

# Postsecondary education in the changing learning & living landscapes<sup>1</sup>

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*It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of education have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty. To the contrary, I believe that it would be possible to rob even a healthy beast of prey of its voraciousness, if it were possible, with the aid of a whip, to force the beast to devour continuously, even when not hungry, especially if the food, handed out under such coercion, were to be selected accordingly.*

Albert Einstein, quoted in Gorder, C. (1990), p. 79

## Introduction

In this chapter I consider the role of formal, postsecondary educational systems in the context of the dynamic and broader learning landscape. While nonformal learning paradigms (such as free-choice learning, incidental learning, and some aspects of workplace learning) receive considerable attention in today's discussions about lifelong and lifewide learning, it remains a reality that formalized learning systems are an integral part of the learning landscape, and that they are likely to remain so as long as that the completion of a postsecondary education continues to positively impact an individual's opportunities in the economic system within a society. Although at this juncture there is little reason to believe that the place of postsecondary institutions in the broader learning landscape is threatened, there is also considerable evidence that these systems are challenged in responding to the increasingly unpredictable changes in the learning landscape. Unlike more nimble counterparts (such as non-formal learning programs and work-based training programs), many postsecondary systems find themselves significantly hampered in efforts to respond to changing expectations and needs, by virtue of their sheer magnitude, political placement, and their entrenchment in their own historical foundation and placement.

A common thread that is woven between the diverse components of the learning landscape is the central focus on *learning* as the purpose for being. For this reason, I begin this chapter with a brief consideration of those facets of the complex construct of *learning* that are most central to the discussion of postsecondary education systems in the changing learning landscape. Building on this

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initial consideration of *learning*, I give some attention to what we mean when we discuss the *learning landscape*, and to the place of postsecondary education system in the broader learning landscape. Next, I explore in greater detail how the postsecondary education system is changing, both in terms of its internal functioning and in terms of its relation to the broader learning and living landscape. Here, I have focused the discussion on three central themes: Evolving (and at time discordant) views of the purpose of the postsecondary education system, changing perceptions of the value of a postsecondary education, and changes in the internal and external functioning of the postsecondary education system as a consequence of commercialization. I present for each theme an incomplete and somewhat eclectic series of relevant issues and opportunities and I focus specifically on the implications for the postsecondary *learner* of these phenomena of change in the postsecondary system. To conclude the chapter I consider how researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are positioned to impact our understanding and nurturing of postsecondary learners in the changing learning landscape.

This chapter deals with a series of issues and developments that are potentially broad in scope. For this reason, I have chosen to focus my comments on the situation as confronted primarily in the context of US postsecondary education. At various points, I refer to data and sources from Canada, the UK, and continental Europe. This chapter's constraint in the geographic scope is not intended to limit exploration of the relevance of some of the issues presented to societies outside of this rather limited area. Instead, it is intended to aide in the clarity of the discussion by containing the scope of the examples to a situational context that shares a number of fundamental common attributes.

## Learning from the learner's perspective

In exploring the broader theme of "learners in a changing learning landscape" it is of fundamental importance that the construct of *learning* is given due consideration. In the context of this chapter, where the focus is on adult learning in the formalized components of the learning landscape, we should best focus on those aspects of the meaning of learning that are connected to our conceptions of *teaching*.

Van Rossum, Deijkers & Hamer (1985) explored conceptions of learning from the learner's perspective, using a phenomenographic methodology. Responding to open-ended questions, the 42 Dutch college students participating in the study elucidated on their ideas about learning and concepts related to learning. Emerging from the analysis of the data gathered, the researchers identify five distinct learning conceptions, each affecting the learner's perception of teaching (as cited in Dawson-Tunik, 2004, p.6):

1. Learning is seen as the augmentation of knowledge through the accumulation of factual information, and the teacher's role is one of presenting a variety of facts.
2. Learning is perceived as memorization of knowledge for performing on assessments, and teaching is defined from a technological vantage point. Understanding of subject matter is believed to be related to performance on assessments.

3. Learning is viewed as applying knowledge and in this frame of reference good teaching manifests itself in an organized, controlled, and active learning environment.
4. Learning is defined as the process of trying to identify relationships within a discipline and across disciplines. Good teaching consists of giving students the conditions explore their own learning process, and to engage in the process of constructing knowledge.
5. Learning is regarded as personal development. Effective teaching is dialogical in nature and emphasizes opportunities for independent learning.

The categories identified by Van Rossum, Deijkers & Hammer (1985) are consistent with those identified by Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty in 1993, although the latter group of researchers supplemented the list with a sixth category, "associated with increased awareness and a sense of learners becoming irreversibly different people as a result of learning" (Cliff, 1996, para. 2). In other words, learning encompasses a process in which the learner changes in the way in which she views phenomena, and consequently the new way of seeing the phenomenon changes the learner (Dawson-Tunik, 2004, p. 9).

It is of interest to note that the categories of perceptions of learning as described above are positioned hierarchically. In other words, the conceptual interpretation of learning ranges from the lowest level in the hierarchy, where learning is viewed as the simple accumulation of factual information, to the highest level in the hierarchy, where learning is viewed as having the capacity to have "a dimension of personal transformative power" (Cliff, 1996, para. 3).

For the purpose of this chapter, we will operate from a frame of reference that builds on the contributions of the phenomenographic research above in two key ways. Firstly, we will attempt to keep a relatively fixed focus on *learning* and the *learning landscape* from the vantage point of the learner. Secondly, we will primarily concern ourselves with those perspectives on learning that would, in the context of the research by van Rossum et al. (1985) and Marton et al. (1993) appear on the higher levels of the hierarchy. In other words, our focus will be on conceptions of learning that emphasize meaning-making, cross- and trans-disciplinary understand and application, independent exploration, dialogous relationships between members of a learning community, and sustained personal growth and development.

## Learning and living landscapes

*You may not divide the seamless coat of learning. What education has to impart is an intimate sense for the power of ideas, for the beauty of ideas, and for the structure of ideas, together with a particular body of knowledge which has peculiar reference to the life of the being possessing it.*

Alfred Whitehead, Aims of Education, p.23,

The notion of a *learning landscape* is a broad, complex, and dynamic construct that recognizes at once the commonalities and the idiosyncrasies between discrete points and entities in the broader universe of learning. Recognizing both the aesthetic and ecological dimensions to learning (Visser, J., 2001), it is a landscape that may be made up of numerous other sub-landscapes, such as the media landscape and the instructional landscape (Visser, J., 2003). Much like any “natural” landscape in the world around us, the metaphor of a learning landscape encompasses conditions and entities that can both foster and hamper growth and development. In this respect, a learning landscape embodies similar attributes to what John Dewey’s (1916) *Democracy and Education* describes as the nature and meaning of environment in education:

In brief, the environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being. Water is the environment of a fish because it is necessary to the fish's activities -- to its life. The north pole is a significant element in the environment of an arctic explorer, whether he succeeds in reaching it or not, because it defines his activities, makes them what they distinctively are. Just because life signifies not bare passive existence (supposing there is such a thing), but a way of acting, environment or medium signifies what enters into this activity as a sustaining or frustrating condition. (para. 3)

The learning landscape can therefore be likened to the ecological environment in which we, as humans, develop and grow as a result of our interaction with our surroundings. We thus assume the broadest of possible definitions for the *learning landscape*, and might consequently argue with increasing conviction that the *learning landscape* and the *living landscape* are in fact one and the same. Our lives are a perpetual process of interaction with the world around us, and through this process we grow, change, and develop – in short, we learn. Our development as humans, in this context, is mediated through mechanisms that operate largely in ignorance of the boundaries for *levels* and *types* of learning that are neatly established when we study learning in a more detached manner. Informal, nonformal and formal learning will likely all figure prominently in our interactions with the living and learning landscape, and we will learn through both incidental and intentional processes that shape us biologically, mentally, and spiritually<sup>2</sup>. *We are learning, and learning is us.*

Later in this chapter we will explore in more depth some of the things that one might categorize under idea of a “changing learning landscape”, particularly in the context of formalized postsecondary education’s place in this landscape. For the moment, however, let us consider one key way in which the learning landscape is indeed changing, namely, in terms of our very conception of what it is. As rates of change continue to increase, ambiguity becomes ever more prevalent, and we are expected to interact with ever larger amounts of information, we become increasingly resourceful in finding new spaces and

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<sup>2</sup> For further reflection on time spent on formal versus informal learning, see Slowinski and Bransford, pp.xx this volume.

opportunities for learning, so that we can meet the challenges that today's world presents us<sup>3</sup>. In so doing, we redefine our conception of the learning landscape, and our awareness of its breadth and depth increases. We become more aware that *learning* is above all else the dominion of the learner, rather than educators or educational establishments. The learning landscape changes as our perception of it changes.

What then, of the formal learning systems that our societies have so carefully cultivated and fostered over the centuries to provide us with planned learning experiences, dedicated learning spaces, defined learning goals and measures, and access to individuals with recognized subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical skills? Such formalized mechanisms seem at times somewhat outdated when we engage ourselves in thinking of the brave new world of learning that lies ahead of us. However, the reality remains that formalized education systems, with all their limitations, are still a formidable entity in the learning landscape. Compulsory primary and/or secondary education is embedded in the rights and responsibilities of citizens of many countries, and under the Education For All (EFA) movement, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has set as goal that all children will receive and complete free and compulsory education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000.) .While we come closer to achieving the goals of universal access to primary and secondary education, we are also finding that participation in postsecondary education is increasingly becoming a condition for meaningful participation in the economic sector of many countries. For instance, in the United States it is projected that between 2000-2015, some 85 percent of new jobs will require postsecondary education (Gunderson, Jones and Scanland, 2004). In one recent survey of US employers, over one-quarter of respondents projected that they would reduce their hiring of employees with only a high school degree, 60 percent of respondents projected increasing their hiring four-year college degree graduates, and almost 50 percent projected increasing their hiring of two-year degree holding employees (Cassner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006). Thus, while the breadth of opportunities for just-in-time, self-directed, and informal learning is considerable, the reality is that formal education systems remain the "staple" ingredient in the learning journeys for many of us. They deserve, therefore, careful attention and critical analysis in the context of considering learners in the changing learning landscape.

## Changing perceptions of the purpose of the postsecondary education system

*The task of a University is the creation of the future, so far as rational thought, and civilized modes of appreciation, can affect the issue. The future is big with every possibility of achievement and of tragedy.*

Alfred Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, p. 233

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<sup>3</sup> See Visser J., pp. xx this volume and Slowinski & Bransford, pp. xx this volume, for further exploration of ambiguity in the context of the changing learning landscape.

In the developed world, postsecondary institutions shoulder a considerable amount of the responsibility for providing adults with access to instructional opportunities that will enable them to function constructively as independent and interdependent members of society. While attempting to “make good” on this responsibility, the postsecondary education system appears to face an almost innumerable series of challenges, finding itself in a state of flux both in terms of its internal functioning and in terms of its place in the broader social and living landscapes.

During this turbulent time there is in my view one key systemic challenge that has direct implications for how postsecondary institutions fit into the broader learning landscape, namely that there is little consensus about what a postsecondary education should effectively constitute. Reading through the research and policy documentation for postsecondary institutions, one finds that these institutions are expected to serve any of a myriad of different purposes. Often, these expectations placed on the postsecondary sector are wildly different and, indeed, contradictory. Let’s look at three of the most commonly cited expectations for the postsecondary education system: Professional training, remedial education, and cultivation of the knowledge-worker.

### **Professional training and preparation**

Traditionally, the purpose of the postsecondary institution is primarily to take a broadly-prepared secondary school graduate and to expose the learner to the learning experiences needed to develop the pre-defined competencies for effective performance in a specific professional field. A disciplinary program in Information Technology, for instance, is expected to provide its learners with the sequence and scope of course material that is needed to achieve two goals: (1) to prepare the learner for general effectiveness in the world of work (one way in which this might be achieved is by focusing on the development of analytical and communication skills), and (2) for the specific knowledge and skills associated with working in the field of Information Technology. In many of our postsecondary institutions today, we see systems that have been carefully set up to achieve the goal of this kind of professional training and preparation. In an undergraduate program, the academic program is typically set up so that learners begin with a series of general education courses (designed to shape the learner with the broader set of general skills and knowledge for effective integration into society and the workforce), and gradually travel up the academic hierarchy to courses that are increasingly specific to the professional area of concentration that the learner has selected.

Many learners entering the postsecondary system for the first time are likely to be motivated by a desire to receive professional training and preparation in a defined area of specialization. In reality, however, two main factors mitigate the ability of universities and colleges to consider themselves effective if only this expectation is met: (1) the increase in the number of learners in need of remedial education in order to successfully enter an academic program, and (2) the evolving expectations of an economic sector that expects professionals who not only command the skills and knowledge related to the current state of the discipline, but who also command the skills to succeed in what is increasingly referred to as a

knowledge-based economy<sup>4</sup>. As a result, universities and colleges have sought to expand their purpose, while new types of postsecondary entities (such as corporate universities) have emerged to fulfill the role of providing a narrow, skills-based professional training.

## Remedial education

Mastery of key entry-level skills is considered a cornerstone for success in any instructional intervention. Postsecondary institutions are therefore increasingly expected to serve as what is perhaps best described as a bridge to *themselves*. In other words, postsecondary institutions are expected to provide inadequately prepared high school graduates with the learning opportunities needed to enter into a postsecondary level academic program of study. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) about half of US students admitted to college must complete remedial education courses in English and Math before undertaking college-level courses (2001).

The growth in the demand for remedial education at the postsecondary level is certainly condemnatory of the condition of the secondary education system and the poorly-conceived policies for standardizing education and assessment in middle and high school. However, the responsibility does not reside on the shoulders of the secondary education system alone – in fact, one might argue that a significant proportion of the responsibility resides with the postsecondary education system, since this is the system that has after all been responsible for the professional preparation of the teachers teaching in the secondary education system. Regardless of where the blame resides, however, the consequences are altogether troubling from the vantage point of the learner. A report released by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006), notes that “Among high school graduates who do make it on to post-secondary education, a troubling number of undergraduates waste time – and taxpayer dollars – mastering English and Math skills that they should have learned in high school” (p. x).

The secondary school system’s failure to prepare learners for a postsecondary education results in the learner having to dedicate additional time and resources to taking remedial courses in core subjects such as Math and English. In so doing, the learner enters into an aspect of postsecondary education that could reasonably be viewed as operating within a conflict of interest: The remedial courses offered at postsecondary institutions do not count as credit toward the learner’s intended academic program of study, effectively meaning that whatever time the learner spends on taking remedial courses is added on to the anticipated length of time during which the learner expected to pay tuition to the postsecondary institution. The learner who would under normal circumstances have paid tuition for four years for an undergraduate degree, may end up paying tuition for five years if she is required to take a full year of remedial coursework. Much like it was once argued that distance education programs had no vested interest in improving completion rates of learners if non-completion meant that tuition could be charged to the same learner over and over again, the impression created in the presence of remedial education programs at postsecondary institutions is that these institutions – increasingly driven by

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<sup>4</sup> Skills associated with learner success in a knowledge-based economy are related to the areas that Visser, J. posits today’s learners should be competent in (pp. xx, this volume).

financial incentives - have little vested interest reducing the demand for remedial education or the amount of time that the learner spends on taking remedial courses.

The impact of remedial education on the purpose and place of the postsecondary institution in the learning landscape goes beyond only economics. The need for remedial education affects the probability that a learner will earn a postsecondary degree (NCES, 2002), and it also affects the major area of study that the learner will concentrate on. Learners who need more than two semesters of remediation are one-sixth as likely to graduate with a baccalaureate degree as learners needing no remedial courses (NCES, 2002). Learners who have been inadequately prepared in secondary-level math will generally be less inclined to pursue postsecondary studies in disciplines where the requirements for math competence are greater (such as the sciences, economics and engineering fields).

## Cultivation of the knowledge worker

*The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning; a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change.*

Carl Rogers, Freedom to Learn, p. 163

On the one hand the purpose of the postsecondary institution has expanded beyond professional training and preparation to encompass the provision of remedial education opportunities. On the other hand, the postsecondary institution has expanded to encompass a more elusive set of competencies: the preparation of the worker for the knowledge-based economy. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines knowledge-based economies as “economies which are directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information” (p.7)<sup>5</sup>. Learning and education take on a different role in such a knowledge-based economy:

Without investments oriented towards both codified and tacit skill development, informational constraints may be a significant factor degrading the allocative efficiency of market economies. Workers will require both formal education and the ability to acquire and apply new theoretical and analytical knowledge; they will increasingly be paid for their codified and tacit knowledge skills rather than for manual work. Education will be the centre of the knowledge-based economy, and learning the tool of individual and organisational advancement. (p. 13-14)

In a world where knowledge, rather than a more tangible production factor, is the key capital asset in an economy, universities and other postsecondary institutions are increasingly expected to focus on the preparation of learners for a future as knowledge workers (AAUP, 2006). Some, such as the Commission

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<sup>5</sup> One point of reflection is that the term “knowledge-based economy” conveys a more narrow scope than is perhaps justified for the concept of such an economy. While in the knowledge-based economy an emphasis is placed on the worker’s ability to produce, distribute and manipulate knowledge and information, there are critical skills and attitudes that underscore the ability to constructively interact with knowledge in this manner.

on the Future of Higher Education argue that postsecondary institutions are inadequately preparing learners for this new environment. In its final report (2006) the Commission notes that “unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism correctly holds, knowledge matters more than ever” (p.vii). One of the reasons for perceptions of failure of the postsecondary system in this regard may be the lack of clarity in the understanding of what, specifically, constitutes a well-prepared knowledge worker (OECD, 2001). In general, however, it appears that workers in a knowledge-based economy are expected to have higher levels of literacy and/or education, and that they are expected to have more advanced skills in terms of teamwork, leadership, problem solving, and continuous learning (OECD, 2001). Postsecondary institutions that have traditionally focused on measuring the attainment of product-oriented and observable discipline-specific knowledge and skills are now challenged to develop teaching and assessment methods that are more in line with the process-oriented competencies that are associated with effective practice in the knowledge-based economy.

The impact of the broadened view on the purpose of the postsecondary sector in cultivating the knowledge worker extends well beyond analyzing the competencies of graduates from postsecondary institutions. Higher education institutions are also being expected to contribute to the development and growth of knowledge economies through increased innovation and research partnerships with the private sector. The growing focus on the knowledge economy is further being interpreted by some as meaning that postsecondary institutions must anticipate a world in which learner-as-consumer education models prevail, demand increases for more advanced levels of higher education, institutions have access to a potentially larger and more distributed target audience for their educational goods and services, and competition among postsecondary educational providers increases.<sup>6</sup> Each of these potential changes emerging from a redefined role of the postsecondary education sector in the living and learning landscape has considerable implications for the learner, and we will explore some of those implications in more detail later in the chapter.

## Changing perceptions of the value of postsecondary education

### From the vantage point of the learner: Higher demand coupled with higher concerns about its worth

We have seen that postsecondary education is becoming an increasingly prevalent “minimum qualification” for initial and sustained employability in the workforce. Enrollment, consequently, in postsecondary institutions continues to grow. According to the U.S. Department of Education,

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<sup>6</sup> To explore this issue further, consider accessing “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education” (2006), a report of the commission appointed by the US Secretary of Education. This report, and its recommendations, exemplifies the increased emphasis on consumer- and market-driven, results-based paradigms for postsecondary education. The report is available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>.

enrollments in U.S. undergraduate education are expected to continue growing throughout the next decade, reaching a new high each year between 2006 and 2015 (NCES, 2006). Similarly, enrollment in graduate and professional education courses has grown 62 percent between 1976 and 2004, and these enrollment increases are expected to continue between 2006 and 2015 (NCES, 2006). The curious thing about the increase in postsecondary enrollments is that while on the one hand it suggests that learners are increasingly demanding the “value-added” of the additional academic training and preparation, on the other hand the increased prevalence of postsecondary training in the general population raises questions about how such additional training uniquely benefits each individual learner. Learners wonder whether their learning experiences, educational quality, and subsequent employment options will compare to those of previous generations (Baker, 2001). This question emerges from an increasing concern that, while the quality of education may still be high, the possibility of realizing a postsecondary education degree is shared by a greater percentage of the population than in previous years, and subsequently one might argue that “a university degree is no longer as distinctive as it once was” (p. 2).

For the learner, then, there is the concern that the postsecondary degree is the new high school degree, because postsecondary degrees are increasingly considered a requirement rather than an asset for employment, and because an ever greater percentage of the adult population has completed some postsecondary studies. However, the diminishing “uniqueness” of a postsecondary degree is only one dimension of the concern that today’s learners should have about the worth of postsecondary education. With the increased enrollment in postsecondary institutions, and the increased emphasis on postsecondary education as a competitive economic sector, resources are reduced and learners are less likely to find within their learning experience the unique dimensions that allow each learner to potentially graduate with a qualitatively different set of insights and experiences to bring into the economic sector. The prevalence of a mass education metaphor in postsecondary education has not only yielded a cattle-herding mentality for the processes and procedures of shuttling a learner through the levels of the education system; it has also infected the very way in which the learner interacts with learning in the formal context. One might argue that it is this mentality, rather than the overbearing emphasis on somewhat outdated notions of learning, that underscores the concerns about the worth of a postsecondary education.

### **From the vantage point of employers: Challenges to the ability of the postsecondary education sector’s ability to prepare learners for the world of work**

There is growing concern that aspects of the postsecondary education system are failing to prepare learners for effectiveness in the world of today and tomorrow. For example, a recent report surveying some 430 human resource professionals on employer’s views of the readiness of high school, two-year college, and four-year college graduates who are new entrants into the United States workforce. In the *Are they really ready to work?* report, a very bleak picture emerges for the readiness of high school graduates entering the workforce (over one-half of respondents rate high school graduates as deficient in core skills such as oral/written communication, critical thinking/problem solving, and work

ethic/professionalism). However, the report's findings are perhaps most alarming in that additional years of postsecondary education do not yield the magnitude of improvement that one might expect in key skills for successful integration into the workforce (Cassner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006). Some highlights from the data relating to employers' assessments of the preparedness of new workforce entrants with degrees from *two-year colleges*:

- Almost half of the survey respondents rated them as deficient in written communication skills.
- One-quarter of respondents rated them as deficient in lifelong learning/self direction and creativity/innovation.
- Over 20 percent of respondents rated them as deficient in critical thinking/problem solving, oral communications, and ethics/social responsibility.

The report's authors further observe that; “[f]or two-year college-educated entrants, one “very important” applied skill—Information Technology Application—appears on the Excellence List while seven skills appear on the Deficiency List” (Cassner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006, p. 10).

Survey results for employers' assessments of the preparedness of new workforce entrants with degrees from *four-year colleges* were only marginally more optimistic (Cassner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006):

- Around one-quarter of respondents rated them as deficient in writing skills and leadership skills.
- Only about one-quarter of respondents rated them as demonstrating excellence in lifelong learning/self-direction, reading comprehension, critical thinking/problem solving, teamwork/collaboration, and creativity/innovation.

While one can argue that postsecondary education is not simply pursued for the purpose of fitting a predetermined professional mold, the reality is also that few individuals pursue a postsecondary education purely for personal enrichment purposes. In the broader learning-living landscape, it appears that postsecondary institutions are losing ground in their efforts to position themselves so that their students develop the competencies needed to be effective in the changing world of work. More troubling, however, is that they may even be losing ground in preparing learners for even the most elemental desired outcomes for adult education, such as writing and problem solving. If employers are expressing profound concerns about the ability of postsecondary programs to adequately prepare prospective employees in basic skills such as writing and essential applied skills such as leadership and lifelong learning, it is the learner who ultimately is left dealing with the consequences of this systemic failure.

Poor alignment between postsecondary education and workforce education is something that has plagued the education system for some time (Conley, D., 2005). However, it appears that the distance between the classroom and the “real-world” work situation is getting more pronounced rather than less pronounced, to the extent that in many of the fastest changing fields, postsecondary education qualifications may be becoming an afterthought, if not a liability. The value of ongoing education in

recognized by most entities in the economic sector (in other words, employers do appear to believe that someone with postsecondary education will have developed more competencies needed for success in the workforce than someone who enters into the workforce with only a secondary education). However, the alignment of specialized postsecondary academic curricula with the world of work in that area of specialization is increasingly challenged. Many of the most successful high-tech companies in Silicon Valley, for example, have gone to great lengths to set up recruitment approaches that directly speak to the lack of estimation of a postsecondary education *per se* in terms of enhancing the appreciation for a prospective employee.<sup>7</sup>

Stewart, the founder of a management consulting firm employing some 600 people, recently wrote a revealing piece in *The Atlantic Monthly*, essentially laying out his case for why he hires graduates from Philosophy programs as opposed to MBA-degree holders in his company. In *The Management Myth* (2006), Stewart argues that cornerstone skills for effective management practices are not effectively taught in classroom MBA curricula, and that MBA curricula instead invoke in their students an unhealthy obsession with faddish approaches and an overreliance on heuristics for management. Having worked in management without holding an MBA himself, Stewart (2006) summarizes his impression of the MBA experience as “taking two years out of your life and going deeply into debt, all for the sake of learning how to keep a straight face while using phrases like ‘out-of-the-box-thinking,’ ‘win-win situation,’ and ‘core competencies’” (p. 1). In Stewart’s (2006) assessment, business school provides little in the way of relevant academic training for business work, while placing an undue emphasis in a cult-like following of the *movements du jour*. Likewise, he notes that business school curricula, with their stated emphasis on the development of problem solving skills, in fact fail to teach that the problem solving frameworks presented to learners are simply heuristics; “they can lead you to solutions, but they cannot make you think” (p. 8).

## Changing operational aspects of the postsecondary education sector

It is fair to assume that the changing views of the purpose and value of postsecondary education as discussed above will have a trickle-down effect on a myriad of the more operational aspects of the institutions in the postsecondary education sector. Teaching, instructional delivery, student support and many other facets of day-to-day interaction between the learner and the postsecondary institutions are all undergoing significant change. These changes are explored briefly in this section.

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<sup>7</sup> Google used an innovative strategy for recruitment of engineers, posting a complex mathematical equation on a billboard in silicon valley. Olsen (2006), explains: “In a kind of geek ‘Jeopardy,’ the billboard read: ‘{first 10-digit prime found in consecutive digits e}.com.’ The answer, 7427466391.com, would lead a puzzle-sleuth to a Web page with yet another equation to solve, with still no sign the game was hosted by Google. (...) Mastering that equation would lead someone to a page on Google Labs, the company’s research and development department, which reads: ‘One thing we learned while building Google is that it’s easier to find what you’re looking for if it comes looking for you. What we’re looking for are the best engineers in the world. And here you are.’”(para. 4-5)

## Commercialization and commoditization

Few people would contest the observation that economic and commercial forces play an increasingly important role in virtually every facet of the postsecondary education system. In a report commissioned by the US Secretary of Education, there is ample evidence the higher education environment being described as a *consumer-driven environment*, a *mature enterprise*, *risk-averse*, and at-risk of losing *market-share* (A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education, 2006). The commercialization of postsecondary education defines some aspects of the relationship between the postsecondary institution and the learner. Postsecondary institutions tend to characterize the learner in terms of the monetary value of that learner's participation in the system. Learners are inclined to characterize the postsecondary institution's services as commodities that have been purchased, whereby the learner is increasingly placed in the role of being a consumer whose financial investments allow him/her to leverage a certain amount of influence over the manner in which the purchased service is delivered. The relationship between the corporate sector and postsecondary education sector is evolving, too, with a greater number and diversity of vendors involved in defining the *what* and *how* of providing learning opportunities. Instructional and curricular design decisions, such as the delivery of instruction through distance education methodologies, are often driven by economic and marketing considerations rather than philosophical inclinations. Today's learner is impacted by this phenomenon not only in terms of concrete ways in which commercial products enter into the learner's instructional experience (such as the prevalence of one-size-fits-all Learning Management Systems), but also in terms of the things which, as a result of an increased emphasis on commercialization, are rapidly disappearing from the postsecondary learning landscape (such as idiosyncratic instructional tactics and deep-rather-than-broad explorations of instructional topics; things that are not easily justified as falling under the umbrella of efficient, results-driven, consumer-friendly strategies).

Commercialization goes hand-in-hand with commoditization. Landon, reviewing Neil Postman's "Building a Bridge to the 18th Century" succinctly summarizes the commercialization-commoditization link in education (in this case in the education of children); Children are no longer viewed as adults in the making, but rather as consumers, as a "market" to be exploited for commercial gain. And public education has lost an animating sense of purpose, oriented as it is more toward the form than the substance of instruction. Noble (1998), in an impassioned piece about the automation of higher education, argues that decision-making for instructional practices in postsecondary classrooms has transferred from the faculty-student level to the institutional level, driven mostly by a significantly increased emphasis on commoditization and commercialization of teaching. Painting a rather bleak picture, Noble (1998) argues that - since the 1970s - higher education has shifted toward a highly commoditized conception of the research function of universities, with detrimental consequences for the teaching function: "Class sizes swelled, teaching staffs and instructional resources were reduced, salaries were frozen, and curricular offering were reduced to the bone" (para.10). Responding to the crisis that has ensued, instruction was commoditized: "teachers as labor are drawn into a production process designed for the efficient creation of instructional commodities, and hence become subject to

all the pressures that have befallen production workers in other industries undergoing rapid technological transformation from above” (para. 21). The movement toward the commoditization of higher education instruction has, according to Noble (1998) continued to gain ground with the growth of the digital revolution and the distance learning movement, generating questions for today’s postsecondary learners about issues such as “costs, coercion, privacy, equity, and the quality of education” (para. 21).

### Adoption of a mass education metaphor

It is interesting to note that many of the countries of the developed world are – in synchronicity – lamenting the loss of their competitive edge relative to other countries in the developed world. Thus the European Union rings the alarm bells regarding the lowered placement of their postsecondary education relative to the United States, while the United States expresses their concerns regarding the way in which they are losing ground relative to European countries<sup>8</sup>. To the extent that some European countries, however, are able to make the case that their higher education sector has fallen short in years gone by, this can in part be attributed to the prevalence of a mass education metaphor in European postsecondary education. Trow (2000) notes in the European context:

The response of governments was to demand greater productivity. The rationalization of university life and management, the pressures for “efficiency” in operation and outcome, the consequent loss of “slack” resources, the imposition of the criteria and language of business and industry, all threaten the autonomy of the university and the capacity of its scholars and scientists to pursue long-term studies that do not promise short-term results. (p. 1)

Indeed, postsecondary education systems today are characteristically different from those of the past in terms of the sheer volume of individuals participating in them. Baker (2001), aptly describes this difference when stating “the university experience has gone from a five-star, luxury design to a mass-transit economy model” (p.2). The mass education metaphor, because it strikes at the fundamental aspects of the definition of education, permeates many aspects of the learner’s experience. Earlier in this chapter we explored the implications of increased enrollment on the perceptions of value of higher education. The mass education metaphor, however, also affects more mundane but persistent aspects of the learning experiences of today’s learners. As enrollments increase, individualized interaction between learners and professors is becoming more rare. Indeed, the amount of in-depth interaction between professors and learners decreases significantly, with larger portions of the course-specific communication being mediated through teaching assistants or pre-packaged instructional communications. An almost single-minded focus on the formulaic fulfillment of academic requirements fills the air in educational institutions. Professors are responsible for teaching a greater number of courses or course sections each semester, resulting in less out-of-class time being available for things

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<sup>8</sup> The European Union’s perspective is represented in Lambert and Butler’s (2006) *The Future of European Universities: Renaissance or Decay?* While the US perspective is found in the Department of Education Commission on the Future of Higher Education’s (2006) “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education”.

such as instructional planning and generating in-depth feedback to learner's assignments. A view of postsecondary education as focusing on quantity over quality has also shaped the rationales behind the infusion of technology into the learning experience. The National Education Association (NEA) notes that "Technology is seen by some as the panacea for budgets cuts: some see visions of hundreds of students sitting in front of monitors, with talking heads providing cheap, mass education" (para 1, n.d.)

### Growing diversity in educational service providers

Perhaps one of the most significant factors affecting today's postsecondary learning landscape is the increase in the sheer number *and* type of educational providers and businesses seeking to reach – and cultivate – adult audiences for their programs and services. As a result of growth, learners are offered a potentially larger number of formal venues for learning. In addition, learners may also expect that the type of learning experiences they are offered is changing.

Historically, learners' options for postsecondary education were generally restricted to colleges/universities and vocational/technical programs. Unless the learner was willing to undertake their postsecondary education through correspondence instruction, his or her access to educational providers was constrained by time, space, and geography. These constraints are rapidly falling away for many of today's postsecondary learners, with the growth and proliferation of ever greater numbers of more diverse postsecondary education providers, such as corporate universities, virtual colleges and universities, educational brokers, and consortia of postsecondary education providers (Middlehurst, 2003).

To contemplate the effect of this phenomenon on the postsecondary learning landscape, consider the phenomenon of the *corporate university*. Christensen et al. (2003), note that there are some 2000 corporate universities in the United States (p.20), and that these target learners who "are interested in achieving some sort of outcome but can't because of lack of money or skills" (p. 21). McDonald's Hamburger University alone trains 700,000 people per year (Marquardt and Kearsley, 1999). These educational providers generally specialize in providing learning opportunities tailored to the industry sector, employee needs, and corporate culture of the company that they serve. Corporate universities have thrived in recent years because they do not seek to compete with traditional academic programs (such as university degree programs), but instead seek to serve the many employees who would not pursue a formal program but who desire access to the types of lessons normally taught in traditional academic programs. Corporate Universities generally do not seek accreditation to award formal terminal qualifications such as university-equivalent degrees (Middlehurst, 2003). There are two obvious ways in which corporate universities have changed the postsecondary learning landscape: (1) they serve an audience that otherwise would have been unlikely to participate in additional postsecondary education, and (2) they have created a niche within the broader learning landscape by offering curricula that seek to forge clear and immediate links between classroom learning and employment-based application.

The proliferation of types of corporate universities is but one small instance of the increase in educational service providers. In a UNESCO-funded report on borderless higher education, Middlehurst (2003) outlines the following commercial sector providers in higher education: private and for-profit providers (such as the University of Phoenix); media and publishing businesses (such as Pearson Education and Thomson Learning); educational services and brokers (such as Learndirect and Western Governors University), and; corporate universities (such as McDonald's Hamburger University). The increase in the number and diversity of educational providers involved in postsecondary education affects learners in a multitude of different ways. Those espouse the merits of commercial view of education expect that increased competition and commercial involvement in the educational marketplace will encourage all educational providers - including the traditional postsecondary education institutions – to improve the quality and effectiveness of their educational services. However, this argument is often made from the vantage point of the bottom line for the educational provider, rather than from the vantage point of the benefit to the learner and the society to which the learner will contribute. As postsecondary education providers are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate viability and profitability to their financial underwriters (be those corporate investors or governmental entities), they are more inclined to use cost-saving measures whose educational impact is – at best - unclear. The effect of this on public higher education institutions in the U.S. has been particularly disheartening to witness. There is a dramatic increase in the proportion of courses being delivered by adjunct instructors and graduate assistants (neither of whom are typically offered either job security or health insurance and other employment benefits) to deliver courses. Particularly at the undergraduate level, the acquisition of prefabricated, standardized curricula for core courses is becoming increasingly prevalent, leaving faculty members unable to select the scope or instructional tactics that would allow him or her to make the course most dynamic and engaging for the learner.

### **Increased prevalence of distance and distributed modalities for instructional delivery**

The attributes of today's learners actively involved in the postsecondary education formal education component of the learning landscape are arguably quite different from those of years gone by. This is illustrated in the statistics regarding learning attributes in the UK, where almost one-fifth of freshman students are classified as "mature students", and over 25% of all postsecondary education students are enrolled on a part-time basis (Baker, 2001). In the context of the United States, 40 percent of students in postsecondary institutions today are enrolled on a part-time basis, and the same percentage of students are aged 25 or older. In combination with the increased commercialization of postsecondary education, the changes in the demographics of learners has been a major contributory factor in the movement toward more flexible course and degree programs. Indeed, according to Stokes (2006) some seven percent of higher education learners are currently enrolled in online certificate and degree programs, and it is expected that by 2007 some 1.8 million students in the United States will be enrolled in fully-online programs.

Given the changing attributes and needs of learners in today's postsecondary education landscape, distance and distributed delivery of instruction has become increasingly popular at many institutions. Thus, the large-scale adoption of distance and distributed learning modalities is perhaps one of the most immediately obvious – and most significantly impacting – features of the changing learning landscape in this sector. Motivated by advancements in the enabling technologies, pressures to access and serve a growing student body, and cost and space constraints, postsecondary institutions have undertaken an unprecedented, large-scale adoption of networked technologies in the learning environment. Indeed, the statistics in relation to distance education in postsecondary education speak to a system in flux. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics' (NCES) Condition of Education 2006 report, over 60 percent of two- and four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States offered distance learning courses during the 2004-5 academic year (p. 96). Interestingly, however, while the majority of these institutions have offered distance learning courses, the distance learning courses are being taught by a significant minority of faculty – some eight percent of full-time faculty and six percent of part-time faculty taught via distance education in 2003 (NCES, 2006). In addition, the NCES (2006) report indicates that; “Among full-and part-time staff, those who did not teach distance education carried a lighter course load than their peers who taught distance education” (p.96). A picture of a turbulent landscape emerges as a result of the simultaneous pervasive integration of distance education into the postsecondary institutions, the surprisingly small proportion of faculty within institutions delivering courses via distance learning, and the inequitable distribution of teaching loads between faculty who are and aren't teaching via distance education.

Distance and distributed learning has been adopted *en masse* at many institutions explicitly because of the profit gains that were believed to be associated with being able to reduce overhead operation costs, increase the number of students per section, and with indefinitely reassigning and reusing a given course once it's content had been developed for efficient web-based delivery. And, while students in public postsecondary program witness this array of strategies being tested out for financial viability, tuition rates and auxiliary fees have continued to increase well above the rate of inflation.

### Reduced funding

The learning landscape, one might argue, is also changing as a result of changes in the funding of postsecondary education. According to the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession (2005-6), there are troubling developments on the front of academia as a profession, and one would logically assume that, given the interdependent relationship between teaching and learning, the postsecondary education learner's place in the formal learning landscape will be affected by this dynamic situation in the university professoriate. The AAUP notes that, while society places increasing pressure on postsecondary education to prepare students for success in the knowledge-based economy (p. 25), the shift toward larger numbers of part-time teaching faculty (p. 32) and toward fewer tenure-earning faculty lines (p.21) (among other things) directly threatens the quality of US postsecondary education. Indeed, the AAUP reports that 46% of faculty jobs are on a part-time basis (p.32), and that over half of new full-time faculty appointments are not tenure-

earning positions. In the UK, one way we might look at the funding issue is in terms of public per student spending on postsecondary education. An article in the BBC News World Edition reports that public per student spending at the beginning of the 1990's was over £7500, but had dropped to around £4800 a decade later (Baker, 2001), representing a decrease of more than one third. In Canada, funding for public higher education institutions was decreased by thirty percent (Davenport, 2000).

## Implications for the learner

*A learned man came to me once.  
He said, "I know the way, -- come."  
And I was overjoyed at this.  
Together we hastened.  
Soon, too soon, were we  
Where my eyes were useless,  
And I knew not the ways of my feet.  
I clung to the hand of my friend;  
But at last he cried, "I am lost."  
Stephen Crane, 1905*

In the previous sections of this chapter I have identified and discussed those aspects of the changing postsecondary education sector that I believe have the most immediate impact on the learner in today's learning landscape. In so doing, I have considered changing perspectives and approaches in relation to the purpose, value, and operations of postsecondary institutions. While each of these changes yields specific implications for the learner, the sum-total of the changes also yields a broader set of recommendations and implications for learners. I have chosen to write this section focusing on the latter set of considerations.

**Reconciling changing perceptions of individuals and employers in relation to the value of higher education.** Learners seeking to enter into today's economy should recognize at once that while a postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important, mindlessly going through the motions of education at that level will significantly limit the potential economic value of the time and resources invested by the learner. I mention this particularly given the potential inconsistency between public opinion about the economic value of advanced degrees in the knowledge economy, and the data in relation to entry level of skills for jobs in this new economy. An article in Canada's Financial Post illustrates this discrepancy, observing; "The public is beginning to realize a technical education at a college or vocational school is considerably more valuable than more university degrees. ... a recent poll commissioned by the Ontario government surprised many ... Ontario residents overwhelmingly recognized skills and apprenticeships are better than a degree." (Francis, D., 1998). Statistics for Canada, however, appear to contradict the view of Ontario residents. It appears that approximately 70 percent of new jobs created in Canada in the last few years require some form of postsecondary education, and that a full quarter of new jobs created require a university degree.

**Greater expectations are placed on the learner to find intrinsic motivation for mindful engagement in postsecondary education.** Fulfilling preset academic requirements and demonstrating competence on predetermined performance measures alone will assure neither the learner nor the broader society that the learner is prepared to seamlessly apply newfound knowledge, skills, and attitudes to some meaningful endeavor. The crux of the issue faced by learners is that they cannot assume that mindlessly wandering through the maze of academic requirements for any postsecondary learning endeavor constitutes a sufficient level of engagement with learning. In this respect, the excessive focus of all levels of education on standards and formulaic fulfillment of academic requirements has done a tremendous disservice to the learner, the education system, and the broader society. Implied in the often-complex systems for channeling learners through the myriad of academic procedures and requirements is the idea that satisfactory completion of the administrative requirements is in itself the goal for the learner: *“If class assignments are submitted in this sequence, and with that degree of detail, you have achieved the goals of the class”*; *“If you complete these courses, in this sequence and that timeframe, you will be able to graduate and you will be prepared to apply what you have learned in every situation you face”*. Learners are thus encouraged to focus first and foremost on following a series of academic procedures that more often than not have actually been instituted for the sake of efficiency in the administrative oversight of the academic system rather than because of their inherent logic within the learning and development trajectory of the learner. Such approaches likely instill in learners a sense that they are doing their part in the learning process solely by fulfilling requirements, and therefore logically that the fulfillment of the requirements constitutes adequate and appropriate engagement with learning. In today’s dynamic and chaotic world, nothing could of course be further from the truth. Dispelling such misunderstandings is the responsibility of all involved in postsecondary education.

It is becoming evermore important that learners be exposed to a more realistic view that separates the adherence to academic and administrative procedural requirements from more fundamental measures that the learner can use to gauge his or her level of engagement with the learning experience. This involves leveling with learners about how the formal education system works – with all its strengths and weaknesses, and allowing learners to recognize that success in navigating the formal education system does not necessarily constitute success in learning or success in transferring what is learned. In all likelihood, the development of such a realistic view of the parallel roles that the learner plays in fulfilling academic requirements versus capitalizing on the fullness of the learning experience is something that is best achieved well before the learner enters into the postsecondary education context. If learners can develop a more refined view of this distinction from the earliest times of engagement in the formal education process, benefits will be reaped across all sectors of the formal education system. It will instill in learners a sense of appreciation for their potential for autonomy and personal responsibility in all their learning experiences, both formal and informal. It will allow learners to more actively engage in their development as learners and, indeed, as humans. And, it will provide learners with perhaps one of the most critical sets of skills in the world of today and tomorrow: The ability to gauge their personal learning needs and processes.

**Learners have a greater range of options to choose from when considering the kind of institution they wish to attend for postsecondary training; However, making well-informed choices requires learners to develop a sound understanding of the short- and long-term implications of choosing one within the myriad of educational service providers available.** In terms of considering the implications of the increased intersection between commercial sectors and postsecondary institutions, learners are likely to experience both benefits and drawbacks. They are likely to generally be positively served by an increase in the number of venues in which the learner may consider pursuing his or her learning needs and goals. While brick-and-mortar universities and colleges may continue to serve the needs of many learners much of the time, the presence of “additional players” in the postsecondary educational landscape empowers learners to choose alternate educational providers if those providers are likely to be able to meet their needs more efficaciously. However, this changing context for postsecondary education also challenges the learner. For example, in order for learners at the corporate universities to fully take advantage of the learning experiences they are offered, they will have to supplement their corporate university training with additional informal or formal training, if they wish to have their corporate university training not only serve their employer, but also serve their own human development needs. Corporate university curricula obviously do not seek to better prepare the learner to be effective in the workplace for competing corporations, or to develop the “whole” of the learner, unless the development of the “whole” translates into quantifiable value-added for the corporation. Instead, corporate universities seek to place their curricula at the intersection coordinate for that efficiency and effectiveness variables that is most likely to yield immediate gains in on-the-job performance. Interestingly, one of the potentially most enduring effects that the increase in the number and diversity of commercial education providers will have on the learner is perhaps in the destabilization that this is may cause in the postsecondary education sector as a whole. The education sector has often been characterized as remarkably stagnant relative to other sectors of society. With the increase in educational providers, the chances increase that a specific educational entity will not be capable of competing in the new postsecondary context. The impact of this is not limited to those commercial entities seeking to serve the postsecondary institutions. When a company like WebCT is acquired by a major competitor, teachers, learners, and staff at all postsecondary institutions using WebCT are immediately affected. And, in a more extreme case, when one of the for-profit postsecondary institutions is not able to remain financially viable, learners who have earned degrees or certificates from that institution suddenly find themselves in the previously-unfamiliar situation of having careers and credentials that survive beyond the lifespan of the organization that granted them. In light of these changing dynamics, learners entering the postsecondary sector must become evermore informed consumers – not only considering an institution’s reputation, but also factoring in the long term financial viability of the institution and its commercial partners into the their decision-making for where to pursue continued studies.

**Autonomy, resourcefulness, and persistence are competencies essential to success in a rapidly changing world; These are also competencies that learners will be forced to develop expeditiously as they interact with a postsecondary education sector that is in flux.** The self-regulatory demands on the learner in changing learning landscape are considered by many to be considerable. Opportunities for individualized attention and support are diminishing in many postsecondary institutions, instructional modalities are physically distancing the learner from the instructor (USDOE, 1999), faculty salaries are languishing (AAUP, 2006), and the proportion of adjunct professors in the teaching faculty continue to increase (ibid). These factors, far outside of the realm of control of the individual student, change the dynamics in the learning environment and, more broadly, in the educational culture in postsecondary institutions. They also place new demands on the learner in terms of personally investing in the learning process, and in terms of developing an effective self-regulatory and attitudinal disposition when navigating the formalized postsecondary education landscape.

The challenge faced by many learners is that they are confronted with a formal postsecondary education context that likely has little in common with what they were exposed to in their earlier formal training. In other words, with little alignment between today's postsecondary learning environment and the K-12 learning settings that they graduated from. Learners are therefore unlikely to come equipped with the dispositional attributes most likely to yield success in the postsecondary learning landscape. Nor are they likely to know exactly how to go about developing the desired habits of mind for achievement of personal learning goals using formal postsecondary education as vehicle. Self-direction relies on the ability of the learner to learn how to learn (Gallagher, 1994), and self-regulatory skills and meta-learning skills development is intertwined with the recognition of the dialogical nature of learning. Morgan (1993) notes that a philosophy recognizing the learner responsibility and autonomy in the learning process is fundamental to developing "the facility for dialogue" (p.93). Both the role of dialogue, and dialogous learning, are explored in more detail in the next paragraph.

**Learners have less access to in-depth, individualized interaction with a professor, but greater access to rich opportunities for in-depth dialogue and collaboration with peers and relevant people outside the immediate instructional setting.** Combining the impact of increased prevalence of distance and distributed modalities in postsecondary education with the effect of reductions in funding on the frequency and depth of learner-instructor communication, we might also posit that the changing learning landscape makes it more important than ever for learners to develop a constructive disposition toward both asynchronous and synchronous dialogue with peers and individuals outside of the immediate instructional setting. Dialogue – in its many forms – is an integral aspect of learning (Freire, 1976; Morgan, 1993), and effective, meaningful dialogue is essential to the achievement of what Lindemann (1947) referred to as *true* adult education, when he observed that "true adult education is social education" (p.55). Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning, as a social activity, takes place through communication with others. Yet much of the attention to the dialogical nature of education has traditionally been on its application in real-time, face-to-face dialogue between a learner and an instructor. New demands are placed on the learner in the changing learning landscape, and new

methods of dialogous learning have to be assumed; indeed, the medium of communication is considered of central importance to considering the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

According to a survey of distance education at postsecondary institutions conducted by the National Center of Education Statistics (1999), “asynchronous Internet instruction, two-way interactive video, and one-way prerecorded video were used by more institutions than any other distance education technologies” (p.5). Critical to the development of learner competence in social, dialogical learning in today’s learning landscape is therefore the acceptance of non-verbal dialogue as a valid and unique form learning<sup>9</sup>. Ihalainen (1997), cited in Geursen (2000), observes that there is a potential difficulty in “changing existing cultures and long accepted ways of operating” (p.3). However, I contend that the potential benefits of changing such cultures to fully recognize the unique power of written, asynchronous communication in postsecondary education is paramount to helping learners capitalize on this new reality of formal learning. Indeed, Derrida (1967) noted that written communication is not only qualitatively different than verbal communication, but that written communication allows for the expression of thoughts and perceptions in a manner that verbal communication does not.

**Empowerment over, and responsibility for, the learning process position the learner in the postsecondary education sector and the broader learning landscape for sustained growth and success.**

As mentioned earlier, one of the changes in the learning landscape is the greater prevalence of mass models of education as opposed to elite, personalized models of education (Baker, 2001). With the resulting reduction in personalized attention and consideration for individualized educational needs, it appears more important than ever that learner’s in today’s learning landscape develop the skills and habits of mind needed for personal success and for locating support mechanisms outside of only the instructor-student relationship. Succeeding in this is further complicated by the increasing number of university courses and programs where instruction is largely or exclusively offered through distance learning modalities that increase the probability that the learner will be physically separated from both the instructor and fellow students during his or her postsecondary education learning experiences. The sum total of conditions and experiences encountered by the learner in the changing postsecondary setting is unfamiliar to most learners entering into the system from a traditional secondary school setting. This unfamiliarity can threaten to make even the best-intentioned person second guess the extent to which they can function as empowered learners.

In truth, however, perhaps one of the most important and overarching competencies that today’s learners must develop is a sense of empowerment over – and responsibility for – their learning trajectory. In the postsecondary education setting there are particular conditions and challenges that make this important to the learner’s success. However, the postsecondary education sector is far from the only context in which an empowered disposition is essential to success. As an organic phenomenon, every aspect of the learning and living landscape is in a perpetual state of flux. Learners within such an

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<sup>9</sup> de la Teja and Spannaus, pp. xx this volume, explore in more detail the hints provided to learners of non-verbal communication competencies needed for learning.

ecosystem work most harmoniously with their environment if they carefully cultivate a disposition of empowerment and responsibility. And, while the challenges and opportunities facing the learners in today's learning landscape are unique to the specific place in which our societies find themselves, the desire for active, empowered engagement is certainly not something new. Spinoza (1632 – 1677), in his key work on Ethics, introduces the active affects, believing that it is ethically important that a person be active rather than passive. The active affects (active joy and active passion) emphasize a person's "role as total cause of what they do" (LeBuffe, 2006). Borrowing from Spinoza, perhaps one of the most meaningful effects that the postsecondary education sector can have on learners is in emphasizing our role as the total cause of our learning and growth in the learning and living landscapes.

## Questions for Reflection

1. In the *Learning and living landscapes* section of this chapter, reference is made to the impact of the increasing prevalence of ambiguity on learners in today's learning landscape. What are the competencies and habits of mind needed to interact constructively with ever-greater levels of ambiguity? How and where can today's learners best develop the skills for tolerating – or indeed, thriving on – ambiguity?
2. What are some of the key competencies for the knowledge economy? How can these competencies be measured? What, if any, changes are needed in instructional strategies to support the development of competencies for the knowledge economy?
3. The concluding section of this chapter explores the implications of the changing role of postsecondary education for *learners*. However, one can argue that the responsibility for dealing with the postsecondary education's state of flux does not reside only (or even primarily) with the learner. What, then, would be some of the implications for the policy-makers, researchers, and practitioners that shape the postsecondary education today?
4. What are some of the ways in which the postsecondary sector and its institutions can adapt to better prepare learners for the rapidly changing world?
5. Imagine that you have been asked to outline the key areas for further research on the postsecondary education sector's changing place in the living and learning landscape. What, from your perspective, are the important questions to be addressed regarding this topic?

## Further Resources

**Dawson-Tunik, T. L. (2004). "A good education is..." The development of evaluative thought across the life-span. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 130, 4-112.**

*This monograph outlines the process and results of research conducted to answer the question; "How does evaluative reasoning about education change over the course of cognitive development?". In addition, the literature review provides an insightful introduction to the various perspectives on conceptions on education and their evolution over the lifespan. Hunt, J., & Tierney, T. (May 2006).*

**Lambert, R., & Butler, N. (2006). *The Future of European Universities: Renaissance or Decay?* . London: Center for European Reform.**

*An insightful analysis of the state of European higher education. The report begins with; "Europe's universities, taken as a group, are failing to provide the intellectual and creative energy that is required to improve the continent's poor economic performance. Too few of them are international centres of research excellence, attracting the best talent from around the world. Their efforts in both teaching and research are limited by a serious, and in many areas desperate, lack of resources"(p.1). The authors look at country-specific and regional indicators of the troubling condition of higher education in Europe and current reform efforts, and conclude with a series of policy recommendations to address the challenges faced in European postsecondary education.*

**Lagemann, E.C. (2000). *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.**

*This book seeks to elucidate the reasons how the field of education (and specifically educational research) has come to have so little credibility. It offers an insightful analysis of the state of the field of education through the lens of the historical development of methods and paradigms in educational research. A review of the book was published in the Harvard Educational Review, and can be accessed at <http://www.hepg.org/her/booknote/72>.*

**U.S. Department of Education (2006). *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.**

*This is a report of the commission appointed by the US Secretary of Education. It examines the quality of postsecondary education in the United States through the lens of variables such as accessibility, affordability, accountability and quality. The report concludes with the commission's recommendations for improving U.S. higher education.*

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