

The learning society: Six approachesⁱ

Sociedade da Aprendizagem: Seis Abordagens

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RESUMO: Este artigo examina a literatura sobre a sociedade da aprendizagem durante a última metade do século. A primeira parte aborda algumas questões conceituais e apresenta um breve panorama histórico. A segunda parte sistematiza teorizações sobre a sociedade da aprendizagem em torno de seis temas: auto-realização, desenvolvimento econômico, mercado da aprendizagem, teias de aprendizagem, comunidades democráticas e políticas governamentais. A literatura sobre o humanismo progressista enfatiza a auto-realização, desenvolvimento pessoal e direitos. A abordagem neoliberal para a sociedade da aprendizagem propõe um mercado de aprendizagem em que o conhecimento é uma mercadoria que pode ser comprada e vendida de acordo com a dinâmica de oferta e procura. O corpo de literatura das "teias de aprendizagem" está ligado em parte aos desafios relacionados ao monopólio do Estado sobre a educação formal; promove iniciativas de desescolarização, *homeschooling*, e uma variedade de iniciativas da sociedade civil para promover aprendizagem. A literatura relacionada a democracia local baseia-se em educação comunitária e tradições educacionais populares que enfatizam a aprendizagem na ação social, e apela para o desenvolvimento de "comunidades de aprendizagem" e "Cidades Educadoras". Finalmente, a literatura da "política de Estado" coloca ênfase em estruturas reguladoras, orientações políticas, programas e modalidades de financiamento iniciados por agências governamentais para promover as sociedades de aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: Sociedade da aprendizagem; desenvolvimento econômico; comunidades democráticas; políticas governamentais

The learning society: Six approaches

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the literature on the learning society during the last half-century. The first part discusses some conceptual issues and provides a brief historical overview. The second part organizes the literature on learning societies around six themes: self-actualization, economic development, learning marketplace, learning webs, democratic communities, and state policy. The literature on progressive humanism emphasizes self-actualization, personal development, and rights. The

neoliberal approach to the learning society proposes a learning marketplace in which knowledge is a commodity that can be bought and sold according to supply and demand dynamics. The body of literature of 'learning webs' is connected in part to challenges (coming both from the left and the right) to the monopoly of the state over formal education, promotes deschooling initiatives, homeschooling, and a variety of civil society initiatives to promote learning. The local democracy literature draws on communitarian and popular education traditions that emphasize learning in social action, and calls for the development of 'learning communities' and 'educating cities'. Finally, the 'state policy' literature puts the emphasis on regulatory frameworks, policy guidelines, programs and funding arrangements initiated by government agencies to promote learning societies.

Key words: learning society; economic development; democratic communities; state policy

Société cognitive: six approches

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article examine la littérature sur la société cognitive (*Learning Society*) ces 50 dernières années. Sa première partie aborde quelques questions conceptuelles et présente un bref panorama historique. Sa seconde partie organise la littérature sur les sociétés cognitives autour de six thèmes: épanouissement (*self-actualization*), développement économique, marché de la connaissance, réseaux d'apprentissage, communautés démocratiques et politique d'État. Les ouvrages sur l'humanisme progressiste mettent l'accent sur l'épanouissement, le développement personnel et les droits. Ceux sur le capital humain se concentrent sur les investissements publics pour augmenter les compétences et améliorer le développement économique et la compétitivité internationale. L'approche néolibérale de la société cognitive propose un marché de la connaissance où cette dernière est une marchandise pouvant être achetée et vendue selon la dynamique de l'offre et de la demande. Les publications sur les « réseaux d'apprentissage » s'attachent en partie aux enjeux (provenant aussi bien de la gauche que de la droite) liés au monopole de l'état sur l'éducation formelle et mettent en avant des initiatives de déscolarisation, le *homeschooling* et toute une série d'actions de la société civile pour promouvoir l'apprentissage. La littérature sur la démocratie locale focalise une éducation communautaire et des traditions éducationnelles populaires, soulignant l'apprentissage dans l'action sociale, et elle appelle au développement de « communautés d'apprentissage » et de « villes éducatrices ». Finalement, les textes sur la « politique d'État » s'intéressent aux cadres réglementaires, aux orientations politiques, aux programmes et modalités de financement mis en œuvre par des organismes gouvernementaux pour promouvoir les sociétés cognitives.

Mots-clés: société cognitive; développement économique, communautés démocratiques; politique d'État

Introduction

In the last few decades, the concept of learning society has gained prominence in educational debates. A Google search in 2013 for the term with “learning society” identified 359,000 results. The idea of learning societies has been promoted by a variety of international agencies, including UNESCO, the World Bank and the OECD. The interest in the learning society has increased concurrently with the interest in the cousin concept of “lifelong learning” (6,600,000 results). The terms ‘learning society’ and ‘lifelong learning’, although often closely related and sometimes understood as synonyms, have different connotations and policy implications. The concept of ‘lifelong learning’ often alludes to the learning that is acquired (or should be acquired) by individuals throughout their lives, and to the different ways and spaces in which individuals acquire such learning. The concept of ‘learning society’, instead, alludes to a collective entity (society) that develops (or should develop) institutional and organizational structures to promote relevant learning opportunities to all members of that society. The key actor in ensuring that a ‘learning society’ takes place is the state, and this suggests the existence of a social contract between the state and the citizens that is translated into appropriate policies, planning strategies, and funding arrangements. The academic literature on learning societies includes a variety of themes, including theoretical and conceptual analyses, discussions on policy design and funding arrangements, and methodological proposals for policy implementation.

This paper starts by examining some conceptual issues around the concept of a learning society, distinguishing between the normative and the descriptive literature, and providing a brief historical overview. Then, it discusses six main themes identified in the literature on learning societies: self-actualization, economic development,

learning marketplace, learning webs, democratic communities, and state policy. The literature on progressive humanism emphasizes self-actualization, personal development, and rights. Human capital focuses on public investments on skill growth for economic development and international competitiveness. Neoliberalism proposes a learning marketplace in which knowledge is a commodity that can be bought and sold according to supply and demand dynamics. The body of literature of 'learning webs' is connected in part to libertarian and religious-based challenges to the monopoly of the state over formal education, promotes deschooling initiatives, homeschooling, and a variety of civil society initiatives to promote learning. The local democracy literature draws on communitarian and popular education traditions that emphasize learning in social action, and calls for the development of 'learning communities' and 'educating cities'. Finally, the 'state policy' literature puts the emphasis on regulatory frameworks, policy guidelines, programs and funding arrangements initiated by government agencies to promote learning societies.

The learning society: normative and empirical dimensions

Livingstone (2004) suggests that learning as a process needs to be understood at three different levels of abstraction: 1) the intrinsic activities we all do in our lives; 2) the institutionalized practices of any given society; and 3) the images and ideologies of “a good education” advocated in that society. A great deal of the literature on learning societies belongs to the third category. This literature tends to be normative in nature, dealing more with ideal pedagogical models and recommendations about what people ought to learn rather than about what they actually learn. In the literature on learning societies, it is not unusual to observe a conflation between ontological, descriptive, and empirical claims, on the one hand, and axiological, normative, and value-oriented claims, on the other. Hence, it is pertinent to distinguish between ‘what is’ and ‘what

ought to be', between learning society as a fact and as a guiding concept for policy, and between "learning society" as description and as aspiration (Hughes and Tight 1995, Rubenson 2000a, Jarvis 2012).

Ontologically, the concept of 'learning society' tells us the obvious fact that, throughout history, all human societies have developed a variety of ways to manage, organize, and enable learning among their members within and outside educational institutions. From this perspective, human societies have always been learning societies. Likewise, lifelong learning describes the equally obvious fact that people acquire a variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes throughout their lives in a variety of spaces, both inside and outside educational institutions. In this sense, all human beings are lifelong learners. Empirical research attempts to explore the characteristics of different learning experiences and their impacts on people's lives.

Other research projects examine the ways in which a particular society provides learning opportunities to its citizens, looking at funding arrangements, enrollment patterns, laws, policies, and the like. These projects often require empirical studies that interrogate learning content and modes, as well as the inclusionary/exclusionary nature of institutional practices. Among the questions addressed in this body of research are the following: what, how and when do people acquire certain knowledge, skills, attitudes and values throughout their lives? How is the learning acquired in different educational settings (formal, non-formal and informal) internalized, adapted, challenged or rejected by learners? How do these different learning experiences interact with each other? Do different institutions and organizations promote different types of learning? Do current institutional arrangements for lifelong learning favor or hinder particular groups? A different type of empirically-driven question relates to whether there is enough evidence to affirm that a given society has become a 'learning society'. Four areas of evidence are usually invoked to support this claim: availability of continuing education courses and programs, time devoted to intentional learning,

participation rates in higher education, and the arrival of a knowledge-based economy (with the growth of occupations requiring advanced cognitive skills and continuous skill upgrading).

A different test of a learning society is to ask to what extent the collective learning acquired is helping to improve society. The response is often a mixture of accomplishment and failure. In this regard, Livingstone (2004) notes that together with unprecedented progress in science and technology, our 'learning societies' have created a potent mix of air, water and soil pollution, and global warming. This has been coupled with widespread conditions of impoverishment, social inequalities, war, prospects of a nuclear winter, and a massive collective institutional incapacity to comprehend the consequences of our interventions in the global ecosystem. This leads him to suggest that, at least in this respect, we may be becoming 'ignorant societies' rather than 'learning societies'. There is also a branch of empirical literature that deals with factors affecting adult participation in lifelong learning. Rubenson (2000b), examining data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), found that adults with lower levels of formal education and with lower occupational status are less likely to participate in adult education and training and spend less time in reading either at or outside work. The correlation between educational background and participation in adult education is very clear. In the USA, for example, only 11 percent of those with a primary education or less participate in adult education and training, compared with 64 percent among those with a university education. This means that those who are most in need of expanding their learning are the ones who participate the least in adult education.

At the normative level, the concepts of 'lifelong learning' and 'learning society' have multiple meanings and interpretations, and constitute a contested territory in which a variety of philosophical, pedagogical and policy-related issues are intensely debated. Among the questions that are often raised in this debate are the following:

How should societies organize themselves to promote learning among its members, and what should be the role of the public and the private sector? To what extent should these institutional arrangements and policies promote individual learning processes and to what extent should they promote collective learning processes? Which social groups (e.g. employers, unions, community groups, business groups, educators, government, learning communities, etc.) should participate in the definition of the content, methods and outcomes of the learning? Who should benefit primarily from this learning? What are the most appropriate accreditation systems for learning that are usually unrecognized by educational institutions and workplaces? And, last but not least, a highly contentious question: Who should pay for it?

The learning society literature in the last half-century: A summary

The contemporary literature on the learning society can be traced to the 1960s, as a response to the perception that the traditional school system was no longer capable of responding to new societal trends. Three most influential books from that period were *Beyond the Stable State. Public and private learning in a changing society* (Donald Schon, 1963), *The Learning Society* (Robert Hutchins, 1969) and *Deschooling Society* (Ivan Illich, 1970). In *Beyond the Stable State*, Donald Schon, a professor at the Boston's Massachusetts Institute of Technology, provided a conceptual framework that connected the rapid social and institutional transformations with an increasing need for continuous learning. He argued that institutions are in continuous processes of transformation and are largely unpredictable (he called this "the loss of the stable state"). As individuals could no longer expect to face stable states throughout their lifetimes, continuous learning becomes a need, not only to adapt to social changes, but also to influence the nature and direction of those changes (Smith 2000). Anticipating

much of the future literature on learning societies, Schon called for new institutional designs ('learning systems') to nurture continuous learning:

We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations. We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our institutions. We must, in other words, become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation. (Schon 1963/1973: 28)

The arguments advanced in *Beyond the Stable State* struck a cord. Its first edition (1963) quickly sold out, and due to its popularity it was quickly reprinted in 1967 and 1973. A second key early contribution was made by Robert M. Hutchins, one of the first writers to talk about the concept of 'learning society' in North America. For him, a learning society was one that, in addition to offering part-time adult education to every person at every stage of their adult life, succeeded in transforming its values and its institutions in such a way that learning, fulfillment and becoming human become its aims. Hence, he characterized the learning society as a fulfillment society. In his analysis, Hutchins identified two main trends pushing for a learning society: the rapidity of change and the increasing proportion of free time due to technological progress. The first factor requires a learning society, and the second makes it possible. According to Hutchins, contemporary education should revive the Athenian model, in which education was not a separate activity constrained to a period of life, to specific hours and to specific places, but was part and parcel of the life of the city. He argued that machines could make possible what slavery did in Ancient Greece: to release the time of citizens to fully participate in learning. The only difference, in Hutchins' optimistic forecasting, was that in the late twentieth century technology was going to provide significant leisure time to allow everyone to pursue lifelong learning, not just a

fortunate few. For this to happen, he proposed specific strategies like sabbatical leaves for older workers, and part-time educational opportunities for all at every stage of life.

Hutchins' book should not be confused with another book, also entitled *The Learning Society*, published in England in 1974 and written by Swedish scholar Tornstein Husén. In this volume, Husén argued that a distinctive characteristic of contemporary societies was a knowledge explosion, and thus equated 'learning societies' with 'knowledge societies'. He predicted that by the year 2000, education was going to become a continuous lifelong process, without fixed points of entry and exit, and with new and faster mechanisms for the production and distribution of knowledge. He rightly predicted that, with the emerging communication technologies, more learning would be occurring at home, at the workplace and in learning centers. At the same time, he wrongly predicted that by the year 2000 society "...will confer status decreasingly on the basis of social background or, assuming there is any left, inherited wealth", and that "educated ability will be democracy's replacement for passed-on social prerogatives" (Husén 1974:238). It is interesting to observe that two academics working in different parts of the world (one in North America, the other in Europe) came up with the exact same title, a similar approach to the topic, and comparable, optimistic predictions. It seems that both Hutchins and Husén managed to capture –from an educational perspective- the spirit of social futurism (large-scale, organized thinking and research about national goals, probable futures and their impact on people's lives) that characterized the era, and was best articulated by Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* (1971).

It was also in 1970 that Ivan Illich published *Deschooling Society*, a book that had an immediate international impact. Illich's proposals for a learning society were more radical than the one advanced by Hutchins. Indeed, in an unprecedented demand, Illich called for nothing less and nothing more than abolishing compulsory schooling altogether. In Illich's deschooled society, schools would continue to exist but on non-compulsory basis. Illich noted that deschooling could only occur if alternative social

arrangements and legal protections were provided, and if there were a reconceptualization of what constitutes learning in the heart of every deschooled person. In a deschooled society, individuals choose for themselves action-oriented lives, rather than lives constrained by the parameters of consumption. They participate in “learning webs” in which all are teachers and learners. Relationships among people are convivial and promote self- and community-reliance rather than addictions to institutions and to their product, consumption addiction. Like Hutchins, Illich called for new relational structures, for goods that are engineered for durability rather than obsolescence, and for “...access to institutions that increase the opportunity and desirability of human interaction...” (Illich, 1970:63). In a deschooled society, the worlds of work, leisure, politics, family and community become the classrooms. Learning occurs in the world and individuals define themselves by their own learning and the learning that they contribute to others, not by their degrees and diplomas.

In addition to Schon, Hutchins, and Illich, the debates on the learning society in the early 1970s were influenced by two UNESCO publications: *An Introduction to Lifelong Education* (Lengrand 1970) and *Learning to Be* (Faure et al. 1972). These texts argued that education should not be about ‘having’ but about ‘being,’ and that it should be synonymous with culture and not an asset to be gained. From this standpoint of self-realization, the true subject matter of education was to assist learners in ‘becoming’ at each different stage and in varying circumstances of their lives. *Learning to Be*, which was particularly influential due to its broad international dissemination, conceptualized the learning society around the notions of lifelong and lifewide learning, and upon the assumption that a significant renewal of educational systems was both necessary and desirable:

If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the

necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society. (Faure et al. 1972: xxxiii)

During the 1980s and early 1990s, with the budget cutbacks and a focus on economic competitiveness that characterized neoliberal policies, the 'back to basics' movement in education became hegemonic. Save a few exceptions like Adler's Paideia Proposal (1982), or some UNESCO publications (e.g. Canadian Commission for UNESCO 1985), the humanist-progressive approach to the learning society took a back seat, and the educational discourse was dominated by human capital and marketplace approaches. At the end of the 20th century, some observers noted that the progressive humanist tradition of the late sixties and early seventies re-emerged in a variety of international declarations and reports. Among them were the *Dakar Declaration on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (2000), the *Hamburg Declaration of CONFINTEA V* (1997), the *Mumbai Statement* (1998), and *Learning: A Treasure Within* (1996), the UNESCO Report of the Delors Commission that updated the Faure Commission Report of 1972. However, this time around, these documents were less influential than their predecessors, as in many countries the mainstream educational discourse and practice was now dominated by a market-centered and vocationally-oriented conception of education that stressed economic competitiveness and individual entrepreneurship. In the 21st century, the different conceptions of the learning society discussed during the past century continue to compete in the scholarly and policy debates. Reviewing the academic literature, government documents and political discourses on the learning society of the last half-century, six main approaches can be identified: learning societies as individual self-actualization, as economic development, as marketplace, as fluid education system, as democratic communities, and as state policy. These different (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) understandings of learning societies will be described in the next section.

The learning society: six themes

In examining current literature on learning societies, six themes can be identified: 1) self-actualization and lifelong learning; 2) human capital for economic development; 3) learning marketplace; 4) informal learning webs; 5) democratic learning communities; and 6) state policy. Although sometimes they overlap, each theme tends to relate to different approaches, traditions, actors, and understandings.

1. Learning society as self-actualization and lifelong learning: the liberal humanist approach

The liberal humanist tradition tends to emphasize those dimensions of the learning society that relate to self-actualization, human development, fulfillment, and personal autonomy. In this literature, education is seen as an end in itself for living a human life and for contributing to society. Education should aim at the integral formation of the person, nurturing informed, knowledgeable, curious and responsible human beings who can pursue happiness. Among the authors who have influenced this tradition are Robert Hutchins (1969), Malcolm Knowles (1970), and Mortimer Adler (1982). A more progressive strand within the liberal humanist tradition (rooted in the ideas of John Dewey) also addresses issues related to the right to education, civic participation, critical thinking and societal democratization. For this tradition, a learning society is a society of lifelong learners who strive for personal growth, and a society that offers a variety of learning opportunities for all at every stage of life.

This tradition looks at ancient Greece as the model to follow, and makes frequent references to the concept of *paideia*. Perhaps the best articulation of this notion was expressed in an influential book entitled precisely “The Paideia Proposal” (Adler 1982).

For Adler, education should serve three purposes: to teach people how to use their leisure time well, to earn their living ethically, and to be responsible citizens in a democracy. He argued that all human beings have the innate ability to do these three things and that the main task of education should be to prepare people to become lifelong learners. For this approach to be successful, adults who are charged with the education of youth must also adopt a lifelong learning attitude. Adler noted that learning never ends, and proposed age 60 as the earliest that anyone can claim to be truly “educated”, but only then if they have devoted their entire life to learning. Adler’s proposal called for a liberal, non-specialized education without electives, vocational classes, or any type of differentiation in tracks. He argued that learning is not finite or static, but ongoing and lively. Education should simultaneously work on three main areas: the acquisition of organized knowledge, the development of intellectual skills, and the enlarged understanding of ideas and values through Socratic questioning, active discussions of books, and involvement in artistic activities. Adler’s ideas and concepts reverberate in much of the current humanist liberal literature on learning societies.

It is interesting to note that references to the *paideia* framework do not only appear in the academic literature, but also among learners’ opinions about the learning society. For instance, Pohl (1993) conducted a study on how learners perceive and describe a potential learning society by asking them to reflect upon their own experiences of extraordinarily good and bad learning episodes. Among the common features of good learning experiences recalled by learners were that they were pursuing a personal interest, were as self-directed as their ages and setting allowed, and entered a personal relationship with a mentor. Bad learning experiences, conversely, were characterized by forced activities, rote memorization requirements and teachers’ bad manners. Learners’ views on a learning society did not make references to ‘knowledge society’ themes. They were more aligned with the central tenets of *paideia*, which placed lifelong learning

as its society's 'central project'. In another study, Heltebran (2000) explored the beliefs of learners about their own self-direction, motivation to learn, self-efficacy, and the development of a learning society. Those adults who participated in the study (ranging between 52 and 78 years of age) did not credit their personal experience with formal education as having significantly contributed to being lifelong learners. Similarly, they did not see formal education as inspiring or nurturing the joy and value of learning in their children, grandchildren, or in society. They viewed their self-education as a natural, integral, and necessary part of their lives resulting in the improvement of self and society, and as an important source of their personal happiness and vitality. For them, a learning society will only be a reality when the majority of the individuals and organizations in that society actively engage in learning. They argued that schools must come to terms with their role in fostering the development of lifelong learners, but this can only occur if society does the same. In summary, the liberal humanist approach to the learning society emphasizes lifelong learning and self-actualization. Among the recurrent ideas in this body of literature are the notions of learning for its own sake, personal growth, individual happiness, and fully educated persons. A learning society is one that ensures the development and fulfillment of all its members, one that nurtures the capacity and the desire to learn continuously, and one that has lifelong learning as a central project. It is also one that puts learning ahead of teaching and knowledge transmission.

Those who criticize the liberal humanist approach argue that it overemphasizes the role of 'autonomous individuals' to pursue their hobbies and educational projects, assuming that all are equally able and have the same opportunities to pursue their self-directed learning projects and to purchase cultural services and products in the market. Critics of this approach contend that it does not give much consideration to inequality issues that range from economic resources to cultural capital to availability of time. It is a discourse that tends to ignore material conditions, and more often than not is

classless, raceless, genderless and stateless. Furthermore, the emphasis on ‘self-directed learning’ underemphasizes both the equalizing role of educational institutions and the collective dimension of learning. This individualistic bias is based on the implicit assumption that most learning is (and should be) acquired individually rather than in a collective or relational context.

2. Learning society as human capital for economic development: The knowledge society approach

The focus on economic development can be linked to original formulations of human capital theory (Schultz 1959, Becker 1964), which assumed a connection between education and productivity. In the human capital model, education is understood as a social investment in the training of employees for labor market needs. The ‘knowledge society’ approach is to some extent a new incarnation of previous attempts to ‘recycle’ workers so they can catch up with the new technologies of the workplace. The main argument advanced in this body of literature is that in the context of increasing globalization -and the ensuing technological, informational and work organization changes- what is needed in order to keep nations economically competitive is the training and development of flexible and autonomous workers. Critics to this approach contend that in this framework, the broad concept of lifelong learning tends to be equated with professional development, and that professional development, in turn, tends to be narrowly equated with job skills. In this sense, it is contended that in this approach lifelong learning becomes merely ‘worklong’ learning (Hunt 1999, Church et al. 2000, Mojab and Gorman 2002).

Three related assumptions can be identified in the literature on the knowledge society. One is that contemporary societies are experiencing significant techno-economic transformations (‘post-fordism’) and becoming ‘knowledge-based’ societies.

The scale, speed and complexity are unprecedented in the history of humanity, and the time available for adaptation shrinks from eras to generations to individual lifetimes. Unlike the agrarian and the industrial revolutions, today there is an explosion of information and discoveries that lead to a faster pace of change and to a greater need for adaptation. The ability to learn, to generate and to share ideas and knowledge are becoming the most critical sources of comparative advantage and the determinants of quality of life. Moreover, knowledge is changing so rapidly that some occupations become obsolete within decades, and therefore workers need to update their skills permanently to remain employable. For this reason, from this approach, the notion of 'job security' is likely to be replaced with the notion of 'skill security'. This leads to the second assumption: in this era of relentless global international competitiveness, the key determinant of national economic prosperity is the capacity for adaptation and innovation. The rapid increase in the amount of information available creates confusion and limits the capacity for thoughtful planning. Given this situation, one of the main goals of a 'knowledge-based' society is to make sense of all this information in order to improve its ability to respond and adapt to changes, and eventually to generate new changes. As the "price" of information decreases, the argument goes, what will distinguish more successful societies is their relative ability to learn from that information, and to adapt efficiently and to rapidly changing conditions. In short, the claim is that the main strategy to remain competitive in the context of economic globalization is to be able to make the required shifts at a fast pace, and this requires a learning society.

The third assumption is that the capacity for innovation is the result of two factors: a significant pool of creative workers, and strategies to maximize this ingenuity. From this perspective, learning becomes a necessary condition for the survival of individuals, organizations and societies. Therefore, individuals must develop the key competencies to manage their learning careers and to become lifelong learners,

organizations must become learning organizations, and societies must become learning societies (Keating 1995, Morris 2000, AUCC 2000). Three main agendas arise from these assumptions. One is to ensure that individuals and societies have the capacity to adapt effectively to accelerating changes. Another is to build a new economy model that creates wealth from ideas to be competitive in the global economy. The third is to sustain a healthy social environment for human development in a time of diminishing resources (Keating & Mustard, 1993, pp. 101-102). The main concept that encapsulates these three agendas is that of a learning society. This body of literature tends to associate a learning society and a learning economy. The argument is that learning enables individuals, firms and organizations to succeed in the world and to turn the forces of globalization to their advantage. Societies that value learning, innovation and creativity will be more successful because a learning society is a precondition to a learning economy (AUCC 2000). It is interesting to note the 'human capital' language has become typical of documents submitted to politicians by budget strapped universities feeling that it is important to justify their funding by their contribution to economic growth. Not surprisingly, one of the main indicators used in the human capital literature is the participation of workers in post-secondary courses and in retraining programs.

One of the debates in the human capital literature deals with the type of skills that need to be acquired by workers in order to succeed in a knowledge-base economy. It is recurrently argued that in the new economy, workers need basic literacy skills (reading, writing and math), but also 'computer literacy' (ability to use information and communication technologies), as well as the ability to work in teams (collaborative learning), knowledge of other languages, a variety of contextual skills, and the capacity for continuous learning and adaptation to constantly changing environments (Garmer and Firestone 1997, Morris 2000, ACST 2000). The emphasis on the ability to adapt is probably the one factor that distinguishes the current human capital literature from the

previous generation. Indeed, a recurrent mantra of the human capital discourse on learning societies is that the fast-paced world of the knowledge economy requires more than technical skills, demanding workers to be lifelong learners. This call for perpetual learners is also driven by the prediction that workers will have to be able to renew their professional skills or change their career directions several times during their working lives. If the main task of workers in a learning economy is to become lifelong learners, the main challenge for workplaces is to become learning organizations. The concept of learning organizations, which originated in the management field and attracted the interest of adult educators connected to human resource development, is based on two assumptions. First, that learning occurs not just within individuals, but also by groups and organizations. Second, that as the world to which we need to adapt becomes more complex, effective learning can only occur when knowledge and expertise are distributed among individuals (Schon 1973, Argyris and Schon 1978, Senge, 1990, Keating 1995). In summary, the human capital approach to learning societies assumes that contemporary societies are knowledge-based societies, that the key to compete in the global economy is the capacity for adaptation and innovation, and that continuous learning is a requirement for individuals and organizations. Hence, the twin recommendations of the human capital approach to learning societies are that individuals must become lifelong learners who can adapt to changing contexts and that workplaces must turn into learning organizations, which are capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.

These assumptions and recommendations have been the subject of much debate, which could be synthesized in four criticisms. The first is that the learning organization constitutes a modern-day myth that builds on earlier myths of productivity and change. A second is that the discourse on learning organizations, once implemented into concrete policies and programs, becomes a strategy operating largely in the interests of capital, the state and professional corporations. From this perspective, the learning

organization model is both a mechanism for the extraction of surplus value from workers and a method of social control (Marsick and Watkins 1999, Mojab and Gorman 2003). A third critique is that the main role assigned to a learning society by governments is to provide a flexible, adaptable and skilled workforce to make countries competitive in the globalized, knowledge-based economy, and this approach overestimates the “job-skills gap”. By doing this, it ignores the empirical evidence that shows substantially less skill upgrading of jobs than the “knowledge-based economy” assumes, and puts most of the blame on low-skilled workers and not on the low availability of high-skilled jobs. In short, the criticism is that human capital theory assumes that economic globalization mainly requires highly-trained workers, ignoring that this model of capital accumulation relies heavily on low-waged, menial jobs. A related criticism is that human capital approaches overemphasize educational upgrading as the solution to economic problems. By doing this, these approaches tend to ignore the need for economic reforms themselves, and diverts the attention from the central problem, which is the lack of decent jobs (Livingstone 1998, 2004). Last but not least, another criticism to the human capital approach deals with the difficulties of labor forecasting. Indeed, it has been acknowledged that anticipating the amount of workers that will be required in a given industry is more a guess than a science. Since human resource development is largely based on labor forecasting, it is likely that there will be a shift from a focus on occupations to a focus on skills.

3. Learning society as a learning marketplace. The neoliberal approach

The concept of learning society as a space for the supply and demand of educational services can be linked to neoliberal economics approaches that conceive education as a commodity to be traded in a supposedly “free” market. The argument is that education, like any other service, is best provided by private providers, and this calls for a separation between education and the state. From a neoliberal perspective, then, a

learning society is a learning market. The main support for this conception comes from the business sector and associated think tanks. Neoliberalism rejects the main principles of Keynesian economics, as it argues against positive government intervention in the economy to correct market imperfections. Neoliberal thinkers argue that when the market can operate freely, without government restrictions, it is more likely to promote economic development, social progress and even social justice. From a neoliberal perspective, an effective and democratic learning society can be achieved by developing a market of learning opportunities to meet the demands of individuals and employers for the updating of skills and competencies (Edwards 1997). With the popularity of neoliberal discourse, the traditional terminology on learning societies (with its commitments to civil society, democratic citizenship and the public good) was replaced by the language of the marketplace: learners become clients, and future students are 'the market' (Boshier 1998). Indeed, a market-oriented learning society puts the onus and the responsibility for learning (including the financial responsibility) on the individual. In this model, people are not conceived of as citizens with the inalienable right to education, but as potential consumers of educational products and services whose rights consists of choosing among several options in the marketplace.

This approach is different from the human capital approach discussed in the previous section because under neoliberalism education is no longer considered as a social investment with economic returns, but as a commodity itself. This implies a transition from workplace training and state provision of public education to self-recovery or for-profit provision offered by private companies and paid for by the learner. The neoliberal discourse on learning societies, with its discourse on the efficiency and democracy of the free market, is often adopted with enthusiasm by governments and employers. The former can use it to justify cutbacks to adult education programs, and the latter to withdraw from funding training programs. Hence, the neoliberal discourse on learning societies provides a good rationale for the

public sector to resign its prime responsibility as an education provider and good excuses for employers to transfer training responsibilities to their employees. As a result, there is a concern that the neoliberal approach to the learning society may increase inequalities. If education becomes a commodity to be traded in a market, material inequalities could translate into learning inequalities. This, in turn, would allow for more direct conversions of economic capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983). This neoliberal approach to education became influential in the last decades, largely due to the work of the Chicago School, and particularly the Chicago Boys under the leadership of Milton Friedman, who developed the idea of school vouchers in the 1950s. During the 1980s and 1990s, many governments around the world adopted the market-friendly recommendations of neoliberal economists. These recommendations also made their way to the World Trade Organization, which incorporated an educational chapter of the General Agreement of Trade and Services.

In summary, the neoliberal discourse on learning societies emphasizes the idea of a learning market regulated only by “the invisible hand” of supply and demand. The market is conceived as essentially free and democratic, and the state is demonized as a bureaucratic obstacle that undercuts the efficiency of the market. While the neoliberal discourse has a strong anti-state rhetoric, it says little about the ways the state is influenced by lobbyists of corporations, and about the extent of corporate welfare in contemporary societies. This market-oriented approach to the learning society privileges individual over collective learning, and conceptualizes learners as consumers rather than citizens. In theory, the neoliberal approach to the learning society is supposed to encourage a market democracy (due to low state regulations), individual freedom (due to consumers’ choice) and efficiency (due to competition among suppliers). In practice, however, it is likely to generate monopolies and oligopolies, to create problems of quality control (diploma mills), to increase learning inequalities, and to reduce most educational services to simple commercial transactions.

4. Learning society as informal learning webs. The *deschooling* approach

Over forty years after Ivan Illich popularized the case for deschooling society in 1970, it is still a theme in the literature on learning societies. Today, however, advocates of deschooling do not have the same amount of self-righteousness and certainty that were characteristic of the first wave of the movement. This is partly due to the fact that some of the predictions made during the seventies were unrealized. For instance, in 1979, Professor Norman Henchey, from the Faculty of Education at McGill University (Montreal) did a study on future trends and strategic planning commissioned by the Research Unit of the Ontario Ministry of Education. Henchey foresaw that by the year 2000 compulsory education would disappear, to be replaced with a 'guaranteed access to educational services' (for other predictions on this topic from that era, see also Husén 1974). Although deschooling never became a serious consideration in educational or social policy, and the scenario depicted by Henchey is far from today's reality, it is possible to observe a small but growing movement against compulsory schooling, particularly in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The literature on deschooling, which takes different expressions, includes a wide spectrum of positions in relation to the formal education system.

One body of literature, which has increased considerably in the last two decades, relates to homeschooling (teaching the school curriculum at home) and its curriculum-free variation unschooling, homeschooling. Currently, homeschooling is legal in several countries. In the USA, the number of homeschooled children has increased from 850,000 in 1999 to 1.5 million in 2007 (representing a 74% relative increase). The increase in homeschooling has been partly facilitated by access to the Internet. Like the general deschooling movement to which it belongs, the homeschooling movement is not homogeneous: it includes a variety of groups ranging from the conservative religious

right to the anarchist left, naturalists and libertarians. Whereas all these groups have in common a dislike for compulsory schooling, they have important differences regarding the reasons for such dislike, their pedagogical approaches, their ideological outlook, their curriculum content, and their desired degree of educational de-institutionalization (Priesnitz 2000, McDowell and Ray 2000, Hardy 2001).

Another body of the deschooling literature focuses on 'knowledge explosion'. The argument is that the production and distribution of knowledge does not reside anymore exclusively in formal education institutions. The expansion of the publishing industry, the mass media, the library systems, and the new information and communication technologies have created a new situation in which schools and universities do not hold anymore the monopoly on knowledge. This literature argues that this information/knowledge explosion will lead to the erosion of the highly institutionalized, bureaucratic and isolated educational system. Many influential authors in this stream are 'futurists' who do not shy away from predicting social trends (Toffler 1971, 1980 and 1990, Bell 1973, Senge 1990, Drucker, 1993, Boshier et al. 1999).

A third body of deschooling literature, which is the most relevant to this paper, is the one that conceives the learning society as a fluid system of learning webs. Following the proposal for learning webs raised by Illich in the last chapter of *Deschooling Society*, many publications have addressed different dimensions of such a system. This literature regrets that most educational reform efforts tend to focus exclusively on the K-12 school system, and calls for bold, thoughtful and innovative action to promote learning outside of the school system (Weber 2000). Three main issues are addressed in this literature: learning networks, learning partnerships, and learning recognition. In relation to learning networks, it is argued that learning societies need to find ways of organizing human ingenuity in more productive ways. A broad social goal should be to maximize learning, both by individuals and by groups (firms, organizations, communities, etc.). Keating (1995) suggested that governments should coordinate rather

than control such learning activity, and should encourage new learning partnerships across traditional divides (school/work, management/labor, private/public sectors, etc). This could be achieved through a monitoring system on the actual workings of the learning society. Such a system (which would include data about learning at the local, provincial and national level) could provide usable information on how people are learning, and where problems are occurring. To leverage this knowledge effectively, a learning society needs to build networks among these multiple monitoring activities, and undertake research to improve the outcome indicators and the processes to accomplish them.

In relation to learning partnerships, the argument is the creation and dissemination of knowledge in a learning society requires collaboration, synergy and institutional arrangements among a variety of social agencies such as universities, schools, neighborhood organizations, cultural centers, workplaces, libraries, museums, and community gardens. Such collaboration should also include closer interaction among disciplines (e.g. between the arts and the sciences) and age groups (e.g. through intergenerational projects). This stream of literature proposes that in a true learning society, the entire community -from corporate institutions to family units- should share the responsibility for creating and nurturing a complete learning environment for all members throughout their lifetime. Information and communication technologies could play (if not yet do play) a significant role in creating a learning society by nurturing learning webs that link different public learning spaces and households (Senesh 1991, Garmer and Firestone 1997, Webber 2000, AUCC 2000, Simmons 2012).

Finally, in relation to learning recognition, this body of literature has made a contribution to raise awareness about the large amount of learning that occurs outside formal schooling, through non-formal and informal learning activities and settings. This is particularly important in terms of recognizing the learning and the knowledge of subordinate groups (Illich 1970, Tough 1978, Livingstone 2004). What is needed, then, is

to build a fluid system of recognition and accreditation of prior learning to guarantee that knowledge and skills already mastered do not have to be re-learned. Such system, which is already in place in some countries, has great potential to encourage self-directed learning and to reduce costly duplications (Morris 2000). In North America, the system is usually known as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), and includes a variety of instruments to recognize non-credited knowledge using direct and indirect evidence like tests, interviews, and portfolio assessments (Deiro 1983, Brain and Koenig 1994, Burnie et al. 1994). These alternative ways to recognize and reward talent acquired outside of the formal classroom can help people to access educational institutions or occupations that otherwise would be closed to them. In sum, the notion of learning societies as a fluid education system can be connected to the efforts to legitimize learning spaces outside of formal educational institutions, to develop networks among learning spaces, and to create more open channels for the acquisition and accreditation of learning. Among these efforts are initiatives to revitalize the deschooling agenda, to promote homeschooling as an alternative to the mandatory school system, to establish institutional partnerships, and to develop and implement policies and programs for the assessment and recognition of experiential learning.

5. Learning societies as democratic communities. The ‘local development’ approach

The notion of learning societies as democratic communities can be linked to the radical education tradition that emphasizes social learning, community development, civic engagement, political participation and societal transformation. In this literature, the conception of a learning society is inseparable from the conception of a good society, which in turn cannot be detached from ideals of social justice, democracy, and general wellbeing. A central feature of this literature, then, is a concern for economic, social and political democracy, and an ethical commitment to freedom and equality. These issues, which are marginal in the other discourses on learning society discussed previously,

become center stage here. The thrust of this literature explores the democratic possibilities of a learning society or, put in a different way, the possibilities for democratizing learning societies.

Although guided by high moral and social principles, most proposals emanating from this literature rarely present a well-designed blueprint for a learning society. More often, these are writings about the conditions for the development of inclusive and democratic learning communities, examining real stories of success and failure. As Mary Parker Follett (1918) pointed out in her pioneering work on the topic, a democratic learning community begins wherever people live and work. A learning community, she notes, starts with everyday life in places like community centers or neighborhood associations, using cooperative methods and implementing democratic practices. Today, these ideas are carried out by a variety of organizations such as the movements of healthy communities, sustainable communities and popular education, the cooperative sector and a myriad of grassroots organizations.

One of the new areas of research in this body of literature is social learning, also referred to as social action learning, social movement learning, community learning, collaborative learning, or democratic citizenship learning, among other terms. Until now, most research on learning has focused on the individual. However, increasingly more researchers are focusing on the social aspects of learning and knowledge creation. The main argument of this literature is that democratic communities are learning communities, because their members learn through social action, collective dialogue, civic engagement and livelihood projects. A "learning community" can be defined as a culture of life-long learning and civic involvement, a culture of equal access and contribution to the community wellbeing (Learning Community 2000). However, the empirical literature on learning support structures also recognizes that these communities do not always focus enough energy on maximizing learning opportunities.

Partly inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1970), three main dimensions can be found in this body of literature: critique (denunciation of existing inequalities in today's society), proposal (annunciation of a democratic learning community) and strategy (roads to walk in order to move from the real to the ideal). In terms of critique, this literature deals with issues of power inequalities, wealth distribution, gender and ethnic oppression, and the like. It argues that knowledge is unequally distributed, and that inequalities in the production and distribution of knowledge are related to material inequalities. Likewise, this body of literature challenges the human capital learning society project that focuses almost exclusively in training new kinds of workers to meet the instrumental demands of a knowledge economy, as well as the neoliberal project of a learning marketplace. In relation to the workplace, this perspective challenges the view that associates the learning organization model with progressive and emancipatory claims of inclusion and collaboration (Mojab and Gorman 2003, Boshier 2003, Schugurensky 2003, Plumb 2005).

In terms of proposals, this literature makes recurrent calls for an agenda that equalizes learning opportunities by paying attention to the homeless, the unemployed, the underemployed, and other disenfranchised citizens. It also proposes a model of learning communities inspired in the radical democratic traditions of adult education (particularly popular education). These initiatives give a central role to civic engagement and active participation in democratic spaces, which is not surprising since one of the main tenets of the model is that a good learning society is also a democratic society. From this perspective, such learning community -and a true learning society- could be strengthened with a more open system of governance with shared leadership, which departs from the top-down management style typical of industries, governments and educational systems. Moreover, this approach recommends more connections between the micro-reality of local communities and the macro-policies that are generated at the provincial and national level.

In terms of strategy, this approach argues that social organizations need to nurture more opportunities for their members to reflect on their learning within a broader framework of economic justice, political democracy, environmental sustainability and the construction of a culture of peace. This should be complemented with cultural and institutional changes that encourage inclusiveness within organizations, equalize learning opportunities, and provide safe learning environments (Griffin and Brownhill 2001, Field 2001, Welton 2005). This strategy is already being nurtured by progressive municipal governments, social movements, NGOs and grassroots groups through a variety of small-scale experiments, including a variety of participatory democracy experiments like participatory budgeting. A critical factor for the success of community learning initiatives is the existence of visionary leaders able to inspire and involve all those in the organization as partners and collaborators, and to promote their resilience and growth (Dickinson 2002, Calderwood 2000).

The interest in the topic of learning communities is growing. In the USA, a National Learning Communities Project hosts annual summer institutes and conferences, and commissions papers on learning community theory and practice. Likewise, the Mary Parker Follett Foundation has the Design of Communities of Learning as one of its main foci. This program consists of educational transformation through the participatory, idealized re-design of public education in a community context. In Spain, several of universities formed a network in 2013 to assist the activities of learning communities in their areas (Junta de Andalucía 2013). In Scotland, discussions on learning society are influenced by Freire's ideas on local development and social change (Kirkwood 2012). In closing, the learning societies as democratic communities approach is inspired by the local development approach and by the radical democratic traditions in adult education that are connected to progressive social movements. In this body of literature, a learning society is often conceived as a society committed to social justice and general wellbeing, and as a condition for the

development of more democratic, sustainable, just and happier societies. Consequently, for many authors in this tradition, the construction of learning societies and the construction of democratic societies is one indivisible project.

6. Learning societies as government intervention: the policy approach

This approach deals with the enabling structures (policies, programs, incentives, etc.) that facilitate the development of learning societies. Metaphorically speaking, this approach is particularly concerned with the engineering and architecture of the learning society. Coffield (2000) argued that the discourse of learning society must leave behind the vacuous rhetoric of the stage of romance and address issues related to evidence and implementation, as well as develop clear policies through democratic rather than technocratic processes. In this approach we find both policy-related literature and a preoccupation for the institutional design that nurtures the realization of lifelong learning for all members of society. Hutchins (1969), for instance, proposed specific strategies like sabbatical leaves for older workers, and part-time educational opportunities for all at every stage of life. This suggestion resurfaced in the 1980s, when Canada's National Advisory Panel on Skill Development Leave recommended that the response to technological and structural change must be learning throughout life and proposed a universal educational leave to allow people continuous access to retraining and upgrading opportunities (Wilkinson 1984). At the same time, some official master documents have been criticized for not providing useful policy directions. That was the case of the 1983 U.S. report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, known as "A Nation at Risk". The report alluded to the development of a 'learning society', but the recommendations section did not provide clear guidelines about issues like the articulation of educational goals, or the responsibility for setting goals and planning learning opportunities (Berman 1984).

Compared to the literature on the five previous themes, the policy-oriented literature on learning societies is not particularly vast. Among some academic groups, during the last decades there has been a shift away from grand designs and macro-level policy. Partly because of the failure of central planned economies, partly because of the ascendance of postmodernist theories, and partly because of the recognition of the diversity of local communities and the increasing complexity of contemporary institutions, many academics became leery of grand social designs and of centralized decision making. Awareness of these issues has led to a rise in popularity of decentralization strategies. The argument of decentralization advocates is that the best safeguard against future grand social designs is the active participation of the whole population in lifelong learning in various learning organizations including the household, the school, the workplace, the public library, the local museums and the community. In any case, most of the policy-related literature on learning societies tends to emanate from government offices, specialized firms, consultants and task forces rather than from full-time academics. For this and other reasons, academics have little knowledge about the processes of policy formation, or the evaluation of policy outcomes. The policy literature reflects the new human capital framework adopted by many governments since the mid-seventies. Therefore, by and large, the literature presents different strategies for enabling institutions to provide services for individuals as a condition for improving economic productivity. The main role assigned to the learning society by policy-makers seems to be to provide a flexible, adaptable and skilled workforce to make countries competitive in the globalized economy.

Other policy approaches are more comprehensive. For instance, in a policy paper, Morris (2000) outlined three main elements of a learning society strategy: ensuring that all citizens are aware of the importance of learning in the 21st century, that all citizens have adequate foundation skills to take advantage of learning

opportunities, and that all citizens have the broadest possible access to continuous learning opportunities throughout their life course. In order to order to translate these general goals into policies and action, what is required is a greater degree of collaboration among stakeholders (government agencies, private sector, non-governmental organizations, individuals) and a good process for consensus building. Indeed, a recurrent theme in this body of literature is the need to create policies and programs that build bridges between school levels, between school and work, and between school and communities. When the relationships already exist, policies should aim at leveraging them. This requires the combination of three simple factors: political will, modest resources, and a basic coordination system. For this to occur, governments can play an important enabling role by promoting within-community and community-to-community exchanges. Additionally, policies and programs for a learning society should recognize that the success of a learning society depends on the participation of the population, so it must encourage and facilitate learning opportunities for existing initiatives rather than imposing them from above. These policy recommendations to rely more heavily on local communities are often justified on three grounds: it promotes community empowerment, it saves government resources, and ensures that local problems are addressed with relevant solutions. From this perspective, a genuine learning society is based on collaborative learning and in a shift from occupation-oriented skills to skills-oriented competencies, particularly the ability to learn and produce collaboratively. Moreover, the essence of a learning society consists of the permanent creation, maintenance and expansion of effective learning organizations, which would complement other existing networks. The main principle that guides progressive policies around learning societies is that lifelong learning for all can only be achieved in a society that actively engages *all* its citizens in learning activities, which means that special efforts must be made to address the impact of structural inequalities

(Boshier 1980, Keating 1995, Doray and Rubenson 1997, Rubenson 2000b, Mac Neil 2002).

A policy initiative that takes seriously this principle must acknowledge that, for different reasons, not all adults are ready to make use of existing opportunities for education and training. Two key inhibiting factors are what Rubenson calls “the long arm of the family” and “the long arm of the job”. Hence, any realistic policy for a learning society must recognize educational and social inequalities and generate strategies to reverse them. However, if policies are based on a different assumption (e.g. that society is formed by self-directed individuals that have the intellectual, material and emotional resources to jump at every learning opportunity) the ensuing policies would increase rather than narrow educational and cultural gaps. The policy formation process must recognize that those most in need of learning are usually the least likely to participate in education and training activities, and often find themselves in contexts that do not stimulate a readiness to engage in learning projects (Rubenson 2000b). One interesting international initiative that attempts to implement the concept of a learning society at the municipal level is the movement of Educating Cities, which has over 450 member cities in all continents. Two of the 20 principles of its charter make explicit references to policy. Principle 4 notes that the municipal policies pertaining to education should go beyond the school system and should be inspired by the pursuit of social justice, democratic community spirit, quality of life and the nurturing of active citizens. Principle 5 poses that municipalities must implement a broad and integrated education policy, in order to include all the modalities of formal, non-formal and informal education and the different cultural manifestations, sources of information and paths of learning.

Notwithstanding this and other progressive initiatives, most official policy documents on the learning society tend to rely on the assumptions of human capital theory discussed in the second approach and hence focus on the development of a

competitive workforce. In general, they accept the premise that we live in a knowledge-based society, and as a result, lifelong learning is the driver of economic and social development. At the same time, academics trying to inform the process of policy formation suggest that certain principles and premises should be considered if a genuine learning society is the main goal. Policies to promote a learning society require complementary social policies that support citizen participation in lifelong learning, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalized. Because a healthy community is a precondition for a learning society, policy initiatives for learning societies must work with other policy initiatives for healthier and inclusive communities. From this perspective, one of the main roles of the government in policy-making and policy implementation is to promote public debate about the ideal features of a learning society, to support learning communities by providing infrastructure and communication networks, and to address inequalities in learning opportunities.

Summary and conclusions

In the analysis of the literature on learning societies we can identify three categories. First, a normative literature that focuses on the desirable features of an ideal learning society. Some of this literature takes the form of social forecasting, but most of it relies on prescriptive statements about the “should be” of learning societies. A second body of literature, which can be called ‘descriptive’, makes general claims about the learning society, the knowledge-based society, the information-age, but without supporting those claims with research or with data. A third, and smaller body of literature attempts to understand the conditions and dynamics of learning societies today through empirical research. The normative literature provides great insights for including learning as an important element in the idea of a future society, but at the same time tends to remain at a high level of abstraction. The descriptive literature tends

to oscillate between insightful essays and unsubstantiated opinion pieces. The empirical literature, save a few exceptions, tends to focus on isolated case studies.

In the literature on the topic, there are many more references to the concept of lifelong learning than to the concept of a learning society. The first concept focuses on the learning processes experienced by individuals. The second emphasizes the collective dimension of learning, and locates such learning in the context of particular policies and programs. The learning society could be understood as the set of enabling structures put in place to support lifelong learning. The concept of learning society is contested and can take a variety of contradictory meanings. In this analysis we identified six themes in relation to learning societies: learning society as self-actualization and lifelong learning, learning society as human capital for economic development, learning society as a learning marketplace, learning society as informal learning webs, learning society as democratic learning communities, and learning society as state policy. Each theme is informed by particular traditions and approaches.

In general, the bulk of the literature relates to the second theme (learning societies as human capital). Indeed, the current discourse on the learning society, particularly the official discourse, is permeated with references to human capital formation, global competitiveness, knowledge-based economy, skills growth, learning economy, organizational learning, and the like. This is followed by a significant literature rooted in the humanist progressive tradition. The neoliberal approach is not as present in a page count as it is in its real power to influence decisions. The democratic learning communities approach, while relatively marginal vis-à-vis the other approaches, is being nurtured by progressive municipal governments, social movements and grassroots organizations through a variety of democratic experiments. These initiatives give a central role to civic engagement and active participation in democratic spaces. This is not surprising, since one of the main tenets of the model is that a good learning society is also a democratic society, and thus it understands the

construction of learning societies and the construction of democratic societies as one indivisible project.

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ⁱNote: This article is a revised version of the paper "The Learning Society in Canada and the US", published in Michael Kuhn (ed.), *New Society Models for a New Millennium. The learning society in Europe and beyond*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 295-334, 2007.