Wrestling with the Iceberg

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Is the world again surprised by the revelations of the 1998 study by NALL on informal learning? Perhaps not so surprised as it was by Allen Tough’s original discoveries in the late nineteen-sixties, but there was still an echo of “gee-whiz” about the newspaper coverage. Why were we surprised at that time? The nineteenth-century Canadian farmer, with his contempt for book-learning, if he had had time to pay attention to such a report, would not have been surprised. For him and his family, learning, as separate from teaching, that is informal learning, was a matter of survival. As it has become again, reflected in Matthias Finger’s recent argument for “Learning Our Way Out.”

By the 60s the “hegemony” (not a word I use easily or loosely) of education over learning had reached its zenith. Almost all Western children and youth were in school, and it was unquestioned that the rest ought to be and would be soon. A goal that remains unrealized but not abandoned. So were an increasing number of adults, a trend that, as Livingstone demonstrates, continues. Education had assumed the throne of knowledge, proper knowledge, worthwhile knowledge, and was aspiring to exert the same role for learning. To echo a school administrator of the period, “if we don’t teach it, it ain’t worth learning!” The role of Education as a control mechanism of all learning, except outcomes resulting from proper research, appeared to be triumphant. The fusion of learning as activity and learning as outcome was imbedded in formal education, true seamlessness was at hand. The challenge then was to maintain that seamlessness in the face of a rapidly changing society, fueled by the relentless creation and spread of useful knowledge.

While no one doubted that private learning occurred, though misapplied American studies following experience with serviceman in the First World War had sewed doubt about the prevalence even of that, the crevice that Allen Tough opened and expanded, was that not only did adults, to say nothing of children, engage in astonishing amounts of private learning, but that that learning cast as “outcomes” was important not only to the individual learners but to the society as a whole. Seamlessness began to disintegrate steadily, though Education, with its control of public learning expressed in law and
evaluation, has been slow to realize it. The recent invocation of such seamlessness is perhaps another version of Minerva’s owl.

It has happened before, in Western history at least. While in earlier cases we are reflecting mostly the history of elites similar patterns can be discerned. The late sixteenth century found the universities firmly in the Ecclesiastical grip, driving learning, principally in terms of outcomes, out of the academic cloister. The enlightenment version of “think tanks,” known as Academies, flourished for a century, until the amalgamation of the Academy and the University in Berlin at the beginning of the nineteenth century. An examination of Eastern history of learning may very well reveal a similar pattern allowing us to posit a tectonic-like cycle between learning and Education, that is between public and private learning, that clarifies the history of the world.

The simile of the “iceberg,” which we owe to David Livingstone, allows further exploration. Icebergs are random pieces of a larger whole; restless and unpredictable, at least individually speaking, they are often menacing and dangerous, which may explain the unending twentieth-century intoxication with the Titanic. However, they also surround themselves with fresh water in which, and because of which, extra life abounds. Learning frequently begets learning, and its associated vitality, in its immediate human neighborhood.

They are mostly invisible, and without wearing out the simile, perhaps the public tip can be perceived as participation by learners in non-credit classes, the closest educational form to private learning.

If we consider private learning by adults, the activities that the NALL study reveals, once again, in its entirety, that is as human activity independent of content, which is probably the main impact on the public of these studies, then the image of the single iceberg remains useful. We are obliged to accept its reality, its continuance, even, according to the NALL study, its growth in depth and frequency. What does all this activity present in our society mean? First that adults can and do engage in it. That it is a natural, and perhaps inevitable, human activity. We also know form observation that adults enjoy it, despite impressive challenges, and that it is, in itself, important to them. It is not unreasonable to argue that as human beings, we are at our best when we are learning. In fact, the most positive images of human beings, reflected in literature, music, art, and perhaps most evidently in professional behavior, are of us engaged in learning. Its importance to the individual is reflected every time we ask them about their learning. Once they understand that we are not talking about what they have been or are being taught, most investigators have found, trusting us to really be interested in their learning, they are difficult to stop. Their learning is where their hearts and hopes are, and who of us dismisses a serious question about our own.

It seems to be curious and sad that while as a generation of eager pollsters we ask others their opinions on nearly everything, their intentions on a similar scope, but rarely ask them what is most important to them, that is, what they are engaged in learning. When we do, they feel good and so do we. If we undertook serious studies of this kind on
Wrestling, as distinct from controlling and steering, implies the separate existence and integrity of both participants. Try to control it, and it slips out of our hands. Wrestling with “this” iceberg, conceived as a valuable essential human activity, must be done with care, with respect, with support, and in public. The present “information” society, with its overwhelming proliferation of new sources, containers and transmitters of information provides automatic support. We must continue to protect as vigilantly and as wisely as we can, unlimited access to these phenomena. Finally we probably need to private more “assistance” with the experience of learning itself. Neither its processes or its results are always welcome, even in our most intimate relationships. Proponents of lifelong learning need to understand that often human beings need help in understanding and accepting it in others.

However, it seems to me that it is the alternate aspect of learning, its outcomes, that we need now to pay more attention to, and where “the” iceberg image needs qualification. In this case, we are obliged to think of not one but of multiple icebergs, perhaps ultimately as many as there are human beings. Multiple, small icebergs can present small threats, such as learning the skills of crime or terrorism, but mostly they contribute to the vitality and development of democratic societies. We also need large icebergs, in the sense that the preponderance of the population are learning or at least reinforcing those skills and attitudes that support the basic machinery of a democratic society; for example, respect for the law, commitment to due process, and support for representative government; all essential behaviour for citizenship. However, when the single, large iceberg embodies skills and attitudes that run counter to those characteristics, any society must be on its guard. In this case the single iceberg does present a menace of which Iran is perhaps a cogent example.

In the nineteen-seventies, when the then Shah was trying to engage his people in learning how to become a contemporary, western-modeled, techno-capitalist society, it became clear, too late for the Shah, that a great many of the people had been learning something else entirely form an elderly cleric with access to oral taping equipment and a remarkable system of retail distribution. One wonders what would have been the result of a NALL-like study in Iran in the last years of the Shah. In this case, it was not the fact that they were learning, but what they were learning, that was essential to understand. Also in this case, what was supposed to be an increasing multiplicity of icebergs as more and more citizens learned the diverse skills of a modern economy, in fact, had become one big iceberg related to the establishment of an Islamic theocratic state. If we were to discover the existence of such a single iceberg forming in Canada, what would we do? Would such information be trusted, taken seriously, acted upon? It is impossible for me to believe that it would not be useful. One might observe that it is the formation of such a single iceberg forming in Quebec that concerns us.

What I am arguing here is the consequence of moving beyond the attribution of “basket-weaving” as the main characteristic of private learning. That both its content and
its context is of immense importance to us as individuals and as a community. Implicit in this argument is also the contention that regular studies of the kind that NALL has just conducted will, and in fact must, become part of our political culture. For that reason it is vital that such studies be conducted by reputable and trusted authorities, and that their results be made as public as, perhaps, income tax information is private. There is virtue and common sense in making the icebergs more visible.

Second, in this context, while I am not of the opinion that private learning to be judged valid must be translated into public learning, as a supporter of prior learning assessment, I am persuaded that there must be the maximum range of opportunities to do so for as many individuals as wish to avail themselves of those opportunities. The implications of making that possible are, of course, part of the explorations of Group 2. However, the various procedures involved must be managed with the maximum protection of the individual involved, in the sense that the management of learning, which this is, must be perceived to be imbedded in ordinary civil liberties and protections. To ensure that is to lay a principal foundation of a civil society.

Finally, it seems to me that we need a network of sources of information—perhaps in the multitudes of specialized magazines in existence we already have the beginnings of that network—which encourage different icebergs to exchange enthusiasms, aspirations and experiences with each other quite separate from formal Education. That seems to me to be an essential ingredient of a post-modern, civil society.
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