

RESPONDING TO LEARNING NEEDS IN THE 1980s

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The beginning of the new year and a new decade seems an appropriate time 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 student unrest and confrontation. But despite the attention given to dissension, 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.

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 campus. Feelings of optimism that intellectual leadership would do unto others has changed to feelings of resignation that educational institutions will be done unto.

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

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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.

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 this summer to obtain tickets to the King Tut exhibits. Recently, America's Number One magazine for the masses, The Reader's Digest (January, 1979) selected a book by the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for its book section. 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 encouraging 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 (Dubin, 1972). 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). My guess is that the half-life for education may lie between medicine and

psychology. That should be a sobering thought to the graduate students among you--that one-half of the content that you are working so hard to learn right now will be obsolete in five to ten years. Thus graduate school is not the glorious end of your professional education, but rather the beginning of it. The escalation of change in the society has profound implications for what, how, when, and where students learn.

It looks as though American society is 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). There seems to be growing dissatisfaction now, however, on the part of almost everyone, with this 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 which permits learning, work, and leisure to go on concurrently.

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 only 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.

Education is expanding into the lifestyle as well as the lifespan of the new learners. But far more revolutionary in its implications for education is the subtle change that is taking place as education is perceived as a characteristic of the learner rather than an offering of the provider. Attention is turning from teaching to learning, and that shift will have considerable impact on traditional education.

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

"The term 'life-long education and learning', for its part, 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 adult 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 education is self-propelling, and the better educated people are, the faster they will propel us into the learning society. And the populace is becoming better educated with each passing generation. Eighty-four percent

of today's young people between the ages of 20 and 24 have a high school education or more, compared with 66 percent of the parent generation and 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, but 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 multiple learning resources of the community. The Commission on Non-Traditional Study would probably be called the Commission on Lifelong Learning today, but in the early 1970s they called for a shift in emphasis in education that

" . . . puts the student first and the institution second, concentrates more on the former's need than the latter's convenience, encourages diversity of individual opportunity rather than uniform prescription, and deemphasizes time, space, and even course requirements in favor of competence and, where applicable, performance" (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973, p. xv).

That seems to me an eloquent call for putting the learner at the center of the educational enterprise. But as the competition among colleges for the adult learning market heats up, there is some danger that institutional survival rather than the creation of self-directed learners is the name of the game. To the extent that educational institutions can make people dependent on their services in order to attain access to the good life, institutional survival will be assured, but there are real dangers in making learners overly dependent on institutionalized education.

Warren Ziegler (1977, pp. 15-16), an outspoken critic of the lifelong learning movement in the United States, deplores today's emphasis on 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." He charges that some advocates of lifelong learning are promoting lifelong schooling rather than lifelong learning, making formerly self-directed adult learners increasingly dependent on professionals to plan, direct, and legitimate their learning.

It is too early in the history of research on adult learning to judge the legitimacy of Ziegler's concern. We do know that the average adult in this nation is an amazingly active self-directed learner. A spate of recent research suggests that between 70 and 90 percent of all adults

undertake learning projects each year, with the typical adult conducting five learning projects, each project averaging 100 hours of learning effort (Tough, 1978; Penland, 1977; Coolican, 1974). At present, only about 20 percent of such projects are planned by a professional. There would be cause for concern, I think, if self-directed learning were about to be replaced by professionally directed activities, but I don't think that likely. It would call for the assumption that there is a limited amount of time available for learning activities and that if students could be sitting in a classroom learning from experts, they wouldn't be devising their own learning projects. Past experience, however, would cast considerable doubt on that turn of events. Usually, learning a little bit about almost any subject stimulates the desire to know more. The television program "Roots," for example, resulted in a rash of requests to libraries and records bureaus for help with self-directed learning projects. In this case, self-directed learning, far from being subverted, was stimulated and given direction by what could be considered a nationally televised course in black history.

Hence, while experience does not support the likelihood of a learning society in which large numbers of adults are doing their learning within the limitations of organized schooling, the prospect is sufficiently alarming to urge us to think carefully about an appropriate role for colleges and universities in the learning society. Without attempting to present a complete list of appropriate responses of colleges and universities to the new demands of the learning society, let me cite a few

examples of some services that are not presently receiving adequate attention. Two involve direct instructional services, and two involve research and leadership services to the society.

At the top of my list of priorities, I would place the basic responsibility of colleges to prepare 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 12 years spent in the full-time occupation of learning, college freshmen remain remarkably unsophisticated about what constitutes a good learning experience for them. They 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 available resources.

Several years ago, while on a 10-month leave of absence to the University of Nebraska, I proposed to the University and to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education that a freshman course be instituted to teach students how to be more knowledgeable consumers of their own education, in their remaining years at the University as well as throughout life. Students in the course, which was entitled "Learning Analysis," studied about human learning in general and their own cognitive styles in particular. They learned under four different teaching strategies and were helped to become more self-analytical about themselves as learners (See Trani, Cross, Sample, and Wiltse, 1978).

Lifelong learners are going to be inundated with a staggering array of learning options--some good, some fraudulent; some good for them, some not so good. While regulation and consumer protection may eliminate some of the most fraudulent practices, it won't do much to improve poor traditional education, and it won't do nearly as much as critically selective consumers to raise the overall quality of educational options for adults. Thus, I believe that colleges and universities should accept as top priority the task of teaching students to be more intelligent consumers of their lifelong learning options.

A second priority instructional service that universities can provide lifelong learners lies in the realm of continuing education in the professions. Milton Stern (1979), Dean of Extension at the University of California at Berkeley, maintains that universities are defaulting on this responsibility. Increasingly, state licensing agencies and professional

associations are mandating continuing education for a host of professions, and according to Dean Stern, the universities have been largely outflanked by the competition. The American Institute for Certified Public Accountants, for example, 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.

If the learning society is to be a cooperative venture among diverse providers, there may be some legitimate arguments that professional associations should assume major responsibilities for continuing education in their profession. The point Stern is making, however, is that the universities are asleep while professional associations are taking over a new educational function without discussion and conscious decisions about what is best for society.

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 touch briefly in the remaining few minutes on some indirect and cooperating roles for colleges and universities in the learning society. I am concerned about the loss of independence and autonomy on the part of large segments of our population. Here, I refer not only to the rise of the Welfare State, which robs the poor and the elderly of their autonomy and dignity, but also to a rising dependency on the part of the total society.

In 1930, there were 10 workers for every retired person in the United States. By 1950, the ratio was seven and one-half to one; by 1970, it was five and one-half to one; by the year 2020, it is expected to be four and one-half to one. And if one adds dependent children to retired people, there will be fewer than two workers for every nonworker in the society in the early years of the 21st Century. Economically, we cannot afford a society in which huge numbers of nonworkers are increasingly dependent on a relatively small number of workers. Worse yet, psychologically we cannot afford a society that promotes dependence on direct services rather than independence through educating people to provide for their own needs insofar as possible.

A partial solution to the growing problem of dependency in the society was proposed by Harry Moody in a background paper on the elderly prepared for the Lifelong Learning Project. He suggested the use of a "piggyback" principle in which educational programs are piggybacked onto direct support programs in health care, income maintenance, and crime prevention. He analyzed it this way,

"Is crime against the elderly a problem? Then we need to train older people in crime prevention, in how to avoid victimization, in how to organize block associations, block watchers, and other community groups. Is health care for older people a problem? Then perhaps we need to invest in preventative medicine, in teaching senior citizens about self-care, home health care, about the need to recognize symptoms requiring medical attention, about health education. Is income a problem for older people? Then why not invest in educating our older citizens in consumer buying, budget planning, ways of increasing their real income and receiving authorized entitlements? (Moody, 1978, p. 13).

Moody points out that the 91st Congress voted appropriations of 250 million dollars for direct support nutrition programs such as meals-on-wheels, while the amount provided for nutrition education was negligible. He concludes that, "Money for direct services alone will never be sufficient to meet basic needs as long as the elderly themselves are not trained to provide for their own needs" (Moody, 1978, p. 14).

Moody's proposal makes economic sense only if we can also assume that education itself is going to be geared to helping people become more autonomous. But I'm afraid that educators are themselves currently oriented to direct care, encouraging learners of all ages to enroll in classes where the teacher assumes major responsibility for the direction of learning. I believe that the role of higher education in the learning society is not to teach adults to become dependent on education, but to help people become independent through education. To that end, higher education has an important leadership role to play in the design and coordination of community programs to enhance the autonomy and capacity of people to care for themselves.

Finally, I believe that we are not going to have an equitable learning society until we learn more about motivation and success in human learning. While I think there is legitimacy in the demands for equity in financial aid for part-time learners, I doubt very much that money--or lack of it--is the major cause of the growing gap between the educational "haves" and "have nots." Rather, I suspect that the poorly educated will remain poorly educated until education becomes a successful and rewarding experience for them. How the schools can prevent the rise of a class of people known as "the undereducated"--usually the lower academic third through grade school and high school--is a research and development task of major proportions for universities.

If higher education is to rise to the new demands of the learning society, we must look far beyond the elimination of age discrimination in education. Our goal should be an equitable learning society in which each individual is helped to become an active agent of his or her own education.

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