

# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

# Contents

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	5	Editor's Letter
<i>John Dewey</i>	8	The School as Social Center
<i>Lawrence A. Cremin</i>	14	Public Education and the Education of the Public
<i>Stewart Ranson</i>	23	Towards a Learning Society
<i>Judith Green</i>	33	The Continuously Planning City
<i>Wendy Brown</i>	44	We Are All Democrats Now
<i>Bill Bywater</i> <i>in an interview with Noëlle McAfee</i>	53	Tarrying with the Negative
<i>David Mathews</i>	59	. . . afterthoughts

# Towards a Learning Society

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By Stewart Ranson

*Our priority must be both to change the purposes of education and to embody, in the reform of social and political institutions, the organizing principle of learning.*

**E**ducation has, once more, become a national issue and priority during a period of great social, economic, and political change in our society. The intention of this paper is to identify the argument surrounding education, to develop an analysis of its needs, and to propose organizing principles upon which to base education and society for the 21st century. My purpose is to argue for the centrality of education by tying it into the large and unique issues of the time.

It is not possible to assume that the reform of the service can be taken for granted. Indeed, it is central to my argument that the principles upon which the present reforms of education are being based are themselves the problem: education is being made a priority to serve the needs of the nation's economy. It is good that there is a window of opportunity for education based on economic need; but if we value education then we need to discover firmer ground than an instrumental economic imperative to stand upon. Tomorrow, that need may have evaporated. In any event it mistakes the central needs of our time, which are moral and political. My argument is that if society is seriously to address the problems facing education then the solution requires more than a quantitative expansion or a mere adaptation of existing systems; rather it will need a reform of the organizing principles of learning: from instrumental and technical rationality to moral and political principles of the learning society; from learning for economic interest to learning for citizenship.

It is not lack of capacity or educability of the disadvantaged that explain underachieve-

ment; it is more the conditions which have eroded the motivation to learn, or to take seriously an education that all too clearly has provided little meaning or purpose to their lives. An understanding of these factors requires an analysis of the deep social and political structures of our society, which define the subjectivity, self-esteem, and capacity of individuals and their communities.

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## The problems of the time are public, require public solutions, and yet it is the public institutions that are being eroded.

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The cause of underachievement lies in the long, cultural tradition of educating a minority. Only a few succeed because that is what our society has preferred. Any analysis of the dominant characteristics of the educational and political systems reveals the institutionalizing of underachievement. Young people fail to fulfill their potential, develop their powers because of principles and assumptions that are constitutive of the education system. Boundaries typically surround the process of learning. Education is too often regarded as a stage in life: to be in education is to be young, to be successful academically, and to be located within an institution—traditionally a school—because colleges specialized in “training.” Such boundaries express a narrow conception of who education is for, excluding most people and limiting the possibilities of achievement.

Traditional conceptions of teaching and learning—insisting upon the didactic transmission of knowledge to passive and solitary

individual pupils—have almost certainly diminished rather than enhanced the motivation of most young people, inculcating anxiety rather than joy at the prospect of learning.

Assumptions about the curriculum have usually involved the introduction of unnecessary barriers into the experience of education: organizing learning into bounded subjects and bifurcating knowledge between theory and practice, defining “an education” in the former as the accumulation of abstract understanding. More recently, a curriculum that reverses this traditional emphasis and now insists upon a narrow concept of vocational preparation for work determined instrumentally by the needs of the labor market has been imposed upon the majority of young people.

Not only has education been “institutionalized,” the schools and colleges have typically been conceived as enclosed institutions controlled by their professional communities. Parents or employers or the wider community—the sources of complementary support and motivation—have usually been held at bay. The organizing rules and structures of educational institutions have, moreover, rarely been responsive to the needs of the clients they are designed to serve.



The economic, social, and political transformations of our time are altering fundamentally the structure of experience: the capacities each person needs to flourish, what it is to live in society, the nature of work, and the form taken by polity. The changes raise deep questions for the government of



education and for the polity in general: What is it to be a person? Is a person a passive being or possessed of powers that define his or her essential agency? Is there any such thing as society and what is it? An aggregation of individuals or some form of social and linguistic community? What should be the nature of the polity? What is it to be a member and with what rights and duties? What distribution of power and wealth is consistent with justice and freedom? Who should make decisions and how? What forms of accountability and representation define our democracy?

**A**ny effective response will require a capacity for renewal, for learning, from the institutions of our society as much as from each individual confronting the changed circumstances in private life. From either perspective, the problems of the time are public, require public solutions, and yet, it is the public institutions that are being eroded.

There is an urgent need for fundamental change, to create a common purpose and the conditions for individuals and their communities to flourish by empowering their sense

of agency and responsibility for the future. The foregoing analysis suggests that to realize such aims will depend upon the creation of a new moral and political order both to support the development of individual powers and to create an open, public culture responsive to change. The defining quality of such a new order, and the key to change, is a society that has learning as its organizing principle. There is a need for reforms that will rescue us from the mistakes of the past and prepare us more adequately for the future. Our priority must be both to change the purposes of education and to embody, in the reform of social and political institutions, the organizing principle of learning.

**W**hat we learn from the strategies pursued by disadvantaged authorities is that however important resources are, and they are very important, how much more significant it is to hold a new conception of the purposes and conditions

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of learning. We cannot learn without being active and motivated; without others (i.e. the support of society); and without shared understanding about justice and rights to equal dignity. This suggests that if we are to establish the conditions for all to flourish, to

be motivated and to take their learning and lives seriously, then reform needs to address the wider public purposes and conditions of learning. The challenge is vast: it implies no less than the reenchantment of the world with the learning society whose principles can dissolve and supplant the dominant paradigm of instrumental rationality, the drive to competitive self-interest, prejudice, accumulation, and bureaucracy that embody Weber's iron cage of icy darkness stifling the conditions for most individuals and communities to flourish. Our task is to reenchant the world with a moral and political order, the defining principle of which is learning as inquiry, understanding, and discourse. This could provide the possibility of linking together a morality of personal development, setting out principles about

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how we are to live, with a just polity that can constitute how we are to agree on a future.

This sketch for a theory of the learning society builds upon the ideas and practice being developed "from the inner city." Reforms do not begin *de novo*, they have their origins in local communities, which are discovering solutions to dilemmas they confront. Our task is to develop understanding of underlying principles in order to create the basis for their more general application.

The theory builds upon three axes: of presupposition, principles, and purposes.



The *presupposition* establishes an overarching proposition about the need for and purpose of the learning society; the *principles* establish the primary organizing characteristics of the theory; while *purposes* and *conditions* establish the agenda for change that can create the values and conditions for a learning society.

There is a need for the creation of a learning society as the constitutive condition of a new moral and political order. It is only when the values and processes of learning are placed at the center of the polity that the conditions can be established for all individuals to develop their capacities and that institutions can respond openly and imaginatively to a period of change. The transformations of the time require a renewed valuing of and commitment to learning: as the boundaries between languages and cultures begin to dissolve, as new skills and knowledge are expected within the world of work and, most significant, as a new generation, rejecting passivity in favor of more active participation, requires to be encouraged to exercise such qualities of discourse in the public domain. A learning society,

therefore, needs to celebrate the qualities of being open to new ideas, listening to as well as expressing perspectives, reflecting on and inquiring into solutions to new dilemmas, cooperating in the practice of change and critically reviewing it.

**T**wo organizing principles provide the framework for the learning society. The first principle is that its essential structure of citizenship should be developed through the processes of practical reason. Citizenship establishes the mode of being, in the learning society: the notion of being a citizen ideally expresses our inescapably dual identity as both individual and member of the whole, the public—our duality as autonomous persons who bear responsibilities within the public domain. Citizenship establishes the right to the conditions for self-development but also a responsibility that the emerging powers should serve the well-being of the commonwealth. *Citizenship*, I define as the status of membership of national and local communities which thereby bestows upon all individuals equally reciprocal rights and duties, liberties and constraints, powers and responsibilities. Citizens express the right as well as the obligation to



participate in determining the purposes and form of community and thus the conditions of their own association.

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**S**econd, practical reason establishes the epistemology, mode of knowing and acting of the citizen in the learning society. Practical wisdom (or what Aristotle called “*phronesis*”), describes a number of qualities that enable us to understand the duality of citizenship in the learning society: knowing what is required and how to judge or act in particular situations; knowing which virtues should be called upon. Practical reason, therefore, presents a comprehensive moral capacity because it involves seeing the particular in the light of the universal, of a general understanding of what good is required as well as what proper ends might be pursued in the particular circumstances. Practical reason, thus, involves deliberation, judgment, and action: *deliberation* upon experience to develop understanding of the situation, or the other person; *judgment* to determine the appropriate ends and course of action, which presupposes a community based upon sensitivity and tact; and learning through *action* to realize the good in practice.

To provide such purposes and conditions, new values and conceptions of learning are

valued within the public domain at the level of the *self* (a quest of self-discovery), at the level of *society* (in the learning of mutuality within a moral order), and at the level of the polity (in learning the qualities of a participative democracy).

At the center of educational reforms, within the inner city as much as those emerging from the polity itself, is a belief in the power of agency: only an active self or public provides the purposes and condition for learning and development. Three conditions are proposed for developing purpose within the self: a sense of agency, a revived conception of discovery through a life perceived as a unity, and an acknowledgement of the self in relation to others.

Learning requires individuals to progress from the tradition of passivity, of the self as spectator of action on a distant stage, to a conception of the self as agent both in personal development and active participation within the public domain. Such a transformation requires a new understanding from self-development for occupation to self-development for autonomy, choice, and responsibility across all spheres of experience. The change also presupposes moving from

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our prevailing preoccupation with cognitive growth to a proper concern for development of the person as a whole—feeling, imagination, and practical/social skills as much as the



life of the mind. An empowering of the image of the self presupposes unfolding capacities over (a life) time. This implies something deeper than mere “lifelong education or training” (referred to as “access institutions”). Rather it suggests an essential belief that an individual is to develop comprehensively throughout his or her lifetime and that this should be accorded value and supported.

**W**e need to recover the Aristotelian conception of what it is to be and to develop as a person over the whole of a life and of a life as it can be led. This has a number of constituent developments: first, perceiving the life as a whole; the self as developing over a lifetime. Second, therefore, a conception of being as developing over time: life as a quest with learning at the center of the quest to discover the identity that defines the self. Third, seeing the unity of a life as consisting in the quest for value, each person seeking to reach beyond the self to create something of value, which is valued. Fourth, developing as a person towards the excellences; perfecting a life which is inescapably a struggle, an experience of failure as well as success. Fifth, accepting that the

struggle needs to be guided by virtues, which support the development of the self; dispositions which strengthen and uplift (character); valued dispositions. Lastly, acknowledging that the most important virtue is that of deliberation, a life of questioning and enquiry committed to revising both beliefs and action. Learning from being as a means becomes the end in itself, the defining purpose creatively shaping the whole of a life.

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But we can only develop as persons with and through others; the conception of the self presupposes an understanding of how we live a life with each other, of the relationship of the self to others; the conditions with which the self develops and flourishes are social and political. The self can only find its moral identity in and through others and membership of communities. Self-learning needs to be confirmed, given meaning by others, the wider community; what is of value will be contested; therefore we need to agree with others what is to be considered valuable; to deliberate, argue, provide reasons.

**T**he unfolding of the self depends upon developing the necessary social conditions that can provide a sense of purpose within society both for the self and for others. These conditions are *civitas*, active participation in creating the moral and social

order, and a capacity for interpretive understanding.

The conditions for the unfolding self are social and political: my space requires your recognition and your capacities demand my support (and vice versa). The importance of mutual responsibility in developing conditions for all individuals to develop their unique qualities recalls Aristotle's celebration of civic friendship—of sharing a life in common—as being the only possible route for creating and sustaining life in the city. Such values, arguably, are now only to be found within feminist literature, which emphasizes an ethic of caring and responsibility in the family and community and the dissolution of the public as a separate (male) sphere. It is only in the context of such understanding and support that mutual identities can be formed and the distinctive qualities of each person can be nurtured and asserted with confidence.

The late-20th-century world was silent about the good, holding it to be a matter for private discretion rather than public discourse. But the unfolding of a learning society will depend upon the creation of a more strenuous moral order. The values of learning (understanding) as much as the values that provide the conditions for learning (according dignity



and respecting capacity) are actually moral values that express a set of virtues required of the self but also of others in relationship with the self.

Yet a moral order is a public creation and requires to be lived and re-created by all members of the community. Each person depends upon the quality of the moral order for the quality of his or her personal development and the vitality of that order depends upon the vitality of the public life of the community. For the Athenian, the virtuous person and the good citizen were the same because the goods that inform a life were public virtues. But the authority of a moral order for the modern world will grow if it is an open morality rather than a socialization into a tradition. The development of a moral community has to be a creative and collaborative process of agreeing on the values of learning, which are to guide and sustain life in the community.

The forms of knowing and understanding, as much as—or at least as part of—a shared moral order, are the necessary basis of civic virtue. Historically conditioned prejudices about capacity, reinforced by institutions of

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discrimination, set the present context for the learning society. The possibility of mutuality in support of personal development will depend upon generating interpretive understanding, that can create the conditions for learning in society: in relationships within the family, in the community, and at work.



In society we are confronted by different perspectives, alternative life forms and views of the world. The key to the transformation of prejudice lies in genuine conversation where the participants are led beyond their initial positions, to take account of others, and move towards a richer, more comprehensive view, a “fusion of horizons,” a shared understanding of what is true or valid. Conversation lies at the heart of learning: learners are listeners as well as speakers.

The presupposition of such agreement is *openness*: we have to learn to be open to difference, to allow our prejudgments to be challenged; in so doing we learn how to amend our assumptions, and develop an enriched understanding of others. It is precisely in confronting other beliefs and presuppositions that we are led to see the inadequacies of our own and transcend them. Rationality, in this perspective, is the willingness to admit the existence of better options, to be aware that one’s knowledge is always open to refutation or modification from the vantage point of a different perspective. The concept of *bildung* describes the process through which individuals and communities enter a more and more widely defined community—they learn through dialogue to take a wider, more dif-

ferentiated view, and thus acquire sensitivity, subtlety, and capacity for judgment.

Reason emerges through dialogue with others: through which we learn not necessarily “facts” but rather a capacity for learning, for new ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. It is Habermas, who articulates the conditions for such communicative rationality as being, “ideal speech contexts” in which the participants feel able to speak freely, truly, sincerely. The conditions for this depend upon the creation of arenas for public discourse—the final and most significant condition for the creation of the learning society.

**T**he conditions for a learning society are, in the last resort, fundamentally political, requiring the creation of a polity that provides the foundation for personal and collective empowerment. The personal and social conditions described above will be hollow unless bedded in a conception of a reformed, more accountable, and thus more legitimate, political order. The connection between individual well-being and the vitality of the moral community is made in the public domain of the polity: the good learning person is a good citizen. Without political structures that bring together communities of discourse, the conditions for learning will not exist: it is not possible to create the virtues of learning without the forms of life and institutions that sustain them.

Preconditions of the good polity include: (i) Justice: a contract for the basic structure. The conditions for agency of self and society depend upon agreement about its value as well as about allocating the means for private and public self-determination. Freedom rests upon justice. But this makes the most rigorous demands upon the polity, which has to determine the very conditions on which life

can be lived at all: membership, the distribution of rights and duties, the allocation of scarce resources, the ends to be pursued—the good polity must strive to establish the conditions for virtue in all its citizens. These issues are intrinsically political and will be intensely contested, especially in a period of transformation that disturbs traditions and conventions. (ii) Participative democracy: Basing the new order upon the presupposition of agency leads to the principle of the equal rights of citizens both to participate in determining what conditions the expansion of their powers and to share responsibility for the common good. The political task of our time is to develop the polity as a vehicle for the active involvement of its citizens, enabling them to make their contribution to the development of the learning society. There is a need, in this age of transition, to fashion a stronger, more active democracy. The post-war 20th-century polity specialized politics and held the public at bay except periodically and passively. By providing forums for participation, the new polity can create the conditions for public discourse and for mutual accountability so citizens can take each other’s needs and claims into account. Learning as discourse must underpin the



learning society as the defining condition of the public domain.

**A** more active citizenship, Mill believed, would be a civilizing force in society: through participation citizens would be educated in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity. The upshot of participation should now be (iii) public action, based upon deeper consent than that obtained from earlier generations. The possibility of producing a fairer world, one which will enrich the capacities and entitlements of all citizens, depends upon the vitality of public, democratic action. The creation of a learning society expresses a belief in the virtue of the public domain and will depend upon the vitality of public action for its realization.

A beleaguered service is variously accused of failing young people who leave school at the earliest opportunity with much of their potential unrecognized and underdeveloped. This happens, it is argued in recent critiques, because education is committed to perpetuating an elite culture which offers little connection with the lives of ordinary children: a more practical curriculum tied to the world of work is proposed as the solution most likely to provide the required motivation to learning for those pupils. But this proposal turns an effect (the school curriculum) into the focus of

policy, thus obscuring real (social and political) causes. Moreover the proposal is confused: for unless the vocational reform is for all children then it becomes another policy that will reinforce the social selection it is purportedly designed to overcome.

Education will always “fail” if the capacity of young people has to be sectioned off to match a pyramidal, hierarchical society (the hidden curriculum of which is learned very early by young people), underpinned by a political system that encourages passive rather than active participation in the public domain. A different polity, enabling all people to make a purpose of their lives, will create the conditions for motivation in the classroom. Only a new moral and political order can provide the foundation for sustaining the personal development of all. It will encourage individuals to value their active role as citizens and thus their shared responsibility for the commonwealth. Active learning in the classroom needs, therefore to be informed by and lead towards active citizenship within a participative democracy.

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*Stewart Ranson is a professor emeritus of the University of Warwick. This article was first published in the journal, Education Management and Administration, vol. 20, no. 2 (1992) and is reprinted here with the permission of Sage Publications.*

