In Search of the Meaning of Learning

Not your usual session

The question was: 'What is learning?' The occasion: the opening day of an exciting AECT Convention in Long Beach, CA. Some 30 people from different parts of the world, including Europe, Latin America and North America, chose to attend the conceptual development workshop on *In Search of the Meaning of Learning: A Social Process of Raising Questions and Creating Meanings*. The facilitator team of five had an equally international flavor. Its members came from three different continents.

Unlike most of the other sessions during the Convention, this was a two-hour no-presentation event requiring everyone to be active right from the beginning, if not already before that. In fact, for quite a number of the participants, the work had started several weeks earlier as they provided solicited inputs – either academic papers or brief thought-provoking statements and urgent questions, or sometimes both – for a website set up in preparation of the Long Beach event. The website also benefited from the inputs of some contributors who could not be in Long Beach, but who liked the idea of the workshop. The website in question, http://www.learndev.org, and more specifically the segment of it that is dedicated to the Meaning of Learning (MOL) project (http://www.learndev.org/MoL.html), forms the basis for a longer-term research effort to clarify what it actually means to be learning. In other words, we try to find answers to such questions as: What direction does learning give to our lives? What is its importance, its relevance for us? Why do we do it? When do we do it? What is it that makes us do it? What do we actually do when we learn? And, of course, are these the questions that should be asked when we search for the meaning of learning?

Why ask the obvious?

It may seem superfluous to ask the above questions. It's like everyone knows the answers already and there should be no reason to explore the issue in greater depth. For most people, when they talk about learning, they do so on the basis of the tacit assumption that learning is the consequence of instruction. This certainly is the driving force behind the idea of instructional design. By designing instruction adequately, one is able to determine to a considerable degree the learning that members of the target audience will engage in and the results they will obtain. To the extent that learning is indeed the consequence of instruction, our knowledge of its systematic design has yielded great benefit. The success of the instructional design field has thus greatly contributed to more effective and more efficient learning. However, success has its downside. The more we have become convinced of the connection between well-designed instruction and its

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effect on learning, the more we seem to have lost sight of the multifaceted nature of learning. Much of what we learn is not the result of systematic instruction and for many people some of the most important things they have learned are unrelated to purposefully designed instruction. Paradoxically, our comprehensive vision of what it means to be learning has suffered from the success of effective instructional design.

So, what's the problem?

Learning is crucial for our capacity as human beings to interact, individually and collectively, with change and to do so in a constructive manner. It is this intimate link between learning and responsiveness to change that compels us to take a serious look at the meaning of learning at this specific juncture in time. Why now? The following two reasons seem to stand out.

We have reached the stage where we are getting confronted with the limits of our planet and its resources. We have managed to double the human population from three billion to six billion in less than 40 years, an extremely short time span considering the millions of years of hominid development it took to reach the first three billion. Constructive interaction with change, and thus learning, has all of a sudden become essential for the survival not only of us as a species but also for other life forms on the planet.

Physicist Abraham Pais observes in his 1997 autobiography *A Tale of Two Continents: A Physicist's Life in a Turbulent World* that the pace at which things around us change is now faster than the period typically required for the leadership of one human generation to pass on to the next one. This unique circumstance alters fundamentally the perspective, so prominently represented by the idea of schooling, that we learn in the first place to prepare ourselves for the remainder of our lives. The schooling tradition has been able to cope very well with the much slower rate of change in the past. Each generation would simply prepare the conditions of schooling for the next one. Whatever change was required, could thus be managed at the pace at which different human generations replace each other. No longer so. Typically, we must now adapt to fundamental change within our lifespan and do so in often-dramatic ways. The notion of learning as preparation for life has become obsolete, except in one sense: The best preparation for life is to learn to learn and to learn to unlearn as early as possible and to keep perfecting ourselves at it.

What motivated the event

The Long Beach workshop was prompted by the above concerns. These concerns were reinforced by the first author's experience as Director of the Learning Without Frontiers area of work in UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. A reflection of that work, which has been a team effort all along, involving people from both inside and outside UNESCO, can be found at http://www.unesco.org/education/lwf/. The most striking experience of that four-year effort has perhaps been the following one. Every time you would try to cross a boundary – after all, that's what Learning Without Frontiers is supposed to imply – you would be confronted with sharp resistance. Such resistance would not only come from the traditional education establishment, but equally, and sometimes particularly, from inside the organizational environment that had generated Learning Without Frontiers. It would

tell you that learning is what we do in school and that, therefore, our first responsibilities are with the school system.

Fair enough. The school system is undoubtedly a vital piece of the overall learning environment and it is a shame that much still needs to be done in many parts of the world to provide adequate conditions for the schooling of all. However, the school is also only one segment of the overall learning environment. That learning environment – or better still, learning ecology – consists of many other, equally important segments. The family, for instance, is one such a segment, and it becomes increasingly clear how important it is now that we discover how inadequately people are sometimes prepared for the challenges of today's pressures due to the breakdown of traditional family structures in the absence of new ones that could replace them. In addition to the school and the family environment, one can think of such other components of the learning ecology as diverse as the workplace; people's circle of intimate contacts; the broadcast media; museums; libraries; the Internet; places of worship; nature; the movie theatre; the concert hall; the marketplace; the city; the street (such as in the case of street children); or the rural community. For each of these segments, including the school system, the real life and value of it depends on the health of the learning ecology as a whole, and *vice versa*.

The Long Beach workshop, then, was born out of uneasiness among the five facilitators/organizers – David Berg from The Netherlands, Ron Burnett from Canada, Carlo Fabricatore from Chile, Yusra Laila Visser from Florida, and Jan Visser from France – with the existing tendency towards overspecialization. Many disciplines and professions seem each to claim a small portion of the rich world of learning, working in isolation of one another, and no one caring for the learning landscape as a whole.

Workshop procedures

The two-hour time slot available for the workshop was divided up as follows:
- Introduction by the chair on the nature of and procedures for the session.
- Small group interaction, allowing each group to create an intuitive sense of what its individual members consider meaningful learning, based on their personal learning stories.
- Reporting, by the small groups, on the results of the previous exercise, creating an overall mindset of what should be considered relevant and important as regards learning.
- Summary of pre-workshop inputs received from participants and non-participants on the www.learndev.org website and presentation, by the chair, of a facilitator-generated framework for discussion based on the received inputs.
- Plenary debate, inspired and informed by the previous items.
- Shared conclusions about implications for research on learning, the development of the conditions of learning, and facilitating policies.
- Next steps.

Workshop outcomes

Several significant ideas about the meaning of learning and its associated research, practice and policy needs emerged from the discussions during the workshop session. The following paragraphs describe them in some detail.

The workshop participants began by creating a common understanding of learning as a concept, and of the conditions present in meaningful learning experiences. As such, a picture emerged of learning as a natural human process that is continuous in nature and has no defined end. In terms of the conditions for meaningful learning, the discussion of relevant learning experiences led to the conclusion that both personality attributes and external factors that promote meaningful learning are important. Curiosity, persistence, enthusiasm, and openness were attitudinal characteristics that the workshop participants associated with initiating and sustaining meaningful learning. The ability to regulate and evaluate one's own learning process, to consider the implications of one's actions, and to regenerate learning through post-experience reflection on the learning process were also mentioned as key skills present during the most meaningful of learning experiences. In terms of external conditions for meaningful learning, the discussion focused on the importance of circumstances that (1) encourage the making of connections and bridges; (2) support the learner's efforts to branch out from a previously chosen path; and (3) that acknowledge the inseparable relationship between teaching and learning.

Serious attention was given to the way in which the research tradition could be transformed to gain both a deeper and a broader understanding of learning. The crucial importance of including in the research culture a fundamental concern with longitudinal research studies on learning stood out in the debate. In addition, participants identified the need for research that looks beyond formal learning settings to inform the understanding of the meaning of learning. Several participants also pointed to the value of having a research tradition that is truly international in nature, addressing goals and themes that transcend geopolitical boundaries. Participants also considered the value of increasing partnerships between the business/industry sector and learning specialists to foster research opportunities that address the goals of both parties.

The discussion then focused on some of the research topics that should receive greater attention from the research community to lay the empirical and theoretical foundations for the construction of a more transdisciplinary understanding of learning. This discussion also looked at the kinds of research interests represented among the participants, and the way in which those research interests could be directed toward informing the meaning of learning. Among the *foci* of research discussed were: the role of "pop" culture in learning and the skills needed by people to interact constructively with the manifestations of popular culture; the design of videogames that are optimized in terms of both entertainment and learning value; the development of alternative models for the use of gaming in learning; the construction of paradigms and models for understanding creativity in the learning process; the study of conditions for meaningful learning experiences outside of the formal learning context; and the identification of conditions needed to facilitate processes of unlearning.

The final portion of the workshop was devoted to identifying the policy needs for constructing new meanings of learning. Many of the policy matters that were discussed turned out to be intimately linked to the research needs that had previously been identified. In terms of promoting appropriate practice and research, the discussion thus pointed to the need for policy that encourages international perspectives and that focuses on the perceptions of learning across contexts whose internal chemistry is driven by diverse concerns, such as economic, social and educational ones. Similarly, the workshop participants saw the need for policies that support the evaluation as well as the effective

and equitable use of global resources for learning. They also identified the need to assess and address the discrepancies between expectations among members of the 'education establishment' and those that pertain to a vision of the education system as an entity within the wider learning landscape.

Where go from here?

At the broadest level, the outcomes of the workshop reported on above reaffirm the idea that a refocusing of the meaning of learning entails systemic change in different areas of the learning landscape. Practices, research, and policies that characterize those areas require fundamental review. The same workshop outcomes also indicate that the study of learning should move beyond the limited focus on objectively measurable outcomes of learning in predominantly formal, Western-style educational settings. The success of efforts to create new meanings of learning is thus intricately linked to success in fundamentally restructuring and reorienting practices, research, and policy development.

In other words, we have a major effort ahead of us. We have merely started lifting the veil and got a first look of the immense complexity involved in a more serious effort. Should that discourage us? No, definitely not. It simply means that much more needs to be done and that, to undertake that effort, there is a great need for collaboration. There is also a need for such collaboration to go beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines and research traditions.

It should be noted in the above connection that the workshop session was attended by a group of mainly self-selected people with a manifest professional and personal interest in learning and education. Discussion thus remained limited. A certain bias towards issues of education (and its problems), rather than those pertaining to the area of learning at large, could not be avoided. For any follow-up effort, everything possible must be done to reduce such a bias.

The Long Beach workshop having been a mere beginning, we are following up in a variety of ways as listed below.

Learning stories: The workshop generated as many learning stories as there were participants. Those stories were narrated verbally during the session. Participants have been approached to provide those same stories in written form. As they come in, they are being posted online at (http://www.learndev.org/LearningStories.html). This compilation may as such already provide interesting raw material for systematic analysis by researchers. However, the work is in the first place undertaken as a prompt to building a larger collection to which particularly stories from other parts of the world and different cultural settings should be added, especially also of people from outside the community of educators and educationalists. The present compilation then serves as an example and as a source of inspiration for expanding the collection. The Learning Development Institute intends to use its international contacts for generating further learning stories from around the globe.

Stimulating research: The workshop served as an eye opener for many of its participants. A number of them have already indicated their intention to direct some of their research to problems identified by the workshop. The workshop provided participating graduate students with ideas for graduate level projects and dissertations. By broadening the scope of the Meaning of Learning project and attracting attention to it in

diverse professional and scientific contexts, we plan to further stimulate expanding the research effort across disciplines and areas of interest.

Scientific communication among diverse communities: Workshop participants concluded that it would be of interest to generate publications (such as special issues of professional journals; a volume of invited chapters) exploring the issue of learning from a variety of angles and elevating the inquiry into learning to a level that would transcend the narrowness of individual disciplinary approaches. Typically, such a transdisciplinary inquiry would require more than compiling individual articles. A propitious collaborative framework (including ways to establish effective communication among traditionally separate professional communities) needs to be developed for it.

This year in Denver: Finally, the facilitator team was invited to create a follow-up event at AECT's International Conference in Denver, CO, October 25-28, 2000. That event will be different from the Long Beach workshop, as it will build on the specific outcomes of the latter. We shall definitely seek to obtain a more structured input into it reflecting concerns not normally represented at AECT conferences. The Denver event will be prepared, though, in a similarly collaborative fashion as the session just held in Long Beach. Researchers, developers and practitioners who recognize the importance of the issues raised in this article, and who wish to contribute to or be involved in preparing the next event, are thus being invited to contact the first author at jvisser@learndev.org. In addition, the www.learndev.org website will serve to keep interested readers informed on progress.