

RESPONDING TO LEARNING NEEDS IN THE 1980s

K. Patricia Cross

Distinguished Research Scientist
Educational Testing Service

Danforth Associates have long enjoyed a reputation for thinking beyond the confines of academic specialities and local campuses. A conference such as this one that brings together faculty members from a variety of campuses and disciplines is probably better geared to expanding horizons than to providing answers. But whatever your reasons for coming here, whether to renew old acquaintances, to get away from the routine of day-to-day thinking, or to seek answers to the renewal of undergraduate education, I think the most useful role I can play in opening this conference is to present a broad overview of the learning society that is emerging in the 1980s. This is the world in which undergraduate education will move and be moved.

The beginning of a new decade, of course, provides a good excuse to assess the past and plan for the future. I'm not going to do much assessment of the past, except to observe that the 1980s will be as different from the 1970s as the 1970s were from the 1960s. If you will remember, the 1960s ended with considerable dissension and confrontation. But despite the attention given to what was euphamistically called "student unrest," the dissension of the 1960s was probably more constructive than destructive in uniting campuses in a common cause. It was the kind of dissension that generated high energy, optimism, and feelings of power to change things.

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Today, just one short decade later, the campus climate across the nation is almost the opposite. While there is still dissension, it is divisive rather than unifying, directed not toward a common external enemy, but toward one's fellow educators, on and off the campus. There is growing competition among institutions for students, departments for funds, and professors for jobs. Moreover, almost suddenly it seems, campuses have changed from playing the role of social critics on significant issues such as civil rights and the war in Viet Nam to being the object of social criticism on a wide variety of issues, ranging from student loan defaults to the ethics of football coaches to the quality of teaching and learning.

I point out the dramatic differences in campus climate between the end of the 1960s and the end of the 1970s, not to depress you, but rather to advance the hypothesis that the end of the 1980s may be startlingly different from the beginning of this decade. Personally, I think that living with the coming changes in higher education will be considerably more pleasant than anticipating them, and that the 1980s will end on a high note as higher education begins to find its new role in the learning society. Because I view the 1980s, not as a time of temporary setback for higher education, but as a time for serious transition, I want to spend some time talking about the learning society and the role of institutionalized education in it.

Educators, understandably perhaps, have a penchant for looking at the learning society in the context of how fast adult part-time learners will move into college classrooms to fill the seats left vacant by diminishing numbers of 18 to 24 year olds. The 18 year olds who could be attending college in 1995 have already been born--or more to the point, not born.

Thus there is no argument over the demographic fact that the number of 18 year olds in the population peaked this fall, and will bottom out in 1992 when there will be 26 percent fewer 18 year olds in the United States population than there are today. It will then begin to rise as the grandchildren of the baby boom generation attain college age (Bureau of the Census, 1977a). At the same time, the population of adults between the ages of 25 and 29 will peak in 1986 and maintain a conveniently high plateau between 1983 and 1990. This high plateau represents the population inflation of the baby boom generation, and it will gradually give way to the baby bust generation around the turn of the century (Bureau of the Census, 1977a).

How much these birth statistics have to do with enrollments in colleges and universities is anyone's guess. Howard Bowen (1978) has pointed out that the future of education does not necessarily reside in the birthrate of either 18 year olds or 29 year olds, and that we might better spend our time talking about what should happen in education rather than trying to predict what will happen, as though we had absolutely no control over the matter. I heartily agree with Howard's point that the demographics of the birthrate is only one small piece of planning for the 1980s, but I want to go even further to caution that what happens within colleges and universities is only one small piece of what happens to education in the 1980s.

We are headed for a learning society in which people of all ages will be learning from multiple resources. The signs of the learning society already surround us. In city after city, record breaking crowds stood in line last summer to obtain tickets to the King Tut exhibits, and America's Number One magazine for the masses, The Reader's Digest (January, 1979) selected for its book of the month, a book by the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In the year just passed, millions remained glued to their television sets to try to understand human history as revealed in documentaries such as Roots and Holocaust. An estimated one-third of the huge and ever-expanding paperback book industry is devoted to teaching people how to do everything from fixing the plumbing to fixing a marriage. Those signs of the times bear testimony to the existence of a flourishing learning society.

Visions of a learning society are equally vivid when we look at official counts of the number of adults participating in group or organized educational activities of one sort and another. National surveys estimate that between 17 million (Boaz, 1978) and 32 million (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974) adults are currently participating in classes, workshops, job training, discussion groups, or some other form of organized instruction. One in every three American adults will probably join with others in some form of organized learning endeavor this year. That is a very substantial learning force with a head count two to three times as great as the total number of college students enrolled for degree credit.

There are a number of factors contributing to the growth of the learning society. The most obvious is the escalation of the rate of change itself. Margaret Mead once observed that the world in which we live is not the world we were born in nor is it the world in which we will die. In the world I was born into, for example, the average citizen had no experience with television, commercial airplane travel, credit cards, computers, or frozen foods. Generations used to change faster than the world about them, and thus parents and teachers could pass along to the new generation the lessons they needed to know to get along in the world. Now, however, the world

changes faster than the generations, and it is clear that no education will last a lifetime. The rate of change is so rapid in many academic disciplines that professional obsolescence can be measured in terms of half-life, a measure borrowed from nuclear physics. The half-life of a professional's competence is the time after completion of professional training when, because of new developments, practicing professionals become roughly half as competent as they were upon graduation. The growth of new knowledge in medicine has been so rapid, for example, that the half-life of physicians is estimated at about five years. In my own field of psychology, it is thought to be about ten years (Dubin, 1972).

This should raise questions in every discipline about the purpose of education. If it is simply to help students master subject matter content, then we must give some attention to the time lag. If that time lag is not to become excessive, lifelong learning will be a necessity for college teachers, but that is a problem too. One study estimated that a compulsive well-read engineering psychologist would need to read 40 articles and books a day to keep up with current knowledge--and the literature of psychology is not nearly as voluminous as that in biology or chemistry (Dubin, 1972). The incredible explosion of knowledge also makes it difficult to find agreement on just what content a college graduate should know. In my opinion, higher education in general needs to give far more attention than we are currently giving to the development of skills for lifelong learning. I can't get very excited about the renewed enthusiasm for curricular revision as long as the debate is over content. The question that should be faced in periods of escalating change is not what students should know but how we can help them develop the skills to keep on learning.

If anything could change faster than knowledge these days, it has to be American lifestyles. We are moving away from the "linear lifeplan" in which education is for the young, work for the middle aged, and enforced leisure for the elderly, toward a blended lifeplan in which education, work, and leisure go on concurrently throughout life. So far in history, there has been a pronounced tendency to increase the separation between education, work, and leisure by keeping young people in school and off the labor market and by forcing older persons into ever-earlier retirement (Best & Stern, 1976). But now there seems to be growing dissatisfaction on the part of almost everyone with that formula for protecting jobs for the middle years of life. Sociologists are observing the rise of what has been called "rights consciousness" or the "psychology of entitlement." Today almost everyone feels entitled to a job. At the same time, almost everyone feels entitled to education and to full enjoyment of their leisure hours. Older people have insisted upon their right to work if they want to, and Congress has endorsed that right through a roll-back of mandatory retirement. Young people are showing increasing dissatisfaction with long years of uninterrupted schooling, especially when there is no guarantee of the well-paid and meaningful job to which they feel entitled at the other end of the educational pipeline. There has been a steady increase in the number of students exercising their right to a job. The majority of college students today are already in the labor market--all of which brings about the phenomenon of the part-time student, part-time worker, part-time vacationer. There is nothing very exceptional anymore about the individual who attends college, holds a job, and takes off for what would once have been considered extravagant leisure weekends of skiing or surfing.

It is not only young people who feel entitled to the good-life as a blend of work, education, and leisure. Women, dissatisfied with unidimensional lives, are flooding into the labor market--and into education--in unprecedented numbers. Blue collar workers feel entitled, as never before, to a life beyond the factory. Labor unions are negotiating education and vacations into contracts. There is a rising desire on the part of the rank-and-file for benefits beyond mere wages--benefits that enhance the quality of life.

The point is that after a long human history of moving steadily toward a linear lifeplan, people from all walks of life seem to be opting for a blended lifeplan. Most students work; at least one-third of all workers take classes; and leisure has become big business, attracting money and time from young and old alike.

At the same time that there is a blending of life activities for individuals, there is a blending of function among the organizations of society. Schools no longer have a monopoly on education, nor do businesses tend strictly to business. Employers are increasingly into education, conducting on-the-job training for employees, workshops for professionals, and think-tanks for executives. Travel agencies are adding educational components to packaged tours at the same time that alumni offices and university extension services are adding packaged tours to credit-bearing courses. Although 85 percent of today's adult learners are high school graduates, colleges and universities provide only about a third of the organized instruction for adults. Increasingly, the learning society consists of a rich mixture of community learning resources, and no

educational provider has any monopoly on the learning market. And so education is expanding into both the lifestyle and the lifespan of the populace.

As learning becomes a lifelong activity, education is perceived as a characteristic of the learner rather than an offering of the provider. Attention turns from teaching to learning, and that shift will have considerable impact on traditional education.

The implications for education show clearly in the definition of lifelong learning adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 1976:

"The term 'life-long . . . learning', . . . denotes an overall scheme aimed both at restructuring the existing education system and at developing the entire educational potential outside the education system; in such a scheme men and women are the agents of their own education. . . ."

That definition contains three basic ideas about the nature of lifelong learning: One is that the entire formal educational system, from elementary school through graduate school, should be restructured to develop lifelong learners. Second, the UNESCO statement makes clear that it is not just schools and colleges that are to serve as the targets for improved education. Rather, the world is full of people, organizations, and other learning resources that can be marshalled in behalf of lifelong learning. Third, this definition stresses the importance of helping people become self-directed learners, the active agents of their own education.

We in the United States tend to take a more limited view of lifelong learning. Despite lip service to the idea that lifelong learning includes cradle to the grave learning, we rarely think of the lifelong learning movement as a call for the reform of elementary education. Yet, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the education of the lifelong learner must begin very early. We are quite unlikely to develop a lifelong learner through trying to entice an adult who hated school as a youngster back into the classroom.

Survey research is unanimous in concluding that the single most important predictor of whether an adult will engage in further education is past level of educational attainment (Cross, 1979). Learning is addictive; the more education people have, the more they want and the more they take advantage of available opportunities. A high school graduate is three times as likely as an elementary school graduate to participate in adult education, and a college graduate is twice as likely as a high school graduate to be engaged in educational activities as an adult (Cross, 1979).

There is good news and bad news in those statistics. The good news is that we are quite unlikely to run out of people to educate. Almost anything that any college or other educational provider does to educate people stimulates rather than satiates the market. An excellent example of such stimulation exists in the impact of Roots on the educational resources of the society. Not only did this nationally televised course in black history result in increased registration in formal courses in history, black studies, and anthropology, but records bureaus and libraries reported significant increases in requests for help with self-directed learning projects on family history.

Far from competing for students in a finite educational market, educational providers in the learning society are actually creating new demands for their services. The market for education has been stimulated in part by the fact that the populace is becoming better educated with each passing generation. Eighty-four percent of today's young people between the ages of twenty and twenty-four now have a high school education or more, compared with 66 percent of the parent generation and only 45 percent of the grandparent generation (Bureau of the Census, 1977b). Given the addictive nature of education, the rising educational attainment of the nation will almost certainly result in increased demand for adult learning opportunities and in increased participation in a wide variety of options.

The bad news is that the educational gap between the well educated and the poorly educated in this nation is increasing. Research is clear in documenting the fact that adult education, viewed as the sum total of all organized learning opportunities for adults, serves largely the privileged classes. As a group, today's adult learners are disproportionately young, white, well-educated, and making good salaries. Furthermore, the situation with respect to equal opportunity is becoming worse for all groups except women. The greatest increases in educational participation between 1969 and 1975 were made by white women with college degrees and family incomes of \$25,000 a year and over. The rate of growth for women was more than double that for men; adult learning activities for the college educated increased twice as fast as for high school graduates; and the participation for whites increased eight times as fast as that for blacks (Boaz, 1978). Thus not only are white, well-educated people with good jobs already overrepresented on the

adult education scene, they are making much faster progress than their less well-educated peers, and the educational gap between the "haves" and "have nots" is increasing.

There are many things that can and should be done to encourage the participation of those who stand to gain the most from further education--better information about available opportunities, convenient and effective educational and career counseling for adults, equity in financial aid, and more job-relevant education--to cite a few of the more prominent proposals. While these steps may be desirable, they seem to me to ignore the fundamental importance of personal motivation. It is reasonable to suggest that the same factors that led to the early school leaving of the poorly educated are responsible for their reluctance to return.

The statistics regarding educational participation make it painfully apparent that schools and colleges are not yet dealing adequately with the problems of the undereducated. We are not educating them very well when they are with us, and neither are we motivating them for their future role as lifelong learners. Thus the UNESCO call for restructuring the existing educational system is a necessary first step into an equitable learning society.

The other two elements of the UNESCO definition are equally important, namely the development of self-directed learners and the full utilization of the learning resources of the community. The multiple learning resources of the learning society are a reality of the 1980s, one that few academics are even aware of. The education budgets of some businesses dwarf those of major universities. Last year AT&T spent 900 million dollars on the education of its employees, compared to about 200 million dollars for MIT. An engineer at

AT&T with Masters degrees in applied mechanics and electrical engineering described his life in the learning society this way, "I'm forty-five, and I don't think there have been more than two or three years of my adult life when I haven't taken classes" (Luxenberg. 1978/79). Some active learners are volunteers, some are coerced, and some are required to take courses and pass tests if they wish to retain professional licenses. Certified Public Accountants in the State of California, for example, must now complete eighty hours of instruction every two years if they wish to retain their licenses. The American Institute for Certified Public Accountants has a seven million dollar budget for continuing education this year, mostly for materials and workshops to be provided under the auspices of the state associations with limited roles for professional schools and colleges. The number of learners served by professional associations and private industry is equal to the number of undergraduate and graduate students in all colleges and universities combined, and the number of learners served by city recreation departments and community organizations also exceeds that of higher education (Peterson, 1979).

If you are silently wondering what all this has to do with the education of undergraduates, let me remind you that we in higher education maintain that we are preparing people to live in the real world. The real world today is a broad based learning society, and it is critically important that colleges and universities be clear about their own role in this world that didn't exist when colleges were founded.

Having made the point, I hope, that colleges and universities should view the learning Society as a far broader social movement than the "greying of the campus," I want to move to the third element of reform suggested in the UNESCO definition--that men and women should become the "active agents of their own education." By using the term "active agents" UNESCO is not suggesting that learners should become independent of schools and other providers of educational services. Rather they are urging that learners should be encouraged to take a more active role in the direction and form of their education. There is concern in the United States right now that the new wave of enthusiasm for the education of adults has more to do with the self-serving interests of college administrators and faculty for the protection of academic jobs than with the more altruistic and responsible interests of serving society through the development of self-directing learners. Warren Ziegler (1977, pp. 15-16) a futurist at Syracuse University, deplores what he sees as "a strong trend towards getting more and more citizens to conduct their learning activities within the organizational arrangements of the formal educational system." His recommendation is to "leave adult learners alone to conduct their learning in ways and about concerns which meet their own criteria and standards." He advocates a public policy that would encourage a highly diversified system in which choice and responsibility remain with individual learners.

I share Ziegler's concern that the interests of colleges in recruiting adult learners could be counterproductive. The point of the learning society, after all, is not to create a society in which people become increasingly dependent on someone else to tell them what, when, and how to learn, but to give them the tools and the desire to become the active agents of their own education.

A broad understanding of the nature of the learning society contains no threat to formal institutions of education. They are not going to be weakened by sharing the educational society function with other agencies of society nor by striving for independence rather than dependence on the part of learners. Much as education from any provider in the learning society stimulates the market for other providers, so the creation of learners who are active agents in their education expands rather than restricts the role of educators. Let me give an example. One of the policy papers prepared for the Federal Task Force on Lifelong Learning (Moody, 1978) argued that present Federal policy gives far more support to direct services for citizens than to education to free people from the need for such direct services. The Ninety-First Congress, for example, voted appropriations of 250 million dollars for direct support of nutrition programs such as Meals-On-Wheels, while the amount provided for nutrition education was negligible. The argument is frequently made, but rarely heeded, that educating people to provide for themselves at all levels of education, is more enlightened economically as well as psychologically than the perpetuation of the welfare state.

I have tried to paint with a broad brush the picture of the learning society as I see it emerging in the 1980s. I have suggested that such a picture will demand new responses from colleges and universities, including the creation of new relationships with other educational providers and with adult learners in the society. But first and foremost, I believe that colleges will have to give major attention to preparing undergraduates for their future roles as lifelong learners. That requires helping students with three basic understandings: First, students should have some understanding

of the future and the certainty that lifelong learning will be a necessity and should be a pleasure. Most of today's education is rooted in the past. Teachers overemphasize what their generation knows, i.e., factual content, to the exclusion of how future generations might learn the new knowledge that will be essential for them. There is a rising interest now among some faculty in teaching courses about the future (See Toffler, 1974). That seems to me an important emphasis, with the pedagogical advantage of teaching students how to go beyond absorbing information from the past to formulating and thinking about the uses of knowledge.

Second, students need to understand themselves as learners, and third, they need to know how to select from multiple options those that are best for them. Despite twelve years spent in the full-time occupation of learning, college freshmen remain remarkably unsophisticated about what constitutes a good learning experience for them. And adults are not much better as knowledgeable consumers of educational services. College students know little about themselves as learners; they don't know much about the learning options available, and they have little understanding of how to match their learning needs to the available resources. Given the continuing escalation of change, the preparation of college students for their role as lifelong learners is the most important thing colleges can do for students.

I find some interesting parallels between what has been happening in the gourmet cooking and dining industry in recent years and what could happen in education were we to develop gourmet learners. By gourmet learners, I mean learners who know good education when they see it and who are sufficiently sophisticated to demand innovation and improvement. It is undeniable, I think, that knowledgeable consumers represent one of the most effective

routes to improved quality. The gourmet cooking movement has demanded and received a tremendous response from restaurateurs, manufacturers of cooking equipment, cooking schools, and publishers of specialized cookbooks and magazines dealing with everything from artichokes to wines. Without question, knowledgeable cooks with highly developed and sophisticated tastes have stimulated the economy of the cooking and dining industry. The more people know about foods, cooking, and nutrition, the more imaginative and responsive the industry must become. Were we really about the business of developing gourmet learners and responding to their needs, we would not be worrying about survival. While some professors insist that nothing will ever replace the standard classroom lecture as sound and efficient pedagogical technique, that is a little like saying that nothing will ever replace meat and potatoes as the standard American diet. Tastes do develop and change, and as people are exposed to alternatives, whether in diet or in education, large numbers are likely to find something that suits their particular needs better than the standard fare.

But let's face it, most learners whether traditional eighteen year olds or nontraditional forty year olds, are not gourmet learners. And educators must assume some responsibility for the lack of good taste in learning experiences that seems to predominate in today's market. Perhaps that is one reason for the growing concern about quality in education today. If learners don't know good education from bad, they must be protected through regulation, and there are many efforts now to bring so-called nontraditional alternatives for adults under closer regulation. To deal with the immediate problem that may be necessary, but in the long run it will be about as hard to prescribe education appropriate for the needs of widely varying

individuals as it is to prescribe good diet for the American public. A farm laborer has completely different nutritional needs from an urban office worker, and each must assume personal responsibility for fulfilling those needs if both are to remain healthy and physically fit.

Today's college student bodies have grown so diverse that there is no longer any such thing as a quality education that will meet the needs of all learners equally well. There are, to be sure, basic nutritional requirements, but student development will be enhanced only to the extent that the learning experiences are appropriate to the needs of the learner. The diversity of college student bodies will grow greater for almost every college in the nation during the 1980s. Not only is there the constant push to include previously underrepresented groups, but many colleges, through no choice of their own, are becoming more diverse through becoming less selective. Moreover, by 1986, part-time learners will constitute almost half of all college students in the nation. Most of the part-time students are coming from the ranks of full-time workers, but some are coming from the ranks of formerly full-time students. In any event, the age of college students has been increasing rapidly over the last decade and there is solid research evidence that on almost any dimension you care to think about, a representative group of forty year olds show greater diversity than a representative group of eighteen year olds--physically, psychologically, academically, and in educational goals. Dealing with the new diversity is a major challenge to educational institutions in the 1980s, and colleges will be successful to the extent that they can either select their clientele for homogeneity or deal with the diversity that comes walking through their opening doors.

I suggest that creating gourmet learners who know their own needs and who know how to provide for those needs from the multiple learning resources of the society should be the first priority of colleges in the 1980s. I further suggest that such a mission will demand major revision in how education is structured and in how teachers teach. I hope that the educational institutions of society will broaden their vision beyond narrow concerns about keeping classroom seats filled to providing leadership in the creation of the learning society.

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