

## The Learning Society in Canada and the US

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### Introduction

The academic literature on learning societies emanating from North America (an arbitrary category encompassing Canada and the U.S.A) includes a variety of themes, including theoretical and conceptual analyses, discussions on policy design and funding arrangements, and methodological proposals for policy implementation. While the North American literature on this topic is significant in relation to other regions of the world, it pales in comparison to the vast amount of scholarly production, policy documents and lively debates that can be found in the European Community. Indeed, a basic library search of relevant publications reveals that the concept of a 'learning society' is not as central in the North American academic or policy literature as it is in Europe.

Indeed, a review of articles published during the last five years (from 1999 to 2004) in the *American Education Research Journal*, one of the leading North American educational journals, reveals no articles containing the term 'learning society' or 'learning societies' either in the title or in the abstract. Likewise, one of the leading adult education journals in North America (the *Adult Education Quarterly*, or AEQ) published only two articles that mention either of these terms (in one of them the reference is in passing) during the last five years. During the same time period, a comparable European journal (the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, or ILJE) has mention of these phrases in 43 articles.

Having said that, some caveats are necessary. Given the internationalization of scholarship production and dissemination, sometimes it is difficult to clearly determine what exactly falls under 'North American' literature on learning societies. The first confusion arises from the fact that there are academics based in North America who publish in European journals and books. The latest book of Canadian scholar Michael Welton (2005) published in the UK by NIACE is a

case in point. Conversely, there are academics based in Europe whose work is published in North America. A second caveat is that some international publishing houses may print a book simultaneously in Europe and North America. Third, a book may contain chapters written by scholars from different parts of the world, and even the editors may be based in different countries. An example of this is the text *The Learning Society: Challenges and Trends*, edited by Raggat et al. (1996). The book, which was originally produced as a reader for a course in the Open University in England, was published simultaneously by Routledge in London and in USA/Canada. Although most chapters in the book are from authors based in Europe, several contributors were based in North America. All these factors make it difficult sometimes to clearly identify a contribution as 'North American'.

This paper is organized in two parts. The first one examines some conceptual issues around the concept of a learning society, distinguishes between the normative and the descriptive literature, and provides a brief historical overview. The second part discusses six main themes identified in the North American literature on learning societies: self-actualization, economic development, learning marketplace; democratic communities, learning webs, and state policy. Each theme is informed by particular traditions and approaches, such as progressive humanism, neoliberalism, libertarianism, human capital, communitarianism and socialism. The paper ends with a short summary and some preliminary conclusions.

## PART I: OVERVIEW

### **Terminological and conceptual issues: learning societies and lifelong learning**

Due to the dearth of academic publications that refer directly to the learning society in North America, one way to infer discussions on this topic is through indirect means, such as exploring the literature on the twin topic of 'lifelong learning'. In this regard, it is interesting to note that, for a variety of ideological, historical, and policy-related reasons, in North America the concept of lifelong learning has attracted more attention from academics and policy-makers than the concept of a learning society.

Without undertaking a deep discourse analysis, it is possible to suggest that the terms 'learning society' and 'lifelong learning', although often closely related and sometimes understood as synonyms, have different connotations and policy implications. The concept of 'lifelong

learning' often alludes to the learning that is acquired (or should be acquired) by individuals throughout their lives, and to the different ways and spaces in which individuals acquire such learning. Given this double dimension of time and space, this concept is sometimes referred to as 'lifelong and lifewide learning (LLL). It is often assumed (sometimes explicitly, usually implicitly) that the main actor in ensuring that 'lifelong learning' occurs is the individual, who is conceived as a consumer exercising her or his choice in a market of educational services.

The concept of 'learning society', instead, alludes to a collective entity (society) that develops (or should develop) institutional and organizational structures to promote relevant learning opportunities to all members of that society. The key actor in ensuring that a 'learning society' takes place is the state, and this suggests the existence of a social contract between the state and the citizens that is translated into appropriate policies, planning strategies, and funding arrangements.

Beyond the discussion on the differences and similarities between 'lifelong learning' and 'learning societies', in both literatures a tension can be found between two educational traditions: progressive humanism, and economic instrumentalism. The former emphasizes self-actualization, learning for its own sake, community development, and education as a human right. The latter focuses on economic competitiveness, job training, employability, and learning as a means to increase productivity and income. In North America, the majority of the literature belongs to the second approach, which tends to fall into a double reductionism. First, it reduces 'societal learning' and 'lifelong learning' to adult populations, with negligible attention paid to children and youth, K-12 educational institutions, and intergenerational learning. Second, it reduces 'adult learning' to workplace learning, with little attention paid to non-commodified learning or to any learning that is not aimed at increasing employability and work productivity. However, some authors (e.g. Hake 1999, Morris 2000, Lafferty 2002) have made an attempt to bridge the two traditions by using the term 'lifelong learning society'.

### **Empirical and normative dimensions in the literature on learning societies**

Livingstone (2004) suggests that learning as a process needs to be understood at three different levels of abstraction: the intrinsic activities we all do in our lives; the institutionalized practices of any given society; and the images and ideologies of “a good education” advocated in that society. A great deal of the literature on learning societies belongs to the last category. Indeed, most of the literature tends to be normative and speculative in nature, dealing more with ideal pedagogical models and recommendations about what people ought to learn rather than about what they actually learn.

In the North American literature on learning societies, it is not unusual to observe a conflation between ontological, descriptive, and empirical claims, on the one hand, and axiological, normative, and value-oriented claims, on the other. Hence, it is pertinent to distinguish between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’, between learning society as a fact and as a guiding concept for policy, and between learning society as description and as aspiration (Hughes and Tight 1998, Rubenson 2000a).

Ontologically, the concept of ‘learning society’ tells us the obvious fact that, throughout history, all human societies have developed a variety of ways to manage, organize, and enable learning among their members within and outside educational institutions. In this sense, human societies have always been learning societies, albeit to different degrees. Likewise, lifelong learning describes the equally obvious fact that people acquire a variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes throughout their lives in a variety of spaces, both inside and outside educational institutions. In this sense, all human beings are lifelong learners. At the ontological level, there are ongoing empirical research projects attempting to explore the characteristics of different learning experiences and their impacts on people’s lives. Other research projects examine the ways in which a particular society provides learning opportunities to its citizens, looking at funding arrangements, enrollment patterns, laws, policies, and the like. These projects often require empirical studies that interrogate learning content and modes, as well as the inclusionary/exclusionary nature of institutional practices. Among the questions addressed in this body of research are the following: what, how and when do people acquire certain knowledge, skills, attitudes and values throughout their lives? How is the learning acquired in different educational settings (formal, non-formal and informal) internalized, adapted, challenged or rejected by learners? How do these different learning experiences interact with each other? Do different institutions and organizations promote different types of learning? Do current institutional arrangements for lifelong learning favor or hinder particular groups?

A different type of empirically-driven question relates to whether there is enough evidence to affirm that contemporary North America has become a true 'learning society'. Four areas of evidence to are usually invoked to support this claim: availability of continuing education courses and programs, time devoted to intentional learning, participation rates in higher education, and the arrival of a knowledge-based economy. First, it is argued that today North American citizens have access to a vast supply of continuing education programs and courses as never seen before in terms of amount and diversity. Secondly, as two recent Canadian surveys report (NALL 1998, WALL 2004), over 80 percent of Canadian adults report devoting some time to intentional informal learning activities related to their paid employment, household duties, community volunteer work and/or other general interests, an average of over 12 hours a week. Thirdly, it is argued that North America has finally become a true learning society because, as a result of mass educational expansion, for the first time in history the majority of high school graduates pursue some form of tertiary level education. However, it is pertinent to remember that access to higher education is still far from being universal, and that lower income groups and ethnic minorities still are more likely to be excluded from it.

The fourth and most recurrent argument to claim that North America is a learning society is that it has become a post-industrial 'knowledge-based economy'. In turn, the evidence to support the arrival of the knowledge-based economy draws on three trends: the increased participation of the service sector vis-à-vis agricultural, extractive and manufacturing activities, the rapid growth of occupations requiring advanced cognitive skills in management and technical design work such as computer analysts and other 'knowledge workers', and the general need in all types of occupations for continuous skill upgrading (Reich 1991, Keating 1995). However, it has been cautioned that the celebration of the arrival of the knowledge-based economy may be too premature and not based on fact.

Indeed, a census-based analysis of occupational distributions over the 1971-96 period indicates that during this period there was a redistribution of jobs from goods production to services, data processing and especially to management and knowledge work. However, while the proportion of workers in management positions nearly quadrupled, by 1996 it still represented just about 10% of the labour force. Overall, workers in knowledge-based occupations related to the generation of ideas and to expertise (such as scientists, engineers, and artists) still remained a very small proportion of the employment landscape. Even today, in the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the vast majority of the Canadian workforce continues to be employed in jobs that require routinized transmission of data, processing of goods or provision of personal services. Likewise, the projections of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate that only about 20 percent of job

openings will require a university degree in the early part of this century, compared with over a third of new entrants who have one. At the same time, the vast majority of new jobs will require only short-term training. Such data challenges the claim that North America has become a knowledge-based economy (Lavoie and Roy 1998, Hecker, 2001, Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2004), and puts into question the argument that explains the emergence of a learning society by the arrival of a knowledge-based economy.

A different way to test if North Americans truly live in a learning society is by asking to what extent the collective learning acquired is helping to improve society. The response is a mixture of accomplishment and failure. In this regard, David Livingstone (2004) notes that together with unprecedented progress in science and technology, our 'learning societies' have created a potent mix of air, water and soil pollution, and global warming. This has been coupled with widespread conditions of impoverishment, war, prospects of a nuclear winter, and a massive collective institutional incapacity to comprehend the consequences of our interventions in the global ecosystem. This leads him to suggest that, at least in this respect, we may be becoming 'ignorant societies' rather than 'learning societies'.

There is also a branch of empirically driven literature that deals with factors affecting adult participation in lifelong learning. Rubenson (2000b), examining data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), found that adults with lower levels of formal education and with lower occupational status are less likely to participate in adult education and training and spend less time in reading either at or outside work. The correlation between educational background and participation in adult education is very clear. In the USA, for example, only 11 percent of those with a primary education or less participate in adult education and training, compared with 64 percent among those with a university education. Similarly, the likelihood of Americans with a university degree to participate in some form of adult education and training is 15.7 times higher than that of Americans with a primary education. In relation to the connection between occupation and participation, Rubenson found that the likelihood of an employee receiving some support for education and training from the employer is related to three factors: the size of the company (larger companies are more likely to provide training opportunities), the occupational status, and the engagement in literacy activities at work. This means that those who are most in need of expanding their learning are the ones who participate the least in adult education.

At the normative level, both 'lifelong learning' and 'learning society' are polisemic concepts, as they have multiple meanings and interpretations. They constitute a contested territory in which a variety of philosophical, pedagogical and policy-related issues are intensely debated. Among the

questions that are often raised in this debate are the following: How should societies organize themselves to promote learning among its members, and what should be the role of the public and the private sector? To what extent should these institutional arrangements and policies promote individual learning processes and to what extent should they promote collective learning processes? Which social groups (e.g. employers, unions, community groups, business groups, educators, government, learning communities, etc.) should participate in the definition of the content, methods and outcomes of the learning? Who should benefit primarily from this learning? What are the most appropriate accreditation systems for learning that are usually unrecognized by educational institutions and workplaces? And, last but not least, a highly contentious question: Who should pay for it?

- Broadly speaking, the literature addressing questions can be organized in six main categories. Progressive humanism emphasizes self-actualization, personal development, and rights. Human capital focuses on public investments on skill growth for economic development and international competitiveness. Neoliberalism proposes a learning marketplace in which knowledge is a commodity that can be bought and sold according to supply and demand dynamics. The local democracy literature draws on communitarian and popular education traditions that emphasize learning in social action, and calls for the development of 'learning communities' and 'learning cities'. The body of literature of 'learning webs' is connected in part to libertarian and religious-based challenges to the monopoly of the state over formal education, promotes deschooling initiatives, homeschooling, and a variety of civil society initiatives to promote learning. Finally, the 'state policy' literature puts the emphasis on regulatory frameworks, policy guidelines, programs and funding arrangements initiated by government agencies to promote learning societies. In the second part of the paper, the literature on learning societies will be presented in light of these six themes.

### **Historical background: The learning society in 20<sup>th</sup> century North America**

In the USA and Canada, some of the early conceptualizations of what is called today 'the learning society' (particularly those connected to the 'local learning communities' tradition) can be traced to the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these approaches could be identified in the ideas, policies and initiatives of the 'common school movement' led by intellectuals like James Carter, Horace Mann, Francis Parker, Henry Barnard in the USA, and Egerton Ryerson in Canada. This movement, which advocated for a universal, secular system of public education for boys and girls, faced three sources of resistance. For

conservative political forces, universal education meant less availability of child labor and more taxes, church leaders perceived public education as a threat to parochial schools, and parents perceived common schools as charitable, substandard instruction for the poor. The common school movement was a complex one that included both oppressive and progressive dynamics. On the one hand, the movement responded to the needs of expanding capitalist industries and the realities of growing cities. Among them were the training and disciplining of new immigrants so they could become productive and docile workers, and the provision of stability and control in the populated urban areas. On the other hand, the common school movement removed the walls of an elitist educational system and opened its doors to large numbers of children who were previously excluded, paving the way to understanding education as a right. The common school movement, then, addressed multiple (and sometimes contradictory) needs and demands. It combined the need of factory owners for a disciplined and productive workforce with the need of the emerging liberal state for social and ideological control (removing it from the church). At the same time, it responded to the hopes of working class and immigrant groups for upward mobility, and to the drive of many well-intentioned educational reformers who conceived public education as the main avenue to build a more democratic and egalitarian society.

During the first decades of the 20th century, the combined efforts of the 'progressive education' and the 'community education' movements brought new proposals and initiatives to the table. While these traditions did not necessarily use the term 'learning society, they had a complex and open understanding of learning that went well beyond the school classroom. Their proposals and initiatives often linked formal and non-formal educational practices with the promotion of active citizenship, liberal democracy, participatory institutional models, social justice, peace, accessibility, critical thinking, civil society organizations, integration of immigrants, and progressive social change. This movement attracted educators and social reformers like John Dewey, Mary Parker Follet, Jane Addams, Mary Harris ('Mother Jones'), Margaret Naumburg, Emma Goldman, Marietta Johnson, Eduard Lindeman and Myles Horton in the USA, and Moses Coady, Jimmy Tompkins, Alfred Fitzpatrick and Adelaide Hoodless in Canada. At that time, many innovative programs flourished, like Frontier College and the Women's Institute in Canada, and Hull House, the Working People's College, The Bryn Mawr School for Women workers and the School of Organic Education in the USA. Even medieval institutions like universities promoted imaginative programs to nurture learning among labourers and farmers. Particularly influential were the Wisconsin extension model and the partnerships with the labour movement that ignited the Workers Educational Association.

The synergy created by this constellation of educators, reformers and unprecedented initiatives would reach its climax during the 1930s, a decade characterized by an economic depression and by fertile social and educational experimentation as well. This was the focus of a Syracuse University doctoral thesis by Ronald Hilton (1981) suggestively entitled *The Short Happy Life of a Learning Society*. According to Hilton, the Great Depression (1930-1940) was a period of great educational innovation in the USA that included a variety of learning formats such as public libraries, pulp magazines, radio, movies, phonograph records, colleges, universities, and proprietary schools. This decade gave new impetus to immigration and Americanization education, the Lyceum Movement, Cooperative Extension, University Extension, and the Civilian Conservation Corps. In that decade was also created the Highlander Centre, which would become an educational cornerstone of the civil rights movement in the following decades. During that decade, several innovative projects flourished also in Canada. Among them were the Antigonish Movement (started by a university extension programs with a 'social gospel' orientation), the 'film circuits' organized by the National Film Board, the Banff Center for Continuing Education and Fine Arts, and the Radio Farm Forum (which would later become the 'Citizens Forum') an innovative joint project of the newly created Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the Canadian Association for Adult Education).

During the Depression, at least one-third of all adults in the USA participated in adult education. Many of them were non-traditional students and drop-in/drop-out students. In that decade, old forms and formats of education were revitalized and new forms came into existence. Among them were credits by examination, alumni education, education for adults in prisons and in hospitals, and basic adult education under the rubric "adult primary education". As Hilton (1981) noted, at that time it became evident that adult learning could effectively take place almost anywhere that the adult learner could be comfortable, be it in a union building, a conservation camp in a rural area, a grange hall, a YMCA or a department store. In the USA and Canada, this period was also characterized by the genesis of the adult education movement and the coming into being of several national, state and local organizations. The Joint Planning Commission, for instance, created in Canada in the mid-1940s, brought together representatives of many national agencies such as government departments, voluntary agencies, churches, labour and business groups, in addition to other groups actively involved in educational, social and cultural activities. The organization was a gathering place (meeting about 3 times a year) and the national clearinghouse and coordinating body of non-formal education activities in Canada (Clark 1954, Faris 1975, Selman et al. 1998).

After two decades in relative oblivion, the idea of a 'learning society' returned with full vigour during the 1960s. This time, the impetus came largely from the perception that the traditional school system was no longer capable of responding to new societal trends. In North America, the most influential books of the 1960s advancing this argument were *Beyond the Stable State. Public and private learning in a changing society* (Donald Schon, 1963), *The Learning Society* (Robert Hutchins, 1969) and *Deschooling Society* (Ivan Illich, 1970).

In *Beyond the Stable State*, Donald Schon, a professor at the Boston's Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), provided a conceptual framework that connected the rapid social and institutional transformations with an increasing need for continuous learning. He argued that institutions are in continuous processes of transformation and are largely unpredictable (he called this "the loss of the stable state"). Hence, individuals can no longer expect to face stable states that will endure their lifetimes, and continuous learning becomes a basic necessity, not only to adapt to social changes, but also to influence the nature and direction of those changes (Smith 2000). Anticipating much of the literature on learning societies, Schon called for new institutional designs ('learning systems') to nurture continuous learning:

*We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations. We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our institutions. We must, in other words, become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation. (Schon 1963/1973: 28)*

The main arguments advanced in *Beyond the Stable State* struck a cord in North America. Its first edition (1963) quickly sold out, and due to its popularity it was reprinted in 1967 and 1973.

A second key contribution of this decade was made by Robert M. Hutchins, one of the first writers to talk about the concept of 'learning society' in North America. For him, a learning society was one that, in addition to offering part-time adult education to every man and woman at every stage of grown-up life, succeeded in transforming its values and its institutions in such a way that learning, fulfillment and becoming human become its aims (Hutchins 1969: 134). Hence, he characterized the learning society as a fulfillment society. In his analysis, Hutchins identified two main trends pushing for a learning society: the rapidity of change (Schon's argument) and the increasing proportion of free time due to technological progress. The first factor requires a learning society and the second makes it possible. According to Hutchins, contemporary education should revive the Athenian model, in which education was not a separate activity constrained to a period of life, to specific hours and to specific places, but was

part and parcel of the life of the city. He argued that machines could make possible what slavery did in Ancient Greece: to release the time of citizens to fully participate in learning. The only difference, in Hutchins' optimistic forecasting, was that in the late twentieth century technology was going to provide significant leisure time to allow everyone to pursue lifelong learning, not just a fortunate few. For this to happen, he proposed specific strategies like sabbatical leaves for older workers, and part-time educational opportunities for all at every stage of life.

Hutchins' book should not be confused with another book, also entitled *The Learning Society*, published in England in 1974 and written by Swedish scholar Tornstein Husén. In this volume, Husén argued that a distinctive characteristic of contemporary societies was a knowledge explosion, and thus equated 'learning societies' with 'knowledge societies'. He predicted that by the year 2000, education was going to become a continuous lifelong process, without fixed points of entry and exit, and with new and faster mechanisms for the production and distribution of knowledge. He rightly predicted that, with the emerging communication technologies, more learning would be occurring at home, at the workplace and in learning centers. At the same time, he wrongly predicted that by the year 2000 society "...will confer status decreasingly on the basis of social background or, assuming there is any left, inherited wealth...", and that "...educated ability will be democracy's replacement for passed-on social prerogatives..." (Husén 1974:238). In any case, it is interesting that two academics working in different parts of the world (the former in North America, the latter in Europe) came up with the exact same title, a similar approach to the topic, and comparable, optimistic predictions. It seems that both Hutchins and Husén managed to capture the spirit of social futurism (large-scale, organized thinking and research about national goals, probable futures and their impact on people's lives) that characterized the era, and that was best articulated by Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock*, published in 1970.

It was also in 1970 that Ivan Illich published *Deschooling Society*, a book that had an immediate international impact. Illich's proposals for a learning society were more radical than the one advanced by Hutchins. Indeed, in an unprecedented demand, Illich called for nothing less and nothing more than abolishing compulsory schooling altogether. In Illich's deschooled society, schools would continue to exist but on non-compulsory basis. Illich noted that deschooling could only occur if alternative social arrangements and legal protections were provided, and if there were a reconceptualization of what constitutes learning in the heart of every deschooled person. In a deschooled society, individuals choose for themselves action-oriented lives, rather than lives constrained by the parameters of consumption. They participate in "learning webs" in which all are teachers and learners. Relationships among people are convivial and promote self- and

community-reliance rather than addictions to institutions and to their product, consumption addiction. Like Hutchins, Illich called for new relational structures, for goods which are engineered for durability rather than obsolescence, and for "...access to institutions that increase the opportunity and desirability of human interaction..." (Illich, 1970:63). In a deschooled society, the worlds of work, leisure, politics, family and community life are the classrooms. Learning, therefore, occurs in and of the world and individuals define themselves by their own learning and the learning that they contribute to others (Stuchul and Kreider 1997).

In addition to the books by Schon, Hutchins, and Illich, North American debates on the learning society during the early 1970s were influenced by two UNESCO publications: *An Introduction to Lifelong Education* (Lengrand 1970) and *Learning to Be* (Faure et al. 1972). Departing from the human capital approaches that permeated education planning at that time, these texts argued that education should not be about 'having' but about 'being,' and that it should be synonymous with culture and not an asset to be gained. From this standpoint of self-realization, the true subject matter of education was to assist learners in 'becoming' at each different stage and in varying circumstances of their lives (Lengrand 1970:59). Building on this humanist approach, but more influential due to its broad international dissemination, in *Learning to Be* the conceptualization of the learning society was built upon the notions of lifelong and lifewide learning, and upon the assumption that a significant renewal of educational systems was both necessary and desirable:

If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society. (Faure et al. 1972: xxxiii)

During the 1980s and early 1990s, with the budget cutbacks and a focus on economic competitiveness that characterized North American policies, the 'back to basics' movement in education became hegemonic. Save a few exceptions like Adler's Paideia Proposal (1982), the humanist-progressive approach to the learning society took a back seat, and the North American educational discourse was dominated by human capital and marketplace approaches.

At the end of the 20th century, North American observers noted that the progressive humanist tradition of the late sixties and early seventies re-emerged in a variety of international declarations and reports. Among them were the *Dakar Declaration on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (2000), the *Hamburg Declaration of CONFINTEA V* (1997), the *Mumbai Statement* (1998), and *Learning: A Treasure Within* (1996), the UNESCO Report of the Delors

Commission that updated the Faure Commission Report of 1972. However, this time around, these documents were less influential than their predecessors, as North American mainstream educational discourse and practice was now dominated by a market-centered and vocationally-oriented conception of education that stressed economic competitiveness and individual entrepreneurship.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the different conceptions of the learning society discussed during the past century continue to compete in the scholarly and policy debates. Reviewing the academic literature, government documents and political discourses, six main approaches can be identified: learning societies as individual self-actualization, as economic development, as marketplace, as fluid education system, as democratic communities, and as state policy. These different (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) understandings of learning societies will be described in the next part of the paper.

## PART 2: MAIN THEMES IN THE CURRENT NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE ON LEARNING SOCIETIES

In the current North American literature on learning societies, six themes can be identified:

- Learning society as self-actualization and lifelong learning
- Learning society as human capital for economic development
- Learning society as a learning marketplace
- Learning society as informal learning webs
- Learning society as democratic learning communities
- Learning society as state policy

Although sometimes they overlap, each theme tends to relate to different approaches, traditions, actors, and understandings. Of these six themes, the most prevalent in the current North American literature on the topic is the second one. The present discourse on the learning society, particularly the official discourse, is permeated with references to human capital formation, global competitiveness, knowledge-based economy, skills growth, learning economy, organizational learning, and the like.

### 1. Learning society as self-actualization and lifelong learning: the liberal humanist approach

The liberal humanist tradition tends to emphasize those dimensions of the learning society that relate to self-actualization, human development, fulfillment, and personal autonomy. In this body of literature, education is seen as an end in itself for living a human life and for contributing to society. Education should aim at the integral formation of the person, nurturing informed, knowledgeable, curious and responsible human beings who can pursue happiness. Among the authors who have influenced this tradition are Robert Hutchins (1969), Malcolm Knowles (1970), and Mortimer Adler (1982). A more progressive strand within the liberal humanist tradition (rooted in some of the ideas of the influential U.S. educator and philosopher John Dewey) also addresses issues related to the right to education, civic participation, critical thinking and societal democratization. For this tradition, a learning society is a society of lifelong learners who strive for personal growth, and a society that offers a variety of learning opportunities for all at every stage of life.

This tradition looks at ancient Greece as the model to follow, and in this literature there are frequent references to the concept of *paideia*. Perhaps the best articulation of this notion was expressed in an influential book entitled precisely “The Paideia Proposal” (Adler 1982). For Mortimer Adler, education should serve three purposes: to teach people how to use their leisure time well, to earn their living ethically, and to be responsible citizens in a democracy. He argued that all human beings have the innate ability to do these three things and that the main task of education should be to prepare people to become lifelong learners. For this approach to be successful, adults who are charged with the education of youth must also adopt a lifelong learning attitude. Adler noted that learning never ends, and proposed age 60 as the earliest that anyone can claim to be truly “educated”, but only then if they have devoted their entire life to learning.

In sum, Adler’s proposal called for a liberal, non-specialized education without electives, vocational classes, or any type of differentiation in tracks. He argued that learning is not finite or static, but ongoing and lively. Education should simultaneously work on three main areas: the acquisition of organized knowledge, the development of intellectual skills, and the enlarged understanding of ideas and values through Socratic questioning, active discussions of books, and involvement in artistic activities. Adler’s ideas and concepts reverberate in much of the current North American humanist liberal literature on learning societies. The influence of his ideas led to the creation of a National Paideia Center (NPC) in 1988, located at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

It is interesting to note that references to the *paideia* framework do not only appear in the academic literature, but also among learners' opinions about the learning society. For instance, Pohl (1993) conducted a study on how learners perceive and describe a potential learning society by asking them to reflect upon their own experiences of extraordinarily good and bad learning episodes. Among the common features of good learning experiences recalled by learners were that they were pursuing a personal interest, were as self-directed as their ages and setting permitted, and entered a personal relationship with a mentor. Bad learning experiences, conversely, were characterized by forced activities, rote memorization requirements and teachers' ill manners. Learners' views on a learning society did not make references to 'information society' themes, like shifting the production of goods and services to the production of information and courses to study. Their notions, reports Pohl, were more aligned with the central tenets of the Ancient Greek concept of *paideia*, which placed lifelong learning as its society's 'central project'. For these learners, a central element of a *paideia*-oriented learning society is a personal relationship between learner and mentor

In a related study, Chien (1998), from the University of South Dakota, found a significant correlation between self-directed learning readiness and resource support. As a result, Chien recommends that educational programs help learners to become ready for self-directed learning. In another research project along the same lines, Heltebran (2000) explored the beliefs of lifelong learners about their own self-direction, motivation to learn, self-efficacy, and the development of a learning society. Those adults who participated in the study (ranging between 52 and 78 years of age) did not credit their personal experience with formal education as having significantly contributed to their being lifelong learners. Similarly, they did not see formal education as inspiring or nurturing the joy and value of learning in their children, grandchildren, or in society. They viewed their self-education as a natural, integral, and necessary part of their lives resulting in the improvement of self and society, and as an important source of their personal happiness and vitality. For them, a learning society will only be a reality when the majority of the individuals and organizations in that society actively engage in learning. They argued that schools must come to terms with their role in fostering the development of lifelong learners, but this can only occur if society does the same.

In summary, the liberal humanist approach to the learning society emphasizes lifelong learning and self-actualization. Among the recurrent ideas in this body of literature are the notions of learning for its own sake, personal growth, individual happiness, and fully educated persons. A learning society is one that ensures the development and fulfillment of all its members, one that nurtures the capacity and the desire to learn continuously, and one that has lifelong learning as a central project.

Those who criticize the liberal humanist approach argue that it overemphasizes the role of 'autonomous individuals' to pursue their hobbies and educational projects, assuming that all are equally able and have the same opportunities to pursue their self-directed learning projects and to purchase cultural services and products in the market. Critics of this approach contend that it does not give much consideration to inequality issues that range from economic resources to cultural capital to availability of time. It is a discourse that tends to ignore material conditions, and more often than not is classless, raceless, genderless and stateless. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'self-directed learning' underemphasizes both the equalizing role of educational institutions and the collective dimension of learning. This individualistic bias is based on the implicit assumption that most learning is (and should be) acquired individually rather than in a collective or relational context.

## 2. Learning society as human capital for economic development: The knowledge society approach

As noted above, this body of literature (which includes both advocates and detractors of the human capital approach) is the most prevalent in North America. The focus on economic development can be linked to original formulations of human capital theory (Schultz 1959, Becker 1964), which established a connection between education, productivity and change. Among the typical concepts used in this theory are 'rates of return on educational investments', 'skills growth', 'productivity' and 'employability'. Contemporary formulations of human capital theory maintain its main assumptions, but add new concepts such as 'global competitiveness', 'knowledge-base society', 'technological innovation', 'entrepreneurship', 'learning organization', 'information revolution', 'learning economies', 'further education' and 'lifelong learning'. In the human capital model, education is understood as a social investment in the training of employees for labour market needs. Although the knowledge society approach appeals to new terminology, for the most part it is simply a new incarnation of previous attempts

to 'recycle' workers so they can catch up with the new technologies of the workplace. Indeed, this model maintains a narrow focus on training but adds a new language that refers to the information society, knowledge management, global competitiveness and the like.

The main argument advanced in this body of literature is that in the context of increasing globalization, and the ensuing technological, informational and work organization changes, what is needed in order to keep nations economically competitive is the training and development of flexible and autonomous workers. Critics to this approach contend that in this framework, the broad concept of lifelong learning tends to be equated with professional development, and that professional development, in turn, tends to be narrowly equated with job skills. In this sense, it is contended that in this approach lifelong learning becomes merely 'worklong' learning (Hunt 1999, Church et al. 2000, Mojab and Gorman 2002).

In the recent literature on the knowledge society (e.g. Keating & Mustard 1993, Kaplan 1994, Keating 1995, Hughes and Tight 1998, Hake 1999, Morris 2000, AUCC 2000, Kellogs 1999, Stewart 2002) a set of three related assumptions can be identified. The first one (already discussed in the first part of this paper) is that contemporary North American societies are experiencing a major techno-economic transformation (known as 'post-fordism') and becoming 'knowledge-based' societies. It is argued that today's societies are experiencing changes at a scale, speed and complexity unprecedented in the history of humanity, and that the time available for adaptation shrinks from eras to generations to individual lifetimes. In agrarian societies, skills were passed along from one generation to the next, often within a family unit. More recently, the industrial revolution created the need for more specialized job training while machines replaced a great deal of work previously performed by workers. In the last decades, there has been an explosion of information and discoveries, which leads to a faster pace of change and to a greater need for adaptation. It is argued that in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the keys to success have changed dramatically with respect to prior eras. Today, the ability to learn, to generate and to share ideas and knowledge have become the most critical sources of comparative advantage thus becoming the determinants of the quality of life and the foundation of our social cohesion. Moreover, knowledge is changing so rapidly that some occupations may become obsolete within decades, and therefore workers need to update their skills permanently in order to remain employable. For this reason, the notion of 'job security' is likely to be replaced with the notion of 'skill security'.

A second assumption -which follows from the first- is that, in this era of relentless global international competitiveness, the key determinant of national economic prosperity is the capacity for adaptation and innovation. Contemporary societies are being inundated by incredible amounts of information (and hence the term 'information age') that tend to create confusion and to limit the capacity for thoughtful planning. As a result, it has been suggested that one of the main tasks of a 'knowledge-based' society is to make sense of all this information in order to increase its ability to respond and adapt to changes, and eventually to generate new changes. As the "price" of information decreases, what will distinguish more successful societies is their relative ability to learn from universally-available information, and to adapt quickly and productively to rapidly-changing conditions. In short, the claim is that the main strategy to remain competitive in the context of economic globalization is to be able to make the required shifts at a fast pace, and this requires a learning society.

A third key assumption observed in this body of literature is that the capacity for innovation is the result of two factors: the available pool of human ingenuity, and the strategies designed and implemented to maximize such ingenuity. From this perspective, learning becomes a necessary condition for the survival of individuals, organizations and societies. Therefore, individuals must develop the key competencies to manage their learning careers and to become lifelong learners, organizations must become learning organizations, and societies must become learning societies (Keating & Mustard 1993, Kaplan 1994, Keating 1995, Hughes and Tight 1998, Hake 1999, Morris 2000, AUCC 2000, Kellogg 1999, Stewart 2002).

Three main tasks for North American societies arise from these assumptions. The first is to make sure that both individuals and societies are able to adapt effectively to accelerating changes. The second is to build a new type of economy that creates wealth from ideas in order to be competitive in the new global economy. The third is to sustain a healthy social environment for human development in a time of diminishing resources (Keating & Mustard, 1993, pp. 101-102). The main concept that encapsulates these three tasks is that of a learning society.

In this body of literature, a connection is often established between a learning society and a learning economy. For instance, an official report of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) submitted to the House of Commons was entitled *Towards a Learning Society, Learning Economy: An Action Plan for Canada*. This document argues that learning

enables individuals, firms and organizations "...to acquire the tools needed to flourish in today's world and most importantly, to turn the forces of globalization to their advantage...." The brief argues that by focussing on learning and by valuing innovation and creativity, Canada can create the conditions that support its successful development in a learning economy because a learning society is the keystone to a learning economy. In conclusion, the Canadian universities' umbrella organization claims that making Canada a learning society and establishing the foundations of a learning economy are common goals. It is interesting to note the 'human capital' language has become typical of documents submitted to politicians by budget strapped universities feeling that it is important to justify their funding by their contribution to economic growth. It is not surprising, then, that the brief also recalled that Canadian universities have not yet recovered from the cutbacks of the 1990s, and warned that this was a major competitive disadvantage for a nation striving to be more fully integrated in the knowledge based economy and society (AUCC 2000).

At the same time, participation of workers in post-secondary courses is now a common indicator used in the human capital literature. A recent comparative and international study of continuing education programs in seven developed countries has found that the United States was near the bottom of the group in the percentage of employed workers, 25–64 years of age, enrolled in courses at colleges and universities. While 67 percent of Australian, 61 percent of Finnish, and 57 percent of French workers had taken advantage of this opportunity, less than half of the U.S. employees (49 percent) had participated in these kinds of courses. The study concluded that if continuous learning is a key to global economic success, U.S. industry has to do more to encourage their workers to seek further education and retraining, and established institutions must make relevant, flexible programs easily available (Kellogg 1999).

One of the debates in the human capital literature deals with the type of skills that need to be acquired by workers in order to be successful in the knowledge-base economy. It is recurrently argued that in the new economy, North American workers need to read, write and calculate at ever-higher levels of competence. These calls for improving the level of literacy and numeracy skills often follow the complaints about the low performance of North American students on international tests. In addition to the 3 R's, usually referred to as foundational or essential skills, the human capital literature notes the need to develop the ability to use information and

communication technologies, usually referred to as 'computer literacy'. Moreover, the argument goes, North American workers need to develop the ability to work in teams (collaborative learning), knowledge of other languages, a variety of contextual skills, and the capacity for continuous learning and adaptation to constantly changing environments throughout their lives (Garner and Firestone 1997, Morris 2000, ACST 2000). The emphasis on the ability to adapt is probably the one factor that distinguishes the current human capital literature from the previous one. In the words of the AUCC, the key to succeed in this changing world is to become a lifelong learner:

What is needed is a whole set of core competencies that allow individuals to seek and capitalize on opportunities: the ability to be creative, to communicate, to make judgements, to learn, to analyse, to assess information critically, to solve problems and to work in teams. To function successfully in a world that is increasingly global and interdependent requires that everyone become a perpetual learner (AUCC 2000, 10 ).

Indeed, the most recurrent mantra of the human capital discourse on learning societies is that the fast-paced world of the knowledge economy requires more than technical skills, demanding workers to be lifelong learners. This call for perpetual learners is also driven by the prediction that workers will have to be able to renew their professional skills or change their career directions several times during their working lives (Kellogg 1999).

If the main task of workers in a learning economy is to become lifelong learners, the main challenge for workplaces is to become learning organizations. The concept of learning organizations, which originated in the management field and attracted the interest of adult educators connected to human resource development, is based on two assumptions. First, that learning occurs not just within individuals, but also by groups and organizations. Second, that as the world to which we need to adapt becomes more complex, effective learning can only occur when knowledge and expertise are distributed among individuals. An institution becomes a learning organization when it designs and implements 'learning systems' capable of bringing about their own continuous transformation. Indeed, one characteristic of learning organizations is that they understand and can analyze the dynamic system within which they are functioning. Another feature is that learning organizations are collaborative learning environments characterized by horizontal networks of information flow rather than vertical/hierarchical structures for top-down decision making (Schon 1973, Argyris and Schon 1978, Senge, 1990, Keating 1995).

Under which conditions could a learning organization work effectively? This is a question that the human capital literature addresses in different ways. Waterman et al. (1996), drawing on their experience with high-tech industries in Silicon Valley, California, and considering that lifetime employment is gone, argue that the right formula lies in a reciprocity contract between employers and employees. Under their proposed covenant, employers should provide workers opportunities to enhance their employability in exchange for higher productivity and commitment to the company. Such agreement between employers and workers should be based on employability rather than on employment. Keating (1995), contends that there must exist an active commitment to continuous improvement and to the diffusion of best practices throughout the organization must exist and that part of each individual's contribution to the organization is to discover ways of doing the task better or more efficiently. He also suggests that the information age provides a new momentum to the learning organization, and claims that improvements and refinements in information technology, such as the emerging platforms for telelearning, create unprecedented opportunities for the building of learning organizations.

Another important stream of literature on learning society as human capital for economic development can be found in the official government discourse on the topic. In the U.S., the official discourse on learning societies has been rooted in a human capital approach for decades. For instance, in a position paper on literacy published in 1984, Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell stated that educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a learning society in order to cope with ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace. He argued that a literate society is a precondition for an ideal learning society, and noted that rapid advances in technology exacerbate the problem of adult illiteracy by raising the skill and knowledge levels required to perform well in an increasingly-complex economy (Bell 1984). More recently, a group of high-level partners (including the U.S. Department of Education and some of the most powerful US private corporations) released a document entitled *Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: a report and mile guide for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills*. Echoing the leitmotif of contemporary human capital discourse, the document notes that the key factors pressing for the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are accelerating technological change, rapidly accumulating knowledge, increasing global competition and rising workforce capabilities around the world (*Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills* 2003).

In Canada, major government initiatives on a learning society agenda took off with the dawn of the new millennium. In 2000, the Canadian government and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) organized an international conference on lifelong learning as an affordable investment. In 2002, at a National Summit on Innovation and Learning, the Minister of Human Resources Development Canada outlined an Action Plan on Innovation organized around five arguments. First, Canada needs to be made a Learning Society, where learning and upgrading become continuous. Second, the nation must become a Knowledge Society that invests in ideas. Third, improvements in how we bring ideas to the market are needed, creating clusters that link those who produce and those who apply knowledge. Fourth, the country needs to develop regulations to spur innovation. Finally, to ensure that Canada becomes a magnet for talent and investment from all over the globe, the Minister asked to draw on the country's diversity of talent, and implement an urban strategy that will help create a quality of life in communities (Stewart 2002).

In line with the arguments of the human capital literature noted above, the Canadian Minister asked the business sector to invest in upgrading the skills of their workers. This is imperative, noted the Minister, if they want to compete in the world economy because today's workplace requires people who adapt quickly to new products, new techniques and new software. The Minister argued that Canada is becoming a Knowledge Society by investing in research and advanced studies, by pursuing multi-disciplinary approaches and making new discoveries. The present challenge is “to refine these new discoveries and ideas and make their application and commercialization the fuel of the new economy”. This call for the commercialization of knowledge also included universities, which were alluded to with the announcement that Canadian universities have agreed to double the amount of research they perform and to triple their commercialization performance. Repeating the double mantra of the human capital discourse that emphasizes the need for lifelong learners and learning organizations, the government official stated that just as workers must become learners and upgrade their skills, so must business, government, and the voluntary sector become learning organizations (Stewart 2002).

In that discourse, the Minister announced the creation of a Canadian Learning Institute in order to have a locus for information and research on learning. Thus, in 2004 the Canadian Council on Learning was established to act as an overarching body to catalogue and disseminate the available information on learning so Canadians can improve their ability to benefit from the knowledge economy. The mandate of the Council includes integrating innovation-related skills in curricula, process and culture, developing and tracking indicators of innovation in learning,

and developing strategies to support innovation in both formal and informal learning in all disciplines, for learners of all ages (see [www.ccl-cca.ca](http://www.ccl-cca.ca)).

Currently, several programs launched by official government agencies allude in one way or another to the concept of learning society. For instance, 'Making Canada a Learning Society' is the name of a youth internship program launched in 2003 by HRDC (Human Resource Development Canada). The program, which consists of paid internships to young engineers, aims at enabling them to develop skills in the industry, gain exposure and contacts in the field, and help them successfully integrate into the labor market. At the same time, the program assists employers by providing pre-screened qualified engineers matched to the company's needs, contributing wage subsidies, and reducing recruitment time and costs ([www.csce.ca](http://www.csce.ca)). It is interesting to note that a conventional internship program is now presented with the ambitious language of making Canada a learning society.

In summary, the human capital approach to learning societies assumes that contemporary North American societies are knowledge-based societies, that the key to compete in the global economy is the capacity for adaptation and innovation, and that continuous learning is a requirement for individuals and organizations. Hence, the twin recommendations of the human capital approach to learning societies are that individuals must become lifelong learners who can adapt to changing contexts and that workplaces must turn into learning organizations, which are capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.

The literature also reflects a significant amount of critical debate around these assumptions and recommendations. One of the criticisms raised is that the learning organization constitutes a modern-day myth that builds on earlier myths of productivity and change. Another critique is that the discourse on learning organizations, once implemented into concrete policies and programs, becomes a strategy operating largely in the interests of capital, the state and professional corporations. For instance, it has been argued that the learning organization model is both a mechanism for the extraction of surplus value from workers and a method of social control (Marsick and Watkins 1999, Mojab and Gorman 2003).

A related critique is that the main role assigned to a learning society by governments is to provide a flexible, adaptable and skilled workforce to make countries competitive in the globalized, knowledge-based economy. One of the problems with this approach is that it overestimates the so-called "job-skills gap". By doing this, it ignores the amount of empirical evidence that indicates substantially less skill upgrading of jobs than the so-called knowledge-based economy

tends to assume, and puts most of the blame on low-skilled workers and not on the low availability of high-skilled jobs. In other words, this approach assumes that economic globalization mainly requires highly-trained workers, ignoring that this model of capital accumulation also relies heavily on low-waged, menial jobs. A related criticism is that human capital approaches tend to overemphasize educational upgrading as the solution to economic problems. By doing this, these approaches tend to ignore the need for economic reforms themselves, and diverts the attention from the central problem, which is the lack of decent jobs (Livingstone 1998, 2004).

Another criticism to the human capital approach relates to the difficulties of labour forecasting. Indeed, it has been acknowledged that anticipating the amount of workers that will be required in a given industry is more a guess than a science. Since human resource development is largely based on labour forecasting, it is likely that there will be a shift from a focus on occupations to a focus on skills. Indeed, the Advisory Council on Science and Technology (2000) identifies five main types of skills that should be nurtured in a learning society: 1) essential skills (reading, writing, numeracy, computers, problem solving, communication, critical analysis); 2) technical skills (ability to perform specialized tasks); 3) management skills (planning, marketing, evaluation, budgeting, supervision); 4) leadership skills (ability to motivate, mentor, take risks, formulate and champion a vision); and 5) contextual skills (ability to operate successfully in different settings).

### **3. Learning society as a learning marketplace. The neoliberal approach**

The concept of learning society as a marketplace for the supply and demand of educational services can be linked to neoliberal economics approaches which conceive education as one more commodity to be traded in a supposedly free market. From a neoliberal perspective, a learning society is a learning market. The main support for this conception comes from the business sector and associated think-tanks, like the Heritage Foundation in the USA and the Fraser Institute in Canada. Interestingly enough, this approach has also been endorsed by the Libertarian Party of the USA, which adopted a new national platform in its most recent convention, held in Atlanta, Georgia, in May 2004. The libertarians' platform states that education, like any other service, is best provided by the free market, and calls for a separation between education and the state.

Neoliberalism rejects some of the main principles of Keynesian economics, as it argues against positive government intervention in the economy to correct market imperfections. Neoliberal thinkers argue that when the market can operate freely, without government restrictions, it is more likely to promote economic development, social progress and even social justice. From a neoliberal perspective, an effective and democratic learning society can be achieved by developing a market of learning opportunities to meet the demands of individuals and employers for the updating of skills and competencies (Edwards 1997). With the popularity of neoliberal discourse, the traditional educational terminology on learning societies--with its commitments to civil society, democratic citizenship and the public good--was replaced by the language of the marketplace. Thus, learners become clients, and future students are 'the market' (Boshier 1998). Indeed, the neoliberal conception of a or market-oriented learning society puts the onus and the responsibility for learning (including the financial responsibility) on the individual. In this model, people are not conceived of as citizens with the inalienable right to education funded (and often provided) by the state, but as potential consumers of educational products and services whose rights are reduced to choosing among several options in the marketplace.

This approach is different from the classic human capital approach discussed in the previous sections because under neoliberalism education is no longer considered as a social investment with economic returns, but as a commodity itself (Pannu et al. 1994). This implies a transition from workplace training and state provision of public education to self-recovery or for-profit courses offered by private companies and paid for by the learner in a competitive marketplace. The neoliberal discourse on learning societies, with its high rhetoric about the efficiency and democracy of the free market, is often adopted with enthusiasm by governments and employers. The former can use it to justify cutbacks to adult education programs, and the latter to withdraw from funding training programs. In this regard, it is argued that the neoliberal discourse on learning societies provides a good rationale for the public sector to resign its prime responsibility as an education provider. It also provides good excuses for employers to transfer training responsibilities to their employees. As a result, there is a concern that the neoliberal approach to the learning society may increase the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots." If education becomes a commodity to be traded in an educational marketplace, material inequalities are likely to become learning inequalities. This, in turn, would allow for more direct conversions of economic capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983, Hart 1996, Baptiste 1999, Tobias 1999, Hake 1999, Butler 2000, Gorman 2002, Grace 2002, Mojab and Gorman 2002, Rubenson 2002, Schugurensky 2003).

In North America, this notion became influential since the 1970s, due to the work of the Chicago School, and particularly the so-called Chicago Boys under the leadership of Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman, who developed the idea of school vouchers in the 1950s. During the 1980s, many market-friendly recommendations of neoliberal economists were adopted by the governments of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. and Brian Mulroney in Canada, whose attacks on the Welfare State culminated in the 1988 free trade agreement between the two nations (joined by Mexico in 1994). More recently, the neoliberal approach to learning societies is being expressed in the development of an educational chapter of the General Agreement of Trade and Services (GATS), as part of the World Trade Organization. The U.S. has a special interest in accomplishing this initiative, because it would allow its more powerful educational providers to expand their markets internationally.

A related issue that arises from free trade agreements like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), compounded by the expansion of new communication technologies, is the relative erosion of labour market borders. Indeed, the emergence of a North American labour market for skilled workers creates serious problems for government agencies in charge of the development of human resources for national economic growth based on the assumptions of human capital theory discussed in the previous section. At this point, Canada is the most concerned party in relation to the potential “brain drain” that may arise from this situation. Indeed, Canada’s Advisory Council on Science and Technology (2000) noted that a North American market for skilled labour means that labour market shortages do not necessarily originate in Canada, nor can they necessarily be easily remedied in Canada alone. As a result, the Council predicted that if the United States fails to produce enough high-knowledge workers to meet the needs of U.S.-based employers, the impact will almost certainly be felt in Canada as Canadians are offered jobs in the United States and the going wage is bid up across North America. This creates a conundrum for policy makers who conceive learning societies primarily as an instrument for national economic competitiveness.

In summary, the neoliberal discourse on learning societies emphasizes the idea of a learning market regulated only by the “invisible hand” of supply and demand. The market is conceived as essentially free and democratic, and the state is demonized as a bureaucratic obstacle that undercuts the efficiency of the market. While the neoliberal discourse has a strong anti-state rhetoric, it says little about the ways the state is influenced by lobbyists of corporations, and about the extent of corporate welfare in North America. This market-oriented approach to the learning society privileges individual over collective learning, and conceptualizes learners as consumers rather than as citizens. In theory, the neoliberal approach to the learning society is supposed to encourage a market democracy (due to low state regulations), individual freedom (due to consumers’ choice) and efficiency (due to competition among suppliers). In practice, however, it is likely to generate

monopolies and oligopolies, to create problems of quality control (diploma mills), to further learning inequalities, and to reduce all educational activities to simple commercial transactions.

#### 4. Learning society as informal learning webs. The deschooling approach

Over thirty years after Ivan Illich popularized the case for deschooling society, it is still a theme that can be identified in the North American literature on learning societies. Moreover, the literature has been accompanied by a deschooling movement that, although marginal, is certainly alive and well in Canada and the USA. Today, however, advocates of deschooling do not have the same amount of self-righteousness and certainty that were characteristic of the first wave of this movement. This is partly due to the fact that some of the predictions made during the seventies were unrealized. For instance, in 1979, Professor Norman Henchey, from the Faculty of Education at McGill University (Montreal) did a study on future trends and strategic planning commissioned by the Research Unit of the Ontario Ministry of Education. Henchey foresaw that by the year 2000 compulsory education would disappear, and be replaced with a 'guaranteed access to educational services' (for other predictions on this topic from that era, see also Husén 1974). Although deschooling never became a serious consideration in educational or social policy in North America, and the scenario depicted by Henchey is also far from today's reality, it is possible to observe a small but growing movement against compulsory schooling. The literature on deschooling, which takes different expressions, includes a wide spectrum of positions in relation to the formal education system.

One body of literature, which has increased considerably in the last two decades, relates to homeschooling. According to the figures of provincial ministries of education, the number of home-schooled children in Canada grew from only 2,000 children in 1979 to approximately 18,000 children in 1996. The Fraser Institute reports that some estimates put the number of home-schooled children in Canada up to 80,000. For the USA, the Institute reports that home schooling is growing at a rate of between 11 to 40 percent annually, and that in 1999 the US Department of Education estimated that approximately 850,000 students were being homeschooled. In both countries, the increase in homeschooling has been partly facilitated by access to the Internet. Like the general deschooling movement to which it belongs, the homeschooling movement is not a homogeneous one. Indeed, partisans of homeschooling include a wide variety of groups that range from the conservative religious right to the anarchist left, naturalists and libertarians. Whereas all these groups have in common a dislike for compulsory schooling, they have important differences

regarding the reasons for such dislike, their pedagogical approaches, their ideological outlook, their curriculum content, and their proposed degree of educational de-institutionalization (Priesnitz 2000, McDowell and Ray 2000, Hardy 2001).

Another expression of the literature on deschooling is the one that focuses on the 'knowledge explosion' argument. This body of literature argues that the production and distribution of knowledge does not reside anymore exclusively in formal education institutions, namely schools, universities and specialized research centres, as it used to be the case in a not-so-distant past. The expansion of the publishing industry, the mass media, the library systems, and the new information and communication technologies have created a new situation in which schools and universities do not hold the monopoly on knowledge. In this literature is it often argued that this information/knowledge explosion will lead to the erosion of the highly institutionalized, bureaucratic and isolated North American educational system. Many influential authors in this stream are 'futurists' who do not shy away from predicting social trends (Bell 1973 and 1996, Husén 1974, Naisbett 1982, London 1987, Toffler 1971, 1980 and 1990, Senge 1990, Drucker, 1993)

A third body of deschooling literature, which is the most relevant to this paper, is the one that conceives the learning society as a fluid system of learning webs. Following the suggested proposals for learning webs raised by Ivan Illich in the last chapter of *Deschooling Society* (Illich 1970), many publications have addressed different dimensions of such a system. This literature regrets that in North America most educational reform efforts tend to focus exclusively on the K-12 school system, and calls for bold, thoughtful and innovative action to promote learning outside of the school system (Weber 2000). Three main issues addressed in this literature addresses are learning networks, learning partnerships, and learning recognition.

In relation to learning networks, it is argued that learning societies need to find ways of organizing human ingenuity in more productive ways. A broad social goal should be to maximize learning, both by individuals and by groups (firms, organizations, communities, etc.). Keating (1995) suggests that governments should coordinate rather than control such learning activity, and should encourage new learning partnerships across traditional divides (school/work, management/labor, private/public sectors, etc). To that aim, Keating proposes the creation of a monitoring system (a sort of data bank) on the actual workings of the learning society. Such a system (which would

include information about learning at the local, provincial and national level) could provide usable information on how people are learning, and where problems are occurring. To leverage this knowledge effectively, a learning society needs to build networks among these multiple monitoring activities. Keating also calls for continuous research to inform both the outcome indicators and the developmental processes and pathways that underlie them. To a great extent, the mission of the Canadian Council on Learning launched in 2004 is aligned with several of these suggestions. As noted above, the main function of this institute is to catalogue and disseminate the available information on learning in Canada, which includes developing strategies to support innovation in learning in all disciplines and for Canadians of all ages.

In relation to learning partnerships, it has been argued that the creation and dissemination of knowledge in a learning society requires collaboration, synergy and institutional arrangements among a variety of social agencies such as universities, schools, neighbourhood organizations, cultural centers, workplaces, libraries, museums, and community gardens. Such collaboration should also include closer interaction among disciplines (e.g. between the arts and the sciences) and age groups (e.g. via intergenerational projects). This stream of literature proposes that in a true learning society, the entire community--from corporate institutions to family units--should share the responsibility for creating and nurturing a complete learning environment for all members throughout their lifetime. Information and communication technologies could play (if not yet do play) a significant role in creating a learning society by nurturing learning webs that link different public learning spaces and households (Senesh 1991, Garmer and Firestone 1997, Webber 2000, AUCC 2000).

Finally, in relation to learning recognition, this body of literature has made a contribution to raise awareness about the large amount of learning that occurs outside formal schooling, through non-formal and informal learning activities and settings. This is particularly important in terms of recognizing the learning and the knowledge of subordinate groups (Illich 1970, Tough 1971 and 1978, Livingstone 2004). What is needed, then, is to build a fluid system of recognition and accreditation of prior learning to guarantee that knowledge and skills already mastered do not have to be re-learned. Such a system, which is already in place in some institutions, has great potential to encourage self-directed learning and to reduce costly duplications (Morris 2000). In North America, the system is usually known as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), and includes a variety of instruments to recognize non-credited knowledge using direct and indirect evidence (Aber 1996, Anderson and Ross 1992, Brain and Koenig 1994, Burnie et al 1994, Deiro 1983), Kimeldorf 1994, Lamdin 1997, Mann 1993, Vermont State College 1991,

Thomas et al. 2001, Livingstone 2004). These alternative ways to recognize and reward talent acquired outside of the formal classroom can help people to access educational institutions or occupations that otherwise would be closed to them.

In sum, the notion of learning societies as a fluid education system can be connected to the efforts to legitimize learning spaces outside of formal educational institutions, to develop networks among learning spaces, and to create more open channels for the acquisition and accreditation of learning. Among these efforts are initiatives to revitalize the deschooling agenda, to promote homeschooling as an alternative to the mandatory school system, to establish institutional partnerships, and to develop and implement policies and programs for the assessment and recognition of experiential learning.

#### 5. Learning societies as democratic communities. The social movement approach

The notion of learning societies as democratic communities can be linked to the radical education tradition that emphasizes social learning, community development, civic engagement, political participation and societal transformation. Among the most influential North American authors in this tradition are John Dewey (1916), Mary Parker Follett (1918), Edward Lindeman (1926), Moses Coady (1939), Jane Addams (1902) and Myles Horton (1997). This tradition is also influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who lectured in the USA and Canada during the seventies. In this literature, the conception of a learning society is inseparable from the conception of a good society. In turn, the conception of a good society cannot be detached from a conception of social justice, democracy, and general wellbeing. A central feature of this literature, then, is a concern for economic, social and political democracy, and an ethical commitment to social justice. These issues, which are marginal in the other discourses on learning society discussed previously, become center stage here. The thrust of this literature explores the democratic possibilities of a learning society or, put in a different way, the possibilities for democratizing learning societies.

Although guided by high moral and social principles, most proposals emanating from this body of literature rarely present a well-designed blueprint for all learning societies. More frequently, these are writings about the conditions for the development of inclusive and democratic learning communities, examining real stories of success and failure. As Mary Parker Follett (1918) pointed out in her pioneering work on the topic, a democratic learning community begins wherever people live and work. A learning community, she notes Parker Follet, starts with

everyday life in places like community centres or neighbourhood associations, using cooperative methods and implementing democratic practices. Today, these ideas are carried out by a variety of related organizations such as the movements of healthy communities, sustainable communities and popular education, the cooperative sector and a variety of grassroots organizations.

One of the new areas of research in this body of literature is social learning, also referred to as social action learning, social movement learning, community learning, collaborative learning, or democratic citizenship learning. Until now, most research on learning has focused on the individual. This is not entirely surprising, since the North American education system tends to view knowledge and expertise as an exclusively individual possession (possessive individualism). However, researchers have recently begun to focus on the social aspects of learning and knowledge creation (Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991, Keating 1995, Hall 1999). One of the most recent expressions of this tradition in North America is the 'social movement learning' project, coordinated by Budd Hall at the University of Victoria (Hall 1999).

The main argument of this literature is that democratic communities are learning communities, because their members learn through social action, collective dialogue, civic engagement and livelihood projects. A "learning community" can be defined as a culture of life-long learning and civic involvement, a culture of equal access and contribution to the community well-being (Learning Community 2000). However, the empirical literature on learning support structures also recognizes that these communities do not always focus enough energy on maximizing learning opportunities.

Three main dimensions can be found in this body of literature: critique (denunciation of existing inequalities in today's society), proposal (annunciation of a democratic learning community) and strategy (roads to walk in order to move from the real to the ideal). In terms of critique, this literature deals with issues of power inequalities, wealth distribution, gender and ethnic oppression, and the like. It acknowledges that knowledge is unequally distributed, and that inequalities in the production and distribution of knowledge are related to material inequalities. Likewise, this body of literature challenges the human capital learning society project that focuses almost exclusively in training new kinds of workers to meet the instrumental demands of a knowledge economy, as well as the neoliberal project of a learning marketplace. In relation to the workplace, this perspective challenges the view that associates the learning organization model with progressive and emancipatory claims of inclusion and collaboration (Mojab and Gorman 2003, Boshier 2003).

In terms of proposals, in this literature it is possible to find recurrent calls for an agenda that equalizes learning opportunities by paying attention to the homeless, the unemployed, the underemployed, and other disenfranchised citizens (Boshier 2003). It also proposes a model of learning communities inspired in the radical democratic traditions of adult education (particularly popular education). These initiatives give a central role to civic engagement and active participation in democratic spaces, which is not surprising since one of the main tenets of the model is that a good learning society is also a democratic society. From this perspective, an essential factor for the evolution of this kind of learning communities and of a true learning society is an open system of governance with shared leadership, which departs from the top-down management style typical of industries and educational systems. In this literature, a learning society is a more democratic, sustainable, just and happier society. Hence, there should be a connection between the micro-reality of local communities and the macro-policies that are generated at the provincial and national level.

In terms of strategy, this literature argues that social organizations need to nurture more opportunities for their members to reflect on their learning within a broader framework of economic justice, political democracy, environmental sustainability and the construction of a culture of peace. This should be complemented with cultural and institutional changes that encourage inclusiveness within organizations, equalize learning opportunities, and provide safe learning environments (Welton 2005, Horton 1997, Schugurensky 2003, Plumb 2005). The literature explains that this strategy is being nurtured in North America by progressive municipal governments, social movements, nongovernmental organizations and grassroots groups through a variety of small-scale experiments. Also in relation to strategy, it has been noted that a critical factor for the success of community learning initiatives is a visionary leader able to inspire and involve all those in the organization as partners and collaborators (Dickinson 2002). Likewise, Patricia Calderwood (2000), from the University of Connecticut, explored multiple layers of learning communities and the conditions that inspire their resilience and growth. Confronting the inherent fragility of community, she also provided a hopeful discussion about the ways communities of ordinary people can overcome vulnerabilities.

The interest in the topic of learning communities is growing. In the USA, there is a National Learning Communities Project (funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts) that hosts annual summer institutes and conferences, and commissions papers on learning community theory and practice. In spring 2004, in collaboration with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE),

the project held a national conference on learning communities (See [http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/02\\_nlcp\\_entry.asp](http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/02_nlcp_entry.asp)). Also in the USA, the Mary Parker Follett Foundation has the Design of Communities of Learning as one of its main foci. This program consists of educational transformation through the participatory, idealized re-design of public education in a community context. Three core assumptions guide this program. First, if a community today had to design a system of learning and human development (public education system) completely from scratch, it would not look like what they have today. Second, the only way to know if the present system is the best possible is to design the ideal and then look at the present system in light of that ideal. The third assumption is that only the users of a system have the right to design that system. In Canada, the Transformative Learning Centre at the University of Toronto has a research program on the connections between citizenship learning and participatory democracy, and in the fall of 2003 organized an international conference on this topic, which resulted in two volumes of proceedings (Mundel and Schugurensky 2004).

In closing, the literature on learning societies as democratic communities is inspired by the social movement approach and by the radical democratic traditions in adult education. In this body of literature, a learning society is often conceived as a society committed to social justice and general wellbeing. Consequently, for many authors in this tradition, the construction of learning societies and the construction of democratic societies is one indivisible project. Most of the publications on social action learning tend to be normative, but there is an emerging empirical literature with studies that explores the actual content and dynamics of learning in communities of practice.

- Learning societies as government policy: the planning approach

This body of literature deals with the enabling structures (policies, programs, incentives, etc.) that facilitate the development and sustenance of learning societies. Metaphorically speaking, it is the literature that deals with the engineering and architecture of the learning society. Although the policy-related literature on the learning society produced in Canada and the USA is not as abundant as in Europe, there has been for decades a preoccupation for the institutional design that nurtures the realization of lifelong learning for all members of society. Hutchins (1969), for instance, proposed specific strategies like sabbatical leaves for older workers, and part-time educational opportunities for all at every stage of life. This suggestion resurfaced in Canada in the 1980s, when the Canada's National Advisory Panel on Skill Development Leave recommended that the response to technological and structural change must be learning

throughout life and proposed a universal educational leave to allow people continuous access to retraining and upgrading opportunities (Wilkinson 1984).

At the same time, some important official master documents have been criticized for not providing useful policy directions. That was the case of the 1983 U.S. report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, known as "A Nation at Risk". The report alluded to the development of a 'learning society', but the recommendations section did not provide clear guidelines about issues like the articulation of educational goals, or the responsibility for setting goals and planning learning opportunities (Berman 1984).

In general terms, the North American policy-oriented literature on learning societies is not particularly vast. Among some academic groups, during the last two decades there has been a shift away from grand designs and macro-level policy. Partly because of the failure of central planned economies (symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), partly because of the ascendance of postmodernist theories, and partly because of the recognition of the diversity of local communities and the increasing complexity of contemporary institutions, many in higher education became leery of grand social designs and of centralized decision making. Awareness of these issues has led to a rise in popularity of decentralization strategies. The argument of decentralization advocates is that the best safeguard against future grand social designs is the active participation of the whole population in lifelong learning in various learning organizations including the household, the school, the workplace, and the community (Harvey 1989, Keating 1995).

In any case, most of the policy-related literature on learning societies tends to emanate from government offices, specialized firms, consultants and task forces rather than from full-time academics. For this and other reasons, academics have little knowledge about the processes of policy formation, or the evaluation of policy outcomes. The policy literature reflects the new human capital framework adopted by North American governments since the mid-seventies. Therefore, by and large, the literature presents different strategies for enabling institutions to provide services for individuals as a condition for improving economic productivity. The main role assigned to the learning society by policy-makers seems to be to provide a flexible, adaptable and skilled workforce to make countries competitive in the globalized economy.

In a policy paper to guide the Canadian government, Morris (2000) outlined three main elements of a learning society strategy: ensuring that all Canadians are aware of the importance of learning in the 21st century, that all Canadians have adequate foundation skills to take advantage of learning opportunities, and that all Canadians have the broadest possible access to continuous learning opportunities throughout their life course. In order to translate these general goals into policies and action, what is required is a greater degree of collaboration among stakeholders (government agencies, private sector, non-governmental organizations, individuals) and a good process for consensus building.

A recurrent theme in this body of literature is the need to create policies and programs that build bridges between school levels, between school and work, and between school and communities. When the relationships already exist, policies should aim at leveraging them. For this to happen, what is needed is a combination of political will, modest resources and a basic coordination system and simple communication technologies. In this regard, governments can play an important enabling role by reserving public spaces on the information highway to make within-community and community-to-community exchanges possible. Additionally, policies and programs for a learning society must accept four basic principles. The first one is that the success of a learning society depends heavily on the participation of the population, so it must encourage and facilitate learning opportunities for existing initiatives rather than imposing them from above.

It is worth noting here that policy recommendations to rely more heavily on local communities are often justified on several grounds: as a tool for promoting community empowerment, as a strategy to save government resources, and as a means to ensure that local problems are addressed with relevant local solutions. The second principle is that a genuine learning society is based on collaborative learning. This implies a shift in the range of competencies to be developed from occupation-oriented to skills-oriented. Paramount among these skills is the abilities to learn and produce collaboratively. The third principle is that the essence of a learning society consists of the permanent creation, maintenance and expansion of effective learning organizations, in addition to networks in the public sector, the private sector and local communities. The fourth principle is that lifelong learning for all can only be achieved in a society that actively engages *all* its citizens in learning activities, which means that special efforts must be made to address the impact of structural inequalities (Keating 1995, Rubenson 2000b, Mac Neil 2002).

A policy initiative that takes seriously is the last principle must recognize that, for different reasons, not all adults are ready to make use of existing opportunities for education and training. Two key inhibiting factors are what Rubenson (2000b) calls “the long arm of the family” and “the long arm of the job”. Thus, a basic point of departure for any realistic policy for a learning society is to recognize educational and social inequalities, plus generate strategies to reverse them. However, if policies are based on the wrong assumption--that society is formed by completely self-directed individuals in possession of the intellectual, material and emotional resources to jump at every learning opportunity--then that strategy is doomed to widen, not narrow, the educational and cultural gaps in society. The policy formation process must recognize that those who are most in need of learning are usually the least likely to participate in education and training activities. To compound the situation, they also often find themselves in contexts that do not stimulate a readiness to engage in learning (Rubenson 2000b).

In closing, current policy documents in North America tend to rely on the assumptions of human capital theory and focus on the development of a competitive workforce. In general, it tends to accept the premise that we live in a knowledge-based society, and as a result, lifelong learning is the driver of economic and social development (for a discussion of the government discourse on this subject, see section 2, ‘learning society as human capital’). At the same time, academics who are trying to inform the process of policy formation are suggesting that certain principles and considerations should be taken into account if a genuine learning society is the ultimate goal. Policies to promote a learning society require complementary social policies that support citizen participation in lifelong learning, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalized. Because a healthy community is a precondition for a learning society, policy initiatives for learning societies must work with other policy initiatives for healthier and more inclusive communities. One of the main roles of the government in policy-making and policy implementation is to promote public debate about the ideal features of a learning society, to support learning communities by providing infrastructure and communication networks, and to address inequalities in learning opportunities.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The review of the North American literature on learning societies identified three main categories. First, a normative literature that focuses on the desirable features of an ideal learning society. Some of this literature takes the form of social forecasting (futurism) and claims to

anticipate the characteristics of our future learning societies, but most of it relies on prescriptive statements about the “should be” of learning societies. Second, there is a smaller body of empirical literature that attempts to understand the conditions and dynamics of learning societies today. There is a third body of literature, which can be called ‘descriptive’, that makes claims about the learning society, the knowledge-based society, the information-age, etc., but without supporting those claims with research or with data. Across these three categories, the normative literature provides great insights for including learning as an important element in the idea of a future society, but at the same time tends to remain at a high level of abstraction. The empirical literature, save a few exceptions, tends to focus on isolated case studies. The descriptive literature tends to oscillate between insightful essays and unsubstantiated opinion pieces.

In the North American literature, there are many more references to the concept of lifelong learning than to the concept of a learning society. The first concept focuses on the learning processes experienced by individuals, while the second focuses on the collective dimension of learning, and locates such learning in the context of particular policies and programs. This literature review identified six main themes in relation to learning societies in North America: learning society as self-actualization and lifelong learning; learning society as human capital for economic development; learning society as a learning marketplace; learning society as informal learning webs; learning society as democratic learning communities; and learning society as state policy. As discussed, each body of literature is informed by particular traditions and approaches.

In general, the bulk of the literature belongs to the second theme (learning societies as human capital), followed by the first theme, which is rooted in the humanist progressive tradition. The neoliberal approach is not as present in a page count as it is in its real power to influence decisions. The democratic learning communities approach, while relatively marginal, is being nurtured by progressive municipal governments, social movements and grassroots organizations through a variety of experiments. These initiatives give a central role to civic engagement and active participation in democratic spaces. This is not surprising, since one of the main tenets of the model is that a good learning society is also a democratic society, and thus it understands the construction of learning societies and the construction of democratic societies as one indivisible project.

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