

WHO IS EDUCATING ADULTS?

K. Patricia Cross
Harvard Graduate School of Education

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

Prepared for presentation at the CAEL Conference at
Mountain Bell Training Center, Lakewood, Colorado,
October 4, 1984

have replaced land and machines as the economic assets of our 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.

If you accept these two interpretations of the learning society, then the broad implications for higher education would appear to be these: first, if knowledge is the chief economic asset in society, then colleges must hold a position of high esteem and high importance to society. And second, if learning is pervasive throughout the organizations and people of society, then colleges are only one of many providers of education for adults--first among equals, so to speak.

I would like to take the first few minutes this morning to talk about the emergence of the learning society, and then I will spend the remaining time talking about the impact of the learning society on educators. My goal is to set this discussion in the context of your conference

theme, "Higher Education and the Adult Learner: Focus on New Partnerships," and also to lay before this distinguished and diverse panel of respondents some observations and thoughts that might spark further discussion.

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 from migratory foraging groups to scientific agriculture in other parts of the world. 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.

Recently, a number of authors, who write mostly about business organizations and the economy, have promoted the thesis of dramatic change in the economic power-base of corporate America. Rosabeth Kanter, the respected Yale scholar on business management, talks about a renaissance in corporate America which emphasizes the importance of people to productivity and profits. She maintains that scientific management theories are "out" and human development is "in." It goes almost without saying that if business is going to turn from designing management systems to developing human capabilities, then education and the learning society have enormous economic value.

Peters and Waterman (1982), 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. They are "truly unusual in their ability to achieve extraordinary results through ordinary people.... We are talking about tough-minded respect for the individual," they say, "and the willingness to train him, to set reasonable and clear expectations for him, and to grant him practical autonomy to step out and contribute directly to his job" (p.239). (That is one of those quotes where one wishes the authors had suffered the awkwardness of our language to make explicit the rising importance of women to corporate success, but the point is that if business is going to bet its future and its profits on the knowledge and ideas of

people, those people are going to have to be well educated.) Remember, that these authors are talking not just about so-called leaders and decision makers but about the "average Joe and the average Jane" who are being encouraged to think, to learn, and to contribute actively to their jobs. The fact that some of the hierarchies in business are being replaced by flatter organizational patterns means that individuals in even modest supervisory positions are being asked to go beyond providing information to higher echelons to making decisions and understanding the role of their activities in the broader context of the organization (Lynton, 1984).

No doubt most of you have been reading something about these new theories on business management. Many of them are best sellers in education as well as in business. My point in reviewing the dependence of the Third Wave on knowledge and learning is to set the stage for some discussion of the impact of this interpretation of the learning society on higher education.

The pressures for change on colleges and universities are sufficient now to call for a new lens through which to view the changing role of higher education in society. That new lens might be likened to a wide-angle lens which includes a great variety of educational providers and an unprecedented diversity of learners of all ages.

Looking through that new lens of the learning society, we would see a number of dramatic changes taking place in the center of the picture where the focus is clear. Around the periphery, the picture is somewhat more blurred, but that is because we are used to looking at education through small low-powered lenses that focus only on traditional providers of education such as schools and colleges. When we get the full picture of the learning society, we will find a dynamic scene with constant interaction among educational providers and new and changing options for learners throughout the life span.

One aspect of the learning society that is in clear focus right now is a change in the distribution of education, work, and leisure in people's lives. Throughout 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 remaining in school longer and longer while older people, until just recently, have been forced into ever-earlier retirement. There is a growing dissatisfaction now 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. 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 professional colleagues across a wide variety of disciplines, will have to return to formal education periodically, and universities will have to begin to think of alumni, not as donors and loyal boosters of the institution, but as permanent students.

It is time to replace the obsolete metaphor of academic institutions as "ivory tower" organizations with a more modern description, and I would suggest the metaphor of "permeable membrane." Academics, both faculty and students, will flow in and out of colleges and universities, through the light permeable membrane that separates--almost imperceptably now--the "community of scholars" from the "community of the whole."

Few people realize how much even the major research universities, which are always thought of as the slowest to change, have already moved in the direction of serving life-long learning. At the University of California, for example, there are ten times as many students enrolled in continuing education as in the standard degree programs, and almost 80 percent of those continuing education students already have graduate or professional degrees (Stern, 1983). Although the Harvard Extension School was established in 1910, it has doubled in size just within the past decade, and 75 percent of these students already have bachelors degrees. Ninety-five percent of them say they are not actively pursuing any

degree, yet 80 percent take their classes seriously enough to pay the extra \$50 needed to get credit for the course (Finegold, 1984). Lifelong learners at many colleges and universities represent the new breed of students in the learning society, which consists of a mixture of professionals keeping up and adults pursuing personal enrichment through education.

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 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 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 the 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.

I coined the term blended life plan (Cross, 1981) to suggest that increasingly the three activities of life --education, work, and leisure--will take occur concurrently

throughout the lifespan. Schools, colleges, industries, community agencies must, I believe, prepare for the inevitability of lifelong learning and the blended life plan.

Happily, the organizations of society are already well on the way toward the implementation of lifelong learning. 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 provided by a vast array of non-collegiate providers, many of whom offer everything colleges do and more. They may offer credit, degrees, education leading to promotion, licensure, personal fulfillment, intellectual stimulation, and practical skills. Industry, for example, currently 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, pp. 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, p.51). At the present time about 27 percent of the corporate executives polled by the Conference Board, a non-profit business research organization, said that some or most of the education they provide for their employees should have been the responsibility of schools and colleges (Lusterman, 1977, p.63). Indeed, the study showed that more than one-third of the large corporations in the United States are providing basic skills instruction to make up for the deficiencies of high school education (Lusterman, 1977, p.54).

Clearly in focus, as we look through the wide-angle lens of the learning society is the dramatic increase in the number of providers of educational services and the mounting confusion about who does what for whom. Currently, we are in a transition stage with respect to the providers of educational services. Earlier in our history,

schools taught readin', writin' and 'rithmetic and businesses took apprentices to teach them the tools of the trade, but today the roles of educational providers are becoming increasingly blurred. The distinction that we used to make between the training offered by industry and the education offered by colleges is difficult to maintain--at least when it is 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.

The professional educational activities of professional associations already surpass those of colleges and universities, reaching an estimated five to six million people annually, compared to three to four million for college and university extension programs. Consider as one example, the work of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA). Most of their annual educational budget of seven million dollars, goes into the provision of materials, books, and programmed instruction for use in meeting the mandated educational requirements of the accounting profession (Stern, 1979). The American Management Association operates another educational empire. They conduct more than 3200 programs annually, enrolling some 100,000 learners. But even their far-flung educational programs have no corner on the growing market for business education. It is estimated that three thousand different providers, many of them private entrepreneurs, conduct some 40,000 business seminars year year. It may be that the providers of educational services are finding their appropriate market niche, meeting new needs as they see them. On the other hand, education is a labor-intensive, expensive service, and the learning society is going to have to learn

how to marshall its resources to distribute learning opportunities efficiently and effectively. As we move into the learning society there is a clear need for more conversations and more partnerships to clarify the most appropriate roles for educational providers.

A problem related to the blurring of educational functions among providers is the loss of distinction between credit and non-credit learning. I cited earlier some figures demonstrating the confusion--at least in the minds of keepers of statistics--over degree credit in the learning society. Most of the people registered for credit at the Harvard and California Extension Schools, for example, already have degrees. They are non-degree students doing their learning at degree-granting institutions. In fact, the non-degree programs of some major colleges and universities regularly enroll more students than the degree-granting divisions, and some of these huge schools have become the major money-making arms of higher education--a fact that has not escaped the notice of resource-starved colleges. Between 1968 and 1978 more than one thousand colleges entered the non-credit education business for the first time. Today it is the norm rather than the exception for degree-granting colleges to be involved in non-degree instruction.

Just across the street of the learning society, however, non-colleges are beginning to get involved in degree-granting programs. 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 non-colleges offering bachelors and masters degrees in fields as diverse as health sciences, software engineering, business management, and banking and finance. Nature abhors a vacuum, not only in the physical world, but in the world of goods and services too. New England is filled with colleges and universities of every description, but some needed services--especially for part-time working adults--were not being provided, and new providers rushed in to fill the vacuum created by the sudden on-rush of need for lifelong education.

As anyone familiar with CAEL and its impressive work on behalf of adult learners knows, it is increasingly easy to convert non-credit learning into college degrees. Just a decade ago only about one-third of American colleges granted credit if students could demonstrate on standardized examinations that they knew the material; today 84 percent of all colleges grant credit-by-examination. Ten years ago, only 14 percent of the colleges would consider granting credit for experiential learning; today 40 percent do (Stadtman, 1980).

Historically, colleges have been reasonably generous in accepting credits of other colleges; today they are increasingly likely to endorse learning regardless of its source. The

American Council on Education's Office of Education Credit lists over two thousand courses offered by more than 180 corporations and government agencies that appear worthy of college credit to university faculty members conducting on-site visits.

Illustrations of the blurring of once distinctive functions of education could be extended, but my point is that the role of the various educational providers in the learning society is far from clear, and that blurring of functions rather than distinctiveness seems to be the trend.

Maybe that is good. Perhaps the essence of the learning society is that teaching and learning will spread throughout the organizations of society and across the years of peoples' lives. Certainly those are the trends that seem in clear focus today as we look through the wide-angle lens. They are, however, largely unplanned and unexamined. The purpose of conferences such as this one, I presume, is to take a look at what is happening and what needs to happen. The questions for examination seem to be these:

1. Who should do what in the learning society? Should providers play distinctive roles or is the blending and merging that seems to be taking place the essence of the learning society? This question can be asked at all levels. Ernest Lynton, for example, says that colleges must "wipe out the dividing line between 'regular' and 'continuing education'

(Lynton, 1984, p.74). That would be a blending action. Lynton is also a "blender" when it comes to the college curriculum, maintaining that "Colleges and universities are generally inflexible and unresponsive, and tend to be too abstract and too theoretical" (p.69). "The focus of higher education is now almost entirely on the acquisition of knowledge," he says, "and no longer on the competence to use it" (p.67). Will the learning society be better served if colleges adapt the curriculum to the needs of employers or if they stick to their academic knitting? Should we make sharper the distinction between "training" and "education," and who should provide which, or will we be better off if providers fill needs as they see them? Should corporations be offering college degrees? Should colleges be emphasizing non-credit education? For that matter, should credit education be subsidized, while non-credit education is expected to be self-supporting?

Some of the most far-reaching and profound questions concern whether we seek greater distinctiveness of functions or whether we direct our efforts to greater cooperation and merger in common concerns. Partnerships can be formed around cooperation on common concerns or on defining the unique strengths of the partners and urging each to make a distinctive contribution to the common enterprise of educating adults for the learning society.

2. The second major issue raised by the emergence of the learning society is the role to be played by faculty members. I think it is fair to say that many people consider faculty in the abstract to be a major bottle neck to innovation and change in higher education. The academic procedures of faculty review and oversight are so slow and inefficient that many employers have found it easier to establish their own education divisions than to go through the frustrating business of setting up partnerships with colleges. Even colleges find it easier to go around the "regular" faculty by setting up special offices of continuing education or community relations whose business it is to get things done in a reasonably efficient manner by going outside the traditional academic procedures. And finally, some of the most entrepreneurial faculty find it easier and more profitable to bypass academe and to set up their own consulting services to industry. What role should college faculty members play in the learning society? What role can/will faculty-development programs play in educating faculty to the needs of the learning society?

3. Finally, there is the matter of establishing procedures and networks for communication and cooperation among educators throughout the learning society. How are we to establish working relationships among educators working in schools and colleges, business and industry, community and governmental organizations, libraries and museums, the military? In the

United States, the fifty states have primary responsibility for education. In a study just completed (Cross and McCartan, 1984) my co-author and I identified four approaches currently used by the state governments to move us into the learning society. (1) The state can take an essentially hands-off or laissez-faire stance; (2) it can offer encouragement and incentives for adults to learn and to providers to offer appropriate services; (3) it can intervene to actively promote access or regulate quality; and (4) it can offer services or support directly.

Conferences such as this one which bring educators together over common concerns will go a long way toward defining the issues and creating personal networks, but ultimately we are all citizens of the learning society and we will have to determine the policies under which the learning society will operate.

I hope I have been able both to describe the trends which are taking us into the learning society and to raise some questions about whether we want to go in the directions in which we are headed and if so, how we might best get there. It is an exciting road we have chosen to travel, as educators with a special interest in adults as learners and as citizens of the learning society.

REFERENCES

- Cross, K. Patricia. Adults as Learners. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981.
- Cross, K. Patricia and McCartan, Anne-Marie. Adult Learning: State Policies and Institutional Practices. Washington, D.C.: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Reports, 1984.
- Finegold, David. "Extending Harvard--to a Degree," The Harvard Independent. Commencement, 1984.
- Hawthorne, E.M., Libby, P.A. and Nash, N.S. "The Emergence of Corporate Colleges." Journal of Continuing Higher Education, Fall, 1983.
- IBM Systems Research Institute Bulletin. New York: IBM Systems Research Institute, 1981.
- Kanter, Rosabeth. The Change Masters. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.
- Kost, R.J. "Competition and Innovation in Continuing Education," in Alford, H.J. (ed.) Power and Conflict in Continuing Education. Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1980.
- Lusterman, Seymour. "Education in Industry" Report No. 719. New York: The Conference Board, 1977.
- Lynton, Ernest A. The Missing Connection Between Business and the University. New York: Macmillan, 1984.
- Peters, Thomas J. and Waterman, Robert H. Jr. In Search of Excellence. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.
- Richardson, P.L. "Lifelong Education and Politics." In Policies for Lifelong Education. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1979.
- Stadtman, Verne A. Academic Adaptations: Higher Education Prepares for the 1980s and 1990s. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1980.
- Stern, Milton R. "Competition in Continuing Education in the 80s." Paper delivered at the University of Keele, United Kingdom, April 11, 1979.
- _____. "How Can We Keep Them Educated?" Paper delivered at the University of Michigan, March 22, 1983.
- Toffler, Alvin. The Third Wave. New York: Bantam Books, 1980.