The learning society: Two justifications

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This article examines the view that has long been fashionable in related policies and literature that the establishment of the learning society is a necessary response to changing times. This article suggests that the association between the learning society and current change may be defensible but is limited. The justification of the learning society should be expanded beyond that association, and the learning society should be promoted as a good in its own right. This article begins with an exploration of the phenomenon of change, which has been the primary argument for the establishment of the learning society. Then, it examines the claim that the learning society is essential. Finally, I suggest that discussions of the learning society should shift from the current paradigm of justification based on external relationships to an appreciation of the learning society in its own right.

Change tends to lead contemporary societies to consider the conversion into a learning society as an important aim (European Commission 1996, Faure *et al.* 1972, Husén 1986, NCIHE 1997). What evidence supports the association of the establishment of the learning society with adaptation to changing times? Discussion in the related academic literature has tended to focus almost exclusively on how the development of a learning society helps in dealing with current change, but little has been written on the more fundamental, underlying issue of what status the learning society is granted by this emphasis on its association with change. Thus, there is a need to examine the argument for the establishment of the learning society and thus perhaps to change our conception of the role of the learning society.

This article begins with an exploration of the phenomenon of change, which has been seen as the distinguishing challenge of current times (Smart 1992) and has been used as the key argument for the establishment of the learning society. Then, I examine the claim that a learning society is essential as we work to respond to our changing times. This article suggests that the extrinsic view of the association of the learning society with current change may be defensible but is limited. Indeed, this association fails to justify the perpetual existence of a learning society. Our justification of the existence of the learning society should be expanded beyond that association, so that the learning society is promoted in an intrinsic mode without specific dimensions as in current discussion, but rather as an open learning practice that is of great value and is appreciated in its own right.

The phenomenon of rapid change

It has become customary to observe that 'the tempo of social change accelerates and reaches an unprecedented pace' (Böhme & Stehr 1986: 17). As Platt (1966: 196) said, "We may now be in the time of the most rapid change in the whole evolution of the human race,

either past or to come". The phenomenon of rapid change is said
to be occurring in all aspects of society, including the economy,
culture, technology and population trends. For instance, most
developed countries are said to be changing from an industrial to a
post-industrial (Bryson, Daniels, Henry & Pollard 2000: 16, Husén
1986) or knowledge-based economy (Dunning 2000), and skills or
knowledge demands in employment now tend to change with greater
frequency than before.

In terms of culture, the direction of change is said to be towards
a consumer culture (Featherstone 1991, Field 1996, Lury 1996)
or lifestyle culture (Edwards 1997, Giddens 1991). In information
technology, unprecedented progress is occurring in the changing
human concepts of time and space. Because of the capacity of
technology to transgress frontiers and subvert territories, Morley
and Robins (1995: 75) point out that 'the very idea of boundary–the
frontier boundary of the nation state, for example, or the physical
boundaries of urban structures–has been rendered problematical'.
Technology de-spatialises, opening up new forms of gathering and
different opportunities to bring people together (Maffesoli 1996).
In population trends, the demographic structure of the population
is also changing in terms of the proportion and distribution of age
groups in society. Not all of these changes are necessarily occurring
rapidly. For instance, the claim that the skills required in employment
are changing with greater frequency than in the past does not imply
that all skills are changing (Halliday 2003). The point is that change
in all these aspects of society is rapid enough that it characterises the
human condition in current times.

However, if this idea is taken further, it is soon recognised that things
changing over time is natural. While society is changing rapidly today,
it also changed in the past. If that is the case, why is contemporary
society in particular characterised by change? In the literature, the
uniqueness of the situation in which we now find ourselves tends to

be attributed to its rapidity, with the term exponential growth used to indicate the shortening time-span for important change. This sense of 'shortening' is derived from the comparison of 'the past' with 'today'. As Whitehead (1933: 118) puts it, 'In the past the time-span of important change was considerably longer than that of a single human life... Today this time-span is considerably shorter than that of human life'. Accordingly, it seems that the exponential growth of the change, rather than the change itself, is what impresses us and leads us to conclude that our times are characterised by change.

The perception of acceleration in change is by no means unique to current times, and this acceleration must also have been perceived at many different times in the past. People of the past, for whom the past was their 'today', perceived the same acceleration when looking back to the more remote past, which for them represented 'the past'. Times have always appeared to change rapidly for any generation, and the time-span of change has appeared to shorten. As Price (1963: 14; italics in original) said, 'This result [of an exponential growth], true now, must also have been true *at all times in the past'*.

The claim that the phenomenon of change in contemporary times is unprecedented cannot simply refer to the 'phenomenon of quantitative growth'. Rather, it refers to 'a qualitative transformation affecting man's most profound characteristics and, in a manner of speaking, renewing his genius' (Faure *et al.* 1972: xxi–xxii). For example, Schön (1971) thinks that the uniqueness of change in our time is not only in the fact that '[w]e are reaching ever greater *levels* of scientific and technological activity and performance, both absolutely and in relation to the society as a whole' (italics in original; p. 23), but also in 'levels or degrees of novelty' (p. 24). In this view, it is the pervasiveness and the extent of novelty that count. As a result, their effects on our everyday lives are on a grand and penetrating scale. However, the argument against rapidity as what is peculiar to our changing times can be applied here again. Given the contrast

between change in 'the past' and that of 'today' as proposed by Whitehead, the relative nature of novelty must also have been at play at many different times in the past as it is nowadays. All generations have always experienced rapid change through innovation.

The question remains of whether there is anything unique about change in contemporary times. I argue that one significant way that change in current times can be distinguished from change in previous times is what Barnett (1997, 2000) calls 'supercomplexity'. Supercomplexity is the 'form of complexity in which our frameworks for understanding the world are themselves problematic' (Barnett 1997: 11). Janne (1976: 140) notes that some factors that constitute the world are not fixed but are rather changing and uncertain, while some factors are change-resistant and certain, so they can be taken as the framework of the world. The change-oriented factors and the relatively change-resistant factors are multi-dimensionally intertwined and interwoven. However, Lyotard (1984) points out that even meta-narratives themselves, as the frameworks of the world which should be the most change-resisting and underpinning bases, can be problematic and uncertain.

The move from certainty to uncertainty at the epistemological level relates to the phenomenon of reflexivity and the rapidity of change. Beck (1994) sees reflexivity as an occurrence that refers back to itself as an automatic response to a stimulus. This is an automatic self-generation and self-confrontation that occurs in an unconscious, unintentional, involuntary and therefore unpredictable way. In supercomplexity, the meta-narratives as the frameworks for understanding the world change reflexively, but in a different way from what occurred the past. In the past, reflexivity was seen as a character that the frameworks owned and that helped the frameworks to self-reinforce towards renewed certainty. Today, reflexivity is seen not so much as justifying the frameworks, but as contesting them by casting doubt on their certainty and subjecting them to competition

with opposing voices. These frameworks are considered to be settled for the time being—they are only temporarily certain. Therefore, within the current supercomplex context, it is always possible that the frameworks become problematic.

Furthermore, the movement of supercomplexity towards uncertainty is exacerbated by the rapidity of change, which refers to the shortening of the intervals between reflexivities. As Crook, Pakulski and Waters (1992: 220) describe it, '[a]s soon as we attempt to acknowledge the rule of change by specifying its principal dimensions and fields of operation, we are left with only its empty husk: the phenomenon itself has moved on'. This may be exaggerated, but it reflects the pace of current change we are confronted with. Accelerating communications technology is responsible for this rapid change, since it is capable of transgressing the limits of geographical space and 'has multiplied the degree of contact and interaction between persons' (Bell 1973: 42). The internet, for instance, transforms the mobility of knowledge and its speed of transmission between people. The public, those who were previously identified as less qualified in producing knowledge, nowadays have the same right as the academic elite to participate in what Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny *et al.* (1994) call Mode 2 knowledge production, which is often generated with the intention of applying knowledge under actual conditions; this is unlike Mode 1 production which allegedly occurs for reasons of scientific discovery. By means of technology and greater literacy, the public has convenient access to the production, acquisition and reproduction of knowledge.

The first justification: A response to change

Once 'change', the unique quality that symbolises contemporary times, is clarified as above, we can ask what role related policies and texts consider the learning society to play. Jarvis (2000: 350) finds that '[e]ndeavouring to discover the certainty of an unchanging

world is a reaction to the learning society'. Confronted with uncertain change, a learning society is considered to emerge as a reflection on change. A reflection on the context implies that one is not born or 'thrown' into the context but instead 'throws oneself' into it (Lash 1994: 161). This metaphor implies not only that the learning society is aware of contemporary conditions, but also that it is proactive, with aims and intentions relevant to its situation. Reflective thought and action among humans form through the development of 'reflection-in-action' (during action) and 'reflection-on-action' (before and after action) (Schön 1983). According to Schön, learners (practitioners) define and restructure their thoughts and actions by reflecting on uncertain, problematic situations and then experimenting with thoughts they construct that might be triggered before, during or after action and practice. Reflective learning could disrupt tacit and spontaneous repetition and routines, in which case the society in question may have 'over-learned' (may be repeating what has been learned without adaptation to change), in Schön's terminology (1983: 61).

The main reason for taking the emergence of the learning society as a response to change in the world, I believe, is that such a society emphasises the *instrumentality of learning*–that is, its helpfulness in allowing people to achieve certain tasks to keep pace with changing times. Most of the tasks associated with the learning society hold either an economic or civic appeal (Coffield 1997a). From the *economic* viewpoint, the direction of change determines how we take economic action, regardless of whether it is the direction in which we should act. The idea that competitive learning is required to keep oneself informed about change is largely based on economic grounds (European Commission 1996); the basic point here is the emphasis on encouraging the renewal of skills and knowledge needed in the workforce (Boud 2001, Evans, Hodkinson & Unwin 2002). In contrast, the *civic* view insists that we should learn to promote social integration by directing social change in the desired direction,

rather than letting change overwhelm us. The learning society that draws attention to social integration runs parallel with economic competitiveness (Coffield 1997b: 450).

On the one hand, the civic/social perspective is opposed to the economic perspective in its insistence that learning cannot simply be a means to economic strength and that the links between learning and economic imperatives should not be exaggerated. However, the civic/social position is not essentially different from the economic position, given that linking learning to human solidarity, while it may seem more noble, is simply another way of taking learning as a means to meet a public need. Despite their differences, these perspectives use learning to achieve a public need—either the need to promote overall economic strength or the need to promote overall solidarity. These two appeals do not necessarily take *us as individuals* lightly, but they do seem to take the overall public good as the justification for the learning society, whose establishment is a resource for the public dimension.

A learning society that moves towards economic competitiveness leads to the 'economisation' of learning (Macrae, Maguire & Ball 1997: 500), whereas a learning society that ensures social cohesion may concentrate on the 'socialisation' of learning. These two imperatives–the economic perspective and the civic/social perspective–have acted powerfully to marginalise other possible purposes of learning. The exploration of learning for individual development seems to have little place in discourses on the learning society. Even when this subject is raised, the discourse tends to be subject to economic progress or the cultivation of citizenship. Individuals themselves also seem to be instrumentalised in the name of the learning society–in a sense, making it a term that serves ideological purposes while giving those goals an innocuous-looking appearance (Hughes & Tight 1995).

The learning society, if it is to stand firm, cannot be justified merely as a response to change, either economically or civically. Excessive focus on the statement that the emergence of learning societies is an economic or civic response to surrounding conditions leads to the justification of a learning society based mainly on the appropriateness to the surrounding situation. In this sense, the rationale for a learning society depends on external factors. This implies that once society changes in a different direction for unpredictable reasons, the strategy required to protect against new changes may be different from what the learning society can offer, and the concept of learning societies may be replaced. Thus, the emergence of the learning society as a strategy for response to change makes the learning society a contingent phenomenon.

The second justification: A final value

Instead of justifying the existence of the learning society by appealing to its instrumental value–that is, by grounding its value in the economic or civic help it provides in dealing with change–we can also justify it with regard to its final value. Before indicating what it means to consider the learning society as having final value, we must first consider the meaning of 'value', which is often somewhat ambiguously defined.

Saying that the learning society has value indicates that it is something that people value. That is, it is something that, as Zimmerman (2001) puts it, one judges to be good or thinks good and is therefore favourably disposed towards. With this in mind, there are two possibilities for interpreting the learning society as having value. One is that people are favourably disposed towards the learning society. The other is that people judge, find or believe the learning society to be good; that is, they think it worthy of approval. In the first case, the person who values the learning society *immerses* themselves in that value, practising it as a value. In the second, the person who

values the society *distantly* thinks or reflects upon it and judges it to be good. The result of this judgement does not necessarily lead to practice of that value, to *truly be* favourably disposed towards it.

So to value the learning society or see the learning society as having value means either that it *is* good and people are favourably disposed towards it, or that people *judge* it as good. 'Good', whether in terms of 'being good' or 'judging it to be good' does not only mean 'good', but more particularly means 'good to someone'. This means that someone is favourably disposed towards the learning society or judges it to be worthy of a favourable disposition. As Thomson (1997) puts it, '[f]or a thing X to be good ... is for X to *benefit* someone or some thing Y ... in the appropriate way, or to be capable of doing so' (italics in original; 289). The learning society cannot merely 'be good itself', but also 'be good to someone'.

'Good to someone' means 'good in some way to someone'. For the learning society to have a final value, it must be good to people by being 'good for its own sake'. This term 'good for its own sake' refers to a learning society as good as a final, ultimate purpose rather than as valued for some other purpose (e.g. dealing with changes). In this view, the source of goodness is the fact that individuals become involved and engaged in learning activities (Lemos 1994), not the learning society's use as a means to achieve some other good that people may need. However, unlike with final value, for the learning society to simply be good, it could, for instance, just help people to deal with change. This perspective values the learning society as an instrumental value–that is, as helpful in allowing people to accomplish certain other tasks. Its value is contingent on its helpfulness in relation to some other thing or purpose, rather than on itself as the final purpose.

Seeing the learning society as having a final value presupposes seeing it as having an intrinsic value, but not vice versa. Intrinsic value refers to something that is 'good in itself', while final value means

something that is 'good for its own sake' (Korsgaard 1983, 1996). Final value presupposes intrinsic value: if there is nothing good about the learning society in itself, it will be absurd to say that it is good for its own sake. Thus, it is first necessary to confirm whether there is anything valuable about the learning society in 'itself' that may lead people to become favourably disposed towards it; then, this 'good' can be considered as the final value if the result is positive. Taking the learning society as a final value means not only confirming that the learning society is good in itself but also accepting the 'good in itself' as the goal. On the other hand, intrinsic value does not necessarily lead to final value. What is judged to be good in itself is not necessarily taken as the ultimate purpose to pursue. The learning society can be taken mainly as a means for other ends while accepting its intrinsic good.

Accordingly, a learning society as its own end, in which the source of goodness lies in the fact that individuals become involved and engaged in learning, is a heterogeneous society in which there are a variety of individual tastes and preferences regarding learning content. Due to their heterogeneous character, individuals in the learning society will never agree about what to learn through the aggregation of individual preference orderings. Free choice regarding what to learn is exercised prior to any specific learning purpose. In a learning society grounded on a freestanding perspective, without reliance on any particular metaphysical or teleological view about what to learn, learning is seen as open to the pursuit of any individual learning purpose, which will vary from person to person. Learning as an activity does not depend on its utility for economic strength as a response to change or for citizenship in the development of solidarity; instead, it simply offers the hope for individuals to shape their own 'learning projects' (Tough 1979) or their biographical existence (Alheit 1999). Its value is not justified by public needs or its relation to outside change, but rather by its helpfulness to individuals on their own terms.

Instead of grounding the justification for the learning society in its helpfulness for some other purpose, we can offer an account that seeks to justify its existence for its own sake. That is, the learning society should be established in terms of its final value rather than its instrumental value. We should not only take the learning society as a good in itself, but also focus on the 'good in itself' as the ultimate purpose to pursue. While the literature focuses on the instrumental value of the learning society, this does not mean that its intrinsic value is always denied. However, the intrinsic value is largely overlooked, representing a failure to emphasise the concept of final value in terms of a society's goodness for its own sake. To view the learning society as having a final value means neither that learning as a means to address public need is of little significance nor that the cultivation of learning in such an intrinsic manner should bar us from pursuing learning for external purposes as well. The principle of taking learning as an end does not eliminate the importance of economic efficiency and collective benefits. The goals of meeting public needs, such as economic adequacy and the strengthening of citizenship, are significant; these are requirements that make the practice of the learning society possible. They are required as the *basis*, however, rather than as the *justification* for development of the learning society as a final value.

Conclusion

This article develops the concept of the learning society itself as a final value. The learning society is its own end, which provides inner power and self-sufficiency to justify the acceptance of such a society on a more durable basis. This vision provides the starting point for developing a view of what the learning society can be—a re-description of what should happen that is a counterpoint to previous descriptions developed in the relevant literature. The alternative justification that I offer, rather than justifying learning based mainly on public needs as in the literature, grants the learning

society legitimacy as an open practice allowing for different kinds of learning rather than focusing on some specific learning practice.

There is ethical significance in seeing a learning society as legitimate in its own right because it turns the goals of learning over to people themselves. This ethical significance lies in the fact that, if a society allows its people to decide what to learn, respect for people's goals and desires will be secured. When people are respected as the ultimate decision-makers and their choices and preferences for learning are fully respected, the learning society is then understood as a foundation for people to use to develop themselves and flourish. What people learn may not bolster economic progress or citizenship, both of which are important public needs. However, this does not reduce the ethical value that the learning society has in its own right in empowering people.

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