

Subject: Learning after September 11, 2001

September 21, 2001

### **Invitation to participate in collaborative reflection**

Dear Colleague,

Please be kind enough to acknowledge receipt of this message, even if you decide you will not, for whatever reason, be part of the collaborative effort proposed hereafter.

I am writing to you after discerning consultation during the past week with the following three persons: Leon Lederman (Resident Scholar, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, Aurora, IL, and Director Emeritus, Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory [Nobel Laureate in Physics, 1988]); Federico Mayor (President of the Foundation for a Culture of Peace, Madrid, Spain, and former Director General of UNESCO); and Gavriel Salomon (Director of the Center for Advanced Studies and Co-director of the Center for Research on Peace Education, University of Haifa, Israel). All three of them have been associated with the work undertaken since 1999 by the Learning Development Institute (LDI; <http://www.learndev.org>). I am LDI President, Jan Visser. The four of us are committed to what I will respectfully propose to you in what follows.

The events of September 11, 2001, have shocked the world. Yet, it was not the first time that human ingenuity was used to cause harm to humanity. As one of us observed during the above consultation, the September 11 events should crystallize human conscience as other events, throughout human history, could have. The horrendous acts we have all been able to witness were not the uncontrolled spontaneous explosion of emotion on the part of some. They were perpetrated by educated people who had used their capabilities to think and to solve problems in the careful and ingenious preparation and planning of a terrible act with tragic consequences. While the group that was involved in carrying out the act and those who might ideologically have supported it could be small, the simple reality of our time is that small groups of people and even single individuals can wreak immense havoc with global consequences.

It seems justified to ask ourselves questions about what human beings do with their brain and what we together do, as communities and societies, to create the conditions for the proper management and self-management of that faculty. The question thus comes up if such events as the ones we witnessed should prompt us to reflect on what it means to learn. Has our focus on learning been too narrow? Have we overly focused on learning for the purpose of acquiring skills and mastering knowledge, having in mind narrowly defined performance goals, without paying sufficient attention to developing the perhaps more important faculty to reflect on our behavior while we perform the things we have prepared ourselves for? Have we forgotten that learning is not only what we do in school or other instructional settings, but that it is a lifelong disposition manifested in a wide

variety of contexts? Have we failed to see that learning is not a mere event within the individual brain, but that it also has to do, perhaps even primarily, with what happens between human beings, or between human beings and their ever changing environment? In short, aren't our visions of learning blocking our sight of what is really at stake, as it relates to the full complexity of human consciousness, the dynamics of our group behavior, emotions, love...hate. If learning is important, what actually is it and, as we create the conditions in our world to make learning happen, what should we attend to? These are but a few questions among the many that can be asked.

During our consultation we felt that it is worth asking such questions and, while exploring them, raise other questions in the process. We also felt that we should become more concerned with our puzzlement than driven by what we already know about learning in advancing the cause of its development.

*If you share our feelings, we should like to invite you to contribute to a process of collaborative reflection. We thus invite you to contribute a brief (one to two pages) thought piece on the following question: "What directions do we see for the development of human learning in the light of the events of September 11, 2001, and similar atrocities throughout the history of humankind?" In the process of addressing that question, we suggest that you particularly also try to clarify the important things we don't know about learning and that appear to be important challenges. Please send your contribution (in English, French, Portuguese or Spanish) to [jvisser@learndev.org](mailto:jvisser@learndev.org), specifying "Learning after September 11, 2001" in the subject field of your message.*

Contributions received will be posted, as they come in, on the Web site of the Learning Development Institute (<http://www.learndev.org>) as part of the discussion area on "Learning after September 11, 2001." This area can be accessed by clicking on the relevant item on the home page. Contributions will initially be posted in their original language. We shall make every effort to translate them into English as soon as possible thereafter.

*Kindly let us know by responding to this email*

- a. if you will participate (please also let us know if you will not)*
- b. when we could expect to receive your input*
- c. who else you suggest we should invite to take part in this dialogue.*

For your information, you find in Annex 1 an initial, alphabetically organized, list of people to whom the current invitation is being distributed. **[Not included in this PDF file.]**

Sincerely,

Jan Visser  
President, Learning Development Institute