

Knowledge: The Greatest Gift?

Review of *Learning as Development*:

Rethinking International Education in a Changing World (2018)

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Daniel Wagner introduces *Learning as Development* with an anecdote dating from his days as a graduate student when, while traveling abroad, he discovered modes of human learning that he had not encountered in his psychology textbooks. Why, he wondered, did his education not expose him to the variations in human learning that he encountered in other countries? This question, and others like it, led him to a career spent studying how people learn around the world, and the role that learning plays in the lives of diverse cultures. At the same time, he was seeking to understand how peoples around the world were preparing for the future and assessing their welfare in relation to that of other countries—the enterprise we have come to know as international development.

It has become common practice to gauge development in economic terms. Thus, when striving to understand or enhance international development, we may look to such organizations as the International Economic Development Council, the World Bank, or the World Trade Organization. Although there have been efforts to study well-being across nations (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1999), and the small country of Bhutan has become

known for its advocacy of Gross National Happiness as an alternative measure of development (Biswas-Diener, Diener, & Lyubchik, 2015), an economic measure, Gross National Product, has become the widely-accepted default indicator of successful development. The question Wagner poses in the introduction to *Learning as Development* is this: “. . . [W]hat would international development become if viewed through the prism of human development?” (p. 2). Specifically, he suggests, it is learning that lies at the core of development, for individuals, families, and societies. And learning, he argues, provides the foundation for quality of life, economic success, health, and other important social goods.

There is an echo here of the twentieth-century economist E. F. Schumacher, who asserted in his 1973 book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, that “The best aid to give is intellectual aid, a gift of useful knowledge. A gift of knowledge is infinitely preferable to a gift of material things” (p. 197). Both Schumacher and Wagner focus on those in greatest need—the people of low-income nations—and the hope of improving their lives. Wagner divides his discussion into four major sections: Development, Learning, Educational Institutions, and Trends and Challenges. Within each part there are multiple chapters, each beginning with an anecdote illustrating an important aspect of education as an influence on the life of a person in a developing country.

Although the book is richly and densely documented with evidence and conclusions from research, the anecdotes are an important contribution, because each shows, in a personal way, the profound effects of education: Will a young Spanish-speaking man lose job opportunities to better-educated applicants who can also speak

English? How does parental illiteracy influence a child's ability to learn to read? What are the chances that poorly educated youth, displaced from rural occupations by environmental degradation, will find meaningful work in an over-crowded urban center? Wagner builds the case for the importance of learning and education through a series of issue-oriented chapters, beginning with the troubled history of colonialism and empire building. Empire builders generally did not understand or acknowledge local values and modes of living, and often assumed they had the right (or duty) to dominate peoples whom they saw as less fortunate. In the aftermath of the colonial period, the focus of rich nations was economic development, and in the eyes of many, poor countries were seen simply as sources of raw materials for industrialization and as potential markets for manufactured products. Too often, the result for many people has been poverty and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

Wagner discusses the traditional roles of economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and psychologists, pointing out both the shortcomings and the contributions of each, and stressing the need for solutions that focus on human development and that extend beyond the limits of any particular discipline. Psychologists, for their part, have sometimes contributed to ethnocentric views of racial inferiority and perceived deficient mental aptitudes in developing countries, but in more recent times have been leaders in the study of learning and instruction. Nevertheless, only a small percentage of the world's psychological research has as its focus the people of developing countries.

In framing the concept of development, Wagner makes a distinction between economic development and lifespan human development. The former, he notes,

emphasizes such concerns as the effect of level of schooling on a country's economy; the latter is concerned with maximizing human capital along the lines of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model. International development workers have learned that knowledge of lifespan development, including the role of cultural experience, is crucial to developmental progress. This discussion of lifespan development leads to the important role of lifelong learning, recognized as an aspiration within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and emphasizing gender equity, literacy, numeracy, sustainability, qualified teachers, and upgraded education facilities that are accessible and safe.

Although learning is often associated with educational institutions, much learning also takes place in other settings. Wagner explores a learning framework that recognizes the importance of overlapping contexts and practices, formal and non-formal, and more or less structured. He highlights the importance not only of the environments and activities that we typically consider *schooling*, but also the learning that occurs in settings like marketplaces, television viewing, peer conversations, and bedtime stories. Not surprisingly, children's learning is related to such variables as parental education and economic standing, as well as the language spoken in the home and its relation to languages used in schools or other official contexts. Wagner reports that more than 200 million children of school age speak different languages at home than in such more public settings.

Universal education has not always been an international goal. Nevertheless, primary school enrollment rates, especially in low-income countries, have risen significantly over the past three decades. At the same time, dropout rates are high,

children in many places are learning only a small proportion of the curriculum that is taught, and in numerous low-income countries cultural values and gender discrimination keep many school-age girls at home. Teachers are often poorly prepared, and in some developing countries large majorities of students, after attending school for two or three years, cannot read any words at the second-grade level. Furthermore, in Sub-Saharan African countries, numerous students, sometimes as many as a dozen, may have to share a single textbook in reading or mathematics. As Wagner makes clear, schooling creates opportunity; unfortunately, however, problems like poor facilities, over-crowded classrooms, teachers who are absent or off task, teaching in nonnative languages, and lack of textbooks may mean that schooling does not always lead to learning.

There has been a worldwide explosion of use of information and communication technologies, and Wagner documents this proliferation in several ways, including the rapid increase in mobile technology subscriptions, regional spending for such technology around the world, and the billions of daily uses of social media. However, he also reports that technological innovations do not always get into the hands of students, and that hopes for dramatic effects on learning have sometimes been exaggerated. In some cases, well-intended efforts to provide schools with innovative technology have been thwarted by local worries about theft or damage, as in the case of a headmaster who proudly showed that he had kept 50 computers, still in their original boxes, locked up and safe for more than a year. The headmaster was apparently oblivious to the speed with which such equipment moves toward obsolescence. Of course, not all technologies that facilitate learning are designed expressly for use in education; smartphones, for instance, have multiple uses, including retrieval of useful information.

And technology has not always been a boon to learning; Wagner reports, for example, the results of a large multi-national study suggesting that reading achievement decreased as a function of frequency of Internet browsing among high school students. He outlines a framework for discussion of technological applications that includes identification of purposes, devices, end users, and contexts. Together, these components can contribute to design solutions to address educational problems.

In considering possibilities for innovative use of technology, Wagner proposes several ideas. Among these are provision of local content, including support of mother-tongue languages in primary schools; study of use of mobile technologies, to enable educational institutions to determine whether/how they could be used to support learning; enabling teachers to receive information and materials digitally; conducting inventories of devices among marginalized groups; and creating design solutions, with sufficient resources, specific to disadvantaged populations. As new devices and applications continue to appear, such thoughtful approaches to their use may enhance the likelihood that technology can help, not hinder, efforts to support improved learning.

Throughout this book, Wagner marshals evidence in support of the foundational nature of human learning, drawing upon research from many disciplines. But the most important chapter may be the one dealing with globalization and environment. Here, in a message at odds with that of many politicians and economists, he makes the case that growth is not the answer to climatic and environmental threats. Instead, in the context of a discussion of urbanization, globalization, and the effects of conflict and migration, he shows the compelling relation between education and environmental vulnerability and sustainability, including the fact that climate change disasters have already produced

degradation of education in a number of developing countries. While the importance of sustainability education is gaining attention in Western institutions of higher education (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2016; Hocking, McCormack, Nagpal, & Lugg, 2017), Wagner also discusses the integration of environmental adaptation in school curricula in developing countries—an approach that may increase adaptive capacity and save lives.

While contemplating the array of variables that influence learning and education, and in turn recognizing the contribution of learning to many aspects of cultural well-being, psychologists reading this book might wonder what psychological science has to offer. Wagner addresses this issue in Chapter 11, Measurement of Learning, where he notes the fact that the data base available to teachers and educational decisionmakers is often weak. Teachers and testers may be poorly trained and resources limited, resulting in poor data collection. In addition to presenting essential methodological characteristics (e.g., reliability, validity, and research designs), Wagner points up the inherent tension between etic (universal) and emic (context-specific) approaches to research and assessment. Each has its place: The former may be useful when comparing outcomes across cultures, but also often reflects the hegemony of Western mainstream psychology; context-specific approaches may be more appropriate in non-Western developing cultures, where needs may be quite different (e.g., Allwood, 2018). Depending on local needs and aims, either (or both) can be useful. However, if those aiming to aid development fail to achieve deep understanding of cultural context, the credibility of their efforts will inevitably suffer. Psychological scientists can also contribute to the “unpacking” of key variables; too often, researchers have assumed that culture is a fundamental cause of behavioral differences. However, one might question

(and psychological scientists could explore) the role of such cultural features as industrialization, politics, or availability of educational resources.

Wagner provides a particularly useful discussion of approaches to educational assessment at the national level, comparing and contrasting large-scale cross-national assessments with those he calls “smaller, quicker, and cheaper” (SQC). Although SQC assessments have some limitations in such dimensions as sampling, standardization, and cross-cultural comparability, they offer the advantages of culture-specific content, cost effectiveness, and speed of implementation. They also allow for more frequent assessment, providing truly useful feedback “. . . for teachers, schools, and students, whose lives could be affected positively by the results . . .” (p. 227).

Throughout this book, Wagner’s focus returns repeatedly to the learning needs of poor people, whom, referring to Prahalad (2006), he calls the “bottom of the pyramid”—the people ignored by large corporations. Poverty, Wagner argues, replicates itself from one generation to the next, and it is learning that holds the promise of improved life quality. He has assembled a readable, wide-ranging array of empirical sources that, taken together, help to illuminate both the promise and the problems associated with learning in developing countries. Improvements in learning lead to dramatic long-term gains in health, social costs, dropout rates, and well-being; these effects are illustrative of the outcomes that lead Wagner to the conclusion “. . . that learning is both a useful way to measure success in international development, and a critical guarantor for the future of the world’s children” (p. 3). *Learning as Development* is a useful compendium for those, especially psychological scientists, who might wish to join in the effort. The book is both accessible and empirically credible, pointing the reader to the question

posed by Schumacher (1973): “If we talk of promoting development, what have we in mind—goods or people?” (p. 191). Dan Wagner’s answer seems clear.

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