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Studentship and Membership: A Study of Roles in Learning

It is a curious fact that even the most radical political approaches to education as a social issue of growing prominence still attach their arguments and nostrums to the education of children and youth. It has not yet become apparent in many of the centres of public debate and analysis that the educational system can never again be considered a matter of concentration on the young. That this is true is not simply because of the contemporary awareness of governments of the close relationship of productivity and prosperity to trained and retrained manpower, nor because of the recently resulting availability of substantial financial support for an enterprise of this kind. Actually, the latter situation has prompted voices within organizations like the Canadian Teachers' Federation to argue that an imbalance in support has already occurred, and that elementary education, where all begins, is being slighted in favour of secondary and post-secondary. Rather the argument that we can no longer concentrate only on the young is based on two more fundamental factors that seem at the moment at any rate to have the right to be treated as facts.

Any system of endeavour seems to breed its own contradictions; education, conceived as a publicly-supported concentration of teaching resources on the young, is no exception. It is perfectly obvious that there are now some problems, problems in fact created by the very nature and existence of our present system with all its achievements, that cannot be solved by further fixing our full attention on childhood education. Planning an effective attack on poverty and the provision of proper educational opportunities for women, adjusted to the new styles of life demanded by, or made possible by, our present society, are two cases in point. Even if we took all the available money and resources and invested them in the best possible elementary and secondary system for all children, we would not be closer to reaching these goals. Indeed, we might be further away.

The second fact is that an increasing number of adults seem to choose freely to continue their education or learning, and that the degree to which they do so is a direct reflection of the amount and kind of education they have had within the conventional child-centred system. From all the somewhat sparse research done on the participation of adults in some form of continuing education, one message comes through consistently. For the

most part, those individuals who are engaged in adult education received more education to start with. The meaning of this fact is not quite clear and is subject to interpretation. The preponderance of good starters in the total population of engaged adults will no doubt decline as more and more retraining and remedial programs get under way, but there seems no reason to believe this basic factor will change. Those people who go furthest, and with the best records of success, in the child and youth-centred systems are the most likely to associate themselves with some form of continuing education.

A number of interpretations are possible. The relation between education, occupation and upward mobility in our technological society is, of course, evident; or it may simply be a matter of habit formation — people learn to like going to school. This latter explanation would account for the repetition of patterns of administration and instruction, some good, some atrocious, at the adult level. The slaves may simply have learned to love their chains.

Whatever the interpretation, it appears that this trend is not likely to change very quickly. In the years ahead, this will present adult education in this country with a very large problem of numbers. If, as is being argued, the success of the present system implies the demand for access to continuing education, then an increasing proportion of the present school population will make those demands felt in the next few years as they pour out of the conventional system. Secondly, an increasing proportion of those just out of school with good starts are associating themselves with some form of continuing education. Based on American estimates, the number of Canadian adults pursuing some regular, organized program is probably about three million. Finally, there are substantial pockets of adults who did not get even a reasonable start for a variety of reasons and who must, because of the demands of the economy and the society as a whole, be brought into some productive contact with continuing education. A recent statistic to the effect that nearly half the Canadian labour force has a grade eight education or less puts the latter case pretty dramatically, when you consider that the United States now accepts grade eight as the base line of functional literacy.

To be realistic about those potential demands suggests that we had better consider how to meet them and face the costs. This means either a drastic increase in the numbers of existing conventional institutions, a dramatic increase in the use to which we put existing educational capital — for example, 24 hour use of present schools or the invention of whole new types of institutions and techniques, some of which are implicit in the development of educational television and a great many other new devices. It probably means a combination of all three. But before we get too firmly launched, we also need some more profound consideration of adult learning and some of its manifestations.

What happens to familiar patterns of learning when they manifest themselves as adult activities? What do adults actually do when they

engage in learning? What is the quality, the style of the experience? To answer these questions we need not only empirical research but the perceptions of artists, novelists, painters, television directors and the like. But education has not attracted many imaginations of quality in the past and there is some danger in waiting for it to do so. The fact that it is adults and not children engaged in the learning may hurry up the process a little. There is some indication of this happening at the moment. The omnipresence of education perhaps makes its institutional settings as good a venue for current fiction as any other. There have been one or two television series devoted to educational settings and the murder thriller has been located there in a few instances. "Don by day, done by night" or "Why he preferred to teach at night" are the usual approaches. They do in fact throw some light on the experience even within these stereotyped forms, but not very much. The fascinating subtleties involved in responsible, mature adults engaged in learning have still not gripped the artistic imagination. So we must continue to depend, at least for a time, on the analytical reflections and controlled observations of educators and social scientists in our effort to understand the phenomena with which we are dealing.

The purpose of the present exploration is to examine two major roles in which adult learning occurs, to describe some of their characteristics and to speculate on how an acceptance of these roles may affect the decisions of planners facing the impressive growth in adult education. In particular we are interested in suggesting how learning is related to social change and how people and agencies interested in social change of one sort or another can understand this relationship. For example, a great many countries, Canada included, are interested in community development as an intrument by means of which groups of individuals can improve their standard of living and the environment on which that depends and in which they live. Obviously there is a learning factor involved since individuals alter their behaviour permanently only through their own action. But the relationship between the role of individual learning in that context and the role it plays in the more formal educational settings has never been made clear. The result is that the two enterprises are conceived and administered entirely separately; what is more, are often at loggerheads with each other. The present analysis may help clear up some of the ambiguities.

If we take the entire spectrum of adult learning — that is, from the adult student laboriously pursuing an ordered series of courses towards some degree or certificate awarded by an established institution, to the man or woman acquiring through observation or attendance at an evening workshop the minimum skills of running a meeting or directing a project of some kind — it becomes quite clear that there are two main roles within which most adult learning is accomplished. In the first case the role is as a *student,* the formal, institutionalized, conventional role created by organized education. The latter case demands the role of a *member,* a less

formal, less organized, less conventional group of behaviours, and one certainly less associated with learning or education. Despite this fact, it is safe to argue that in the past, and in the present, and probably in the future, far more adult learning is accomplished in the *member* role than in the *student* role. Yet it is of the greatest importance that we understand the difference between them and the nature of each.

One interesting fact is that in the practice of education the roles are not mutually exclusive. On the part of both the learner and the institution, in varying degrees, one seems to beget the other. This suggests, as we shall argue, that there is some psychological quality in each role that is of very great consequence to learning. However, it helps at the outset to examine each separately as though one were entirely distinct from the other.

The student role is quite familiar to everyone, so much so that it is rarely examined. One reason for this is probably because it is so implicit in the formal institutions that we normally associate with learning and teaching that we never have admitted the existence of contrasting roles associated with learning. Another reason is that compulsory education, from which we draw most of our examples, by virtue of its requiring compulsory participation, at least physically, has eliminated most of the spontaneous characteristics of membership and quite sharply emphasized and distorted the student role to the exclusion of any other. Everyone becomes familiar with being a student early in the game.

The outstanding characteristic of the student role is that it is completely dependent. This characteristic is established early because the child in the school system is dependent in every sense, just as he is dependent outside of school. He is a ward of the educational agency which operates *in loco parentis* — with a vengeance. But the dependency continues long after the individual's emergence from compulsory attendance and dependence on his parents. In fact it continues right to the end of graduate school and after. The authority of parents and paternal school systems is replaced quite unobtrusively and almost (at least until recently) painlessly, by the authority of knowledge, competence, and skill. It is replaced also by the institutional control of rewards and accreditation, that is, of access to employment and prestige. It used to be that the authority of age and length of experience also played a role, but recently students have grown older, and specialized teachers younger so this is not quite so prominent a factor as it once was. It is in fact the product from both directions of rapid social change, wherein the young learn the new things earlier and faster, and the old must go on learning longer. Above it is the institution that determines what will be learned, when and where and how long it should take. It is also the institution which possesses the ultimate power of telling the student how well it has been learned, completely independently of the student's own judgment.

The student's role is a highly individualized one. The institution creates competition among individual students by public individual evaluations,

by rewards, and by its system of accreditation. The student is grouped according to criteria established by the institution; the groups are rational and sociological, not psychological except at the upper limits unless inspired teaching is accompanied by some luck. Thus the relationship is predominantly one of student to institution, and only secondarily of student to student despite the hopes and protections of good teachers. However, this is not to say that the student is treated pedagogically as an individual (a relationship much touted by educational theorists) but only that he is treated socially, and philosophically as one. Courses are not tailored to his needs, but tuition fees, rewards and administration are. The student role is one of constant conflicts between self-advancement and gratification which is emphasized by one aspect of the teaching institution, and loyalties to the collective demands created by the circumstances of group instruction. The nature of these demands becomes much clearer when you examine the situation of the adult or part-time student, where the conditions of day-time participation, all of which are collective in effect, are diminished and the individual self-enhancing characteristics are maximized.

The role of the part-time student also reveals another characteristic: the cash relationship that exists between student and institution. It is, however, a curious one, for the student is buying a product completely controlled and determined by the institution. To be cynical, what he wants as well as knowledge is the *imprimatur* of the institution, and he is willing to surrender his choice, his judgment, his cash and his time and energy to get it. Obviously, because both students and institutional personnel are human beings, there are all sorts of adjustments and accommodations involved. The teaching and learning that is in fact accomplished would not be possible without them. But these are all "chancey," i.e., individual choices made within the bounds of institutional relationships which in fact make no formal place for them.

Finally the student role is quite self-conscious, a characteristic which also reinforces the individualizing aspects. The individual has, once the compulsory period is passed, chosen to involve himself in learning, chosen to alter his behaviour in terms of characteristics presented by an outside institution. Not only does he engage in the behaviour required as a means of learning (attendance at classes, writing, studying, memorizing) but more subtly he has committed himself to adopt behaviour that the institution regards as preferable and is prepared to reward. There is also in the student role a sense of preparation, of separation, indeed of isolation from action and decision-making while the period of learning, of adjustment to a new self takes place. This isolation, now being so vigorously challenged by the militant, collectivized university student is embodied in the very architecture and setting of most formal institutions. Recently the growing accessibility of the city university has been deliberately challenged by the enclosed, unitary, seminary-like buildings of Simon Fraser University and Scarborough College. Even, or perhaps especially with the adult

part-time student, who lives a real life between attendance at classes, the element of separation for the sake of preparation is apparent.

The student role then contains the following characteristics: it is dependent, individual, self-conscious, market-oriented in the sense of purchasing a service, and self-centred. It is also on the positive side made up of participation in a regular, repetitive, systematic series of activities, exposed to both public and private scrutiny. Both the scrutiny and the activities are designed and controlled by others who possess the power of inclusion or exclusion over the student. These characteristics are a mixture of a whole series of planned and unplanned developments, and obviously possess both advantages and disadvantages.

The member role is in its pure sense almost a complete contrast. It is present in all education (as we shall later describe), but in its purest form it can only exist where free choice of participation and association are possible. Thus for children the member role can only really occur outside of, or tangentially to formal education, which does not allow a free choice. For adults it occurs for the most part outside formal education, though increasingly it is converging towards it, and in some cases, such as in community development, a clear attempt is being made to incorporate its power within a developmental educational enterprise.

The member role occurs when adults associate in a group of any size in order to achieve a specific goal. The goal can be completely internal to the group of associates, such as providing an activity in which they engage to their own satisfaction, for example a chess club or a sports club of some kind; or it may be a goal which involves influencing the community at large, such as a charitable or political group. The association occurs because of a mutual agreement about the importance of the goal, but it also includes satisfactions in the association itself which may be personal, professional or of some other kind. It is of the greatest importance to understand the subtle balance that the group maintains between individual membership satisfactions and the pursuit of the stated goal. There is a whole field of social psychology devoted to understanding the nature of this balance and the factors involved in it. The learning element enters when the group as a whole or its leadership realizes that, in order to accomplish the stated goal, some special skills or some particular knowledge must be acquired by some or all of the group members. In more sophisticated groups, or large groups, these skills often turn out to be hierarchical in nature, related to positions in the group and the degree or length of participation. Sometimes the skills are as simple as learning how to conduct a meeting or understand a group in operation, sometimes they are as technical as learning how to deal with outside groups like legislative bodies, technical experts or whole communities. Sometimes a highly sophisticated group hires specialized assistance, such as a lawyer or an engineer, but even this act implies the need for some learning among the group members. The simplest and most important act from our point of view occurs when the group hires some specialist to

teach all or some of its members how to perform certain functions or how to understand some complex problem.

The member role in learning now becomes clear. The member is neither dependent upon institutional authority nor particularly self-conscious about the engagement in learning. It is the collective goal that is important, not individual enhancement, and thus the learning is merely a means to a collective end. The member did not for the most part become a member to learn something of advantage to himself but to do something. The goal is both determined and to a degree described in detail by the group, and the teacher is hired to provide help towards that goal. If the teacher deviates too far from the member's perception of the means to that goal, either the group dismisses the teacher, or members begin to drift away from the group. The teacher carries with him the presumed authority of relevant knowledge and to a certain degree the authority of the institution from which he comes, but it is a fragile authority which must be proved and won repeatedly in intercourse with the group. The cash relationship exists between a group of learners and the individual teacher, rather than between institutionalized learners and the collective teachers entrenched in a large institution. This of course has its dangers but it does mean a reduction in the individualization and self-consciousness of the learner. While the actual teaching and learning may enhance these characteristics, the member generally does not see himself as an individual engaged in a selfish or personal undertaking but as a part of a group engaged in a collective social endeavour.

Finally the member is not, except temporarily, aware of a sense of preparation or isolation. The need for learning emerges from action and is part of it, however interesting the periods of teaching and experimentation in learning may be. The physical venue of this experience is almost always the learner's familiar action-bound setting — the union hall, the conference room, the community centre — and the teacher comes to him rather than he to the teacher.

The activity of learning for the member then may be of a somewhat sporadic nature, subject to the choice of the learner as to what he will learn, when and for how long. The possibility of delayed satisfaction necessitated by the pyramiding of learning experience, seen as necessary by the teacher or expert, is relatively infrequent though not unknown.

The member then engages in real learning, but it is an experience seen as a means to a collective goal, undertaken by the choice of and in circumstances determined by the learner, and as part of the collective satisfaction of membership.

The distinction between these two approaches is fundamental, and provides an important lesson for any teacher or administrator who has engaged himself in the more chaotic regions of informal and formal adult education. The files of any adult educator are full of plausible, theoretical programs of education developed for groups, where the imposition of

the student role began to conflict with the satisfaction and needs of members and the result was the complete failure of the program.

Before attempting to put some pedagogical value on the performance of these two learning roles, it will be helpful to examine some of their combinations, for it immediately becomes apparent that all teaching endeavours, compulsory or non-compulsory, and all institutions, have tried to compensate for the lack of one or the other and to provide some balance of the two. It does appear that the dimensions and satisfactions of each are absolutely essential to the success of any kind of learning. It is also apparent that many of the major changes now occurring in education in Canada and the United States involve alterations in this balance. To put it briefly, it is apparent that there is now a major attempt on the part of individuals normally conceived of as predominantly *students* to become *members,* and conversely of members to become more like students.

Whatever the present circumstances involving the shifts from studentship to membership and *vice versa,* any logical or historical perspective on educational endeavours reveals the fascinating love-hate relationship between the two roles. Taking the compulsory education system, the dialectic is instructive. The student role is provided initially by the compulsory system. The individual child is compelled to attend school, and legislated into the role of student. No natural, spontaneous grouping is either permitted or encouraged; no class lines, no necessary kind of association, or kinship is acknowledged. Every child in a certain economic, geographical or political region is forced to attend a certain school. This condition prevails until the end of compulsory schooling and even after that, since the method of central financing of institutions, dominant in North America, with few exceptions, insists on attendance at specific institutions. Even before the creation of compulsory schoolings, geography, pedagogical logistics, and other factors inclined the educational enterprise towards the emphasis on the student role and away from membership. Perhaps so long as the student is a dependent, and what is to be learned even by choice is thoroughly institutionalized, the student role is inescapable.

What is at once amazing is that having eliminated the factor of free choice and determination, the contemporary school at every level sets out to cultivate assiduously the psychological and sociological characteristics of membership. To a certain degree the attempt succeeds, for the collective conditions of learning, plus the tireless and expensive efforts of the institutions do produce a kind of belonging. The elements of nostalgia for P.S. 101, good old Lord Belvedere High, and the class of 6T9 from some Alma Mater or another are pretty viable. The financial security of public schools and high schools has not provoked them to more than a minimal exploitation of this sense of belonging, but universities and other more financially diverse institutions have cultivated it to a considerable degree.

If one examines the very pedagogy of contemporary education at all levels, though it has had less effect at the higher levels, one discovers that half of it or better is made up of techniques designed to recreate the conditions of membership. In all of the attempts to stimulate the imagination, involve the child, youth or young adult in some form of choice, to develop class, group or year loyalty, what is actually being attempted is to create the conditions of membership, which apparently have something to do with learning. Outside the classroom, of course, the sky is the limit. Athletics, clubs of every kind — all their characteristics are familiar within the context of an institution where primary attendance is not freely chosen. It often appears that the learning that occurs even within these secondary membership groups, which often by virtue of enforced contact become primary membership groups — for example, the cult of the "teenager" so obviously and inadvertently created by schools — is far more compelling and powerful than that accomplished in the classroom. Almost all surveys of the attitudes of the participants seems to confirm the power of these associations in their lives. At the university level, where the choice is a little more free, where either institution or individual is free to alienate the other, the contrasting form becomes clearer and more interesting. The function of membership has always been at the heart of the curious hybrid that the contemporary university has become. It is not just skill or knowledge for cash that the university has traditionally offered, but a certain style of life, present and future, that suggests a kind of membership. The phrase "community of scholars," which has recently become such an object of mockery, is indicative. The clearest indication of this can be seen in the curious position of the part-time student. No matter how well he does class by class or grade by grade (and part-time students indeed do well) he is never quite accepted as legitimate or very important in the life of the university because he never really qualifies as a member. The final indication of this came some years ago when Brooklyn College began experimenting with a perennial well-meaning, if muddleheaded, preoccupation with adult education — the translating of academic credits into adult experience or *vice versa*. An elaborate system of equivalents was worked out until the time when a very mature candidate appeared whose experience, by whatever complicated algebra one used, easily exceeded the number of academic credits needed for a Master's degree. And yet the College, understandably, balked at giving him one. Why? Obviously because something other than the relentless accumulation of credits is involved in education, however much the institution is outwardly dominated by them. The individual must somehow become a member of the institution.

One presently interesting fact, however, is that the bulk of the activities within the university designed to stimulate membership has been perhaps valuable psychologically, but sociologically completely fraudulent. In no way did these activities, in fact, create real conditions of membership, but were designed to conceal the basic dependence and isolation of the student. Recent student agitation for real membership in the community

of scholars has made this sham of student government and busy-work clubs all too obvious both to the students and everyone else. The cultivation of the outward forms of membership in the interest of learning sometimes has unexpected effects.

Recently this dynamic if spurious balance which our formal institutions have tried to maintain between studentship and membership has been breaking down. It is most evident in the senior years of high school and in the universities, but it is quite clear in the work with high school dropouts, where reliance is placed on spontaneous grouping as a basis for teaching rather than conventional studentship.

If the contemporary student wishes to bring the learning to which he is either required or forced to submit closer to comprehensible action, it is equally clear that, at the other end of the age scale, in the traditional field of adult education, the preoccupation has been with bringing action closer to learning. Here traditionally the preoccupation is with the adult, already engaged in a variety of memberships, and involved in the normal decision-making of adult life. The attempt of all adult education is to bring to this decision-making, which cannot be set aside or stopped, though it may be temporarily delayed, the benefits of learning. The educational enterprise here is always tailored to the active milieu of the adult learner, because he will learn only under these circumstances. He will only enter the environment of learning if it seems relevant to the action in which he is engaged. If formal education seems a process of providing answers to questions the learner has not yet asked, and therefore fabricating situations in which the questions are stimulated, informal or adult education is a constant attempt to shape codified or institutionalized knowledge so that it is relevant to the questions the learner or potential learner by virtue of his experience is asking. This experience is largely collective in one way or another and for this reason the adult learner most often appears as a member.

Membership organizations, that is organizations whose membership is to a very large extent based on common occupations or common lifestyles, have been knocking at the doors of formal institutions demanding that their special programs should have both the advantage of the expert teaching and experience that the faculty of those institutions possess, and the prestige of having their program validated by these institutions. The problems inherent in this development are substantial. While the membership characteristics do ensure a high commitment to learning, always a satisfaction to any teacher, the exclusiveness implied results in a serious misuse of the power of the teaching institution, and leads to what is actually happening, the return to the contemporary scene of a group of guilds.

There is some irony in this development, for the membership - studentship conflict was originally fought in the middle ages between the powerful membership guilds, including the ecclesiastical ones that controlled

access to knowledge on behalf of their members, and the freer student-oriented schools and universities. For some years, particularly at Bologna, the students formed their own free guild and controlled the professors. Obviously the same phenomenon is appearing at Berkeley and other American institutions in the form of underground universities that are really student guilds. But because youth, the basis of these guilds, is temporary and fleeting, they are much less dangerous than the professional or occupational guilds that last a whole lifetime and beyond.

The conflict between scholastic and monastic education of the late middle ages is another example of the same conflict. The monastery was a membership organization based on an ideological commitment and the striving for a way of life. Students were unrestricted in subject; it was the way in which subjects were treated that mattered. In some ways the monastery reminds one of the contemporary scientific research organization, with its apprenticeship base, and its limited numbers, devoted not to specific studies but to supporting a way of life — namely research. The membership qualities of these institutions, with their preservation of learning and teaching in its purest form, indicate why they seem more desirable to many researchers than the universities with their dominant student qualities of life. The curious fact to be observed here is that under some particular conditions it is the membership organizations that appear to be most isolated, and yet closest to some brand or concept of action. It would be useful to us to understand better what those conditions are.

It would be easy to put a value on one or other of these roles. Obviously the educational enterprise of the past century chose the role of student as opposed to that of member, knowingly or unknowingly. Formal education is always the instrument of an establishment, however enlightened it may seem or be, so that it is always performing a function other than or as well as its stated aims. The individualism of the 19th and early 20th centuries was perhaps behind the emphasis on the student role that has been so dominant. It represented a deliberately constructed attempt to destroy old collectivities and open up the society to more individual enterprise and freedom. The demands of learning are such that the characteristics of membership must be cultivated, but always within the iron-clad bounds of the student role.

Recent examinations, the most important being John Porter's devastating critique of Canadian education in the *Vertical Mosaic,* suggest two things: first, that studentship has its limits and that as education grows more powerful in the life of the society a new membership is being or has been created; second, that it has not been as individual as it seemed.

It is difficult not to respond more positively to the warmth and spontaneity of membership as opposed to the worst bureaucratic aspects of studentship. It is the qualities of membership in learning that the teacher, any teacher, really seeks with his methods, questions, group projects,

and discussion; but despite the caution about unwarranted affection, a deeper inclination must be acknowledged. What appears to be true, returning to our original question of the relationships of learning and social change, is that the membership role is the principal one within which social change actually occurs. It is difficult not to conclude that the student-based teaching system exists only after a major social change has occurred, and is created only to sustain it, not to bring about new change. In short, formal education cannot do anything but support the *status quo*. Thus the conundrum that George Counts placed before all contemporary education in the late thirties in his question "Dare the schools build a new social order?" can only be answered by "No". They dare not because they cannot. All formal education, by virtue of its essential student basis, is a support to a social order, not a revolutionary element in it. It may offer criticism and comment from time to time, but this is in the direction merely of mild reform, not of fundamental change.

It is from the learning arising from membership that real change comes, and this is perhaps why community development movements in whatever form they ocur, based as they are totally on membership roles, find themselves in such conflict with formal education. The curious thing is that as formal education grows in power and size, it tends to lose its ability to maintain the student role and to spawn the real manifestations of the functions it has always played with for pedagogical purposes — that is the energies of membership, which can become seeds of its own destruction.

This dialectic, alternately suppressed and enhanced by our social and political decisions, is important for us to understand. We have used it unknowingly, but we have used it during a period when the capital resources of learning, information, research and teaching, were relatively easy to control. In the present society where access to information is very much greater, when a variety of popular media may suddenly be taken seriously, the problem is quite a different one. The balance between the calm, controlled, bureaucratic, rational student learning and the more spontaneous, explosive, membership learning will be much more difficult to maintain in the future. Yet it is exactly that balance, risky as it is, on which the learning society must be built.