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Focus on Collective Learning

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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Last year, for the first time in history, people in virtually all countries experienced an acute catastrophic event that affected them in fundamentally the same way, if not to the same extent. In that, the COVID-19 pandemic differed from climate change—the other global emergency, much slower, more gradual, and more diversely manifesting. Yet, the two emergencies have much in common.

One commonality is our lack of preparedness for both. Homo sapiens missed the best opportunities to mitigate global climate change while there was time; most societies are still struggling even to adapt to it. Likewise, most of the responses and coping strategies towards the pandemic proved woefully inadequate. An independent panel of the World Health Organisation noted that the majority of countermeasures took effect too slowly, amplified inequalities, and lacked discipline and transparency, and that the international effort lacked coordination, accountability, and commitment.¹

That disconcerting lack of preparedness is indicative of widespread learning deficits. Strongly worded and scientifically sound warnings of impending environmental disasters had been issued by the scientific community for decades—to little avail. Many countries and societies come across as poor learners, slow in processing new information, reluctant to act on reasonable conclusions, and inhibited by wishful thinking and denial. Not only are we poorly prepared for the challenges of the Anthropocene—sea level rise, new zoonotic diseases, food shortages, and conflicts over scarce resources—but most of us are not learning fast enough to acquire the kind of “actionable, adaptive knowledge” that would improve our chances in the future.²

As outlined by Stephen Sterling in his excellent [introduction](#), a person's state of learning represents the impacts of formal schooling as well as numerous informal, experiential, and often unreflected avenues of learning through culturally contingent contexts. Yet, only the formal curriculum can be designed, revised, and deliberated upon, directly influenceable by political processes. Professional educators and institutions not only have the moral and legal duty to "act in the best interests of their learners" but also wield an extraordinary amount of power to make a difference in the future lives of their students. As far as that "best interest" includes a Great Transition, they have failed—through commission as well as omission. Many individuals in powerful decision-making positions make ill-advised and counterproductive decisions despite having ample amounts of higher education. Much of the OECD's citizenries share high levels of education while nevertheless pursuing wasteful, counterproductive lifestyles, driving humanity ever further into ecological overshoot. That means that most of us can no longer expect to get what we want; many are unlikely to even get what they need. Moreover, nasty surprises are on their way. That is what education should have prepared young people for.

Instead, generations of students were placated into a false confidence that the economic prosperity of the late twentieth century would continue indefinitely. Even a year into the pandemic, public discourse abounds with prospects of a "return to normal" that reflects little vision beyond a glorified status quo ante. Conventional pedagogy aimed to empower individuals to self-actualize, to develop their professional careers in the service of the consumer society, and to acquire the skills necessary to cope with the competitive challenges of twentieth-century living. Visions of the future hardly extended beyond vague predictions of "rapid changes" and the urge to adapt to the vagaries of a fluctuating job market. All of that was supported by a hidden curriculum exhorting modern progress, cornucopian confidence in endless growth, and anthropocentric ethics exhorting the relentless exploitation of nature.³

This widespread failure of education to prepare learners for the emerging existential challenges does not harm all people equally. Climate change, pandemics, food shortages, and resource wars tend to hurt the world's poorest first and foremost. Teachers' moral duties are to replenish the curriculum to correct omissions (e.g., ecological footprints); to subvert curriculum content that does more harm than good (e.g., resourcism); to instigate frequent discussion of what constitutes real "progress"; and to empower learners to learn better, to listen to their heads and to their hearts, and to make their own sound decisions.

The Cultural Dimension of Learning and Coping

After four decades as an educator, I am continually astonished and intrigued by the discrepancies between individual learning and collective learning. Teacher education tends to hyperfocus on the former and restricts the latter to small group activities. Conversely, our general failure to come to grips with the challenges of the Anthropocene represents at least as much a failure of collectives as it is a failure of individuals. Entire societies are failing to face important facts, failing to develop much needed resilience, and engaging in hectic fiddling rather than addressing fundamental problems. Such collective failure directly harms the human security of all members—albeit unequally.

How could education be responsible for the failure of collectives? Collectives learn all the time, but primarily through informal ways—families, peers, community, public discourse, media, etc. Historical examples include the adoption of new technologies, linguistic evolution, the abolition of slavery, and the ongoing liberation of women. Cultures learn to adapt and to evolve, driven internally by new ideas and moral insights promulgated by positive deviants, or influenced by other cultures from the outside.⁴ This involves changes in factual knowledge, but even more so changes in worldviews, attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms of conduct. I refer to this as cultural learning. The renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined culture as “the shared patterns that set the tone, character, and quality of people’s lives.”⁵ In that sense, only cultural learning can accomplish lasting changes of behavior, both of individuals and of collectives. And the inability of collectives to cope can be traced to a failure of cultural learning.

Cultural learning takes place at the individual level in parallel with the collective. Positive deviants of the likes of Great Thunberg rise above their peers and exert a lasting influence on collective behavior, but the collective also learns.⁶ Current models of social-emotional learning, value acquisition, and socialization describe the learning process as the development of cultural beings as individuals and as members of collectives. One particularly distressing failure of cultural learning manifests, on both levels, in excessive resourcism, cruel and casual abuse of animals for gratification and entertainment, and eco-vandalism—referred to as humanity’s “war against nature.”⁷

Such crass failures of cultural learning amount to an inability to self-manage, both at the collective and individual levels, often accompanied by denials of the challenge. Particularly illuminating examples include the denial of the climate change emergency and the phenomenon of

“coviديو” —ostentatious non-compliance with public safety rules and gregarious protesting during the pandemic.⁸ Denying an evident emergency is coupled with insisting on the individual privilege to endanger others and ultimately oneself.

Cultural learning, importantly, happens not only within cultures but also between them. As globalization and modernization intensified, cultural knowledge converged and homogenized as a result of increasing intercultural contact. That intercultural mode of collective learning is now the predominant mode, in which cultures learn from each other by exchanging traditions, experiences, adaptations, and innovations. It is through this mode that we can increase our resilience to the next pandemic, improve our self-management, pre-empt denialism, raise more positive deviants, stop our war on nature, and adopt ecocentric ethics, making the Great Transition a real possibility.

Endnotes

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4. John Scales Avery, *Ethics for the Future* (2020), self-published at <https://eacpe.org/app/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ethics-for-the-Future-by-John-Scales-Avery.pdf>.
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6. Sara Parkin, *The Positive Deviant: Sustainability Leadership in a Perverse World* (London: Earthscan, 2010).
7. Ronnie Hawkins, “Our War Against Nature,” in *Human Security in World Affairs: Problems and Opportunities*, ed. Alexander Lautensach and Sabina Lautensach, 2nd edition (Victoria, BC: BCcampus, 2020), <https://opentextbc.ca/humansecurity/>.
8. The term was coined by Saskia Esken, a German politician, during the mass protests against official lockdown rules in August 2020. See Kate Connolly, “Berlin Protests against Coronavirus Rules Divide German Leaders,” *Guardian*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/03/berlin-protests-against-coronavirus-rules-divide-german-leaders>.

About the Author



Alexander Lautensach is an adjunct professor and teacher trainer at the University of Northern British Columbia. His current research focuses on human ecology, cross-cultural education, and environmental ethics. He is the author of *Environmental Ethics for the Future: Rethinking Education to Achieve Sustainability* and *Survival How? Education, Crisis, Diachronicity and the Transition to a Sustainable Future*, as well as associate editor of the *Journal of Human Security*. He holds a PhD from the University of Otago.

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