

Focus Group 1 - New learning in new contexts

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1. INTRODUCTION

Whenever we talk about ‘new’ learning the old question arises “Is there really anything new?”. The discussants in the focus group agreed that what is new is the rapidly changing context in which today’s learners live, work and learn and the social condition that change is now a constant in our lives. These social, economic and technological changes, and the condition of constant change challenge us to re-evaluate, re-engineer and where necessary create new purposes and processes for learning.

The discussants accepted that the purposes of learning we need for an ever changing world are encapsulated in the statement of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century (UNESCO, 1996). They are: learn to know, learn to do, learn to live together, and learn to be. As a general statement, it is seen to apply across nations, and in different and evolving social, economic and technological contexts.

The processes of learning most associated with ‘new learning’ seemed to fall into two main categories. Many pick up on processes of yesteryear which lost prominence when learning was institutionalised through the establishment of mass schooling and the paper-based technologies such as text-books shaped the nature of schooling. Such phrases include ‘lifelong learning’, ‘learning through apprenticeships’, ‘just in time learning’. Others which include ‘learning to learn’ and ‘constructivist learning’ and

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'scaffolded learning' draw upon new theoretical understandings but are contested in the worlds of government policy and classroom practice. These processes, along with the processes that currently dominate traditional forms of schooling, and which are considered successful by many communities, policy makers and professionals, need to be re-evaluated and re-engineered in terms of how they meet the above defined purposes of education with the changing contexts. The group agreed that the new technologies play a special role in new learning and new contexts because technological change is not only a key factor generating pressure for change, but also a key facilitator through providing new tools to enable such change.

2. THE CHANGING CONTEXTS OF LEARNING

In order to more clearly identify the pressures on 'new learning' we defined some key outcomes of the changing contexts. These are the blurring of traditional boundaries, the redefinition of global and local, the changing role of various social groups and institutions in the enterprise of education, and the trend to client-led from institution-led education.

2.1 The blurring of boundaries

One key aspect of change is the increasing blurring of boundaries between dimensions such as time, space, and informal and formal working learning. Today workers can engage in international transactions from their home offices, children can vicariously experience a volcanic eruption on their television screen while it is actually happening and students in one classroom can co-operatively solve problems with students in classrooms in another city, country or even continent. Similarly boundaries are blurring between informal and formal learning, between levels of formal schooling, further study, work-place learning and life long community-based learning. We observe, older members of the community working within schools to hand on their knowledge and skills and wealth of experiences, younger and older learning and working together in community settings to solve social and environmental problems, and workers undertaking formal study within their workplace.

Another observation relates to the continuing blurring of boundaries between teaching and learning. As well as the recognition of teaching as a reflective practice where teachers increase their own knowledge and understanding from their experiences and their interactions with learners, students are increasingly assuming teaching roles as 'more capable' peers.

2.2 The redefining of global and local

Learners experience school as a place where they access locally known and controlled resources. With the appropriate ICT infrastructure in place, learners are able to access people, content and opportunities for learning on a global basis. The learners' relationship to the local and global contexts is changing to a situation where the distinction is blurred and they are simultaneously in both. It is now common, for students to be working with fellow learners on shared learning objectives, in real time, where they are not readily aware of their co-learner's location. As more people are able to experience both, the learner will need to be able to operate effectively in both, moving effortlessly between the two.

With a redefinition of the local and global, local forms of social community in which people of all ages engage for learning, citizenship and work, will themselves be redefined. The changing forms of social community, with learners' redefining and managing their learning environments, can lead to people forming different local communities that provide shared social values that extend beyond learning. The local forms of social communities can lead to the revitalisation of the village, whereby services that can be accessed from anywhere in the world, such as banking and health care are removed for economic reasons from local communities does not lead to the villages demise, but provides new communities of teleworkers and telelearning. An old African proverb states, "it takes a whole village to educate a child" in the local and global village! The arrival of new technology could make this the slogan of the future.

2.3 The role of other players

So far main players in formal education have been teachers, carrying most of the educational activities, and state or community officials generating policy and distributing resources. Today there is growing influence of other players, such as students, parents interested in the future of their children and other institutions with special interests like churches.

However, business and commerce are rapidly becoming the very influential. They either want to influence education for their own interests (staff training) or want to sell education to make a profit. So education is going to be for sale: public education will compete with private provision. This is changing the range and nature of economic circumstances in schools and the nature of influence on education. We observe increasing numbers of private schools, charter schools run by corporations, industry funded universities, accredited private (for profit) providers of technical and further education. The most recent phenomenon is the trend for Internet service

providers to develop educational content, often edutainment, as a marketing tool for their services. Given these scenarios, public schooling will either diminish or change its role and expand.

2.4 A trend to client-led education

There is a discernible move to a client-led focus to the provision of learning opportunities. Lifelong learning resonates with the notion that learners will be able to avail themselves of personally relevant learning activities at their convenience. Organisations are increasingly developing bespoke training/learning environments for their members. The implication of this move will be that the balance of control will shift from the provider of learning (the teacher) to the consumer of learning (the learner). Technology-mediated contexts will have a significant role in enabling a client-led focus. The capacity of technology to iron out temporal and spatial boundaries will act as a stimulus in developing an educational market in which clients can purchase educational provision in forms suited to their own needs.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations follow from the above observations.

- Past paradigms of learning need to be critically appraised in terms of how they facilitate the necessary learning in our changing and increasingly complex world. Teachers must be ready to move from an instructional role to a facilitation role. They need to hold onto what works, while questioning long traditions at the same time.
- New relationships between emerging actors in education need to be explored. Productive partnerships between local governments and industry and between the parents and the teachers will be essential.
- Productive relationships and partnerships need to be brokered. Educators should not wait to react once relationships are imposed.
- Change must be recognised as variable in an increasingly complex and chaotic educational process. The consequence of this is that educators need to be advocates for their own professionalism and for the common good of education for all.

REFERENCES

UNESCO. (1996) *Education Holds a Treasure*. Prepared by Jacques Delors on behalf of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century