

A Learning Society Retrospective

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A Learning Society...?

Leisure for contemplating philosophic truths? Databases connecting us to learning partners? Upgrading ourselves for the knowledge economy? Schooling for all for as long as we live? New opportunities for the educationally deprived to join modernity? Or learning to leave modernity behind?

What is meant by “learning society”? All of the above. The term has multiple and tangled meanings at least as divergent as these questions suggest. The idea of the learning society is not new; it has been discussed as a concept for more than thirty years. In the past, the term has invoked a critique of the limitations of schooling, an affirmation of learning outside institutional walls, and a concern for collective problem-solving. More recently, the idea of creating a learning society has become especially popular among education officials to demonstrate the competitive prowess and electronic connectivity of their workforce. Because of the allure of this concept in contemporary discourse about education and globalization, it is important to critically examine the origins of the idea and recover the texture of a term that can easily become a glossy slogan. In this chapter, I will introduce several formulations of the learning society concept, highlighting a few critical themes of this unfinished conversation and suggest questions for further dialogue.

Learning While Slaves Work

The first notable book on this theme, called The Learning Society, was written by Robert Hutchins in 1968. In this book, Hutchins envisions a learning society as one in which citizens are free to cultivate their intelligence through liberal education, i.e., education in the classical questions and liberal arts of western civilization. The ancient Greek city of Athens is his model learning society — a society characterized not by the expanse of its educational system, but by the richness of its political and cultural life. The prosperity of Athens depended on slave labor, and for Hutchins, slave labor enabled free citizens (men) to enjoy abundant leisure time for learning.

Because leisure time is his precondition for learning, Hutchins defines learners as those privileged to enjoy leisure time, and the leisure class as the group supporting the advancement of culture. In his view, work is merely work, an obstacle to learning.¹ Looking forward in time, he anticipates that new technologies — the modern substitute for slaves — would create the free time necessary for future generations to enjoy ever greater amounts of leisureful learning as manual work vanished and universal liberal education became possible. He assumes all cultures will find fulfillment in the study of classical ideas, making this first learning society an elitist, mono-cultural vision based on the belief that the desire for studying a classical liberal curriculum is a universal ideal. Ironically, Hutchins’ forecast of a society liberated from work and therefore free to learn has been turned on its head by globalization: in much of today’s discourse on the knowledge economy, learning is being driven by the demands of work and the commercial imperative for innovation to expand economic production.

Hutchins also senses that the world is being irrevocably connected by advances of western technology. In a passage that sounds remarkably similar to contemporary discourse on the virtues of globalization, he writes: “A world community is being formed by communication, by shared knowledge, by intellectual exchange, by economic ties, by travel, and by a sense of a common destiny, or at least of a common fate.” Given this shift, he advocates for a kind of education that can be a catalyst for human unity across cultures. The learning society will be, in other words, a “worldwide republic of learning” based on the belief that humans are everywhere similar and liberal education is a universal good. What is evident in Hutchins’ book often goes unspoken among today’s advocates of schooling for all: the creation of a learning society is predicated on the global spread of western ideas and systems. In any discourse about creating the learning society, it is important to consider how it might involve another colonial effort to “teach” non-western peoples about the superiority of the western worldview and its attendant technologies.

Introducing an important theme in the learning society literature, Hutchins argues that education should not be confined to schooling during a limited portion of people’s lives. He points out that learning bounded and confined to specific institutions may have made sense in foregone times when the future was continuous with the present and past. But in light of rapid social and technological change, the future has lost its stability, and a pre-determined program of learning in childhood can no longer prepare people adequately for productive adult lives. This critique continues to serve as the primary conceptual logic for much of the discourse on learning societies. For Hutchins,

and most others who write about the learning society, the West has entered a new phase in which the pace of change introduced by modernity compels people to learn continuously — learning which itself propels further change — and the need for more learning.

Building the Learning Web

In his 1971 book, Deschooling Society, historian Ivan Illich argues for the liberation of learning from institutional controls that create intellectual dependency and train people for lives of uncritical consumption. The professionalization of education, for Illich, mystifies expertise and creates an artificial constraint on the learning capacity of a society. In the same way, modern institutions tend to legitimate their control over functions and processes previously performed by communities. Claiming only authorized doctors can heal or only authorized teachers have meaningful knowledge, modern institutions erode peoples' confidence in their own abilities and eventually create dependency and new forms of "poverty", defined as a lack of the service the institution provides. In "developed" nations, people typically rely on institutions — with their professionals, treatments, and products — to solve their problems and support their welfare.

In rethinking education, Illich discusses the importance of conviviality, mutual sharing based on learner's self-identified interests. Convivial institutions are those people use spontaneously, without official manipulation. Illich warns of alternatives to schooling that result in greater manipulation: "The alternative to dependence on schools is not the use of public resources for some new device which 'makes' people learn; rather, it is the creation of a new style of educational relationship." Believing that people will learn what they desire to learn if helped to come together, Illich proposes the formation of "learning webs." These webs would be connective technologies, such as directories and computerized exchanges, which match learners with teachers, peers and other resources. In the process, the operation of the learning web could build friendships and enhance the level of shared skill in a community far more powerfully than could schooling.

Today, Illich's vision of learning webs connecting learners inspires reflection on the use and potential of the internet as a global learning network. To what extent has the internet achieved Illich's vision? How is the internet enabling learners to connect and share resources? As people form digital communities, are they becoming more isolated from communities of place? How is the mutual learning potential of the internet being thwarted by commercial interests?

Breaking Institutional Monopolies on Education

The touchstone of the discourse on learning societies has become Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow, the 1972 report of the International Commission on the Development of Education, chaired by Edgar Faure. Notably, the publication of this report came only one year after the publication of Illich's Deschooling Society and a few years after student riots in Paris. While far less critical than Illich, the Faure report shares his distaste for institutional self-importance. It objects to gradations of learners and other systemic barriers to access and equitable treatment.

In the minds of most professional educators and the public, there are usually a limited set of institutions (schools) that carry out the work of education. Learning to Be challenges the simplistic equation of education with schooling and attempts to expand the meaning of the "educational system" to include alternative institutions and community resources. The report argues that education should no longer be limited in time to a certain period of life called "school age" or be limited in space to particular authorized buildings called schools: "education must be conceived of as an existential continuum as long as life."

The Faure report focuses on expanding freedom at the individual level. It calls for a new level of respect for learning, wherever or however that learning occurs. The report envisions that all avenues of learning would be treated with equal respect. What should matter to society is not institutional prestige, not authorized teaching, but individuals' learning and the freedom for people to find their own path along the way: "There is no real freedom of choice unless the individual is able to follow any path leading to his goals without being hindered by formalized criteria." The report affirms the importance of self-learning and argues for social investment in resources that support individual's self-learning efforts.

With Learning to Be, education is articulated as a more widely dispersed social process. The report focused on breaking the arrogance of formal systems as the only legitimate spaces of education. In this way, Learning to Be could be considered a reformist effort. It focuses on critiquing and expanding how formal institutions understood

learning. Distancing itself from Illich, the Faure Commission does not question the negative impact of formal institutions on the broader landscape of learning. In this way, it serves to reinforce their status by bringing alternative institutions into popular understanding of the system.

Underneath the Faure report is the belief that a more expansive configuration of education can sustain and support economic growth. While the report problematizes institutional elitism, it does not question the powerful ideas about technologically-driven progress upholding the educational enterprise. In short, it is not interested in advancing the question, education for what? The report stresses the importance of scientific education and technological mastery for continued economic progress in traditional terms. For development to happen more effectively, lifelong learning and more accessible educational institutions would be necessary.

The Faure report develops the conceptual groundwork for lifelong learning now in vogue with state human resource development policies. The report argues that the educational system should support “maximum vocational mobility,” i.e., equipping students for adaptability and connecting the educational system with work-based training. This emphasis foreshadows recent OECD policies aimed at creating a credentialed and mobile workforce. Such policies demand that workers become more flexible and eager to learn as jobs and technologies change (Spring, 1998). In contrast, Learning to Be asks the educational system to be flexible according to the needs of learners. Yet those needs are likely to be shaped by economic conditions — Learning to Be, as many other visions of the learning society, fails to ask this question: how might economic conditions be shaped by learners for their own well-being, rather than learners shaping themselves to fit the demands of the economy?

The Faure Commission argues for high quality basic education, but notes that responsibility for education extends far beyond the formal organizations charged with educating the young. In the future, it predicts, schools “will be less and less in a position to claim the education functions in society as its special prerogative. All sectors — public administration, industry, communications, transport — must take part in promoting education” (1972, p. 162). This idea foreshadows the notion of learning ecology advanced by UNESCO’s Learning Without Frontiers network. Learning, according to this approach, is not exclusively the concern of educational policy, but a broader concern of social and economic policy to create generative conditions for learning at all levels of social organization.

While nurturing seeds of discontent with oppressive institutional structures, Learning to Be also shares convictions with the Education for All (EFA) movement. Like EFA, it advocates an expansion of early childhood education and universal basic education. It aims to open more space for learners to come inside society’s formal educational systems. Yet Learning to Be is more critical than EFA has become, in discussing creative alternatives to schooling and the possibility of part-time basic education stretched over a longer period. It embeds radical questions about the boundaries of educational institutions with systems-conserving faith in scientific progress for the fulfillment of human potential. For the Faure Commission, a learning society is a society working to achieve the promise of infinite progress.

Overcoming the Human Gap

Can communities learn to create a better future? The meaning of the learning society shifted to refer to a higher level of innovative collective consciousness with No Limits to Learning, written in 1979 for the Club of Rome by James Botkin, Mahdi Elmandjra, and Mircea Malitza. The authors of No Limits to Learning argue that humanity has the potential for collective learning which could overcome the pressing global problems caused by human activity. This gap, the space between human-caused problems and human capacity to solve them, is labeled as the “human gap.” Moving beyond the reform-oriented Faure report, No Limits to Learning has a global scope, envisioning learning as the key to human survival and positive cultural change.

No Limits to Learning concerns itself with issues of learning at higher levels of scale and complexity than earlier writers had considered. Examining learning at the level of a society as a whole, the authors focus on the distinction between maintenance learning and innovative learning. In the past, they argue, humanity has relied largely on maintenance learning, i.e., learning needed only to maintain a comfortable status quo. Maintenance learning could be characterized graphically by a series of long plateaus in social functioning, with periodic shifts to a higher level forced on the society by severe unanticipated circumstances — learning by shock. Acceptance of maintenance learning, the authors point out, blocks innovation and makes catastrophe more likely.

Innovative learning, in contrast, refers to intentional change, the reformulation of problems and self-adaptation of a system in response to anticipated environmental change. Thus, one important feature of innovative learning is anticipation. Here, anticipation refers to forecasting, modeling, and other deliberate efforts to scan the horizon for signs of change, as well as efforts to shape the desired future. The book also emphasizes participation and the importance of collaborative, dialogic processes in learning, rather than learning as the social assimilation of “expert” knowledge.

Whereas earlier versions of the learning society tend to imagine it as a future state, the authors of No Limits to Learning begin to analyze the learning occurring in their current environment. If we appreciate learning as a constant, widespread social process, what are the most powerful elements of its “curriculum”? What factors encourage global perspectives and systemic thinking? What forces perpetuate outdated values and parochial perspectives? No Limits examines the consumeristic values conveyed by mass media and excessive spending on militarization, for example, as inhibitors to learning. It also critiques schooling as another source of maintenance learning, particularly in societies burdened by colonial curricula. Rather than learning what prior generations felt was important, students should be able to engage in community apprenticeships and other creative, socially-engaged learning spaces. This emphasis presages other innovative learning policies, as well as the interest in school-work connection within the business community.²

Many of the concepts in No Limits to Learning foreshadow the now widespread view that learning is the key characteristic of successful social systems. It offers a fresh understanding of learning as a capacity of groups, rather than merely as an individual experience, as earlier conceptions of learning societies had focused on. The ideas of collective learning continued to be developed in the work of Peter Senge on organizational learning in the 1990s. No Limits to Learning opened new possibilities for understanding learning in collective and ecological terms. Today, learning is popping up everywhere: communities learn, organizations learn, cities learn, nations learn.

Nurturing the Ecology of Learning

One of the most recent articulations of the learning society emanates from the UNESCO Learning Without Frontiers (LWF) network and its descendant, the Learning Development Institute.³ Like earlier formulations of the learning society, LWF foregrounds the rapid rate of social and technological change occurring throughout the world and critiques the inadequacy of schooling to prepare young people for adult life. Whereas schools depend on the packaging and consumption of knowledge, they should now focus on the shared creation of knowledge.

Learning Without Frontiers argues for an expansive appreciation of the multiple spaces and levels of organizational complexity in which learning occurs. It challenges old assumptions that learning is a matter of individual knowledge acquisition in isolation from a social context. Understanding that learning is fundamentally social, LWF discusses an “ecology of learning,” the interlaced network of open learning communities: classrooms, clubs, families, associations, neighborhoods, conversations, and activities in which learning ripples throughout life. Learning at any level contributes to and builds upon learning at other levels. Creating a learning society, from this perspective, involves caring for the learning ecology as a whole and creating generative conditions for learning through multiple channels, at multiple social levels.

The conception of the learning society advanced by LWF involves a shift from focusing on particular institutions to the interactions between different groups, a shift characteristic of ecological, non-linear perspectives on living systems. It does not offer an ideal to be achieved by careful planning and intervention; it does, however, caution that an intervention at any one level of social organization should not degrade the conditions for learning at another level.

The concept of the learning ecology offers the possibility of integrating the ‘soft’ concerns for relationship, care, and mutuality with the ‘hard’ concern for the generation of new knowledge. It enables us to move beyond old separations of rationality and emotion, while appreciating community as the ground of learning.⁴ At the level of the individual, LWF and other organizations such as the 21st Century Learning Initiative, appreciate learning as a non-linear process. The human brain seeks patterns of meaning in all that we do, thriving on immersion in rich, complex experiences rather than suffocating in the sterile environments imposed by schools.

Busy with the expansion and improvement of schooling, the international educational community has been slow to embrace the idea of the learning ecology. The group most engaged in the development of learning ecologies and other innovative approaches to collective learning has been the business community.⁵ Because learning is seen as essential to commercial success within the context of global corporate competition, business is experimenting with organizational structures that promote collaboration and creativity at a collective level. Whereas Hutchins focused on leisure as the space for learning in 1968, echoing the classical tradition, the corporate workplace has become the driving force in redefining learning in the present age.

What is troubling about corporate dominance of the learning conversation is the way it champions the value of learning while limiting its meaning. For those who preface their remarks with the phrase ‘in the knowledge economy’, learning tends to have value only in terms of corporate success. Learning that extends beyond the realm of the economic — especially learning that challenges the preeminence of the economic as the arbiter of value — tends to be exiled from the corporate version of the learning ecology. Self-reflection, coming to know another person, assisting a friend, or learning a new hobby — just a few examples of the many kinds of learning that *homo oecenomicus* (economic man) is not interested in, as he labors to expand markets and produce more consumer goods (Rahnema 1997). Further, the corporatized learning society discourse pays no attention to the learning occurring at the edges of the market, as commodification rubs against and covers over older systems of valuing and being.

Shikshantar

Several of the directions articulated by the Learning Without Frontiers network have continued to be explored by Shikshantar: The People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development in Udaipur, India. While advocating for an expansive appreciation of learning, Shikshantar also advances a powerful critique of schooling and its association with normative conceptions of economic development. Shikshantar invites learners to remove their “school-colored glasses” (Jain 2000) to consider the harmful impact of schooling on learners and the learning ecology. Diminishing natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation, robbing students of the confidence that they can learn without state-certified experts, reinforcing social stratification, and perpetuating habits of competition and arrogance, schooling is all too often a regressive form of organization for learning. This critique problematizes the effects of schooling and its role in perpetuating unjust industrial systems. Inspired by Indian thinkers/activists such as Gandhi, Krishnamurti and Tagore, Shikshantar refuses to view ‘underdevelopment’, in techno-material terms, as a deficit or ‘globalization’ as a positive inevitability. It invites reconsideration of the learning resources and processes available in communities, rather than bemoaning the quality or inaccessibility of formal educational systems.

Most visions of the learning society might be labeled as ‘schooling-plus’, i.e., learning happens at school, plus many other places. Following Illich, and working within a larger critique of western-oriented development, Shikshantar asks learners to imagine a ‘minus-schooling’ learning society. What new possibilities for intergenerational learning might open, were children not confined to state-run institutions during some of their most curious years? How does the hegemony of modern schooling limit local dialogues about the deeper meaning of education and how communities want to live and work and learn together? With a twist on the title of the Faure report, Shikshantar asks, what do we need to **unlearn** to be?

Shikshantar’s vision of a learning society is manifest in “process-projects” such as Udaipur as a Learning City (Jain and Manav 2000). This initiative uncovers and nurtures the non-institutional learning spaces in the local community, exploring local expressions of the learning ecology and relationships between the city, the region, state agencies, and international forces. It also stimulates dialogue among teachers and NGO workers in Udaipur about the meaning of education and learning, critiquing the assumption that the city’s problems are caused by insufficient amounts of formal education.

In addition to its local efforts, Shikshantar has undertaken a leadership role in bringing voices from different regions and perspectives together to continue exploring the meaning of the learning society in our time. It is a time when university researchers, business leaders, social activists, students, and teachers must move beyond their familiar spheres of conversation and share insights that can nurture a pluralistic, trans-disciplinary, trans-cultural, trans-generational dialogue on learning societies that, in a microcosm, models the work at the heart of a learning society: sharing with each other what we notice in the world, what we care about, and what we hope to create together. Such dialogue is especially critical at a time when the idea of the learning society is becoming trademarked by powerful commercial interests.

Is Learning Just for Earning?

In recent years, national governments have begun to adopt the learning society concept. New Zealand is a learning society, as are England and Japan; Singapore is a learning nation; Namibia is a nation of learners — the list of officially-designated learning societies crosses old categories of north/south, developed/developing. The designation signals a nation's interest in highlighting the responsive character of its workforce, revitalizing the cultural value of learning across the lifespan, and its desire to be a leader in the global knowledge economy. These policies have resulted, in part, from neo-liberal economic shifts, including the retreat of the welfare state, a focus on worker retraining, and tension about global market competition.

Since its beginnings, the idea of the learning society has focused on the rapid pace of change. The social and economic turbulence noted by earlier writers is now positioned center-stage in the era of globalization: to keep pace with change and remain competitive in an aggressive global marketplace, leaders from industry and education argue that learning has become the master capacity in a knowledge economy (Jin and Stough 1998). Individuals must learn; organizations must learn; societies must learn — and keep learning. Education ministers and corporate leaders alike argue that a nation's prosperity in the 21st century will depend on the capacity of its citizens to learn.

National learning society policies tend to focus on the worker as the locus of adaptation to rapid technological change. Responsive to ongoing change, workers must have “the capacity to adapt and renew continuously” (Paye 1996). The focus on creating flexible workers suggests that what policy makers want is not self-directed learners, but “smart” workers — smart in the sense of “smart” cars or “smart” houses or “smart” appliances, i.e., being capable of self-regulation and adaptation to environmental demands. In Singapore, the Prime Minister has stated that “even the most well-educated worker will stagnate if he does not keep upgrading his skills and knowledge” (Tong 1997).

The economic imperative for learning has generated anxiety about accountability and assessment in formal education systems. Typically, state learning society policies are coupled with national assessment and qualifications schemes. These initiatives are intended to produce detailed data on individual achievement that, ideally, can be transferred across regions or nations. The OECD, for example, has introduced the idea of the Personal Skills Card. This card would serve as a profile of the worker's skills and allow her to find employment across Europe. Touted as a vehicle for individual mobility and economic empowerment, the Personal Skills Card can also be understood as a convenience for corporate human resource departments (Spring 1998). It moves toward the formation of the ultimate human capital management tool: a data set of standardized knowledge and skills in economically productive domains, across the population. Like a common currency, standardization of skills reduces costs associated with conversion between national systems and ensures consistency.

The learning society, in this sense, has become the crowning conceptualization of human capital thinking: a society in which people are capable and eager to continually upgrade their skills — and the exact status of their skills is known to businesses and the state. This version of the learning society has been called the “skilled society” by McClellan (2000), a society that prides itself on the productive technical competencies of individuals rather than improving collective understanding. Taken to an extreme, it becomes a “Walkman distopia” (Schuller and Field 1996) — an image of a training room of learners plugged into their training modules, their learning understood only in terms of how it serves the productive capacity of the employer.

Conclusion

More than thirty years after the concept of the learning society was introduced, its meaning now pivots around this question: is learning about people changing their worlds to make them more habitable, more equitable, more beautiful, or is learning about changing people to make them more suitable for the global economy? The notion of the learning society, throughout its history, has attempted to explode the restrictive association of learning with schooling and expose the inadequacies of schooling for addressing the turbulence of contemporary times. As summarized above, the motivation for the development of a learning society has involved creating more flexible institutions and finding ways to solve complex problems collectively. But that vision is now being transplanted with narrow, market-dictated goals.

In the current policy discourse on learning societies, the images associated with becoming a learning society seem to be laptop computers and cellular phones, rather than parents playing with children or children scavenging through

fields of garbage produced by globalized industry — all scenes of learning. The current discourse on learning societies neglects the concept's historical roots, an amnesia that serves its orientation toward building a wired global village of knowledge workers. Given the importance of assessment and accountability for policymakers who worry about economic competitiveness, it is not surprising that schooling and increased enrollments have become a global imperative through the Education for All campaign. But is schooling for all the goal of a learning society? Is retooling ourselves for the sake of global industry the goal of a learning society? Or might the idea still have something to do with human creativity, freedom, and relationship? At this critical moment, it is important to reassert multiple meanings of the concept and reconsider their implications.

The attractiveness of learning in corporate, university, and policy-making circles has created widespread interest in the theme and opened more space to discuss it. At the same time, it raises critical questions about the assumptions underneath the new learning society ideas: life is inherently competitive and we only learn to dominate others; human beings must be motivated by the state or educational institutions to learn; human beings only adapt to, rather than create, pervasive economic and social conditions; learning is only an individual act of acquiring skills/knowledge, rather than a social process of community- and meaning-making.

With diverse images, visions, and meanings of the learning society available to us, it is an important moment for many voices to join the dialogue and challenge the limited definition of learning as a merely economic imperative. With the rich conceptual history of the learning society, we can now discuss learning on multiple levels, in multiple institutions and common spaces, and for multiple purposes. We have come to understand learning as complex, tangled, uncontrollable, wondrous, yet very natural. We have come to be more humble about the small fraction of learning that is ever visible to us, aware that our institutions of formal education are merely tiny, and often dysfunctional, nodes in a much more powerful and profound network of human learning than we have allowed ourselves to imagine before. The challenge of creating and recreating a learning society is, in part, to look around and talk together about how our physical environments, media, organizational structures, jobs, consumption habits, and relationships all nurture and frustrate the learning that matters to us as individuals and as communities.

Ongoing dialogue is necessary to prevent the concept of a learning society from becoming colonized to serve the ends of any particular interest. In these conversations, we must continue talking about the questions that brought us to this idea: Whose learning counts? What are we learning for? How is schooling getting in the way of what we value? How do we revive the dignity of life's multiple pathways to being and growing? How can we reclaim marginalized sources of knowledge and more fulfilling modes of living, while reasserting the primacy of wisdom and compassion over the cold logic of the market? How do we enlarge those moments when we join together in quiet appreciation of what is, and energetic building of what might be?

ENDNOTES

¹ The Greek word for leisure, *schole*, is the origin of the English word, *school*. The assumption that learning is the pursuit of the privileged is a powerful idea underlying how elite educational institutions construct themselves — with pastoral campuses and students in clean uniforms that, on a symbolic level, convey freedom from manual work and the sophistication meriting a leisurely life.

² If the promotion of learning were at the center of social policy, how might educational systems be reconstructed? Echoing many of the issues raised in 1979, the 21st Century Learning Initiative <www.21learn.org> has addressed this question in recent years. It argues for greater social investment to support learning in early childhood and new opportunities for apprenticeships and self-directed learning for adolescents.

³ The Learning Without Frontiers project was ended by UNESCO in 2000. The former LWF director, Jan Visser, now coordinates the Learning Development Institute <www.learndev.org> which seeks to explore and expand the meaning of learning in educational discourse.

⁴ The image on a website devoted to the idea of knowledge ecologies is comprised of a butterfly inside a microchip—a provocative conflation of aesthetic, ecological, and economic rationale. <www.knowledgeecology.com>

⁵ Please see the interview with James Botkin in this issue for further discussion.

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