

EDITOR'S NOTE

Learning Societies: Towards a Reflective and Generative Framework

Manish Jain

What are the diverse perspectives that exist about learning societies? What are the key attitudes, frameworks, actors/institutions, processes involved in unfolding a learning society? What are the obstacles that stand in the way of unfolding diverse learning societies? What are some examples of interesting initiatives that are underway which might contribute to the unfolding of learning societies?

This special issue of *Vimukt Shiksha* is not a how-to manual, it is not a prescriptive workplan, and it is certainly not a declaration. For those in search of quick fix solutions and clear answers, it will be a great disappointment. Rather, this booklet should be seen as an open invitation to enter into a dynamically evolving and still-muddled discourse around learning societies which is being propelled forward by several different forces, agendas, and experiences. We wish to share a cross-sample of these perspectives with you. All of the authors in this booklet, however, do share at least one common concern and understanding – that something is seriously wrong with the modern framework of education and that this can not be ‘fixed’ by expanding access to schools/NFE centers/distance education courses or by simply reforming schools through training more teachers, changing the textbooks, etc. This booklet is an invitation to stop looking at the world through school-colored spectacles, to move beyond the deficit rhetoric of ‘reaching the unreached’, to reflect on the damage that schooling has caused (and continues to cause) to millions of people around the world. It also represents a deep-felt desire to rediscover, regenerate and re-value different ways of questioning, of understanding, of relating, of creating, of living, in the face of larger societal concerns and impending catastrophes.

TAKING OFF OUR SCHOOL-COLORED GLASSES

John Holt (1976) has described that when most people use the word ‘education’, they are in fact referring to some kind of Treatment – which typically involves transmitting, thought-controlling, indoctrinating, social-engineering, coercing, and manipulating other human beings who are perceived either to have some sickness to be cured or some deficit to be filled. The most common form of this Treatment takes place through Schooling (Noam Chomsky (1988) and others have argued quite persuasively about the Treatment also being administered through large State and Corporate media such as television and newspapers). So before people go to school, they and their communities are diagnosed by some outside ‘expert’ and branded with dehumanizing labels like ‘uneducated’, ‘illiterate’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘irrational’, ‘backward’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘unreached’, etc. In other words, one is not fully human, nor can one ever hope to be, without the Treatment. Without a certificate to prove that you have been professionally ‘treated’, you are not only considered a lower form of life but also a menace to society. Which is why it has now become commonplace in our social greetings to make sure to identify, within the first 30 seconds of conversation, the level of Treatment received by those in our company by asking questions like: “What are your qualifications?”

The biggest fallacy that comes with the Treatment is that some of us believe that WE not only have the right but also the moral responsibility to Treat other people for their own good. This grows out of a tradition which is commonly referred to as the White Man's Burden. Gerald Porter (1995) describes the W.M.B. as "the imperialistic conviction that the superior white man, having conquered the inferior colored peoples of the world, was responsible for the care and well-being of the colonized people. The white man's attitude toward the defeated races was presented by Kipling as *noblesse oblige*. But beneath the thinly patronizing veneer was fundamentally an attitude of contempt and hatred that dehumanized the white man's alleged beneficiaries. No culture was regarded as equal to the European standard, which was held up as the yardstick of true civilization. To the extent that the cultures of colonized people were judged to be different, they were found wanting and inferior." This yardstick (now American and Virtual) continues to be both the measure of the Treatment's success as well as its compass for the future.

Because we have framed the Schooling-Treatment as an 'universal human right' and 'value neutral public good', neither Schooling nor any of its 'products' have been subject to much serious widespread interrogation. However, a far-reaching set of crises have emerged that raise deep doubts about both the future of humanity and the future of the planet. These global crises implore us to stop blaming the 'poor' and 'marginalized' for our problems and to start looking at more closely at the 'crisis of the schooled'. We have not yet begun to fathom the levels of destruction (to different languages, creativities, cultures, species, etc.) that has both taken place among the 'schooled' and **because of** the 'schooled'.

Schooling has led to severe fragmentation – fragmentation of our whole beings, of our brains, of our knowledge systems, of our communities, of our links with Nature. It has also created new more rigid and unaccountable structures of stratification, vicious competition and debilitating forms of dependency throughout the world. The vast majority of the schooled live their lives believing that they are 'losers', 'failures' or 'drop-outs' and that their local languages, manual labors, traditional cultures, etc. are sub-human and dirty, and deserve to be scorned (unless, of course, they can attract tourism i.e., foreign currency). The few elite 'winners' in the system live their lives believing that it is their natural right to exploit other human beings and Nature because they are the 'fittest' and the 'mightiest', and the poor and oppressed are 'lazy' and 'stupid'. Both the winners and losers alike are sucked into a vicious postmodern whirlpool of mechanized consumerism, selfishness, ego, violence, and insecurity. With every additional year of Treatment, the natural processes of inquiry, creativity, collaboration, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation, which both derive from and replenish the human spirit, get further institutionalized and suffocated. As Aaron Falbel (1996) describes, "Most of us have forgotten what it is like to follow our own noses, to ask our own questions, and find our own answers. Years of educational treatment have convinced us that learning is, and can only be, the result of teaching." The great tragedy is that not only have we lost faith in our capacities to 'do', 'know', 'live together' and 'be/become' without the Treatment, but also that we have lost our love for self-learning. If one is open to also seeing and

understanding these ‘realities’, then we have much reason to pause, take a deep breath and reflect before steam-rolling forward with more targets and action plans.

A decade has passed since the infamous “Education for All” meeting that took place in Jomtien, Thailand. Rather than glorifying superficial successes built around the internal logic of schooling or by limiting our critiques to failures in achieving certain goals, there is an urgent need to problematize Schooling in relation to the larger discourse of Development. It is quite noble that EFA2000 thinks that everyone should be given a chance to get a lottery ticket. But it is unfortunate that they are unwilling to engage with the overall set-up of the lottery. We cannot seriously discuss peoples’ ‘learning needs’ without some having larger vision of Life and a clearer understanding of our collective Pasts, Presents, and Futures. Today, larger questions around the meaning of Development, Globalization and Progress are being seriously debated and reconsidered by various groups around the world. It is imperative that those involved with education link to these debates as they have profound implications for the very meaning of education. The anniversary of Jomtien is the right time to engage in some serious reflection and deep soul-searching around the meaning of education – not for more trite slogans, for more propagandized success stories and statistics, for more bull-dozing over the voices of resistance.

Many people would argue that we should proceed with the agenda of promoting access to and enrolment in Schooling, “After all, everyone should have a right to the Treatment. Granted, there are small glitches in the quality of the Treatment, but these can be corrected afterwards with improvements in curricular content, better teacher training, better teaching aids, etc. Such pauses only further unnecessarily delays the marginalized from developing.” In the face of this W.M.B. mindset, it is useful to recall Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) famous saying “the medium is the message”. By this McLuhan was trying to warn us that content may not be the only problem, or even the principal problem, with Schooling. The mere existence of Schooling causes society to be re-organized in certain ways. It impacts our time-schedules, where we live, who we talk to, how we dress, etc. We get also bound into various dependency relationships with the State and Market. We don’t realize what is behind one little government school in a village – how many interest groups, how many industries (textbook publishers, construction companies, teacher’s unions, uniform manufacturers, examination companies, etc.), how much infrastructure, how many layers of management. Our choices and options get limited and directed as we must spend all of our time maintaining this ‘investment’. Furthermore, whatever natural strengths (wisdom, knowledge systems, relationships, people) we have that do not ‘fit’ into this model get devalued and dumped. Thus, Access/Quality to Education vs. the Meaning of Education are essentially different kinds of questions. In the former, we are locked into a particular worldview of Development and Progress; while in the latter, we still have space to re-conceptualize and re-negotiate this worldview.

Jerry Mander (1991) has suggested that, “All technologies should be assumed guilty until proven innocent.” The same test should be applied to Schooling. We must consciously examine the hidden negative values of the Treatment in a world brainwashed to see only

the positive side of the story. Implicit in Mander's statement is an assumption that judgement could and should be made in time for the intervention to be halted. We believe that there is an urgent need to engage in a critical review around the overall system of Schooling – to more honestly assess its guilt or innocence. There is also an urgent need to understand the state of other learning spaces and processes which have not been colonized by Schooling. The emerging discourse on learning societies must thus serve a dual purpose of providing a critical set of reference points from which to reflect on Schooling as well as a generative framework which can facilitate discussions and actions concerning the meaning of education.

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING SOCIETIES

When we begin thinking about and discussing learning societies, we must be very clear that we are not talking about reforming Schooling, that is, simply treating the Treatment so that it becomes easier to swallow. Rather, we seek to create more open and participatory spaces for dialoguing around the various meanings of education for the 21st century. This dialogue begins with a very basic question: “what kind of world do we really want to live in?” There is not a predetermined right answer to this question; nor, is it too late to discuss it. From this question follows many other questions such as: “what is our role – individually and collectively – in giving shape to such a world?” and “what must be the role of learning in these processes?” From these questions, emerge critical questions regarding knowledge, *parampara*, popular culture, technology, spirituality, intelligences, the brain, governance and economic structures, family and community.

This publication seeks to open up this discussion with learners, teachers, parents, local communities, and to take the Treatment out of the hands of the so-called ‘experts’. We have tried to stimulate this process by asking various individuals from around the world who are involved in unfolding learning societies in different ways to share their ideas and experiences. The reader will find a diversity of viewpoints and may even notice several contradictions between the different authors. We believe that this is healthy as it serves to highlight key areas for further reflection and debate. There are a few areas though that clearly emerge from the essays which begin to form the basis for a loose framework/agenda of learning societies:

- We must more deeply recognize the infinite, diverse and divine potentials of every human being and their different learning styles/paces, intelligences, creativities, meaning-making systems, etc. and allow space for these to bloom (outside of the functionalist categories of worker, soldier, consumer, citizen, etc.). At the same time, we need to better understand and foster the dynamics of collective learning, interdependence, collaboration and dialogue which are critical to living in healthy communities.

- We must appreciate a larger landscape of living realities, knowledge systems, associations, and natural environments, in which dynamic and purposeful forms of learning-sharing take place. However, we should be clear that when re-valuing these other learning processes and contexts, our intention is not to colonize these by bringing these within the four walls of Schooling (this would be tantamount to signing their death warrants). But rather, to modify our homogenizing,

compartmentalizing and commercializing mainstream Systems so as to give more encouragement to these other spaces to evolve in their own ways.

- We must restore agency to each learner to self-direct and self-evaluate their own lives. First, by changing our view of him/her as a passive individual merely experiencing/consuming the learning landscape to that of an active constructor of learning spaces, knowledge, meaning, and learning communities within this larger landscape. Second, by re-valuing those learners who consciously choose not to fit into the System or are choosing other priorities than Schooling in their lives. As Aaron Falbel (1996) suggests, “Let us rid our own minds of the prejudice that views others who opt out of educational treatment as ‘delinquents’, ‘failures’ or ‘drop-outs’. Let us view them as conscientious objectors to a crippling and dehumanizing process.”
- We must also seek to more sharply interrogate, challenge and reshape exploitative, unjust, and dehumanizing political, economic and social systems – not to reinforce and legitimize the hegemony of these structures. There is an urgent need to critically examine dominating notions of Development and Globalization and to nurture alternative narratives of progress and success. As part of this, we must address the growing commodification of knowledge, relationships, and human beings.
- We must understand more deeply how Schooling stands as a barrier to the natural healing processes required to regenerate diverse ways of learning, knowing, understanding, being, and becoming. This Treatment prevents any other diagnoses of our situation, while monopolizing all of our attention and resources. Arundhati Roy (1999) suggests a bold agenda for the 21st century, “The dismantling of the Big...big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big mistakes, big heroes. . . perhaps it will be the Century of the Small.” To this, I would add the need to dismantle the big Schooling-Treatment.

In moving forward in this process of unfolding learning societies, we should be clear that there are no ready-made formulas or monolithic prescriptions; no standard learning society to be set-up all across the world. Unfolding learning societies must essentially be understood in terms of constructivist and organic processes that are fueled by continuous contextualized action, reflection and dialogue. It will, however, require a tremendous effort of unlearning and deconditioning on all of our parts – to allow us to re-affirm our faith and trust in the goodness of human beings, to creatively dream and share our dreams, and to create more robust and sensitive languages for perceiving and communicating about learning.

This booklet consists of three sections to help facilitate a critical review of Schooling and a discussion on the meaning of education: 1) *Unmasking a Schooling Society*, 2) *Towards Learning Communities: Experiences and Explorations*, and 3) *Conceptual Priorities*. In organizing the booklet in this way, we seek to integrate critiques, innovative experiences and questions for deeper research as we believe that all three of these dimensions are necessary for unfolding learning societies and must be discussed together. After editing this booklet, we find that there is still a great deal to elaborate – conceptually,

operationally and, most importantly, personally – on the theme of learning societies. We invite you to join us in this process.

REFERENCES:

Chomsky, N. Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media. Pantheon Books, 1988.

Falbel, A. “Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No, thanks.” in M. Hern (ed.) Deschooling Our Lives. New Society Publishers, 1996.

Holt, J. Instead of Education. Holt Associates. 1976.

Mander, J. In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & The Survival of the India Nations. Sierra Club Books, 1991.

Porter, G. “The White Man’s Burden, Revisted” in R. Miller (ed.) Educational Freedom for a Democratic Society. Resource Center for Redesigning Education. 1995.

Roy, A. The Greater Common Good. IndiaBook Distributors. 1999.