Educational Considerations

Volume 14
Number 2 *Nos. 2-3 (Spring/Fall)*

Article 6

9-1-1987

Adult Education and the Learning Society

Jerold W. Apps

Recommended Citation

Apps, Jerold W. (1987) "Adult Education and the Learning Society," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 14: No. 2. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1663

Innovation and flexibility in education demands quality . . . educators must avoid isolation and build connections.

Adult Education and the Learning Society

by Dr. Jerold W. Apps
University of Wisconsin-Madison

In 1968 I first saw the words "learning society." I had read Robert Hutchins book (1968), **The Learning Society,** that year. Hutchins, a former president of the University of Chicago, wrote that two forces were going to propel us toward becoming a learning society—the rapidity of change, and the increase in the amount of leisure time.

Now, some 20 years later, we see an occasional reference to "learning society," but with no agreed upon meaning. (We have also seen great change, but some might question whether we have more leisure time.) Hutchins had a vision as to what a learning society would be. He said a learning society is "one that, in addition to offering part-time adult education to every man and woman at every stage of grown-up life, had succeeded in transforming its values in such a way that learning, fulfillment, becoming human, had become its aims and all its institutions were directed to this end" (pp. 164-165).

In recent years we've all heard much about lifelong learning. It is important that the concepts of learning society and lifelong learning do not become tangled. The two ideas are of course related. Lifelong learning is certainly an important condition for a learning society. But there is more to the metaphor of learning society than lifelong learning.

Donald Smith (1985), former executive vice president of the University of Wisconsin-System, sees the metaphor of a learning society as a possible unifying vision for human beings. He writes, "Humankind, we may observe, is most distinctively a learning species, and people are never more human or more themselves than when engaged in learning. . . . here is pleasure, a sense of growth, and an increased capacity for wisdom potentially available in ways that require no necessary differences of power, wealth, status, or fame among us. This is a healing vision that need not challenge the plurality of other goals" (pp. 10-11).

Smith sees a learning society as a way of unifying an increasing pluralistic society made of a multitude of special interest groups, ethnic groups intent on maintaining their unique cultural characteristics, celebration of individualism and a host of other diversity within the society. Smith says "the learning society is a vision responding to the reconciliation of unity within diversity, of free people joined in common cause; a vision of creating a universalizing culture which joins together the variety of old memories; a vision in which equalities of opportunity and differences in results may be freely chosen; a vision of a fulfilling life disentangled from the old passion of power, wealth, status, or fame" (p. 18).

The learning society then, can be viewed as: (1) a practical idea for human beings living in a rapidly changing world where a lifetime of learning is a requirement of survival, (2) an attitude that learning need not only be for practical reasons, but learning can be for its own sake, and such learning is a way toward people becoming more human, (3) a unifying attitude, an approach for bringing together an ever more diverse society, and (4) a metaphor for a new age of defining the relation of education to learning, and a recognition that educational opportunities and, thus, learning potential goes well beyond that provided by those institutions we ordinarily associate with education.

Influences on a Learning Society

Learning in our society, at all ages and stages of a human being's life, is influenced by a variety of forces. These forces influence what is learned, when certain things should be learned, who should learn what, what or who should provide opportunities for learning, and even the methods by which something should be learned.

Population Trends

One of the most dramatic changes in the structure of our population is that we are rapidly getting older. In 1970 when the population of this country was 203.7 million people, 14 percent or 28.7 million were 60 and older. By 1980 that percentage had increased to 16 percent, and by 1990 it is predicted that those 60 and older will make up nearly 17 percent of our populations. In 1983, for the first time in the history of our country, we had more people older than 65 than we had teenagers (Hodginkson, 1986, p. 50).

We often talk about the "Baby Boomers," those 70 million people born between 1946 and 1964. The oldest of that group is now in its 40s. After 1964 we began to see a dramatic drop in birth rates. For example, in 1960 there were 23.7 births per 1,000 population. In 1975 the birthrate had dropped to 14.6 births per 1,000. By 1981 we began to see a slight increase in birthrates, 15.8 per 1,000 people.

This rather dramatic shift in birthrates has meant a decrease in 18-26 year olds for the next decade or so. Looking at birthrates more closely, one sees a considerable diversity among societal groups. The birthrates among blacks and Hispanics remain at higher levels than for whites, and we will thus see increasingly larger numbers of minorities in our society.

We are, though, currently experiencing what might be called a "baby boomlet" because of the huge number of fertile white women in the child bearing years. For a few years at least this will result in larger actual numbers of white births. As Hodgkinson (1986) points out, "If (the baby boom mothers) were having 2.7 children as their mothers did, we would be in the middle of another white Baby Boom. In the next decade, large numbers of white women will be moving out of the child-rearing years producing a sharp decline after the current "Baby Boomlet" ends. The current Baby Boom age stretches from 22 to 40; by 1995 they will span 31 to 49, meaning that the "boomlet" for whites will last not more than five more years" (p. 9).

In examining population trends, one must also consider the immigration patterns in recent years. For example, in 1981, Asia and Latin America contributed 81 percent of

Dr. Jerold W. Apps is professor and chair of adult and continuing education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

the 600,000 legal immigrants who came to this country. The largest number of these immigrants came from Vietnam, Korea, and the Philippines. Hodgkinson predicts that by about 2010, one in three in the U.S. population will be black, Hispanic, or Asian American (p. 9). As we shall see below, these demographic changes will have a dramatic effect on most of society's institutions, none more so than educational institutions, particularly higher education institutions.

Economic Conditions

In the late 1980s, many people in this country and other so-called more developed countries of the world cite job security and a strong economy as a major underlying force influencing the society. In the past 25 years in this country we have seen a rather dramatic shift in the nature of the economy, from an emphasis on producing goods to providing services. For instance, in 1970 21.8 percent of the labor force was classed as operators, fabricators, and laborers. By 1980 this had decreased to 19.2 percent. In 1970, 3.8 percent of the labor force were farmers, in 1980 the percentage of farmers had decreased to 2.9 percent.

Meanwhile, white color jobs (managerial and professional) had increased from 18.5 percent of the labor force in 1970 to 21.8 percent in 1980. The trend has continued from 1980 to the present time. With these shifts, large numbers of workers have lost jobs as the economy struggles with one of the most dramatic structural changes in the history of the country. One example is agriculture. During the past decade thousands of farmers have sold their farms, or lost them to mortgage foreclosures, and have left the land, victims of changing conditions. Many of these displaced farmers are in their prime working years but are ill-suited for many jobs. Yet, work they must in order to maintain some semblance of a living standard to which they had become accustomed.

One can also point to steel workers, auto workers, heavy equipment laborers, foundry workers, oil drillers, and a host of other jobs in our society to see similar evidences of lost jobs and disrupted lives.

These structural changes influence a learning society in ways not yet realized. The obvious, and most visible, is the often critical need for a displaced worker to gain additional knowledge and skills in order to find new employment. Who should provide these educational opportunities, and who should pay for them? How much responsibility does a society have for retraining the workers that have been displaced? Who decides and how is it determined which educational institutions and other providers should be involved in making such educational opportunities available? These are some of the educational policy questions that emerge from even the most cursory examination of the structural changes occurring in our society.

International Forces

The United States belongs to a global community, in hundreds of ways. We were abruptly reminded of this in 1973, when OPEC decided to increase prices of crude oil several fold, resulting in an inflation shock in our country, to say nothing of the inconvenience of gasoline shortages.

One needs only to visit an appliance store and note the "made in Japan" labels on VCRs, radios, and televisions to see an everyday reminder of our dependence on this country for much of our electronic equipment, automobiles, and motorcycles, cameras and telescopes. Examining the United States' current trade deficit helps one realize how much we import from other countries. For example, in 1982 the U.S. trade deficit was $36.4 billion; in 1983, $67.1 billion; in 1985, $124.4 billion; and in 1986, $146.4 billion (estimate) (Economic Report of the President, 1987).

Analyst George Keller (1986) points out, "every year since 1979 we have traded more with Asia and less proportionately with Europe" (p. 13). So not only have we increased the amount of trading we do with other countries, our trading partners have changed as well.

Because of this country's involvement in world markets, we are influenced by what happens in other countries. For example, wheat farmers in the United States are affected by weather patterns in the Soviet Union as well as weather patterns in Asia and South America because all are involved in world wheat trading.

These are but a few examples to illustrate how rapidly this country has become immersed in the global community. And the influence on a learning society is just becoming to be felt. We are beginning to see Asian languages taught in our public schools. We see short courses for American business people who must learn something of the cultural characteristics of the Japanese business people with whom they work. Slowly, we see increasing numbers of people wishing to learn more about what is happening beyond the borders of their cities and states. More subtly perhaps, we may see the beginnings of changes in fundamental assumptions on how we view people and their relationships to each other and to the world.

Technology

Technology is another force that ever increasingly influences society. Robotics and computer-controlled machines are becoming commonplace in factories across the country. Micro-electronics has given us radios and calculators the size of credit cards, and allows surgeons to see within our bodies with tiny exploratory cameras.

Biotechnology and recombinant DNA technology are resulting in improved crop varieties and even new crop types. It is possible for example, to develop a wheat variety that has the ability to fix nitrogen as legumes do. It is also possible to construct a special bacterium that can be sprayed on potato plants and which lowers the temperature at which the potato vines will freeze.

High performance computing provides for "artificial intelligence," allowing machines to distinguish between fragrances, read, hear, and even speak using naturally spoken language. Technology has had a dramatic effect on information and communications.

Robert Naisbitt (1982) argues we are moving from an industrial society to an information society. Technology is revolutionizing how we store, transmit, and manipulate information. The compact disk, using laser technology, allows one to store thousands of pages of information on one disk. On one 4¾" inch Compact Disk Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) up to 250,000 printed pages, or 250 large books can be stored. The Holy Bible takes up only a fraction of the space of one disk. A laser beam is used to encode the information on each disk, and the same technique is used to retrieve the information. Nothing ever touches the disk directly, eliminating the possibility of wear.

Another technology is the optical digital disk which stores up to 1 million pages of information, including illustrative material on one disk. With satellites we have the capacity to send vast amounts of information anywhere in the world. Never in the history of humankind have we had access to so much information, so readily. And never has there been so much information. I read recently that we are doubling the amount of information available to us every seven

https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations/vol14/iss2/6
DOI: 10.4148/0146-9282.1663

years.

The implications of technology to the learning society are many. Technology is often the culprit that results in job layoffs and requires job retraining. Think of the newspaper business as an example. One no longer finds Linotype operators setting type for the daily editions. Computers perform this function. No only are far fewer workers needed, their skills are different as well.

Philosophical questions emerge. What is the meaning of humanness in a highly technological world where many day-to-day activities are performed by machines? What is the place for arts and the humanities in the lives of people who are often driven by economic and technological concerns?

Information technology (laser disks, computers, fiber optics, satellites) has a profound influence on the learning society. Think only of the amount of up-to-date information that most of us will have readily available to us. Also think about those persons with lower incomes who may not have the financial resources to obtain information from computer data bases on their home computers, and from other modern-day information sources. Will we see an even greater spread between the "haves" and "have nots" because of who can afford to purchase information? Many moral and ethical questions are raised as well. How does one decide on the accuracy of information available? Who decides which information should be available to the public? This becomes an important question when we discuss national policy and particularly when questions of national security are involved.

What is the role of educational institutions in storing and dispersing information, versus the role of, say, libraries and national computer data bases? How are such questions as copyright resolved when one can so easily reproduce information? One only has to see the agonizing difficulty the computer software industry faces in trying to discourage illegal copying of computer software programs. In a couple of minutes a $400 program can be copied onto a blank disk for a cost of two or three dollars.

What does "curriculum" mean when new information is available at ever increasing rates, and old information nearly as quickly becomes obsolete? Theodore Roszak (1986) admonishes us to make certain we keep clear the difference between ideas and information, and that we know the relationship between the two. According to Roszak, "information, even when it moves at the speed of light, is no more than it has ever been: discrete little bundles of fact, sometimes useful, sometimes trivial, and never the substance of thought" (p. 87). "Ideas are integrating patterns which satisfy the mind when it asks the question, What does this mean? What is this all about" (p. 90)?

We must not be seduced into believing that the more information we have, the higher quality will be our thinking and our problem solving. We must not be deceived into believing that the more information we have the more ideas will emerge. In fact the opposite may happen. Again, as Roszak underlines, "the mind thinks with ideas, not with information. Information may helpfully illustrate or decorate an idea; it may, where it works under the guidance of a contrasting idea, help to call other ideas into question. But information does not create ideas; by itself, it does not validate or invalidate them. An idea can only be generated, revised, or unseated by another idea" (p. 88).

Computers and other information technology allow us to have access to, through computer data bases, and other storage devices, amounts of information that boggle the mind. But we must constantly remind ourselves that information by itself does not replace critical and creative thinking. Information is an often necessary adjunct to an active exploring mind, but it, no matter how sophisticated, can not replace the ideas the human mind generates, ideas that often go well beyond the related information.

In a recent book (Apps, 1985), I discussed the difference between information and acknowledge and pointed out that information transmitted and accumulated by human beings remains information—discrete bits of data—until the individual human mind wrestles with this information, tries to make sense out of it, and tries to see particular and specific personal applications (pp. 164-170). Information is of course extremely useful, to the enhancement of ideas, as Roszak points out, and to the creation of knowledge as I have argued, but information must be kept in perspective. If we are indeed moving into an "information society" as Naisbitt argues, then we must be prepared for how this tremendous store of information will influence the learning society.

Illiteracy

A problem this country has not yet solved is illiteracy. With ever increasing information available to the people and with extensive, compulsory schooling, one would think that illiteracy would no longer be a problem. Yet, as Jonathan Kozal (1985) has noted, up to 25 million adults in this country can't read the label on a bottle of poison, and another 35 million can't read well enough to function in society (p. 4).

Stedman and Kaestle (1987) in a summary of literacy and reading achievement trends over the past century conclude that from 20 to 30 percent of the population has difficulty coping with common reading tasks and materials. They do not believe that illiteracy is rapidly increasing in this country, but argue that the demand for more literacy is on the increase. "The solution to rising literacy demands is now more difficult. . . . even if the work place is not truly demanding more reading ability, we shall nonetheless need much better reading skills across the entire population if we are to survive and improve as a democratic society in an increasingly complex age. Seen in this light, there is much to galvanize renewed efforts at literacy training, at all levels" (p. 42).

Not only is inability to read, write, and do numerical manipulation a problem, but there is also political illiteracy. One only has to examine the poor voting records and the lack of involvement by people in discussion issues that affect them. There is also economic illiteracy—people failing to understand how economic conditions, their jobs for example, are affected by international markets.

A learning society is based on an assumption of literacy: people having the basic skills to read and write, and understand the workings of the country. Literacy is a fundamental cornerstone for a learning society to exist in this country, yet millions of people do not have these most basic of skills, and thus can not be true partners.

One implication of the illiteracy situation is for a learning society to use some of its resources to correct the problem. Such remedial programs are essential. But a learning society must also be concerned about the root problems of illiteracy which are often poverty, less than supportive family life for children, excessive television watching, and formal schooling that has allowed persons with low levels of literacy to pass through the system without remedial work occurring.

Not only can one point to problems with illiteracy, but one can see evidence of inadequate critical thinking skills.

This is, of course, far more difficult to measure quickly, particularly when compared to a determination of illiteracy. But nevertheless, there is concern about the inability of people to discern truth from lies, about their inability to analyze arguments carefully, and their inability to examine several points of view on an issue and reach their own conclusions.

The learning society is thus bombarded by a series of societal forces that will affect the learning society's nature and direction. These forces affect all aspects of education, from the formal institutions such as elementary and secondary schools through post-secondary and higher education, to the non-formal education conducted by business and industry and a host of other organizations and institutions, to the informal education that is a part of our daily living. None of us can escape these societal forces, and the learning society, as we have defined it, cannot escape. An interesting question, one posed earlier, is whether the learning society itself can become a societal force that will influence the other forces, or will it as it most often has in the past, continue to be acted upon rather than become a more forceful actor itself.

Challenges to Adult/Continuing Education

1. We should be concerned for innovation and flexibility, but always concerned for quality. One way to assure quality is to help people go deeper with their learning. Assisting with critical thought is one approach.

Critical thought means being aware of the assumptions that undergird what we do, being aware of the metaphors and the slogans in our language, and their subtle meanings. It means helping our students make the usual unusual, of showing them how to examine what they do. It means stepping back and asking why? Why do I do a needs assessment, for example? What assumptions am I making about human beings when I do a needs assessment? Are there alternative approaches? What are the assumptions of these alternative approaches?

But not all of critical thought is so rational. We should also encourage people to listen to their inner voices that often scream to be heard. In our zeal to be "scholarly" we often stifle this personal source of critical examination, and we discourage ideas that may have their roots in our intuitive rather than our rational selves.

2. Concern for all of education. Adult educators tend to isolate themselves from the rest of education. We talk about adult development and adult learning. We discuss planning, teaching, and evaluation approaches for adult/continuing education—but always from the perspective that there is something uniquely different about adult/continuing education. In our zeal for adult education we magnify our uniqueness, and thus we see no connection between what we do as educators of adults and what first grade teachers do. We see no connection with high school English classes, or even beginning courses in schools of nursing.

Unfortunately, not only do we not see any connection to formal schooling, we seldom see the relationship of adult education to the many other sources of learning in society, from what occurs in the family before schooling begins, to the learning that occurs through everyday living, from going to movies and from the mass media.

We need to ask and seek answers to several questions:

a. To what extent does what happens or does not happen during a child's first years influence his or her desire for a life of learning? What of the many children who are born to young women who themselve are still children—what will be their interest in learning throughout their lives?

b. To what extent does one's elementary, secondary, and post-secondary or higher education experience influence both one's desire for adult continuing education as well as the style that one learns best?

c. To what extent does the amount of TV one watches as a child influence one's interest and skills for a life of learning?

Each of us is challenged to learn more about what is happening at all levels of education, from child education in the home to the effects of television. Where were we when the debates occurred about reforming elementary and secondary education? Where are we when people speak out on the effects of television? Will not the successes of the several educational reforms that have commenced lately contribute greatly to what adult educators do and how they do it?

Unless we begin to be more concerned about the rest of education and begin to see that we are indeed a part of it and not separated from it, the field of adult/continuing education will increasingly be concerned with remedial education. What happens to children in our society from birth until maturity is as much our concern as it is anyone else's, in many ways much more our concern.

3. Concern for access. Although the numbers are impressive—in 1981 about 21 million adults participated in some organized adult education activity—this amounts to only 12.8 percent of the population.

Those most likely to participate in adult education are those 17-34 years of age. Those least likely to participate are 55 and older. Of those who participate in adult education, only 6.3 percent early $7,500 or less, while 18.8 percent who participated earn $50,000 or more.

In 1981, 60.3 percent of those who participated in adult education did so for job related reasons. Thus, nearly 40 percent participated for non-job related reasons. This is a high percentage, given that many would have us believe nearly everyone enrolls in adult education for a job-related reason.

Of those who participated in adult education, only 2.2 percent had eight years of school or less, while 31.1 percent had five or more years of college.

To generalize, those most likely to participate in adult education, as it is currently offered, are those who are well educated, have above average family incomes, and are relatively young. What responsibility do we have for the less well educated, the less well-to-do, and the older person?

4. Concern for developing a vision for adult/continuing education. Educators of adults must dream and translate those dreams into images that other people can share. We have developed over the past couple of decades a cadre of competent professors of adult/continuing education. We know how to teach program planning, and evaluation, and the ages and stages of adult development. But can we go beyond the how-to of adult/continuing education? Can we sit back and close our eyes and dream of what might be? Are we able to have a constant uneasiness so that we are always trying to look ahead, to develop a vision of what might be, an ideal toward which we can work?

5. Concern for informing the public. We have not done a good job informing the public about what adult education is, who is involved, and why it is important in society. Almost always, when legislation is considered for adult continuing education, the question asked is: "What is it? What is adult continuing education? We hear a variety of answers. We've got to learn how to talk about adult/continuing education, and we've got to take our message to the people. We have a tendency to talk to each other, in a language that is sometimes incomprehensible to anyone who is not on the

https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations/vol14/iss2/6
DOI: 10.4148/0146-9282.1663

inside. We talk about bicycling programs around our states, about behavioral objectives, and performance indicators. We've got to learn how to speak English about adult/continuing education, and then we've got to begin talking with people about it, in a variety of ways.

References

Apps, J. (1985). **Improving Practice in Continuing Education.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Economic Report of the President (1987). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Hodgkinson, H.L. (1986). **Higher Education: Diversity is Our Middle Name.** Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Hutchins, R.H. (1968). **The Learning Society.** New York: New American Library.

Keller, G. (1986). **The Wisconsin Idea: Yesterday and Tomorrow.** Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Idea Commission, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Kozal, J. (1985). **Illiterate America.** New York: Anchor/Doubleday.

Naisbitt, R. (1982). **Megatrends.** New York: Warner Books, 1982.

Roszak, R. (1986). **The Cult of Information.** New York: Pantheon Books.

Smith, D.K. (1985). **The Learning Society.** Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Idea Commission, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Stedman, L.C. and Kaestle, C.F. (1987), "Literacy and Reading Performance in the United States, From 1880 to the Present." **Reading Research Quarterly.** Winter, 1987, Vol. XXII, 1, 8-42.