

Learning Si, Schooling No!

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by

Arden Brummell, Ruben Nelson, Wilson Winnitoy, Brian Woodward

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Will the next fifty years be kind to learning? Yes! Extraordinarily so! (Did Ralph see this when he created the Ministry of Learning?)

Will the next fifty years be kind to schools, school boards, colleges, and universities? Not a chance! If you aspire to be a school superintendent or a university president, give it up now while you still can. These roles are just the newest additions to a long list of abandoned careers which already includes Generals, Bishops, Deputy Ministers and union presidents. (Did Ralph see this when he created the Ministry of Learning?)

Something remarkable is about to happen to public education in Alberta, indeed in Canada and North America. Public Education is about to be shattered by forces that are loose in the world—globalization, demographics, information and communications technologies, the cognitive sciences and our own changing aspirations and consciousness. These same forces are already reshaping the world of work, our communities, our churches, our governments, our politics and our personal lives. That education is next in line should not surprise us.

The Commissioners of the Premier's Commission on Future Health Care for Albertans put it this way about future of the health care system, "it became increasingly clear that the present system—however successful it may appear—has just about run its course. It cannot be held together much longer. Returning to a simpler past is not even an option. Nor would it be sufficient to tidy up our present arrangements, even if unlimited funds were available—which they are not. We simply cannot spend our way to the future. We must *think* our way there."

So too with our education systems. We will explore five main reasons why these are the twilight years for institutions which specialize in education.

1. Learning is increasingly central to success—societal, organizational and personal.

We live in the midst of one of the great societal transformations of all time—physical strength and even financial capital are slowly giving way to mental power as the key to sustainable survival and wealth creation. This historic shift is behind the flood of talk about the emerging information society, the knowledge-based economy, intellectual capital and knowledge management. It is behind the investment in the creation of learning societies and learning organizations. It may also be behind Ralph's creation of a Learning Ministry. It is certainly behind the increasing employment of teenagers as web masters and software designers. Put simply, the capacity to sustain societal success, wealth creation and personal advancement all hang on our ability to keep learning and become learners.

By "keep learning" we mean just that—learn continuously, learn more, develop even bigger and better knowledge-bases. We are moving from, Frank Sinatra's "he who has the most toys, wins" to

“she who knows most, in well on the way to winning.” But continuous learning is not enough. More conferences praising it will not do the trick. We must also become learners.

By “becoming learners” we mean the ability to monitor, govern, shape and take responsibility for what one is learning at any given time, in any given situation. Being a learner is a stance towards life. Learners experience life as a world of plenty to be trusted, not a place of scarcity to be feared. Learners know that any moment holds the possibility of learning a huge number of different things. (Think of the many things which can be learned from the experience of reading this article: How to analyze an argument. That one is more skilled than one knew. That one uses newspapers to put off difficult tasks. Something about how to layout a newspaper. Even reasons why school systems are in trouble.)

Being a learner is also a stance towards oneself. Learners are necessarily reflexive—self aware and self critical. If I am bright, I can deconstruct the world of others. If I am a learner, I can deconstruct my own life and work. Learners, therefore, are marked by humility—an openness to encounter and inquire into all that they do not yet know. Learners are also marked by self confidence—they chafe under established authority, fixed rules and set operating procedures because these things get in the way of good learning.

In short, a society of learners will neither respect nor agree to live within specialized industrial institutions designed just for education. The future lie beyond schools, not in better schools. There is irony here. We are learners only because of industrial educational institutions, yet because a critical mass of us are becoming learners we are about to turn and devour them.

2. Because it is so important learning is infusing our whole society.

A quick glance at recent speeches given at graduations, Chambers of Commerce, service clubs, and the annual meetings of both corporations and voluntary organizations reveals that the central importance of learning is slowly sinking into our consciousness. It is not, as has been said for so long, the “crucial preparation for life”, it is at the heart of living well for everyone of us, everywhere, every day.

In a sustainable learning society the distinction between learning for work and learning for living disappears. When this sinks in Revenue Canada will allow all learning as a deduction, not just “job related” learning.

Many who run our education industry cheer the new focus on learning. They think they have finally been discovered. In their dreams they see the whole world becoming a giant classroom. The thought makes them drool. But, this is an illusion. Ironically, the very importance of learning will further erode the power and place of our school systems. Just as our spirituality is escaping our ecclesiastical institutions, and our creativity the Fortune 500, so our capacity as learners is taking us out of the clutches of the education industry. Besides...

3. We no longer have to be in school to learn.

Until today, by ‘learning’ we have really meant activities for young persons within industrial

schools, complete with classrooms, teachers and established curricula. No more. We no longer believe that we have to be in school in order to learn or that learning is only for the young. While we have not yet acted upon these new views, rest assured, we will in the 21st Century. This prospect bodes ill for our school systems.

Why has learning = schooling?

To see why we have equated learning with schooling, ask yourself, “Why do we make our children go to school and urge them to go on to SAIT, college or university?”

The obvious answer is, “to learn; to get a good education.”

But, we ask again, “But, why go to school to learn?”

This time the answer comes, “Because that’s where the teachers are!”

“But, why are the teachers in school?”

“Because our education systems were created when there were oh so many to be taught and ever so few who knew enough to teach.”

The simple fact was that if you wanted to be taught by someone better educated than yourself, you had to go to school or university. The relative scarcity of well educated persons has been a fundamental fact of life from the time human animals left the savannas of Africa some 40,000 years ago to just yesterday. Few parents, neighbours or fellow workers were even high school graduates, much less persons with advanced education.

Consider that in 1920, the graduating class from high school in Hoosier Saskatchewan as a class of one—Ruben’s mother, Dorothy Werthenbach. That spring the teacher left town and moved on. In that instant, Dorothy, at seventeen, became the best educated person within 50 miles. So the next fall, she became the teacher. A few years later she took one year of training at Normal School—she was normalized as a teacher. This experience was so common in the early days of the prairies it was just taken for granted.

Today, of course, high school graduates are dime a dozen, college graduates are very common and persons with graduate degrees are no longer rare or just found in universities.

But we are still behaving as if our world has not changed; as if scarcity is still the norm; as if learning can only occur in government-owned schools. Our educational institutions still have the same government-blessed monopoly on teaching that used to make sense. We have not yet begun to exploit the opportunities present to us by a world of plenty because we are still trying to manage scarcity.

In spite of all our brave talk of innovation and creativity, we are still locked into specialized educational institutions as the sole legitimator of learning. Consider these examples:

- In spite of all our talk of our institutions to become “learning organizations,” we still withhold the right to teach from all but a very select few—those called schools, colleges or universities. In 1999 why is the government still deciding who may and may not teach and confer degrees? Why can’t any organization which is willing to do the work offer a degree as long as it meets the commonly accepted standards? One answer is that we have not yet really got it that the days of scarcity are over; there are now lots of teachers to go round for all but the most specialized at the doctoral level.
- Consider that just a few months ago the Minister of Advanced Education committed \$51 million to double the number of graduates in information technologies and computing science. So far so good. But he was careful to stipulate that the money was only available to existing colleges and universities. He chose to ignore the fact that many firms have the PhDs, the technology, the labs and the will to teach undergraduates if they were only given the opportunity. Maybe he could have tripled the number of graduates in Alberta for our \$51 million, if he had been willing to allow fling the door open to Nortel, or SNC Lavalin or KPMG or Smart Technologies or the Calgary Board of Education. Who knows what creativity might have been let loose had they all be invited to bid. Now we will never know. However, we do know that our established educational institutions are high overhead organizations—as is true with any monopoly. While we deregulate power and much else, where is the brave talk in Alberta of deregulating education—of allowing a genuine market to emerge?
- Consider home schooling in this new light. Today, no jurisdiction does more than tolerate it. None, including Alberta, has committed to actively supporting it. None have explored the many reasons for doing so, reasons which extend far beyond the education of children. However, there are community development, urban design, mental health and economic development reasons to support family-centred learning. As our thinking emerges from the silos by which it has been channelled we will move towards societal learning systems which feature the home as a major site for learning.
- Consider distance learning. When the learner is said to be distant, it is clear that our centre of gravity is still with our institutions. The fact is, all learning is local—it happens wherever the learner is. If the Herald said that this newspaper enabled you to learn at a distance you would rightly say, “Phooey, get your head out from your life and into mine. I am the reader. Your paper fits into my life where and when I want it to, not the other way round.” How long will it take us to say same thing about education? To demand that learning be re-focussed on the persons who is learning and not on the institutions.

4. Learning only through schools is killing us.

The downside of staying with our present commitment to “deliver learning only through schools” is not just the costs of missed opportunities, it is the actual damage to our lives and communities.

When communities were small and life was stable there was little hardship cause by the fact that we separated education dollars from health dollars and both of these from community dollars and economic development dollars. Each was, and still is, a separate vote. It was, and still is, illegal to spend money voted for one purpose, for another. The result is that, even today, a school is only

an educational facility. It is not a general place of learning, community resource, a health centre or an economic development centre.

This industrial dynamic is behind the insanity of forcing Calgary and Edmonton to close inner city schools in order to get new funds for new schools in newly built communities. In order to comply with yesterday's rules, which reflect yesterday's realities, we may well close every classroom within two miles of the Calgary Tower. And we will do this a time when we need more people in the inner core of our cities and when more people are willing to make the commitment to live there. The answer is not more money, or more charter schools, but more fertile imaginations about re-integrating learning into living. And more courage in facing up to the ways our world has profoundly changed in this century. We must get out of the box of education and into the box of learning-to-become-learners everyday, everywhere.

5. Learning beyond schools is now possible.

New possibilities for learning beyond schools, colleges and universities arise from the factors which characterize Alberta the end of the 20th Century.

- A pioneering, can-do, get up and get at it, attitude.
- Citizens who are learners with high levels of education.
- Powerful technologies for communicating and processing information.
- A knowledge-driven economy, heavily dependent on learners learning.
- Systems thinking which enables us to see the relatedness of one thing to another.
- Our homes as places which reintegrate learning, healing, creating wealth, recreating and shopping with our living.
- Civic pride and lots of good will.
- Governments who are willing and able to listen.

What might a 21st Century societal learning system look like?

- The premise will be that learners live happier and healthier lives; that learning to become a learner is at the heart of living well in every dimension of life; and that there are no limits to learning which cannot be addressed, if not overcome.
- Learning will be a co-creation among parents, students, the community and facilitators of learning, some professional and many not. This will be more than our current rash of partnerships. All of the organized learning opportunities in every community will be catalogued, indexed to formal curricula and published on the web. This will support intentional choices, synergy among organizations and mutual support regardless of distance.
- Learning will be a year round, everywhere, everyplace affair. It will often be hard to tell whether a person is working, learning or on holidays.
- Progress will largely be self-paced.

- Facilitators will work as coaches and mentors to persons, groups and families.
- The formal requirements for every form of certification will be publically posted and explained. The many routes to the certification will also be explained.
- The home will again become a major centre for all dimensions of living, from personal formation to wealth creation to learning to healing to recreating.
- Learning facilitators will include friends, neighbours, free lance individuals, professionals in small consulting firms and staff persons of huge transnational corporations. They will be available day and night in every conceivable form—in one-on-one sessions, in classes, by phone or modem and in digital form.
- The settings for learning will vary greatly. Some will look remarkable like schools; others like living rooms, campfires, offices, film studios or laboratories.
- In every community there will be a design studio—a place where persons, parents, and children will be able to explore the possibilities and design unique paths through the woods of learning. The specifications for the learning will be set out and agreed to, as will the particular mix of methods and processes for each person—how much technology, home learning, community-based learning, distance learning, traditional (classroom) learning, coaching, mentoring, monitoring and reporting.

In summary, in times of scarcity, it makes sense to create a system with institutions at its centre; to fund the institutions, not the learners. But today, this makes no sense at all.

We now live in an age of educational plenty, with well educated and demanding citizens. For the first time in history, learning can truly focus on the person who is learning, not the facilitation of learning within an institution the sole purpose of which is education.

Will our new Minister of Learning pick up this challenge? We hope so. Will we as citizens, parents, workers and executives support him if he does? We hope so. These are the questions which will haunt us in the early years of the 21st Century.