THE UNIVERSITY OF LEARNING IN TRANSFORMATION: NEW SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES AND MODELS

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In 1995 the EU formulated an educational policy for 'lifelong learning for all its citizens', and in 1997 the Dearing report (National Committee of Inquiry into HE) presented a vision of the UK transformed into a society committed to 'learning throughout life'. A fundamental shift towards a 'learning culture' is implied but, almost three years on, are the systems and mechanisms in place? Are staff able and prepared to take on new responsibilities which may require a transformation of the ways in which they model their job? And what about the students? They too may have to approach learning very differently to succeed in a rapidly changing world. We need a radical agenda for the 'new Millennium university' in which 'learning' becomes a fully-functioning process; new models of learning, new roles for academic staff and a quantum shift in art values of 'learning quality'.

Hundreds of thousands of learners from all walks of life and all levels of education suffer from learning pathologies which disable them as life-long learners. They are by and large unaware of how they learn, and their capacity for modelling their own learning is limited. Learning is something which happens to them, rather than a process that can be regulated and improved. They are impressed in a web of negative mythologies which are obstacles to their personal development. Furthermore, widening access to university education has resulted in a new type of student, eager to learn, but unused to study and generally unreflective. It is no exaggeration to say that a 'learning entropy' pervades within a 'top down teaching culture' that suffocates individual enterprise.

How can we transform the teaching/learning environment so that learners can be rehabilitated and develop themselves to become a 'new species of learner' capable of productive and creative engagement in a world in which uncertainty, chaos and complexity, and accelerated change are the only constants? New insights are required, new processes need to be developed and a sea change in the educational enterprise as a whole has to take place. No time can be lost, in a massive reorientation of attitudes, purposes and strategies and more fundamentally in the ways we model life-long learning. 'Learning' has to be freed of the constraints of old paradigms and life long learners must be supported to develop their skills, competencies and creative capabilities.

Some initiatives are already underway, the RSA 'Opening Minds' project is redesigning the curriculum for a changing world giving emphasis to competencies and to learning; the HEC 'Networking for Capability' project aims to help HE institutions and other organisations to understand how they can best work together to identify issues and concerns they have in common and how effective collaboration can come about; the University of Industry seeks to widen access and deliver quality learning within an 'on the job' framework; the CSHL (Centre for the Study of Human Learning) is developing a 'learning pedagogy' for the virtual environment based on the principles of self organised learning (SOL) and the methodology of 'learning conversations'; the Institute for Learning and Teaching aims to reform lecturer training and set new targets of standards and quality for the teaching profession. But do we

have a coherent policy for change?

Many universities are piloting new courses giving emphasis to project work (within a horrible modular system) and a more learner centred method of assessment. For example, the new integrative multi-media degree course for undergraduates at Brunel is organised within a faculty structure but involves a team of multidisciplinary staff delivering their subject matter within a student-centred self-organised-learning environment. Graduates are expected to be accomplished in multi-media as well as capable of life-long learning. Although only in its first years new demands are being made of the staff, and an on-the-job staff-support system has been actioned. A climate of radical reform is developing within HE which is challenging staff and students alike. For a long term commitment to change to succeed, the university of the future has to respond to the changing needs with foresight, sensitivity and a learner-centred policy.

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Learners of the future have increased their expectations about the quality and availability of their learning resources; they expect quality feedback on the full range of their learning outcomes in the short, medium and long term. They also expect to be more involved in their informal and formal assessments, as equal participants. They depend on

their tutors and 'virtual librarians' to support them in accessing relevant resources on the Internet's global library, and learning coaches to support them in their day to day learning. Discussion groups and e-mail learning communities involve tutors in various functions from counselling and coaching to 'learning opportunity providers'. As they become increasingly self-organised, learners of the future require a new type of learning support, that of enabling them to develop their capacity for life-long learning. To achieve this they will need to develop a level of awareness of their own learning experiences in ways which enable them to meta-model their own processes. For conversing with themselves and others about learning they will need to become familiar with a new language, new tools and processes, and new ways of monitoring their learning. This form of support is not remedial; it is highly sophisticated, and is best undertaken within an integrative curriculum. New expertise is offered on their subject matter by tutors as well as counsellors.

Within an integrative curriculum, tutors' responsibilities extend to developing their students' capabilities for engaging people and managing situations and information as well as to developing sophisticated forms of higher understanding. Cause and effect relationships, critical evaluation and innovative thinking strategies that go beyond current knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, quality judgements, analyses and synthesis are only some examples of the higher levels of mind-processing required within a complex and changing environment.

As self-organised, life-long learners

students will value knowledge gained in science, technology, business, law and the arts differently. It will not be enough to digest such knowledge for its own sake, but even more to gain insights into how the minds of those innovations at the forefront of the world's major discoveries work. It is in appreciating such mechanisms of discovery that learners will be enabled to achieve innovative capabilities within their own topics of study. Such learners will have a new capacity for personal transformation and adaptability. Life-long learning becomes a personal research venture, with its unique dynamics and consequences.

Enabling the new type of learning involves new expertise for teaching staff and within the University system career structures will have to be redesigned.

For this new type of learning to be nourished and sustained it is necessary to reconstruct what we mean by 'learning', and the qualities we imagine are required for life-long learning. Learning has carried different meanings according to the philosophy of the time, educational policies of specific cultures, and the psychology of the day. Learning as an activity pervades across all time, societies and cultures. It continues to shape our destiny as part of the living world.

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Within our own educational system 'learning' bifurcates into what I shall refer to as 'other organised learning' (OOL) and self organised learning (SOL). OOL exists in two variant forms. Variety 1 focuses on content or 'subject matter' as its primary purpose and the authority on which this is based is seen as 'expert' knowledge. Instruction, demonstration and good solid teaching is its means of transmission in a top-down framework. Variety 2 focuses on skills and competencies as its primary purpose and addresses the so-called basic skills, communication skills, study skills, problem solving skills and so on. Nevertheless, the approach is generally prescriptive and the mode of assessment remains authoritative, often ignoring the perspective of the learner. The missing dimension within such an expert-system-based pedagogy is the nature of the processes that are going on in the learner. Where does the locus of control of their learning reside? If this is externally directed they will act as 'other organised learners'. Yet, the same teaching methods can have different learning outcomes depending on how the learners' own processes are organised.

Variety 3 has the potential for SOL, although it is presented in the form of 'self-managed learning', 'autonomous learning', 'independent learning' and 'self guided/discovery learning'. On close scrutiny the teaching/learning interface often reveals a top-down prescriptive pedagogy; an authoritative wolf in the rhetorical garb of a learner-centred lamb! Truly learner-centred environments are rare and interestingly those that appear to exist are to be found in commercial enterprises that call themselves 'learning organisations'.

WHAT IS S.O.L. AND HOW CAN IT BE FURTHER DEVELOPED?

Self-organised learners engage in purposive, strategic and self-evaluative learning conversations with themselves and others in their learning world. They challenge their understandings of a topic, performance of a skill and in a systematic way set about to develop their capacity for learning, so that they are in a better position to ask themselves how their understandings can grow, how a task can be done better and how learning can be done in a better way. Frozen meanings and fixed values and attitudes are opened up and new metaphors for learning and living are explored.

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SOL is a dynamic, messy and often unpredictable business which functions best 'on the edge' between chaos and complexity. One cannot know exactly how it leads to the construction of a 'personal epistemology of knowledge', a 'personal knowing' which is significant, relevant and viable for each individual. It is only when actively processed through their own system of understanding that learners can anticipate and act with coherence and purpose. Defined in this way it is valued by the learning environment. It is a process which has to be

experienced and prepares the individual for continuous life-long learning.

SOL implies that learners are able to:

- negotiate their own personally meaningful learning purposes
- employ appropriate learning strategies and tactics to achieve these
- evaluate their learning outcomes
- review the effectiveness of this whole activity
- develop their capacity to learn.

Self-organised learners model themselves as action researchers, carrying out their own personal experiments as they set about to learn. As 'good' scientists they are continually testing out their 'personal theories' through action and revising these as they seek and generate knowledge of results about their learning.

Developing greater awareness of how they learn and how they can improve their learning, they are capable of meta-modelling their own learning, and through this better organising and developing it.

SOL is not confined to one person; a pair; a team; a family, a community, a department and an organisation as a whole can act as a self-organised learning entity. Their uniqueness lies in a capability for negotiating a shared understanding with a growing awareness of how this is achieved. They can meta-model their shared learning.

The benefits of SOL are many and varied. Above all SOL adds value for learners themselves, for the tutors who support them, and ultimately for the institution which supports them. It is a highly productive and cost effective approach and adds new qualities to the enterprise of

education. Everyone (post Dearing) will agree that an emphasis on learning is a good thing. Some of the reasons are of benefit to the students, but there exist less altruistic reasons for this trend. It can cost the university less. The worst scenario is to see it as a means of processing more students with less staff. But, seeking economies in the budget by placing more responsibilities on learning will not bring about a transformation towards life-long learning. In the short and medium term learners' learning will have to be rehabilitated, and investment in learning support is essential. This is a complex and skilled task requiring sensitivity, dedication and deep commitment. It may seem a daunting task - a task which is easily avoided by remaining in the old paradigm.

I shall now consider the roles of University staff, and their new responsibilities as enablers of learning and what may be in it for them in job satisfaction and professional development opportunities. We have to create a new agenda for staff as well as students.

A STAFF AGENDA FOR A LEARNING SUPPORT ENVIRONMENT

A system of SOL across all departments and faculties, involving all levels and all courses, requires the introduction of new functions and new roles for staff. Briefly, some of these responsibilities include: learning managers (LM), learning coaches (LC), learning domain designers (LDD), learning opportunity creators (LOC), as well as expert knowledge providers (EKP). LMs develop a well formulated 'learning policy' capable of addressing the needs of the learning system as a whole, and offering guidelines and benchmarks for transferring learning

quality. They support the team of LCs, LDDs, LOCs and EKPs offering specialist tools and they steer the cacophony of learning conversations as all participants become engaged in transforming their learning. LMs answer to the governing board and senate and are responsible for the total quality of learning. New skills and expertise are required.

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The LC is responsible for conducting one-to-one and small group 'learning conversations' offering specialist learner-centred tools and techniques to support learning development. These conversations involve an interweaving weft of specific dialogues which are subject-matter independent in the sense that discourse focuses on the processes of learning. LCs, LDDs and LOCs share responsibility for extending the horizon of the learning environment as a whole, creating a rich web of learning opportunities. Each has a specified function in the system as a whole. My aim here is not to spell out the methods and technologies which empower a truly learner-centred environment; rather, to present an overview of a system which has been tested out in practice in various learning organisations with highly significant and transformative results.

The renaissance of 'the learner' as sovereign and self-organised, capable of life-long learning, as ever-changing individuals able to grow and reshape their 'personal knowledge', able to share their understanding with others and able to identify areas of agreement and disagreement and engage in creative encounters is an exciting and joyous prospect. The renaissance of the teacher/tutor/counsellor as enabler of learning, equipped with the expertise to support and maintain a dynamic learning environment is equally exciting. Each participant is learning within a dynamic corpus of new understandings, shared meanings and personal and environmental growth. Models, structures and systems are undergoing revision and redesign as new aspirations, individual needs and values emerge. The complex organism of the university of learning is itself learning as a life-long process.

This organismic transformation cannot be achieved by patching up and reforming components in an ad-hoc fashion. It requires a coherent policy across all of HE based on a new philosophy and ethos. In my experience of three decades as a lecturer, senior research fellow and professor within a number of HE institutions, such a policy does not exist. In this contribution I go so far as to suggest an agenda which might work. Post Dearing we have a long way to go if HE is to deliver life long learners active in the diverse enterprises of human endeavour in self-organising and creative ways.

Business academics and senior managers in industry have developed the notion that the rate at which a learning organisation can learn may be the only sustainable source of competitive advantage. Two

questions repeatedly arise; how can we build enterprises in which continuous learning occurs, and what kind of personnel can best lead and manage such a venture? We are at the edge of a new world order and we have not taken these questions seriously in HE. Old boundaries will only dissolve when new functions emerge and everyone becomes involved as members of a fully functioning learning and learned society.

Human beings are designed for learning. Unfortunately, the major institutions of our society are predominately orientated towards other-organised control rather than self-organised learning, rewarding people for performing according to public standards and prefixed expert criteria, rather than for cultivating their capacity to learn. ' Our prevailing system of management has destroyed our people' writes Edward Deeming, leader in the Quality Movement. He goes on to say, 'Corporations create the very conditions that predestine them to mediocre performance.' Can this also be said for education? People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, curiosity in learning and joy in learning. The forces of destruction begin with toddlers and on up through the university and on to industry and society as a whole.

Quality in performance depends on quality in learning. CSHL research projects have brought us into close touch with 'managers' in education and in industry. When managers can be enabled by means of learning conversations to reconstrue the nature of their job, then exciting things begin to happen to them and to those who work and study with them. Managing starts from

developing one's own capacity to learn on the job, and from enabling others to learn and to take responsibility for the quality of their learning. Managing an SOL environment as a 'learning culture' has repercussions far beyond current practices. The quality of individual, team and organisational achievements depends on a radical shift in emphasis towards self-organised learning.

Throughout history few humans have broken free to construct and create new vistas of the human prospect. These are the mavericks, and recognised as the so called 'gifted ones', 'high fliers' and 'enlightened ones'. The SOL adventure so far has shown that many more can achieve this awareness, generality, control, freedom and creativity, and so attain quality in their lives. Quality lies in an empowerment for creative and personally fulfilling conversations with our world. We cannot go back. We can go forwards to construct an alternative future, a happier and more humane way to learn, live and work. It is up to our education institutions to lead the way.

I invite those interested in concentration of developing a learning pedagogy to join in a forum. I plan to draw together some of the UK's foremost innovators as well as researchers engaged in the study of the nature of learning. The forum is planned to provide a focus for debate, innovation and new practice. For more details, e-mail me at Sheila.Harri-Augstein@brunel.ac.uk.

What do you think?
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