

What is Learning For?

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Why Revisit the Old Question?

Can we not take the purpose of learning for granted? Since Aristotle, via Confucius, Voltaire, Dewey and a host of others, the question of purpose has been posed and answers proposed. Some solutions have aspired to the status of eternal verities: intrinsic, somehow, to the human condition. Others have been — self-consciously or otherwise — more ideological. Moreover, the question has classically been framed in terms of ‘education’: i.e. the purposive arrangement of experiences to promote learning. In contrast, humans cannot help *learning*. We are wired for it, and, because of that, our evolutionary status progressed.

But if we conflate the two issues and ask the question: *what should be the purpose of organised learning experiences in contemporary conditions?*, then we have a very important and massively consequential question, which is, paradoxically, scarcely addressed in public discourse.

Debates about the question have never taken place in conditions such as the human race currently faces. These include:

- Existential threat to continuing life on the planet within a few generations
- Resource depletion of fundamental resources — water and food — and their inequitable distribution in a globalised context
- High levels of destructive violence (again, posing potential existential threat) often accompanied by fundamentalism and intolerance, with the concomitant issues of immigration and dislocation
- Technologies of awesome power and transformational scope (including of the very stuff of evolution and human beings), which pose threats, but also hold the potential to solve some of the challenges we face — many of which are of our own making.

‘The best of that which has been thought and said’ will only help us so far in our predicament. Never before was the very planet’s future (at least as a liveable home to humans) under threat. Nor had we developed technologies with which we ourselves will, in the foreseeable future, merge. Old narratives about economic competitiveness, or personal fulfilment are plainly inadequate. **Today, learning has to be about saving our species on this planet, and in conditions which do justice to our aspirations for good lives.**

Another dislocation with the past arises in the democratisation of this question. Previous generations had it answered on their behalf by élites supported by experts. Prevalent industrial educational models reproduced stratified societies. Today, an education worth having is not just that defined by others. As the channels for learning have opened, individuals (almost) anywhere can define, design and achieve their learning goals without institutional or state mediation. The collective task, perhaps, is to help to shape those individual learning goals in order to address the greater challenges and possibilities we face as a species and in our communities. If learning’s purpose is to secure our survival in conditions which are better than just tolerable, we can consider the challenges in four clusters.

Four Levels of Purpose for Learning

Challenge Cluster #1: Planetary/Global

Collectively and individually, we have to learn to live within the earth's renewable resources. This entails not just learning how to redirect new technologies, but also to be responsible consumers and reshape economies so that they are not predicated on endless growth and limitless consumption. Wide recognition of how broken our economic models are has not yet led to their reinvention. This geo-political problem is also a learning challenge: for new generations must re-create their relationship with the physical planet. Similarly, the acquisition of global cultural competence, in the sense of respectful appreciation and tolerance, is the only means by which we can create the conditions for peace. The experience of globalisation is now profound and extensive. It may have created malcontents; but they will have to learn how to reshape it, since it is unlikely to disappear.

Challenge Cluster #2: National/Local

Whilst the nation-state may be eroding (and indeed the very purpose and functions of the concept of 'state' contested), learning how to reinvent democracy into some more participative process will be increasingly important if aspirations for equity and progress are to be realised. There is widespread dissatisfaction or disinterest in instruments of governance. If the collective learning is to create means and processes for participative democracy, then at the individual level, the challenge is to learn how to practise it — and understand its importance. As economic turbulence and restructuring proceed apace, learning to earn a living through 'the start-up of you' must gain centre stage. In our increasingly longer lives, we must learn to expect and embrace change of job, career, field, skill-set — not once, but regularly. And as economies will increasingly depend upon entrepreneurship and creativity, so too will individuals, both for material well-being and their own satisfaction. The processes of learning and earning will become symbiotic. So, as there will be no sharp distinction in start- and end-points of education and work, learning's purpose and function will be intrinsic to working life. Learning to make a living successfully and contribute to the new economies will entail learning to think and act 'green, lean, and eco'. It will also mean learning to adapt to work with automation, and with co-workers who are robots.

Challenge Cluster #3: Interpersonal

It is relatively recently that learning to live well together has come to be seen as a purpose of learning. As we become more reflective (and knowledgeable) about the conditions for, and skills involved in creating and maintaining healthy human relationships, we recognise the scope for learning in this space. The damage done to individuals through dysfunctional families; the scarring of societies by sexist and racist behaviours — from atrocities to discrimination — is incalculable. Again, fast-changing conditions in this century increase the urgency for education to address this cluster of challenges. Changes to family structures and multicultural communities provide the diverse contexts within which learning to relate authentically and respectfully takes place. But education needs to equip learners with the knowledge base and the skills to acquire empathy and insight. Engagement in the arts of all forms is one route for achieving this. Though digital technologies in learning are a liberating force, they have also created the spectre of the 'new

Mowglis' — brought up by screens, unsocialised and isolated. In an age when immersion in digital environments has been responsible for the pornographising of sex, compounding grotesque sexism, it is a challenge for learning to enable people to acquire sexual identities which do no harm but rather enhance and humanise life. Finally, learning to care for and nurture others must moreover extend well beyond family ties: demographic changes are creating aged societies, not all of whose denizens will remain healthy and independent till death.

Challenge Cluster #4: Intra-Personal

Learning about and within our own selves presents the ultimate frontier — and for some thinkers is the precondition for authentic learning in other domains. There is however a C21st twist on the goal of Maslovian 'self-actualisation'. The notion of 'self' will change; humans will have access to more and more forms of enhancement (physical and cognitive). It is not necessary to sign up to the complete thesis of 'the singularity' to recognise that humans must learn to deal with exponentially increased levels of artificial intelligence applied to everyday life; to a gradual incorporation into our own bodies of powerful technologies. Life journeys will be much longer, centenarians not unusual. Taking early personal responsibility for health and fitness will be a precondition for later well-being (in addition to preventing the collapse of health systems because of lifestyle illnesses like the obesity epidemic). Dignity, purpose and social engagement will be the dividends of continuing to learn. And lastly, the spiritual dimension cannot be omitted. Increasingly, in mechanised, technology-infused, confusing modern life, the need for mindfulness, awareness, inner silence and balance will demand to be met. Organised learning must provide the means for its acquisition. There are many routes: the joy of the arts is one. Ultimately however, we cannot avoid the conclusion that there is an enduring response to this question of learning's purpose. It consists in *wisdom* — though redefined for our post-modern context.

ENDNOTE

This short contribution has dealt with the '*why?*' not the '*how?*' of organised learning. It is immediately clear that current education systems are not even close. Radical redesign is needed, and it is urgent. The disjunction with the conceptions of the past arises in recognising that today, learning is so intimately entwined in every aspect of life, throughout life; for *everyone*; and in a context where we will incorporate and merge with learning technologies. The dimensions of learning may stay the same, although the emphasis has shifted from the individual to the collaborative and the social. We are still addressing values, dispositions, knowledge and skills. Of these, values have been the least considered and yet are perhaps the most critical. We should ponder the fact that Goebbels had a PhD in literature.

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