

**CONVENTION ON THE GLOBAL COMMONS:**

**LEARNING COOPERATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS:**

An introductory briefing on conceptions of learning  
in creating and sustaining cooperative human responses to  
conditions of economic, ecological, political, social and cultural crisis.

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The collapse of the global marketplace would be a traumatic event with unimaginable consequences. Yet I find it easier to imagine than the continuation of the present regime.

- George Soros (as cited in Gray, 2004)

While Bill Gates and his colleagues prolong the agony of education, many people are anticipating its death with creative, convivial initiatives that widen their capacity for learning, studying, and doing (instead of the capacity to buy and consume)....

- Esteva, Stuchel & Prakash (2005)

## **Convention on the Global Commons: Learning Cooperation in Times of Crisis**

### **Abstract**

The first public discussion outline for a Convention on the Global Commons was released in 2007, including a preliminary framework for an action plan of response to several of the most urgent problems now facing humans of every continent, among them: major global climate shifts; growing hunger, famine, and disease; growing poverty and disparities of wealth; widening ecological destruction and extinctions; and escalating human violence, arms production, and nuclear uncertainties. The intent of the initiative is to open a global consultation process and prepare a global action plan, to be made public at an international conference in 2010.

While the preliminary action plan cogently outlines many relevant issues and objectives, the functional role of education – not as an end goal, but as a path of human reflection and action toward the capacity to make real all other goals – is undeveloped and inadequately envisioned. This paper provides a brief, critical overview of the international field of adult education and lifelong learning, with lines of analysis relevant to the global commons. It contends that conceptions of learning are concerned with the cultivation of critically-reflective consciousness provide a viable foundation for an inquiry-based global consultation process and collaborative action. It further maintains that the essential characteristics needed to sustain the convention on the global commons are similar to those of effective learning communities: specifically, commitments to intentional listening, critical reflection, and to creative, courageous action.

### **Preface**

Hope is inherently audacious (Fenwick, 2006). Those who dare to act on hope, no matter how altruistic their intent, inevitably do so according to complex and always insufficiently-explored designs. In the life of communities, what is enacted from hope may go by such names as ritual, tradition, education, development, or progress. Yet at the core of hope, in all its forms, is our human preoccupation with learning – learning what we need and what we want to change, learning who we are, how we know ... learning how to become.

As we learn to learn in this way, learning itself changes. Around the world, the forms and purposes of learning are changing profoundly. A century of scholarship on “adult education” is giving way to basic inquiries into the nature of teaching and learning through every stage and dimension of life (Faure, 1972; Smith, 2001; Gardner, 2007). Opinions vary on the forces driving this change (Edwards, Ranson & Strain, 2002; Brown, 1999): to what extent it reflects change and uncertainties in the wider world or is a function of the information age; whether it is driven by capitalist economic interests or is an egalitarian reflection of the spread of free markets and democratic social relations around the globe.

Whatever rationale is offered, however, a common assumption supports the most divergent views: the Enlightenment promise that science, education, and reason hold the answer to all of humanity’s problems has been called deeply into question (Sachs, 2005). Most who teach now

claim more modest goals (Fenwick, 2006; Bejarano, 2005). With this shift, a common experience finds expression: the long juxtaposition of master and disciple, leader and follower, educated and uneducated – of wise men and fools – is crumbling. The earth is moving beneath the entire educational enterprise, manifesting new landscapes and powerful currents at every level of engagement – producing unexpected forms of teaching and learning in new places among increasingly varied peoples, and for ever more diverse goals. And while unsettling, such change itself holds hope.

Hope, however, has perhaps never been so audacious. Humanity faces unparalleled challenges. Since the collective realization of human destructive power in the 1945 American use of nuclear weapons, people from every region of the earth have harnessed hope in attempts to bring change to human relations and institutions. The Marshall Plan for Europe, the United Nations, and a wide variety of international treaties, formal or informal initiatives – all these evidence the efforts of nations to learn from apocalypse and to attempt global change. Such plans responded to facets of human troubles with varying degrees of support and success. Yet, by the turn of the new millennium, it was apparent that exponentially-growing problems still threaten both humanity and the earth itself (Kyoto Protocol, 1997; UN Millennium Project Report, 2002). Grassroots organizations like the World Social Forum have multiplied in number, reach and influence (WSF, 2001) – evidence of the changing nature of teaching and learning on every continent – but to date, no single initiative has attempted to network peoples throughout all the earth to address every major category of hope and challenge that humanity faces in common.

In 2007, this too changed. The first public discussion document of the Global Marshall Plan Initiative – renamed significantly, “The Convention on the Global Commons” (CGC, Finkbeiner & Quilligan, 2007) – outlines the most desperate of these challenges unflinchingly:

Humanity is in crisis. The facts are against the future of the world ... reveal[ing] the threatening circumstances now facing humanity:

- 30,000 children die *daily* from hunger, dirty water and preventable diseases
- 2.8 billion people, almost *half of the world's population*, live on less than U.S.\$2 a day
- U.S.\$104 billion in aid given by developed countries in 2006 *was offset by* U.S.\$123 billion in interest payments from developing countries
- U.S.\$1.2 trillion is spent annually on arms and weapons systems
- The world's *four* wealthiest people together are richer than the poorest 1 billion people
- 40% of the world's population owns over 94% of the world's wealth
- Over 50 million people are refugees of war, hunger and persecution
- 200 animal and plant species die or disappear *each day*

... Despite the *exponential progression* of these problems, political and economic decision-makers often think in restricted timeframes, developing linear solutions that anticipate linear outcomes. ... Businesses are driven by the gains of profit, interest, and stock value. ... Our worst crimes are legalized. ... *Old habits rule the world.* ... *A different world is possible.* (pp. 7ff; emphasis added)

This initial document defines the *global commons* as encompassing “all activities, relationships, and conditions that spill over national borders and involve matters of shared international concern” (Finkbeiner & Quilligan, p.4). Among the concerns identified are: “hunger and malnutrition, water and sanitation, disease prevention and health care, education and employment, global human rights, ethics and values, cultural arts and traditional heritage, international aid and income, global credit and debt, global business and production, science and population, climate and energy security, disarmament and peacekeeping, refugees and displaced persons, migration and trafficking, international law and corporate responsibility, technology and patents, media and cyberspace, and more” (p.4).

Audacious, indeed: yet despite the scale of such challenges, the use of the word “commons” hearkens to something very different than colonizing assumptions about “fixing” the world. The commons evokes images of community, a way of constructing public space that assumes that cooperation and sharing are not only possible, they are more life-enhancing than the redundant privatization of individual needs and wants. It implies a more foundational ethic than the organization of societies around critical resources – which are then doled out by superior design. Rather, the commons connotes recognition of the commonalities amongst all people *and* the earth, and an assumption that we live as guests in mutually-created and ever-changing social ecologies of space, feeling, thought, and aspiration.

Ecologies, whether biological or psychological, are by definition complex, both dynamic and vulnerable, and therefore require consistent and conscious care. They belong to no *one* for they are the product of integration, and so they must become the responsibility of all. In this sense, the commons itself comprises a crucial link between our human conceptions of the “one” and the “all” of life, between mentalities of scarcity and competition on the one hand, and of sufficiency and synergy on the other.

What does education have to offer? Surrendering the belief that mere transmission of information, whether by teaching or technology, can itself solve problems – what is a more helpful function of learning? How can the forces of change in this field support a mindful, coordinated, global response to mounting human crisis, thus furthering constructive hope for “a different world”?

High among the requirements for responding to the challenges they outline, Finkbeiner & Quilligan state, is “the participation of the people of the *entire world*” in order to reach policy-makers and law-makers, “**educating** them through *worldwide campaigns and action programs* about the global adjustments that are necessary” (p.4, emphasis added). This is, in fact, one of the forms to which rumblings across the field of education are pointing globally – that of increasingly informal, cooperative, locally-directed learning that has far more to do with development of critically-reflective consciousness, what Faure (1972) called *Learning to be* and Freire (1970, 1974) called “conscientization,” than with the mastery of information.

This paper presents a view of human learning that constitutes a viable foundation for an inquiry-based global consultation process, toward cooperative action on behalf of the global commons. To outline this perspective, this brief will discuss the vision of education developing in the UN Education, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the work of the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V, held in 1997 in Hamburg, Germany), and the

work of the International Council on Adult Education (ICAE). It will link these visions to the thinking of selected educators and people's movements around the world. And it will examine, specifically in relation to the global consultation process now contemplated by those initiating the Convention for the Global Commons (CGC), one of the emerging conceptions of human learning as the cultivation of reflective consciousness.

This paper will argue that such a dynamic construction of learning can comprise a vital *pulse* for the CGC process: from the two-year multi-stakeholder consultation period and the drafting of a global action plan, to the collective venues created for a 2010 international conference on the global commons, as well as for long-term implementation of a collective action plan. From this perspective, the essential characteristics of sustainable global dialogue and effective collaborative action are *also* the characteristics of effective learning communities (Bagnall, 2006). Those characteristics include sustained commitments to intentional listening and critical reflection, ongoing dialogue and creative, courageous action (Rule, 2004; Welton, 2002). On this foundation – the sharing of experience and the creation of new forms of local, viable knowledge – the CGC can best proceed toward the goals and aspirations of a shared future for humanity and the earth.

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