

LEARNING COMMUNITIES:

WHOLENESS AND PARTNESS, AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCE IN THE LEARNING ECOLOGY

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This brief paper has been prepared at the request of the organizers of the International Symposium on Learning Communities, held in Barcelona, Spain, on October 5 and 6, 2001. The invitation letter for the Symposium stated as its aim "to analyze the 'learning community' concept from various angles." It was suggested that "learning communities and educational networks are some of the most promising topics for 21st century education" and should therefore be seen as "the core theme of the education project of the Universal Forum of Cultures - Barcelona 2004." In this paper I intend to provide a framework for thinking about this "core theme."

Why we learn

At the outset of the debate we must ask ourselves why we learn, and try to answer that question against the backdrop of the particular conditions of our time. My first observation is that our era is fundamentally different from earlier times in at least the following respects:

- 1) The pace at which the environment with which we interact changes has overtaken the rhythm set by the approximately 20-year time interval separating the human generations. This has profound implications for the ways in which members of the human species must prepare themselves for life and maintain their preparedness throughout life as well as for the role a previous generation can play in preparing the conditions of learning for the next one. That latter role has become greatly diminished in one respect: It is no longer appropriate for the older generation to tell the younger generation what it should learn. ***Everyone, at any age, is in need of learning, and continuous development of the capacity to learn has become more important than the learning of specific competencies in the early stages of life.***
- 2) The first three million years of hominid development on planet Earth resulted in a human population of approximately three billion ($3 \cdot 10^9$) by the year 1960. In less than 40 years following that date, we managed to double the number and reach the six billion mark. The number is still growing, yet the dimensions of the planet and the extent of its resources are limited. This phenomenon has challenged our inventiveness to manage problems while we create them in the process of trying to solve previous problems, which, in turn, often emerged from our attempts to solve the problems that preceded them. The

pace at which that process of responding to ever new challenges moves forward is equally accelerating. It leads to explosive development, which causes human activity to impact not only locally, but to affect people everywhere as well as to have consequences that not we, but future generations will experience. Consequently, we have become, more than ever, a species whose members' well-being is intimately linked to the well-being of others, both those who share our passage through life and those whose life is still to emerge. ***There is thus a great urgency for us not only to learn to live together, but first and foremost to learn to learn together, having in mind the dynamic relationship between where we come from and where we are going.***

- 3) As a consequence of our explosive growth, our planetary society faces problems that are truly global and that have potential consequences that threaten our sustainability as a species as well as the sustainability of many other life forms on earth. Those problems are also complex in nature, complex in the sense that Complex Adaptive Systems are complex. Their solution is thus no longer solely dependent on the intervention of central organs of government. They require the participative problem solving involvement of all. ***For our increasingly planetary society to work, we must be aware of the world as a whole while, as individuals and local communities, we must focus on the interaction with our immediate environment.***
- 4) Not only are the problems we face global in terms of spatial dimensions, they also challenge our imagination in the perspective of another dimension of our perceptual framework, namely *time*. The question, "Why are we here?" will never be answered, but always be asked. Whether we look at human life as a miraculous accident of evolutionary history or perceive of it as embedded in a framework of intention, our inability to answer the question "Why are we here?" should compel us to reflect on ourselves from the perspective of our place in the universe and the related question: "Who are we that we may be so clever as to be able to destroy ourselves and other life with us?" In other words, ***there is a need to reinstate in our thinking about learning a concern with ultimate values.***
- 5) Our increasing technological capability makes it possible to intervene more and more in our very humanity. In a discussion on the meaning of learning, organized by the Learning Development Institute at last year's International Meeting of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology in Denver, Colorado, Spohrer asserted that, while "it is not surprising that at this time of rapid change, we choose to ask the question 'what is the meaning of learning?'" (2000, October, p. 4) a more powerful question emerges. "By the middle of this century," Spohrer says, "we may well be asking 'what is the meaning of being human?' as our grandchildren develop the capability to create new intelligent species of biological, digital and hybrid life forms" (p. 4). In line with the recommendations in Spohrer's paper, this calls for urgent attention to the need to ***develop meta-learning abilities that allow us to ask pertinent questions, to set responsible goals and to use technology wisely in the pursuit of those goals.***

The learning we need

Learning is the one human factor that plays a vital role in the context of all of the above challenges. However, it can't be learning as we used to think about it. A radical redefinition of what it means to learn is required. More is needed than mastering the set of fixed skills a traditional curriculum helps students to acquire. The idea of the traditional curriculum is, in fact, wholly at odds with what is needed, as we must move away from the sacrosanct idea that *all* learning is undertaken in a step-by-step fashion leading the learner from a particular point to a well-defined next destination. While this may be true for certain specific learning tasks, it is not a good perspective on learning in general. Antonio Machado in his "Cantares" advises the traveler through life: "Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar. Al andar se hace camino," and, therefore, as the road before us is always under construction – by us, who travel it – learners must in the first place have a keen eye for the problems ahead of them. Throughout life those problems will constantly change, providing novel challenges all the time. ***If there is such a thing as "preparation for life," then it must be a preparation that allows us to cope with the unpredictable*** (see also Lederman, 1999, April).

Consequently, designed learning environments worth their salt must be structured around problems, problems that have to do with whole human beings, body and mind, and that can very often not be tackled by simply adding up the separate pieces of compartmentalized knowledge that multiple disciplines have generated. A transdisciplinary view, in addition to the wealth of cognitive heritage that we owe to the development of our various disciplines, is definitely important. It requires collaboration among human beings. A good learning environment, responsive to the challenges of our time, must therefore lead people to continually develop their consciousness and their ability to deal with novel situations – which is, after all, what the word "intelligence" means – by working together. ***Creative collaboration is what is required*** (John-Steiner, 2000).

Possibly most importantly in the above context, we must conceive of learning as an ecological phenomenon. Any learning community – be it a school, a corporation or organization, a family, a city or region, or even an entire society – is always itself part of something larger that learns. At the same time, it is also the environment in which smaller learning entities are nested. I have given much emphasis to the concept of "learning ecology" in my writings over recent years (e.g. Visser 1999, April; 2001), and find it also increasingly reflected in the work of other authors, such as Solomon (2000, October) and Shotter (2000, October). A related notion, that of "ecological human development," pervades the work of developmental psychologist Bronfenbrenner and his collaborators (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The learning ecology is made up of a host of what one can call "sub-learning environments." Those sub-learning environments – in fact, the learning communities that operate within them – interact with each other, allowing the learning occurring in each of them to become mutually reinforcing. Some of those sub-learning environments are instructional settings, such as the school, but the concept

also includes, for instance, the family; the Internet; museums; nature; sports, spiritual practice, and broadcast media. The variety and diversity of such sub-learning environments is in fact endless, as they tend to emerge, submerge, reemerge, and regroup all the time while one's learning life develops. ***At a societal level we must be aware of the need to develop "learning environmental policies" that can ensure that learning becomes mutually reinforcing in the different, though interconnected, parts of the learning ecology.***

Learning: The elements of a definition

Learning is a lifelong "disposition to dialogue...with [our] human, social, biological and physical environment" (Visser, 2001, p. 453). We – as individuals as well as together, in all manner of socially organized configurations – engage in that dialogue to allow us to "interact constructively with change" (p. 453).¹ The emphasis on dialogue in the definition referred to in the previous two sentences can also be found in the work of Shotter (e.g. 1997 and 2000, October). It is equally well represented in John-Steiner's (2000) imaginative concept of "creative collaboration." It is a corollary also of the emphasis that Tessmer and Richey (1997) put on "context" as an important factor to be taken into account in the design of learning environments as well as of the idea that learning and activity are inseparable concepts (Jonassen, 2000, October). It is also embedded in how Cole & Engeström (1993) see the building of knowledge as a cultural-historical process. Added in the definition from which the above quotes originate (Visser, 2001), is the idea that we engage in dialogue for a purpose, a purpose that becomes increasingly more important in the context of the various challenges pointed out at the beginning of this paper. The need not to see us as mere passive entities that can only *react* to change, but instead to conceive of ourselves as *active and conscious participants* in it, stands out. Moreover, as we ourselves also contribute to change, it is eminently important that we do so in a constructive manner. As humans we have the ability to choose between being constructive and being destructive. I thus contend, and explicitly define, that human learning must include the imperative that our dialogue be a constructive one. To be an educated person then means ***to be able to take charge and give direction to one's life; to do so while being fully aware that "one's life" is inseparably interwoven, in space and time, with the lives of others; and to enhance our common humanity through the active dialogue that ensues.***

Learning communities: The building blocks of dialogic interaction

The above definition that learning is a disposition, which leads to a process, rather than that process itself; that the process it leads to is a dialogic process; that it transcends the individual and includes the social; and that it is related to a conscious effort to engage constructively with one's ever changing environment, that definition is quite a bit more comprehensive than traditional definitions, which focus on learning engaged in by isolated

¹ The complete definition reads as follows: "Human learning is the disposition of human beings, and of the social entities to which they pertain, to engage in continuous dialogue with the human, social, biological and physical environment, so as to generate intelligent behavior to interact constructively with change" (Visser, 2001, p. 453).

individuals who are subjected to deliberate processes that change their performance. ***The difference is between doing things yourself together with others, and things being done to you.*** In the context of the thinking that emerges from previous definitions, it is only natural for educators to perceive of themselves as having to tell others what to do. That attitude on the part of educators results in the expectation of submission, passiveness and obedience on the part of the learner, connotations that are, indeed, not alien to the etymological meaning of the word "education." Learning as a "disposition...to engage in continuous dialogue," a disposition shared by all human beings, cannot but lead to an entirely different learning reality, a true "learning ecology" in which all that learns does so thanks to the learning engaged in by others.

Within the ecological and dialogic vision of learning referred to above, learning communities are both *part* and *whole*. They are *dependent* and *autonomous* at the same time, entertaining those two modes of existence in a parallel fashion. This view is essential if we want learning to mean more than what is contained in the various notions that link the concept predominantly to the context of instruction.

At the beginning of this paper I have highlighted five major challenges humanity faces at this juncture in time. In developing my argument, I have linked those challenges to the need to fundamentally broaden the meaning of learning. An important thread throughout that argument is the essential interconnectedness of the society of humans. Feldman (2000) refers in this connection to the search for "balance between individuality and social connectedness" (p. xii) as the central theme of the current century, contrasting it with the past century's focus on "intellectual development that placed the lone seeker of knowledge...at the center of the developmental process" (p. ix). The shift of focus comes at a good time, considering the convoluted nature of the challenges earlier referred to, which make it difficult for them to be addressed through solo efforts. They call for ***visions of learning that are built around notions of sustained collaboration and dynamically evolving dialectic relationships between individuals and communities.*** Such visions have only marginally to do with the content of learning. Rather, they impact on *how* people learn and therefore on how the learning landscape should be restructured.

As the organizers of the International Symposium on Learning Communities suggested, learning communities are indeed at the core of new visions about learning. However, such visions are at risk of remaining truncated, stunted, incomplete visions if the different kinds of learning communities proposed for discussion are going to be treated as closed entities, unrelated to other communities, closed off from the world that surround them, and with disregard for their constituents. ***Wholeness and partness; individuality and communality; autonomy and dependence, at different levels of complexity at which learning organizes itself, must be respected, not as competing notions, but as belonging together within an overall ecological perspective of learning.***

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