

Chapter 1

Youth and Contemporary Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with contemporary and future challenges of education. The text falls into two interconnected parts. One part relates to societal changes that have relevance to education issues worldwide. The other explores the challenges inherent in the context of information technology and knowledge society.

The aim of the chapter is to problematize the concept of learning and common views on transformed conditions for learning; have contemporary digital media reformed the processes of learning and if so, how can the educational system benefit from and exploit this? The chapter highlights changes and reflects on contemporary and future aspects of learning. What is seen as meaningful learning? Is learning more demanding today or does the open and abundant access to information simplify it?

INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense, education is a universal human activity with a long history and a future directed ambition. It is culturally situated and allocated at global, international and local levels. Thus, as an essential human activity the educational phenomenon is interlaced with societal structures

and human interactivities, governed by political ideologies, expressed as different values in the laws, curricula, course handbooks, examinations and teaching practices. At the same time, it is also true that values, practices and artefacts of formal education evolve in different ways in different parts of the world.

Furthermore, education has endured two powerful historical shifts; The Industrial Revolution and The Information Revolution. In relation to

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educational impact there is at least one major difference between these two historical changes: “While the industrial revolution gave rise to a universal schooling system where none had previously existed, the information technology revolution presses a very real, active system to reconsider its fundamental practices.” (Collins & Halverson, 2009). Learning became associated with schooling at the time as public schools arised. Before that, learning was incorporated in an era of apprenticeship (Collins & Halverson, 2009).

During the last few years educational institutions have also gone through many reforms that have had an impact on how we arrange learning situations on the one hand and also how we understand learning as a concept, on the other. Today we understand learning as a lifelong process and not only as an activity taking place in school. This particular notion of learning has, however, little correspondence with steering documents aimed at formal educational settings. Another feature of today’s approach to education is that the emphasis has shifted from teaching to learning. But since learning has been understood as an essentially individual process, and education as an institutional one, we now see a clear separation between formal, non-formal and informal learning environments (Jarvis, et al 2003).

SOCIETAL CHANGES AND LEARNING

Not only is the approach to education transforming but also the conditions of human society have changed profoundly. E.g. English sociologist Zygmunt Baumann (2003) explores the conditions and claims that we have moved from the solid stage of modernity to the liquid stage of modernity in the recent decades. The metaphor of liquidity is a demanding view and a challenging condition for contemporary society. For the first time in history, fluidity is a major logic for structuring

human life, since ideas of instability and change are more prevalent than ever.

To picture living in a society under thorough transformation there might be a need for an extension of the classic change-analogy; that we are not able to step into the same river twice. Perhaps the continuously shifting structures of our everyday life are better compared to an online game, that deals with adaptation and power? Given the proposed fluid logic of societal structures, players and rules are shifting continuously and randomly. Even the scripts of the everyday game are under constant change. Synchronicity is irrelevant at times. The ability to identify important information, learning new rules and being flexible becomes key competences. Thus, in the end, the winner is not necessarily the player with the most points, or the one who played by the rules. The winner is most likely the one who could create and recreate truth, meaning and reality; the one who had the power and ability to adapt to change and generate the best storyline.

Following the ideas from the Game Analogy it becomes essential to develop ways of acting, and ways of interacting, which are fit for living in a state of constant change and uncertainty. This demands a different approach to learning; our culture today has become as much a culture of learning as it is a culture of forgetting in order to clear the ground for new things to replace the old ones. Learning is now more or less understood as a life-long process. And above all, today learning consists of the ability to change what is considered true, appropriate, usable, and effective knowledge.

The internet provides us with information, tools and resources. The combination extends memory and improves the quality of retrieving. In other words, internet extends accessible facts and concepts. But what is seen as important information seems to change from one day to another and the learners have to be ready to review their prior knowledge.

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