

PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT

TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR ITS MEETING ON JULY 20, 2005

FIVE YEARS IN PERSPECTIVE AND A LOOK AHEAD

INTRODUCTION

For the past two years – 2003 and 2004 – I have refrained from writing formal annual reports of this kind and restricted myself to communicating with the board orally, speaking to points (in 2003 supported by PowerPoint slides) prepared in advance, but not leaving a recognizable trace to posterity. This was, perhaps, justified by the dynamics of LDI's development. Things were in constant flow and we all seemed happy, as the minutes of the board meetings testify, with progress made and with the course in which things were moving. Now that we have completed five years of formal existence as a legally recognized institution, and some seven years since the idea to create LDI first emerged, time has come for reflection. I will thus focus in this report on why we do what we do, rather than trying to cover an itemized overview of the actual things that happened. Examples will be drawn not just from LDI's performance during the past year but also during previous years.

TRUE TO ITS MISSION

LDI's mission statement specifies that "The Learning Development Institute is a transdisciplinary networked learning community devoted to excellence in the development and study of learning." An important criterion by which to gauge the performance of an organization is to evaluate the extent to which it stays true to its own declared mission. This criterion is

particularly relevant in the case of LDI. Our mission statement clearly expresses what we declare ourselves to be. It features prominently on our website and is frequently used by others as a short description for the Institute. As of the day of writing, a google search for the exact phrase “a transdisciplinary networked learning community devoted to excellence in the development and study of learning” produces a list of more than 800 instances. Interestingly, many of them are in the area of philosophy or linked to the notion of transdisciplinarity.

Key ideas in LDI’s mission statement relate to the Institute’s role in

- *reaching excellence in the development and study of learning*
- its emphasis in doing so on the *building of learning communities through networking* and
- its dedication to *transcending the traditional disciplines*.

Below I shall describe and analyze LDI’s performance against these three criteria.

REACHING EXCELLENCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND STUDY OF LEARNING

Over the two years of its embryonic growth and the subsequent five years of its formal existence, LDI has succeeded identifying key areas of interest in the study and development of human learning that have attracted the attention and collaboration of some of the best minds on the planet. It started in April 1999 with a symposium, collaboratively organized with UNESCO, at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, held in Montreal, Canada, which boldly called in its title for “[Overcoming the Underdevelopment of Learning](#).” The symposium, the preparation for which started a year earlier in 1998, was poorly attended as it took place in the early hours of a cold day at a difficult to locate venue in one of the hotels in Montreal. However, it was widely quoted afterwards.

The abstract of the paper (Visser, 1999) that served as an introduction to the symposium stated:

Learning is an underdeveloped concept. It is increasingly necessary for humans to be able to adapt themselves to continuous and ever faster change and to conceive of the world as a complex environment. School-based learning, in many parts of the world, however, is often still largely based on the assumption that human intervention in the world is linear and that preparation for life is more important than preparation for learning during the lifespan. Fundamental change in the school system, attitudinal change in the actors within the school, and the conceptualization of more comprehensive learning environments of which the school is a part, are some of the urgent requirements.

One of the key references in the above statement is the school. Over the years, LDI has grown beyond that preoccupation with the school, which, in most societies, is seen as a major means to support the learning needs of their citizens and often – at the same time – to ensure their acculturation and socialization into its core values and ways of being. Increasingly, the questions posed by LDI have as a basic assumption that learning takes place in a multiplicity of spaces, according to procedures and conditions that vary widely, school-based learning simply being one of them but not necessarily the ideal modality. In fact, one of the major challenges the LDI community faces is to reestablish the ecological integrity of the entire, highly diverse, learning landscape.

Thus, none of the focus areas of activity identified by LDI makes a specific assumption about any particular learning space as the preferred one. Including the most recent addition, there are now six such areas with the following designations and acronyms:

- [Meaning of Learning \(MOL\)](#)
- [The Scientific Mind \(TSM\)](#)
- [Problem-Oriented Learning \(POL\)](#)
- [Learning to Learn and Think \(LLT\)](#)
- [Attitudinal and Behavioral Change \(ABC\)](#)
- [Learning to Live in Harmony \(LLH\)](#)

With the exception of LLT, which still lags behind, and taking into account the duration of their existence, all other focus areas have satisfactorily developed, in terms of research results obtained, networks created, and dialogue developed around them. In some cases gestation has taken a long time.

A typical example in the latter regard is TSM, which was among the first focus areas identified, almost at the inception of LDI itself. It took until last year before a concrete initiative started to develop and another year of hard work before the Advanced International Colloquium on Building the Scientific Mind – BtSM for short – could take place at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, The Netherlands, in May 2005. The level of its success, relevance, participation, impact and meaning in terms of forward looking strategies can be gleaned from the BtSM Web page at <http://www.learndev.org/ColloquiumBuildingTSM2005.html>. Those who were most closely connected to the organization of the colloquium are so inspired by its success that

enthusiastic discussions are already going on about the next edition of BtSM, now foreseen for 2007 and proposed to focus on the theme “Learning in the Perspective of Complex and Long-Term Change.” The enthusiasm about the colloquium was shared by the participants in general. In the words of one of them: “The BtSM colloquium exposed me to many people representing many organizations that were inspiring while, at the same time, made me realize that I don't know much about how people in one place manage to work with people in another.” Surely, BtSM2005 had a strong international flavor. A full report on the event, including a more extensive selection of comments by participants, is available at <http://www.learndev.org/dl/BtSM2005-FinalReport.pdf>.

In our mission statement we make reference to ‘excellence’ as the criterion to be reached in the development and study of learning. Excellence refers not only to superior quality of performance in what one does; it is also a measure of the extent to which one goes beyond where others are and what others do. I submit that the way LDI’s six different – but interacting – focus areas of activity have been defined, generally transcending the purview of traditional disciplines, gives LDI a unique position, not occupied by any other institution. The claim to excellence seems thus justified from the latter perspective. In addition, spontaneous feedback and requests for collaboration received also indicate that from a quality point of view LDI’s work is equally seen as being of a very high standard.

BUILDING OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH NETWORKING

LDI makes extensive use of information and communication technologies – both well-established and emerging ones – and participates regularly in diverse fora, calling attention to what it sees as important issues and motivating researchers, practitioners, policy makers and change agents to join its efforts. No single means is preferred. Participation in meetings; approaching identified individuals by email; vigorously using the learndev.org Web site; being in touch by telephone; IP-based audio and video conferencing; and travel by different means of transport when necessary are all part of a comprehensive array of modalities through which networking is achieved.

The focus in networking is not necessarily on LDI itself. LDI frequently intervenes as a catalyst, bringing people into contact with each other without involving LDI directly. The focus is on the network and the purposes it serves rather than the concern to serve as a hub or gateway. The expectation is that in the long run this will serve the purposes for which the Institute exists better

and that LDI's role will be recognized in connection with the causes it serves and not because it has planted a flag somewhere. This may sound idealistic, which it probably is, but it is also practical. There is no way that LDI could compete – if it so wanted – with other institutions on the grounds of traditional criteria of imposing its presence. Besides, if the communities to be built are to be learning communities in the true sense of the word, than any focus on imposing oneself in the learning environment would work counter to that objective. Again, feedback received so far indicates that the attitude is useful. No one perceives LDI as a threat, which greatly helps in generating collaboration and willingness to contribute to LDI's causes, often with the material and moral support of institutions affiliated with collaborating individuals. In the absence of institutional support, individuals have often been found to be willing to support their collaboration from personal resources.

In addition to its own initiatives, LDI is also responsive to the initiatives of others. It participates actively in online dialogue – specific discussions and more generic lists to which it gets invited or that it chooses to join – as well as face-to-face encounters and participation in research and development activities under the responsibility of others. Sometimes such environments of dialogue are discipline based, sometimes they are multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary. Select examples are LDI's regular collaboration with organizations, institutions and networks such as:

- the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), in the framework of whose annual conventions several Presidential panel sessions and workshops have been organized;
- the Centre International de Recherches et Études Transdisciplinaires (CIRET), to whose work LDI has contributed in writing and by participating in events such as the Rencontres de Strasbourg;
- the learning societies conference and diversity in learning lists, originated, respectively, by Shikshantar and the Arab Education Forum, resulting also in LDI's participation in the face-to-face meeting on learning societies in Jerash, Jordan, in 2004;
- the BioVision forum, held in Lyon, France, in April 2005;
- the EU's *Science in Society Forum*, held in Brussels, Belgium, in March 2005 (in the process of participating in the forum, LDI joined the Scientific INformAtion for Policy Support in Europe [SINAPSE] network);

- the EU supported K2 Event: *Researching Technologies for Tomorrow's Learning*, held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in September 2004;
- the Santa Fe Institute;
- UNESCO;
- the Food and Agricultural Organization, particularly in the framework of the *Education for Rural People* flagship partnership program, of which LDI is a member;
- the Education Development Center, with which LDI has collaborated in regard of the implementation of projects in Central and West Africa;
- individual scientists such as Roy McWeeny and John Avery with whom LDI got involved, collaboratively with the Pari Center for New Learning in Italy, in efforts to make science learning materials freely available, particularly to users in developing countries, via the [*For the Love of Science*](#) project.

The above is but a short list of networking instances LDI got involved in most recently. Many other such instances could be mentioned. Typically, the crux of the networking links lies in the contact with individuals of flesh and blood rather than those with the institutions mentioned. No formal institutional linkages are therefore being pursued. Nonetheless, institutions do get involved indirectly as they often provide the material and infrastructural support for the collaborating individuals.

A typical feature of LDI's own role within the various networks is its attitude to be critical of the status quo as well as to be critical of those who are critical of the status quo (thus including being self-critical). It is believed that such an attitude is crucial for any institution that wishes to play a constructive role in dealing with most needed change processes in our complex world, if such processes are to have a lasting impact. Nurturing such an attitude requires LDI to continue to develop its capacity to listen.

TRANSCENDING THE TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES

The areas of concern within which LDI operates and the problems it aims at addressing require it to be keenly aware of and in touch with the most advanced achievements of what multiple disciplines that have a bearing on the development of human learning have to offer. On the other hand, many of the problems it addresses equally require it to overcome the limitations imposed by the compartmentalization of knowledge and of the exclusive pursuit of knowledge

within the boundaries of individual disciplines. This entails more than bringing multiple disciplines together (multidisciplinarity) and encouraging disciplines to interact with each other, particularly by applying the approaches developed in one discipline to another one (interdisciplinarity). Over and above the need to approach problems in disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary manners, problems must equally be formulated in ways that elevate them above the level at which disciplines interact with them. Doing so brings in concerns regarding human values and ethics as well as critically reflective insights into the nature of knowing and the assumptions underlying how knowledge is being pursued. A case in point is the report produced by the special interest group that worked within the framework of the recent Building the Scientific Mind colloquium on the issue of "[*HIV/AIDS and the Scientific Mind*](#)."

From a practical and organizational point of view the above considerations mean that it is not sufficient if the communities of learning and practice that emerge from LDI's action are merely made up of scientists and practitioners from different disciplines. It equally means that those individuals must be carefully selected from among those who demonstrate consciousness of problems at levels beyond purely disciplinary concerns. Participation in the debate about transdisciplinarity in various fora, LDI's liaison with the Centre International de Recherches et Études Transdisciplinaires and participation in LDI's work by such individuals as Basarab Nicolescu (starting with the earlier reported event in Montreal) have been important ways to feed our thinking about how to grow into a truly transdisciplinary institution.

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE

For an organization that operates actively on the World Wide Web and whose real presence is virtual, it makes sense to gauge its importance in terms of criteria that relate to that same environment in which it exists. Over several years now, <http://www.learndev.org> has come up quite consistently with a Google toolbar page rank of 6/10, twice dropping to 5/10 for brief periods a long time apart. On an average, the Google toolbar page rank for LDI's Web presence, a measure of its importance and relevance as perceived by other inhabitants and users of the Web, is thus a solid 6/10. The measure is logarithmic (I. Rogers, 2002). It should be interpreted in comparison with, for instance, the 7/10 ranking for large membership organizations such as the [American Educational Research Association](#) or the [Association for Educational Communications and Technology](#) and the 6/10 ranking for a similarly large international membership organization

like the [International Council for Open and Distance Education](#). It is equally relevant to take as a comparison the 7/10 ranking for such very active and broad-based R&D organizations as [EDC](#), [McREL](#), [TERC](#), [WestEd](#), and the [Concord Consortium](#). LDI's page rank is at a par with that of the Web site of [New Horizons for Learning](#) and that of the [Centre International de Recherches et Études Transdisciplinaires](#) (CIRET),¹ both of which have existed much longer than LDI. It now ranks two points above the Web site of LDI's predecessor [Learning Without Frontiers](#) (which is a now no longer developing archived site) and one point above another successor to Learning Without Frontiers, the Web site of [Shikshantar](#). It ranks equally one point above the Web site of the [Culture of Peace Foundation](#),² established around the same time as LDI, by UNESCO's former Director-General Federico Mayor.

One should be prudent not to interpret these numerical indices in a competitive sense. They are but one measure of perceived importance and relevance. As argued, the measure is particularly relevant in the case of an Internet-based networked organization like LDI. However, for other organizations the context in which they operate may have quite different emphases. Besides, the point here is not to rank ourselves in comparison with others, but rather to develop a feel for how users in general perceive LDI's contribution in the context of its peers. I submit that, for an organization that has chosen to explore human learning in areas and ways that are clearly distinct from what other organizations are already engaged in, LDI may look back with satisfaction on its five-year achievement and has also reason to continue to put an effort in enhancing its profile in the eyes of others. The above conclusion is furthermore supported by the frequency with which LDI receives spontaneous inquiries, proposals for collaboration, and requests for intellectual contributions.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE MODEL

The model according to which LDI has so far functioned is believed to be unique. Unlike non-governmental organizations in general, LDI has never sought or received funding to sustain its own existence. It generates income – annually some \$ 15,000 on an average – by providing services and has been able to do everything it does at an average yearly budget of less than

¹ Note that the page rank of 6/10 for CIRET applies to the French language version of the site and should thus be interpreted within the francophone environment; CIRET's English language version has a 4/10 toolbar page ranking.

² The ranking of the Web site of the Fundación Cultura de Paz should be interpreted within the Spanish language environment.

\$ 10,000. The fact that no one's living depends on LDI allows the organization to pursue sustaining itself in an entirely non-competitive manner, focusing on the declared purposes for which it was created.

A prime condition of sustainability for the model of functioning chosen by LDI is the intrinsic motivation and dedication to a cause by those who drive the organization in addition to the availability to such individuals of sufficient alternative means to sustain themselves. Such alternative means can for instance be derived from a regular job in a different context with time left to dedicate oneself to other important issues; independent retirement benefits or other forms of independent wealth; or an already financially assured setting in which someone undertakes a study and, as part of that effort, seeks an opportunity to enhance the study environment by linking it to a relevant sphere of intellectual pursuit in line with the objectives of the study. LDI has benefited from all such opportunities. Typically, those who contribute to its work voluntarily range from students to highly accomplished retired professionals. The question is not if such potentially available work input exists. It is there, and in some cases abundantly so. The more important question relates to how it can be mobilized for a desired purpose. People who are free to choose will dedicate their voluntary effort to options of their choice, selecting one opportunity over the other.

Several factors are believed to have worked in favor of LDI's model of sustainable mobilization of voluntary efforts.

1. LDI has actively positioned itself in relevant professional circles, providing it with visibility and credibility.
2. LDI has actively published its results and publicized its efforts via alternative media, such as books, journals, the printed press in general, radio, TV, and multiple Internet-based fora, including its own Web site. While doing so, it has selectively chosen the channels through which it communicated, keeping in mind the size of the audience reached and the perceived relevance and reliability of a particular channel.
3. LDI has actively responded to requests for keynotes, invited papers, workshops and the like in contexts that could be expected to enhance its visibility and to contribute to its perceived relevance by association with others, perceived to be relevant by LDI.
4. LDI has created a small network of select Fellows and other associates of outstanding achievement in fields relevant to LDI's work among individuals whose ages and levels of

accomplishment vary widely. Their presence often serves as an attractor to others who seek to join.

5. LDI has stayed keenly attuned to emerging technological developments and has been an early adopter³ of them, particularly as regards the broad variety of IP-based technologies. It is no exaggeration to state that it would have been impossible for LDI to become what it presently is had it not been possible to take advantage of these technological developments. Besides the opportunities such technologies afforded for effective communication, it is at least as important that they were available at an extremely low cost.

FIVE YEARS AND BEYOND: OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF LDI

Symbiosis⁴ and catalysis⁵ have been the mainstay of LDI's work since the organization started its activities. It sets LDI – and a small number of like-minded organizations – apart from the large majority of organizational entities (whether for profit or not for profit), who, independently of what their mission statement may specify, also represent the understandable interest of those who work in and for them to have a stable job. No one's livelihood depends in an immediate sense on LDI's continued existence. The organization can thus be genuine in its declaration that it exists for a purpose and has no intention to survive that purpose. In considering options for future growth of the organization, it is thus important to retain LDI's unique position as a symbiotic and catalytic entity.

As the analysis of the past five years presented above has shown, preserving those key elements of LDI's existence is essential to its mission. It is also essential to retaining the level of autonomy that has thus far allowed LDI to address the non-mainstream issues to which it dedicates itself. In other words, this is what has allowed LDI to retain its excellence in the sense of going beyond where others are.

The attitude advocated above has obvious financial implications. It would be counter to LDI's mission if the organization were forced to attribute priority to issues of its own institutional survival in terms of fulfilling financial needs. The five-year history of LDI as a legally established

³ In the sense of E. M. Rogers's (1995) Diffusion of Innovations model

⁴ Symbiosis can be described as "an association between different organisms that leads to a reciprocal enhancement of their ability to survive" (e.g. Lee, Severin, Yokobayashi, & Ghadiri, 1997).

⁵ Catalysis is the process of lowering the required activation energy for a (bio)chemical reaction, leaving the catalyst itself unchanged. A catalyst can thus speed up a specific process. Catalysis can bring about change in situations that

organization provides sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that it can sustain its growth at the pace at which it has so far developed. This provides LDI with a level of comfort that allows it to choose between options that currently present themselves.

The thematic focus areas have developed themselves – thanks also to the ongoing dialogue that LDI has stimulated and facilitated over the years – to the extent that research questions and development options start emerging that call to be addressed. Considering the transdisciplinary nature of most of these research questions and development options it is unlikely that more traditional organizations will take them on. Thus, LDI starts finding itself in a position that it is morally obliged to follow through on the results of its work and, in addition to being catalytic, also take on well-proportioned active leadership positions in carefully selected areas. Thus, the following two options lie ahead:

1. LDI can continue to exist at its current level of intervention. For the foreseeable future societal conditions are likely to remain what they are, not becoming significantly worse and probably not much better either. Under such conditions it should remain possible for any organization that has a worthy cause and is willing to serve that cause in a transparent manner to mobilize the voluntary effort that has so far been responsible for LDI's growth in the absence of external financing. It would be perfectly justified to follow such a course of 'no change.' If that position were chosen, LDI should be expected to retain its leadership position in the areas in which it is currently active. It will likely develop additional areas as well and stand a good chance to develop a similar level of leadership in them. However, it will not itself become a lead player in following through on the questions that emerge from its action.
2. Alternatively, and in addition to the option presented above, LDI could take advantage of its current achievements and position of comfort and use it as a springboard and fallback position from which it can carefully start exploring limited interventions beyond its current level of existence. Such limited interventions, such as small scale R&D projects, might involve accepting a level of financial commitment for which one or more officers of the Institute would shoulder the responsibility on a part-time basis and against a remuneration concomitant with the size of the commitment and the tasks involved. Basically, such

are otherwise entirely stable, leaving the catalyst intact to continue to perform a similar role elsewhere (e.g. Watson, Hopkins, Roberts, Steitz, & Weiner, 1987).

initiatives could be developed on a case-by-case basis by interested officers, using LDI as an umbrella for their initiatives and as an institutional framework for networking. As argued, should this second course of action be followed, then great care should be taken that such arrangements should not start interfering with LDI's essential role as a symbiotic and catalytic entity. Moreover, the nature of such small interventions, which would be developed in addition to the course of action referred to under Item 1 above, should naturally support LDI's mission and vision.

The recognition LDI has gained during the past five years should potentially allow it to pursue the above mentioned second course of action. I recommend to the board that during the next five years we retain our focus on symbiosis and catalysis while at the same time exploring opportunities for active leadership in areas of collaborative R&D that are directly related to LDI's transdisciplinary foci of concern, acquiring funding as necessary for their implementation.

Eyragues, France, July 12, 2005.

Jan Visser
President

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