

To school, or not to school: is that the question?

PURPOSE:

This discussion is about asking ourselves questions about such things as school and schooling. The purpose is to gain better insight into how societies could best create conditions and infrastructure for learning in a lifelong and life-wide perspective for those who now live, i.e. at the start of the third millennium. For the purpose of this discussion I suggest we think of school not only in terms of the institution that children and adolescents spend a large proportion of their time in, but also contemplate the extension of that same phenomenon in later life at continuing (often tertiary) level.

BACKGROUND

Critique of the school and what it does to people is possibly as old as the idea of schooling itself. MIT's Seymour Papert, for instance, sees school as the environment more resistant to change than any other thing humanity has produced. In *The Children's Machine* (1993, Basic Books, New York) Papert asks: "Why, through a period when so much human activity has been revolutionized, have we not seen comparable change in the way we help our children learn?" (p. 2)

When John Brockman of The Edge suggested as the World Question for 2006 "What is your dangerous idea," Roger C. Schank responded: "My dangerous idea is one that most people immediately reject without giving it serious thought: school is bad for kids — it makes them unhappy and as tests show — they don't learn much." He also said: "Schools need to be replaced by safe places where children can go to learn how to do things that they are interested in learning how to do. Their interests should guide their learning. The government's role should be to create places that are attractive to children and would cause them to want to go there." (see his entire response at http://www.edge.org/q2006/q06_2.html#schank).

Thoughts such as the above ones are not new. The idea that we must "disestablish school" figures prominently in the work of Ivan Illich (see <http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich.html>), particularly in his *Deschooling Society*, of which an online copy can be found at <http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich/Deschooling/intro.html>. Reflections of such critique can also be found in the 1972 report to UNESCO by the Faure Commission, *Learning to be*.

Current debate on the issue of the societal meaning of schooling (positively and negatively) takes place among part of the UNESCO community (e.g. http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31483&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) and previously <http://www.unesco.org/education/lwf/>; among those associated with the Learning Development Institute (<http://www.learndev.org>); Shikshantar (<http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/>); and New Horizons (<http://www.newhorizons.org/>), to name but a few.

The issue of schooling came up recently in a HELP discussion on cabweb.net on "Assessment of Online Discussion" (<http://www.cabweb.net/portal/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1350>). Frances Bell then suggested (<http://www.cabweb.net/portal/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1350&parent=8019>) we dedicate a special discussion event to the issue and asked me to facilitate it.

RATIONALE

From my perspective, and that of some people whose work raises questions similar to the ones that emerge from my own concerns, we live in a world that is fundamentally different from the one we used to know a couple of decades ago. This has to do with more than the pervasive proliferation of technological means to access, process and communicate information. The kind of problems the world, and thus its citizens, face is of a fundamentally different nature than those

that provided the setting for past learning needs. Much of my own work during the past decades (part of which can be found on the Web site of the Learning Development Institute, www.learndev.org) is inspired by the above concern. The French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin has perhaps most fundamentally touched upon this issue in his writings of the past 15 years or so. He calls for the development of a planetary awareness and of capabilities to entertain complex thought processes. Those familiar with the French language will have no problem locating Morin's writings. English speakers may prefer Morin's *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future* at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001177/117740eo.pdf>. A different perspective on the changing meaning of learning can be found in the work of Canadian researchers Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia (often in collaborative partnership). I have myself written in collaboration with Yusra Laila Visser an essay with the title *On the Difficulty of Changing Our Perceptions about Such Things as Learning* (see <http://www.learndev.org/dl/DenverVisserVisser.PDF>). No doubt a more extensive list of resources can be identified and contributors to this discussion are invited to suggest further readings.

The principal point is that a variety of folks are arguing that we should get serious about rethinking the meaning of learning and make fundamental adjustments to conditions, infrastructure, policy and focus areas for research in line with the kind of learning that is now needed. By way of example, there is a need to replace the notion of 'learning as preparation for life' by something like 'learning to learn in a lifelong perspective to interact constructively with unpredictable change.' There is a similar need to become more worried about the overall development of mindsets than about the development of skills. Likewise, the exclusive attention to disciplinary knowledge may have to be replaced by a more comprehensive focus on what the world and its problems look like from a transdisciplinary perspective, i.e., a point of view that transcends the visions emanating from neatly compartmentalized areas of knowledge development that are as such no longer questioned.

Some may think that the problem of the traditional school will get automatically solved now that much learning occurs no longer within the walls of brick-and-mortar structures but rather in virtual environments enabled by such technologies as the Internet. However, it should then be considered that the underlying assumptions of e-learning and other forms of distance education are hardly different from those that inspired the traditional school setting. Moreover, it is important to think beyond the school context per se, whether that notion refers to physical or virtual space. People do not only learn thanks to deliberately designed instruction, but sometimes despite such instruction and often thanks to myriad additional prompts and opportunities. So, the question then is: 'What kind of school, and what place for the school, should there be within a wider ecology of learning spaces, which include, e.g., the family; the workplace; media of mass communication as well as interactive media, such as the Internet; spaces of spiritual enlightenment; and libraries and museums.'

FIRST QUESTION

In view of what I wrote above, there seems to be no shortage of questions that can inspire the proposed discussion. So, the first question I propose for our dialogue is the following one:

What questions come to mind when you ask yourself 'To school, or not to school: is that the question?'

After a couple of days and for the remainder of the two-week period of discussion we can then start reflecting on (a selection of) the questions raised by participants in the dialogue.

I look forward to meeting you online.

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