



## Commentary: Learning and Leading in a Connected World

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationships between learning and teaching, and focuses on challenges for the future, which include the integrity of research, not only in academia but also in other fields, arising from the developments in the field of information technology. It suggests that learning and teaching need to be combined with principled leadership and the establishment of fundamental values.

Learning is not compulsory; neither is survival. (Deming, Unsourced section, para. 7)  
W. Edwards Deming

Conjure up in your mind the image of a silo: a stand-alone structure, normally constructed of concrete, the primary purpose of which is to store some form of commodity. Apply that image to some of the traditional fields of study, whether the arts, sciences, education or the professions, in which the currently available knowledge has been accumulated and stored and from which it must be accessed. Examine, in your mind as well, how the silo image has been allowed to reflect the approach to thinking and teaching in each of those fields.

Now, draw a large mental “X” through the silo.

While much might be said about the advancement of knowledge within the confines of a silo approach and the progress achieved in such a context, the days in which such an approach to learning might possibly have been justified are now gone.

No field of study can be adequately pursued today in isolation, whether the isolation be splendid or a bitterly contested territorial imperative. Whatever silos may still exist need to be made completely permeable and the advancement of knowledge must occur in the context of actively relating all aspects of study with all other fields of study. The complexity of the world today requires awareness of and commitment to interdisciplinary study and application of knowledge. This observation is not to suggest that one need not master particular disciplines—far from it—but merely underlines that, whatever the discipline, it is inseparable from other aspects of knowledge and the application of that knowledge within an integrated society.

## Learning

Several questions arise from such considerations. Is there a new definition or concept of learning? Will the process of learning be fundamentally altered in our increasingly connected world? What will be the fate of some of the traditional values associated with learning?

Learning has been defined as “knowledge or skills acquired through [experience or] study or by being taught” (Compact Oxford English Dictionary, para. 1). Interestingly enough, while *learning* is a noun, *learn* is a verb, which is to “acquire knowledge of or skill in (something) through study or experience or by being taught” (Compact Oxford English Dictionary, para. 1). Even with the geometric progression of the volume of knowledge, this basic concept will change little. The noun and the verb will likely retain essentially the same meanings. The content of the noun will change and the modalities of the verb will evolve as the tools for access to knowledge change. The pace of change is the principal unknown element.

There is an interesting dichotomy inherent in the definitions. One implies that the knowledge can be acquired actively, from experience or study, while the other implies a more passive process, that of being taught. Whether the latter can ever be completely accurate is a matter of degree. That which is taught must somehow be absorbed before learning occurs, which seems, even if only intuitively, to require the active process of assimilation on the part of the recipient of the teaching, which reverts back to the primary portion of the definition, that of experience or study. For anything to “stick” there must at least be some form of matrix in place that provides a context which enables the recipient to retain and interrelate the material.

The mere absorption of facts and data has never been considered (at least by those who have given the concept some thought) to constitute learning. Memorization may, on occasion, be impressive and the ability to regurgitate a mass of data an amusing parlour trick, but few have ever confused that particular skill with learning. As Heraclitus observed, “Much learning does not teach understanding” (Heraclitus, On the Universe section, para. 3). No real learning occurs without some element of understanding the meaning of the facts and data.

- How do they relate to other knowledge in the field—and in other fields?
- What theories can be deduced from them?
- If the facts and data will not yet support a theory, what hypotheses may be proposed for further examination?
- What myths can now be exploded?
- What horizons expanded?
- What new interrelationships identified?
- What novel applications explored?

If none of these and the countless other questions of a similar nature can be answered, the obvious conclusion is that no learning has occurred.

## Teaching

On the other hand, it is arguable that, no matter how much one may attempt to nuance the concept of teaching, teaching is inseparable from learning. Even the so-called self-taught go through the exercises inherent in teaching, namely:

- pointing the way, based on existing knowledge, to new experience and knowledge
- determining the facts, based on observation, deduction or extrapolation
- recognizing and acknowledging errors
- developing judgment in the appreciation of scientific method and logic
- developing the ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable or incomplete data
- forming the ability to recognize new relationships

- generating the intellectual excitement that leads inevitably to further learning

The vast majority of people will nevertheless require more formal guidance from someone who can identify the guideposts and who will encourage the thirst for further knowledge.

The role of the teacher, at whatever the level, is fundamental in any society. It is, however, one that is seldom accorded the importance and recognition it deserves. Opinion may differ, for example, on whether the comments of Forbes in 1980, in discussing university environments, are still as apt as they may have been at the time:

Is there any college that puts a premium on good teaching? Is there a university that rewards — in pay and promotion — outstanding teachers? Always and everywhere in academia, recognition, promotion, tenure depend on what a faculty member publishes. Teaching? Exciting the minds of undergraduates? Turning them on to learning? Weighing pounds of print the way butchers weigh beef, faculty fathers more often butcher those who show brilliance in lecturing or in the classroom. Publish or perish is an option. Teach well and perish is for sure. (Forbes, 1980, Thoughts on the Business of Life section, para. 1).

Perhaps a better appreciation may be found in the German proverb, which holds that a teacher is better than two books. (In proverb days, two books were a lot of books!) A contrary view, perhaps uttered more for illustration of a danger than from profound conviction, comes from Ivan Illich, who in describing schools, said that, “School is an institution built on the axiom that learning is the result of teaching. And institutional wisdom continues to accept this axiom, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary” (Illich, 1971, Quotes section, para. 1). There can, to give this view its due, certainly be bad teaching and bad schools, in which the spirit of learning can be stifled and discouraged. Practically everyone has had the experience of at least one bad teacher (one hopes not exposure to an entirely bad school) and the resulting resentment flowing from that experience. With luck, almost everyone will have experienced an inspired teacher and will remember the delight with which their intellectual horizons expanded beyond any imagination.

Good teaching enables and empowers the pupil; it is a gift and an art. A good school is a wonderful institution and a tremendous societal asset. The teaching

applied, the knowledge and experience absorbed, the encouragement of the ability to think and reason will all shape the future of each society. On the other hand, as Forster has observed, “Spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon” (Forster, para. 1).

## Learning in the Future

If there is to be a change in the fundamental concept of learning as we go forward, it will no doubt be incremental in nature. Most likely it will involve the crafting of additional questions to be asked in the evaluation of the facts and data. The traditional “silo” questions would necessarily have required some assessment of the relationship of new or emerging knowledge to established knowledge within the field. Today’s questions will expand that assessment to the relationship with knowledge in other and related fields.

- How does the knowledge of what produces increased resistance to certain diseases apply to plant growth and agriculture?
- How can the new knowledge be applied to improve crops, our physical conditions and be applied in other parts of the world?
- What will be the likely social impact of improved water management?
- What are the implications of expanded understanding of the human genome on the future delivery of a public health system?
- What are the precursors of the next pandemic(s) and how can they be identified and used to minimize the social impact?
- What are the legal and societal implications of AIDS?
- Can the environment be changed for the better?

The process of learning will, without doubt, continue to be affected by increased access to data provided by the enormous expansion of digital communication and connectivity. Never has so much information been so readily available to and so easily accessible by so many people. Never has it been so easy to communicate with so many people so cheaply. To describe this as a revolution is hardly to do it justice.

There is, however, no such thing as an educational free lunch. The sheer volume of data is almost overwhelming. In reality, it is overwhelming and will become increasingly more so. The existing Internet search engines are good and will improve,

but will remain imperfect. More important than access, however, is the daunting task of assessing the value of the available information. Today's teachers and students will need to develop much greater capacity to exercise critical judgment in the face of the increasing mass of data inundating them. In times past, the volume of data might have been considered almost manageable. Not so today and even less so in future. In times past, there were some indicators of reliability, on which teachers and scholars could place a certain degree of confidence. Well-documented treatises founded on original sources and verifiable data and peer-reviewed articles in recognized journals carried with them an imprimatur, short of gospel, but nevertheless indicative of scholarly acceptance. Separating the wheat from the chaff is much more difficult today.

Anyone familiar with, for example, the media will know the tendency of reporters digging for the "facts" to use search engines that will pull up, say, the last ten stories on the particular subject or individual and to rely on the facts as so reported as the facts for purposes of their own story, with no effort whatsoever to verify the accuracy of the facts as reported in the articles they used for the purpose. Thus, in today's media, the errors of the most recent reporters become perpetuated as the "new facts" and public opinion is frequently fashioned on the basis of incorrect information. As Mark Twain once stated:

It has become a sarcastic proverb that a thing must be true if you saw it in a newspaper. That is the opinion intelligent people have of that lying vehicle in a nutshell. But the trouble is that the stupid people--who constitute the grand overwhelming majority of this and all other nations--do believe and are moulded and convinced by what they get out of a newspaper, and there is where the harm lies. (Twain, NEWSPAPER section, para. 12)

This conduct is not restricted to the media. Today's teachers and scholars have a much greater onus to pursue the reliability and accuracy of the data which form the basis for any conclusions. There are at least as many charlatans as ever before, with the notable exception that their unsupported nonsense is, unfortunately, all too readily available and masquerades as fact alongside accurate facts and conclusions. How can the nonsense be distinguished from the real? One feature of what will become the "good old days" for today's generation may be that in those good old days, for the most part, the idiots and charlatans had far more difficulty in convincing someone to publish their un-pruned and unreliable material. Now, anyone can circulate the most outrageous content to millions of people in a nanosecond.

If the data supporting a purported result are incorrect, the scientific or other conclusions will be similarly incorrect and cannot be replicated. The efforts will have been a waste of time for everyone and there may be unintended and perhaps dangerous consequences, as we have seen on many occasions, to take but one example, in the pharmaceutical field. Scientific reputations of individuals and even institutions can be ruined—occasionally too late to avoid serious consequences.

Academia bears some share of the blame, arising from the relentless pressures to publish. All too often, one of the best ways to attract attention is to challenge or criticize the work of other academics. This, in and of itself, is not an objectionable pursuit. After all, part of the role of academics is to publish new material and to advance learning by doing so. Another part is to examine any already published material with a critical perspective—does it hold up to rigorous examination, does it respond to all the questions essential for full understanding, and so forth? This is legitimate academic scrutiny, which can be distinguished from challenge for the sake of notoriety and contrarian opportunism. But one must be on the continual alert for the latter.

Even greater than the “no free lunch” aspect of modern technology and the overwhelming volume of data that bombard us and which will continue to increase at logarithmic rates is the danger that the next generations may become, in effect, a generation of Alzheimer-like creatures, unable to remember more and more of the basic facts that have normally been part of traditional human memory. Flashing more and more bits of information on a screen, replacing them by others with only a click, may increase the risk that, like the Alzheimer patient, nothing “sticks” and what was there, fully occupying consciousness a second ago, is simply erased, leaving no mental imprint whatsoever. The particular information may be, and probably is, stored somewhere in digital form, but externally and therefore potentially inaccessible to the mere human when it may be required. This phenomenon would be well worth some rigorous academic study to determine what the brain is now registering and remembering, compared with pre-connected generations. Is there more grey matter, or is there less? What is the impact on the learning function?

If this phenomenon exists, there could well be significant impacts where competitive situations occur and examinations are taken without the benefit of digital and other assistance. Those with an ability to retain knowledge and to apply it under circumstances of pressure of time and relative results as the basis for career or other advancement will inevitably score better than those who cannot. In that respect there could be something of a return to the traditional methods of determin-

ing outcomes. In recent years there has been movement away from classifications based on the all-or-nothing examination approach, but this has created problems of its own. There is likely more academic fraud than ever before and the grade inflation that has resulted is now almost unmanageable.

Every generation has its challenges and every generation has concerns about its ability to meet them. Our situation is, in principle, no different than the concerns that arose when printing was developed and the spectre of the masses becoming educated terrified those then leading society. Mass and mechanical transportation and the Industrial Revolution rearranged many of the fundamental concepts of the day. The atomic world has teetered on the brink of mass destruction for more than six decades and now we have the digital and virtual worlds threatening the basic societal structures, as well as legal and political systems.

If the past is a reliable predictor, we will weather this development, as we have all others. But nothing should be taken for granted. Survival is not compulsory.

## Learning, Teaching and Leadership

There is, in my experience, a close connection between learning, teaching and leadership in an era of change. Any good leader takes advantage of the learning process and is in a constant position of teaching what needs to be learned within the organization. This is all the more important when change occurs at the pace it does today. An organization needs to be able to count on its leaders to determine what goals are established and to demonstrate the means that will be used to accomplish them.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines *lead* as to “cause (a person or animal) to go with one by drawing them along” and *leader* as the “person who leads, commands, or precedes a group, organization or country.” Warren Bennis (1989), in his book, *Why Leaders Can't Lead*, said, “Leaders are people who do the right thing: managers are people who do things right. Both roles are crucial, but they differ profoundly. I often observe people in top positions doing the wrong thing well” (Bennis, 1989, Thought du jour section, para. 1). In the same vein, Peter Drucker (1985) concludes: “Management is doing things right ... leadership is doing the right things” (p. 16).



Leadership requires a vision of what the organization should be or become. It is implicit in this concept of vision that there is always a gap between what the organization is, to date, and what it can become, that there is a potential that remains unfulfilled. I was sitting on the board of a public company a few years ago when one of my fellow directors asked the Chief Executive Officer of the company what was his vision for the company. The CEO pulled out the corporate mission statement and began to read from it. The director interrupted him and said he had not asked him to describe the corporate mission, but, instead, his vision of what the company should be—where he wanted to take it. The director illustrated the point rather amusingly by saying that a religious leader has a vision and sends out missionaries, but does not have a mission and send out visionaries.

I do not suggest, by any means, that leadership is a solitary exercise—far from it. Leadership should involve at least as much listening as it does speaking. No one has a monopoly on good ideas. Leadership includes the willingness to accept good ideas from any source, whether inside or outside the organization, and the ability to separate the good from the bad. Leadership requires the ability to establish certain objectives that the leader has identified and is able to articulate. It also requires that these objectives be organized into a plan and be packaged in such a manner that they are achievable by the organization. The leader must be aware of what is possible and, perhaps more importantly, what is not achievable. This may well mean that the leader has to be prepared to parse his/her objective or series of objectives and not (without abandoning the ultimate objective in any way) attempt to go too far too fast. It may also mean that the leader does not necessarily disclose the full plan sooner than the organization is able to absorb it.

The next skill is to be able to communicate the plan, within the organization, and to generate “buy-in” at all levels. Without such buy-in, it is unlikely that the plan, however good it might be, will be properly executed. Only when the management team and employees are committed to the plan will they exert their best efforts to make sure that it is achieved. In most cases, there will also be a need to have external buy-in to the plan, which will, of course, vary in accordance with the publics affected by it, but whose support, whether tacit or overt, is essential to the success of the organization. It may be a voting public, an investing public, an eleemosynary public, a consuming public or an entertainment-seeking public. Whatever public it may be, the leader must be able to generate the necessary support. With the plan in place and the buy-in generated, the leader must then enable management and employees to act. He or she must rigorously avoid any impulse to micro-manage the activities—and, the more he or she understands what needs to be done, the more certain it is

that such temptations will arise. The leader's job is to supervise and ensure that all levels of the organization are giving their best.

In some respects, the leader must become something of a cheerleader, dispensing recognition and appreciation for jobs well done and for the successes enjoyed. It is amazing how much harder people are willing to work when they know that their efforts are noticed and appreciated by the leadership of the organization. In many respects, job satisfaction is less about financial compensation than feeling valued for one's contributions to the organization. There is a Chinese proverb which holds that a good leader inspires others with confidence in him or her, while a great leader inspires them with confidence in themselves. A leader is always assessing and measuring progress toward the objectives of the organization. Again, this is not necessarily an exercise in detail, but one from the perspective of 10,000 metres.

No one is completely clairvoyant, even the best leaders, so events may unfold that will require adaptation to new circumstances and reworking of strategies and plans. The leaders must always be alert to the circumstances that may require changes and the best leaders will be able to see the circumstances in advance and figure out how best to deal with them in real time, not after they may have had a crippling impact on the organization. It is invariably better to avoid a problem than to have to solve it. This leads to a prescription that all good leaders should follow. Leaders must leave themselves enough time to think."

I believe that the best leaders also have a moral or ethical responsibility that comes with leadership. We are, in the final analysis, speaking of values: what we are willing to do and what we are not.

In some respects, for those with marketing experience, it is easier to understand the issue if you think of a brand or the brand of your own organization. As you know, a brand is not just a trade or other mark on a product or a description of a service. A brand is a set of expectations and permissions. It is easily illustrated by a simple example. If I say "Lada" and "Rolls Royce" or "Bic" and "Mont Blanc" or "Swatch" and "Rolex," I am in each case describing two products that do precisely the same thing—provide transportation, allow you to write, or tell the time of day. But each of them has undoubtedly triggered in your mind completely different sets of expectations and a sense of what is or is not appropriate for the use of each and the amounts you would be willing to pay for them.

For many years I was responsible for negotiating television rights to the Olympic Games and for the development of the international marketing program of the International Olympic Committee. As part of this exercise, we had to figure out what were the core values of the Olympic brand, in order to know what the world thought of and expected from us. It was a fascinating and particularly valuable exercise and we learned that the Olympic brand was remarkably consistent throughout the entire world, east and west, north and south, developed and developing nations. Interestingly enough, while elements such as “gold medal,” “Olympic champion” and “world record” were obviously part of the brand, the core aspects were much more value-oriented and expressed in a moral context, such as: aspiration, youth, international, peaceful, striving and respect.

This research enabled us to be sure that we did not stray from these fundamental values in any of our commercial or television arrangements. It also told us to avoid relationships that would damage our brand. It made it easy for us to refuse tobacco sponsorships that were very popular with other sports events and association with distilled spirits as being off-message not only with the public expectations of the Olympic brand, but also offside as far as the “permissions” attaching to the brand. We would not allow our Olympic television broadcasters to run commercials advertising such products.

In one case, we had an broadcaster who had a tobacco sponsor. We said that it could not run the commercials during the Games. The broadcaster nevertheless insisted, saying that tobacco was not regarded negatively within its broadcast territory, so that there would be no adverse public reaction to the commercials. There was something of a standoff, until we hit upon a solution. All Olympic broadcasters depend on what was then known as the host broadcaster to provide the basic signal from all competition and other venues, to which general coverage they may add some unilateral coverage for their national audiences. Our solution was simple. As soon as we saw that the broadcaster had run another tobacco commercial, we pulled the plug on their connection with the basic signal. Their network went completely blank—no audio, no video, nothing. They panicked and said there was a huge problem—their network had crashed—what could be done about it? We said we were very sorry to hear that and perhaps it was because of some electronic allergy to tobacco. The penny dropped; they understood. We plugged them back in and the problem was solved, then and for the future.

So, I believe you have to identify what are your basic principles, where you draw the proverbial line in the sand and be certain that you do not compromise

those principles. The responsibility as a leader is to make sure that everyone in the organization understands the principles and that they are fundamental, not just because the leader says they are, but because the leader's conduct makes it clear that this is the case.

It is certainly useful for good leaders to ask themselves if there is a difference between what they stand for and what their organization stands for. And perhaps, vice versa. Any discrepancy is bound to carry with it the likelihood of a moral failure.

A leader should also be known for the integrity of his or her promises. A verbal promise is no less binding than a written contract. I had an example of that a few years ago involving one of our huge television contracts with NBC for the U.S. television rights to the Games. We had had the usual negotiations, followed a few weeks later by a formal signing of the contract to record the deal, with the usual celebratory dinner and had gone off into our respective sunsets. A few weeks after the signing, the head of NBC Sports called me at my office in Montreal and said that he and a bunch of his executives needed an urgent meeting with me that very afternoon in Montreal.

When they arrived, I asked what was so urgent that so much talent was needed here in Montreal on such short notice. They said they had been reviewing the contract we had just signed and had found, to their horror, that it appeared from the language (relating, as I recall, to the computation of revenues from their owned-and-operated stations) that they would have to pay the IOC about \$60 million more than they had anticipated and that they thought we had agreed. I asked to see the portion of the contract and, sure enough, that was what it provided. I said I agreed with them as to what the contract said. Their high-priced lawyers and our lawyers had settled on the language and signed off on it before the contract was executed. There were many long faces. But, I said, the deal as written was not the deal we had agreed upon and it was clear that the lawyers had made a mistake. I was not going to try to take advantage of the drafting error in our relationship with a good Olympic partner. The matter was settled in 15 minutes. Our partners could rely on us to do what we promised and to act in good faith at all times.

The conduct of a leader should be consistent, rather than occasional and opportunistic. All of us have had experience with members of organizations, people and professionals whom, to put it at its most basic, we do not trust and who are not reliable. There are some clients for whom I am not willing to act, for precisely that reason—I do not trust them and I do not wish to be identified with them, or to have my

firm identified with them. It has nothing to do with the size of the client or the ability to pay the related fees. It is a matter of the ethical and moral choice I have as a professional regarding those to whom I am willing to provide services.

A leader's reputation in the community is what they say about him or her when he or she is not present. For example, what do they say about you? The flip side of this is that you should be willing to say the same thing to a person's face that you say behind his or her back. Never think that people make no judgments about you based on what you say about others. They may believe what you say, especially if it is negative, and may even share the same view, but they will remember where they heard it and will wonder what you say about them when they are not present.

In my firm, we often use a litmus test in cases where we are not certain about something we have been asked to do, or an opinion that a client is seeking, or an action or negotiating tactic. There was one of the founders of the firm who was a consummate lawyer and gentleman, held in universal respect that bordered on reverence. I'll call him George. So whenever we were not sure, we would ask ourselves, "What would George do?" It was amazing how the moral clouds would instantly disappear. What would your George do?

Let me conclude by saying that, in the end, a leader must have one essential quality, that of being able to decide. The decisions may not (and probably will not) all be correct. But the leader must be able to make them.

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**Richard (Dick) Pound** has enjoyed a prolific 50-year career as an Olympic athlete, tax lawyer, business leader, sports ambassador and academic contributor. He represented Canada as a swimming competitor at the 1960 Summer Olympics and at the 1962 Commonwealth Games (where he earned one Gold, two Silver, and one Bronze medals). Pound obtained a Bachelor of Commerce from McGill University in 1962 and a Bachelor of Arts from Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in 1963. Returning to McGill, he received a Licentiate in Accounting in 1964 and a Bachelor of Civil Law in 1967. Pound was elected to the International Olympic Committee in 1978 and helped build the Olympics into a multi-billion dollar enterprise. He also served as President of the Canadian Olympic Committee from 1977 to 1982 and was an Executive Member of the Organizing Committee for the 25<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympics in Calgary. In 2004, he released the book *Inside the Olympics, a Behind-The Scenes look at the Politics, The Scandals, and the Glory of The Games*. Concerned by drug use in sports, Pound wrote *Inside Dope* in 2006, and completed a term as chair of the World Anti-Doping Agency in 2007. Dick Pound is a partner of the Montreal law firm Stikeman Elliott and author and editor of numerous publications including *Pound's Tax Case Notes* and *Doing Business in Canada*. In 1992, he was named Officer of the Order of Canada, and in 1993, Officer of the National Order of Quebec. He has served as Chancellor of McGill University since 1999 and has also taught at the university's Faculty of Law and Centre for Continuing Education.