

A LEARNING SOCIETY

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The next step in human evolution depends on developing a society that can learn to live sustainably on the Earth

Human evolution has always depended on the ability of communities and groups to learn. In prehistoric times, bands of early hominids survived by learning how to work together to find food. The Agricultural Revolution was only possible because hunter-gatherers shared information about how to cultivate seeds and domesticate animals. In the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution was built on a partnership between scientists and capitalists. These and many other advances depended on collaborative learning. Now, in our time, we need to develop an entire learning society so humankind can take the next step in its evolution.

To continue our evolutionary journey, *Homo sapiens* needs to learn how to live sustainably on the Earth. Previous advances, while bringing many gains, have led to an ecological crisis of unprecedented proportions that threatens our well being, and perhaps our very survival. Created by western culture's addiction to economic growth and consumerism, the crisis is comprised of many interconnected facets including climate change, the depletion of natural resources, the loss of biodiversity, and increasing pollution and toxic wastes. Looking at the whole picture, it is easy to see that human health and the health of the ecosystems which support life are in jeopardy. Unless our species can take the next step and learn to think and act sustainably, the future appears grim.

If learners are to gain the sustainability literacy skills necessary for life in the twenty first century then there will need to be a fundamental reform of the education system. Today's schools, colleges and universities serve the needs of the industrial society, fostering consumerism, technicism, competition and individualism. They prepare students to become willing cogs in a vast dysfunctional economic machine. Their approach to learning emphasizes theories over ethics, detachment over relationship, and immediate answers over thoughtful inquiry. Based on a worldview that asserts the superiority of our species above all others, mainstream education perpetuates the patterns of thinking and behaving that cause the ecological crisis.

Among those who have called for a radical transformation of education are David Orr and Fritjof Capra. They have suggested that the purpose of education is to develop an ecologically literate society – one that understands the principles of ecological systems and uses them to design sustainable human systems. David Orr's (1992) book *Ecological*

Literacy developed this idea and laid out an entire educational agenda based on the belief that ‘all education is environmental education’. At about the same time, New England educators and environmentalists Laurie Lane-Zucker, John Elder and David Sobel coined the phrase ‘place-based education’. This form of education is based on the proposition that the best learning happens when it is grounded in familiar local communities and ecosystems (Sobel 2004, Elder 1998). Then in 1999 Ed O’Sullivan went to the other end of the spatial scale and advocated a cosmological approach to education. In his book, *Transformative Learning* (O’Sullivan 1999), he suggested that education should be based on the ‘universe story’, the grand narrative of the cosmos originally developed by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (1992).

Ecological literacy, place-based education and a cosmological approach to education are excellent suggestions. But they do not fully recognize that the transition to sustainability will require creating an entire learning society where people gain sustainability literacy skills together. Just as it ‘takes a village to raise a child’, it will take human society as a whole to learn how to live lightly on the Earth. No one person or group of people has all the answers. We need the knowledge of indigenous peoples, the expertise of people who work on the land, the curiosity of children, and the wisdom of the elders. We need artists, scientists, poets, engineers, spiritual leaders and film stars. In short, we need everyone’s creativity and ingenuity. Only by listening to each other and sharing what we know will humankind be capable of evolving truly sustainable societies.

Active listening and authentic sharing are essential, not only because they encourage the exchange of ideas, but because they make collaborative learning possible. Like a synergistic chemical reaction in which substances interact to create new ones, collaborative learning is a powerful way of creating new knowledge. When individuals share their thoughts and experiences about a mutual problem, new and better solutions emerge. The collective creativity often generated in groups leads to fresh perspectives and innovative thinking. Recognizing that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of the parts’, collaborative learning views learning as a social process as well as an individual one.

If learning is a social phenomenon, education cannot be limited to schools, colleges and universities. It becomes a lifelong active learning process that can occur anywhere, any time, with anyone, no matter how young or old. Learning is not a segregated set of activities, conducted at specific times of the day, in specific places, and at a specific stage of life. Instead, it is integrated into the fabric of everyday living. As singer and actress Eartha Kitt once said ‘I am learning all the time. The tombstone will be my diploma.’ And understanding education as an active, lifelong, collaborative process is at the heart of a learning society.

The idea of a learning society was first proposed by American educational philosopher Robert Hutchins. In a 1968 book called *The Learning Society*, he advocated a society whose primary goals were continuous learning, active citizenship and social well being. According to Hutchins (1953:3), ‘The object of the educational system, taken as a whole,

is not to produce hands for industry or to teach the young how to make a living. It is to produce responsible citizens'. His idea of a learning society was based on the belief that education should improve society by helping learners understand, participate in, and change the world around them.

Sadly, Hutchins' original idea has been turned on its head. Since the mid 1970s, governments and businesses have used the phrase 'a learning society' to mean the opposite of what he intended. Arguing that its purpose is to continuously update workers' skills, they are using this idea to enhance national competitiveness and economic growth. For instance, in 1998 the UK government published a Green Paper called *The Learning Age* which stated that a learning society could help ensure a well-trained and adaptable labor force. The paper calls for the UK to be re-skilled to create a repeat of the industrial revolution, with a nod towards social justice in the limited sense of more people having the opportunity to get rich, but without considering the disastrous impact of the previous industrial revolution on the systems which support life. The introduction to the paper states that:

The Industrial Revolution was built on capital investment in plant and machinery, skills and hard physical labour... We will succeed by transforming inventions into new wealth, just as we did a hundred years ago. But unlike then, *everyone* must have the opportunity to innovate and to gain reward - not just in research laboratories, but on the production line, in design studios, in retail outlets, and in providing services. (The Learning Age 1998: introduction section 1)

The more recent Leitch Review of Skills (2006) is entitled *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills* and echoes exactly the same sentiments:

In the 19th Century, the UK had the natural resources, the labour force and the inspiration to lead the world into the Industrial Revolution. Today, we are witnessing a different type of revolution. For developed countries who cannot compete on natural resources and low labour costs, success demands a more service-led economy and high value-added industry... The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice. (Leitch Review of Skills 2006: 1)

The thought that a learning society should produce engaged citizens with the capacity to lead social change has all but disappeared from public discourse.

So how can we revive Hutchins' original idea and develop a learning society to assist humankind's evolution towards sustainability? How can we help learners of all kinds gain the sustainability literacy skills they will need to survive and thrive in the twenty first century while building a more sustainable world? A good start may be to explore how a learning society can support ecological literacy, place-based education and a cosmological approach to learning. Let me suggest six strategies:

1. Creating Learning Communities:

Collaborative learning happens best in communities, so it makes sense to create learning communities for sustainability throughout society. First developed in higher education, there are now many types of learning communities including professional, online, spiritual and neighborhood ones. A learning community is any group of people who share a common purpose and who are engaged in learning from each other. Conversation Cafés and World Cafés are other forms of learning community that can bring a diverse range of participants together to share perspectives on sustainability issues. Involvement in practical shared tasks such as creating community gardens or building a transition town can stimulate active learning and the sharing of skills.

2. Learning from Experience:

Experience is an important guide to living sustainably. Books and experts can be helpful but our own lived experience is a powerful teacher. Through experimentation and critical thinking we can learn what works and what does not. John Dewey, the father of experiential education, claimed that learning from experience can equip students to become better citizens. By developing knowledge based on their own experiences of the world, they become responsible and engaged members of society. This form of active learning is obviously very different from conventional educational practices which deliver a pre-determined body of information to passive learners. Experience does not just have to be personal, however. It is also possible to learn from the historical, place-based experience of living sustainably in the local environment which exists within local communities and is passed on through the generations (Bowers 2004).

3. Fostering a New Cultural Worldview:

A learning society for sustainability could foster the development of a new cultural worldview – one that is based on respect for the Earth and the great diversity of life that humans depend on both for meaning and for continued existence (see *Values Reflection and the Earth Charter*, this volume). With its presumption of human superiority, the dominant western worldview is based on disrespect and arrogance. It assumes humankind has the inherent right to over-exploit other species and exhaust the planet's resources, sawing away at the branch that we and countless other species are standing on. Developing values and beliefs consistent with sustainability will require a shared understanding of the destructive consequences of the old worldview, as well as a widely-held desire to create a respectful, long term relationship with the Earth.

4. Thinking Systemically:

A learning society must be able to think systemically. Based on the belief that the parts of a system can best be understood in the context of their relationships with each other,

systemic thinking emphasizes patterns, trends and feedback loops (see *Systems Thinking and Gaia Awareness*, this volume). Within a learning society, systemic thinking would focus on understanding the interactions between human and ecological systems, and restructuring human systems to be more sustainable. Without systemic thinking, society will continue to apply ineffective band aid solutions that do little to resolve underlying problems.

5. Embracing Diversity:

A learning society would embrace diversity - not only different cultures and ethnicities, but also different ideas, beliefs, and ways of knowing. A diverse learning society is important because it demonstrates a commitment to a democracy based on inclusion, equality and respect. It is also important because differences are a source of learning. We can learn from people who do not think like us because they challenge our assumptions, beliefs and expectations. We can learn from the wisdom of peoples and communities around the world that have proved their sustainability over hundreds or thousands of years; who have found ways to live in a great diversity of local environments and conditions. In the same way that the health of an ecosystem depends on its biodiversity, the sustainability of human systems depends on cultural diversity and a diversity of ideas and practices.

6. Whole Person Learning:

A learning society could foster the development of whole human beings, who can think critically, respond compassionately, and act ethically. Whole person learning enables students to grow as authentic human beings. It develops their personhood. This is very different from contemporary education which focuses on the intellect while ignoring ethical values, emotions, embodied experience and the grounded experience of place. Contemporary education leaves learners with few practical skills for sensitive engagement with those around them, for interacting with their local environment, or for navigating the complex world around them. We need a learning society that engages and integrates peoples' hearts, minds, hands and spirits.

These six strategies are a beginning, but there is not much time. The task of developing a learning society to facilitate humankind's evolution towards sustainability is urgent. Given current trends, our species will need to learn and change more in the next 50 years than it has in the past 50,000. The Agricultural Revolution took thousands of years and the Industrial Revolution took 200. We have so much less time to achieve the massive social changes needed for survival. While governments are urging us towards another, even more intensified Industrial Revolution through their skills agendas, it is urgent for us to step back, look at the larger picture, and ask what skills it will take for people to be able to contribute to thriving, flourishing and, above all, sustainable societies. Let us hope that the urgency of the global situation catalyzes the creation of a learning society where

people can gain sustainability literacy skills and dramatically enhance *Homo sapiens'* ability both to survive and evolve.

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