

## **EXPANDING CONCEPT OF LEARNING TO LEARN**

*Hiroshi Azuma PhD*

Bunkyo Women's University, Japan.

The concept of "learning to learn" is both new and old. It is old because the phrase was used and elaborated in the early 1960s by Jerome Bruner and others, and the original idea perhaps dates back to John Dewey in 1920s. The rapid rate of accumulation and obsolescence of scientific and social knowledge in that period made people doubt whether the receptive learning of currently accepted knowledge was an appropriate education for future citizens. The accumulated knowledge would be quantitatively too large for one person to store in his brain, and even if it were possible, a good portion of that knowledge would become useless within a few decades. So educational leaders rightly emphasized the need to switch the goal from accumulation of knowledge to the ability and readiness to learn new or needed knowledge.

The concept of "learning to learn" thus included intrinsic curiosity, critical thinking and contextualization. This concept was a driving engine of the curriculum reform movement which took place in the early 60s and received worldwide popularity. Instead of learning everything, students should acquire the ability to learn so that effective learning could take place whenever environmental need or intrinsic curiosity demands it. The ability to learn in this context was still about the learning of contents although these could extend far beyond the contents of textbooks.

The concept, however, has assumed a new look in the early 80s, with the advent of the so-called information revolution. The information media have been computerized at great speed. The knowledge and skill to handle those media have become crucial for effective learning. Media and computer literacy are now one of the important targets of school education. Not only the contents, but the means to reach those contents are subjected to learning. Like reading, which was the medium of learning, later turned into the content to be taught, computers have now become a content of teaching. In the '80s, computer literacy meant familiarity with hardware and software. Literacy training included keyboard skills, programming with Basic and Fortran, etc. It was believed that learning in the computer era would be built on those skills.

However, technological advances soon made those skills unnecessary for learning through computerized media. Without any knowledge of hardware or software, and without special training, one can explore the vast world of information on the internet. The ability to learn again become more closely linked to the acquisition of the cognitive map of the sphere of information. In a way,

it seems that after 70 years of exploration we have returned back to John Dewey. Aside from computerization, a new learning task is emerging for the citizens of the new century. As globalization of economy and industry proceeds, the world is becoming more and more interdependent. In the 20th century education aimed at personal excellence of individuals. In the 21st century the readiness to understand people, help people and cooperate with people across national and cultural borders will be needed on top of personal excellence. Learning to learn the thoughts, attitudes and feelings of others is the new learning task. Not enough has been discussed about the means to foster this learning.

Recently, the Ministry of Education issued the final revision of a document titled "The Program for Education Reform". This will be treated as the guideline along which educational reform in the coming years should proceed. It will be reviewed by councils and implemented gradually from 1999.

The document starts by pointing out that, up to now, Japanese education inclined to be a one way teaching of knowledge and tended to underplay the ability of independent learning and thinking. Also, having been preoccupied by equality in education, sufficient attention was not given to variety of personality and ability. The educational potentiality of families and local communities declined. Problems like school bullying, school absenteeism, misconduct and violence among youngsters are related to this basic problem.

Following this analysis, the Ministry identifies four major directions for reform. The first priority is the "education of mind".

What they call the "education of mind" is to foster the respect for social rules, and the sense of justice, ethics and empathy, which jointly form the wisdom and the will for better and more harmonious living.

Apparently, the need to foster these skills and the will to understand others and to empathize with them is felt by the Ministry. They are rather unimaginative, through, in proposing ways to make students learn those skills and attitudes. Their proposal is little more than curriculum humanization and moral education. And for that matter, nobody has spelled out convincingly what we should do to foster this new "learning to learn".

However, skills in understanding people are accumulating in social and clinical psychology, and the formation of the "theory of mind" has become a hot topic in developmental psychology.

Hopefully, this expanded concept of "learning to learn" will be the catalyst for revitalizing education in the coming century.