An aide-mémoire concerning the establishment of an Institute for the Advanced
Study of Human Learning and Community Development

The Emerging Opportunity

Worldwide education is at the top of the political agenda. Public officials everywhere are
seeking more effective education systems. They all recognise that future prosperity is dependent
upon the full development of the intellectual, social, creative and entrepreneurial skills of all
their young people.

However, despite two or more decades of expensive, exhausting, and sometimes divisive
educational reform, the results in many countries and communities are far from satisfactory.
“Young people may have the information to pass exams,” frustrated employers and others moan,
“but they seem to have little idea as how to sort out problems for themselves, and are unsure of
their role in civil society.”

Why is this? Part of the reason undoubtedly lies in significant changes within the home and
community, but it now seems that many educational reforms have achieved little because the
focus has been on institutional reform, rather than on exploiting what is now understood about
how children actually learn, and what their real learning needs are. Such a fundamental change
in emphasis from “teaching to learning” is already emerging within the commercial world where
the focus is shifting towards investment in the individual’s ability to learn, work in teams and be
self-adapting, rather than investing in layers of management to provide external direction.

New models of education that enable children to become self-motivated life-long learners are
being guided by powerful insights in recent research from the brain, evolutionary and
behavioural sciences. These findings are largely informed by breakthroughs in biomedical
technology (fMRI, PET, CAT, etc.), and they have spawned a movement towards educational
practices which confirm that thinking skills (meta-cognition), as well as significant aspects of
intelligence, are learnable. Learning is a collaborative, problem-solving activity which occurs
through the progressive construction of individual knowledge. The act of learning, as it is
becoming better understood, is the most natural and innate of human skills; it is driven more by
personal goals than by external rewards. Research in the biological sciences supports findings
from anthropology and archaeology that explain the operation of inherited “predispositions” in
all children to learn particular skills and attitudes when very young. This “inherited tool kit”
provided by evolution is matched by the innate determination of adolescents to take more and
more responsibility for their own learning and sense-making, a trait not generally recognised in
Western society that regards adolescence as problematic.

These findings suggest that if learning strategies are to go with the “grain of the brain” then it is
critically important that the youngest pupils receive intensive and sympathetic encouragement in
developing the basic skills necessary for “learning how to learn.” Following on from this, as
children grow older they should benefit from the natural tendency of adolescence for increasing
control of their own learning. This could happen partly through the use of information and
communication technologies, and partly through participation within the larger adult community.
Adolescents themselves should become active participants of the learning process rather than just

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recipients of pre-packaged information. In this way, a teacher in Canada argued, “it would be the students who would be tired at the end of term rather than the teachers.”

An example of this comes from a group of educational innovators and policy makers in Estonia. They have incorporated these powerful new possibilities in a recent “long-term education strategy” that they proposed to their President and Prime Minister. They wrote that education must strive “to develop all young people so that, by the time they leave secondary school, they will be able to learn independently and take full responsibility for their continued study. Teenagers (should be) considerable generators of new ideas and play a critical role in the development of their local communities. Older students should work as tutors for younger students and help them in the use of new technologies.”

Similar themes were picked up by a group of Indian innovators who are working to “create lifelong learning environments (in schools and out of schools) that seek to enable and empower the huge wealth of diverse human potential that exists in our people and cultures.” They, and many others elsewhere, are asking the Initiative for assistance in transforming their education systems with new models of learning that develop creative, thoughtful and responsible citizens.

Daily the Initiative receives comments from innovators whose efforts are constrained by firmly entrenched educational arrangements. “We have a new Head who is swinging the school back to a read, cram, test and vomit model. Parents are disturbed about this trend since most kids quickly loose interest.” To their frustration they have discovered that new understandings about learning collide head-on with established interests. Why? Because what is now known about how people learn challenges the essentially late 19th century assumptions which still permeate educational provision. These assumptions include:

- Intelligence is largely innate, as is creativity.
- As children become older they need more formal instruction.
- Learning is dependent on direct instruction and extrinsic reward.
- Learning is seen as being strictly logical, objective and linear.
- Real learning is accomplished in formal settings and is measurable.
- Learning is dependent on class-time, and the technologies of talk, paper, pencil and textbooks, all of which predate the word-processor, computers and the Internet.

Each of these assumptions is now understood to be either incorrect or of such limited value as to hold up the implementation of new strategies more applicable to current opportunities. Most Western education systems don’t, in reality, take into consideration the natural development needs of children; for example, class sizes currently are largest for young children, and smallest for 18-year olds. Such arrangements are reinforced by policy prescriptions that enshrine these older assumptions about learning in the very architecture of schools and colleges. In country after country these are maintained by a massive weight of legislation which ensures the perpetuation of the current model of education. At the same time society has delegated more and more tasks to schools that previously were undertaken by parents and community.

Yet the simple, but expensive, solution of expanding the education system indefinitely to compensate for what the home and the community are no longer doing is not sustainable in any
country over the long-term. As the White House recently noted, “as a result of current budgetary pressures...economic considerations have in fact assumed a position of central importance in ongoing deliberations surrounding the topic of educational reform.”

The Initiative’s solution would place intensive emphasis on informal learning within the home and the community, and on primary and pre-primary education. This should lead subsequently to a fundamental restructuring of secondary and tertiary education. This could be achieved not by extra expenditure, but by a radical reallocation of current moneys within the system and between the formal system and the informal learning opportunities of the community. The Initiative calls this “turning existing systems of education upside down and inside out.”

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The 21st Century Learning Initiative has spent the past three years conducting an extensive study into how people actually learn, and how environments can be developed which maximise learning opportunities for all children.

The Initiative is a transnational assembly of 60 leading researchers, policy makers and educational innovators from 13 countries who met at the Johnson Foundation’s Wingspread Conference Centre for six conferences between November 1995 and November 1997. They discussed how to enhance the effectiveness of learning worldwide. These meetings informed the findings set out in the recently published Policy Paper which shows that it is now possible to design and organise learning environments that would have far greater influence on the intellectual, social and moral growth of young people than do current models of education. This is fully explained in the book *The Child is Father of the Man: How children learn and why*, written by the Initiative’s President John Abbott and likely to be published in the summer of 1999. The details of the work have been shared widely in lectures and articles world-wide under the heading, “*Upside Down and Inside Out: Why Good Schools Alone Will Never Be Good Enough to Meet the Needs of the 21st Century.*” People from some 50 countries visit the Initiative’s active web site each month and approximately 1000 pages of information are downloaded daily.

The Initiative’s work is obviously having an impact on educational thinking around the world. The Rössing Foundation in Namibia recently hosted a key meeting of other foundations from across southern Africa to discuss in detail collaborating with the Initiative. Other presentations in South America, Asia and Southeast Asia have pursued similar lines. Following the Canadian Education Association Conference this past July the Premier of New Brunswick, in setting up a special Province Wide Conference on the Future of Education, remarked “what we need is your (the Initiative’s) help in transforming education, not simply reforming it.” Afterwards his Minister of Education commented “those ideas are spot on. As an outsider you can set the challenge even more effectively than I can.” Already three other provinces are setting up similar meetings.

\[1\] Report to the President on the Use of Technology to Strengthen K-12 Education in the US (1997).
As an increasing number of policy makers, and others, in developed countries recognise the scale of the emerging opportunities they are over-awed by the political challenges of reversing an "upside down and inside out" system. A high-ranking policy maker within the US educational establishment commented, "I think you're probably intellectually right, even morally right, but politics just can't deal with what you're saying." Others see this in as big, if not bigger terms, but recognise that it is an opportunity waiting for real definition. An English banker associated with the Initiative remarked, "you are trying to do for education what people in finance are beginning to do with the global financial system. Developing a new form of Bretton Woods. What you're saying challenges the current system head on. I doubt whether any country alone can deal with this. It needs a vast amount of transnational collaboration."

What the Initiative now needs is the operational capacity to respond to this interest.

It is to support the development of new models of learning that the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Learning is to be set up.

The purpose of the Institute is to facilitate the advanced study of human learning, and its significance to the development of community world wide. The Institute will disseminate new ideas about learning and will assist policy makers, community leaders, educators and the general public in understanding the strategic and resource implications of new models of learning.

Strategy

To use the ideas, experiences and models of best practice identified by the Institute to help those most able to implement transformative change within education, and subsequently to effectively draw upon this thoroughly evaluated experience to secure its appropriate and wide international replication.

Tactics

One, disseminate the relevant evidence now known about learning and how it is most effectively developed through a highly efficient and interactive information exchange system (through the Internet, mass media, policy seminars and public presentations) so as to influence the public agenda by ensuring a higher and deeper level of awareness of the significance of these findings.

Two, maintain and expand the authority of the Institute's documentation and presentations by constantly vetting new research findings, and evaluating the evidence from innovative practice world-wide, including the non-English speaking world.

Three, provide training and support programmes in line with the Strategy for those people who need help in designing and implementing new models of learning. Initially the Institute would target four groups of people:
(a) **Policy makers** - Permanent Secretaries, Ministers of Education, Senior Civil Servants, and key Professors of Education - who require intensive one-on-one support, and the opportunity of working informally with a small number of colleagues involved in similar work in other countries,

(b) **Implementers** of new programmes, such as Assistant Secretaries, locally elected representatives, School Superintendents, Chief Executives, and Mayors, whose needs are similar to (a) above, but are more detailed and “practical,”

(c) **Young people** in the 17-25 year-old range whose interest in these ideas needs to be “fired up” now, both to energise the older generation with the significance of these ideas, and to provide a trained, knowledgeable group demanding genuine reform over the next 10 years, and,

(d) **Advocates**, all the many hundreds of people who have already expressed an interest in the work of the Initiative and need far more exposure to these ideas if they are going to be able to advocate for the idea of “upside down and inside out” in their communities.

**Why the Institute should be established in a small, high-profile, independent country**

To broaden the imperative necessary for change, it is critical that the Institute have a small permanent staff based in a country that has a tradition of working with transnational, humanitarian, and scientific programmes; is seen to be largely politically neutral; and would be proud to host such a high profile Institute. The Institute will need to operate at appropriate levels of influence and status within the international sphere, and be capable of mounting significant conferences of a kind that delegates from other lands would want to attend. (The Initiative has recently been invited by Gorbachev’s State of the World Forum to plan the learning component of the Conference to be held by the United Nations in New York in late 2000 focusing on humanity’s “Common Agenda.” We expect that many such similar gatherings will flow from the Institute’s work.)

In order for the Institute to have maximum influence, it needs to be associated with a well-recognised international institution of excellence in the host country - in the case of Ireland this could be Trinity College, Dublin. The Board of Trustees will need to be broadened beyond that of the present Initiative through the inclusion of people of wisdom and distinction, and should no longer be dominated by either the British or the Americans.

**What the Institute would look like**

So great is the potential influence of these ideas that it is critical for the Institute to plan for reasonable and steady expansion from the start. The management of its activities has, at all times, to be commensurate with its resource capabilities so it will be necessary for its ongoing programme to be continuously evaluated. Initially a professional staff of eight people (who will bring with them their professional networks) together with a small technical and support staff will be sufficient to establish the Institute and lay the foundations for expansion. As a general principle the Institute would expect to recruit at least half its staff from the host country, though initially, whilst still small, there might be slightly more people from outside the country who would bring with them access to very many other intellectual networks. It will be important that,
on a day-to-day basis, the Institute’s staff develop many informal relationships with local university faculty.

Though the Institute will retain the freedom associated with a small non-politically aligned organisation, it will seek to work with larger, more formalised international agencies. This is critical to helping the Institute affect the wider policy agenda through collaborative work with such organisation as UNESCO, UNDP, OECD, etc.

Who would fund the Institute and why?

Over the first three years the Institute would largely shape the nature of the programmes needed subsequently. The funding arrangements will need to recognise a tripartite partnership. This will involve the interests of those funding agents able to see the significance of the Institute at an international level; some of these may well have a particular sub-agenda in as far as they recognise the particular advantages to their own countries. Secondly it must be noted that the country which hosts the Initiative has, in one sense, the most to gain from the Institute. Thirdly, the University in that country stands to gain prestige and practical advantage from the ready access to such a group of critical thinkers, and their networks. The putting together of such a funding programme becomes a matter of prime importance with the balance struck between the three parties being influential in helping each group to recruit and justify its own contributions.

An as yet largely unexplored source of funding is that which could be charged eventually for differing levels of consultancy and on-site services. While this is likely to be small initially it should rise steadily to become the most significant aspect of revenue so ensuring the Institute’s long-term sustainability. By the third year the operating costs of the Institute will probably be of the order of US$2 million per annum, but these would rise subsequently as the programme expands.

What would be the results of the Institute over a period of time?

Ten years hence, the Institute would expect that there would be many communities in different parts of the world operating as “test-site learning communities” where new learning environments would be highly compatible with natural brain functions; with what is known about how humans learn and develop creativity, and in particular, with the adolescent’s need to feel involved and of value. Such models of learning enhance people’s intelligence and their capacity for thoughtful creativity. They depend on engaging whole communities in the process of learning in which young people become the focus around which communities can be revitalised. Such places would make for a better, more exciting world in which living, working, and learning come together in order to create vibrant, self-sustaining communities. Other communities around the world would be able to access information about the efforts being conducted by these pace-setters in order to debate, organise and implement new models of learning themselves.