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A TRANSFORMING ECOLOGY OF LEARNING AND THE LEISURE BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

As the nation seeks to increase the level and scope of human competence, largely to meet its economic challenge, a shift from the present "education paradigm", with its narrow cognitive curriculum and emphasis on schools and colleges as the primary learning settings, to a learning paradigm that begins to account for all that we learn, its multiple settings, the several modes of learning and links the substance of learning to a comprehensive goal matrix, is underway. Such an "explicit ecology of learning" provides a more effective analytical, empirical, policy and program tool for the understanding and guidance of the learning process as instrumental to personal, institutional and societal goals.

The most significant changes in the nation's "ecology of learning" are driven by a handful of "information companies" as they support the managerial revolution taking place in corporate America. As these changes ripple into other sectors and into citizen consciousness generally profound personal and institutional adjustments will take place. The problems and opportunities for the "learning business" are explored.

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THE ECOLOGY OF LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

It is immediately self-evident that each of us has lived and learned within an "ecology of learning" in order to acquire the knowledge, skills, values, role, affective and other characteristics that make us unique human beings. As we remind ourselves of "what" we have learned and continue to learn, we might also remind ourselves that such learning has taken place in our families, communities, religious institutions, our work, recreational, health and human service settings, via the increasingly omnipresent media, and through our own self-directedness.

These reminders of the "what" and "where" of our learning must now

be joined by another reminder that "how" we learn is not limited to the active cognitive modes dominant in the educational paradigm. Much, if not most of our learning, takes place via experiential, imitative, and conditioning modes. Finally if we remind ourselves that learning is largely instrumental and functional, we confront the issue of "why" we learn what we do, and discover the economic, communal, familial and personal goals that drive the learning process. Our answers to the "what", "where", "how" and "why" questions provide the basis for describing both an individual's or a society's "ecology of learning".

Given this perspective it becomes to understand the evolution of the learning process in the past, and to give more explicit guidance to its strengthening in the light of changing challenges and opportunities. The reader may wonder why, if the idea of an "ecology of learning" is so self-evident, it is not a commonly held perspective and the basis of American education? The short answer is that, as long as the traditional sources of human learning, from family, community and church, were effective the idea of an "ecology of learning" could remain embedded. Since the premise no longer holds, the need for an explicit "ecology of learning" becomes urgent.

THE CUTTING EDGE EXAMPLE OF THE "INFORMATION COMPANIES"

Within the past decade the American consciousness of "change" has expanded enormously through the writings of Alvin Toffler, Peter Drucker, John Naisbett and a host of other "change commentators". As the business sector has turned to the challenge of economic transformation its creative adjustments have been both reported and stimulated by books like THEORY Z, IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE, INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP and a ten foot shelf of kindred publications. The image of THE MAN IN THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT opting out of a stuffy, controlling, hierarchical environment has been replaced by Naisbett's "high tech, high touch" image of an innovative, risk-taking, yet nurturing corporate environment.

While this image shift has more than its share of hyperbole it conveys the centrality of human competence, in all of its dimensions, to economic success, and the centrality of the "corporate culture" in developing and supporting such competence. Viewed in the terms of the "ecology of learning" perspective the managerial revolution is a cutting edge example of the shift to an explicit "ecology of learning" with sharper answers to the "what", "where", "why" and "how" of workplace-related learning.

Given the scope of the economic transformation modern managers require much more "information" on the changing competitive, political, regulatory, technological, financial, etc., environments in which they operate. In addition to their internal management information systems a host of external information providers has arisen to meet this need. Just examine the cutting edge acquisitions and additions within Dow Jones, Dun and Bradstreet, Times Mirror, Knight-Ridder, the Big Eight public accounting companies and a variety of smaller companies and you will see how the entrepreneurial spirit has responded to a new and emerging need. Given their existence and spirit these information

providers not only respond to management's needs, but have begun to shape and expand that need with new products and services in a kind of spiraling synergy.

Again viewed from a learning perspective the modern manager has become a continuing, self-directed learner in order to do his/her job better and the cutting-edge information companies are providing a cost-effective "curriculum" in a pedagogy that is space and time free, and utilizes all of the modern technologies. While this transformation of the corporate "ecology of learning" is still a limited phenomenon and not at all understood as a creative contribution to the nation's learning process, it provides a basis for extrapolating its impact to other sectors and to the citizenry-at-large.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEISURE BUSINESS

At its core this example of a more explicit "ecology of learning" in the business sector has two primary characteristics. First it requires that a company has a much sharper sense of its goals and its environment as the means of meeting those goals. There is a "metacognitive" consciousness that goes well beyond the level of institutional awareness in most other institutions. Second managers and other employees come to a sharper sense of their own characteristics and competencies as instrumental to company goals. The burgeoning career development field supports employee awareness and provides a means to enhance one's personal contribution to the economic process.

There is growing evidence of this "new consciousness" elsewhere in our national life, although not on the scale one finds in the corporate sector. Women especially, given their new freedom and choice, are exercising an expanded "intentionality" in managing their lives. A proliferation of life planning workshops and related self-help material in newspapers, magazines and books is rippling into our lives. The "wellness" revolution in reshaping the health care system and encouraging millions of us to be more responsible for our bodies. There is a surge of support services for more "intentional family and community development". As the information companies come to understand the transferability of their corporate management support model to help us "manage" our personal, familial, institutional and communal lives as a new line of business we will move much more rapidly toward a strengthened and explicit "ecology of learning". Clearly there will be substantial implications for the leisure business.

While many individuals and families give the same high level of planning and goal-setting to their leisure and recreation as they do to their work lives most of us do not. This is clearly not the fault of available time, disposable income, nor the availability of leisure and recreational goods and services. Any careful reading of a Sunday newspaper reveals the fantastic array of leisure and recreation riches American society offers in the arts, crafts, travel, food, sports, and all of the communications technologies from print to VCRs and personal computers. No, the problem is that we have not yet learned to be as "metacognitive" in managing our leisure as our careers. As a consequence

we tend to overinvest in our worklife and pursue our leisure in a less thoughtful way. Viewed from the vantage point of the leisure business we comprise an underdeveloped market whose resources are inadequately and inefficiently spent on leisure goods and services.

Clearly it is in the strategic interest of the leisure business to understand the cultural drama leading us to a more explicit "ecology of learning" for it will expand and sharpen the leisure market as individuals and families set sharper goals for their leisure and recreation in a better balance with their work lives.

Since the leisure business and the information business are deeply entwined through advertising, feature articles, criticism and commentary the means of disseminating the ecological "aha" are at hand. Since the information companies are already at the cutting edge in one sector they are further along and may see the opportunity confronting the leisure business before the latter does.

As the leaders of the leisure business see the need for a sharper and more explicit leisure consciousness in the citizenry they will need to pay attention to "what", "where" and "how" questions that bear on how such consciousness and commitment is earned. The roles of families, communities, schools, colleges, peer groups, media and workplaces need to be understood and strengthened not only as a ultimate social good but also as an evolving market development strategy.

Should the leaders of the leisure business wish to get their domain on the cutting edge of the nation's learning ecology they clearly need to assess the consciousness of their own domain. Is the very notion of the "leisure business" an academic abstraction or do the many subsectors of the leisure business have a sense of common membership in this central domain of our national life? If not, what is being done to deepen this necessary sense of shared and common membership. The task is not unlike what those of us who are moving the "ecology of learning" paradigm along are confronting. While families, communities, churches, schools, colleges, workplaces, media, etc., are all part of the nation's learning ecology the ecological "aha" is only beginning to happen. But as it does the sense of common membership in a shared enterprise is bound to grow and deepen.

There is clearly a special role for that small part of American higher education devoted to leisure and recreation study and training. As a key resource of the leisure business it can provide the intellectual, research, policy and programmatic vision and leadership to move both the nation and the leisure business along.