

Forum/Tribune

Towards a New Continuing Higher Education: Listening to the Subtle Signals of Change

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ABSTRACT

Change has been a prominent theme in adult and continuing education in recent years. Among the recommended responses for continuing higher education are rapid adjustment, adaption, and accountability to ensure our continuing survival as an institution. This paper suggests that there are other changes of a more subtle nature that need to be considered. By paying attention to these more subtle signals of change in our society and by considering their relationship to continuing education, we may

reshape our thinking, recreate our organizations, and redefine the way we work, both inside and outside the university. Paying attention to the subtle signals does not mean giving up what we are doing or ignoring our present difficulties. Rather, it means that we find ways to respond to and incorporate these varied influences and messages into a broader "vision-logic" or wider integrated rationality. While the response may differ among CE units, what is important is that we begin to attend to the subtle signals that may be ushering in a personal and social transformation.

RÉSUMÉ

Le changement est un thème qui ressort dans l'éducation aux adultes et permanente ces dernières années. On recommande, entre autres, pour l'éducation permanente supérieure, de s'ajuster rapidement, de s'adapter et de se responsabiliser pour assurer notre survie en tant qu'institution. Dans le présent exposé, on suggère qu'il existe d'autres changements de nature plus subtile dont il faut tenir compte. En prêtant attention à ces signaux plus subtils de changement dans notre société et en étudiant leurs relations avec l'éducation permanente, il nous sera possible de revoir notre façon de penser, de recréer nos organisations et de

redéfinir la façon dont nous travaillons, au sein de l'université comme à l'extérieur. Faire attention à ces signaux subtils ne veut pas dire abandonner ce que nous faisons ou ne pas tenir compte de nos difficultés actuelles. Au contraire, cela veut dire qu'il nous faut trouver des manières de réagir à ces influences et ces messages divers et de les incorporer dans ce qu'on appelle en anglais une «vision-logic» plus large ou une rationalité intégrée élargie. Si les réponses peuvent différer entre les diverses unités d'éducation permanente, il est cependant important de prêter attention aux signaux subtils qui peuvent inaugurer une transformation personnelle et sociale.

Subtle—from the Latin word meaning “finely woven”—is used by physicists to describe frequencies beyond direct physical detection; the more subtle an energy or finer its vibrations, the greater its potential power.

Change has been a prominent theme in adult and continuing education in recent years. The profound social, political, and technological events in all spheres of our society have been the focus of recent conferences, characterized as “Winds of Change” (AAACE 1993) and “Change as Catalyst” (CAUCE 1994). Among the recommended responses for continuing higher education are rapid adjustment, adaptation, and accountability to keep us in step with these propelling forces and to ensure our continued survival as an institution. Although we acknowledge and support the importance of reacting, surviving, and maintaining our existence, it is also possible that by doing so, we promote such

behaviours as struggling to fit in, staying the same, and making minor adjustments to forestall any real change. The effect may be to obscure the sense of what we are, who we are, and what we might become.

While these manifest events are making significant claims on our society and our institutions, others of a less dramatic nature are also being felt. These changes—subtle, less obvious, less celebrated—nonetheless have the potential to precipitate a transformation in the way we work in continuing higher education:

- a) the subtle signals of a global network—that we are citizens of the planet, interconnected to people, places, and events;
- b) the subtle signals of new ideas—replacing old, linear, top-down thinking with an understanding of nature in terms of interrelationships and connectedness;
- c) the subtle signals of human evolution—that we have the potential to develop toward higher levels of complexity and integration;
- d) the subtle signals of spirit—our search for meaning, and through meaning, finding our own significance and value;
- e) the subtle signals of community—opening ourselves to others, and working with others collectively.

In this paper we will explore several themes that suggest the presence of the more subtle signals of societal change. Further, we will suggest that by attending to these more subtle signals of change, we may be releasing ourselves to an evolution in our thinking, our interaction with one another, and our work towards creating a better society.

THE SUBTLE SIGNALS OF CHANGE

a) The Subtle Signals of a Global Network

There is no place left on earth where one can plan one's destiny without taking into account what is happening in the rest of the world (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 7). . . . The interconnectedness of human activities and interests is going to increase even further than we are accustomed to in the third millennium we are approaching. Our actions will affect everyone living on the planet and we will be affected by them. It is together that we shall prevail or disappear. (p. 19)

As ecological, political, and social problems continue to threaten the future of the planet, it is becoming more apparent that our destinies are joined with those around us. What happens in one place precipitates a reaction elsewhere. Economic, business, political, and social events are all connected in terms of their impact on and reaction to something that happens. Moreover, due to advances in mass communication, there are few remaining secrets. Everyone now knows more about what everyone else does and knows. We are responding in various ways—through social activism, grassroots movements, recycling practices, or passive submission. But it is also beginning to dawn on us that we need to go much further: we need to move towards widening our identity and extending our circle of identification beyond self, family, neighbourhood, and community, to include nation, humanity, and even nonhuman beings as well (Zimmerman, 1991). We are being asked for an attitude and behaviours that promote the self-realization of life on earth. This represents a shift from an environmental consciousness that still maintains our self as separate from the environment, to an ecological consciousness that acknowledges the intimate relationship of self and environment (Fox, 1990). In Wilber's (1995) terms, it represents a shift from "worldcentric" to "Kosmic" consciousness.

This retooling of our thinking presents a formidable task for continuing higher education. To engage in this sort of intervention and to encourage others to rethink their conception of the natural world and their relationship to it represent no less than an agenda of transformation of human consciousness.

b) The Subtle Signals of New Ideas

... systems thinking makes understandable the subtlest aspects of the learning organization—the new way individuals perceive themselves and their world. At the heart of a learning organization is a shift in mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how to create their reality. (Senge, 1990, p. 12)

Traditional, linear thinking emphasizes a world made up of separate entities, each having its own separate existence and identity, and only accidentally relating to other entities. This way of thinking promotes reactive behaviour to events that are perceived to have direct and simple

causes. In organizational contexts, it invites short-term thinking that encourages attention to immediate circumstances and discourages consideration of future potential events. Overall, while individual parts are sustained, their interrelationships as part of a whole are ignored. This attitude perpetuates job specialization and expertise, artificial unit boundaries, and competition for resources and outcomes. In sum, it is combative rather than collaborative. These features limit interaction and learning abilities which, in turn, encumber the ability of organizations to change and grow.

Systems thinking, on the other hand, encourages us to see parts in relation to a wider whole. A frequent image is that of a web of relations, emphasizing the connectedness and interdependence of multiple factors in events. Accordingly, there is by no means a one-to-one correspondence between external environmental changes and internal organism changes. Change and the direction of change are indeterminate and unpredictable—persistent features of systems behaviour. While the ideas of systems thinking are not entirely new, they encourage us to reconsider the way we organize and the way we do our work such that they promote learning and change.

c) The Subtle Signals of Human Evolution

I believe that we are living in a world which is not given to us. It is not like an open book which we can read and open at this chapter or that. We have hints, fragments. (Prigogine, 1986, p. 103)

Scientists and sages alike frequently describe a world that is not “given” as one that is apprehended and understood, but a world that is continuously being created, emerging, and evolving towards something more integrated and complex. In Prigogine’s (1986) view, our world is being created right here on the spot. He has shown that while closed systems are bound to decay to the state of least order, open systems have an inherent possibility to evolve to states of increasing complexity and order. This feature applies to all aspects of the universe and all living things, including human beings and organizations. In human beings, evolution offers the possibility of development towards higher levels of consciousness—towards a more integrated, whole personality, and an opening to a greater humanity. Humankind, it follows, is not at an endpoint of development but at a step along the way. Wilber (1981, 1995) argues that our task is to shift beyond the boundaries of our present limited rationality to a wider integrated

rationality or “vision-logic.” Vision-logic permits us to hold various rational perspectives together at once and to reconcile seemingly incompatible notions (Wilber, 1995, p. 185). Through vision-logic, we shift from correspondence thinking to coherence thinking. And, suggests Wilber, it is vision-logic that will prepare us for the challenges of the global network.

In our work, an evolutionary perspective suggests the possibility of novel processes and programs created on the spot out of the events, dialogues, and relationships of that moment. Lindemann, an adult educator for whom the creative process was of supreme importance, foresaw the creative potential in our adult education endeavours. He encouraged us to rely not on preconceived conclusions or prearranged solutions, but on the creative spirit. Lindemann (1989) observed, “Whenever it becomes possible to add a new quality to experience, we stand in the presence of creation” (p. 57).

d) The Subtle Signals of Spirit

Deep down, all of us are probably aware that some kind of mystical evolution is our true task. Yet we suppress the notion with considerable force because to admit it is to admit that most of our political gyrations, religious dogmas, social ambitions and financial ploys are not merely counterproductive but trivial (Robbins, 1988, p. 82)

Fifteen years ago, Marilyn Ferguson (1980) described an underground network of “conspirators” who were working to bring about a different kind of society based on a vastly enlarged concept of human potential. Today, judging from the books on the best-seller lists and from the footage of library shelves devoted to personal and social change, it is evident that the desire for fulfilment and meaning is growing. This quest for ultimate meaning and to be part of something that is greater than just ourselves seems to be constituent of the human condition. According to McKenzie (1991, p. 11), we seek answers not with the expectation that reality will become perfectly clear or that unanswerable questions will be resolved, “but with the assurance that the process of striving for meaning contributes to our growth as human beings . . .”

Although detractors of this effort dismiss it as further evidence of an egocentric and self-centred society, its supporters recognize the moral ideal that guides this commitment. This moral ideal, says Taylor (1992), is “a

picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where 'better' and 'higher' are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire" (p. 16). For many, this ideal involves the pursuit of meaning, as addressed by McKenzie. For others, says Taylor, the ideal is to become authentic, that is, to take on the task of defining one's self and being true to one's originality, and through becoming authentic, to become better equipped to create harmony in ourselves and others.

Personal change leads to social change. Individuals who undergo personal change bring marginal views into the mainstream; their views are, in turn, recognized for their possible contribution to the processes of societal change. According to Wilber (1995), those individuals who transform themselves "create a 'cognitive potential' in the form of new worldviews, that in turn feed back into the ongoing mainstream of social institutions" (p. 197).

e) The Subtle Signals of Community

We also need community, the presence of others, to learn and live. Other people provide mirrors for us. In other people we see ourselves reflected back at us. It is easy to dismiss our mirrors, particularly those that reflect what we perceive as negative. We must learn to accept the reflection and try to see and hear, even if our immediate feelings want to reject the image. (Apps, 1994, p. 8)

Apps suggests that working with others and our experience of others allows us to learn about ourselves. Our shared experiences allow us to clarify our thinking, open ourselves to criticism, test our ideas, increase our awareness of others, and uncover our values and beliefs. In other words, through community we further our self-knowledge.

This experience of community—working and learning with others—is enhanced when we seek and value diversity among those with whom we work. Listening carefully with an open mind and learning from our differences broaden our viewpoint. Also, through listening we create community with others. We are enabled not only to notice those needs and understandings that are already fully formed, but also to participate in the mutual processes of creating and forming new needs and understandings. In so doing, we take part in mutual learning, growth, and self-creation (Levin, 1989).

RESHAPING OUR THINKING AND RECREATING ORGANIZATIONS

The themes we have touched upon above share the feature of revealing signals or hints of a possible emerging age that will differ qualitatively and perhaps even fundamentally from our current age. Our heightened awareness of such concepts as evolution, connectedness, consciousness, ecology, and community suggests that these are some of the areas in which these differences may occur. Together, these previously marginalized concepts may be signaling the beginnings of a new age and world view. In time they may become so established that they change our lives, our institutions, and our society. Some distinguished theorists have pointed to this possibility (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Wilber, 1981, 1995), and we are seeing signs of these changes already in our society. The promotion of the learning organization represents one of these; the interest in self-development and human consciousness represents another; and the attention to social awareness and social responsibility represents a third. Each of these signs suggests an opportunity for the way we in continuing higher education might reshape our thinking, recreate our organizations, and redefine the way we work inside and outside the university.

a) The Learning Organization

The enhanced concept of the learning organization provides us with a new language and framework for leadership and membership in organizations. There is a call for a shared vision among members of organizations, and an invitation to members to engage in dialogue among themselves and with those outside the organization. There is also an encouragement to pay attention to our connection with others and to the both obvious and subtle consequences of our actions. In all, the conceptual framework of the learning organization sets the stage for us to change our fundamental way of thinking about, and working and learning in, organizations. Senge (1990) offers three cornerstones of the learning organization: aspiration, conversation, and conceptualization. Aspiration considers the personal vision of individuals and the creation of a shared vision for an organizational unit. The shared vision is an integration of the personal visions of organizational members through a process of conversation or dialogue whereby individuals attempt to draw into the open their internalized assumptions. These processes are carried out within a context of systems thinking—looking at

relationships and the interdependence of the parts of our organizations. For example, by adopting a systems orientation, we are invited to rethink our notion of expert, that is, we no longer rely on the expertise of a single individual or discipline. By acknowledging the rapid changes in knowledge, the complexity of problems and issues, and the diversity of expertise among individuals and groups, we may begin to utilize more interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to problem solving and program development. As well, we may employ new combinations of resources and knowledge orientations to deal with issues. Another example would be to take a longer-term perspective that gives less importance to immediate pay-offs and greater attention to multiple benefits in the future.

In a complementary fashion, Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell (1991) suggest that a learning organization is characterized by participation, information exchange, structural flexibility, and learning opportunities. Building on these ideas, it seems important that all members of a CE unit be given the opportunity to take part in, discuss, and debate major policy and program planning decisions in a way that recognizes and resolves differences in values and points of view, which, in turn, leads to more supportable decisions and outcomes. This approach would include making information about the organization as widely available as possible. Flexibility should also be a feature of our new organizational structures so that individuals are not overly constrained by boundaries, policies, and practices that might restrict creativity and new ideas. Further, emphasis should be placed on looking outside our organizations for factors that have implications for the organization. The technique of "boundary scanning" by all organizational members who have outside contacts is suggested.

Overall, our organizations should create learning climates that provide resources for learners and, most importantly, a feeling that mistakes are tolerated and that learning and improvement are highly valued. Self-development opportunities that encourage individuals to engage in their own learning and development should be made available. These latter themes have specific application for staff development in continuing higher education. Recently, staff in The University of Manitoba's Continuing Education Division embarked on a process of developing a plan for faculty evaluation and review. What was striking to observe was the consistent desire on the part of staff to develop professionally and to engage in activities that corresponded with what they found meaningful in work and life. The natural desire to express their uniqueness and to continue to work at what they cared for and about (which is no less than spiritual) was fully

evident. Our experience suggests to administrators that they should be willing to listen for, acknowledge, and even promote the expression of needs, and then to provide every opportunity for their fulfilment.

CE units can continue to be leaders in developing the concept of the learning organization and, by doing so, become models for other parts of the university and for organizations in the larger community. We need to continue to adapt our prevailing system of thinking to the creation of organizations that are “capable of adapting, changing, developing and transforming themselves in response to the needs, wishes and aspirations of people, inside and outside” (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1991, p. 1).

b) Self-development and Human Consciousness

Emerging from the subtle signals is the thesis that it is in our natures to develop psychologically towards greater integration, consciousness, and wholeness. This implies we have the capacity to develop not only horizontally, as in the expansion of our knowledge and skills, but vertically as well, as in the evolution and transcendence of ourselves, our perspectives, and our world views. Vertical education for transcendence and integration moves beyond horizontal expansion and, through its challenge and support of growth and development, promotes those processes of integration and transformation.

In continuing higher education, we have a good deal of experience in addressing development on a horizontal plane, and little experience with addressing development on a vertical plane. Issues of spirituality, transformation, and transcendence have not been high on our agenda to this point. In part, educators themselves are not reconciled on the value of spiritual striving and personal transformation (Do these endeavours promote self-indulgence or do they support a moral ideal?). Also, in an age of manifest and measurable outcomes, education that attends to personal transformation is often at odds with education that promotes observable knowledge and skills. And further, successful program efforts on the vertical plane demand that adult educators themselves be seekers, embarking on a developmental path and being curious about “the transcendent self.”

One of our tasks as adult educators could be to give greater priority to exploring the themes of meaning, spirituality, and human consciousness. We could begin with our learners, by acknowledging and bringing to light in our students this spiritual striving. Students often come to continuing education courses with extrinsic, well-worked-out, career-related goals—to

learn to do something better or to know more about something. But when these students are allowed to explore more deeply their motives for continuing learning, they actually say they want to know more about themselves and want to develop themselves personally. We hear this most often among mid-career and mid-life adults, but not exclusively so. And if we focus only on those easily articulated, extrinsic aspects of motivation, we miss what may be the intrinsic goal—to grow and evolve as a person. Lindemann (1989), in addressing the meaning of adult education nearly 70 years ago, made this precise point. He envisioned for adult education a purpose that extended beyond the preparatory and the vocational: “to put meaning into the whole of life” (p. 5), whose promise lay in its capacity to foster human qualities that contributed to the functioning of the whole, integrated personality. To include this broader orientation, educators need to navigate differently, that is, they need to consider new ways of establishing reliable knowledge, be willing to accept the risks associated with moving beyond social norms, and be open to alternative values and previously avoided choices (McWhinney, 1990).

CE units might consider the value of establishing a more central place for self-development and consciousness studies in higher education through forums, courses, conferences, symposia, and study groups. A recent initiative to develop a program in human consciousness at The University of Manitoba drew together individuals from various university departments and faculties, as well as from the community. To be part of such a group and to explore these issues surfaced as a deeply felt need of many of those who joined. Moreover, to listen closely to the views of others and to grapple with the definitions, issues, ideas, and “truths” concerning human consciousness were in themselves deeply valued developmental opportunities, in addition to the actuality of the resulting program.

A further task for adult education, one that is receiving current attention in the literature, is to create opportunities to engage in self-reflection. Throughout his book, psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1993) makes a compelling argument for the importance of becoming consciously self-reflective, to be aware of both the way our sense organs register information and how we can direct and control our experiences. In that (often brief) moment between a stimulus and our response lies our opportunity for self-reflection. Without self-reflection, we are dominated by instructions programmed in the nervous system by our genes. But with self-reflection, “we begin to write our own programs for action” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 22). In organizational contexts, to be self-reflective is to be proactive in a

very specific sense (Senge, 1990). It means that we stop reacting to and fighting the enemy “out there”; rather, we reflect on what we are doing and how we are contributing to our own problems. Self-reflection holds promise not only for its potential to contribute to adult development, but also for its unique bearing on adult learning that distinguishes it from childhood learning.

We believe that moving the themes of spirituality and personal transformation from the margin to a more central place in our overall continuing education work is of value to our work and to our discipline. For one, we can promote the development of timely research and scholarship in this emerging and still-frontier field of study. More importantly, we can expand our notion of what is worth doing in continuing higher education; we can include more of what has previously been left out; and we can incorporate concepts and ideas that challenge our thinking and contribute to the complexity and coherence of our overall endeavour.

c) Social Awareness and Social Responsibility

As a new millennium dawns, we have awakened to our connectedness to others, both locally and globally, and we are absorbed now more than ever before with our world and our relationship to it. We see ourselves much differently now: we are part of a global community, trying to do our part, from recycling, to saving our whales, to preserving our forests, to protecting our threatened peoples. For many, this interest takes us into social movements that further our own growth and transform our consciousness. In sum, the issues of a global network are being explored and relevant work is being done in all spheres of our selves, our communities, and our societies. We need to ask ourselves how we in continuing education can work with others to support and further those actions being taken by individuals and groups in our society.

In our most recent past, partly in response to financial pressures on our CE units, we have aligned ourselves with groups and organizations who had the resources (students and money) we required to survive. By our actions, we may have inadvertently been supporting the efforts of some to become richer and more powerful, while neglecting their efforts to become more human. Moreover, we may have been dismissing an agenda of social responsibility, along with our capacity and our need to support its visions. We have acknowledged the demands on our CE units to do more with less and to view as realistic those efforts to be more accountable, as well as to enhance our programs through technology, entrepreneurship, and revenue generation.

Our agenda should not be an agenda of “either/or,” nor even an agenda of balance; rather, ours should be an agenda of development. We need to create a mission that reflects a more highly evolved vision. Although this mission must retain the characteristics and demands of financial viability, it must also move beyond them to incorporate a broader, more inclusive, more integrated vision of purpose and possibility. Paying attention to the subtle signals of change suggests that we find ways to respond to and incorporate their influences and messages into the programs we develop and into the structures we put in place.

A first priority is the development of an organizational container for our work that offers both structure and flexibility. Organizational structure is essential to resource allocation (human, spatial, financial), but we also need flexibility, degrees of freedom, tolerance of uncertainty, and creative talent if we are to actualize the possibilities offered by the earlier-mentioned concepts of evolution and creation. For example, in budget decisions, is money set aside and are resources allocated to create programs and opportunities that attend to the subtle signals? To illustrate, we might picture a scenario of several colleagues sharing mutual interests: a discussion ensues, an idea emerges, actions are taken, and a program or event results. It could not have been predicted, it may not even fit neatly into a CE unit’s current priorities, but it does represent the possibility of creating something new, conceivably even a different world of continuing higher education. Attitudes of willingness and open-mindedness can lead to the creation of something entirely new, which, over time, can be the catalyst for further change.

As we enlarge our vision, we need to build more partnerships with individuals and groups whose work reflects the themes of the subtle signals. And, rather than exploiting our relationships with them, we need to work in ways that further the ability of both ourselves and others to achieve our respective visions and goals. When partnerships are approached with an attitude that goes beyond their narrow instrumental value to one of reciprocity and mutual learning, then we begin to gain the most from the integration of our understandings and resources. In addition, we are suggesting that CE units consider a broader notion of partners, to move beyond working with only those with whom we are familiar and comfortable or with whom we are formally identified. We should seek greater diversity and include different groupings of employees, learners, and community members, who in turn represent racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and lifestyle variations; their diverse values and ideas can contribute to the

challenges that promote learning and growth. And, finally, we gain further when we reflect on our partnerships in a deeper, more conscious way-how we enter into them, how we continue them, and how we nurture them. In so doing, we learn about ourselves.

We have proposed an enlarged, more inclusive agenda for continuing education, corresponding to our potential to evolve in the direction of greater complexity and coherence. Beyond this, and in the spirit of indeterminacy and unpredictability, we do not offer formulas. But, as we have indicated earlier, the subtle signals and their related themes encourage us to think differently and more deeply about how we work. Concerning the theme of social awareness and social responsibility, we suggest that it is no longer defensible to exclude or ignore endeavours that address ecological and social concerns, and that CE units should take a leadership role in this area by embarking on programs in partnership with the larger community.

CLOSING COMMENT

We are called into question by our listening; we are tested by what we hear; we can be accused by what we do not hear. (Levin, 1989, p. 137)

In our view, the propelling forces in the modern world tend to draw our attention and efforts to one side, pulling us in a particular direction. But trying to correct problems by attending to the more obvious situations and solutions may cause us to overlook and miss the subtle signals. Paying attention to subtle signals does not mean giving up what we do now or ignoring our present difficulties. Rather, it means that we find ways to respond to and incorporate these varied manifest and subtle influences and messages into a broader "vision-logic," one that transcends and encompasses them both. Turning again to the subtle signals, while we realize that attending to these will not solve all our organizational problems, they may guide us to a wider vision and direct our actions to the promotion of greater human development and greater harmony. How we choose to do this will differ among CE units and institutions. What is important is that we begin to look for, to listen to, and to consider these subtle signals that may be ushering in a personal and social transformation.

Learning to see slow, gradual processes requires slowing down our frenetic pace and paying attention to the subtle as well as the dramatic. If you sit and look into a tide pool, initially you won't see

much of anything going on. However, if you watch long enough, after about ten minutes the tide pool will suddenly come to life. The world of beautiful creatures is always there, but moving a bit too slowly to be seen at first. The problem is our minds are so locked in one frequency, it's as if we can only see at 78 rpm; we can't see anything at 33 1/3. (Senge, 1990, p. 23)

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