

Towards a Wisdom Society: An Interview with James Botkin

In 1979, James Botkin co-authored a groundbreaking work on societal learning, No Limits to Learning: Bridging the Human Gap. Translated into more than a dozen languages, the book emphasized the importance of developing our collective capacity for learning to resolve complex social problems. Over the past two decades, Botkin has continued to explore the meaning and processes of learning, focusing on learning in the business world. He shared the following reflections on No Limits to Learning and the current horizon of societal learning in an interview with Vachel Miller from his Cambridge office on January 11, 2001.

Miller: What happened to No Limits to Learning? The book presages so much of what's being written now about learning. How was it received?

Botkin: The first group that reacted to the book was the church. I received invitations from the young leadership section of the Catholic Church and from adult educators of the Methodist church. Because I have no particular religious affiliation, this was surprising to me. Later on the United States government and then business became interested. Ironically, this sequence parallels the history of education in the U.S. Some two hundred years ago, when the U.S. was an agricultural society, the family and church controlled learning and education. Then when we became an industrial society, the state and federal governments controlled the education system. Now that we're an information-knowledge society, business is setting the new learning directions.

It was a unique project for me as an American to be able to have Moroccan and Romanian co-authors, Dr. Mahdi Elmandjra and Dr. Mircea Malitza. In those days, there was much more separation between the West and the Soviet block, and it was highly unusual to collaborate with a former education minister of Romania. It was also interesting that the book received more acclaim in Europe (Spain, Italy, and Scandinavia) than it did in the United States. In later years, it gained some recognition in Asia when it was translated into Chinese and Japanese.

Participation and Community Learning

Miller: What's been the most influential idea in No Limits to Learning?

Botkin: The most influential idea in No Limits has been the idea of participation and community learning. Learning has gone beyond the individual and now encompasses communities or entire societies. The four main points of the book concern participatory learning, anticipatory learning, autonomous learning, and integrated learning.¹ Of these four, participatory learning has become the most popular. It first appeared in the business world in the 1980s, when businesses were interested in developing the use of teams as a way of working with complexity.

The next step beyond the concept of teams in the business world has been business communities, also referred to as communities of practice², knowledge communities, and learning organizations.³ These are groups of people who share a passion to create, use, and share new knowledge applied to on-going challenging issues. They provide a sense of belonging and identity. Drawing on different members' expertise – and when combined with *trust* – they can be especially effective in dealing with complexity. The most lasting of them produce tangible results in their chosen domains, which further reinforces their effectiveness. A big challenge for learning communities is inter-community learning. Communities can form boundaries around themselves; without corrective measures, they can become difficult to cross and permeate.

Miller: How do you understand societal learning today?

Botkin: "It's the economy, stupid," was the phrase America's former-President Bill Clinton once used. Societal learning? "It's work life, friend." Learning isn't what we do only in school; learning is what we do for our entire work lives. The most innovative thinking and action in lifelong learning today is occurring in the workplace. And by workplace, I include every workplace, whether that place is located in business, foundations, universities, in religious communities, at home, in politics or even the military. Your work life is where your learning takes place. Any workplace that doesn't strive to value, use, promote, enhance, celebrate and develop learning is going to lose

out. That's how I understand societal learning today: community-based, participatory, future-oriented learning as part of your daily work life.

Miller: Do you see that we're more capable of societal learning, learning as a collective, than we were in 1979?

Botkin: Absolutely. In business, the practice of rewarding people according to their ability to learn together, either as a team or as a community, is becoming more common. It was unheard of in 1979. Schools, however, seem to be lagging behind. For example, most universities still use individual test scores to admit students. But even this is changing; for example, the Denmark-based Kaos Pilots University (www.well.com/user/kaos/) admits students according to their ability to learn as a team.

Missing: Wisdom Dialogues

Miller: What important concepts from the book have been neglected?

Botkin: What has been neglected and is still missing is what I call "the wisdom dialogues." To understand this, we need to first discuss what is wisdom.

Most of us tend to associate the notion of wisdom with religious and spiritual leaders, philosophers, and other elders. However, it is not the province of these people alone. The ability to speak and understand issues from a perspective of wisdom is becoming more and more essential for everybody, no matter what walk of life they come from.

'Wisdom' means many things to many people. A working definition I use is 'the ethical and judicious use of knowledge'. Learning is the process for acquiring new knowledge; deep innovative and generative learning, applied to the self and in communities, is what is needed to develop a sense of wisdom. But in terms of such deep learning, especially at the societal level, we have not succeeded yet in generating wisdom dialogues. Not enough people engage in it or take it seriously, particularly in cultures obsessed with stock markets, dot-com companies, and other economic fads.

One of the 'learning building blocks' toward the **judicious** use of knowledge – and thus toward wisdom – is systems thinking. This too has been in short supply. Systemic, or holistic thinking is the antidote to naivete, or overly simplistic views of how the world works. Systems thinking is the major and fifth discipline in Peter Senge's popular book The Fifth Discipline. Yet despite many efforts associated with building learning organizations, the tangible results remain disappointing. One of the sticking points, in my opinion, has been around systems thinking. From several experiences in the business world, I have concluded that learning to think systemically is difficult – as difficult as learning a new language. And since we learn new languages best at an early age, perhaps a goal of prototypes in new learning environments should be to develop holistic systems thinking at an earlier stage than is now being tried.

A precautionary note is in order here: it's the Argyris dilemma, first articulated by Harvard professor Chris Argyris.⁴ The dilemma is the difficulty of teaching smart people to learn. Many intelligent people have never had to learn by failure because they have never failed. They have become quite convinced that they know the right answers. The smarter someone is, the more convinced he or she is that they are above criticism. They become less open to alternative viewpoints. I have often witnessed this dynamic in the business world. Highly intelligent people can easily become arrogant about their learning and fall into a monopolistic thought process that they know all the answers. This too often occurs in government, education, and other institutions as well – which generates popular backlashes against so-called experts.

Miller: I see in that observation both the connection to wisdom and one of the problems with schooling, because it produces people who might be very successful in a closed system but don't have to be open. And wisdom, we could say, is a virtue of intellectual humility.

Botkin: Yes, I agree, though it may be that intellectual humility is a cornerstone of wisdom. Often successful people or companies become so arrogant that they can no longer see beyond their own way of thinking. This is one reason I prefer to work with a community of diverse companies because getting out of your own culture is often the best way to learn more about it and break through the arrogance barrier.

Whenever a business or any institution with social impact launches a new initiative, it needs to ask itself where its wisdom dialogues are. Otherwise, it runs the risk of arrogance- and monopoly-thinking that block the very type of learning that is needed. It is learning that can create just and equitable futures to improve the human condition rather than dehumanize our societies.

Miller: In No Limits to Learning, you also talked about values. How do you see ethics and values now connected with learning?

Botkin: Questions of ethics and values are taking a larger and larger role in learning. The old belief that learning was value-free was misguided. We now recognize that every form of learning has a value proposition behind it. People are more open to analyzing the values behind their concepts. Of course, there is still a long way to go.

The Human Gap – Can e-Learning Help?

Miller: Is the human gap more problematic today than it was in 1979?

Botkin: The human gap – the gap between global problems of our own making (e.g., ethnic violence, environment degradation, greed, absence of globally valid values) and our own ability or inability to find solutions to those problems – has widened since the time the book was published. Nevertheless, the possibilities for corrective action are greater today than they ever have been. We have the Internet and possibilities of e-learning suddenly at our fingertips. In 1979, we didn't know what computers were, much less worldwide networks like the worldwide web.

Now, e-learning threatens to crack the monopoly of governmental school systems. And I think that's a good thing. The linear and rigid model of K-12 (kindergarten to 12th class) immediately followed by higher education does not afford a workable model of lifelong learning. Over-institutionalization of learning poses obstacles to a lifelong process which is needed now more than ever. But what kind of learning? Innovative, or "generative" learning, that enables judicious, ethical, diversity-driven futures is the stretch goal. And this type of learning is done best in communities. The Institute for Research on Learning (www.irl.org) pioneered the basic research on this important point, which they summarized by saying "learning is social."

E-learning today is too often portrayed negatively as taking the human teacher out of the loop. That's an overly naïve view. We need to make room for e-learning to develop further – not at the expense of personal coaching or tutoring or working with a great teacher – but we need to appreciate that e-learning can open opportunities for community learning that were inconceivable before. For example, a colleague was on a project team with five members from different parts of the globe. One team member was from Brazil; one was from India; and others were from Indonesia, the U.S., and Germany. Over a two year period, they traveled to each other's home countries for a week, but that was their only face-to-face contact. All of the rest of the work was done by e-learning via the Internet. This arrangement has proven to be a very effective way to combine face-to-face work with electronic communication to go deeply into certain global issues.

We need to be very cautious that technologically-mediated global learning doesn't become a new force for domination. If we can imagine a kind of global learning that respects human diversity without asserting a cultural dominance over others, then e-learning opens a flood of possibilities that we have only begun to explore. The philosophical question is: industrial technology helped create the human gap, can information technology help bridge it? With respect for cultural diversity and a touch of wisdom, I think it can.

Miller: You mentioned that it is a good thing that e-learning threatens to break the monopoly of schooling. Could you say more about that?

Botkin: Many people criticize schooling like Ivan Illich did in Deschooling Society. Other thoughtful people ask, "Well, if you don't want schools, what do you want? What's your proposal?" I have often thought about that question, and I see a growing movement of alternatives to schools and schooling. We should understand that school is only one approach to learning and ask, what are the other alternatives that we could have?

Apprenticeship

One example is apprenticeship. Instead of secondary school, why don't we offer the opportunity for students to spend four years doing four different apprenticeships. Give young people in their teens experience with different kinds of organizations that are important for work life. One could be in a church; one in a hospital, one in a business, one in government. This way, students could be introduced to work life. They can always return later to learn the things they were supposed to have learned in secondary school. Why worry about forcing students to learn all that material between the ages of fourteen and eighteen when so many lack the motivation and rationale for learning abstract things they may never use?

Work Place Universities

At the post-secondary level, we should take alternative universities more seriously. I'd like to see Motorola University⁵ be considered on a par with the University of Michigan. The types of things you can learn at Motorola University are as valuable as what you can learn at a traditional university. Why don't we give people equal recognition for going to a corporate university?

In the U.S., the number of corporate universities will soon surpass the number of traditional universities. No new traditional university has been built in the U.S. since 1963. Meanwhile, 10,000 new corporate universities have been built since that time. For some people, this trend may be a threat. But it reflects the new appreciation of learning in the workplace. Naturally, the corporate universities don't have the same curriculum as traditional universities, but students can learn more about values, personal behavior, and leadership in a corporate university than they can at the Harvard Business School or at Harvard University. Corporate universities offer an alternative avenue for learning. They teach more about leadership, ethics, and trust than can be taught in formal, traditional schools struggling to keep church and state separate.

Parenting

It is also important to think more imaginatively about the role of learning in the early years of human life. Very few systems of education anywhere in the world concern themselves with learning from birth, or even conception, to age five or six. This is the time when our human learning ability is at its absolute peak! Everything we are learning through brain research indicates the importance of early experiences. We can learn practically any language in the world at the age of two. By age twelve, that window begins to close. The things one could have learned in the early years, or even before birth, are enormous. But we should ask ourselves how well parents are prepared for their role. In industrial societies, we spend more time as adults learning how to get a driver's license than learning how to parent and raise children. That's scandalous. We need to offer opportunities for people to become good parents.

The Challenges of Globalization

Miller: Business may be in the lead with learning. But in the age of globalization, these learning leaders are also those that, in some ways, are responsible for that widening gap between the "first world" and the "third world." How do you see that issue, and how does it come up in the work you do?

Botkin: All of the companies I work with are involved in globalization. One company in our community, for example, is doing business in 132 countries. They have learning systems around the world that dwarf the capacities of the traditional university system. Are they using their learning systems in ways that are contributing to the future of humanity, or are they just widening the gap further? I would answer, both.

Systems thinking teaches us that all initiatives have both positive and negative effects, reactions and counter-reactions. The first report to the Club of Rome (www.clubofrome.com) was Limits to Growth; out of that report came No Limits to Learning. At a macro level, the issue in No Limits was not whether to ban or grow learning, the issue was what *kind* of learning do we want and for what purpose. Likewise on globalization, the issue should be framed not in terms of whether we want to ban or grow something that is natural to human development, but rather, it should center around the question what *kind* of globalizing do we want, for what purpose, and who should lead in setting the agenda?

Globalization started in earnest when Columbus sailed from Spain in the late 1400s – the driving force was gaining religious converts and enriching state coffers. Years later when colonization was the goal, the driving force was conquest and political domination. It seems like we are repeating the old cycle of church to state to business. Many readers may disagree with me, but if the choice were church, state, or business – I choose business. How we will

globalize, whether ethically, judiciously, and respecting of local cultures, will depend on our collective learning skills. I see these developing better in business than in any other institution in society.

Miller: One last question about globalization. You say that people should actively discuss globalization. But what about the power imbalance in globalization that excludes the voices of 80% of the world from the decision-making table. How do they have a voice in deciding what kind of global interactions and transactions take place? The powerful lobbies are so strong today around the world. Is there any space for anyone else?

Botkin: You're touching the biggest problem of all. There is no table wide enough, there is no world perspective workable enough, there are not enough people wise enough to have all voices heard except those who yell the loudest.

Finding ways to conduct wisdom dialogues among all parties – environmentalists, ethicists, business executives, government officials – is a critical dimension of positive societal learning. Such dialogue moves us closer to becoming a wisdom society. That's the direction we are going but we need to go further.

Miller: Can you share a little more about your vision of a wisdom society and how do we start to move more seriously in that direction?

Botkin: By wisdom society, I mean societies that have a tolerance for alternative values and value that diversity. I mean cultures that break out of the arrogance and monopoly of believing they know the answers and should tell others how to live. I mean a society that has a large number of people with the ability and capacity to accept more than a single viewpoint. They can understand multiple perspectives and generate multiple solutions to complex problems.

How do we get from here to there? Becoming a wisdom society involves a process of learning, learning to become more respectful of the value of alternative views and ways of living, more open to difference and less attached to preserving ways of life that dominate other people. Each institution needs to model a learning community where learning is the process and wisdom is the outcome. In business, this means learning organizations that focus on the ethical and judicious use of knowledge without arrogance or cultural dominance. In government, this means dismantling the bureaucracies that are so unresponsive to people's needs. In education, this means creating as many alternatives as there are learning styles and objectives.

Endnotes

¹ These can be briefly summarized as follows:

- **Participatory learning** is shared inquiry into issues of common concern. It requires broad involvement, rather than relying on 'expert solutions'.
- **Anticipatory learning** refers to active exploration of alternative futures through methods of forecasting, scenario building, etc. It is the capacity to cope with changing circumstances and to create desired futures.
- **Autonomous learning** refers to self-directed learning, the ability of individuals and societies to make their own judgements and take their own actions, free of dependence on external authority.
- **Integrative learning** involves attention to the systems and the interconnections among different components. It suggests concern for the whole, rather than isolated elements.

² See Etienne Wenger. Communities of Practice. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, U.K., 1998.

³ See Peter Senge. The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. Currency Doubleday: New York, 1990.

⁴ "Teaching Smart People How to Learn." Harvard Business Review, 69(3), 1991.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Jim Botkin <jbotkin@interclass.com> is co-founder and president of InterClass, the International Corporate Learning Association, a knowledge community of Fortune 500 companies seeking to improve their organizational learning capacity. A former Academic Director of the Salzburg Seminar, he is an Honorary Citizen of Salzburg, Austria, a past resident of Santa Fe, New Mexico,

and a present Fellow at the University of Texas in Austin. He has taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and his Doctorate is from the Harvard Business School.