization. My own hunch is that learners who want to work toward a koinosopic society have more impact if they start with their own families, schools, and communities, and work up. Societal learning is fractal; it may be wisest to implant the pattern in small units and watch it spread to larger ones.

Those patterns will spread faster, however, if we gain better theoretical understanding of societal learning. Efforts in this direction have been growing for some time. The Club of Rome project, "No Limits to Learning" called for more research on societal learning (Botkin, 1979). Many Universities, especially MIT<sup>7</sup>, have been making strides in understanding 'organizational learning'. There are bodies of relevant insight from the study of cultural evolution, knowledge diffusion (Rogers, 1995), knowledge management, mimetics (Blackmore, 1999), social change, history, political science, the philosophy of science, etc. What is needed is integration of those insights. This will require a process of collective learning about collective learning, or what I call 'collective learning squared'. Integrative, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary organs like the UN and certain non-governmental organizations might be the best sponsors for such learning. The pay-off would be huge — a quantum leap in the ability of our social institutions to learn. In the meantime, we must do what we can to engender dialogue about the learning society — in person, at conferences, and via the Internet.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John McClellan <qv\_mcclellan@commnet.edu> has long been interested in societal learning. He did his doctoral dissertation on collective learning, in the Future Studies Program of the University of Massachusetts. He participated peripherally in the Club of Rome "No Limits To Learning" project and contributed to *Global Stakes: The Future of High Technology in America*, by James Botkin, Dan Dimancescu and Ray Stata (Cambridge, Mass: Balinger, 1982). He is professor of computer science at Quinebaug Valley Community College in Danielson, Connecticut, USA, and is interested in distance learning and learning communities. He is a member of the Board of the Topsfield Foundation, the parent organization to the Study Circles Resource Center. He welcomes dialog via email on a new bulletin board at <www.delphi.com/co\_learning>.

1 David A. Garvin listed five such definitions in "Building a Learning Organization," *Harvard Business Review*, July – August, 1993. As discussion of "learning organizations" has expanded, so have the ways in which the term is used. Garvin's article is included in *Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Business Review Paperback, 1998) For a recent compilation on organizational learning, see Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, George Roth and Bryan Smith, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (New York: Currency, 1999)

2 Anthropologists have long wrestled with the question of the superorganic and superindividual nature of culture. See, for instance, Alfred Kroeber, *Anthropology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp 253-256 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) For other views of humanity as superorganism, see Gregory Stock, *Metaman: The Merging of Humans and Machines into a Global Superorganism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); and Peter Russell, *The Global Brain: Speculations on the Evolutionary Leap to Planetary Consciousness* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1983).

3 I use "shared lesson set" instead of "culture" because "culture" has been used in so many different ways. Adam Kuper in *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999) lists two dozen definitions of culture given by anthropologists alone.

4 David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, edited by Lee Nichol (London: Routledge, 1996) See also William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life* (New York: Currency, 1999); Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999); John L. Locke, *The De-Voicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998) and Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard, *Dialogue: Rediscovering the Transforming Power of Conversation* (New York: John Wiley, 1998).

5 For a history of study circles including their wide use in Sweden," see <<http://studycircles.org/pages/what.html#hist>

6 The liberating use of dialog has been described by Paolo Friere in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated from the Portugese by Myra Brgman Ramos (New York: Herder, 1970)

7 See the Society for Organizational Learning, Inc at <<http://www.learning.mit.edu/>>