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IJS - 32 A LEARNING FOUNDATION

c/o Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017, U.S.A.

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Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Attached you will find an essay which suggests a model for a new sort of educational institution, which I call a Learning Foundation. The purpose and design of this Learning Foundation is articulated in the body of the essay, so it requires no further introduction.

Suffice it to note that this essay attempts to draw on the insights which I have gleaned in the past eighteen months as an Institute Fellow and to draw them together in the form of a specific institutional model.

I shall undertake similar exercises from time to time in the next few months. And whenever I offer such a speculative proposition for your consideration, I invite you and those who read over your shoulder to comment on it.

Sincerely,



Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.
Fellow
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

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A LEARNING FOUNDATION

The idea of a Learning Foundation is a suggestion for an educational institution which would serve a comprehensive learning population in a decentralized system. The Learning Foundation is designed to overcome discontinuities in educational institutions of age, professional identity, socioeconomic class, race, disciplinary division and different community needs.

This Learning Foundation as I shall describe it may strike the reader as a futuristic design more appropriate to the musings of futurologists or the writing of science fiction writers than the ruminations of a student of educational policy. Such an impression would not be far off the mark, because many of the characteristics of this institution have much in common with the suggestions of educational futurists. But the overall design of the Learning Foundation owes as much to the radical critique of educational systems, which is usually expressed in the language of Illich, Freire, and various and sundry freeschoolers.

Yet the Learning Foundation which I am about to outline differs from the speculations of futurologists and the arguments of the radical chic critics in two important respects: 1) in contrast to the designs of educational futurists, the Learning Foundation could be (and ought to be) implemented now, although it or other configurations of its characteristics would undoubtedly happen in the next few decades, given many existing trends which futurologists are so fond of extrapolating; 2) and unlike the relatively obscure or narrowly applicable positive recommendations of Illich and many de- and freeschoolers, the institutional design and substantive program of the Learning Foundation can be clearly articulated and its possible role in changing the overall educational system identified.

The Learning Foundation is designed to meet the problems of segregation and fragmentation which I consider to be among the most important factors contributing to the alienation and

ineffectiveness which characterize educational systems at all levels and in most national contexts. This fragmentation and segregation is the result of the division of labor and specialization which have characterized the social structures of all industrializing societies and which have become even more acute in the technological leviathans of post-industrial societies. The fragmentation and specialization in educational institutions manifest themselves in a number of ways: 1) institutional divisions--the separation between technical and liberal arts institutions, the division between elementary and high schools; 2) chronological segregation--the separation of educational groups by age grades: the segregation of two-year-olds from five-year-olds, nine-year-olds from twelve-year-olds, adults from children, and so on; 3) economic, social, and racial segregation--the separation of various social groups by virtue of more general patterns of segregation and the inflexibility of educational institutions; 4) disciplinary fragmentation--the divisions among humanists and scientists, technologists and theoreticians, etc.; 5) professional segregation--the insidious distinctions of self-perception and status which seem especially acute in the teaching and learned professions between those who are engaged in research and those who are primarily engaged in teaching and, in institutional terms, between those who are members of the higher educational establishments and those who are not; 6) pedagogical segregation--the division between those who teach in traditional classroom settings and those who use more flexible approaches in different situations, and the division between both of the former and those who are addicts of new pedagogical technologies; 7) "relevance" separation--the discontinuity between those who attempt to make learning experiences "relevant" (by normative measures seldom articulated) to the needs of their students and/or society and those who studiously avoid "pandering to the masses" and steadfastly pursue some vague "knowledge as an end in itself."

I have catalogued the preceding manifestations of segregation, fragmentation and discontinuity in educational institutions not because I claim that the Learning Foundation will cure the whole set of problems but because it is an awareness of these problems that has informed the institutional design which I am about to present. Although I do not claim to have the panacea for all of our educational troubles, I would hold the activities of a Learning Foundation up to the standards implicit in each of the seven problem areas; that is, the Learning Foundation could be evaluated in part in terms of its success or failure in overcoming the various discontinuities which I suggest afflict most existing educational systems.

The design of the Learning Foundation is in some ways the design of an alternative educational system, not just a

suggestion for a different sort of educational institution. But I make this recommendation in terms of a single institution, because the existence of a handful of such institutions in traditional systems (whether such systems are seen as legal or analytical constructs) could have a profound impact on the systems. And if one can test the ideas incorporated in the Learning Foundation in a single institutional framework, then he is more likely to be prepared to deal with whole, entrenched systems. Therefore, I shall now outline a single educational institution which could, in some measure, deal with the segregation and fragmentation of existing institutions and systems. Then I shall deal briefly with the possible impact of such an institution on change in the larger systems.

I. AN INSTITUTIONAL OUTLINE OF A LEARNING FOUNDATION

The Learning Foundation would be a comprehensive educational resource which would provide opportunities for learning to the whole range of ages from infancy to old age and to the whole range of socio-economic and ability groups. Admission to activities of the Learning Foundation would be completely open; however, the rule of provision of educational opportunities in the allocation of scarce resources would be to provide first and foremost for those who have been served last and least by existing institutions. The Learning Foundation would provide these learning opportunities in both formal and informal settings, in its own geographical location and in the community at large, and as well in the homes of its participants--students and teachers.

An important aspect of the Learning Foundation's comprehensiveness would be its breadth in terms of age sets. By providing infant learning experiences for very young children as well as adult programs for retired folk, just to use two examples, the Learning Foundation would be in a position to develop in both teacher and student an understanding of the way in which particular learning experiences fit into overall developmental patterns. Also, by serving a diverse age range without the rigidity of set chronological divisions in the institution, the opportunity for experimenting with combinations of ages in learning situations would be without limit. The heterogeneous age population would also allow the focus of learning to be on the interaction between what is to be learned and who is to learn it without the artificial barriers which the usual institutional divisions by chronological age put on young children and adults.

In addition, the comprehensiveness of age sets served would provide an opportunity to break down barriers between professionals who usually serve different age groups. Then the strengths and insights which are said to characterize the best educators at various levels could be shared within the institution

itself. And problems which transcend particular ages could be approached in a coherent and reasonable manner; for example, the learning of math or the learning of reading could be viewed and then dealt with as an ongoing process in which the participating professionals have both an interest and a responsibility. Over time one would hope to see an exchange of professional roles among members of staff: university lecturers or adult educationists working with preschool children and kindergarten teachers dealing with adolescents and grandmothers; also, older students helping younger students. The insights which such experiences would provide both teachers and taught could be invaluable not only to those directly involved but also to the students of learning processes everywhere.

The Learning Foundation could attempt to overcome disciplinary segregation by a number of different strategies. Although hopefully all participating staff would have disciplinary or age oriented expertise, the learning sequences would be explored in terms of broad intellectual relationships among disciplines as well as the unique contributions of particular areas of knowledge. The Learning Foundation would encourage interdisciplinary approaches to problems by having broad organizational divisions related to disciplines or areas of interest--e.g., humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, professional studies, creative arts, environmental studies, etc.--and also by concentrating on the learning of basic skills through the study of all disciplines, especially verbal and mathematical skills of analysis and creativity in both arts and sciences. In addition, problem oriented learning opportunities which draw on a number of disciplines would be an important substantive component of the learning strategy; for example, learning situations focusing on problems of pollution or methods of artistic expression would be offered at a number of different levels.

The actual learning sites for the activities of the Learning Foundation would be quite diverse and generally quite decentralized. Through the use of community organizing techniques and the newest methods of multimedia education, most of the activities of the Learning Foundation would happen in or near the homes of participating students and faculty. There would not be one physical and social location for the Learning Foundation.

Through a combination of techniques used by study circles in Scandinavia,¹ the Parkway School in Philadelphia,² the University of Liverpool adult education education project in

¹Adult education seminars started by the Scandinavian political parties, especially in Sweden in the 19th century, and now involving a majority of the adult population in Sweden.

²A secondary school which does not have one central building and faculty but instead utilizes the whole range of physical and personnel resources of the city.

Scotland Road,³ Headstart and Follow-Through early childhood programs,⁴ and the Open University⁵ the educational activities of the Learning Foundation would be "delivered" (to use an unsatisfactory but in this case appropriate word) at the points most likely to provide the optimal learning experiences for all involved. This decentralized system would also subject learning experiences to the constraints of perceived needs of individuals and neighborhoods.

Although the basic system would be quite decentralized, the learning sites would be expected to cooperate with each other and central resource centers to provide learning opportunities which no one site could provide--e.g., specialized discussion groups, certain lab facilities, and the use of other community resources such as museums and parks.

And certain components of the whole range of Learning Foundation educational activities would be selfconsciously centralized to insure heterogeneous groups of different races, socio-economic backgrounds and disciplinary interests in order to overcome the social segregation which any decentralized system encourages in an essentially segregated society. Striking the balance between the importance of providing learning experiences in the most accessible possible manner and the social and educational importance of integrating groups segregated by post-industrial Western societies will be one of the most difficult challenges facing the Learning Foundation; but a challenge which an institution committed to overcoming a whole range of discontinuities in a flexible manner is most likely to meet.

The decentralized learning sites would be serviced by a central resources center which would develop and produce curriculum materials and multi-media resources including broadcast and published materials. I should emphasize the word "serviced," because the model is not one of central direction but only coordination and service to the decentralized sites. One would expect a great deal of transfer between professionals and students at the learning sites and those providing central services.

The basic organizational model is that of an institution with certain central resources servicing a series of decentralized learning sites. Two characteristics of this model in the idea of the Learning Foundation deserve further note. The invocation of the Open University example brings to mind the whole complex of new technologies and combinations of educational media which are characteristic of this institution. However, I should clearly indicate that most of the discontinuities which I have suggested the Learning Foundation is designed to overcome could be dealt with without any of the fancy new technologies or media. But

³An attempt to organize a working class community to control and develop a wide range of educational resources.

⁴Community based educational efforts.

⁵The British adult university which provides its learning opportunities mainly through correspondence materials and broadcast lessons but also with some personal tutorial assistance and summer group lessons.

the Learning Foundation could deal with many more people and operate on a much more cost-effective scale if it did use the broadcast and published media in the manner which the Open University is theoretically supposed to. Of course, the role of the various media will differ from one learning activity to another in the operation of the Learning Foundation, but there is certainly no reason why the new technologies and combinations of media cannot be effective at all levels of education, as long as the limitations of diverse contexts are recognized. For example, television has proved its worth at a number of levels. Sesame Street shows the effectiveness of first class broadcast productions for a preschool population. The German Telekolleg uses multi-media materials for secondary school work for adults. And there is already talk in England about starting an Open School to use broadcast and published technologies at both elementary and secondary levels. The only relatively revolutionary aspect of the design for the Learning Foundation is the combination of new technologies with an institution which has a comprehensive view of its educational tasks and the possibilities which this combination creates for dramatic changes in approach to education and for a large scale impact on whole populations.

Another aspect of the operation of the decentralized system is the potential relationship of it to the needs of individuals and groups in various local communities. By using broadcast and printed media as important parts of the learning experience, much work can be done by the individual and informal groups of individuals. But the existence of formal, local learning sites and authoritative individuals with educational responsibilities associated with these sites would be an important part of the operation of the Learning Foundation. The Learning Foundation would have a decentralized staff of "education organizers" who would work in the local neighborhoods to encourage the use of the comprehensive range of learning activities of the Learning Foundation and to assist the Foundation in providing learning opportunities for the particular community. The model for the education organizer would be taken from the adult education activities of the Social Science Division of the University of Liverpool Department of Extension Studies, which is helping a working class community in Liverpool develop adult education activities appropriate for its area. The Learning Foundation would amend this model to include the whole range of learning activities in particular communities. Each learning site would be expected to provide the comprehensive range of learning opportunities characteristic of the Learning Foundation, but with the particular offerings tailored to the needs of the specific communities using the site.

The governance and policy process of the Learning Foundation would insure a system of control which vested great power in the local learning site and also by the confederated learning sites over the program of all central resource services. A formal

political system would be developed which would be limited only by the constraint of actual production of common materials and delivery of central services on a large scale. A representative but participatory system of government would be ideal. And all participants in the life of the institution and its constituent parts, teachers and students, as well as those not participating but affected by the use of institutional resources--the communities at large--would have formal political roles in the Learning Foundation.

The use of educational organizers and the vesting of great policy powers in the local learning sites should probably combine to create very active participation in the learning opportunities offered by the Learning Foundation. Having institutional arrangements which encourage active participation in the learning experiences and in decisions about the nature of those experiences is especially important in a system which intends to use a number of technologies and media, because many of these new approaches tend to cast the student-learner in essentially passive and isolated roles (this is especially true of the broadcast media). So learning institutions which use these new techniques must be especially sensitive to strategies for encouraging active and cooperative involvement on the part of all participants--whether teachers or students.

The professional staff of the Learning Foundation would include both full time and part time teachers and would be drawn from the range of discipline and age interests required by the goals for this comprehensive educational institution. There would be four important criteria for membership in the professional staff: 1) an interest in education without limitation to particular age or social groups; 2) an ability to use (or learn to use) a wide range of educational media; 3) a disciplinary and/or age group educational expertise and scholarly commitment; 4) fantastic flexibility. The full-time staff would play primary roles in four areas of activity: 1) the development of learning materials for use at the learning sites; 2) the educational organizing role; 3) the training and support of the part-time staff; 4) the pursuit of disciplinary and educational research. The part-time staff members would also have an important role in these four activities; however, their primary role would be in making the decentralized learning sites important areas for educational activities across the range of operation of the Learning Foundation. By providing comprehensive learning opportunities in terms of age spread and disciplinary interest, the Learning Foundation is likely to encourage the participating staff to share in the positive attitudes characteristics of the various levels of education--e.g., the scholarly predisposition supposedly characteristic of the university faculty and the personal interest in the student which is thought to be the hallmark of the preschool and primary

teacher. The development of a sense of educational vocation and profession on the part of the faculty may be the most important contribution to education which the Learning Foundation could make to its students and staff and by example, to the educational community at large.

Another innovation in the institutional design of the Learning Foundation would be likely to encourage the professional commitment of the faculty to the educational enterprise: an educational research institute integrated into the overall activity of the Foundation. (This suggestion is modeled on the educational technology institute of the Open University.) This institute would participate in the design and evaluation of all of the work of the Foundation and would provide an opportunity for all members of staff and interested students to take time out and think critically about the educational issues involved in their own work and the work of the whole institution. The staffing pattern of the institute would be designed to encourage the people involved in the various activities of the Foundation to pursue educational research projects regularly: this strategy would be aimed at overcoming the division between researchers and practitioners which especially bedevils educational research. The services of the educational research institute would be available to both central resource services and the learning sites. The operation of such an institute would help insure continuing critical evaluation of the very nature of the Learning Foundation.

The Learning Foundation would be a diploma and degree granting entity. It would provide certification and testing facilities for its own curriculum throughout its range of activities. However, it would involve external examiners in the certification process. Also, its testing and certification facilities would themselves be available as certification opportunities to those not formally participating in the educational activities of the Foundation; in other words, anyone could take its exams. However, it is crucial to note that the Learning Foundation would not separate its testing functions from its overall educational mission and that most of its evaluation would be part of its ongoing educational activities. This integration of evaluation and the educational process is important, because it is the very separation of these activities which is the great weakness of all external testing agencies.

One final observation about the overall design of the Learning Foundation is in order: the problem of its comprehensiveness in terms of participant students and disciplinary interests of participant students and teachers. Actual comprehensiveness of ages served is crucial to the operation of the Learning Foundation and one of its unique characteristics. But having comprehensiveness without an overly large group of students and staff creates a difficult institutional challenge which

can be met only by being quite selective in terms of what is taught at each level and in each disciplinary grouping. Comprehensiveness of learning opportunities can be provided while still restricting the total number of particular offerings at each level of learning. But the problem of size in relation to comprehensiveness will always have to be considered in all policy decisions.

Although this institutional sketch has been incomplete, the outline of the Learning Foundation as an institution designed to overcome a broad range of educational discontinuities is here. But how this new institution might affect the traditional educational systems is still a completely open question. It is to its role as an agent for systemic change that I must finally turn.

II. THE LEARNING FOUNDATION AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

One of the tasks facing the designer of an innovative institution who wishes to encourage change in the whole system is determining how a new institution can most effectively disseminate information about its innovations into the system at large and thereby influence change in the larger system. Perhaps the greatest weakness in past attempts at creating meaningful change in educational systems has been the lack of systematic thought about how one makes the jump from one effective and innovative institution to significant systemic changes consistent with what one has learned in the process of innovation in the experimental institution.

There are at least two ways that innovative institutions can influence their systems context. One way is by their very existence: in so far as they act differently from existing institutions and even more if they are successful in achieving goals of existing institutions in new and more effective ways, they stand as institutional critiques of the existing system. Their very example is a force for change. But this force is often relatively weak: the power of example is usually marginal. So techniques for implementing change should be part and parcel of the very design of new institutions. These selfconscious strategies for change are the second category of influence of experimental institutions on their systems context. These strategies run the gamut from formal training of people in the larger systems to making use of less formal communication of information. The latter is sometimes called propaganda.

The Learning Foundation would develop clear strategies for disseminating its insights and techniques and materials, once it was clear that they were worthwhile. There should be a Dissemination Institute within the Foundation, which would provide

a whole range of learning experiences for teachers and students outside of the Learning Foundation family; these educational opportunities would be designed to acquaint the audience with the educational and organizational techniques of the Learning Foundation. These opportunities could range from formal courses to the simple delivery of information through the fourth estate.

Another mode of dissemination for the Learning Foundation would be a consulting and support service for other educational systems. Almost every imaginable human activity has important educational opportunities and consequences. However, most of these opportunities are lost because those participating in them do not know how to use them. A Learning Foundation could assist other social organizations in making the most of the learning possibilities implicit in their activities by helping them identify the possibilities and by providing complementary learning experiences and resources. For example, the Learning Foundation could help a company or a government department design clear learning experiences into the day to day work of those engaged in the activities of the organization and thereby increase the challenge and reward of the work experience.

The process of dissemination, which is in fact the process of revolutionizing the larger educational systems, would be a top priority activity for the Learning Foundation. And part of the long range success of the Learning Foundation would have to be measured in terms of its impact on all other educational systems.

CONCLUSION

As I said in the introduction to this essay, I believe that the Learning Foundation as I have described it is a practical proposal which may be implemented now. I believe that it could be established and operating at an initial level within three years after detailed planning was begun; it could be fully operational within another two or three years; and it could be a demonstrable success (or failure) within another five years. And, with luck and cash, the Learning Foundation could profoundly change its systemic context in the course of a decade.

I have offered neither a flow chart for the establishment of the Learning Foundation nor an accounting of its possible costs and sources of finance. The constraints of this brief essay explain these omissions. But both components of a more detailed plan could easily be developed.

What I have offered is a sketch with some justification for its various lines and shadings. But a sketch nevertheless.

Whether or not more details are warranted depends upon whether or not the reader believes that this proposal for the future has a claim on the present.

A Learning Foundation would not make the future now, but it might make the present more open to a wider variety of alternative educational futures.

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