

Lifelong Learning and Learning Communities: A Vision for the Future

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1. Lifelong Learning is suddenly big news. Why?

One reason is that many governments around the world are publishing strategies and papers as a demonstration of their commitment to developing a new approach to Education and Training for the economy and society for the 21st century. Momentum is building up for new Lifelong Learning approaches in all aspects of society, and not just formal education, in anticipation of the challenges to nations, organisations, communities and individuals in the next millennium.

Yet another reason is because just about all the major world organisations — from UNESCO to International Corporations, OECD, the European Commission — are developing plans to introduce Lifelong Learning within their spheres of influence. And it isn't just at the international level — local organisations, local governments, local schools, local businesses are beginning to focus on Lifelong Learning.

This thing is big — it's going to influence everyone of us, our children and our children's children over the next century, wherever we are on this shrinking planet. And we are just at the beginning of the process. It's an exciting time.

2. What's really different about the world today?

A new millennium is a time to take stock of the changing world. As a race we are slowly but surely coming to terms with the fact that this planet is finite - that we cannot continue to exploit its mineral wealth, its food resources in land and sea, and change its natural life-sustaining ecosystems without threatening our very existence. And with an expected 5 billion new members of the human race in the next 50 years, learning to adapt has got to play a large part in the future for all of us. These environmental imperatives emphasize a crucial need to educate continually all the world's people as a basis for the survival of species on earth.

Ever since the 'No Limits to Learning' report in the 1980s, which in its time was seminal, major global political and social upheavals have changed the nature of work, life, leisure and learning. Education, like many other sectors of society, is going through a paradigm change in favour of putting the focus on 'Learning' and how it can unlock the enormous potential of each individual human being. Among the many current and future issues contributing to this change and increasing the urgency for a lifelong learning approach are:

A. The explosion of information and knowledge through the application of Science and Technology, on the one hand offering a variety of new opportunities for organisational and personal growth and on the other stimulating a questioning of basic values. Both of these have important implications for Lifelong Learning. At one level, Science and Technology has helped to improve material standards of living in many parts of the world. It has multiplied manifold the information and knowledge available to us and

transformed our way of living, working and communicating. At the same time the speed at which these changes have taken place has outstripped the capacity of many people to cope easily with it. The wealth of information and the technology of handling it has, paradoxically, made possible greater personal decision making, and, through its sheer volume, reduced the likelihood of this being informed and balanced. The skills of information-handling, problem-solving, reflecting and thinking, self-learning, cooperating, and entrepreneurship are part of the new basics to create personal empowerment.

B. The need to come to terms with fundamental global demographics — in the West and Japan, ageing, more mobile, more multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies which could release high inter-racial and inter-generational social tensions and a reduced investment in welfare programmes through a fall in the working, and an increase in the retired, populations. By contrast, in the poorer parts of the world, a massive population growth perhaps destined to live at subsistence level and below unless ameliorative projects are initiated. To avoid the worst effects of both these scenarios, a high emphasis will need to be put on fundamental lifelong learning principles and a use of the new development and delivery technologies.

These two, and many other issues connected with change — globalisation, industrial restructuring, the Internet, bio-genetics — are of great relevance to everyone and to all organisations, urging a strong case to make Lifelong Learning the central unifying theme of any Industry's, Government's or Education Organisation's strategy for the future. The next century will have to be the 'Learning Century' because, unless it becomes just that, the alternative is more and more unhappiness, social disorder, deprivation, poverty and a breakdown of democratic structures.

3. It's evident that change is important but how do you get these imperatives over? Change and Learning aren't the most popular words in many peoples' vocabularies. That's true and that's why this is going to take time. We need 20-20 vision. Lifelong Learning has profound implications for all parts of the system — not just the education systems in the schools, colleges and universities, but also the social, political, economic and cultural systems we have built up in our societies. I believe that the age of Education and Training is dead and that the future focus has to be converted into a new era of Learning, in which, information has to be shared with all people, in the ways in which they want to interact with it — integral to communities, not separated from them.

But in order for that to happen, the Education Providers at all levels have to start focusing on the needs of people as learners — finding out why, when, what and how people prefer to learn, discovering new learning methods, identifying the basic skills which people need in order to learn better individually, in groups and in families - using the modern education delivery technologies and tools to provide new learning for people wherever they want to receive it.

4. Are Education Providers ready for this?

There are pockets of good practice around — there are one or two schools for example which are developing continuous learning and personal skills updating programmes for their teachers so that they can respond better to their own learning needs and those of children. Some universities are widening their intakes and modifying their courses to become responsive to the needs of a much more poly-accessible educational world from industry and the community around.

But, perhaps surprisingly, the greatest breakthroughs have come in Industry Human Resource Departments, and we can all learn from this. Here, there is a much greater take-up of the tools and techniques of the new technologies and a much greater democratisation of the learning process. This is because modern companies have realised that their strength and their future lies in the performance of their people and that the development of individual skills and values is the most important thing they can do to survive in a competitive world. Many companies have taken a deliberate step to ‘empower’ their workforce: to put decision-making in the hands of those do the work. This creates a whole new set of learning needs among adults, which leads right back into challenging conventional schoolroom practices.

However, it has to be said too, that for the majority of Education Providers, there is still a long way to go. Urged by Governments looking for measurable results, they are providing an industrial age education for a post-industrial environment. The emphasis is still on easily-examined information-giving and memorisation rather than creating knowledge, high-order skills, understanding and values - teaching what to think and commit to memory, rather than how to think and how to discriminate between good, bad and indifferent. In an age in which information doubles every 5 years and then feeds upon itself to produce new knowledge, this is utter nonsense.

5. What’s the role of Government in a Lifelong Learning World?

Government has financial levers and uses them to get its own way. That’s why there is a need for mind-set change (if the first part of the word can be located) in all parts of the system. Government has an important part to play in understanding and creating the conditions for a true Lifelong Learning Society so that both the nation and the people prosper economically and mentally.

There is a very strong correlation between the economic health of a nation and the learning health of its citizens. But Government must base its actions on research and understanding of the true need for everyone, rather than ill-considered political dogma or reactionary prejudices nurtured in an elitist past. If, for example, we use a failure-oriented examination system, that is one which creates failure in some in order to celebrate success in others, we can expect to take the consequences of coping with those who fail. Sure, successful learning must be celebrated and rewarded, but let’s make it possible for everybody, or as many as possible, to participate in the fun of success. Nor is there any advantage to be gained from starving teachers and schools of the mental and physical resources and values they need to succeed, and then claiming that they are failing the children.

But although Governments can pontificate, International Governmental Organisations can prescribe and Universities can produce research papers for other researchers to read, the place where the lifelong learning revolution is going to happen is in the cities, towns and villages of every nation. The skills, talents, knowledge and values of real people are developed in real Learning Communities.

6. Learning Communities?

Yes — that is one working vision for the future. These are communities in which business and industries, schools, colleges, universities, professional organisations and local governments cooperate closely into making it a physically, economically, culturally and mentally pleasant place to live;

- from which no-one is excluded from learning and in which learning is an enjoyable and rewarding thing to do;
- which encourages all its resources, especially its human resources, talents, skills and knowledge, to be made available to all;
- which uses modern communications technology to look outwards to the rest of the world and encourages its citizens to do likewise;
- which encourages its citizens to develop personal learning plans and to use guides and mentors to develop their knowledge and skills;
- which mobilises special interest groups - birdwatchers, botanists, scouts, guides, church groups and the many informal organisations in which people congregate - in the monitoring and preservation of a sustainable environment;
- which celebrates learning frequently, and encourages whole families to participate.

This may be a learning utopia — an impossible dream. But already some cities — Southampton in England, Edmonton in Canada, Udaipur in India, Kakegawa in Japan — are taking the first steps towards the dream and declaring themselves to be ‘Cities of Learning.’ There are others in the world setting up similar initiatives, and it is not impossible to imagine, soon into this millennium, a new world of linked Communities of Learning in which knowledge and expertise and talent are shared with each other through electronic links between 3rd age citizens, school children in their studies, universities in their research activities, companies for trade, and hospitals for medical assistance.

7. How are you going to satisfy all the new learners?

That’s where the new technologies come in. They’re not very well-developed at present and resistance is high in schools, universities and elsewhere. But there is a promising future and they are becoming ever more sophisticated in what they can do to help learning. I have already mentioned the vision of a new world of linked Communities of Learning using available-now communications technologies like the Internet.

But there are many other tools and techniques in the Open Learning universe, which utilize a mixture of sound, text, vision, graphics, motion picture to stimulate diverse learning processes. The trick is to develop ever-more creative uses of these media, both within and between communities.

For example, the Lifelong Learning University of the future will use modern open and distance learning technologies to provide services for Continuing Education in Industry and Government Offices, support for teachers in schools, extension courses for adults wherever they may be — in the shopping centres, the pubs, the home. They will use all the media at their disposal — television, local radio, satellite, cable, ISDN networks and the Internet — to make learning the number one activity in each community. They will interact internationally to open up both learning opportunities and minds, and make research more applicable to those on whose behalf it is carried out.

Schools will also be able to make an extensive use of new technologies in the following ways:

- teachers will develop and teach collaboratively common curricula between schools in the community and internationally. Children will learn collaboratively with children from other cultures, regions, countries;
- schools will build up their own geographical, historical and biological databases and share them with others;
- children will access different databases, stimulating communities to enliven and enhance their collective learning;
- children and teachers will participate in joint project work with community associations and businesses;
- language teaching will be given a new dimension through interpersonal contacts around the world.

The possibilities to use learning technologies creatively are endless; the opportunities to liberate minds and mind-sets, trapped in Education and Training, are abundant. And all of this will contribute to the development of the potential inherent in every one of us. This is what I mean by Lifelong Learning. But it won't happen this year or next year, or even by 2010. This is a process which will take at least 50 years and, in some countries, much longer. We have the means to make it happen. Do we have the will, the vision and the staying power to make the 21st Century really 'The Learning Century?'

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