

*...My song will be like a pair of wings to your dreams,  
it will transport your heart to the verge of the unknown.  
It will be like a faithful star overhead when dark night is over your road.  
My song will sit in the pupils of your eyes,  
and will carry your sight into the heart of things.  
And when my voice is silent in death,  
my song will speak in your living heart.*

– Rabindranath Tagore  
“My Song,” Crescent Moon

## **Section One: Navigating Learning Societies**

### **In Search of Learning Societies...** Manish Jain

*“The same people who control the school system, control the prison system, and the whole social system,  
ever since slavery. Know what I’m sayin?”*

— lyrics from dead prez, “they schools”  
(album, lets get free)

Over the past year, I have been trying to engage in various conversations with people around the world about the different meanings they ascribe to learning societies. Through these conversations, I have come to better understand the network of organizations, agendas, tools, and jargon, which ceaselessly attempts to manipulate or crush any initiative that seeks to question the global power structure and its institutions of thought-control. At the same time, I have come to more deeply appreciate human beings’ natural instincts to resist illegitimate and exploitative systems of authority; their inherent desire for a much greater sense of meaning, purpose, justice and connection in their lives than what the comforts of the global consumer lifestyle can ever provide; and, the vast diversity of their local dynamic traditions and modes of learning that (re-)fuel their creative capacities and collective consciences. The insights gained from this past year have nourished me with additional strength and conviction to continuously purge myself of the recurring pangs of the white man’s burden,<sup>1</sup> which had been inculcated in me while at Harvard University and UNESCO.

I will begin this essay by sharing some of these interactions with you, in an effort to describe the current status of the mainstream discourse on learning societies. In the second part of the essay, I will discuss where we need to refocus the content of our dialogues, to help break down the key barriers that stand in the way of unfolding pluralistic learning societies. In the third part of the essay, I will delve into the need to involve and strengthen the role of new co-inventors in the process of regenerating learning communities. Finally, I will focus on some of the initial steps we need to take to deepen the quality of the dialogues on learning societies.

#### **Barriers to Unfolding Learning Societies**

Two major international forums provided me with interesting insights about some of the barriers that stand in the way of learning societies: the Education for All (EFA) World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and the Global Dialogue 7 on “Building Learning Societies: Knowledge, Information and Human Development” in Hanover, Germany.

*Old Wine in New Bottles in Dakar*

Just after publishing the first issue of *Vimukt Shiksha* on “Unfolding Learning Societies: Challenges and Opportunities” (March 2000), I went to participate in the World Education Forum.<sup>2</sup> I had heard about the innovative thinking that had taken place ten years earlier in Jomtien, Thailand (glimpses of which appeared in the EFA documents), and I had hoped that Dakar would provide an opportunity to engage in a critical and generative reflection around different meanings of education and the (overwhelming) complex challenges that face our world. But as Rosa Maria Torres (2000) describes, “One decade on, Dakar does not pretend to elaborate or offer anything new: it presents itself as a Jomtien+10, that is, as a staging post between the evaluation of a decade of EFA and its extension for another 15 years... The reiteration of Jomtien’s vision and goals, and the postponement of the target date, assume that failure and potential success can be explained in terms of a linear axis between more and less, that what is needed is not to rethink the diagnosis, objectives and strategies, but more of the same: more time (15 more years), more money (new loans and donations, and better use of existing resources), more commitment, and more action.”<sup>3</sup>

While this assessment was more or less accurate, there was, however, one new aspect to Dakar: the total surrender of the vision and meaning of education to the inevitability of globalization and to the ‘technical expertise’ of the World Bank. The starting point of all the discussions by national governments was how to use education to allow their country to better fit into and compete in the global economy (i.e., to beat out the competition in other countries).

Sadly, in the face of this, NGOs (both ‘international’ ones and their southern cronies) showed themselves to be intellectually and ethically bankrupt. They were quite willing to buy into the vision of education and globalization propagated by the World Bank for a seat at the decision-making table with the Big Boys, i.e., bilateral and multilateral donor agencies. They continued to use a deficit framework that was patronizing and offensive to large number of people around the world, with phrases like “illiterates living in darkness and ignorance” and “first-generation learners.” With their main concerns situated within this reductionist framework, they ended up proposing simplistic solutions to first-order problems, like:

- (1) how to reach the “poorest of the poor” (the ‘usual suspects’ of girls, child labor, street children, etc.) to inject them with the colonizing drug of factory-schooling,<sup>4</sup> and
- (2) how to reduce the burden of the debt so that poor countries could borrow more (in order to start more foreign-conceptualized projects, hire more foreign consultants, and purchase more foreign teaching materials).

Very few of the delegates were willing to engage in a deeper discussion of the ‘realities’ emerging in many communities: about the larger systems of Development and Globalization that are manufacturing genocidal forms of poverty in both the South and the North; about a system of schooling that is killing local knowledge systems, languages, creativities, social relationships, wisdoms, etc. and is creating a class of ‘educated’ parasites; about the big business of running schools; or, about the legitimacy of global institutions, such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO, United Nations, etc., who impose their conditionalities on the people of the South. Nor were the delegates interested in trying to expand the meaning of education beyond primary schooling and literacy (even in the face of much research on learning<sup>5</sup>) or in exploring how to strengthen the various non-school learning spaces that exist within communities.<sup>6</sup>

The entire Dakar ‘show’ was pre-planned by an elite crew of donor, government, and NGO technocrats. The sessions were run like classroom lectures: the mechanical and pre-scripted presentations gave little space for any honest and meaningful reflection. There was no time for any sort of radical questioning — the unspoken message conveyed to all delegates was “just sign your name on the dotted line of this lifeless document and quietly take your *per diem* home.” As delegates from the South, we had a special role of providing the requisite brown and black token faces, necessary for perpetuating the illusion of a global shared consensus around the final EFA document.

Unfortunately, the outcomes proved to be even more retrogressive and intellectually stifling than the Conference itself. The failures of EFA were attributed to poor planning and management, lack of political commitment, and lack of funds. Reinforcing the tradition of mechanistic planning, the recommendations basically called for tighter controls, bigger rewards/ stricter punishments for compliant/non-compliant governments. There were many references to ‘participation’ of civil society actors in the follow-on process, but these remained rather superficial, as

the real role of NGOs<sup>7</sup> in this game was limited to going to local community leaders, imposing this global declaration and getting their ‘input’/‘consent’ on national plans.<sup>8</sup>

From the outset, it became very clear to me that any serious effort towards regenerating learning societies would need to focus more seriously on processes: the processes of unlearning patronizing frameworks of social engineering and universalism, and the processes of relearning to honestly reflect on and communicate what we, as human beings, experience and feel in our own everyday lives (instead of repeating institutional jargon about ‘the Other’). For such processes to grow, we need different kinds of spaces, tools for perceiving and expressing, etc. than what are available in international conference classrooms.

Amidst the EFA conference, a group of intellectuals, researchers and NGO activists, in the Freirean tradition, issued a parallel statement called the “Latin American Statement on Education for All”<sup>9</sup> which made some noble demands for more holistic education and critical pedagogy.<sup>10</sup> But somehow, thirty years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, these demands seemed to be very naïve – crying out for justice from insensitive and corrupt governments and donor agencies and lacking any understanding of the larger political-economy and philosophical underpinnings that drive the Development Industry. Apparently, no one told this group of dissenters that the rules of the game have changed: the players are bigger and badder and the financial stakes are obscene. The Latin American Statement is full of ‘innocuous critiques’ that provide the illusion that the Development Industry is open to listening to alternative perspectives. The authors of the Statement are unwilling or unable to challenge the larger Development game (as it might mean that their funding from donor agencies or governments would be cut). Thus, they remain content with issuing grand counter-manifestos of wishful thinking, filled with many ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’ such as, “Decision-makers must think ethically”. The most disappointing part of the Latin American Statement was that the authors had very little faith in the intelligence and wisdom of the masses. They still felt that local communities required the ‘education treatment’, albeit from better quality schools, to be ‘conscientized’ to protect their rights from unjust and exploitative systems.

#### *Hi-Tech Hoodwink in Hanover*

A few months later, in September 2000, I participated in the Global Dialogue 7 on “Building Learning Societies: Knowledge, Information and Human Development”, hosted by the World Bank and UNESCO. There, I was expecting a richer discussion on the nature of human learning, knowledge, intelligence, the brain, and wisdom and the implications of these for education in different societies. However, these important conversations were muted for several reasons. First, most of the presentations on these subjects remained highly abstract and decontextualized. There was no time allotted to delve into the specifics, to share real experiences from our own lives. As a result, all that remained were the fancy words — plastic and lifeless. The greatest casualty, in this regard, was the co-optation of the word ‘learning’. Throughout the discussion, the words ‘teaching’ and ‘training’ were religiously substituted with the term ‘learning’. Unfortunately, behind this political correctness, many people still maintained their deep faith in an education framework steeped in socialization, reductionism, behaviorism and totalitarian control.

Second, for the vast majority of participants, the idea of learning societies was not about learning. Rather, it was about the ‘miracle’ of information and communications technologies (ICTs). Their main concern was how to “bridge the digital divide” (in other words, how to sell more computers and software in the South because Northern markets are already over-saturated). Over the course of four days, it became clear that development agencies and their NGOs had swapped roles with computer salesmen. Participants were bombarded with the message that “technology was the key to leapfrogging development”; that “technology was the key to the global family and global equality”; that “technology was the key to rural empowerment and poverty alleviation.” ICTs (and free markets) would overcome the failure of schools and governments. We were presented with seductive feel-good images of the rural farmer sitting at a community cyber-café, in the middle of cornfields, and downloading the latest market prices for his crops, the latest weather information, critical health information, and course materials on agriculture from the best universities in the world. For those endlessly in search of quick fixes to the complex challenges facing our world, ICTs were the answer.

Discussions in the seminar stressed that ICTs can be tools for liberation or for further oppression, depending on who controls them. With this brilliant marketing rationale in place, the task at hand was to get computers in the hands of poor people. For this, pressure needed to be exerted on governments to commit public funds to subsidize computer hardware equipment for rural areas and to subsidize telecommunications infrastructure for networking the country

(of course, the metropolitan cities, particularly private industry within those cities, would be wired first). There was no space to discuss important questions like:

- Do local communities really face a shortage of information on how to live their lives?
- How do ICTs need to be developed to really enable rural and urban local communities to stand up and challenge systems of exploitation?
- What social problems emerge with the use of ICTs (i.e., mental and physical passivity, social alienation and violence, info-glut, the superficialization of human expression, etc.)?
- What learning spaces and opportunities do we lose when we prioritize technologies?
- How do ICTs contribute to increasing the concentration of wealth and power in certain institutions and to furthering their domination in the world?

Any effort to raise any of these deeper questions was instantly dismissed as attempts to deny the poor a chance to escape poverty. Besides, why waste time on questions like these — ICTs are the only hope for survival in this brave new world.

Beyond just selling computers, the seminar also helped me to understand the other agendas of the global elite, why they were pushing for learning societies. For one, they were interested in recycling/dumping outdated learning packages. It seems the distance education market is a source of great hope for cash-starved universities in the North, who are willing to sell fast-food diplomas to the degree-hungry ‘educated’ of the South. The elite were also interested in understanding how to funnel rural assets into the global economy. As one panelist (a European member of Parliament) remarked, “Local knowledge is only useful if it can be given market value.” Finally, the elite were keen on exploring how to ‘develop’ more rural consumers – people who would be willing to give away their land, animals, household savings, and futures to become part of the Pepsi generation. All of these agendas were skillfully masked under the phrases, “increasing rural participation” and “strengthening partnerships with the corporate sector.”

The ‘global dialogue’ made me more sensitive to the difficulties of having a real dialogue with people from different countries. All of the participants came with the baggage of their own rich contextualized experiences, their own egos and hang-ups, their own language and terminologies. To understand each other would require a lot of time, mutual respect and personal dedication. Without this commitment, one is left with lots of empty rhetoric and lots of misunderstandings. Although hi-tech gadgetry was used to make the dialogue more ‘global’, these toys unfortunately did little to either increase the depth of the dialogue or to expand the diversity of perspectives (although there were more voices coming from people with different skin colors, they all seemed to be saying the same thing, i.e., they were all begging the World Bank for more money).

One can draw many insights about the barriers that stand in the way of the unfolding of learning societies from these two events. It would appear that there are two major camps struggling to control the dialogue on learning societies: the pro-Status Quo group (with their reformer friends), who place all their hope in the panacea of the strong State and schools, versus the pro-Leapfrogging Development group, who believe in the promise of the Market and ICTs. Interestingly, anyone who raises questions about the legitimacy of the State and factory-schooling is branded as pro-Market and ICTs – they are against democracy and equity. Alternatively, anyone who raises questions about the Market and ICTs is branded as pro-State and schools – they are against progress and growth. The lines are firmly drawn, and our only choice is to choose which side we are on. If the learning societies concept continues to be trapped in the middle of this stalemate, it will definitely die a premature death.

Liberating the learning societies concept from this stalemate can happen if we expose two faulty premises: (1) the State and the Market are separate forces which have visions of education that are at odds with each other; and (2) common people (the 80%+ social majorities of the world) are ‘ignorant’ and ‘stupid’ and cannot live without Big Brother or the Invisible Hand to guide them.

### **Exposing the Culture of Schooling**

The State (with its duly-appointed team of bureaucrats and politicians) and Market (with its learning organizations of industrialists and financiers) have had a common vision of education since the days of colonialism. While they may disagree on the tools and techniques (e.g., schools vs. ICTs), the State and the Market both have a vested

interest in propagating the ‘culture of schooling’. They both seek to fuel the global industrial-military machine (and manipulate the public to fill their respective coffers).

Rather than falling into the trap of choosing sides, those concerned with unfolding learning societies should discuss the culture of schooling, as it manifests itself through various institutions, programs and technologies, in different aspects of our daily lives. John Naisbatt (1999) describes the Catch-22 we are in, “As Marshall McLuhan liked to say, he didn’t know who discovered water, but he was sure it wasn’t a fish. When you’re in something so deep, it’s hard to see it.” Nevertheless, what we do see today shows us that the culture of schooling:

- 1) Labels, ranks and sorts human beings. It creates a rigid social hierarchy consisting of a small elite class of ‘highly educated’ and a large lower class of ‘failures’ and ‘illiterates’, based on levels of school achievement.
- 2) Imposes uniformity and standardization. It propagates the viewpoint that diversity is a problem, which must be removed if society is to progress.
- 3) Spreads fear, insecurity, violence and silence through its externally-imposed, military-like discipline.
- 4) Forces human beings to violently compete against each other over scarce resources in rigid win-lose situations.
- 5) Confines the motivation for learning to examinations, certificates and jobs. It suppresses all non-school motivations to learn and kills all desire to engage in critical self-evaluation. It centralizes control over the human learning process into the State-Market nexus, taking power away from individuals and communities.
- 6) Commodifies all human beings, Nature, knowledge and social relationships. They are to be extracted, exploited, bought and sold.
- 7) Fragments and compartmentalizes knowledge, human beings and the natural world. It de-links knowledge from wisdom, practical experiences and specific contexts.
- 8) Artificially separates human rationality from human emotions and the human spirit. It imposes a single view of rationality and logic on all people, while simultaneously devaluing many other knowledge systems.
- 9) Privileges literacy (in a few elite languages) over all other forms of human expression and creation. It drives people to distrust their local languages. It prioritizes newspapers, textbooks, television as the only reliable sources of information. These forms of State-Market controlled media cannot be questioned by the general public.
- 10) Reduces the spaces and opportunities for ‘valid’ human learning by demanding that they all be funneled through a centrally-controlled institution. It creates artificial divisions between learning and home, work, play, spirituality.
- 11) Destroys the dignity of labor; devalues the learning that takes place through manual work.
- 12) Breaks intergenerational bonds of family and community and increases people’s dependency on the Nation-State and Government, on Science and Technology, and on the Market for livelihood and identity.

This list is certainly not exhaustive. Many more aspects can be added to it, and the linkages between these different aspects need to be drawn. The list also needs to be nuanced to particular contexts and situations. One key point to note, however, is that the culture of schooling is not limited to just the institutions of schools, non-formal education centers or distance education courses. Rather, today its values have permeated into many of different facets of our lives, i.e., into our families, media, religion, community festivals, etc.

Focussing our attention on the elements of the culture of schooling will help us to avoid getting trapped in dead-end ‘school vs. no school’ debates or ‘school vs. ICTs’ debates. It will also assist us in re-evaluating, re-envisioning and re-directing the activities of alternative school and school-reform initiatives, which currently center on increasing enrolments, mainstreaming students, and adding ‘quality’ components (more infrastructure, changing the textbooks, or training teachers to use the ‘play-way’ method). Lastly, it will help us to collectively generate some complex shared visions about learning societies.

Despite its beautiful rhetoric<sup>11</sup> and its token ‘winners’, the reality is that the culture of schooling has caused great harm to humanity. Today, it is limiting many peoples’ options for living a meaningful life and developing their individual and collective potentials. On one level, this can be seen in the destruction of many valuable learning spaces that could/do enhance different aspects of our being — due to severe environmental degradation, the disintegration of communities and families, extinction of local languages and local media, growing economic inequality, etc.

On another level, this can be viewed in terms of what it has done to the ‘winners’. By providing people with a ready-made world, with ready-made questions and answers, the culture of schooling has made them intellectually lazy and unwilling to engage in struggles to create interdependent freedom and justice. John Taylor Gatto describes the self-destructive amnesia that is engulfing us,

“We are forgetting, I think, how to live together in families and communities; forgetting the necessary personal duties that make families and communities in the first place in a rush to get out from under personal responsibility. To escape. How often do you hear the cry, ‘Let them do it! They get paid for it!’ Them can mean police or street sweepers or social workers or any of a number of other occupational titles that have come to identify our transition from a world of human beings who live together and care about each other to a world of institutions and hired hands.”

The culture of schooling paralyzes each human being’s sense of initiative by humiliating them to such an extent that they begin to lose faith in (and even begin to despise<sup>12</sup>) themselves, their creative energies, their cultural reference points, and their inner conscience. Ironically, many people around the world, who understand the damage that the culture of schooling is doing, demand another ready-made model to replace it.

The situation looks even more bleak, if we consider that it is highly unlikely that the social majorities of the world will be able to wrestle the current vision of education away from the global power brokers, who continue to maintain tight intellectual ownership over it. Nor is it likely that the social majorities will be able to significantly influence its transformation, as they have very little financial force. What then is the scope for challenging the culture of schooling and global systems of exploitation and destruction? If the State and Market are both part of the culture of schooling, who will work to create the organic learning communities that make-up learning societies?

### **Strengthening Resistance Movements**

Actually, there is a great deal of hope for unfolding learning societies, if we can set aside our educated arrogance and understand that the social majorities of the world are not ‘ignorant’ and ‘stupid’, just because they do not have degrees from prestigious universities. Taking off our school-colored glasses will allow us to see that local people have their own critical analyses about what is happening in the world, and they have their own talents, resources and visions to confront the challenges that face them. They do not need us to conscientize them; rather, we have much to learn from them.

For this hope to germinate and grow, we need to honestly admit that in this globalized age of global choices, we really have no choice. Real choice can only come if we have the power to say NO — to schools of thought-control, to hi-tech toys, to lobby-ized democracies, to corporatism<sup>13</sup>, to the dictatorship of money, etc. The key to reclaiming our power to say NO (and with it, real choices and real hope) lies in our capacity to resist the culture of schooling. The situation in the world, in many places, is ripe for widespread resistance movements to take shape.

In fact, many individuals and communities are already carrying out daily acts of resistance, at their own level, based on their readings of the world. Their resistance against the culture of schooling and the institutions of global exploitation is taking many forms. Some of these acts are organized; others emerge spontaneously when the human conscience can no longer bear the pain and humiliation. We can see resistance in the form of grassroots movements against dams, factories, nuclear weapons, WTO and patent regimes, violence in the media, etc. We can find it in the lifestyle changes that people are making, especially around notions of voluntary simplicity, sharing and conservation. There is resistance in the act of families consciously unschooling their children and engaging in co-learning. We can see resistance in youth leaving the artificiality of school to pursue other learning experiences that are linked with real life. There is resistance in the form of critical re-appreciation of the different learning spaces in rural communities and the learning activities that people naturally undertake in their daily lives.<sup>14</sup> Resistance also manifests itself in the production of various cultural symbols and media such as music, dance, art, poetry, etc. (such as the dead prez album mentioned at the beginning of this article), which draw attention to the condition/source of oppression.

There is also resistance that takes place from within the school system. One finds some teachers who refuse to ‘discipline’ their students, who create spaces for critically questioning what is presented in textbooks, who take on the role of co-learners with their students, who challenge notions of competition. There are also some students who

resist by rejecting school symbols (e.g., degrees and examinations), by challenging the illegitimate authority and infringements of the school, by helping their peers, by meaningfully interacting with different people and ideas, outside of their safe institutionalized circle of friends and family. Such teachers and students are often labeled as 'troublemakers' by the school system.

What differentiates these various forms of resistance from random activities is the spirit that underlies the resistance. For example, these resisters are not demanding/begging for more benefits from the State or Market; they are not seeking to increase their institutional dependency or grab a piece of the pie. In addition, people are acting from their own analyses about what is wrong in today's world, their own conceptions of a good human being, and their own notions of love, justice, peace, interdependence, truth — all derived from reflections on their own experiences, independent from any institutional affiliation or training course. Their resistance is grounded in everyday common sense and the natural instinct to care for others. Finally, their resistance does not end with just saying NO or being anti-this or anti-that. It is not a form of escapism. Rather, it is the start of a process that is essentially creative and regenerative; it seeks to engage the political-economy of Modernization, Development and Globalization with its own reference points. Through resistance, we develop the faith to take charge of our own self-learning processes and the power to start creating our own organic learning communities.

Acts of resistance give us the time and space to de-condition ourselves and to think and feel in new ways. They encourage us to break out of institutionalized perspectives of ourselves and to expand our roles and identities. This allows us to make new connections with people as well as to heal/deepen our existing relationships. Resistance also supports processes of replenishing local learning ecosystems as we, on one level, re-engage with our own stories, symbols, values, imaginations, languages, festivals, narratives of past/future, etc. and, on another level, meaningfully interact with dissonant contexts/perspectives to broaden our understandings of others and ourselves. Furthermore, resistance strengthens our natural instincts of love, justice, peace, interdependence, truth — the more we use these, the more confident we become in them and the more we are able to understand how to launch challenges against the culture of schooling and to create our own visions of a meaningful life.

The challenge for us today is to strengthen each of these acts of resistance from within, to organically connect them with each other, so that they can enhance each other's perspectives and mutually inspire each other, and to link them with macro-level conceptual frameworks. The experiments and experiences in living that emerge out of resistance movements are critical elements in the unfolding of learning societies.

### **Towards Deepening the Dialogues**

The challenges of exposing different aspects of the culture of schooling and strengthening resistance movements will depend greatly on our ability to create, expand and deepen the authentic generative dialogues — dialogues that generate shared meaning and action — that take place between us. This will be not be easy, given the way in which the culture of schooling has infiltrated into all phases of our lives and now, not only controls most of our time, but also dictates our very notions of time. But if we are personally willing to struggle to free our time, then there are a number of steps we can start to take to deepen the dialogues.

First, we need to stop pretending that what happens at international meetings (of the sort that I described earlier), or at their national level counterparts, constitutes some kind of real dialogue. Without flexibility and intimate spaces to continually interrogate our deeply held assumptions, mental models and understandings of 'reality', generative dialogues cannot emerge. The pre-occupation with scale, manifestos, action-plans and formality/protocol in these international meetings prevents this intimacy from ever taking place (except for maybe in the corridors and bathrooms). Furthermore, generative dialogues require a great deal of self-initiative to organize themselves and grow. But most of the time, technocratic organizers and presenters 'own' the meeting, and most of the people are there to passively experience the sessions, not to actively create them.

Second, along with admitting to the superficiality of the international meetings, we need to start discussing what a meaningful dialogue actually means to each of us. To do this, we need to better understand the dynamics that lead to aggressiveness/defensiveness and end up stifling dialogues from taking shape. Vandana Shiva (1997) provides some interesting insight on our predicament, "The homogenization processes of development do not fully wipe away differences. Differences persist — not in the integrating context of plurality, but in the fragmenting context of homogenization. Positive pluralities give way to negative dualities, in competition with each other, contesting for the scarce resources that define economic and political power." Generative dialogues cannot grow in the polluting

environment of negative dualities, where all relationships are framed as ‘transactions’ that take place in the larger struggle for power.

To resuscitate environments of positive pluralities, we must focus on rebuilding trust — starting with our own lives. This means that we need to learn to listen to each other with greater humility, as well as to experiment with different forms of expression, in order to get past some of the plastic words and phrases. Our hearts have a greater role to play in such a process than do our ears or our mouths. We also need to make ourselves vulnerable again to a faith in the goodness of human beings and Nature and, at the same time, learn to forgive (and sometimes even appreciate) human mistakes when they occur. Lastly, this means that we need to more deeply try to understand our collective selves — the wholeness of our beings and our connections to and shared interests in the larger web of life.

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Section II of this book highlights certain entrenched frameworks around education and development that prevent us from deepening the dialogues around learning societies. Section III focuses on key processes, tools and spaces for deepening the dialogues. Finally, Section IV shares some experiences in which different people, from around the world, are trying to create spaces for deepening the dialogues. Each of the articles in this book should be taken as an invitation by the authors to start a personal dialogue with them and to broaden dialogues with each other.

The reader will notice that there is a broad agreement, among the various authors, on many principles and concepts. The reader will also find many differences between the authors, in terms of the details and strategies. They reflect the tensions and complexities that emerge from engaging with the culture of schooling, both professionally and personally. They also reflect the authors’ wide range of experiences, contexts, and readings of the world. Lastly, they reflect the fact that there are many hard questions out there in the world of learning societies that need to be faced. Some of these questions include:

- .. How do we go about undoing/unlearning the damage already done to us by the culture of schooling? What kinds of specific capacities, feelings and information sources do local communities need to face external challenges such as globalized exploitation?
- .. What should be the role, if any, of the State, Market, International Donors, NGOs, Media, etc. in creating a generative environments for learning societies to unfold? What kinds of fundamental attitudinal shifts and operational changes do they need to undergo? How do we dismantle their monopoly of power?
- .. How do we go about re-examining and replenishing traditional knowledge systems, social relationships, media, wisdom frameworks, etc.? How to prevent these from being co-opted by the State-Market nexus?
- .. How should ‘Western’ notions of progress, democracy, science, development, and human rights be reconceptualized in the context of learning societies?
- .. How do we negotiate the tensions between equality and diversity, between freedom and responsibility, between creativity and stability in the context of learning societies?

There are no universal or pre-determined answers to these questions. Creating times and spaces to discuss these questions in meaningful ways will be a big step towards unfolding learning societies.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The white man's burden is associated with the paternalistic feeling that "it is our moral obligation to save the ignorant savages" from themselves. The savior assumes himself/herself to be more 'rational' and 'civilized' than the 'savages'. The white man's burden is no longer limited to just white men. It is an essential feature of the entire Development discourse, its modes of planning and administration.

<sup>2</sup> See <[www2.unesco.org/wef](http://www2.unesco.org/wef)>.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosa Maria Torres. "What Happened at the World Education Forum? (Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April, 2000)." Available at: <[www.fronesis.org](http://www.fronesis.org)>.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, there was no space to critically examine the crises facing children and youth in 'mature' school systems in the countries of the North, such as the recurring incidence of student-on-student shootings in the well-funded, efficiently-managed schools in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> The Santa Fe Institute (1995) described the mismatch between emerging learning theory and dominant educational practice when they wrote, "The method people naturally employ to acquire knowledge is largely unsupported by traditional classroom practice. The human mind is better equipped to gather information about the world by operating within it than by reading about it, hearing lectures on it, or studying abstract models of it."

<sup>6</sup> A powerful example is the local apprenticeship formations that exist in communities throughout the South.

<sup>7</sup> It was assumed throughout the conference that civil society actors, namely NGOs, are representatives of the local people and thus can speak on their behalf. This assumption is suspect, since most NGOs around the world have limited relationships with communities, primarily as service-providers. They are neither accountable to local people; nor have NGOs been elected by them to be their representatives.

<sup>8</sup> Gustavo Esteva (1992) describes the participation game, "Development converts participation into a manipulative trick, to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them."

<sup>9</sup> See <[www.fronesis.org/proning2.htm](http://www.fronesis.org/proning2.htm)>.

<sup>10</sup> It was such a beautifully worded statement that, I must confess, even I was moved to sign it.

<sup>11</sup> In a recently released statement on the 1-year Anniversary of Dakar (entitled "Harness the Power of Education"), the heads of UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP and the World Bank boldly stated, "The international community knows that the rationale for making good quality education universally available is compelling. It contributes to economic well-being and cohesive, stable communities; and it empowers poor people to boost their incomes and leave the pain of poverty behind. No country has ever achieved sustained economic growth without reaching the critical threshold of literacy for its population."

<sup>12</sup> Majid Rahnema (1997) describes the crisis that is emerging in many communities across the globe: "The separation of students from their parents and their cultural milieu. The instilling in them in homeopathic doses, of new alienating values, attitudes and goals, drives them gradually to reject and even despise their own cultural and personal identity. They acquire a false sense of superiority, which turns them away from manual work, from real life and from all unschooled people, whom they tend to perceive as ignorant and underdeveloped."

<sup>13</sup> Corporatist thinking argues that a good society is one that has a constantly improving standard of living, a society that relies on "the necessity of wealth creation through the most productive applications of science and technology." Such a society is driven by and prioritizes the values of speed, growth, profit and efficiency. Community thinking, on the other hand, is founded on an appreciation of caring relationships, human dignity, justice and the quality of life.

<sup>14</sup> In a workshop that I participated in last year in Maharashtra, I witnessed indigenous people list over 25 activities that they learned on their own in their community, including: ploughing, farming, cooking, dancing, weaving, carpentry, pounding and husking, fishing, washing clothes, hunting, bird trapping, using a sling shot and catapulting, singing couplets while dancing, story-telling, riddles, counting with tamarind seeds, playing musical instruments, building houses, knowledge of medicinal plants, etc. They then went on to carry out an analysis of the rich pedagogy underlying these activities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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