

**Running head: The Learning Society**

**UK National Information Strategy of 'Learning Society'**

**By**

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## Introduction

A learning society is not without the mutual consent of adoption of learning policies by the society. It is formed by the mutual cooperation of learning institutions as well as those who seek to learn and participate as active negotiators in the formulation of learning systems. This trend stems from a number of factors among which the strongest is the growth of what has been called a 'contracting society'. At all levels of society, from central government down, funds are now given only for the completion of very specific tasks. Even in the education sector, there are many examples. Until the 1980s, Britain's local education authorities maintained and funded further education colleges, but left them fairly free to decide on their policies. Now, the Learning and Skills Councils specify in detail what colleges should deliver in return for the funds it administers.

The oratory of learning contracts and self-directed learning encourages a 'misleading scenario' of adults Voluntarily directing their educational projects through formal learning contracts'. According to Collins,

"Learning contracts and self-directed learning in institutional settings typically place the direction of their learning subtly, but firmly, in the hands of experts who serve predominantly institutionalized interests. Self-directed learning, systematically defined as it is in prevailing adult education practice, permits the learner to choose between options already defined by formal systems" (Collins, 1991, p. 39).

### **UK National Information Strategy of 'Learning Society'**

British education has not confined itself to remain in the boundaries of teaching and assessment, instead it encompasses the conduct of research in education and learning to groom a new society by evaluating different strengths and weaknesses of learning and, by analysing those aspects which it upholds for the benefit of a successful upcoming generation of UK.

According to Webster,  
“Learning society can be analysed with respect to five criterion; technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural”. (Webster, 2002, p. 48)

### **Origins and Historical controversiality of Learning Society**

National educational research forum strategy (NERF) conducted initial proposals for ‘an apparently common-sense solution to the problem of making academic research relevant to the real world’. NERF’s core aim was to conduct a stimulating high quality, evidence-based research with more specific objectives to evaluate and implement learning strategies beneficial for the society. There was felt to be a need for advice and guidance on priorities for research that would involve the establishment, in advance, of criteria for determining relevance and quality. In addition, a strategy for achieving endorsement of these criteria by the funders and publishers of research was recommended. As an outcome, these proposals were treated by a hostile response of educational specialists. “According to *The Times Higher Education Supplement* the draft was

immediately attacked for expressing ‘a philosophically bankrupt view of education’ which, while ostensibly recognising the need for public debate about its nature and purposes, threatened to ‘foreclose on that debate by defining the nature and purpose of education’”. (Brown, 2002)

Other criticisms concerned the threat to academic freedom posed by the centralising aspirations of the NERF proposals in the context of a highly politicised education agenda. As another critic Hodkinson put it: ‘In a democracy, it is important that a significant part of education research is free to investigate issues that lie outside, or even directly counter to, those political priorities’. The response to these criticisms by NERF was that rather than attempting to predetermine the direction of educational research, it indeed opened up a well-informed debate about ‘the nature and purposes of education’.

Despite the confident rhetoric of governments about ‘the learning society’, ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘the knowledge economy’, the ways in which we learn and the status of the knowledge and understanding that we acquire always have been subjects of controversy. These questions are too profound and require a change to think over differing patterns of teaching and learning to be implemented in such relationships where there is a variable between culture and cognition. “Much of the contemporary interest in the posthumous works of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky reflects growing awareness of the complex, poorly understood ways in which the particularities of a culture are symbolised and internalised by individuals in the dialogue between teachers and learners in the broadest sense of these latter terms”. (Brown, 2002)

### **Is there a need to change Education Policies?**

The problem is that learning is now ubiquitous and has been nearly uniform with the same concrete essentials: teachers, classrooms and cohorts of age-matched pupils supported by

complex administrations. According to critiques education policies and practices betray a systematic confusion between the requirements for order and accountability in large-scale organisations and the characteristic needs and potentials of individual learners. Example is the case study of Summerhill School and the UK government's demand for timetabled lessons, prescribed study programmes, systematic assessment and attainment 'in line with national expectations'. (Webster, 2002) It is as though these requirements describe the necessary conditions for effective learning but in reality they do not; they describe a hierarchy of organisational needs: for educators and students in mass institutions to be in the same place at the same time; for all levels of management to know who is supposed to be learning what, and when; for easily digestible evidence of student and school performances for the public domain; for governments to demonstrate firm commitment to improve educational standards to a discontented media and public.

### **ICT – A new approach to Learning**

“In Britain, a much-respected school of thought has devised a neo-Schumpeterian approach to change which suggests combining Schumpeter's argument that major technological innovations bring about 'creative destruction' with Kondratieff's theme of 'long waves' of economic development, these researchers contend that information and communication technologies represent the establishment of a new era (Freeman, 1987) which will be uncomfortable during its earlier phases, but over the longer term will be economically beneficial”. This new techno economic paradigm constitutes the advent of 'Information Age', which is set to mature early in the twenty-first century (Brown, 2002)

This information age suggests ICT (Information and Communication Technology) as a new type of society, which would take us towards qualifying for information and learning society status. The question arises here as to what extent ICT is required in order to identify UK as an information society. This problem of measurement, and the associated difficulty of stipulating the point on the technological scale at which a society is judged to have entered an information age, is surely central to any acceptable definition of a distinctively new type of society. It is ignored by popular futurists: the new technologies are announced and it is unproblematically presumed that this in itself heralds the information society. This issue is, surprisingly, also bypassed by other scholars who yet assert that ICT is the major index of a learning information society. They are content to describe in general terms technological innovations, somehow presuming that this is enough to distinguish the new society.

The use and awareness of ICT within learning organisations commenced with the advent of since OFSTED's (Office for standards in Education), which suggested measures for presenting information from government sources available to schools on the Internet. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were required by the government to increase their use of electronic communication with schools. A statistical survey was conducted which presented some facts about ICT usage, according to which 96 % of primary schools and all secondary schools were connected to the Internet. Pupil to computer ratios rose from 18:1 in primary schools and 9:1 in secondary in 1998 to 13:1 and 8:1, respectively.

With respect to ICT, the government has so far announced plans to encourage the widespread use of ICT in teaching and learning in schools:

- Equip schools with modern ICT facilities

- Create a National Grid for Learning (NGFL) containing educational information and study material.
- Organise in-service training for teachers and school librarians to enable them to use ICT effectively in their work.

(Ofsted, Report from the Office of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools)

### **ICT Initiatives**

ICT plans have coordinated the requirements of the units responsible for all aspects of implementing ICT in education and training, and identified those functions which need to be coordinated through the development of policy to ensure effective and efficient integration of central and local IT systems and the optimum allocation and use of scarce resources. The importance of a stable technological platform in delivering student satisfaction with the use of ICT in learning cannot be over estimated.

In developing the IT Plan, an IT Alignment Project has been undertaken to define the IT and IT process changes needed to take advantage of the opportunities of the changing marketplace within education and training. (Bhanot, 2005, p. 75) The outcome of this project included a high-level process model, and identification of existing initiatives and the gaps in staff capabilities, in technology infrastructure, and in content and application systems between the planned future and what was already being done. Planning for the use of ICT is a crucial first phase in assuring the quality of the learning outcomes for students. The second phase of the IT Alignment Project focused on implementing IT strategies, and developing objectives, time frames and resource requirements for education and training, and to bring coherence to existing initiatives. This included architecture and delivery platforms, user requirements for new students, and product

delivery and management systems, and developing a coherent process for planning and implementation applicable to current initiatives and future projects. The planning methodology adopted in the development of the overall plan included certain stages. (Bhanot, 2005, p. 76)

These provide a useful checklist for the development of IT plans to support the adoption of ICT:

- Identify the external factors that will affect and influence strategic directions.
- Identify IT trends and emerging technologies that the University could take advantage of over the next three to five years.
- Review and assess the current IT environment.
- Revisit the relevant aspects of the University's teaching and learning strategy that could be specifically enabled by IT.
- Identify and document a vision for IT.
- Identify the strategies and actions required to implement this vision, together with policies, projects, funding and resource requirements.

The factors redefining the learning society includes:

- Re-skilling staff.
- Growth of the non-traditional student markets.
- Remote interactive technologies.
- Brokering arrangements with new partners.

The challenge is to manage and meet expectations in the face of rising demand, while providing optimal IT support in a complex networked environment. The critical success factors underpinning high-quality learning using ICT lie in appropriate levels of standardisation, integration and reliability offering a seamless foundation for individualised local environments for innovations in teaching and learning. (Bhanot, 2005, p. 94)

There are two features underlying the IT driven model towards a learned society, the shift from high-cost, fragmented systems proliferation to a common infrastructure, and the empowerment of users to run specialised local applications for teaching and research, and the ease of embedding and maintaining ICT across the curriculum. Once in place, a standardised infrastructure helps to maintain the users' current systems and their business unit independence, as well as giving them options for new courseware, and enabling integration and interoperability across the University where required. There is a significant advantage in introducing such an enabling infrastructure as it meets the needs for certain common teaching and administrative systems across the University, while supporting autonomous innovation in the faculties in IT for both on-campus and distributed teaching and learning. In particular the original plan made a number of specific stipulations to assure the successful implementation of the Distributed Learning System. The aims of the learning system were as follows:

- To ensure that the student-centred teaching and learning focus was not compromised or subsumed by the technology.
- To build teacher and learner competencies and confidence that in turn ensured the appropriate use of technologies as part of the teaching and learning effort.
- To provide management processes to ensure quality outcomes and the effective deployment of resources to support associated design, development and evaluation activities.
- To deploy appropriate infrastructure, systems and support services.

(Bhanot, 2005, p. 110)

A Distributed Learning System (DLS) for online learning has been developed. Some of the principles underlying the development of the DLS are as follows:

- A suite of tools, not just one.
- Integrating educational principles into the description of the toolkit.
- IMS compliance of all tools.
- A team approach to online projects.
- Involvement of all seven Faculties in evaluating the toolkit and the effectiveness of the learning environments that are being developed.

The following are the learning system tools that we have deployed:

- The Campus (an in-house tool in use as a common gateway to the DLS for all registered staff and students).
- The Classroom (Blackboard, Course Info). This is a secure area, accessible through Campus, where registered staff and students can access learning materials and facilities connected with a particular subject in which they are enrolled.
- The Community. This is an area of the website designed to allow RMIT staff and students to be able to set up communication and discussion areas. (Blackboard Course Info may be used, but Web Board is also being provided.
- Critiques quiz tools (Question Mark Perception; and Web Learn, an in-house tool).

The key challenges for providing ICT based quality learning includes:

- Overcoming negative perceptions from early unsatisfactory experiences.
- Educational design and publishing standards.
- Timescale and workload.
- Getting take-up of the quality assurance processes.

- Maintaining momentum.

According to Scardamalia and Bereiter, “in order to meet the future challenges of ICT, there is a need to transform schools into communities where productive working for advancing communal knowledge is a primary goal of both students and teachers. Knowledge building refers to a process of advancing understanding by setting up, articulating, and answering research questions, searching and exploring information, and generating and evaluating explanations”. (Hakkaraine et al, 2001)

## **Conclusion**

Over the past two decades in UK there seems to be a controversy regarding learning styles and technology, research on learning and instruction has produced a knowledge base involving ideas and principles that should guide the design of such powerful instructional environments in general, and computer-supported learning environments in particular. As with any educational technology, the design, use, and evaluation require a pedagogic philosophy of 'how to learn' and 'how to tutor'. That is, it must incorporate reflections about the student as a learner, a view of the pedagogical and cultural goals of environment, a sound analysis of domain knowledge and tasks, as well as a psycho pedagogical theory of development, learning, and instruction. Computers, whether used to teach and learn ICT or to implement CAD/CAM applications have become the part and parcel of UK's 80% population, so they can be of great worth and value in terms of cognitive educational tools for learners and teachers if they are designed for and used in the service of pedagogical goals. There has been a very rapid development in the strategies of Learning technology in British secondary education over the period of last ten years, which has made various learning styles in design and technology followed by the use of computers. This involves designing, information management, and control of machines in the filed of robotics, biometrics, artificial intelligence, e-learning strategies and the advent of virtual reality systems.

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