

VISION OF LEARNERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Vision Statement

May 1996

**Submitted to the
Training, Research and Evaluation Sub-committee and
Executive Committee of the SchoolNet Advisory Board**

of

SchoolNet

Français

Your comments are most welcomed.
See at the end of the text, just before Appendix A.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern communication and information technologies are having an increasing impact on learning - how we learn, where we learn, when we learn, what we learn, what learning resources we have, and why we learn.

It is important that our learning systems are guided by a vision of learners and of the communities to which the learners belong and which they are helping to create.

To open a discussion of these questions, SchoolNet held a workshop on April 19-21, 1996 at the CIBC Leadership Centre in King City, Ontario. There were over 30 participants from across Canada, coming from schools, governments, universities and a variety of organizations.

The purpose of the workshop was to develop a Vision Statement on learners in the 21st Century: what assumptions we should make about the characteristics and beliefs of a successful learner and a supportive learning system, the pressures and tensions involved in developing such a system, the core values that we should hold about learning, some of the possible directions we can follow, and some elements of a vision of learners, learning communities and the learning systems which would support them.

The purpose of this Vision Statement is to help SchoolNet build a vision of learners in the 21st Century and the kinds of learning systems needed to support learners and their communities. It is based on discussions in the workshop and on further development of the ideas by a working group.

The Statement is a work in progress, addressed to learners, educators, parents, policy makers, business and community leaders, politicians and all who are interested in the important subject of learners, learning, and learning communities.

This Vision Statement is intended to invite participation in building a vision of the learner - the assumptions we are making, the core values guiding our vision, and the elements of this vision. Participation is also invited on the problems and tensions we must address and the alternative directions we might take.

SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

These are some assumptions and beliefs about what learning may look like in Canada in the coming century:

Characteristics of the Learning Community

- Canadian society values learning and fosters and supports lifelong learning in schools, in the work place, in communities and in families.
- Knowledge and learning are major foundations of the social and economic well-being of Canada and Canadians. Knowledge and wisdom are among the major assets of both individuals and communities.
- A just and effective learning community must provide adequate resources for learning and an equitable system for allocating these resources.

Characteristics of the Learners

- The process of learning is innate and lifelong. Experiences in childhood and youth lay the foundation for lifelong learning.
- For people of all ages, young and old, learning is an integral part of playing and working.
- People of all ages have a capacity to learn and this capacity is affected by various social, economic and physical conditions and situations.
- People have a variety of learning needs related to their personal interests, their families, their communities and their work. These needs include personal development, social and civic responsibility, cultural enjoyment, and continuing learning related to work and careers.
- People learn at different rates and in different styles, in different situations and at different times.

Characteristics of Learning Systems

- In a society undergoing significant and rapid changes, learning systems need to be accessible, flexible, responsive, diverse, and balanced in their policies and approach.
- An effective learning system presents learners with a variety of patterns of (a) institutional affiliation, (b) service by teachers and resource persons, and (c) access to technologies. These patterns vary according to the context, the kind of learning and the needs and style of the learner.
- Our learning structures and institutions - from preschool to university - are enhanced and extended by forming links and partnerships within the formal education community (e.g. with other schools) and with institutions, enterprises and associations outside the formal system (e.g. cultural institutions, media, business, community groups). The boundaries dividing school, work and community continue to dissolve and their activities mutually reinforce one another.
- Teachers will have new roles and responsibilities as institutional patterns and learning technologies evolve.
- Communications and information technologies are transformational technologies with powerful impacts on society and profound implications for learning and learning systems.
- An effective learning system enables (a) the participation of all sectors of society, including the private sector, (b) the wise management of resources, (c) the use of information technologies to amplify our efforts, (d) services which combine effectiveness and efficiency, and (e) an appropriate investment of resources in all forms of learning.
- The quality of our learning systems and processes is enriched and improved by using the knowledge and skills we gain by experience, innovation and research.

SOME CORE VALUES GUIDING OUR VISION

What values should guide our vision of the learner and the learning community?**Core Values of Learning Communities**

- **The Goal.** Active wisdom as the goal of education, the application of knowledge, skills and attitudes for the benefit of society as well as the individual
- **The Social Project.** Collaboration of all aspects of society - political, economic, cultural - to enhance learning, make it our central social project, and integrate it with life and meaningful work
- **Commitment.** A commitment by the community to provide adequate resources in order to sustain a learning society and the involvement of the entire learning community in the design of programs, based on shared goals and a better understanding of one another's needs

Core Values of Learners

- **The Aim.** The development of active wisdom by acquiring a broad set of literacies, including language, mathematics, science, technology and culture
- **Responsibility.** The responsibility of learners for their own learning, their participation in learning activities, their exercise of choice, as well as their responsibility to apply their learning for the benefit of others
- **Values.** Recognition of the importance of values, attitudes, commitments, moral sensitivity, and spirituality to the integral development of the person and the common good of society

Core Values of Learning Systems

- **Diversity.** Recognition of and support for the diversity of the learning needs of people, reflecting their origins, ethnic background, language, talents, social conditions, and future aspirations
- **Special Needs.** Sensitivity to and support for the particular needs of certain groups such as Aboriginal people, recent immigrants, the poor, those who have suffered exclusion and discrimination, the gifted, and those who live with special physical, social, psychological and learning challenges
- **Access and Equity.** Wide access to learning, equity of treatment and diversity of service for all learners, regardless of background, circumstances or special need.
- **Wise Use of Technology.** Discerning use of technologies to enhance learning, in conjunction with teachers and institutions, and within a rich array of teaching/learning experiences

- **Quality.** Commitment to the highest quality of learning and service to learners
- **Research.** Priority to research in such fields as learning theory, effective teaching, information technologies, communication and many other areas, and to linking research findings to learning policy and practice
- **Teachers.** Recognition of the vital role of teachers in the learning system and their increased importance in developing and implementing new visions of the learning society
- **Diverse Careers.** Recognition that many learners will pursue rewarding careers and vocations in trades, crafts and services that are not directly connected with high technology and advanced academic learning

INTERCONNECTED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

After reviewing a number of possible visions that are briefly described in Appendix B, consensus emerged on a vision of interconnected learning communities.

This vision is based on the principle that diverse learners need diverse learning systems.

Two educational metaphors are blended:

- the global learning village which fosters local community support, stimulation and collaboration, making use of institutions and teachers (both broadly defined) to provide identity and meaning, caring and belonging;
- the information highway which links learners and communities through affordable technologies with other learning villages and resources around the world, providing variety and scope, possibilities and choices.

Learning follows a developmental sequence from childhood through adulthood and maturity. We begin in families and communities where we learn our sense of personal identity, language, and cultural heritage. As time goes on, we interact more and more with other learners in the community, in learning institutions, and in other kinds of institutions. We make more use of technology and communication to expand our visions and range of knowledge.

As our learning and development increase, we learn to discern meaning from information and to expand our understanding of other communities in our country and around the world. We merge local and global approaches to learning and, with the guidance of teachers, we develop maps which help us maintain our roots and proceed on our journey.

If we visualize the learning community as one which:

- is compassionate

- values, fosters and supports learning
- provides adequate resources
- has shared goals
- includes all members of society;

and if we visualize learners as persons who:

- should assume responsibility for learning
- live in a period of rapid change
- will be lifelong learners
- will have a variety of learning needs
- have needs different from other learners
- need a variety of experiences, services, and structures
- should learn both alone and in common with others
- need a balance of learning experiences
- blend learning, working and playing;

then the learning system to support this learner should be

- responsive
- adaptable
- respectful of diversity
- empowering
- accessible
- lifelong
- linked with community and reality
- affordable.

A new learning system for the future would involve changes in all the interconnected elements of the system: the framework of structures and funding; the processes of curriculum, instruction and assessment; the modes of access including institutions, teachers and technology; and the rationale for the system based on research and evaluation. Many of these changes are now occurring in different places and in different ways. What they need is a guiding vision to shape them and to integrate them.

Framework

1. Structures are more varied with less emphasis on hierarchies and more on intersecting networks. Some networks are based on location (integrated school/community services), diversity of background (rural and urban schools, links among different kinds of communities) or community of interest (e.g. current centres of excellence).

2. Governance is based on the concept of the "learning community," participation of all members of the community in the decision-making processes. The role of political and professional leadership is to promote a common vision, guarantee respect for rights and quality of service, and stimulate progress.

3. Funding is diversified but equity is protected by sharing resources among all members of the community. New approaches to funding and resource allocation need to be explored.

Processes

4. Curriculum is typically built around learning outcomes or common essential learnings, clearly defined knowledge, skills and attitudes together with standards of expectation; basic education stresses multiple literacies, thinking, feeling, ethical behaviour, problem based programs, and applications of learning in work and life.

5. Instructional design links outcomes to assessment and stresses both individual learning (projects, independent study) and cooperative learning (peer teaching and collaboration); emphasis is on (a) constructing meaning, (b) skill mastery and (c) interpersonal relationships.

6. Assessment includes evaluation of prior learning (e.g. pretests, challenge for credit, recognition of life experiences of adults) and alternative forms of assessment (e.g. portfolio, performance and authentic assessment).

Modes of Access

7. Institutions provide resources and services in a structured learning environment with an ethos supportive of learning individually and in groups; attendance involves different forms of contact but not necessarily full-time physical presence, and learners may "attend" many institutions simultaneously. Schools, colleges and universities are linked with other formal learning institutions and with institutions outside the formal system (museums, libraries, science laboratories, business, and community centres). The effectiveness of institutions is defined in various ways, according to both the nature of their results (academic, personal) and the quality of their environment (security, resources, quality of teaching, student life, community links, etc.).

8. Teachers continue to be the main learning professionals, acting as guides, organizers, leaders, resources, program designers and facilitators of learning - and as models of educated persons. Many teachers work in schools, while many others exercise their profession as independent consultants, in government agencies, private enterprise or in community services. Some roles now filled by teachers are assumed by non-professionals and paraprofessionals. As teacher roles evolve, there are important implications for the definition of teacher, teacher education, professional development, working conditions and professional associations.

9. Technology dramatically expands access to learning, enriching the resources and expertise available to all learners, and expanding services to those whose access to resources is restricted or who are not well served by present structures. "Distance" education, independent study, and "following programs" are alternative means of learning. Learning becomes separated from time (schedules, duration as a measure of achievement) and place (classrooms, schools and universities).

Ratio ale

10. Research provides the intellectual basis for learning systems; if our learning systems are the best we know how to design and our learning services are the best we know how to offer, then research must enlighten policy and practice and the links among research, policy and practice must be strengthened.

11. Evaluation provides feedback to learning systems, institutions, teachers and learners on whether we are learning the right things (as indicated by our state of knowledge in different fields), how well we are learning (in terms of efficiency and effectiveness) and the degree of match between learning services and learner needs. Current efforts to develop learning indicators are a step in this direction.

Almost all of these initiatives are occurring today. Many are moving us in the direction of a new vision of the learner and learning; some need rethinking and modification but still appear promising.

There are two important questions:

- How can a vision of the future of learning and the learner continue to be developed?
- How can these elements be integrated into a coherent yet open vision?

TAKING IT FROM HERE

A vision is a set of ideas, based on certain values, that requires leadership skills to develop, to win support, and to implement.

Visions do not become realities unless someone gives them life. Any vision of the learner and the learning community - however clear, imaginative or attractive - will continue to be little more than a dream unless it finds sponsors with leadership and will, goals and resources, foresight and skill.

Working and thinking together, SchoolNet, educators, governments, business leaders and community groups are capable - with our present knowledge, resources and technology - of providing all Canadians with a learning environment that is the best in the world, a defining feature of our society, and a rich resource for all Canadians.

In the process of developing this vision statement, we have created a community, a family of educators, with a common concern and we have begun a process which will be ongoing and can be accessed through SchoolNet.

The work continues!

On behalf of the participants in the Workshop on Vision of the Learner in the 21st Century, held on April 19-21, 1996, at the CIBC Leadership Centre, King City, Ontario, sponsored by the Training, Research and

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Your comments: [click here!](#)

Appendix A: PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS

Our era requires substantial investment of society's resources in the learning community and profound changes in the role of learner and educator. As we move towards a new vision of learning communities and learners, we must acknowledge that certain problems, tensions and dilemmas will need to be addressed over the next few years. **Among them:**

- the complementary contributions of formal learning structures and informal approaches to learning
- the tension between the pressure of rapid change and the need for stability
- the importance of foresight and its difficulty in an age of unpredictability
- a desire to have a smooth transition to the future while recognizing our assumptions about learning and learning systems are changing in profound ways
- the imperative of providing real, not just token, access to learning services to learners of all ages, in a climate of limited resources and increasing competitiveness
- the balance of the social-interdependent nature of learning with the focus on the needs and interests of the individual
- the tension between our social institutions founded during the industrial era and the new styles of learning emerging with information technologies

- how to ensure that the use of technology for learning enhances our opportunities and empowers us, and does not dominate our lives
- the need to reconcile those who resist change in education, those who prefer moderate reform within existing assumptions and structures, and those who see the need for profound change
- the balance between creative entrepreneurship and community responsibility, between private and public interest
- the tension between centralization and decentralization, standardization and variety, public good and individual choice
- the tension between quality and standards on the one hand and equality and access on the other hand
- the balance between investing in education and investing in other public services, and the balance in the allocation of resources within the broad field of education (early childhood, elementary-secondary, post-secondary, adult and continuing education)
- the tension between viewing the education enterprise as a short-term business and/or political opportunity or as a long-term strategic investment in people.

Appendix B: POSSIBILITIES

Learning and learning systems may move in a number of possible directions. The vision presented in this statement must be assessed in terms of some of the major alternatives:

Business as Usual

We continue going as we are, relying on our existing assumptions, structures and labour-intensive ways of teaching and learning. Attempts continue to integrate technology into existing structures. Resources are limited and in many places decline, affecting learning quality and public confidence. Competition among schools and school systems intensifies. Is this approach serving individuals and society well at the present time? Can we provide quality learning services with the resources available? Are we missing opportunities to make creative use of the new technologies?

The Funnel

The range of opportunities narrows as technology and global competitiveness limit the job market to low-level service skills needing little education and high-level technical and managerial skills based on post-

secondary certification. For most of the population, a rewarding job is a scarce resource with few winners and many losers. What happens to the link between learning and career? What kind of learning is needed for those outside the job funnel? Can learning enlarge the funnel? Do we need new definitions of work and job?

Competing Systems

There is growing political conflict and economic competition for clients and funding, between the present education establishment and the virtual learning system of communications and information technologies in which teachers and institutions are of minor importance. Is such a conflict built into the nature of competing philosophies? Would it be helpful or dangerous?

Appendix C: PARTICIPANTS IN THE WORKSHOP, APRIL 19-21, 1996

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