

# **A Declaration on Learning: How do you respond?**

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## **Introduction**

The following is the result of considerable deliberation from thirteen of us. We are all people who have devoted a great deal of our working lives to promoting effective learning and development in organizations and we have all published a great deal on the subject. In the time since we first produced this we have had varying reactions to it from 'It's not very radical' to 'It's too radical for us to implement'. Make your own mind up about it.

Ian Cunningham

## **ORIGINS OF THE DECLARATION**

As people who have researched and written extensively about effective learning, we came together in an experiment to see how far we could agree on statements about learning that would be of benefit to others and, in particular, help policy-makers and those in leadership roles. We were excited by the common ground we discovered. We are united in the belief that learning is the core process for the positive development of individuals, organizations, and society as we enter the 21st century. Learning can be the most vital, engaging, and enjoyable aspect of our personal and collective experience. Equally, learning can be difficult and the source of much of our pain and failure. The ability to learn about learning and to harness the learning process is the key to our ability to survive in a complex and unpredictable world.

## **THE CHALLENGE**

Learning reinforces the informed, conscious and discriminating choices that underpin democracy.

National policy makers must:

1. Make learning to learn one of the fundamental goals of education and training and reduce the excessive focus on knowledge and skills that can quickly become obsolete.
2. Support and invest in uncertificated learning as much as in certificated learning. Abandon the preoccupation with controls that inhibit learning (e.g. accreditation, inspection, audit, and pre-defined standards).
3. Recognize there is no such thing as a non-learner; all people are learners. The challenge is to secure the kinds, amount, and pace of learning that benefits individuals, organizations and society as a whole.
4. Encourage and support the self-management of learning (e.g. allowing learners to set their own goals and to choose how and when to learn to meet needs identified by themselves rather than by others).
5. Create schemes that remove financial obstacles to learning for individuals and socially disadvantaged groups.

6. Use participative democratic processes to promote inclusion and co-operation as a basis for learning.

7.

***Learning is the only source of sustainable development.***

**Leaders in organizations should:**

1. Commit to, proclaim and celebrate continual learning as one of the organization's most valuable capabilities.
2. Include the right to learn and develop continually in all contracts of employment.
3. Build into the agreed roles of all managers the primary need to focus on encouraging others to learn and reinforce this through personal support and coaching.
4. Be a role model for learning, by doing such things as asking questions you do not know the answers to, demonstrating how you have learned from your mistakes, articulating and sharing your own learning.
5. Have effective strategies to link individual and collective learning, both within and between groups and organizations.
6. Routinely encourage curiosity, inquiry and diversity of thought as the norm to ensure dialogue about strategy and decision making at all levels.
7. Encourage people to challenge, innovate and experiment.

***Learning to learn is the most fundamental learning of all.***

**Teachers, trainers and developers must:**

1. Be role models for effective learning.
2. Support learning from live problems and experience, as a central activity of work.
3. Encourage and support reflection.
4. Encourage *everyone* to have learning goals and development plans.
5. Respond to both the complexity of situations and the diversity of learners and avoid simplistic solutions that fail to create worthwhile learning.
6. Ensure everyone has the opportunity to learn how to learn effectively and to exploit the full range of opportunities available to them everyday.
7. Support people through the discomfort and uncertainty sometimes associated with learning (e.g. through mentoring, support groups and networks).
8. Invest time and effort in bringing people together to learn from each other.
9. Empower others to take responsibility for, and to manage, their own learning. Stop defining for others what they need and how those needs should be met.

***Learning is the key to developing your identity and your potential.***

**As an individual learner you should:**

1. Take responsibility for yourself as a learner - both in terms of what you seek to learn, and how - by setting your own learning goals, actively seeking the conditions or experiences that will help to achieve the goals, making demands on the system, refusing to tolerate obstacles to effective learning.
2. Make your learning (both in terms of goals and the means to achieve the goals) as conscious, self-disciplined and explicit as possible. Routinely review whether you are making progress towards your learning goals.

3. Share your learning with others as an investment with a high return in terms of personal learning.
4. Learn to exploit everyday experiences as learning opportunities - experiment, try out alternatives, ask others, invite challenge.
5. Learn with and through others as a prime vehicle for learning.
6. Explore and consciously exploit the wide range of resources for learning (e.g. the internet, coaches, mentors and colleagues).
7. Always seek and learn from feedback as well as inquiry.

## **OUR ASSERTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF LEARNING**

Learning is frequently associated with formal teaching and training which, too often, comes to be seen as irrelevant to daily life and work. Most learning takes place outside controlled classroom environments and this needs to be recognized - especially by educators and governments. It is unhelpful to link learning solely to the achievement of qualifications where systems of accreditation are often assumed to represent the totality of a person's learning and can result in unfair discriminatory practices and mere tests of short-term memory.

The critical task for government policymakers and leaders in organizations is to maximize the learning ability of people by encouraging and supporting individual and collective learning. In this way organizations, communities and societies can change and adapt more effectively. Learning can be looked upon as a *process*, for example reflecting and questioning (which can be made more effective through consciously learning to learn) or an *outcome* (which may or may not be planned).

1. Learning is not just about knowledge. It is also about skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understandings and self-awareness.
2. Learning outcomes can be incremental (building gradually on what has already been learned) or transformational (changing ways of being, thinking, feeling and acting).
3. Transformational learning, may be a struggle, take time and involve conflict over aims and outcomes.
4. By its very nature, learning is essentially individual but can also be collectively generated in groups and organizations.
5. There is no one right way to learn for everybody and for every situation.
6. We can learn from any experience - failure, success, having our expectations confirmed or having them confounded.
7. Learning processes can be conscious (which helps us exercise our control over the process) or unconscious and serendipitous.
8. Learning processes can be both planned and opportunistic. Combining the strengths of both can enhance learning effectiveness.
9. Learning outcomes can be desirable or undesirable for the learner and for others - therefore, learning always has a moral dimension.
10. Learning (both as a process and an outcome), can be both a cause of change and a consequence of change. There is no learning without change, though there can be change with insufficient learning.
11. Questioning, listening, challenging, enquiring and taking action are crucial to effective learning.
12. The learning process occurs inside the person, but making the outcomes explicit, and sharing them with others, adds value to the learning.
13. When self-managed, learning becomes more effective.

14. Learning as a process can be subject to obstacles (e.g. social exclusion, lack of resources or confidence) but the desire and ability to learn is hard to suppress.
15. Wanting to learn, and seeing the point of learning, is often crucial and makes it more likely that unexpected opportunities to learn will be exploited.
16. Mood influences the quality of learning. While not a prerequisite, enjoyment of the learning process is a significant enabler.

## **THE BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE LEARNING**

The following benefits assume that the learning in question is morally acceptable in intent, process and outcome. (This of course leaves open the question of whose morality.)

### **For society:**

1. Society, and the communities of which it is comprised, survives, adapts and thrives through developing and sharing learning.
2. A focus on articulating, valuing and sharing learning contributes to a more cohesive society where everyone's contribution is valued.
3. Individual and collective learning reinforces the informed, conscious and discriminating choices that underpin democracy.
4. Learning has the potential to create a society where diversity is valued and everyone can lead more fulfilled lives.
5. Learning (as distinct from education) helps people become active citizens in a constantly changing world.

### **For organizations:**

1. Regular and rigorous use of learning processes increases everyone's capacity to contribute to the success of organizations by challenging, reshaping and meeting its goals.
2. Learning from and with all stakeholders enhances and helps clarify purpose, vision, values and behavior.
3. A focus on learning, planned and unplanned, produces a wide range of solutions to organizational issues.
4. Learning helps achieve a balance between the pressures of long-term effectiveness and short-term efficiency.
5. Learning enables an organization to balance the demands of its stakeholders and its environment.
6. Learning, when shared, reduces the likelihood of repeated mistakes.

### **For individuals:**

1. Learning is the key to developing our identity and our potential.
2. Learning to learn is the key to effective learning.
3. Learning enables us to meet the demands of change.
4. The capacity to learn is an asset which never becomes obsolete.
5. Embracing learning helps us to understand that learning is a great deal more than just formal education and training.

6. Learning increases the range of our options. Learning about our past can help us understand the present and prepare for the future.
7. Learning expands the horizons of who we are and what we can become.
8. The continuing desire to learn fuels curiosity and progress, and restrains prejudice and parochialism.

## WHAT CERTAIN KEY TERMS SHOULD - AND SHOULD NOT – MEAN

TERM	SHOULD BE	SHOULD NOT BE
Lifelong learning	A learning approach to all life and work experience, using formal education and training as a last resort.	Ongoing compulsory formal learning events and monitoring against competency requirements.
Open learning	User friendly learning opportunities minimizing constraints of time, place, cost, access, content and process.	Repackaged and recycled correspondence and distance learning packages.
Learning society	A society in which individual and collective natural learning is a way of life and a major dynamic in social processes, encouraged and supported by formal education and training provision.	A monopolistic take-over by the institutionalized education and training industry.
Learning organization	An organization which promotes learning and sharing, supported by values, processes and investment, to enhance its capacity to create its own future.	An organization that regards training as the only legitimate mode of learning.
Self and personal development	A liberating and emancipating process for individuals as employees and citizens	Self-subjugation, discipline and enforcement of conformity to corporate and state norms.

## THE SIGNATORIES

We never set out to say all there is to say on the subject of learning, or to impose our views on others. Rather, we point to the richness and diversity of approaches to learning as an indication of its potential to achieve desirable transformations. Our goals are to stimulate discussion about the importance of learning and to resist the encroachment of narrow, dogmatic approaches that limit learning, in whatever context they occur.

This declaration reflects the thinking of us all and our passion about the importance of learning. We offer it as a basis for dialogue and action.

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