

EMERGING ISSUES IN THE LEARNING SOCIETY

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I want to talk about the future of adult learning this evening, not only where we seem to be going, but whether we want to get where we seem to be heading. There are some trends taking place today that seem desirable, some that seem undesirable, and some that leave us wondering whether we like them or don't like them. But I submit that the trends that are underway today are creating new forms of education that are not simple extensions of the past. Thus it behooves us to think in new ways about education in and for the 21st Century.

The well-publicized event that is changing the role of education in the society is lifelong learning. There are a number of reasons for the new visibility of lifelong learning in the United States and throughout the world. One of the least important reasons from an idealistic perspective but perhaps one of the most important practically and politically, is the simple demographic fact that we are becoming a nation of adults. By the

Prepared for the State University of New York Continuing Education Conference, Glens Falls, New York, May 5, 1982.

year 2000, says the National Center for Education Statistics, "The United States population will be dominated by persons in their middle years" (Golladay, 1976, p. 12).

The post-war baby bulge that had an explosive impact on the schools in the 1950s and 60s and the colleges in the 1960s and 70s is pushing into the adult years, and the national center of the age distribution is shooting sharply upward. As recently as 1970, the United States was basically a youth culture, with people under the age of 29 constituting a majority (52 percent) of the population; by the year 2000, the United States will be an adult culture, with those over 30 years of age constituting 57 percent of the population (Bureau of the Census, 1977).

The entrepreneurs of business are obviously aware of these changes in the marketplace. The makers of Johnson's Baby Shampoo, for example, are advertising their product for the personal use of thirty year-old football players; and Levi-Strauss is promoting "fuller-cut" blue jeans for the more mature figure. Educational entrepreneurs are not far behind. Some are using the baby shampoo approach, trying to convince adults that educational programs designed for eighteen year-olds are equally good for thirty to eighty year-olds, while others are moving to the Levi-Strauss approach and redesigning educational programs for the mature

learner.

The enthusiasm for lifelong learning, however, goes beyond the demographics of the birth rate to reflect changing needs and changing lifestyles. Almost certainly knowledge is power on the new frontier of the Learning Society -- for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. It is inconceivable that education will be less important tomorrow than it is today. From the ancient occupations of agriculture and fishing to the futuristic "high tech" occupations, workers will need to be better educated than ever before. Moreover, the continued expansion of education to previously unserved segments of the population is inevitable. Everyone is going to need more education -- women as well as men, old as well as young, rural as well as urban or suburban, poor as well as rich, handicapped as well as able-bodied, hard-to-teach as well as easy-to-teach. And education is increasingly important because there are simply more things to learn -- appreciations to enrich life, knowledge to enhance personal growth, and skills to improve performance.

More education for more people for more years of their lives would seem to make education a growth industry. The literature and gloomy prognostications of formal education notwithstanding, education in the broad meaning of that term, is of growing importance in the society. We have all heard it said that the railroads failed, not because there was no longer a need for their services -- indeed the need for transportation was growing at the time -- but because the tunnel vision of the railroad operators concentrated on running the railroad instead of exploring the new frontier of the transportation industry.

Many educators within the formal educational establishment today are so consumed with managing their institutions that they are in danger of giving more attention to running the college than to exploring the new frontier of the Learning Society. Those of you who work on the frontier of bringing education and learning to adults may not feel like pioneers anymore, but to a world that has become dependent on adult education to accomplish its work, you are on the cutting edge of major change in the role of education in the society.

If we looked to the broad future of education rather than to the narrow future of any particular brand of education, what would we see?

First, we would see a greatly increased need for learning, for more people and for more years of their lives.

Second, we would see a wider range of offerings and an explosive increase in the number of organizations providing education. Third, we would see a new worldwide perspective on education and learning that raises questions no one ever thought to ask before. For how long is society responsible for the education of its citizens? In the past, that decision was made in increments through the creation of additional levels of public schooling. The eight years of grade school were capped by four years of high school, and then in most states, by an extensive system of low-cost open door two year colleges. But education is not being added in increments anymore. Suddenly, we are looking at forty or fifty years of additional educational activity, and the question changes from how long should education be the responsibility of the state to who pays for what for whom?

Answers to those questions require a new way of thinking about education for adults -- a "transformation of perspective" (Mezirow, 1978), if you will. Some people have simply extended the equal opportunity arguments to make a case for public support of adult education. The transformed perspective of the Learning Society, however, would argue that education is an important adult activity, justified in its own terms, not just as compensation for missed opportunity. This position would require major change, with education tailored to adult

requirements and public support based on an assessment of of society's need for educated adults. If we need to think differently about learning that is lifelong, then simple solutions such as recruiting adults to fill the seats left vacant by diminishing numbers of 18 year-olds or even making financial aid available to part-time students are not going to address the questions that are being raised.

The Learning Society is not a simple extension of education into the adult years; it is a fundamentally different future that poses philosophical and moral questions that differ in kind from the procedural and economic questions that characterized the growth of education for youth.

The need for education on the part of both individuals and society is escalating as fast as the world changes -- and that is at a heady pace these days. Margaret Mead once remarked that the world in which we were born is not the world in which we live, nor is that the world in which we will die. I was born into a world without television, mass air travel, credit cards, frozen foods, or computers. My parents were born into a world without automobiles, radios, or refrigerators. That is a lot of change in a short span of time, but change has a way of escalating so that each new generation is coping with a faster rate of change than the preceeding generation.

Technological change is only part of the reason for the rising demand for education. The explosion of knowledge forces almost all professionals to become lifelong learners just to keep abreast of new developments. The half-life of knowledge in medicine is now about five years, meaning that five years out of medical school, half of all a physician's information is obsolete. Social change is another education-demanding phenomenon of the 21st century. The majority of adults trekking back to college today are women between the ages of 25 and 40 who need more education to capitalize on new career opportunities that are opening up in business, law, medicine, and a host of other professional and managerial occupations.

The handwriting is on the wall. The people and organizations that will be able to improve themselves and their position in the years ahead will be those who are able to adapt to change. And that means they must possess the capacity for continuous lifelong learning.

Unfortunately, not everyone is a participant in the emerging Learning Society. For those who are not, the future holds little promise, not even the faintly reassuring thought that they can retain their present position while the world changes about them. For what the world seems to be doing is leaving the poorly educated sidelined while the al-

ready well-educated are taking the fast track to ever more education. One of the most consistent findings of all the research in adult learning is that the more formal education people have, the more they want, and the more they participate in a wide variety of educational opportunities (Cross, 1981). A college graduate is seven times as likely as a high school dropout to be participating in some form of organized learning, 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 for education 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 dropout does militates against it. The college graduate frequently enters an employee training program and works for a company or in an occupation that is likely, not only to support but to require further education. College graduates typically belong to social and professional groups that discuss educational opportunities; spouses and friends are supportive and admiring of educational accomplishment. 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 lifestyles and values that spawn new generations of undereducated.

What is needed, I suggest, is a far wider and more varied system of entrances into the Learning Society. Many colleges have devised special programs such as those for "re-entry" women that give adults who have been out of school for some years the support, self-confidence, and skills that

they need to participate fully in college classes. Equally important, however, is the encouragement of "low-threat" learning opportunities that may be offered by other providers of education, such as community agencies, television, and employers.

In these times when most colleges are beating the bushes for more students, there is a tendency to feel that other providers of educational services are in competition with colleges. There is good reason to think, however, that there is a hierarchy of threat in educational opportunities and that adults will enter the Learning Society at the threat level that is tolerable for them. (See Cross, 1981, Chapter 6). We know, for example, that adults who build self-confidence as learners by taking a televised course at home may soon venture onto the campus to try the on-campus competition. Similarly many employees, introduced to classes on the familiar turf of the workplace, may build enough confidence and interest to venture out on their own to off-campus centers and then to classes on campus.

Higher education should, I believe, encourage and help build a wide variety of low-threat entry level learning opportunities. The so-called nontraditional forms of education, far from competing with traditional education, are engaged in the critically important business of making

education convenient and attractive, and in some cases just downright possible, for many adults who are potential college students. Whether the new entry-level opportunities are offered by college divisions, such as extension or community education, or by other providers such as television or employers, there is every reason for higher education to take the broad view in developing the Learning Society. Getting more adults introduced to the satisfactions of lifelong learning is of benefit to the adults concerned because it is the essential route to upward mobility and necessary even to keeping abreast of the fast pace of change. It is advantageous to society because the wheels of change and progress are fueled largely by adults learning new ways to accomplish society's work. Finally, higher education itself stands to gain from the fullest possible blooming of the Learning Society because once people have been introduced to the satisfactions of adult learning, they are quite likely to seek new opportunities and to move to ever more advanced and sophisticated levels of learning.

This analysis, plus the past experience of the decline of the railroads because they saw themselves as railroads and not as part of the larger transportation industry, should suggest to higher education that the development of the

Learning Society is a long-term investment that is every bit as important as the short-term concerns about running the college.

The second characteristic of the future that I mentioned in my introductory remarks is the proliferation of providers of education. Industry spends not mere millions but billions of dollars annually on the education and training of employees. Business currently allocates more money for education and training than all fifty states combined allocate for higher education (Lynton, 1981). Aetna, Xerox, IBM, and other corporate giants have built campuses with classrooms and residence halls that surpass anything offered in our most exclusive and expensive colleges. Professional associations too are becoming the builders of vast educational networks. The American Management Association, with an annual education budget of 50 million dollars, uses 7,500 lecturers and discussion leaders to conduct 2,000 formal education programs each year.

Educational purists like to make a distinction between the education offered by colleges and the training offered by industry, but such distinctions are difficult to maintain. Noncollegiate organizations have moved into education almost as fast as colleges, especially community colleges, have moved into training, and the distinction is now blurred.

beyond usefulness -- 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 business school. Listen to this description of IBM's Systems Research Institute:

The Institute's educational philosophy is in many ways that of a university. It stresses fundamental and 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 differing viewpoints, to broaden the individual, focusing on his or her special skills" (IBM Systems, 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 3 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 come from industry, colleges, museums, labor unions, or professional associations.

A related blurring of educational functions occurs in the distinction between credit and non-credit learning.

Within commuting distance of my home near Boston are four new degree-granting programs founded by corporations -- a hospital, a bank, a consulting firm, and a computer manufacturer. While the image of Bachelor's and Master's degrees offered by these non-colleges is still mildly sensational, the movement of collegiate institutions into the realm of non-credit instruction is now commonplace. Between 1968 and 1978, more than a thousand colleges introduced non-credit programs on their campuses. Today it is the norm rather than the exception for degree-granting institutions to be involved in non-degree instruction.

But whether a course was originally taken for credit is not especially important today. It is increasingly easy to convert non-credit learning into college degrees. Just a decade ago, only about a 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 41 percent do (Stadtman, 1980).

Historically, colleges have been reasonably generous in accepting credit from 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 2000 courses, offered by more

a hundred corporations, that appear worthy of college credit.

Illustrations of the blurring of once-distinctive functions for higher education could be extended, but my point is that the educational frontier is very large, and higher education is not alone out there. There are new obligations to work with others to build a lifelong educational system that will meet the demands of the Learning Society. I suggest that the building of that educational system should receive high priority on the nation's agenda, as well as on the agenda of every state.

New York already has the best start on planning for the Learning Society of any state in the nation. The goals for adult learning services adopted by the Regents recently represent a far-sighted and creative piece of work. Time will tell whether New York will fulfill the hope that the Regents expressed in a recent press release (New York State Education Department, December 17, 1981) that "no later than the year 2000 New York will be leading the nation and the world in its commitment to lifelong learning."

If that is to be the case, New York will need to address such difficult questions as these: How can education best keep pace with the growing demands for adults with the skills to perform the information processing that is critical now to productivity? When I was in college, 17 percent of

the jobs in America involved information processing; today 54 percent do. A community college president in Florida remarked recently that employers in Miami were paying bounties to employees who could recruit a qualified employee -- meaning an adult with good basic information processing skills -- while thousands of unemployed young people were hanging out on the street corners of Liberty City (McCabe, 1982). Over 1/3 of the adults in the state of New York lack a high school diploma -- and it is assumed the skills to make them productive employees. How will New York deal with the growing gap between the education "haves" and "have-nots"? How will you allocate the vast educational resources of your state -- resources that extend far beyond colleges and universities? Is coordination desirable? Is it possible when education extends into every home and every place of business?

The questions are difficult. They are faced by every state in the nation and by the world at large. Creative new initiatives are required, but we also need to stop and take stock of where we are going and whether we like where we seem to be headed.

My intention in this keynote address is to raise some issues that might stimulate thinking and spark discussion over the next few days of your conference. Thus I would

like to set before you three major issues that seem to be emerging from the trends I have been discussing.

1) What are we to do about the growing gap between the well-educated and the poorly educated? Adult education has a long tradition of being voluntary. But virtually every study undertaken to describe volunteer learners concludes that those most likely to volunteer are those whom policy makers are least interested in reaching. It is the well-educated who rush to take advantage of each new educational opportunity while the poorly educated stay away in droves. What if anything can we do about that? Do we preserve the right of free and individual choice or do we require certain people to participate, presumably for their own good as well as for the collective good? Educational requirements for young people have usually been enforced without controversy because mother and society, who both know best, have agreed that education is good and necessary for children. But what if mother is a nurse who resists appeals to voluntarily update her knowledge for the benefit and protection of her trusting patients? Or what if mother is an illiterate who is a drain on the public purse? Now that we know that learning is both possible and necessary for adults, do we have as much right to mandate continuing education for adults as we have to make education compulsory for

school children? Education is being mandated in many professions by licensing agencies and state legislatures now. Do we like that trend or not?

2) My second issue is closely related to the first, but it involves the growing educational inequities among states and regions of this nation. In the absence of any overall policy regarding adult education, states with high levels of educational attainment will gradually pull away from states with a poorly educated populace. California already has one of the best-educated adult populations in the nation, and a study just completed showed that 42 percent of the adult population in California participated in some form of organized instruction last year.

The problem, if one chooses to call it that, is that adults with high levels of education are more interested in education than their less well-educated peers; they are more articulate and effective in expressing their demands for education; they create a climate of acceptance for adult learning that is contagious throughout the state, thereby driving up the participation which drives up the demand. Indeed, some community colleges have been so effective in stimulating interest in adult learning that states have built disincentives for expanding enrollment into their funding formulas. Community colleges that grow beyond

"acceptable" levels are not compensated for additional students. Is that the way to deal with the "problem" of too much demand for education? Should the nation be concerned about the growing gap in the human resources of poor states versus rich? Should federal policy strive for some sort of equitable development of adult education?

I think it is fair to say that there is no federal policy regarding lifelong learning at this time. Some think there should not be (Green, Ericson, and Seidman, 1977; Ziegler, 1977; Fellenz, 1981), while others argue that "the federal government should assume a major role if not become the key leadership agency in adult education " (Moore, 1981, p.208). Arguments for federal involvement concern the usual issues of equity, money, and coordination. Arguments against revolve around the preservation of freedom and diversity and the history of ineffectiveness of federal coordination. Warren Ziegler (1977, p. 17) sums up the objections to federal involvement in these words, "The history of public educational policy leads to the conclusion that to support means to define, curtail, render accountable, and ultimately govern. Lifelong learning should not be governed. It just should be." When adult educators go to Washington, if they go, what should they ask for -- to be helped or to be let alone?

3) Finally, I don't know whether to call this third issue a "trend" or not, but there appears to be an increasing tendency for adults to seek formal recognition for their participation in educational activities. The Continuing Education Unit (CEU) is increasing in availability as well as in popularity. Some corporations are seeking degree-granting authority. Most significant, perhaps, is the growing interest on the part of adults in traditional college credit. Folklore, bolstered by research, has long maintained that adults are "mature" learners, more interested in learning than in credit. Now it appears that adults are just as interested in credit as young people -- a rude shock to those who held out hope that the Learning Society would help correct some of the faults of the credentialed society. Two factors, I suspect, are responsible for the rising interest in credit for adult learning: First, adults are beginning to use education in much the same way that youth use it -- to enhance job qualifications. Second, obtaining college credit for adult learning has become a realistic expectation because colleges are interested in adult part-time learners and are giving their support and blessing to a great variety of efforts to convert non-collegiate education into college credits.

What is the appropriate role of credit in the Learning Society? Are we reschooling rather than deschooling society

through the extension of the traditional trappings of schooling into the adult years? Do we need a common currency for lifelong learning; if so is college credit an appropriate standard? If the courses taught by industry are deemed equivalent to those taught by colleges, should industry be given degree-granting authority? If industry offers degrees, can professional associations be far behind? I don't know the answers to these questions, but I would like to see them placed on our agenda for the future.

Most of the questions I have raised this evening are premised on my belief that the Learning Society is different in kind rather than different in degree from traditional education. Just as lifelong learning is something more than the extension of education into the adult years, so the Learning Society involves more than traditional schools and colleges. I am convinced that education will be playing a very different role in the year 2000 that it plays today. I am not as confident that we know what we want or how to get there. Perhaps your deliberations and discussions over the next few days will sharpen these issues and raise other questions that we should be addressing.

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