

Shall We Choose Lifelong Learning?

NANCY R. RECKINGER *

If we were to make a commitment to valuing people, what kinds of schooling would result? A lifelong learning support system for our rapidly changing living-working life style is attainable but not as yet visible.

HAS the world changed? Are living and working patterns significantly different now than they were in 1940? If we expect to find the answer by looking for reflections of those changes in society's attitudes and institutions the conclusion is *no*; we find some modifications but not radical changes.

Schools have entered the electronic age with most of their patterns from an agrarian and then an industrial society still intact. We continue practices which lead to a high proportion of dropouts, forceouts, and knock-outs. Yet living and working patterns *have* changed.¹

The nature of work has changed. In 1974 this country reached the point where more than 50 percent of jobs were filled by knowledge workers. This shifting emphasis

¹ Nancy R. Reckinger. "Educational Implications of the Predicted Effects of Cybernation on the Nonwork Segments of Man's Life." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Detroit: Wayne State University, 1970.

on knowledge has caused a new cleavage in the work force between the knowledge workers and manual workers who increasingly are the school dropouts with self-images of failure and rejection.²

The working scene has become highly volatile. New jobs are created and others eliminated weekly. It becomes increasingly difficult to decide what you want to "be" early in life and even more difficult to be able to "be" that one thing for a lifetime.

The shape of work is also changing; it is no longer the totally consuming preoccupation it once was as people have increased amounts of nonwork time. In addition, there is an increasing number of permanently unemployed people who would like to find jobs if they could but who currently have huge amounts of nonwork time.

Life has changed for people in other basic ways as well. They live longer and mature physically younger than they did in 1940. They play many roles in an adult lifetime. Aspirations are higher.

² Peter F. Drucker. *Management Tasks, Responsibilities, and Practices*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973. p. 173.

* Nancy R. Reckinger, Associate Professor of Teacher Education, California State University, Fullerton

A Commitment to People

How strange that our institutions and attitudes continue to be molded in images from the past. Parents still ask their children what they want to "be" when they "grow up" and parents still define themselves by what they do.

Schools continue to sort people into grades by age, and students are "graduated" so they can "commence" life. There are still laws that say people of certain ages *must* be in schools and that people of other ages may *not* be in those schools.

One wonders why there have not been changes in institutions to support the changes in life style, and then one realizes that it is not a social requirement that institutions help people. It would take a radical rethinking of values, a new way of looking at life, for lifelong learning to become meaningful.

It has been a tradition for the vast majority of people to subordinate themselves to an economic system, to be primarily workers and consumers, valued solely for their utility. Although the sheer weight of all the unhappy, angry, alienated, lonely people who feel they are not participating in the benefits of our society is becoming unwieldy, solutions in line with this value structure have been detailed in books such as *1984* and *Brave New World*.

The forces of our industrial system, our traditions, and our habits appear to have made this choice, to support a form of slavery—people manipulated and conditioned, treated as objects to serve the economy and only valued in that role.

A second possible choice is a commitment to valuing people. If people were to insist on technology being used in the service of human growth, joy, and reason, as Norbert Wiener urged in his *The Human Use of Human Beings*,³ it could serve us well. Technological developments are responsible for most of the changes in our living and working. Used for human service, they could

free much of our time for creating a good life and a good society.

A humane value system could make it possible for people to develop skills and abilities in such a way that each person could both live and make a living. There is no shortage of valuable work which needs doing. Many people are needed to work on ways of preventing humanity's destruction by balancing the eco-structure and defusing the potential holocaust.

If people and the quality of life were ever to become central values, lifelong learning would be a cherished, supported activity because the opportunity for growth and development is crucial to the issue of human happiness. If primary focus is put on individuals becoming all they are able to become, they will be engaged in lifelong learning. Capacities want to be used and developed, according to Maslow.⁴ They are needs which lead people into productive pathways. A humane society must be effectively and widely educational. There has never been an age when there was such a pervasive need for the educative function spanning all of life and every sphere of living. Learning goes on with or without a teacher but some learning is positive, constructive, and enabling while other learning is negative, destructive, and crippling. It is the first kind we should enhance and support in a humane society.

What Are the Logical Steps?

What are the logical steps for society to take to support the lifelong learning ideal, considering current changes in living and working?

Begin by eliminating the barriers between "day school" and all other kinds of learning situations. Open the doors both ways, letting teenagers out into community learning situations and people of all other ages in.

Rethink the yearly grade steps, the sharp

³ Norbert Wiener. *The Human Use of Human Beings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950.

⁴ Abraham H. Maslow. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1962. p. 25.



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beginnings and endings, the barriers to returning, and the terminal points along the way which so often signify “the end” of learning. Blend secondary schools with colleges and vocational schools and apprenticeships.

Schools can become community centers. With enrollments dropping there will be room for adults in schools if the funding problem is re-thought on the lifelong learning model.

Schools also seem to be the proper places for people to find help in self-knowledge. Now that lifetime employment and lifetime maternity are inadequate organizing images⁵ for most people, they need help in thinking through their span of years to find new images.

People need help in identifying and keeping in touch with their developing strands of aptitudes, strengths, learning style, social skills, interests, personalities, motives, fears, values, and goals. Only by being in touch with those things can a person make a free, better than chance decision about jobs, training, and other major life choices.

People also need to know the range of vocational choices which matches their abili-

ties and the kind of training required along that range, as well as information about what jobs are open and which will not be open, in order to make intelligent vocational choices as many as five to ten times in a lifetime.

That kind of learning needs the cooperation of educators and the whole vocational world, but why not? What excuse is there to bumble along the way we do using vocational socialization practices which served the needs of a simpler time but are mindless today?

As long as jobs appear to be in short supply there is a natural tendency by unions to be protective and employers to be selective. Once society's work is redefined there will be plenty of jobs, and business, industry, unions, civil service, and the military can all take on a share of the training-retraining task. Society should also build in a support system to maintain the human dignity, self-esteem, and feeling of worth of people being displaced while they retrain and possibly relocate.

It is possible to have a lifelong learning support system for our rapidly changing living-working life style, but time goes by and it does not appear to be high on anyone's list of priorities. It is, after all, a matter of values. □

⁵ Suzanne Keller, Professor of Sociology at Princeton, quoted in: Pauline Bart. “Why Women See the Future Differently from Men.” In: Alvin Toffler, editor. *Learning for Tomorrow*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974. p. 55.

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