

THE LEARNING SOCIETY:
CURRENT TRENDS AND PROBABLE FUTURES

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Most of us who work with adults in education have some kind of working definition for common phrases that keep cropping up even if we never make our explanations explicit. We know what we mean when we talk about "lifelong learning" or the "learning society"--or do we? When I was writing my book on Adults as Learners, I thought it would be a good idea to collect authoritative definitions of lifelong learning. By the time I had collected twenty more or less wordy definitions, I came across my favorite definition. Penny Richardson, who directed the Federal policy study of lifelong learning, after, I assume, having somewhat the same experience I had had juggling numerous and varied definitions, wrote that, "Lifelong education means anything you want it to mean" (1979, p.48). Thus, I thought I might start this discussion by telling you what I mean by the learning society.

The learning society has two major interpretations. One refers to the fact that we live in a society which is increasingly dependent on knowledge. Know-how and ideas have replaced land and machines as the economic assets of our

Prepared for presentation at the International Conference on Lifelong Education, University of Maine at Presque Isle, October 26, 1984.

society. Where we once talked about the agrarian society and then the industrial society, we now talk about the learning society.

The second interpretation refers to the pervasiveness of the activity of learning. When learning spreads beyond schools and colleges to pervade the workplace, senior citizens centers, and ships-at-sea, and when people of all ages and from all walks of life participate in learning activities, then we can legitimately refer to the society in which all of this takes place as a learning society.

Alvin Toffler (1980) says that society is currently riding a great wave of change which he labels The Third Wave. The First Wave, which was the agricultural revolution, took thousands of years to play itself out. The Second Wave, the industrial revolution, took about three hundred years. "The Third Wave," says Toffler, "will sweep across history and complete itself in a few decades" (1980, p.10).

Toffler uses the metaphor of waves to suggest that there is a leading edge of change that begins to form while other waves are still rolling and cresting across the planet. The leading edge of the industrial revolution, for example, began to form in Europe while the agricultural revolution was still changing the society in other parts of the world from migratory foraging groups to scientific agriculture.

The leading edge of the Third Wave, with its high technology and knowledge-based economy, is colliding with the machine-based economy of the Second Wave in most of the industrialized nations

of the world today. You have only to read the daily newspaper to learn that governors are scrambling to shift their state's economy from "smoke-stack" to "high tech" in the belief that the fortunes of their state lie in the extent to which they can make the transition from the Second Wave economy to the Third Wave.

Riding Toffler's Third Wave are a number of scholars and authors who are encouraging America to invest in human resource development, which has achieved sufficient status in the business world to be known by its initials--HRD. Rosabeth Kanter, the respected Yale scholar on business management, talks about a renaissance in corporate America which emphasizes the importance of people for productivity and profits. She maintains that scientific management theories are "out" and human development is "in." Peters and Waterman, the authors of the best-selling book, In Search of Excellence, strike pretty much the same theme. They found that the most successful corporations in America are people-oriented. "If you want productivity and the financial rewards that go with it," they write, "you must treat your workers as your most important asset" (1982, p.238). The strategic resource today, says John Naisbitt in Megatrends, is information and the people who know how to use it.

The motivation for the rising concern of business with the development of human resources is largely economic, but the goal

of education for economic productivity received a big boost last year when the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its call for educational reform under the title, "A Nation at Risk." Their oft-quoted contention is that "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people" (1983, p.5). "Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence" they say, "are the new raw materials of international commerce...."(p.7).

The current concensus that the development of human resources is our top proprity today makes the point that education, which was once a privilege and then a right, has now become a necessity for nations as well as for individuals living in the information age.

The question of how individuals are coping with the demands of the learning society is a matter of major interest to adult educators, whether we work in industry, government, community agencies, colleges, or the military. There is good news and bad in the trends of the learning society as far as individuals are concerned.

The good news lies in recent changes in the distribution of education, work, and leisure in people's lives. Until quite recently in the history of industrialized nations, there has been a pronounced tendency to compress work activities into the middle years of life; non-work time has increased substantially at both ends of the age span. Young people

have been urged to remain in school longer and longer while older people, until just recently, have been forced into ever-earlier retirement. ~~There is~~ a growing dissatisfaction now, however, on the part of almost everyone with the linear lifeplan which consists of full-time education for the young, full-time work for the middle-aged, and full-time retirement for the elderly.

The assumptions of the linear life plan are basically these. First, that young people are quick, pliable, and able to learn easily, whereas older people lose the curiosity, the ability, and even the need for formal learning. Second, that there is a certain body of knowledge that once learned will prepare young people for life. The notion is that young people should spend full time absorbing the knowledge and wisdom of their elders. They will then be able to reciprocate by using that knowledge to contribute to the work of society, and having done that will retire to a well-deserved life of leisure.

Almost none of those assumptions hold true any more. Knowledge is literally exploding, and no education, no matter how good, will last a lifetime. New knowledge is created faster than it can be learned or taught. Between six thousand and seven thousand scientific articles are written each day, and information doubles every five and one-half years. In some fields of science, the obsolescence of knowledge is measured by the half life. The half life in medicine, for

example, is now thought to be about five years, meaning that five years out of medical school, half of all a physician's information is obsolete. In engineering, recent technological developments have not even been based on the same scientific and mathematical knowledge that provided the foundation for earlier models. Thus, engineers who have been out of school for more than a few years face the probability that the very foundations of their knowledge will become obsolete. They, along with their fellow workers across a wide variety of occupations will have to return to formal education periodically and to job specific education throughout their work lives.

The basic assumption of the linear life plan, that the middle years of life should be devoted to work, is fallacious because most of us will have to become active learners to keep our jobs or to advance in them, and increasingly many of us will choose to spend some of our leisure hours in educational activities.

The assumption that older people want to or should retire to a life of full-time leisure at the arbitrary age of sixty-five is the second assumption of the linear lifeplan that is called into question. The interest of older people in learning and their ability to continue learning is one of the most significant aspects of the learning society. This past summer, more than eighty thousand people aged sixty and over

attended classes on some seven hundred college campuses and folk schools throughout the United States, Europe, Great Britain, Israel, Mexico, and Scandinavia under the auspices of the Elderhostel Program. The extremely rapid growth of Elderhostel from two hundred students on four New Hampshire campuses in 1975 to eighty thousand students today demonstrates the fallacy of the assumption of the linear life plan that older adults wish to retire to a life of leisure and recreation. But it also demonstrates the more interesting truth that learning is pleasurable, enriches life, and may be pursued for the sheer joy and satisfaction of learning.

Although most retired people are happily freed from the necessity of pursuing learning and credit for its rewards in the market place, a growing number of older people are interested in college degrees for the personal satisfaction of having completed a defined program of learning. One of the high moments of the graduation ceremonies of the Regents External Degree in New York this spring came when a couple, who must have been in their seventies, walked across the stage hand-in-hand to receive their Bachelors Degrees after a lifetime devoted to work and raising a family. And so the second assumption of the linear life plan is no more valid than the first. Leisure is not enough for the later years of life; learning can add immeasurably to the satisfaction and pleasure

in the long life spans that lie ahead.

Finally, we turn to the third assumption of the linear life plan, which is that young people should devote full time to study and school work. That pattern will no doubt remain true for quite young children, but it is no longer true for young adults of traditional college age. Formerly full-time college students are becoming part-time workers almost as fast as formerly full-time workers are becoming part-time students, with the result that college attendance is rapidly becoming a part-time activity for people of all ages.

Last year 43 percent of all college students studying for credit were attending college on a part-time basis, and the National Center for Education Statistics predicts that before the end of this decade, part-time students will be the new majority on college campuses across the nation. Many college students are finding it necessary to work part-time because of escalating costs and decreasing financial aid. Others have decided that they are not ready for a solid diet of study, that stopping out is socially acceptable today, or that work experience enriches and makes more valuable their education.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for the rise of the part-time college student, however, is the rise of the community college in America. Half of all students who enter college

today enter community colleges, and the overwhelming majority of community college students are commuters who have adopted the blended life plan that is replacing the linear life plan in the learning society.

In the midst of the Third Wave economy, with its press for an educated work force, and the blended life plan with its new options for lifelong learning, lies the bad news in the current trends of the learning society.

The bad news is that those who are not caught up in the whirl of learning activities are thrown outward to the fringes of society. It is quite clear now that the people taking the greatest advantage of the new educational opportunities that are arising as a result of the learning society are those who are already among the best educated adults in the nation. A college graduate is roughly seven times as likely to be participating in some form of adult education as a high school drop-out, and the gap between the well educated and the poorly educated is widening rather than narrowing as the learning society picks up speed. The almost certain result is that as opportunities grow, so will the gap between the educational "haves" and "have nots."

The situation is far easier to understand than to remedy. Almost everything the college graduate does adds to the probability of further education, while almost everything the high school drop-out does militates against it. The college graduate frequently enters an employee training program,

works for a company or in an occupation that is likely, not only to support further education but to require it. College graduates typically belong to social and professional groups that discuss educational opportunities, and spouses and friends are supportive and admiring of educational accomplishments. And finally, those who continued in school long enough to graduate from college were usually happy and successful in school and are familiar with the procedures and people that inhabit educational institutions.

The situation is exactly the reverse for the poorly educated. They enter low paying jobs with few educational requirements and no educational benefits. They consort with friends and family who know little about education and may even be hostile to it; they lack the information networks to know about opportunities and the skills to take advantage of them. They are on the downward spiral with respect to education, and they become the hard core undereducated, taking up life styles and values that spawn new generations of undereducated.

Research shows that as new learning opportunities become available it is the already well educated who rush to take advantage of them. The poorly educated stay away in droves. We need not, however, be fatalists about the growing gap between the educational haves and have nots. Many forms of adult education constitute a critical link in the extension of education to underserved populations. There is little

chance, for example, that adults with low levels of educational attainment would be participating in the learning society without the intervention of educators who provide "low threat" learning opportunities.

There is good reason to think that there is a hierarchy of threat in educational opportunity and that adults will enter the learning society at the threat level that is tolerable for them (see Cross, 1981, Chapter 6). Among the most threatening of all educational opportunities is the traditional college classroom. The adult learner enters into the competition out of practice, unsure of her own skills, probably overestimating the skills of traditional college students, and often unfamiliar with the environment and practices of academe. Less threatening is non-credit adult education. There is some public commitment in joining a learning group, but tests and grades are not involved. The learner retains considerable control over the level of performance, and the atmosphere is collegial and friendly rather than competitive.

Another low threat learning opportunity is the course that can be received at home. We know from research, for example, that adults who build self confidence as learners by taking a television course at home are likely to venture out to try other forms of education as their interest and confidence grow. Similarly, adults who participate in

community and employer sponsored education frequently discover interests and abilities that carry them into other learning opportunities.

The increase in the number and variety of providers of educational services is one of the most visible and profound characteristics of the learning society. Schools and colleges today provide less than half of the organized learning opportunities for adults; most adult education is offered by a vast array of non-school providers including employers, community agencies, libraries, museums, labor unions, professional associations, the military services, and independent entrepreneurs. Education in the periphery of the learning society is growing faster than education in the core and many of the new providers offer much of what colleges do. They may offer credit, degrees, education leading to promotion, licensure, personal fulfillment, intellectual stimulation, and practical skills. Industry today allocates more money for education and training of employees than all fifty states combined allocate for higher education (Lynton, 1984). Aetna, Xerox, IBM, and other corporate giants have built campuses with classrooms and residence halls that rival anything offered in our most exclusive and expensive colleges.

One way to look at all of this educational activity on the part of corporations is to conclude that it constitutes

formidable competition for our colleges and universities-- and that it does. But the needs of the learning society are so great that education must necessarily become more disaggregated and dispersed across the organizations of society. Ernest Lynton, in his new study of emerging relationships between business and the universities, concludes that "All of the advanced management and executive training programs currently existing in colleges and universities in this country could not handle the combined needs of the corporate sector" (1984, p.60). At the same time, a senior officer of General Motors observes that industry would rather purchase educational services from colleges wherever that is possible than to develop their own in-house programs (Kost, 1980, 5.51). Clearly that is happening. Census Bureau data indicate an 84 percent increase in employer-financed training at community colleges between 1968 and 1978, and a 42 percent increase at four-year institutions. Such cooperation among providers will become increasingly necessary as we move into the learning society. The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) has perhaps been the most aggressive creator of networks with non-colleges. The goal of their Keep America Working project is to promote the use of partnerships between industry and community colleges at local, state, and even national and international levels. Most recently, the Aetna Corporation with some thirty thousand employees in four hundred locations throughout the United States, has been exploring the

feasibility of decentralizing its training by using community colleges as local training agencies (Community and Junior College Journal, May, 1984, p.44). The AACJC has already put in place a number of nationwide cooperative agreements between labor unions, employers, and community colleges, and most community colleges now have working contracts with local employers.

It is by no means clear, however, that traditional schools and colleges will have any monopoly on the provision of education for adults. Everyone, it seems, wants in the act, and there is competition, cooperation, ignorance about what anyone else is doing, and plenty of confusion about who should be doing what for whom. At the same time that community colleges are seeking a larger share of the training function that used to be the domain of industry, some industries are crossing the line into the teaching of basic skills, which used to be the province of schools and community colleges. Just last month, in a precedent setting agreement with the U.S. Department of Labor, the Prudential Insurance Company agreed to provide remedial education for more than three thousand rejected job applicants, most of whom were minority high school graduates who, nevertheless, failed to meet minimal standards in reading and math (Time, September 3, 1984, p.60).

It is hard to evaluate at this point in our transition into the learning society whether the blurring of educational

functions is desirable or undesirable. It is, however, clear that the distinctions that once prevailed between credit and non-credit learning and between education and job training are increasingly blurred--at least when applied to providers. Colleges are heavily involved in training as well as in education, and the programs of many corporations contain as much emphasis on theory, research, and personal development as those of any college. Consider, for example, this description of IBM's Systems Research Institute:

The Institute's educational philosophy is in many ways that of a university. It stresses fundamental conceptual education and allows students to choose those courses that will best nurture their own development. The intent is to stimulate and challenge, to teach the theoretical and the practical, to discuss and argue different viewpoints, to broaden the individual, focusing on his or her special skills (IBM Systems Institute, 1981, p.6).

Contrast that broad educational philosophy with this course description taken from a college catalogue. The course is called Airline Reservations and carries three academic credits. The description reads as follows:

Prepares students for airline employment opportunities through a familiarization of the procedures involved in airline reservations, the use of official airline guides, and airline route structures.

If one were given a blind sample of course descriptions today, it would be hard to tell whether they came from industry,

colleges, museums, labor unions, or professional associations. And it would be even harder to tell whether they carried degree credit or not.

It used to be that people had to go to a college to get a degree, but today there are all sorts of ways to get a college degree. The New York Board of Regents has granted more than 2000 college degrees since its founding in 1972 without ever offering a college course. The Regents External Degree was established to consolidate the experiential and formal learning of adults through certifying learning through tests, transfer of college credit, credit for college-relevant work experience, credit for courses taken from employers, and so forth. Both the New York Regents and the American Council on Education have published huge catalogues of courses offered by industry and governmental agencies that are recommended for college credit. Last year, the ACE catalogue contained credit recommendations for more than two thousand courses offered by more than 180 corporations and government agencies.

Another way to get a college degree without going to college is to attend one of the new corporate colleges that are springing up across the nation. A 1983 study (Hawthorne, et al., 1983) located fourteen "corporate colleges," that have obtained degree-granting authority from the appropriate state agency. In the Boston area alone, there are at least four corporate colleges offering bachelors and masters degrees in fields as diverse as health sciences, software engineering,

business management, and banking and finance. These colleges were founded by a hospital, a manufacturer of computers, a consulting firm, and a bank.

Lest we in the educational establishment think that new providers are invading our turf, let us look at the recent expansion of colleges into non-degree instruction. Although more adults than ever seem to be interested in college credentials, the expansion of non-credit education for adults has been even more astounding over the past decade or so--ever since colleges learned that their fortunes rise and fall with the demographics of the birth rate. Between 1968 and 1978 more than one thousand colleges entered into non-credit instruction for the first time. Today it is the norm rather than the exception for degree-granting institutions to be involved in non-degree instruction. In fact, the non-degree programs of many colleges and universities regularly enroll more students than the degree-granting divisions, and some of these non-degree programs are more prestigious than the traditional degree programs. The Advanced Management Institute at the Harvard Business School, for example, is a three month non-credit program for the top executives of major corporations, and most professors would rather teach in this non-credit adult program than in the regular MBA program. Adult education is no longer the poor kid on the block. Indeed the riches of many non-credit adult programs are eyed with envy by traditional college departments

A lot of people are going to be marketing adult education in the future, including private entrepreneurs offering workshops on every conceivable subject from wholistic health to financial planning, and businesses exploiting the educational power of technologies ranging from audio-cassettes to computer programs. Xerox Learning Systems (and the name of this Xerox subsidiary gives a clue to their intentions) is offering a \$100 speed reading home study course with a money-back guarantee if the buyer fails to double or triple reading speed and comprehension in ten hours. While adult education has more at stake in satisfying the customer than traditional education, most of us are not ready to offer money-back guarantees.

So far, adult education has been largely a voluntary activity. It is getting less so as employers and professions press people to keep up with new developments in their field. But in the 1980s, adults participate in adult education as long as it meets their personal needs. This simple fact makes it a very different enterprise from that of traditional education. Adult education must satisfy the consumer, and the adult market is both more critical and more pragmatic than the traditional market.

The overwhelming majority of adults want to learn in order to take action--to do something, produce something, or decide something. Relatively few are interested in learning for the sake of learning.

Literally hundreds of surveys have been conducted over the years to determine the interests of adult learners, and it can now be stated with considerable confidence that the single most important educational goal for adults is career advancement. But as we enter the learning society it will be important to conceptualize lifelong learning more broadly.

Cy Houle's (1961) classic study of the motivations of adult learners found three types of learners. The largest number were "goal-oriented." These are the pragmatic learners who want a specific course to accomplish a well defined goal--to learn better business practices, how to upholster a chair, or how to speak before an audience. The second sub-group were labeled "activity-oriented" learners. They participate in classes because they want to join the class to escape loneliness or boredom, to meet new people, to amass credits, or for some other reason not directly related to the subject matter of the class. This group is not large, but it is significant, and these adults are found largely in non-credit, generally low cost, adult education classes. The third sub-group, Houle labeled "learning-oriented"; that is those who pursue learning for its own sake. They seem to possess a fundamental desire to know and to grow through learning, and their activities are constant and lifelong. Most are avid readers; they join groups, and even choose jobs for the learning potential

offered; they watch serious programs on television and make extensive background preparations when traveling in order to appreciate what they see. This group represents a very small, but growing population as the educational attainment of the population rises.

If educators are to serve the learning society well, we will have to stay a step or two ahead of the general public. We need to begin now to think about the full range of educational opportunities that will be required in the 21st Century and we need to conceptualize adult learning more broadly on the one hand, and to target programs more specifically on the other.

In conclusion, I believe that the most central question for adult educators in the near future is to answer for themselves the question that John Naisbitt labels "The question for the 1980s--what business are you really in?" (1982, p.85).

If we are in the business of responding to consumer demand, then we must be prepared to compete with other providers and be constantly alert to new opportunities.

If we are in the business of serving the demands of the Third Wave society for educated workers, then we must be flexible, able to respond quickly and appropriately to the changing demands of industry, and be able to show that our training resulted in a better bottom line at less cost than in-house training.

If we are in the business of serving the general welfare of the learning society, then we must be prepared to lobby effectively for public funds, recruit underserved populations, and demonstrate that education improved the quality of life for participants.

I suspect that most of you are in one or more of these businesses. I hope that during the remainder of this conference you will be able to think and talk about what business you are really in. Whatever business you elect is bound to be stimulating and challenging, and to push you to keep up with your world and its needs for lifelong learning.

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