Richness and Diversity: reconstructing civil society

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“Learning as a Community-wide activity: the nursery for civil society”
by John Abbott

A number of years ago I had the fascinating experience of taking the deputy chairman of a major British manufacturing company to visit a primary school to acknowledge his company’s gift of some computers for the 9-11 age group. On the way out we took a short cut through the playground of the adjacent infant school. It was lunchtime and the four and five year olds – there must have been about 20 of them – were playing by themselves. My colleague was fascinated and stood obviously thinking something out.

“That’s intriguing,” he said. “Those tiny children have all the skills I could ever want to find in my new graduate employees. Just look at them. They’re forming little teams to get jobs done. They’re working out who does what. They may be competitive but see how they’re looking after that boy who doesn’t seem to fit in? OK, they play rough and knock each other over, but look how they pick people up afterwards. They’re talking a lot and they’re putting their arms around each other. They truly self-organize.
So why, oh why, aren’t they still like that when they come out of university?"

"You know," he continued conspiratorially, "if you don’t mind my saying so, I sometimes think many a graduate couldn’t organize a piss-up in a brewery. After all the money that’s been spent over nearly 20 years it almost seems as if education has knocked out of them the very skills that would make them successful adults and good employees. Something’s badly gone wrong. It’s as if they’ve been over-schooled but undereducated. Can you explain this?"

Many of you will have experienced similar thoughts and these will have worried you because – taken to their natural conclusion – they lead you to challenge the very foundations of the western education system of schooling. Let me give some substance to your intuition. Firstly with a true story.

In 1927 Mercedes Benz produced 1400 of three beautifully designed and built cars. The Directors called for a consultant’s report on the possibilities for growth over the next 50 years. Eventually back came the report. By 1977, the consultants said, so rapid would be technological change that the firm would be capable of producing 40,000 cars a year.

The Directors were horrified. They sacked the consultants for irresponsibility. They had left out one key consideration. There was no way the schools could train 40,000 chauffeurs a year!
You may well smile but actually are we not also in danger of making similar mistakes about other aspects of learning?

How do we humans actually learn? What is intelligence? Are learning and schooling synonymous? Does the design brief of the modern school reflect the latest findings about the functioning of the human brain from neurobiology, cognitive science and evolutionary psychology? Or is it still stuck back in the 19th century? Does social and economic policy, as reflected in the nature of our communities, faithfully reflect what we are now coming to understand about the social, collaborative, problem-solving nature of learning? What is the relationship between memory and learning?

If you got stuck on that one who do you think taught Pythagoras his maths, or Einstein about relativity, or Crick and Watson about DNA?

Take a few moments to think about your own most powerful learning experience. What did that tell you about how you make sense of your own thoughts? Where did that happen – at home, in a classroom, on the way to school, behind the bike shed – or wherever? Do today's children still have the same opportunities?

Let me tell you about my experience. When I was 8 or 9 my parents had an old man who came in every Friday evening to do odd jobs for us. Old man Mac
Fadgen was over 80 when I met him. He had served his apprenticeship as a carpenter in the Portsmouth dockyards but by the time he qualified the navy didn't need any more carpenters and so he spent some 50 years shoveling coal into the boilers of battleships. To keep himself sane, every cruise he ever went on he took his carving tools and bits of old wood and, according to the spiel he gave me, every port he visited he would look for the prettiest girl he could find and spend the rest of the cruise carving her as a 6" or 8" ship's figurehead. By the time I met him he had several boxes full of these carvings and every Friday he let me hold 2 or 3 such figures as he told me their stories.

I was entranced and well he knew it. One day he asked if I wanted to be a woodcarver. My sparkling eyes spoke for me – this was the only thing I wanted to do. "Well first you must learn to sharpen your chisels and then you must understand the grain of a piece of wood."

For weeks he let me do nothing other than sharpen chisels but, despite cutting my fingers several times, I never gave up. Then he got me to learn how to work the contorted grain of some rough wood. Again, spilling blood did not deter me. Then the great day came. "You know enough about the basic skills to start carving. You choose what you want to carve and show it to me each Friday, and we’ll talk about what you’ve done and how you’ve got on."
And so, for the next 3 years until I went away to a very traditional English boarding school, Mr. MacFadgen treated me as his apprentice and I was blissfully happy learning, one-on-one, from a master craftsman.

At public school woodwork was beneath the school's academic dignity. I made indifferent progress, passing all my subjects at O Level with the exception of Latin. Latin bored me as indeed it did my Latin teacher who spent all his time telling us how he won the war, single-handed, in his silly little tank in the African desert. I failed Latin 3 times and was within 6 weeks of taking it for the fourth and final time (without which I wouldn't get to university) when the school carpenter who was so menial he was not even allowed into the Staff Room, took me to one side and said, "Congratulations. You've just been selected as the best schoolboy wood carver in the country. You're going to an international exhibition at Olympia."

For a couple of hours my self-esteem knew no limits. But then it crashed when I realized the Headmaster would take no notice: it wasn't a rugby result, or an Oxbridge scholarship, or a debating trophy. As far as the school was concerned it was unimportant.

But it mattered enormously to me. If I could be the best at woodcarving, my 17 year old mind rationalized, why couldn't I pass Latin? The answer to me was simple. I was not in charge and my Latin master was in the way. That afternoon I
went to see him. "As I have to pass Latin in 6 weeks time I'm not coming to any more of your lessons, I'm going to teach myself!"

The staff were shocked. Paralyzed. No one knew what to do with me. I didn't care. I knew I hadn't a moment to lose. I sweated like I'd never done before or since. Into my short-term memory I squeezed all of Caesar's Gallic wars Books 1 and 2 and a fair chunk of Virgil's Aeneid. I learned my conjugations and declensions parrot fashion. I went into that exam room stuffed with Latin and came out with nearly 80%. I got to university – but I had forgotten all the Latin within 6 months. But I still wood carve. And I think I have developed a reasonable confidence in my ability to solve most kinds of problems.

Most importantly I realized – young in life – that learning and schooling are not necessarily synonymous. Happy the child for whom they are, but they weren't for me, at least for much of the time.

I learned something else that day, and that was that I wanted to become a teacher. I wanted to help more and more young people to realize that the only person who can release their innate potential is themselves.

I graduated from Trinity Dublin in the mid 1960s (after doing my Higher Dip Ed and my teaching practice at the Dublin High School in Harcourt Street) and went straight to Manchester Grammar School, then the most elite of the English
grammar schools, to teach geography. I was an enthusiast. I soaked myself in the life of the school, and geography was an ideal subject for the adventurous. Every year for 7 years I took groups of sixth formers to spend the summer migrating with the nomads through the mountains of Iran. The more contact I had with adolescents the more they fascinated me. One evening the desert chieftain asked permission to pose a difficult question. I readily assented. “We are honoured to have these fine young men from England here, but why are they not at home working with their parents and learning their parents’ wisdom?”

It was a question I couldn’t properly answer so great was the culture gap. I would, however, have forgotten this if one of the 17 year olds – a hard lad from north Manchester - hadn’t come up to me later that evening in some distress. “I heard that question. It made me realize I hardly know my dad. He’s so busy at work and so tired at home that we hardly ever talk. I know he loves me but I don’t know him as I should do. It’s as if I’m incomplete.”

Keep that word in mind...incomplete. I’ll return to this later.

I had been teaching for only 2 years at MGS when I was invited to give up teaching for a year to travel around the world raising money from old boys to rebuild part of the school. To a 24 year old this was an amazing opportunity. In just over a year I met some 3000 ex-pupils of one of the most elite schools in England. I was surprised and disappointed, however, for many of the boys had
not grown up to be the men I had expected to meet. "At school, if we did what was expected of us, we shone," explained one. "Somehow or other it was different at university. There we were left to work things out for ourselves and we weren't good at doing that. I guess I was over-taught at school. We were too dependent on the teachers to tell us what to do. It would have been better for me if I'd learned more about working things out for myself!"

Another, who by the time I met him was a reasonably senior civil servant, said, "I wish I'd been more like my younger brother. He was so annoyed at failing the entrance exam to MGS that he decided to go off on his own track and not attempt to follow me. He's been very successful in business. In fact, he's already retired, well in advance of me, and he's actually giving me the money to buy my retirement home."

I returned to the classroom later that year with a far clearer idea of what might be best for my students. I wanted to make it ever more possible for them to stand on their own feet so my job was to help them ask good questions. It wasn't my job to give them the answers. "In times of change learners inherit the earth," Eric Heffer was to write years later, "while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped for a world which no longer exists."

My conscience wouldn't let me stay within the relaxed, if intellectually stimulating, life of a selective independent school and within 7 years of leaving Trinity I was
appointed headmaster of a 16th century grammar school with the responsibility of turning this into an all-ability comprehensive school. England was unsure about comprehensive schools – we are not the land, as you well know, where the labourer’s son is expected to sit down comfortably at the desk next to the doctor’s daughter, so the task that faced me was enormous. Social assumptions coloured people’s professional judgement. Some children were all too easily assumed to be unintelligent because, in the language of the time, they came from “the wrong side of the track”, while slow youngsters (I think I was one of these myself) from professional homes were simply assumed to be “late starters”.

In England the 1960s had seen an impressive flurry of thinking in primary education about how children learned, much of it incorporated into the Plowden Report of 1965. Recognizing that all successful learning started with the individual’s own inquisitiveness, Plowden teachers developed forms of teaching (with classrooms to match) that closely resembled present day Montessori and Froebel teaching. The essence of these reforms lay not so much in the “open classrooms” that were the very obvious manifestation of such a philosophy, as it did in the exceptional character and dedication of the teachers.

What happened in such schools looked, to the outsider, gloriously “playful” but to the teachers masterminding the whole process it was very hard work. Hard but rewarding work. Youngsters quickly grew in confidence and in enthusiasm. That
there was the ‘space’ for such innovative teaching techniques was largely the result of the demise of the old 11 plus examination that had earlier forced so much primary education into the mould of being a preparation for the entrance exam to grammar school. "Primary schools are about children," one such primary head said to me shortly after my appointment to the old grammar school.

"Secondary schools are about subjects."

That might sound trite but I quickly got the drift of the argument. About one third of the 200 or so boys who entered my school at the age of 11 came from such Plowden schools, two thirds came from the traditional primary schools. During their first year in secondary school the Plowden pupils excelled in their quickness, in their willingness to ask questions, and in the volumes of work they produced. To me is was curious that, by and large, the secondary teachers preferred the more docile, predictable pupils from the more traditional schools.

"You know where you are with these pupils, Headmaster," said one senior member of my staff. "They’re more disciplined and ready to be told what to do. The others, well, they’re all very nice but they ask too many questions and want to do things their own way."

That statement worried me. Remember that businessman I told you about at the start of this lecture watching the children in the playground? Then I realized that as the pupils got older the bright eyes and bushy tails became ever increasingly subdued. By the age of 14 or 15 both types of pupils sat, expectantly, waiting for
the teacher to provide another – possibly, even probably – good lesson. But – and it was a very big ‘but’ – it was the teacher who was expected to initiate the action, not the pupil.

I noted all this but still didn’t fully understand it. I was young and there were so many things I thought I could do. “You have more pilot projects in the school, Headmaster,” said one of my Governors after I’d been there 3 or 4 years, “than there are aircraft in the Royal Air Force!”

Yes, I thought to myself, and sometimes each one seemed to be going in a different direction. I was worried. To me, at least, I seemed to have slipped into a mode of over-activity and not enough thinking. Neither my staff nor myself were sufficiently focused on helping young people to learn how to manage their own thinking. We talked too much, and the children were more than happy to listen.

One thing, in retrospect, I did do right. You must understand that I have atrocious handwriting and I’m a bad speller. The former often disguises the latter! Both at school and university if I got, say, 7 out of 10 and a fair grade I never even bothered to read the teacher’s comments as to how my essay could have been better…..as I had no intention of redrafting it. So, of course, I always got roughly the same moderate grades. Over years I hardly improved.
Then my secretary – who had bought her own word processor – showed me how she could ‘tidy up’ one of my reports to my Governors. She was redrafting it before my very eyes. I was intrigued. “What would happen,” I wondered aloud, “if we got children to use word processors with the dexterity with which they currently use a pencil?” Why don’t we find out, my inner voice said.

So, in 1979, after the most enormous difficulties, we opened what was to become England’s first ever fully computerized classroom, with a terminal for every child. These were ‘steam age’ machines, working from programmes that ran on tape recorders. In advance I specified that the center was for the use of all subjects other than computer studies. No one, but on one, could follow my reasoning.

Until two incidents in the first week of operation. The first involved a 14 year old really difficult boy whom I was convinced was intelligent enough to see many of the limitations of the school system. I was right, he did. On the second afternoon he burst into my study. “Please, Sir, it’s so stupid. We went into the computer room in our maths class this afternoon and for the first time ever I started to enjoy doing equations and then the bell went right in the middle of my calculations. The teacher said I had to turn the computer off straight away and it’ll be another two weeks before I can go back to what I was doing. I want to finish it off now. Why can’t I stay behind and do it after class?”
It hurt me to refuse him. The system just couldn't cope with such individuality as both the caretaker and the teacher had locked the room up. In fact, I calculated, this precious resource was only available for 7 hours a day, 5 days a week for 40 weeks in the year – a total of 1400 hours a year, whereas every pupil would be awake for approximately four times that many hours in a year. Old fashioned ways of organizing schools would need to change rapidly if we were to meet the unique needs of each individual.

"The unique needs of each individual" challenges not only the administrative system but also more profoundly our cherished pedagogy.

"Headmaster," said one very upset English teacher two days later," I have been badly insulted. I set an essay for a group of 15 year olds to hand in next Tuesday. Just before class ended this afternoon one boy had the nerve to hand me what he says is the first draft of his essay. He wants me to read this over the weekend, give him my comments so that he can incorporate them into what he calls the final draft of his essay, which he'll then hand in with the rest of the class next Tuesday. Which should I mark – the first draft which is all his own work or the one on which he's cheated by using my comments?"

It was a very important – fundamental, in fact – question. I wonder how you would have answered it? I felt I needed the wisdom of Solomon so I phoned the Chairman of the Cambridge University Examinations Board and asked his
advice. He invited me to lunch and we discussed the matter. I explained the issue and enthused about the ease with which redrafting could now be undertaken. He was troubled.

"Do you realize," he said," that we’ve been making a good living by examining people’s first drafts for more than 400 years and now you’re telling me that the greatest skill will lie not in the first, but in the final draft! Can’t you see that has enormous implications for us!"

"So just what will you do?" I asked.

He was silent for a minute, looking, I thought, for a way out. He found it.

"We won’t do anything until Government has made up its mind – it’s up to them."

I was furious. In fact it was the summation of a lot of earlier frustrations, particularly my frustration that academics had been more concerned to perpetuate the elite models of secondary education than they had been to question whether secondary education was, or was not, preparing children to stand on their own feet.

Chiefly, however, I was frustrated that, increasingly, society at large seemed to be withdrawing its support for young people outside school, in a multiplicity of
little ways, and assuming that school would – or should – do more and more.
However good a school might be, I was starting to argue to myself, it could never be good enough to give youngsters everything they needed. So much of what youngsters, particularly adolescents, need can’t be provided in an institutional form. Children need the community as a place in which they can develop their latent skills in a moderately open, unconventional fashion every bit as much as community needed the energy of young people to keep them alive and vital.

My experience as head, as a father, as a member of my local church, led me to fear that that restless, ever questioning, insolent but extremely vulnerable energy of adolescence that’s never still long enough for us to define, was being lost to modern society.

I must declare my preference. Adolescents are my favourite age group. In years gone by every tribe or small country was ultimately dependent on this blood-minded energy for its survival. Nowadays we don’t talk about adolescents but about teenagers. We no longer have space for their exuberance and their joy of life. Teenagers are a by-product of contemporary society, a society so determined to get the most out of life now that we no longer have the time or the inclination to provide adolescents with the apprenticeships that will fit them for a more distant future. We really wish they would go away. We give them our money but not our time. So they don’t know how to create and sustain communities.
The proper relationship between school and community is not easily defined. Let me start by stating the obvious. Most of us will spend most of our lives in relatively open, diverse and difficult to define ‘communities’. It is only as schoolchildren that we live for several years in the self-contained, very obvious mini community of 500 or a 1000 strong school. Our ultimate survival, our happiness, depends on how well we can identify our own community within the maze of a modern, impersonal city. I believe it is the role of the school to so develop youngsters’ social and interpersonal skills that, as they get older, they have an enhanced confidence to move into unbounded terrain.

You are all probably reading me very clearly; I am arguing that the earliest years of schooling should be about equipping youngsters as they grow older to do more and more of their learning in relatively unstructured ways. If we have really good primary education the role of the secondary school would have to change drastically. “Ah, now I get you,” a Canadian said to me some years ago. “If this were to happen it would be the children who were tired at the end of term, not the teachers!”

One community that really recognized all these dynamics was Princeton, New Jersey. It’s a relatively self-contained district but containing within it a great range of social groups. At one stage its education system was in a mess. A new superintendent was offered the job, but declined it unless he could proceed by
getting the whole community to define a mission statement for learning. Nearly
two years of countless meetings involving many hundreds of people led to this
statement:

*This township believes in functional literacy, that is, the ability to be comfortable
with all the changes of a rapidly evolving, highly technological society.
Comfort depends on mastering the skills of learning, and knowing that it is the
individual's responsibility to develop this a further 70 years or more after leaving
school. It depends on 4 key skills: the ability to think, to collaborate, to
communicate, and to make decisions.*

The effect of such a statement on the town and the schools was dramatic. “Now
that we all know what education is about,” one of the High School principals told
me, “we can use our separate resources to support youngsters taking control of
their own learning. Parents understand more clearly why children should be
encouraged to be collaborative; employers know that even casual Saturday
morning jobs should be used to get youngsters to make decisions.

“The most important change has been in the schools. Every one of us teachers
recognizes that we're using our subject-specific content as the medium to get the
students to think, collaborate communicate and make decisions.”
Young people are making such rapid progress that, during the last two years of high school, most students spend up to 2 days a week working on academic projects outside the school. "Take this 17-year-old girl for an example," said the Principal. "She wants to study medicine at an Ivy League college so she's acting as an apprentice to the Professor of Gynaecology. She works on the labour ward and is actively involved with the midwife, assisting with deliveries."

And there were many more like her. These were not bored teenagers acting as if the world owed them a living. Not at all. These were highly involved, energetic, creative members of the community. Which is just what our genetic structure has prepared us to be.

Some years ago I was invited to address the Annual Conference of the Confederation of British Industry. It was a nerve-wracking experience: 1700 of the captains of the country's largest companies. Before being theoretical I wanted to get them personally involved in the issues. Only then could I take them further.

Standing at the podium, bathed in the bright lights, I said, "Why is it, I'm often asked as a teacher, after years of conventional teaching do so many young people appear to have little personal initiative, seem so unwilling to accept responsibility? After all, at the age of 11 so many of them left their primary schools alert, excited, inquisitive."
I had the audience’s attention. “Maybe you recognize such a child?” I asked.

There was a hum of agreement.

“The clue is in the word teaching. Good primary schools encourage children to want to learn, to explore relationships, to treat the world as their expanding oyster...the child becomes excited – and motivated.

“Secondary schools have been saddled with the artificiality of single subject disciplines, each with a heavy load of content – the teacher takes control, the pupil does as he’s told... ‘It’s the only way to cover the syllabus’.

“The integrated view of knowledge is easily lost...very many pupils lost interest, they do as they’re told because ‘teacher knows best’, not because they any longer feel responsible. A vital attribute – that of responsibility – is destroyed. Many never recover – learning is associated with failure, and this bugs them for all time.”

We are getting closer to answering that question asked of me in the infant playground as to why graduates all too often seem unable to organize the proverbial piss-up in a brewery! Very simply we have inculcated a sense of intellectual dependence on youngsters which gets ever more deeply engrained the older they become.
Currently I am president of the 21st Century Learning Initiative, an organization very much of its time. As many of you know, the bookshops in Ireland, as with the rest of the world, are full of fascinating research on the human brain. It is where the scientific action lies, not in outer space, but in your synaptic connections – and in the synaptic connections of the most bolshie 13 year old you ever had to deal with last thing on a Friday afternoon.

Our mission as adults is immense – or it should be. It is about equipping young people in the nursery for civil society so as to "reclaim and sustain a world supportive of human endeavour.

To synthesize all this material calls for skills for which our highly analytical academic tradition has not well equipped us. All these studies can, if observed in isolation and too close, seem like the dots and strokes of an Impressionist painting. But stand back and let your eyes roam over the full spectrum and suddenly the most tantalizing picture of innate human potential becomes available. So far too few people have stood back, and fewer still are telling the integrated story. Unfortunately very little of this brave new world is yet to be found in the education section of the bookstore.

Unfortunately, too, time precludes me from exploring with you the neurological understanding of cognitive apprenticeship, but you can download this material
from our web site 21learn.org and from the two books which will be on sale during the coffee break.

So to conclude. For too long issues of learning and community have been separated as a result of society's dangerous reductionist thinking.

Mankind is, by nature, a social, collaborative, problem-solving species. It is our brain, working in collaboration with other brains, which gives humans our superiority over all other creatures. It certainly is not our muscle.

Please think the following statement through very carefully. If young people are to develop their intelligence then they have to live in an intelligible, child-sensitive society. This was something which, in years gone by, we thought we could take for granted. We can't now.

We are not, I submit, dealing in the western world with a crisis in schools. No, it is more properly to be understood as a crisis both in childhood and in community. Learning, Childhood and Community have to be interwoven into a seamless web.

"Streets that are unsafe for children to play in are as much a measure of failed educational policy as are burnt-out teachers and decaying classrooms."

Let us all nurture better the nurseries for civil society.
Thank you.