

RENAISSANCE OF THE COMMON SENSE:

*Toward a Dialectical Understanding
of Consumer Culture, Globalized Capitalism
and Adult Learning Processes*

Andrew Leverman
Mount Saint Vincent University

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education
in partial fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education

April, 2007

DEDICATION

Support comes in many ways. We all need it. I have been given it.

I would like to dedicate this work to my friends.

ABSTRACT

Cultural ways of learning and knowledge construction were, historically, traditionally, social processes moving within and between families and communities. Negotiation, sharing and cooperation were (and are) key aspects of communal life and, as community tools, they are currently undervalued much to the detriment of the natural environment and civil society. Consumerism and globalized capitalism undermine cultural ways of knowing leading to deepening crises in both nature and community. Adult educators should aid in the development of a cultural framework that nurtures everyday learning processes and fosters an understanding of ecological interconnectedness. Meeting this tremendous challenge is a vital step in achieving a sustainable balance for civil society and the broader ecology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge my parents, Barb and Doug, for their support in my ongoing efforts to figure on things.

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Nancy Taber to the writing of this thesis. Her contributions were invaluable.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Donovan Plumb . His encouragement has been never ending. He has taught me how to question things and, most importantly, he has always kept me thinking.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II: DISCONNECTION and ECOLOGY	12
CHAPTER III: WAYS OF LEARNING and VALUES	20
CHAPTER IV: THE FORMATION of CONTEXT	40
CHAPTER V: RENAISSANCE of the COMMON SENSE	57
REFERENCES	62

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

You can't have everything ... where would you put it?

- Stephen Wright,

What is common sense if not shared knowledge?

- John Ralston Saul

Recently, I left a business career and began a master's degree in education. Throughout my time in the program, I have been exposed to a variety of social experiences. This interaction and engagement with others, at workshops, conferences, collaborative inquiries, meetings, and classes has aided in a process of negotiation; a process whereby I have reconsidered, within (and because of) a social context, a good deal of what I previously held as firm meaning. I have come to realize that this social process is the essence of learning and I have put considerable thought into what challenges this process. In this thesis, the culmination of my master's degree, I examine a key question: In what ways is contemporary society undermining our capacity to learn in our everyday cultural contexts?

Much of this thesis revolves around discussion of consumption, consumers and consumerism, and so questions of definition, and of who, what, when and where naturally arise. The first two terms are relatively simple to define. To consume is simply to utilize a good or service in satisfaction of a need or a want and, in modern societies, a money

purchase is generally implied. Consumers are those that engage in acts of consumption (whether it is the purchase of \$.07 piece of ginger, a \$200 visit to a spa, or a \$ 15,000,000 private jet). Degrees of consumption vary greatly; there are those that consume only what they need for basic survival and there are those that consume at high levels inconceivable to most.

Consumerism is more difficult to consider. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines it as “a preoccupation with consumer goods and their acquisition” (Barber, 2004, p. 327). The term describes a condition in which consumption takes place for reasons other than the meeting of basic needs and may imply a lack of critical consideration on the part of the consumer (McGregor, 2003a, 2003b). As an example, consumption for the purpose of conveying a certain lifestyle identity might be considered consumerist. There are, however, two difficult questions here: Who decides what a basic need is and what are the criteria for judging whether a consumer is sufficiently critical in making a consumer decision? Is the consumer who articulately argues the need for a 4500 square foot home to comfortably house a family of five consuming uncritically? What about the purchase of a \$70,000 SUV for safe transportation of this family in winter conditions, followed in that same year by the purchase of two family vacations, 10 days skiing at a resort in Colorado and two weeks in the Bahamas, for health and peace of mind? Are these reasonable acts of consumption? Some would say yes, and some would say no. Further, if the argument is presented that this individual was uncritical in the purchase of home, car and vacation, who is to say that all other acts of consumption on the part of this individual were not very well considered? It is important to realize that, consumerist or otherwise, not only do levels of consumption vary from person to person, but no

individual consumes in the same way over time. It should also be acknowledged that there are those that actively, politically oppose consumerism.

Those in developed nations consume more than those in developing nations, and the United States and Canada, in particular, are responsible for the greatest impacts related to consumption (Suzuki, 2003, p. 73). Uncritical decisions of consumption, however, are made all over the world (by low income earners as well as members of the most affluent groups), and consumption is, generally, globally, on the rise (Suzuki, 2003; Diamond, 2005). That said, whether one group is guilty of a greater degree of uncritical consumption than another is not a core part of the argument that is made here. This thesis considers consumerism, in general, not the consumption habits or levels of specific individuals or groups.

Throughout this thesis, the term global consumer will describe those citizens, globally, that consume but whose level of consumption and degree of critical consideration (the degree to which they are consumerist) may vary from item to item, and day to day. More generally, but in the same spirit of acknowledgement, when I make periodic use of the pronouns we and they, and broad terms such as citizens, society, educators and learners, I do so with the full realization that not every member of a group can be fairly described or labelled in the same way. That said, generalizing statements are necessary to a degree to bring cohesive argument together and to reach conclusion. The relationships and interconnections described or alluded to in this thesis are extremely complex, and though I have found categorization and labelling very difficult, I have attempted to be extremely careful in my wording, and at no point in this thesis is it my intention to point a finger in blame at any one group.

Consumption, as a matter of survival, has always taken place, but never has it been as complex as it is now. Remarkable global expansion of capitalism (in particular, the growth of transnational corporations) and global consumerism, interconnected and driven largely by forces emanating from the United States, have wrought monumental change and a stage has been reached where a significant amount of consumption is no longer for basic sustenance (Bauman, 1998, 2000, 2001; Bowers, 2002; McGregor, 2003a, 2003b; Saul, 2001; Suzuki, 2003). Much of culture, including education and knowledge, is being commodified and packaged (Bauman, 1998, 2000, 2001). Progress is evaluated, for the most part, by economic criteria (McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002). The trouble is that narrow notions of progress can damage the everyday learning processes that form our social contexts and fuel healthy cultural processes. The result of not being able to learn in our everyday contexts is that citizens may end up disconnected from ecology and, disconnected and individualist, they may be insufficiently critical of the new and escalating levels of materialism, privatization, and globalized capitalism (McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002).

According to Bauman (1998, 2000, 2001) and McGregor (2003a, 2003b), consumerism and globalized capitalism deeply impact the processes of daily life – how citizens think, what they do, and how they interact. The ideologies (and the ideological partnership) of consumerism and global capitalism are so taken for granted that, as McMurtry (1998, 1999, 2002) contends, we lose sight of them as systems open to critical consideration. McMurtry argues that these ideologies provide a set of assumptions - a framework for knowledge construction - now so fundamental to our social operation, so

deeply imbedded, as to be unquestioned. He states that our economic and social realities are products of a deep value system; an a priori knowledge structure that comprises the cultural ground upon which we walk through life.

The dominant rhetoric, mediated by and from government and corporations, endorses strategies for individual, not community, success (Plumb, Leverman & McGray, 2007). Implicit in the mediated message is 'do what you need to do for yourself and don't worry about anything else'. Through a steady stream of technologically mediated images and sound bites, everyday (communal, social) learning processes are suppressed reproducing a culture that is in many ways ecocidal. McMurtry describes the market (of mass consumption and globalized capitalism) paradigm as "disconnect[ed] from life fact" (1999, p. 47).

The term culture will be used throughout this thesis. Culture is created and reproduced when a framework of negotiated meaning is constructed by members of a society. Negotiated meaning is represented in and conveyed by a multitude of artefacts such as language, gestures, signs, physical constructions and institutions, but cultural ways of knowing have been, traditionally, social processes moving within and between families and communities (Tomasello, 1999). Negotiation and cooperation were (and continue to be) key aspects of the social processes that have evolved in human history. For the vast majority of humankind's history, the *only* way culture was reproduced was through daily social learning, but the common understanding that this everyday learning – the unstructured, organic, emergent learning processes – is the basis for all other knowledge construction has been lost (Bowers, 1993; Plumb, 2003).

On a recent drive through west Kingston, Jamaica, I had a discussion with a co -worker. We were working together on an adult education project and while making our way through the traffic, we talked of community and connection. We talked about David Harvey's theory and, specifically, his work in human geography and dialectical utopianism (see Harvey, 2000). Harvey's dialectical utopianism argues for the importance of seeing and imagining beyond the local (where you are in time and space) to other scales (where you are not in time and space), and that to be truly political is to take awareness and action beyond the personal. We discussed the practicality of this dialectical strategy. My co-worker argued that there is only the local (i.e. nothing else is real). Is this a narrow view? It may be, and it may make apparent a difficulty in attempting to see the value in making the connections between the infinite locals in our complex global structure.

Dialectical social theory (which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter) can aid in understanding the disconnection of individuals and cultural deterioration, but what is its practical application? This is an important question. How do citizens put a dialectical application to work? How do they put it "on the ground"? Well, they start by communicating with each other, by literally talking, and by simply increasing their awareness. They talk, look around and ask questions. They respond to each other, and they engage and negotiate. They agree on some things for a time, disagree on others, renegotiate and on goes the process ; a collaborative inquiry and a creation of community. These would be real, local moments. A question, no matter how complex or abstract, would never be asked (nor would a decision ever be made) if there was no connection to the personal and the local. Harvey explains that the personal is political; that political

action and social change begin with the existential moment (2000, pp. 234-235). It is key though to see beyond the local moment to other contexts and to see the connections between contexts. Harvey contends that human flows move over uneven spatiotemporal terrain and that citizens should begin to conceive on different scales and that, ultimately, authentic political action should be undertaken with an awareness of how it will move through and across different ecological contexts in space and time (2000).

In this thesis, I argue that consumerism and globalized capitalism undermine cultural ways of knowing leading to deepening crises in both nature and community. Adult educators should aid in the development of a cultural framework that nurtures everyday learning processes and fosters an understanding of ecological interconnectedness. Meeting this tremendous challenge is a vital step in achieving a sustainable balance for civil society and the broader ecology.

My research for this thesis might be best described as an examination and comparison of theoretical perspectives. This has been done, largely, through an investigation of the written works of various experts in adult education, philosophy, sociology, geography and cultural studies theory. The aim of the research has been to gain a deepened understanding of the cultural conditions that have led to the above stated problem and, also, to determine those conditions of renewal that could lead to a successful solution. In effect, I have been soliciting opinions and brokering between perspectives from numerous theoretical sources in order to create a cohesion of new meaning in support of my argument for, both, the important relevance of the stated problem and the position I hold for resolution.

It is also important to note that I have been watching for gaps in the discourse. In fact, the greatest challenge has been the lack of adult education theory with specific applicability to this thesis. This has necessitated the need to search out theorists within whose work can be found valuable implications.

Though I do not believe that an examination of a cultural condition of this breadth and complexity lends itself easily to the linear construction of a scientific, empirical study, there are other ways that that I might have approached this challenge. I believe, however, that this particular examination and assertion lends itself well to the method of exploration I have chosen. In short, I believe my interpretations and conclusions will be most effectively derived and communicated by a theoretical, problem-oriented, argumentative thesis. The thesis argument has three core components.

First, in Chapter II, I argue that global consumers are disconnected from ecology; that consumerism and globalized capitalism are obscuring a commonly held ecological sense; and that these obscuring processes run counter to the reproduction of healthy culture. I present evidence showing that global consumers do not connect acts of consumption to their effects and that excessive consumption has led to damage to the natural environment, malaise, decline in social capital, identity confusion, individualism and the general deterioration of cultural process.

Second, in Chapter III, I argue that dominant ways of learning born of predominant value systems perpetuate individualist behaviour and disconnection from ecology, and that these ways of learning systematically suppress everyday, social learning processes and facilitate the delivery of narrowly conceived education targeted to individuals.

Third, in Chapter IV, I argue that the formation of context is necessary in order to understand the nature of predominant value systems and their ecological effects, and to bring about a renaissance of the common sense and a reconnection of global consumers to ecology. I argue that adult educators can aid in affecting positive change by creating and nurturing environments that acknowledge the vital social quality of everyday learning processes.

When we think of common sense, we might think of the knowledge, that voice in our head, which tells us such things as to look both ways before we cross the street or not to walk too close to the edge of a cliff. But it is more than this. Saul (2001) argues that there are two types of common sense. There is “shared knowledge [which] by its very nature is a consideration of the whole [and] is essentially inclusive and human” (p. 23), and there is the false type. The false type, Saul argues, is “a pretension of simplicity and truth [which] can readily be presented as self-evident [and] inevitable”, and it is “centred on disembodied forces and thus denies the very society in which shared knowledge could have effect” (pp. 20-23). Saul argues that it is the ideology behind the false type that “now dominates our use of the term [and] that we have difficulty focusing on the power of common sense to help us act in a balanced and creative manner” (p.23).

Saul tells us that “society does not exist in the abstract. Our shared knowledge exists as a continuation of citizens and their recognition of the other” (p. 24). He further claims that our shared knowledge has two aspects: “the relationship between humans [and] the relationship of those humans to a place (p. 24). In this thesis, in keeping with Saul’s idea of shared knowledge, the term common sense will refer to a commonly held sense of ecology; a knowledge and awareness, shared by as many as possible, of

interconnections within and between families, community, societies across the world, and the biosphere in which all exists. The terms environment and ecology should not be confused. Depending on the context, the term environment is defined either as a space (as in a learning environment or a corporate environment) or as a reference to an area/s , sometimes called the natural environment, and/or a creature/s outside or apart from human-made constructions or areas (e.g. rainforest, water supplies, air, whales, and oceans). Environmental issues or concerns are things like clear cutting, air/water pollution, acid rain, over fishing and climate change. The term ecology, however, will be used in this thesis to describe not just the (natural) environment, but also the processes and entities of human families and communities in rural, suburban and urban living areas. Ecology describes the existence, relationships and processes of the biosphere.

I cite many expert sources throughout the thesis but there are several upon whom I have relied heavily. They are as follows: David Harvey, a political geographer, who argues strongly that today's globalized capitalism has a tremendous impact on contemporary culture and who calls for political action based on dialectical strategy; John McMurtry, a philosopher, who describes a bleak global situation of inequality and ecological devastation, and who uncovers and analyzes the underlying societal value systems; Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, who describes globalization, the individualist global consumer and the ephemeral nature of contemporary culture ; Etienne Wenger, who describes the essential and vital social qualities of learning ; Robert Putnam, a political scientist, who argues that there has been a significant decline in levels of social cooperation; William Greider, a reporter and noted author, who describes the questionable ethics and values of the modern capitalist economic system; Michael

Tomasello, an anthropologist, who describes the relationship between culture and learning; Donovan Plumb, a professor of education at Mount Saint Vincent University, who argues that everyday learning and cultural process are deeply impacted by capitalist systems; John Ralston Saul, a philosopher, who describes the qualities and nature of humans and society; David Suzuki and Martin Rees, who provide evidence and description of environmental damage; Marvin Harris, Ronald Wright and Jared Diamond, who provide valuable historical and anthropological information; Naomi Klein, who provides very detailed evidence of consumer and corporate culture; and C.A. Bowers, who provides an understanding of ecology.

CHAPTER II: DISCONNECTION and ECOLOGY

We have already caused so many extinctions that our dominion over the earth will appear in the fossil record like the impact of an asteroid.

- Ronald Wright

There is no end to the shopping list.

- Zygmunt Bauman

In this chapter, I argue that citizens have become disconnected from ecology to significant ill effect; that consumerism and globalized capitalism are obscuring a commonly held ecological sense; and that these obscuring processes run counter to the reproduction of healthy culture. I present evidence showing that global consumers do not connect acts of consumption to their effects and that excessive consumption has led to individualism and the general deterioration of cultural process.

In 1976, I had to have North Star sneakers. If I did not I was going to die or so that is what I told my mother. What I meant, of course, is that everyone that I considered “cool” had these particular sneakers and I would have been embarrassed, mortified really, if I was the only one who did not. My mother felt the pressure to give in to me, my father felt the pressure to give in to both of us and I do not recall anyone of us giving a thought to those that could not have them. It goes without saying that this was not about protection from the elements, and it was not about improved performance on the court or track either. These sneakers were more than the sum of their materials - they conveyed a

message, to me and from me. This was and is complex stuff. I am only beginning to comprehend it now, but somehow I knew then that the sneakers were an important signifier in my consumer culture. How did I know? How did my mother and father know? How did we come to understand the differences in meaning between different sneaker brands? What is it that facilitates the gaining of this kind of knowledge?

A Brief History of Consumption

Consumption is not a new phenomenon: the agrarian ancestors of modern citizenry consumed to live, as did their hunter-gatherer and primate ancestors before them. Like those before them, modern humans know they must consume to survive, but, for many, consumption today is about much more than procurement for basic needs.

So, what happened? While noticeable change may have been taking place in the cognitive skills and resultant everyday learning processes of Homo Sapien as early as 200,000 years ago (Tomasello, 1999), it was not until about 40,000 years ago that language was fully in use (Diamond, 1992, 1999; Harris, 1989). With the development of language, culture began to be rapidly produced, evidenced by increases in the development and use of ever more specialized tools, the creation of art, and increased cultural diversity. Archaeological artefacts found after cultural takeoff indicate significant increases in the complexity and richness of socio-cultural activity (Diamond, 1992, 1999; Harris, 1989).

Both Diamond and Harris explain that through the millennia language use aided in increasing social organization, in turn aiding in increased technological development. Increased social organization and technological development coupled with some balance

of discovery, investigation, and accident (depending upon anthropological opinion and perspective) led humans from the hunter-gatherer life to one of agriculture. Success in farming led to food surplus, food storage and population growth. The nomadic way of life largely disappeared as humans settled and concentrated into greater, sedentary populations that could support specialized labour and the beginnings of a military force. Scribes and soldiers took their place in the upper levels of historical hierarchies, facilitating writing, mass communication, ever more technological advance and, of course, warfare, allowing conquering peoples even more growth. Certainly by 5,000 years ago, in many areas of the world, culture had advanced significantly and society had been dramatically restructured (Diamond, 1992, 1999; Harris, 1989). For many, the focus of attention was shifting away from matters of daily survival.

In these early societies, material items were symbols: they were a display of wealth and power by “hereditary elites” who ruled chiefdoms and kingdoms in previous millennia (Harris, 1989, p. 375). Material wealth was an indication of superiority in a social structure. Importantly, a great many of these leaders of ancient societies claimed direct descent from one omnipotent being or another and consumed according to their station, adorning and surrounding themselves with a conspicuous display of material wealth in order to set themselves apart from the masses. As Harris argues, these first conspicuous artefacts (or preciosities) were “tokens of concentrated wealth and power” (p. 371). After all, who but a “god” would have the power to commission the creation of such valuable items?

Conspicuous artefacts are still used today to convey messages of social status, but, with increasing consumerism and globalized capitalism, lines of social division are now

blurred. “[T]he new elites of capitalism overturned the traditional relationships of preciosities to the maintenance of wealth and power. In capitalist societies, rooms at the top are not reserved for people who insist they alone are entitled to rare and exotic possessions ... power and wealth flow from buying and selling in open markets...” (Harris, p. 375). As to those global consumers who would not fall into the category of the new elites of capitalism, Harris would argue that they are not so much emulating the elites with their quest and acquisition of material possessions as they are “responding to an unrelenting condition of success imposed from above in a society where wealth and power depend on mass consumption” (p. 375; also see Bauman ’s works).

Disconnection

Global consumers require many of the goods and services purchase d, but, even when the need is less urgent or not even apparent, on its own, as a singular event, the purchase of a new consumer good or service, while worthy of some consideration, is not normally a threat to the greater social and natural environment. As a major lifestyle characteristic, however, and, more fundamentally, as an i dentity component, questions could be asked about consumption. William Greider describes modern culture as a “regime of more” and suggests a serious, deep reconsideration (2003).

Robert Putnam argues that social capital – in essence, the level of social cooperation or community – is in decline and that this is evidenced by, among other things, an increase in “mail order membership” at the expense of grass roots involvement (2000, p. 53) – as he says, we are “pushing a pen, not making a meeting” (p. 51). P utnam presents evidence of a relative decline in charitable donations, a downward trend in

volunteerism (exacerbated by the generational loss of the more civically minded and active seniors), and a general decrease in trust (accompanied by an increase in the number of lawyers and, logically, the amount of legal activity) (2000). Putnam supports the argument that consumerism - in particular the consumption of media – has had a dramatic impact on community. He makes the direct assertion that the generational shift in television viewing habits and, more specifically, dependence on the television for entertainment is the single most consistent predictor of civic disengagement (p. 231). He also generally states, “...the rise of electronic communications and entertainment is one of the most powerful social trends of the twentieth century” and it has “rendered our leisure more private and passive” (p. 245).

Community is in decline and individuals are uncertain, even fearful, of their life condition (Bauman, 2001; Jacobs, 2004). Bauman argues “the present day uncertainty is a powerful individualizing force” (2001, p. 24). Many are now in a loop of a negative feedback: passivity dissolves cultural context; the lack of cultural context begets passivity. As a result, consciously or subconsciously, many seek to distract themselves from the troubled world in which they live – challenges in the workplace, financial difficulties, family pressures, fear of crime, terrorism and war, feelings of guilt over homelessness in their own city or world hunger and third world strife, and concern over the environment – by the temporary enjoyment and false fulfilment that a new material possession brings (Bauman, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001; McGregor, 2003; McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002).

Bauman argues we exist in a “continuous present” (1997, p. 89) and Plumb argues we are experiencing an “annihilation” of memory (1999, p. 157), and both conditions suggest an environment where meaning cannot reify and, therefore, context cannot form. Consumerism and global capitalism, in a symbiotic relationship, are engaged in the constant production of difference; an onslaught of individual choice and a constant state for consumers of new and different. Aided by incredible technological innovation, consumerism and global capitalism have created a new reality, fragmented and ephemeral (Bauman, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001; Harvey, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2001). David Harvey argues that this condition of heterogeneity has created an identity crisis for individuals (2001) and claims that they are the victims of a “disempowering confusion” (2000, p. 233).

Harvey’s claim is not radical – the evidence is everywhere - and so it seems daunting, even strange, that, amidst this confusion, citizens should be required to develop their identities and, make no mistake, they are required, for a full and “successful” role in consumer society, to develop their life-identities through consumption (Bauman, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001). Indeed, Klein argues that they “pay up to fit in” (2000, p. 68). If, however, conveyed identity images are open to endless, individual (re)interpretation then there is no foundation in the meaningful; there is no real understanding of (the process of) identity (formation) by the subject let alone by any other. McMurtry describes a “confusion [of] deformed homogeneity” and offers this comprehensive description:

Non-living corporations are conceived as human individuals. Desire to turn money into more money for unknown stockholders in nameless places is represented as personal production and service to fellow citizens. Consumers who are mass-conditioned under their conscious awareness are portrayed as freely

choosing individuals. Continent-wide machine extractions of the world's natural resources, pollutive mass-manufacturing and throwaway packages are imaged as home-spun market offerings for the local community. Junk and unneeded commodities are made to appear as necessary for vital life as food to eat. Faceless corporate bureaucracies structured to avoid the liability of their stock holders are represented as intimate and caring family friends bearing the responsibility of the larger society ... The very concept of 'the global market *place*' is made into a proper name when all of its primary agents and products are distinguished by the fact that they have no place that they are in, but are borderless operations and transactions directed from cyberspace. (1999, p. 41)

C. A. Bowers (2002) tries to help us understand context (or our lack of it). He makes use of the term *ecology* and states that its origins lie in the Greek word *oikos*, which "referred to the maintenance of relationships within the family household" (p. 29). Bowers makes the important point that the ecology is not just what most would typically refer to as the 'natural environment', but also includes the processes and entities of human families and communities in rural, suburban and urban living areas ; ecology describes the existence, relationships and processes of the biosphere. Bowers calls ecology a root metaphor and argues that it "foregrounds the relational and interdependent nature of our existence as cultural and biological beings" (p. 29) and though, to my knowledge, he has not used the following words, I am sure he would agree *we are nature*. Bowers (2002) helps in the understanding that humans are living in process; that relationships and culture, as ecology, are not static.

Process cannot be understood, however, without meaningful context, and culture, commodified and characterized by individualized consumption, does not support the construction of context. The peculiar human ailments of identity confusion and

disconnection are not conducive to a deep sense of ecology and, as global consumers continue to distance themselves from the natural environment and their communities, crucial, ecological relationships suffer (Bowers, 2002).

In Chapter III, I argue that dominant ways of learning born of predominant value systems perpetuate the individualist behaviour and disconnection from ecology described in Chapter two, and that these ways of learning systematically suppress everyday, social learning processes and facilitate the delivery of narrowly conceived education targeted to individuals.

CHAPTER III: WAYS OF LEARNING and VALUES

Money-demand is a social construction ...

- John McMurtry

And so we slip into ideologies.

- John Ralston Saul

In chapter II, I argued that citizens have been disconnected from the ecology causing all manner of difficulty for humanity and the natural environment. It is very important to this analysis to see that, paradoxically, citizens are disconnected from ecology because they do not critically consider and do not critically consider because they are disconnected. This is a bit of a bind. In this chapter, I argue that dominant ways of learning born of predominant value systems perpetuate the individualist behaviour and disconnection from ecology described in the last chapter, and that these ways of learning systematically suppress everyday, social learning processes and facilitate the delivery of narrowly conceived education targeted to individuals.

Ways of Learning

There are many ways of learning, and mandates and intended outcomes, if any, will range widely. Learning can take place in the classroom, on the street, in the workplace and at home. Learning can be characterized by varying degrees of technology. Learning can range from the unstructured and informal to the structured and formal.

It is interesting to consider the nature of formal learning. If pressed to describe the difference between formal and non-formal realms of learning, most would likely know that credentials (degrees, diplomas, professional designations, etc.) would be awarded for formal learning achievements, and for non-formal achievements, however challenging, time consuming and fulfilling, they would understand that whatever recognition exists is unofficial. What, however, is understood of the realm of (informal) everyday learning? Beyond an instinctive sense, citizens may lack an appreciation for the variety, magnitude and pervasiveness of everyday learning situations and, more importantly, may be challenged in seeing that everyday learning is the basis for all other knowledge construction (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Plumb, 2004; Wenger, 1998). This challenge is due in no small part to a bias for formal learning within the cultural system and this is a situation that warrants concern and substantial consideration (Gouthro & Plumb, 2003).

This bias is a recent occurrence in the history of humankind. For 40,000 years, humans have been talking and negotiating meaning - reproducing culture - through the informal process of everyday learning. (As stated in chapter 2, there may have been some negotiatory learning processes amongst Homo Sapiens as far back as 200,000 years ago (see Tomasello, 1991)). Diamond (1992, 1999) and Harris (1989) help us to understand that language fuelled everyday learning laid the basis for the facilitation of significant cultural movements in our human history. Over the millennia, we have moved from a nomadic, hunting/gathering existence to an agrarian, sedentary one; from tribes to chiefdoms to massive cities; from oral traditions through advanced writing development to technologically mediated communication; and from the basic manipulation of the most

rudimentary hand tools to the development and use of space travel technology, to name but a few of the extraordinary changes.

To strengthen the emphasis, let me reassert that for the vast majority of human history (during which there were no formalized systems of education) the *only* way culture was reproduced was through everyday learning (Tomasello, 1991; also implicit in Plumb, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; also see Diamond, Harris, and Wright on the history of progress, technological advancement, formalization and institutionalization). We did not start out reading architect's plans and building skyscrapers. We started out trying to figure out, together, cooperatively, how to do things like get food down from a tree and how to bridge a stream with a fallen log. Everyday learning is the informal, unstructured, organic learning that takes place in our lives and, as evidenced by the movements in human geography described above, the fruits of these first learning interactions, within this realm lays a tremendous capacity. The ongoing process of cultural reproduction fuelled by everyday learning is, quite literally, the defining characteristic of humans.

Non-human primates, like human primates, have cognitive capabilities of perception, categorization and memory and they can and do learn, to some degree, culturally (Tomasello, 1999). One non-human primate may observe another performing a task and may, in turn, perform the task, identically or similarly. Others may observe the second primate and perform the task, identically or similarly, and, in this way, the ability to perform the skill may move to other members in a social network. It will not, however, spread quickly or consistently, and it will not, as a cultural artefact, be sufficiently reinforced so as to move any great distance through space or time. Though we share most

of our genetic makeup, this is where we humans differ dramatically from our non-human primate cousins (Tomasello, 1999).

All primates are social creatures but humans are the most social and, because of this, they tend to spend more time, relative to other primates, learning imitatively (Tomasello, 1999). This strong tendency to imitate along with a unique ability to identify and relate to another as an intentional agent (a learner with a goal) while engaging around an artefact enables humans to reinforce and to establish complex culture past more than one generation. This cumulative cultural evolution has been ongoing since Homo Sapiens began to thrive (Tomasello, 1999) and, as I create this thesis, engaged socially with everyday learning as I am, I work with, rely on and, hopefully, add to a cultural memory that is perhaps 200,000 years old.

A Social Theory of Learning

Social learning theorist, Etienne Wenger, explains that learning is a process of social participation (1998). He suggests that we adopt a perspective where learning is placed “...in the context of our lived experience in the world” (p. 3). He argues that learning is not an individual pursuit; that education is not facilitated by a monologue on the part of an instructor or power figure; and that learning does not take place in a ‘sanitized’ and separate training facility. He suggests that we consider learning as “...a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing” (p. 3).

Wenger’s social theory of learning is based on four premises. Paraphrased, they are:

1) We are social beings; 2) Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued

enterprises; 3) Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world; and 4) Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce (p. 4). The social, participatory process components at the base of Wenger’s theory are:

- 1) *Meaning* - a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- 2) *Practice* – a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- 3) *Community* – a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
- 4) *Identity* – a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities (p. 5).

In describing his concept of the process of practice, Wenger argues that “...we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds...” and that as “...we interact with each other and the world... we learn” (p. 45). He further argues that “[p]ractice is, first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful” (p. 51). These pursuits and interactions lead to learning; result from learning; are the way we learn – they *are* learning.

Wenger explains that these collective learning practices take place in what he calls communities of practice and key to his theory is the assertion that we reach meaning through negotiation “...involv[ing] the interaction of two constituent processes ...” which he names *participation* and *reification* (p. 52). Wenger uses the term participation to “...describe the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social

communities and active involvement in social enterprises” (p. 55) and the term reification to refer to the “...process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (p. 58). Wenger explains that we use reification to “...project ourselves on to the world ...” (p. 58) and shape our experience (p. 59); it establishes a framework upon which to engage. Reification can be both a process and its product (p. 60) and is all around us in innumerable forms and actions: words, categories, paperwork, ceremonies, agreements, books, relationships and other countless meanings and representations. My North Star Sneakers mentioned in the introduction, far more than plastic and rubber glued together, are an example of reification. The reified meaning attached to those sneakers and to countless other consumer items, conveyed wordlessly, is part of the meaning framework upon which we engage.

Wenger explains that participation and reification do not represent a spectrum (p. 66): they work together and they compliment each other, but it is very important to understand that too much of one creates imbalance (p. 65). He explains that, rather than a spectrum, participation and reification are a duality: one or both can be present in abundance; one or both can be scarce and “[i]t is through their various combinations that they give rise to a variety of experiences of meaning” (p. 62). Wenger contends that these “dual modes of existence” (p. 87) can be a source of both continuity and discontinuity (p. 90). Implicit in this is that constant change is part of practice and, as we negotiate – learn our way – through this disorder, we learn our practice. The participation -reification duality is a fundamental conceptual grounding for Wenger’s theory of learning.

Within this theory, there is a strong emphasis on both the social and process qualities of learning. “To assert that learning gives rise to communities of practice is to

say that learning is a source of social structure. But the kind of structure that this refers to is not an object, which exists in and of itself and can be separated from the process giving rise to it. Rather, it is an emergent structure” (p. 96). Continuing to emphasize the social nature of the process he states, “[i]ndeed, practice is ultimately produced by its members through the negotiation of meaning”; “[l]earning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning” (p. 96). Understanding our history - our trajectory so far - is crucial to the development of vibrant culture.

Learning and Reality

Wenger’s theory, well grounded in the rich human history of cultural learning, certainly describes a cooperative and social process, and it reinforces the understanding that to see learning as anything other than the social process that reproduces culture is to fail to understand the nature of learning. Plumb, Leverman & McGray would argue, however, that the ways in which we learn today do not reflect an awareness of the social process of learning. In sharp contrast, Plumb et al describe a world in which capitalist forces “interrupt capacities for communication or collaborative action and increase individualist strategic action” (2007, p. 7). Informal, social learning should not be considered “derivative of and secondary to formal learning processes” (Gouthro & Plumb, 2003, p.1), but Plumb et al argue that “typologized notions of adult learning” are favoured over “a more contextual, dynamic, and social view of adult learning” (2007, p.2).

Plumb et al (2007) contend that dominant notions of adult learning are informed by (and inform) capitalism. Does it stand to reason, then, that capitalism is valued as a learning system? That is a complicated question. Much of the global citizenry have

clearly welcomed many aspects of capitalism and many seem more than accepting of the lifestyle of consumer plenty it can create. In considering the rationale for the acceptance of the system, Greider speaks of capitalism's enduring strengths and argues "its processes are always forward-looking and constantly adapting to new circumstances" (2000, p. 26). It is important, however, to understand the construction of the perspective lens through which acceptance and success criteria are evaluated.

Increases in the magnitude of globalized capitalism and consumerism are cultural evolution, but the cultural process (learning) that brings about the evolution requires some amount of negotiation between the participants and, as we know from Wenger's theory, this negotiation can only be facilitated upon some amount of reified structure. What is the nature of this structure? Values, just like the things they inform and support, are societal constructs, and in optimum conditions they would be negotiated and reified through a healthy social learning process. It is very important, however, to consider the extent to which this learning process is communal. The extent to which the process is not communal is the extent to which it is individualized, (and possibly) technologized and economic. Questions about value construction processes, like any social process, are necessarily questions about social context. Is the context sufficiently broad and deep or is so much blocked from view (of both space and time) that citizens cannot form, communally, ecologically, a social trajectory?

Examples of how ways of learning and their value foundations are deeply impacted by narrowly constructed socioeconomic context are innumerable, and broad citations of example are easy, but, in my experience, after scratching the surface, it becomes clear that it is difficult to speak of one way of learning without recognizing

implications for and from others. A broad and valid statement could be made about the university, but a question or two quickly makes it apparent that it is very difficult to talk about the university without talking about colleges and technical schools; and that it is very difficult to talk about colleges without talking about training, education for economy and the workplace. This hypothetical conversation could easily lead to talk of government policy and rhetoric and then to capitalist democracy, capitalism, corporations and media. Serious conversations about media, in my experience, lead to discussions about the nature of media and what is mediated (and will probably include discussion of the pervasiveness and impact of advertising, marketing and branding) . And discussion about any of these things always holds serious implications for the home where, regardless of time and distance, we are workers, consumers, individuals and community members as well as being family members – the roles cannot really be separated.

To begin to give a sense of the current cultural learning condition, let me offer a piece of evidence from current media. I have recently seen a television advertisement. A parent is visiting a busy, neighbourhood playground. She holds a child, two or three others are close by while more play in the background. She sits on the ground. She is close to the earth. There is a feeling of family, community and ecology. There is no overt product advertisement. I am not even certain if the company name is spoken, but the logo of the enormous and very familiar transnational oil corporation is very clearly displayed on the screen. In spite of the business logo, the advertisement effectively gives the sense of intimacy and cooperation. Before the parent even speaks, several messages are clear. This parent loves her children. She loves all children. She loves her community. The

community cares about her. The caring company is also part of the community – it is not just about profit. And, together, they all care deeply about the natural environment. It is clever, certainly, and I would say even ‘slick’. The main thrust of the parent’s words is captured by this sentence: “I want them to make the environment a better place”, meaning, she wants “them”, the corporation, to take responsibility for caring for the natural environment.

There are a few interesting implications here. There is acknowledgement by the company of an environmental problem and an acceptance of the responsibility for a share of the associated social cost. Why would the company choose to put this message out in this way? Well, I believe it is a very smart move. First, the company does not admit any guilt or even involvement in environmentally degrading practices. Second and far more important, in the parent, the company has found a community advocate to imply the following on their behalf to the public: that environmental challenges have nothing to do with consumption and everything to do with production and that the citizenry can and should rely on transnational companies to address the challenges with progressive production strategies. Viewed through a narrowly construed environmental value lens, the company appears to be remarkably and admirably progressive. Interestingly, however, in this advertisement, there is not a mention or an implication of the consumptive habits or trends of global consumption. The viewer is not meant to connect consumptive and capitalist practices to ecology, and the “learning moment” is a mediated message channelled to isolated homes with a minimum of social context, but the most interesting thing is that the message, conveyed to millions globally, seems so reasonable.

This 60 second advertising spot between TV movie viewing times speaks volumes about our value system.

The reality is that global consumers have come to expect the mediated message and through it they are pummelled by economic rhetoric (Bauman, 1998, 2000, 2001; Harvey, 2000; McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002). Notions of freedom, democracy, individualism and economy are confused, and individuals try to “get ahead” because that is what they are told, implicitly and explicitly, that they should be doing; and there is an unpleasant urgency to the process as “[t]he corporatized media relentlessly and endlessly repeat the refrain” (Harvey, 2000, p. 154). There is now an unspoken, underlying societal assumption that globalized capitalism is the only possible economic system and, following these assumptions, global consumers are facilitating a fast cycle, perpetuating and increasing economic globalization, consumerism, materialism and individualism (Bauman, 1998, 2000, 2001; McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002). It is important to note that, for many, it is not a case of not wanting to hear the mediated messages. The messages are generally accepted by most members of advanced western societies and growing legions in the east as a backdrop for the play of social process and information movement. There is an expectation of (even a comfort with) economic themes in the dominant rhetoric, and this expectation is reflective of a current value system (McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002).

Greider argues that there is a “collision between society and capitalism” (2003, p. 33; also see McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002). After making clear our historic proclivity for societal values such as responsibility, common sense, morality, and collaboration, Greider asks, “[i]s it fair to say that market capitalism teaches roughly the opposite?” (p.

43). He answers his own question by arguing that we are, in fact, “rewarded concretely for refusing responsibility toward these same values” (p. 43). The individualist value system that Greider argues exists now is shaped and energized by the synergistic partnership of consumerism and globalized capitalism (Bauman, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001; Harvey, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2001). Democracy and economy are conflated now, but not so much so that the latter is not in the ruling position (Frank, 2000). Citizens are encouraged by the messages perpetuated through the dominant cultural media to be entrepreneurial and to assert their individuality, but only to the extent that they can within certain, narrow contexts (Bauman, 1997, 1998, 2000; Harvey, 2000; McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002).

Irresponsible, individualist behaviour is no longer random – it is sung as a virtue; and, indeed, it is systemic (Bauman, 1997, 1998, 2000; Greider, 2003, McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002; Saul, 2001). Greider contends “the irresponsibility is generalized now, thanks to the mechanisms and relationships institutionalized by modern businesses and banking and often codified in law. Irresponsibility is passed around to all” (2003, p. 46). Greider’s argument (and how it relates to this thesis) warrants additional emphasis: dominant ways of learning are institutionalized by a pervasive, economistic and individualist value system. Harvey describes

a general shift from the collective norms and values, that were hegemonic at least in working-class organizations and other social movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s, towards a much more competitive individualism as the central value in an entrepreneurial culture that has penetrated many walks of life ...

Entrepreneurialism now characterizes not only business action, but realms of life as diverse as urban governance, the growth of informal sector production, labour market organization, research and development, and it has even reached the nether corners of academic, literary, and artistic life. (1990, p. 171).

Greider further argues that the institutional

mechanisms are a main reason why most participants – employees and investors, managers and consumers – find they have very little influence in the system or even control over their own behaviour (but also not much accountability to others). This distancing of the personal - the separation of self from the consequences of one's actions – is convenient to (and facilitated by) the system's smooth functioning, of course, and lends flexibility. It also provides a screen of moral opacity that participants can hide behind” (2003, p. 46; also see Saul, 2001).

Greider, Harvey, McMurtry and Bauman all argue in their fashion that capitalism and consumerism affect the cultural learning process, and their arguments can be applied to specific formal educational contexts as these are but temporary reifications of culture. Each thinker, implicitly or explicitly, supports the assertion that our dominant educational mechanisms are based in a value system that encourages and perpetuates the privatization of responsibility, the promotion of individualization and the destruction of the potential for political process. As an example, Harvey states:

To be sure, the ideology and practices of competitive neoliberalism do their quietly effective and insidious work within the major institutions – the media and the universities – that shape the imaginative context in which we live. They do so with hardly anyone noticing. The political correctness imposed by raw money power (and the logic of market competition) has done far more to censor opinion within these institutions than the overt repressions of McCarthyism ever did (2000, p. 155)

The current emphasis on economy has brought with it significant public fiscal shifts in the form of cost cutting strategies and privatization. The public position is that these initiatives, implemented at various levels of government, are in the name of debt, deficit and tax reduction, and it is of no great shock to anyone that many educational systems and programs are feeling this financial pressure as their funding is substantially reduced or completely eliminated. Those programs that might be considered liberal education and those which do not readily serve the corporate job market are particularly vulnerable. Business values, rather than social values, and an economic agenda are now of prime importance in curriculum design policy.

If education in general reflects society, then so, too, does adult education. All education will reflect the norms and values of political economy. For example, there is a current emphasis on training and retraining, reflecting the demand that adult education must meet the needs of the economy. This mirrors the concerns of the neo-conservative governments for a more skilled workforce, equipped to compete with others in the global economy. The argument that governments have to cut public spending and concentrate resources on core activity also fits neatly with this philosophy. There are no resources, the argument goes, to subsidize liberal adult education; it can only be undertaken on a cost recovery basis. In short, on this analysis, 'adult education equals job training' (Spencer, 1998, p. 21).

In an effort of ongoing ideological reinforcement, corporate and government rhetoric would convince citizens that we must become more competitive and fiscally responsible in order to compete in the global marketplace. Governments support is now limited for "personal interest and development" and "social action" adult education programs and government funding is largely reserved for those adult education programs and courses that are in support of the economy (p. 45). There is no question that there is

an increased awareness, on the part of learner and educator, of the need for ongoing education in order to remain competitive in today's job market. Accompanying this awareness is an increased sense of the "value" of the content of the curriculum. "For today's worker, changing careers and re-entering the learning continuum is a common expectation. Increasingly, it is seen as an expression of personal growth and a proud testimony to personal effectiveness and resilience in a climate of unprecedented change" (Bos, 2001, p. 173). Bauman, however, expresses concern for the "submission to the stern criteria of the market and measuring the 'social usefulness' of university products by the presence of 'clearing demand', treating the know-how universities may offer as one more commodity that still has to fight for a place on overcrowded supermarket shelves, as one more commodity among other commodities, still to be tested for quality by its merchandising success" (2001, p p. 134-5), and Jacobs argues that "credentialing, not educating, has become the primary business of North American universities" and argues that this is most certainly a short-sighted, capitalist-consumerist strategy (2004, pp. 44-63).

Bos states, "[p]artnerships have created opportunities for institutions to extend their margins of effectiveness well beyond institutional boundaries in providing students with a breadth of learning opportunity" (2001, p. 183), but McMurtry argues that "the world's leading education systems are being reprogrammed by global market prescriptions" (1999, p. 84; also see Cruikshank, 2002).

University administrators and education bureaucrats have rushed to invoke "the rule of the knowledge-based economy," with no questions asked as to what "knowledge" or "information" is. In the rush to agree to any terms set by the "new global market reality", the academy no longer insists on telling apart the

assertions of truth and propaganda. Instead its leadership tirelessly conceptualizes education as “necessary to get on board the new knowledge economy” (McMurtry, 1998, p. 179).

Learners or Consumers?

Harvey helps us to understand that modern culture is, to a significant extent, characterized by individualized consumption. He argues that it was the recession of 1973 in combination with the oil crisis that was the catalyst behind the pivotal change in corporate strategies and marks the beginning of an epoch of capitalism he calls *flexible accumulation*. “Flexible accumulation...is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism” and is characterized by such things as a shrinking core group of permanent, fulltime employees; significant increases in flexible employment (casual, temporary, part-time, contract); a marked decrease in the power of trade unions; a marked shift in manufacturing locations and processes; and a deskilling of labour (1990, p.147; various other pages, sections). “The economies of scale sought under Fordist mass production have ...been countered by an increasing capacity to manufacture a variety of goods cheaply in small batches. Economies of scope have beat out economies of scale” (p. 155) and those companies that maintained a traditional, rigid corporate structure ran the risk of bankruptcy and/or takeover. Labour was decoupled from capital and the capitalists, relieved of their heavy loads, were able to turn their focus to consumption and the consumer.

Technology certainly improved turnover time in production but Harvey makes a key point when he states, “accelerating turnover time in production would have been useless unless the turnover time in consumption was also reduced” [and s]mall-batch

production and sub-contracting certainly had the virtues of bypassing the rigidities of the Fordist system and satisfying a far greater range of market needs, including quick changing ones” (p. 156). In this sense, Fordist notions of the manipulation of the consumer live on, but it is more complicated than that. Harvey explains

[f]lexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side ... by a much greater attention to quick changing fashions and the mobilization of all of the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies. The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms (p. 156).

It is crucial to note here the symbiotic relationship of supply and demand. Last year’s whim is this year’s necessity. Bauman argues that consumer habits are “indeed, continually, daily, and at the first opportunity thrown aside, never given the chance to firm up into the iron bars of a cage (except for one meta-habit, the ‘habit of changing habits’)” (1998, p. 81). He adds this remarkable commentary:

“[t]hat all consumption takes time is in fact the bane of consumer society – and a major worry for the merchandisers of consumer goods. There is a natural resonance between the spectacular career of the ‘now’, brought about by time-compressing technology, and the logic of the consumer-oriented economy... The needed time reduction is best achieved if consumers cannot hold their attention or focus their desire on any object for long; if they are impatient, impetuous and restive, and above all easily excitable and equally easily losing interest. The culture of consumer society is mostly about forgetting, not learning. Indeed, when the waiting is taken out of wanting and the wanting out of waiting, the consumption capacity of consumers may be stretched far beyond the limits set by any natural or acquired needs; also the physical durability of the objects of

desire is no longer required. The traditional relationship between needs and their satisfaction is reversed: the promise and hope of satisfaction precedes the need promised to be satisfied and will be always more intense and alluring than the extant needs. (p. 82)

In this new era of consumption, the ties between labour and capital are gone. The solidarity of labour is also gone as global consumers are meant to individually consume jobs now as everything else (Bauman, 1998). David Harvey (2000) argues that we are labouring and consuming bodies embedded within the circulation of capital. The economy undergirds all aspects of human life and boundaries between the home and spaces of capitalist production are no longer well defined. “The global economy penetrates all aspects of human life: we are never really off duty. We are all subject to the constant, powerful influence of global economic flows, whether directly through our gainful employment – if we are not physically there, we are “there” with various technological connections – or indirectly through the mass media” (Plumb et al, 2007, p. 5).

There is much weight to John McMurtry’s argument that, while falsely claiming value neutrality, all discussion and negotiation on the part of market system supporters presupposes capitalism and that no knowledge has value unless it is knowledge for profit (1998, 1999, 2002). McMurtry, in no uncertain terms, argues that it – the market system – is the dominant, societal value system, but Saul argues that to accept this ‘inevitability’ is to deny our common sense: “[n]o sensible, intelligent person would imagine that our desire to buy and sell as effectively as possible should eliminate other considerations” (2001, p. 53). Saul further argues, “[s]o long as we accept the idea of self-evident and

therefore inevitable truths – for example, that we are driven by self-interest or that technology leads society – our passivity will prepare us for ideological manipulation” (p. 23) and suggests that with the irresponsible individualist value system prevailing today comes a breakdown of society: the “idea of shared knowledge loses its meaning” and democracy fails (p. 27).

As individuals in a decontextualized social environment, we are challenged. Harvey argues “[t]he particularity of the body cannot be understood independently of its embeddedness in socio-ecological processes” by which he means that we cannot make sense of the body if we do not at the same time understand, fully, the process of its social construction (2000, p.16). In support, Taylor argues, “[t]he agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions” (1991, p. 40). He further states,

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands (p. 40).

Taylor writes of the provision of definition through context. What is our context? Are citizens now, as Plumb (1999) suggests, spending more time forgetting than learning? Understanding the self and the local is worthy, but consumerist ways of learning born of a predominant, individualist, economic value system that fuel the

privatization of action and responsibility will not work in the interests of civil society and the greater ecology.

In chapter IV, I argue that the formation of context is necessary in order to understand the nature of predominant value systems and their ecological effects, and to bring about a renaissance of the common sense and a reconnection of global consumers to ecology. I argue that adult educators can aid in affecting positive change by creating and nurturing environments that acknowledge the vital social quality of everyday learning processes.

CHAPTER IV: THE FORMATION OF CONTEXT

No one can hope to change the world without changing themselves.

- David Harvey

What makes instrumental reason so profoundly irrational is its devotion to mechanistic solutions conceived in a limited time and space, as if the matter at hand were free standing.

- John Ralston Saul

In chapter III, I argued that prevailing ways of learning are born of dominant value systems. In this chapter, I argue that the formation of context is necessary in order to understand the nature of predominant value systems and their ecological effects, and to bring about a renaissance of the common sense and a reconnection of global consumers to ecology. Adult educators can aid in affecting positive change, I suggest, by creating and nurturing environments that acknowledge the vital social quality of everyday learning processes.

I have been talking about an ecological value throughout the thesis, but have humans ever lived ecologically? It could be argued that this has never been the case; that they have been, as a species, narrow minded, short sighted, invasive and destructive. As two prime examples, for millennia, our ancestors have hunted other animal species to extinction and indiscriminately deforested delicate ecosystems, both with dramatic and irreversible effects; and this long before the term ‘anthropocentrism’ was ever uttered.

While it may be true that we have not always made well considered decisions as it pertained to the long term sustainability of our resources, it must be conceded that the degree to which we were connected to community and natural environment in the past was much greater. It could not have been otherwise - we simply did not have the technological means to separate ourselves. To live then as many do now, individually and passively, would have been to perish quickly. The change inside of a few centuries – a mere fraction of human existence - is truly astounding and the degree to which citizens are technologically buoyed (at least for now) in a sea of cultural fragments is a remarkable thing to consider. To argue whether ecological living, however defined, is new and radical is to miss the larger point. In deed, for many global consumers, far removed (possibly for generations) from any sense of the ecology that sustains them, to connect and learn will be radical and first time actions. Regardless, it is still a process of critical consideration and renegotiation of existing meaning frameworks and value systems.

Like any species, we consume at a certain rate relative to the biosphere's productive capacity. If we consume at a rate less than the rate of the biosphere's productive capacity, we are living at a sustainable rate of consumption. If not, then, to use "business speak", we are spending our capital. The impact of our consumption, of course, varies from country to country. The ecological footprint of most western countries is very high, but for certain countries like Canada, because of low populations and large land mass, they are not in ecological deficit (Suzuki, 2003). By contrast, Germany is in deficit (Suzuki, 2003). Interestingly, in spite of huge populations, India and China live close to a sustainable rate due to their low rates of consumption (Suzuki, 2003). Overall, however,

according to David Suzuki, the world's human population consumes at 125% of the biosphere's productive capacity (2003) and while there may be some argument about the current rate, there is little sensible argument about the trend - it is increasing. The World Wildlife Fund estimates that "an area equivalent to almost three planets would be required to support the world population with the lifestyle and consumption pattern that it predicts for 2050" (Rees, 2003, p.102). This may seem an apocalyptic scenario to consider, but the point is that we really do not know what is going to happen, and, unchecked, the present course will undoubtedly lead to some sort of dramatic, ecology altering experience here on our planet Earth. Among other things, Rees suggests we could face massive extinctions with dramatic impact on our biodiversity (humans have already caused a rate of extinctions 100 - 1000 times greater than the pre Homo Sapien rate), as well as untold ecological difficulties due to increased population pressure and climate change (2003).

Consumerism, Capitalism and Individualism: The Implications for Adult Education

As I wrote the proposal for this thesis, I wanted to answer the following question: What are the effects of consumerist and global capitalist mindsets and actions on learning processes and, to the extent that these effects might be deleterious, what changes could be made by community members and adult learners and educators for the betterment of community, civil society and the ecology as a whole? If posed to a gathering, answers to the second part of the question might be such things as, "less cars on the road", "more small business", "less pesticides and more organic farming", "more 'buy nothing days'" and other recommendations, probably all sensible and probably all fairly narrow and

specific. Someone, perhaps, would be less likely to answer, “we should consider alternative learning communities”, but this would be a very good answer indeed. We do face a learning crisis (Plumb, Leverman & McGray, 2007). There is a lack of meaningful engagement between citizens, but more important is the absence of the crucial, supporting cultural framework for the engagement - each constitutes the other.

We should consider alternative learning communities. We should consider the creation of communities of practice where a renaissance of the common sense takes place and adult educators can play a vitally important role in this process. Consumerism and globalized capitalism undermine cultural ways of knowing leading to deepening crises in both nature and community and adult education’s existing response frameworks (whether considered broadly (informal) or more narrowly (formal, non-formal)), could be greatly improved. Responsible adult education should aid in the development of a renewed cultural framework that combats the disabling effects of consumerism and globalized capitalism and fosters an understanding of learning for ecological sustainability. The creation of communities of practice for collaborative, critical inquiry and political action is a crucial step in bringing about a renaissance, a renewal, of a commonly held sense of ecological connections and relations.

Toward a Dialectical Understanding of Culture

Recall that C. A. Bowers (2002) informs us that the term ecology refers to the maintenance of relationships and the recognition of the interdependencies on Earth. His conceptualization aids in the understanding that ecology is process, but that process cannot flow without meaningful context, and consumer culture, commodified and

characterized by individualism, does not support the construction of meaning. The implication for adult education is this: an ecological conceptualization would help the citizenry to understand that educational initiatives that focus on economy (toward the production and consumption of the doctrine of endless capital accumulation), individual success and personal gratification are not neutral alternatives.

So how do citizens and adult educators begin to reconsider their situation? Harvey suggests the following:

Imagine ourselves as architects, armed with a wide range of capacities and powers, embedded in a physical and social world of manifest constraints and limitations. Imagine also that we are striving to change the world. As crafty architects bent on insurgency we have to think strategically and tactically about what to change and where, about how to change what and with what tools. But we also have somehow to continue to live in this world. This is the fundamental dilemma that faces everyone interested in progressive change. (2000, p. 233).

As crafty architects, we want a renewal of community and learning. We should, however, acknowledge that modern citizens – adult educators, consumers and capitalists (we are all learners) - are part of a complex social system and no sensible person would ask for change overnight. Change will be slow and will come about only through a critical examination of generations of consumerist behaviour. Social change education (however emancipatory in ideal) in the form of abstractions and heavy rhetoric emphasizing apocalyptic predictions will be ineffective. Most may not appreciate that to reconsider consumptive behaviour within the capitalist social system is to reconsider a fundamental framework of understanding; that is to say, culture – our culture. What really needs to be done is to dig down through the cultural strata to the value layers

discussed in the last chapter. To begin the process, adult educators can facilitate dialogue framed around (or inclusive of) broader ecological issues and suggest that consumers and business people, as community members, could be asking critical questions in an effort to learn together.

To be a “productive participant” of society – to consume, to be entrepreneurial, to succeed on one’s own terms - is now an integral part of our life-identity. Critical questioning of this value framework is delicate work and if adult educators subscribe to a theory of social learning that discourages rhetoric and asserts the value of authentic participation, then any successful educational effort, whatever the scale, to help the citizenry re-connect to the ecology will: provide a respectful, non-threatening environment; afford an opportunity for reconsideration of past events - a reclamation of collective memory; encourage participation, openness and reciprocity; attempt to build social capital; encourage critical thinking and the negotiation of new meaning; recognize the disconnection of the citizen who feels overwhelmed by a system beyond his or her control; encourage use of the imagination, awareness of the ‘other’, and awareness of the ‘whole’. In short, adult educators will encourage and nurture cooperative engagement amongst community members.

I have heard activists argue that rather than consider relations within and between communities, energy should be focused directly on change of corporate behaviour. They ask, ‘is it not the corporations that have created this global market?’ , but it could be countered that this argument is narrowly construed. Societal process is political but it begins with and never really lets free the individual body (Harvey, 2000). Social

constructs, like corporations and globalized capitalism, are created with a process that begins with the body. Changes to these constructs will begin in the same place. A corporation is not human, but it must be recognized that it is the manifestation of human qualities and cultural process. Capitalists, while acting in their various roles such as shareholders, board members, and executives, have severely limited freedom to exercise their humanness. It is very difficult for them to look beyond production, cost reduction and profit maximization (as narrowly defined in a very specific business operation context). Cornering capitalists in a corporate context and attempting to reason that profits that do not recognize social costs are ecocidal will be ineffective – they will not see it as a sensible view; too much of the dialogue will be out of their context. Even if the human within the capitalist is in agreement, it would be extremely difficult to execute change from that point – like talking to a wall, as it were. When a capitalist says, “it’s just business and this is how business works”, it really is an accurate and fair statement. It is reification born of the cultural process.

There will be nothing but ‘spinning wheels’ in an attempt to appeal to a so called corporate conscience. As difficult or unappealing as it might be, it is better to consider those capitalists not as humans but as part of one of the many reifications that make the capitalist institution, operating on a spatiotemporal plane where words are scripted and only numbers matter. Profit analysis is not a human action at the level of the individual body but a reified, institutionalized tool well distanced across the planes of the cultural process. Well distanced, yes, but still dialectically related – you *can* get there dialectically. If, as an activist/educator, you want to see change in a corporation, then begin political process that will change those numbers. As an example, begin a process

where organization, collaboration and renegotiation create awareness and stop a gro up from buying a product that is harmful to the ecology. Significant changes to buying habits will reverberate and translate across the spatiotemporal planes of community and commerce, and impacted sales figures will result in corporate change. (Of course, the grounded citizenry face significant challenges as massive corporations, floating on their proprietary technology and moving rapidly anywhere they please, dominate the globe.)

As stated earlier, Etienne Wenger (1998) argues that learning is not an individual pursuit; that education is not facilitated by an instructor's monologue; and that learning does not take place in a 'sanitized' and separate training facility. He argues that we should consider learning as "... a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing" (p. 3). Wenger also argues that education and learning involve the process of (re)formation of identities – the "opening of identities"; that learners and educators, as a community, while acknowledging historical perspectives, must embrace the emergent; and that communities must imaginatively engage in the negotiation of meaning on multiple spatio-temporal levels (p. 263). Wenger views learning through a dialectical lens and his theory ties in well with the works of both David Harvey and John Ralston Saul, aiding in laying down a broad framework for community learning and renewal.

How do citizens create community and regain a sense in common? How do they begin to talk and commune? How do they begin to move from passive and individualist to political? How do they avoid narrow, particularist strategies? Learning is social; to learn is to engage. Many, however, are stuck. Whether in front of the television,

brokering commodified paper representations of wealth or eking out an existence in a third world urban slum, political process for many is stalled; many are just stuck. So, they need a way to start. Before we begin to discuss dialectical theory, let us consider what it means to actually talk.

An examination of a community based collaborative inquiry model will be of value at this point. It is not a difficult concept. It is just what most might imagine upon first hearing the term: community members (no matter the spatial scale; it could be the neighbours on your street, it could be the UN) convene to ask questions, raise issues and, hopefully, through answers and subsequent negotiation and decisions, walk away with additional clarity and a renewed basis for political action. It is probable that anyone reading this paper has been engaged in just such a process, however named, in one of his or her own communities of practice. Format and style of facilitation will vary depending on the circumstances. Lee (2003), in her paper, *Engaging the Whole Person Through the Practice of Collaborative Learning*, uses the following working definition:

Collaborative learning mobilizes the social synergy that resides within a group of co-learners engaged in a dynamic process of shared inquiry. Through dialogue, learning as shared inquiry evolves by critically exploring the perspectives of others. New dimensions of interpretations are fuelled, issues clarified and interdependence valued. There is an ongoing negotiation of roles among the community learners. (p. 79)

The reader will note Lee's use of many key terms - dynamic process, dialogue, shared inquiry, interpretation, negotiation, social synergy and community – used in an effort to emphasize the cooperative nature of the engagement. The reader will also note the connection to Wenger's community of practice.

In my research and direct experience, I have concluded the many benefits of the collaborative inquiry approach to learning include:

- A commitment to participation. Negotiation begins (and continues to fuel) the process and issues are framed in such a way as to present the importance to community members.
- A relatively non-threatening environment. Participants will feel welcomed and valued as stakeholders.
- The creation of a learning space. Participants are involved in decisions and negotiations. While a facilitator may frame and lead discussion, the participants will feel that they are on an equal footing and that they are valued. They are empowered with a sense of emancipation and feel they can make a difference.
- The development of trust. With trust, learning can move forward rapidly as there is a willingness to invest in renegotiation of meaning, potentially creating a forum for change.
- Participants and facilitator (note that roles do not have to be rigidly delineated) will learn through interaction and, in so doing, participants and facilitator can obtain several perspectives and, based on these, they will re-evaluate and reconsider their understandings of their own experiences. This leads to a (more) common understanding; a common sense.

No matter the format or content, collaborative inquiry should appeal to our social nature; our humanness. Saul (2001), in his book *On Equilibrium*, describes several human qualities. On the quality, common sense, he writes:

If we organize our society so that we can't use our common sense, then we become dysfunctional...Responsible individualism, healthy human relationships, representative democracy, an inclusive approach towards civilization – all of these are impossible if we are unable, first, to invoke our common sense of what is probable, second, to do so with others as part of our shared knowledge and, third, to act accordingly. (p. 48)

In the interests of creating a common sense, Lee speaks of “meaningful partnership”, “shared inquiry” and a “wholistic approach to life and learning” and states “learning unfolds in the most public of ways” (2003, p. 79). Individuals, though, must move to create the partnerships thus creating a public; a forum for sharing. Harvey, ever arguing that the personal is political, states, “social change begins and ends with the personal” (2000, p. 235); he acknowledges the importance of the personal while at the same time implying that there is also much of importance between the beginning and the end of the social change process. For social change, we must transcend the particular and return: collaborative inquiry affords adult educators and community members an opportunity to imagine this process.

The common thread running through these insights is an acknowledgement of the importance of a community view of the ‘larger picture’ (and the relationships and movements between the other varied pictures of our culture, that is to say, a dialectical view): to transcend; to see holistically; to move beyond ‘I’ to the ‘other’; and to partake of and act upon the common sense. Harvey (2000) argues the importance of a relational

awareness of the processes of the self and the social and problematizes the insistent separation of the two (p. 236). Saul (2001) argues that, due to firmly set anthropocentric ideologies, we humans deny the existence of the “synchronistic whole” of which we are part and, with a variation on Harvey’s notions of the self and the social as spatio-temporal processes, describes our unwillingness to understand or admit that both mortality and timelessness exist (pp.172-6). When an awareness of timelessness is denied, our sense of the social – the common sense – is suppressed with significant ill effects.

Harvey “den[ies] that we have any choice between particularity or universality in our mode of thinking and argumentation. Within a relational dialectics one is always internalized and implicated in the other” (2000, p.16). There is a relational force at play and to hinder it is problematic – but citizens do hinder it. The challenge lies in the apparent difficulty in understanding and imagining (the very sociopolitical act of) the production of space. To be the social animals that humans are is to produce, individually and communally, through spatial and temporal layers, an extraordinary “geographical mosaic” (p. 76) and “[w]ays have to be found to connect the microspace of the body with the macrospace of what is now called ‘globalization’” (p. 49).

To be political is to undertake meaningful action. In order to be meaningful, however, this political (and therefore necessarily social) action requires context. Therefore, meaningful (political) action must be within a social context, large scale or small. Moreover, action, to be truly political, must be undertaken with an awareness of how it will reverberate and translate through other, different ecological contexts in space and time. Harvey (2000) would describe these different contexts that comprise the process of our world as ‘uneven geographical developments’ and, if you will recall, he

helps us to understand that the complexity of this modern condition creates ‘disempowering confusion’. In considering and articulating an alternative learning environment, Harvey asks, “[h]ow are we to cut through these confusions and build a different sense of possibilities while acknowledging the power of the constraints with which we are surrounded?” (p. 233). We have acknowledged the importance of an awareness of spatiotemporal scales and Harvey confirms for us that we carry out political action when we are mindful of the “political possibilities at a variety of spatiotemporal scales” (p. 234). To be truly political is to take awareness and action beyond the personal - to employ a dialectical strategy of thought and action - and this, Harvey suggests, confronts narrow, individualist strategies. “Dialectics permits diverse knowledges and practices to be rendered coherent across scales without resort to some narrow causal reductionism” (p. 234).

A human entity – an embodiment – is necessarily somewhere in space and time. Individual contributions to political action take place at a spatiotemporal point and “[p]raxis is about confronting the dialectic in its ‘either/or’ rather than its transcendent ‘both /and’ form. It always has its existential moments” (p. 235). We must always face the thing or do the thing, but, at the same time acknowledge our sociopolitical role. We must be aware that people are social constructs; people are made of culture, but at the same time reproduce culture. Our sense of self is a social phenomenon: the sensing of the self could not be done without a social framework; one must necessarily be in relation to other. The word ‘self’ represents a concept that is necessarily relative to that which is outside self. Individualism, a philosophical position that reflects a ‘self only’ sense, is process stalled, frozen in time and place, unrecognizing of the cultural processes that

facilitate it in the first place. Individualism is the manifestation of stagnated politics. “The person that is political is then understood as an entity open to the innumerable processes (occurring at different spatiotemporal scales) that transect our physical and social worlds. The person must then be viewed as an ensemble of socio-ecological relations” (p. 236).

On Breaking Rules

David Harvey (2000) argues that we have, as humans, a basic repertoire of capacities. “Th[is] basic repertoire derived from evolutionary experience provides strategic options for human action” (p. 209). Our repertoire includes capacities for:

- Competition and the struggle for existence
- Adaptation and diversification into environmental niches
- Collaboration, cooperation, and mutual aid
- Environmental transformations
- Spatial orderings
- Temporal orderings

When faced with the choices in front of us – our inevitable existential moments – we can make use of these capacities in endless combinations to facilitate our human and cultural process. Harvey explains that it is “vital to interpret the categories [of capacities] relationally rather than as mutually exclusive” and it is through the relations and combinations of the capacities that “the character of a social formation is defined” (p. 210). Capitalism, as the dominant social form, is facilitated through a particular relational combination of these capacities. Interestingly, Harvey notes our natural inclination to

think of capitalism as “being basically about competition” and, more or less, operating through a “Darwinian mechanism” but at the same time observes that “capitalism could not survive without a lot of cooperation, collaboration, and mutual aid” (p. 210).

It is the particular way that the capacities are deployed that result in a capitalist society; it is the “particular mode[s]” of collaboration and competition (in relation to the rest of the repertoire) that define our consumerist, capitalist sociopolitical (p. 211).

Consider the remarkable infrastructure and organization that facilitate our world process. Wenger explains why we institutionalize: “what is institutionalized becomes public, easier to pay attention to, and better able to cross boundaries” (p. 243). Indeed, transnational corporations, many with tens of thousands of employees, necessarily have massive institutional structures and systems and, for that matter, management – coordination of action and communication - of any relatively large scale operation would be impossible otherwise.

We know from Wenger’s theory that structure is essential - there can be no intentional forward movement without a footing and a process will not proceed without the solidity that comes with the reification of previously negotiated meaning. Wenger, however, warns that “there are costs to institutionalization” (p. 243). In describing these costs, he first states that while “[i]nstitutionalization create[s] fixed points around which to negotiate ... it tends to become frozen in reification” (p. 243). Second, he explains that while institutionalization can facilitate change, “it has a limited ability to mobilize the power of practice” (p. 243) and thus, following the theory, can stifle learning. Third, he argues that institutionalization can “engender alienation” as it “represents foreign viewpoints without allowing negotiability” (p. 243). Finally, he states, though the process

of formation may have begun with multiple perspectives and with the best of intentions, institutionalization may “...become the instrument of ... domination” (p. 243).

Harvey agrees and argues existing “[i]nstitutions, rules, and regulations struggle to ensure that only one sort of competition – that within relatively freely functioning markets respecting property rights and freedom of contract – will prevail” (2000, p. 211), facilitating globalized capitalism and consumerism, but stalling other political action. This is problematic, no question, but, as Harvey argues, the reality of the relational dynamic between cooperation and competition (and the rest of our capacities) discloses an ultimate flexibility in the arrangement of the repertoire (2000).

This is key to our success in making change, but the challenge is seeing this flexibility given the apparent rigidity (at least in terms of considering alternative social systems) within our current society. “[A]n already -achieved spatiotemporal order can hold us to some degree apart from [a] fluid and open conception in our thought and practices” (p. 236). So how do we break the rules? To realize that (temporal) social processes move back and forth across uneven geographical terrain is crucial to an understanding of the reproduction of culture. Our world is made up of this uneven terrain and our being is a (temporal) social process of uneven geographical development across spatial scales. Citizens must begin to conceive of spatial scales: their creation; their interrelationship; and the movements between them. It is a matter of deeper consideration.

As an example, what does it mean to view the television at home alone? Considered at one spatial scale, it is a simple act in isolation but, considered at other spatial scales, there are a wide range of remarkable cultural and ecological effects. Or

how do we understand, let alone agree or refute the argument that flowing money “produces no good for society” (McMurtry, 1999, p. 179)? Perhaps we are talking at one scale of a money trader, sitting in an urban office tower pushing a button or two and executing a transaction, but, at other scales, we are talking of profound effects to humanity. To understand the cultural implications of money flows and the facilitating, mediating institutions is to conceive of movement across spatiotemporal scales.

With a dialectical political framework we, adult educators, capitalists and consuming citizens, achieve an understanding of the flows between the particular and the universal and of that which mediates them; and we can see the relational combination of human capacities for action and begin to conceive of alternative combinations. We can begin, through community based collaborative inquiry, in any form, to envision new ways of working through our cultural process and we can begin to conceive of new types of mediating institutions to bridge the planes of space and time with sensible, meaningful, multicontext mandates for social justice and equality. We can begin to renew our shared, common sense of ecology.

CHAPTER V: RENAISSANCE OF THE COMMON SENSE

I have to move up and down the earth.

- Bob Marley

What remains in our power is how conscious we are willing to be of our humanness.

- John Ralston Saul

There are days when I believe things to be so simple. Then there are days when I realize the complexity of our ecology. This, of course, is the nature of the dialectic. It – the dialectical process of ecology — is complex and simple, here and now, there and tomorrow; it is the process of life on earth; it is the parts and it is the whole. It is the simplicity of something like the derailment of a commercial train carrying tons of toxic chemicals – Crash! There it is, what a mess; what a tragedy. And it is the complexity of the neurostructure of the human brain, through space and time, interrelating with and mutually constituted by the social processes that led to the “advancement” that caused the disaster.

My father, nearing eighty years old, has seen much of what is generally referred to as progress. He was raised during the depression. He was in business from the late 1940's to the late 1980's and met with middle class success. He firmly dwells in this modern age, yet, he still watches, jaw agape, the level of modern consumption. Like so many in Canada living through the post war years though, he and my mother have made more and more use of modern consumer goods. Dad was also in the furniture and

appliance business and my parents often sampled the latest consumer item long before anyone else in the neighbourhood. That said, they still remember walking everywhere they had to go as children and even as young adults. Dad also remembers fueling the coal furnace at the schoolhouse across the dirt road in the morning and visiting the local general store for bulk purchases of staple household items wrapped in paper. My mother remembers potato and cheese covered with milk as a regular meal in the thirties and early forties (she still eats this meal - 'old habits' as the saying goes) and also recalls her father milking their cow every morning before breakfast. These memories are only sixty to seventy years old but it was a markedly different world then. My parents cannot conceive of many of the things that young people buy (and to them a baby boomer is young) and the methods by which they buy them. They are truly dumbstruck when they hear of the prices of cars and homes and the payments undertaken to facilitate the purchase of these items.

Interestingly though, in other ways, my parents (and many that I know of that generation) do buy a good many things uncritically. When my parents were young, they did not see food wrapped in plastic let alone buy it, but now they buy and throw out more plastic in a week than I do in several months. In my assessment, it seems that their consideration of consumption is within an economic rather than a broader ecological context. It is a fact, however, that my parents' generation on average does not consume at the same rate as the TV generation and those subsequent (Putnam, 2000; Suzuki, 2003). The cultural programming of my parent's generation still, to some degree intact, has prevented them from making the stronger ecological impact made by subsequent generations. In history, what will be significant about the passing of my parents'

generation is the loss of meaning shared with its members. As the intergenerational common sense is lost, so goes the facility for elders to commune with the younger generations; and so goes the facility for imparting wisdom to the children and other younger members of the community. It is remarkable to think of what my parents know and that most of it will be lost.

During a recent conversation with my father, we were talking about someone we knew and I said, "I'm not sure how happy he is. He seems a little disconnected". Dad responded, "I'm not sure how happy anyone is". We found ourselves talking about changes in community in the last several decades, and I found myself trying to describe to him how I related individualism and the breakdown of community to my thesis in the verbal equivalent of a few paragraphs. It went something like this: As language developed so did society. Once we began to speak to each other, everyday learning processes increased dramatically, concepts around sound and image were born and there began a process whereby members of society negotiated and attached meaning to things – the first cultural artifacts. Meanings, once sufficiently reified, became representations which could then move, unassisted by human hand, within and between communities of practice. The ability to create representations and send them before us or in our stead facilitated the creation of meaning frameworks and communication flows impossible up to that point in our history. In this new, fertile culture, technological growth increased rapidly, agriculture developed allowing for food surplus, populations grew and became sedentary, and specialization of labour developed. Formalizations – educative, governmental, judicial, social and economic to name but a few – became possible and, society became more and more complex.

The difficulty today, however, is that societal structure holds reified ways of learning based in a predominant value systems that are designed to facilitate movement along individualized consumer paths while, at the same time, blocking the social processes that help us to live communally and ecologically. Citizens have become disconnected economic units moving along the conveyor belts of global commerce. Everyday, social learning processes are badly damaged: citizens cannot see beyond individual space and cannot see that much of the activism and politics that do exist today are based in narrow interests. The fragmented and ephemeral nature of modern consumer and capitalist culture make socially contextualized imagination very difficult.

As might be expected, I have found myself explaining my thesis work not only to my father but to different people in various settings. I am sometimes asked, “what’s consumerism or globalization got to do with adult education?”. It is a great question and I always hope that there is the potential for negotiation. If it makes sense, I might try a short discussion about the grocery store and how it came to operate in the way that it does; how we learned to do it that way – no shortage of things to consider there. If they are really interested, I might ask if they see a difference between education based in productive/consumptive systems and emergent, everyday learning processes. Most times, dialogue around this comes down to broadening notions of learning.

Harvey tells us that “[w]e live in a social world that converts all of us into fragments of people with particular attachments, skills, and abilities integrated into those powerful and dynamic structures that we call a ‘mode of production’” (2000, p. 236). Fragmented (but at the same time structured) as we are in “the fierce spatiotemporalities

of daily life” (p. 237), we find it difficult to move from the personal to the political. We should remember, however, that it is all socially constructed. “Our ‘positionality’ or ‘situatedness’ in relation to that [of our social world and the modes therein] is a social construct in exactly the same way that the mode of production is a social creation” (p. 236). We – humans - have constructed this society; we are reproducing it as we speak.

In order to understand the nature of the challenges that we face in our current circumstances, as adult educators, adult learners, global consumers and citizens, we should understand that the social (even when it is dysfunctional) is constructed with the vital building blocks of everyday learning processes. We must attempt to broadly see the production of social space. We must attempt to understand the reproduction of culture and its flows through space and time, and, in order to do this, we need to begin to use the powerful muscles of our imagination. We must attempt to use the dialectical lens. We should view and imagine what is at the end of our nose - now, in a month, in ten years, in one hundred years and in the coming millennia. We should view and imagine (because it is now very possible) what is at the other end of the earth - now, in a month, in ten years, in one hundred years and in the coming millennia. To echo Saul (2001), we need to begin to see and imagine the spatiotemporal swirl of current and potential events and from this swirl we must use our intuition to choose that which will need to be in place (and in flow) in order to facilitate the cultural, ecological process we, as citizens in community, envision as best. Indeed, as Harvey argues, as an “insurgent oppositional movement” we need to do these things as well or better than those capitalists who currently dominate the production of space (2000, p. 245) and in so doing, as social, ecological beings coexisting in a learningful space, we will recreate a common sense.

REFERENCES

- Barber, K. (Ed.). (2004). *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (2nd ed.). Canada: Oxford University Press
- Bauman, Z. (1997). *Postmodernity and its discontents*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bauman, Z. (1998). *Globalization: The human consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bos, A. (2001) Adult education in the community colleges In D.H. Poonwassie and A. Poonwassie (Ed.), *Fundamentals of adult education: Issues and practices for lifelong learning* (pp. 171-188). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Bowers, C. A. (1993). *Education, cultural myths, and the ecological crisis: Toward deep changes*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Bowers, C. A. (2002). Toward an eco-justice pedagogy. *Environmental Education Research*, 8, 1, 21-34.
- Cruikshank, J. (2002) Lifelong Learning or re-training for life: Scapegoating the worker. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 34, 2, 1-14.
- Diamond, J. (1992). *The third chimpanzee: The evolution and future of the human animal*. New York: Harper Perennial
- Diamond, J. (1999). *Guns, germs and steel: The fates of human societies*. New York: Norton.
- Diamond, J. (2005). *Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed*. New York: Viking.
- Frank, T. (2000). *One market under god: Extreme capitalism, market populism, and the end of democratic society*. Toronto: Random House.
- Greider, W. (2003). *The soul of capitalism: Opening paths to a moral economy*. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster.

- Gouthro, P. (2002). Education for sale: at what cost? Lifelong learning and the marketplace. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* , 21, 4, 334-346
- Gouthro, P. & Plumb, D. (2003). Remapping the tripartite register: Moving beyond formal, nonformal and informal learning.
- Harris, M. (1989). *Our kind: Who we are, where we came from and where we are going*. New York, New York: Harper Perennial
- Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (2000). *Spaces of hope*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Harvey, D. (2001). *Spaces of capital: Towards a critical geography*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2003). *The New Imperialism*. New York: Oxford.
- Jacobs, J. (2004). *Dark age ahead*. Toronto: Vintage Canada
- Klein, N. (2000). *No logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies*. Toronto: Vintage Canada/Random House.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Lee, M. (2003). Engaging the whole person through the practice of collaborative learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22, 1, 78-93.
- McGregor, S. (2003a). Postmodernism, consumerism, and a culture of peace. Retrieved Mar. 9, 2004. Website: www.kon.org/archives/forum/13-2/mcgregor.pdf
- McGregor, S. (2003b). Consumerism as a source of structural violence. Retrieved Apr. 28, 2004. Website: www.kon.org/hswp/archive/consumerism.html
- McMurtry, J. (1998). *Unequal freedoms: The global market as ethical system*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- McMurtry, J. (1999). *The cancer stage of capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- McMurtry, J. (2002). *Value wars: The global market versus the life economy*. Toronto: Garamond Press.

- Plumb, D. (1999). Adult education in a world on speed. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 21, 2, 141-161.
- Plumb, D. (2003). *Learning about HIV/AIDS in the meshwork: The nature and value of everyday learning processes in community-based HIV/AIDS organizations*. Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent University.
- Plumb, D. (2004). Thinking dialectically about lifelong learning and democracy. In Peter Willis and Pam Carden, (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning and the Democratic Imagination: Revisioning Justice, Freedom and Community*. Flaxton, Queensland: Post Pressed
- Plumb, D., Leverman, A. & McGray, R. (2007). The learning city in a ‘planet of slums’. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 29, 1, 37-50
- Princen, T. (2002). Consumption and its externalities: Where economy meets ecology. In T. Princen, M. Maniates, and K. Conca (Ed.), *Confronting consumption*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Toronto: Simon and Schuster
- Rees, M. (2003). *Our final hour: A scientist's warning: How terror, error, and environmental disaster threaten humankind's future in this century – on earth and beyond*. New York: Basic Books.
- Saul, J. R. (2001). *On equilibrium*. Toronto: Penguin Canada
- Saul, J. R. (2005). *The collapse of global capitalism: And the reinvention of the world*. Toronto: Penguin Canada
- Spencer, B. (1998). *The purposes for adult education: A guide for students*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Suzuki, D. (2003). *The David Suzuki reader*. Vancouver: Greystone Books.
- Taylor, C. (1991). *The malaise of modernity*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd.
- Tomasello, M. (1999). *The cultural origins of human cognition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Welton, M. (1998). Educating for deliberative democracy. In S.M. Scott, B. Spencer, A.M. Thomas (Ed.), *Learning for life: Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 365-372). Toronto: Thompson Education Publishing, Inc.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*.
Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Wright, R. (2004). *A short history of progress*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc.