

Democracy and the Learning Society: One Coin, Two Sides

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Introduction

Democracy and learning have much in common. Both flow from the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people. Both lead to unforeseen outcomes. Proficiency in both is dependent upon concrete action, reflection and dialogue. And whether one is speaking of learning or democracy, the same paradigm prevails: Everybody is supportive in *principle*, but the details of *practice* engender fierce debate.

In this brief essay, I shall endeavor to develop three highly interrelated ideas: that democracy is a precondition for the emergence of a learning society; that the vitality of a democracy is directly linked to a society's embrace of learning as a lifelong pursuit; and, that the schooling enterprise often subverts fundamental democratic ideals (ironically, the very same ones that receive lip service in classrooms throughout the world).

A society that is both 'democratic' and 'learning-centered' is the product of a mutually reinforcing spiral. Democracy is cause and effect of learning, while learning operates as both subject *and* object in an ongoing dialogue on democracy.

The Learning Society

But what is a learning society? The term describes a group of individuals who have built a community around values and behaviors that promote inquiry and personal growth as lifelong pursuits for *all* citizens. Members of a learning society live inquisitively (sometimes at the expense of acquisitiveness) and question structures of authority. They routinely engage in empirical discovery and prefer direct *personal* experience to the mediated insertion of decontextualized knowledge, facts, and data into their heads. There is a community where learning is active, participatory, open-ended, collaborative, dialogic.

In such communities, there are many 'new' and 'old' answers, but few 'right' and 'wrong' ones. Why? Because community members routinely grapple with novel problems, and these are often too new to have 'right' answers associated with them. For example, learning societies may ask questions such as these: What is an appropriate local response to the forces of globalization? Within our constraints, how do we take advantage of the opportunity presented by 'localization' (i.e., the emerging preference of central governments to delegate functions to localities without delegating them the necessary resources to carry out those functions)? How do we preserve human dignity for all, in the face of massive social and economic dislocations underway throughout the world? Such challenges may lack a known set of 'correct' responses, but they are filled with life-changing possibilities for open-ended inquiry, dialogue, experimentation, and experiential learning, since they are intimately linked to a community's vitality and future prospects.

Learning community members struggle against role rigidity. Today's 'teacher' or 'mentor' will most assuredly be tomorrow's learner. Even more often, teacher and pupil are located in the same individual. In learning communities, people recognize that the capacity to teach and to learn resides in everyone — as does the responsibility to engage in these activities. Teaching and learning are not the exclusive mandate of schools, professional teachers, and other members of the 'education establishment'. Rather, these activities involve young and old, male and female, rich and poor, 'educated' and 'uneducated'. The force that gives life to a 'learning society' is the empirical testing of new ideas. Such testing entails trying concepts out in real-life situations in order to determine whether these ideas are worthy of adoption and incorporation into one's personal repertoire of everyday behaviors. Such processes illumine a learning society's choice of priorities, guide its allocation of resources, and underlie its reward structure.

Democracy and Schooling

True democracy means more than the mere presence of a constitution, elections, and the rule of law. It is also about widespread acceptance of an unwritten social contract among all citizens that governs interpersonal relations as well as civic rights and responsibilities. At the heart of the social contract is a pervasive understanding of what individuals can expect from one another in the various realms in which they operate: personal, communal, familial, spiritual, political, and economic.

The essence of this social contract — transmitted through legal frameworks, cultural ideals, religious or moral authorities, and the everyday practices of countless ordinary citizens — is that the parties to it will behave with care, concern and responsibility toward one another. Thus, for example, an individual's rights (as spelled out in local legislative codes and international conventions) will be respected not only because it is a legal requirement to do so, but, more importantly, because people have been (to a greater or lesser degree) socialized to act respectfully toward one another.

The social contract is relatively rigid; it doesn't change readily from one moment to the next. Nonetheless, in every generation, parts of the contract get 'renegotiated'. It is in this realm of renegotiation that learning societies become critical. Change is the result of many different factors including shifts in cultural patterns and preferences (sometimes — but not always — as a result of media influence); the ongoing practice common in all societies of continually redefining cultural ideals (sometimes as a result of stances taken by spiritual leaders and other opinion-makers); as well as the insights and experiences of citizens from all walks of life who dare to re-imagine such issues as the nature of relations between the powerful and the powerless.

While interpersonal caring, concern and responsibility undergird the social contract, every society needs to invent and re-invent processes and institutions that maintain the contract's vitality and relevance. The practices linked to good governance in a democracy (for example, free and fair elections; the custom of subjecting transactions to public scrutiny in order to guarantee transparency; procedures that enable individuals to air grievances) are particularly apt for this task of 'social contract maintenance' because they lead to the contract's ongoing renegotiation and ratification.

Democracy entails empathy and respect for others as well as three core conditions that are reflected in the everyday actions of citizens: a belief that the laws are essentially just; a recognition that no one is above the law; and, an acceptance of the fact that an individual's personal behavior almost always has consequences for others. Without these three conditions, there is no basis for either a social contract or democracy.

Cooperation and a willingness to consider issues from perspectives other than one's own are democracy's heart and lungs. Democracy's sustenance comes from citizens who, recognizing their interdependence, seek to achieve an appropriate balance between their personal interests and those of the greater good. And democracy's longevity depends on citizens who strive to create a common future, one that transcends differences of ethnicity, religion, race, class, gender, lifestyle, or the false security of blind nationalism.

The health of a democracy rests on a citizenry's commitment to live every day mindful of the fact that individual actions ramify into societal consequences (the cause and effect relationships so dear to empirical learners). Democracy and learning also depend on the respect that citizens accord one another. By respect, I don't mean begrudging acceptance and tolerance of others who are different than oneself, but rather an affirmative appreciation of diversity as a source of societal strength.

So why are schools so ill-equipped to promote democracy? Don't societies that view themselves as democratic expect their schools to play an important role in helping citizens develop the attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge needed to maintain democratic institutions? I offer at least three reasons why:

First, schools transmit information, but information is often not an important determinant of personal behavior. Illustratively, most of the world's smokers know that smoking is bad for them. Nonetheless, they continue to smoke. Likewise, information is not the *key* determinant of democratic behaviors (including voting, following the law, treating others with respect and dignity, using resources responsibly, making decisions about individual actions that, in part, reflect an understanding of these actions affect others).

Respect for others, for example, is not dependent on information, nearly as much as it is on an individual's attitudes and values. These dimensions of individuality emerge from what is practiced in the home, observed in daily interactions with community members, and truly rewarded (not just praised) by local role models and peers. Francis Bacon, the famed British essayist, brilliantly captured the essence of this disjuncture between knowledge and behavior four centuries ago when he wrote, "People usually think according to their inclinations, speak according to their learning and ingrained opinions, but generally act according to custom."

Second, it is democratic *action* — immersion by individuals into the democratic process itself — that leads to the development of attitudes and values favorable to democracy. Such experiential encounters with democracy are profoundly ‘learningful’ and life changing, when they are situationally authentic and personally meaningful. By their very nature, schools alone cannot create authentic encounters with democracy. At best, they can mimic and imitate democratic processes that occur in the wider society. At worst, they reinforce tendencies to choose leaders on the basis of personal popularity, rather than positions or issues.

Third, schools frequently send mixed messages about democratic values. For example, the official curriculum may include content on the importance of treating all people equitably. But, in practice, schools often send an entirely different message to young learners; for example, when girls are seldom if ever recognized by their teachers, when bullying and aggressive behaviors are tolerated, or when blatant favoritism is shown to children from socially advantaged backgrounds. Similarly, key policies and practices of many school systems (including, in particular, those bearing on finance, access, equity, and curriculum) are often inconsistent with democratic values. Thus, for example, in nations around the world, more money is spent per capita to educate relatively well-off children than those who are living in the most precarious circumstances.

Two thousand years ago, Seneca, the Roman philosopher, observed, “The road to learning by precept is long, but by example short and effective.” In light of the power of example, we must ask ourselves if schools — by virtue of what they demonstrate — are actually a powerful force for instilling anti-democratic behaviors among the children entrusted to them (i.e., behaviors that lead to elevating the rights and resources of some at the expense of others).

The three factors we’ve just reviewed — the inadequacy of information to be a force for changing behavior; the inability of most schools to create meaningful, *authentic* democratic experiences for learners; and the essentially undemocratic way in which most schools conduct the education enterprise — pose a seemingly insurmountable dilemma: How can societies foster the values most conducive to the sustenance of democracies if they can’t rely on local schools to get the job done? The answer is breathtakingly simple in its conception, although decidedly complex in its implementation.

If everyday citizen behavior is more important than the information imparted by schools in promoting ‘democracy friendly values,’ then we must promote or strengthen community practices consistent with this reality. In particular, we should recognize the teaching/learning power of community-based organizations that engage citizens in the twin tasks of defining common needs and planning collective actions to address them.

John Dewey wrote, “We cannot seek or attain health, wealth, learning, justice or kindness in general. Action is always specific, concrete, individualized, unique.” Democracy cannot just be generalized into existence. Citizens — adults and children alike — must actually *engage* in tangible, original and situation-specific acts that nurture or reinforce democratic values. Learning — community-based, informal learning — is such an activity.

Why does learning, but not schooling, represent society’s best hope for strengthening ‘democracy-friendly’ values across a citizenry? The answer lies in the power of *personally relevant, self-directed learning* to develop and strengthen those very values that are most conducive to democracy. Reciprocally, the values that are deepened through personal encounters with democracy are precisely those that propel individuals to pursue greater learning.

What are these values and how do they manifest themselves in the two contexts we are discussing (learning and civic responsibility)? Values are internalized principles that serve as guideposts when individuals make behavioral, ethical and moral choices. Woodrow Wilson, the visionary who labored diligently (but unsuccessfully) to establish a viable League of Nations in the aftermath of the First World War noted, “Democracy is not so much a form of government as a set of principles.”

Illustrative principles that are fundamental to healthy democracies are shown in the left column in the table that follows. The table’s right column illustrates how each value finds expression in a learning society. Quick perusal of the listed core values makes it clear that the columns are mutually and reciprocally reinforcing.

Possibilities for Unleashing Democracy and Learning Societies

What can communities do to unleash the mutually reinforcing, powerful concepts of democracy and the learning society? Many excellent ideas have already been explored around the world, including:

- Organized mentoring and tutorial programs that involve young and old in the pursuit of shared learning goals.
- Inclusion of community service internships (and other forms of cooperative, situated learning) as integral components of many formal education programs.
- Widespread support for adult volunteerism (unpaid service) as a learning activity.
- Organized 'learning exchanges' where organizations bring individuals with common interests together for shared learning.
- Internet list-serves that bring together individuals from all over the world to develop common learning agendas.
- Seamless school-community partnerships that remove learning from the sole province of schools by drawing upon the resources of *entire* communities in achieving locally determined objectives.
- A growing pedagogical acceptance of 'facilitation' rather than 'teaching' as a way to promote learning both in and out of schools.
- Early childhood programs that help parents encourage (and take pleasure in) the natural curiosity of their young children.
- Adaptation of community school models that involve extensive community participation in open-ended, inquiry-based learning and school governance.
- Employer incentives to promote learning (e.g., released time for mentoring, learning, and skills development).
- Employer encouragement for teamwork (at its best, a constructivist, dialogic and learning-centered process).
- The emerging practice of using 'life experience portfolios' (evidence of self-directed, learning projects and personal experience) for credential purposes.

Members of the 'education establishment' frequently view efforts aimed at disentangling 'education' from 'learning' as an idea too radical to merit serious consideration. Yet, we must come to understand that there is nothing radical in this idea at all. Indeed, the opposite is true: the surest way to *conserve* democratic institutions is to diffuse responsibility for learning throughout a society and to empower and encourage every citizen to become an active learner.

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