



MINDING THE GAP: SOCIAL LEARNING FOR TURNING IDEALS INTO ACTIONS

BY HAROLD GLASSER

Humans have been both fascinated and tortured by questions regarding our fate and future for at least as long as we have possessed the ability to share our thoughts. Under the best of circumstances, these musings involve asking a series of questions about the present, past, and future. Where are we? How did we get here? Where do we appear to be heading? Where do we want to go? How do we get there from here?

Our fate and future is and always has been intertwined with nature, despite the widespread failure of most humans to act in a manner that reflects a deep understanding of this relationship. And now, for the first time, we have gone full circle, causing the fate and future of nature to become entwined with our own.

The contours of the future we are now forging, however, are yet to be fully determined. Simply restated, the future is emergent and, within limits, plastic. While conscious design is unlikely to afford us the capacity to control the future directly, how we craft our sphere of concern and how effectively we link this to action will likely influence the future in profound ways.

In the recent past, many have assumed that economic growth is a

surrogate for social progress. But some are beginning to value learning over economic growth as the vehicle for bringing about a more sustainable and desirable world for all. My goal in this article is to explore some of the likely requirements and potential stumbling blocks associated with employing learning, and in particular social learning, to achieve a vision of the future I refer to as “ecocultural sustainability.”

Ecocultural Sustainability

Ecocultural sustainability refers to both a state of dynamic equilibrium and a social process that is desirable and ecologically sound. It requires that a society can, at a minimum, continually renew itself and its members by supporting:

- the flourishing of rich cultural and biological diversity;
- forms of governance that are just, egalitarian, transparent, and participatory; economies that are sufficient, equitable, accountable, and bioregionally sound; and
- production and consumption that promotes universalizable lifestyles and keeps its wake in check by both learning from and working with nature and limiting its total life-cycle costs (social, environmental, and financial).

Successful implementation of the ecocultural sustainability paradigm rests both on integrating reason and emotion and on inculcating a balance between the needs of individuals and the imperative of the common good (human and nonhuman). It calls for educational processes and systems that nurture active citizens and open minds by encouraging wonder, creativity, tolerance, cooperation, and collaboration. By propagating the skills to regularly monitor and evaluate the activities of individuals and organizations—to learn from their mis-

takes and celebrate their successes—it promotes vigorous self-criticism, combats rigidity and apathy, and fosters anticipatory decision-making and adaptive learning. And by cultivating the agility to distinguish between needs and wants, meaningful innovation and sheer novelty, the sacred and the profane, and a balance between specialization and generalization, such societies prepare their individuals, organizations, and institutions to counteract maladaptive forces and respond to unforeseen challenges and changes that are beyond their control with hope, joy, imagination, and unruffledness.

I am interested in exploring whether social learning inspires and fosters planned, directed action and behavior that is more consistent with our highest values and aspirations regarding improving quality of life. If so, is this force strong enough to counterbalance the historical tendency toward anthropocentric and ethnocentric approaches that tend to advantage narrow self-interest? In short, does social learning give an edge to anticipatory, holistic, egalitarian, and non-anthropocentric planning processes and decisions that favor continual quality of life improvements for all—humans and the biosphere as a whole?

The Gap

Our generation isn't the first to experience a gap between the world of our aspirations, hopes, and dreams and the world we create with our policies, practices, and everyday actions. Of particular significance to our contemporary dilemma is the seduction of material affluence and the corresponding failure to recognize, appreciate, or effectively respond to the predicament of our seemingly interminable quest

TEAM TIP

In your team, discuss Dave Brower's statement that he was not “blindly against progress, but against blind progress.” How could your organization be more aware of the larger impact of different policies and choices?

for ever greater consumption and its potential to undermine the ecological and social basis of our existence.

What is most surprising or perhaps troubling is that while environmental concerns and attitudes are widely supported and long-standing, they have generally not, at least in the U.S., translated into consistent, effective actions and behaviors—voting habits, purchasing decisions, and lifestyles—for improving environmental quality. Similarly, on the international level these concerns and attitudes have not generated effective treaties for responding to contemporary, global-scale environmental challenges. Simply put, awareness of a problem, accessibility of extensive information on its origins and impacts, and even stated concern about it do not guarantee action or imply that, if taken, the action will be appropriate or effective.

The Greening of Progress

The ideological commitment to sustainable development as continuous improvement in the overall conditions of human life is unavoidably rooted in the notion of progress—at least for those of us in the West. The orthodox view of the idea of progress, which dates back to at least the time of Xenophanes in the late 6th century B.C.E., holds that moral, political, economic, technological, and social betterment are *inevitable*. Such a view of ineluctable, boundless progress became widely adopted in the West during the Enlightenment and continues to be broadly embraced today. This perspective has been justified by—and tied to—humankind’s expanding capability to control and manipulate nature. It is also wrapped up in a conviction that humankind is perfectible. Yet many of today’s interconnected environmental and social problems—over-consumption, poverty, over-harvesting, climate change, stratospheric ozone reduction, over-population, biodiversity loss, pollution, fresh water shortages, invasive species, fisheries collapse, deforestation, over-grazing, erosion, desertification, and salinization—are the unintended, generally unforeseen (but not necessarily unforeseeable) consequences of a failure to recognize, adequately appreci-

ate, or effectively respond to the reciprocal character of humankind’s relationship with nature.

The famous American environmentalist, Dave Brower, was fond of saying that he was not “blindly against progress, but against blind progress.” This phrase could be a mantra for the less dogmatic, constructive critics of the orthodox notion of progress. Their work suggests that progress is multifaceted and contingent. Progress in one realm need not imply progress in another. In fact, progress in one realm can be inversely related to progress in another. Excessive progress in one realm can even foster a lack of resilience that engenders collapse. What’s more, past gains can be irreversible—and irretrievable, as with lost languages or the skills, traditions, and wisdom that are forfeited when a culture becomes extinct.

The fundamental challenge is to better understand our nature—and learn how to work with it—to identify levers that can help us bring about the change we seek.

I have coined the term “greening of progress” to refer to the process of modifying the orthodox notion of progress to support a transition to ecological sustainability. This revisioning of progress incorporates three assumptions. First, the idea of progress cannot be separated from our values and assumptions about human nature (are humans inherently good, bad, both, or neither), technology, economics, what is sacred, and our views about the way the world works. Furthermore, every decision will, almost inevitably, generate tradeoffs. Second, humankind’s quality of life is ultimately tied to, and constrained by, our ability to maintain the health and flourishing of nature and the planet’s various ecosystem services along with our ability to stay within the planet’s biogeophysical carrying capacity. Third, the rate and character of progress are shaped by our concern for

the common good; our ability and proclivities to acquire, process, evaluate, and share information about nature and the current state of affairs (particularly feedback data); the types of decision-making processes and criteria we employ; our proficiency at understanding and reflecting our highest concerns in our institutions, policies, and lifestyles; our adeptness at acting in an anticipatory and adaptive fashion (as opposed to a simply reactive one); and our capacity to support individual and institutional self-renewal.

In contrast to others, I have specifically chosen not to include a formal requirement for radical value change. I have done this because I believe the surveys of the public’s environmental attitudes and concern demonstrate that the underlying values to support such change, while possibly not deep enough or well enough informed by science and a sophisticated understanding of causal relationships, nevertheless already exist, are sincere, and are widely embraced. Rather than eliciting a sweeping change in values, the more fundamental and crucial steps may involve better understanding our existing palette of values (and their relative implications for improving quality of life), reprioritizing or realigning our values in relation to this improved understanding, and eliciting greater consistency in their application.

Niels Röling offered a provocative and challenging admonition that alludes to the essential change embodied by my “greening of progress” perspective when he stated, “Until now man has fought nature. From now on, he will fight his own nature” (translation of French). Rather than fight our nature, however, I believe the fundamental challenge is to better *understand* our nature—and learn how to work with it—to identify levers that can help us bring about the change we seek.

From my greening of progress perspective, I take Röling to mean that environmental management must become much more about managing people—especially the way we learn, form and test our values, and use nature to satisfy our needs and desires—than managing nature *per se* (i.e., attempting to control and

manipulate soil, forests, marine environments, and ecosystems). I would also modify Rölöf's insight to incorporate the idea that a greening of progress tradition, or at least a counter-current, has existed for at least several millennia. But why hasn't this modified view of progress taken hold? The pivotal issue, in my mind, is to clarify the role that learning can play in supporting the greening of progress and in facilitating a transition to ecocultural sustainability.

Social Learning and Ecocultural Sustainability

If a transition to ecocultural sustainability is ever to take hold, unprecedented individual and collective change must occur. Change of this character and scale, however, has no chartered course. While no society has yet to successfully make such a transition, it is not for lack of interest or effort. Comprehensive, coordinated change—spanning our behavior, practices, policies, institutions, and, perhaps, values—is extremely difficult.

Any planned, directed change by individuals or collectives is built on learning. Using the *Oxford American Dictionary* definition as a rough guide, I define learning as the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, norms, values, or understanding through experience, imitation, observation, modeling, practice, or study; by being taught; or as a result of collaboration. I also note that “understanding” is interpreted very broadly here to also include intuition, which may be the product of extensive study, spiritual practice, divine inspiration, or even serendipity, rather than conscious reasoning alone.

Contrary to widely held views, I do not believe that learning must necessarily engender behavioral change. Not all learning warrants behavioral change and sometimes competing interests, goals, and objectives militate against change. It is only through learning, however, that we acquire our values, attitudes, and concerns along with our conception of reality. By acquiring new information (or exploiting existing information), we have the possibility to test these values and concerns against our understanding of reality and, if warranted, we can take measures to rethink

our values, realign our behavior and action, or do both. When corrective responses result from anticipatory learning (as opposed to simple adaptation), I refer to them as *planned change*.

In contrast to others, I view almost all learning by individuals as some form of social learning. The exception is pure trial-and-error learning through direct personal experience, essentially immune from the influence of others. When individuals engage in the process of learning, they more frequently employ observation, imitation, modeling, self-instruction, conversation, and mentoring, among other strategies. All of these strategies, however, rest on some interaction with living beings or at least employing the artifacts (e.g. language, tools, books, drawings, videos, music recordings, software, etc.) of living, or once living, beings.

Albert Bandura has argued that modeling, from the standpoint of behavior elicitation, is the most significant form of learning in which individuals engage (*Social Learning Theory*, Prentice Hall, 1977). His social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous interaction among cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. Bandura separated the conditions for successful behavioral modeling into four components:

- (1) *Attention*—a “model” behavior in the environment must grab or capture a potential learner's notice.
- (2) *Retention*—the learner must remember the observed behavior.
- (3) *Reproduction*—the learner must be able to accurately replicate the observed behavior.
- (4) *Motivation*—the environment must offer a consequence (reinforcement or punishment) that increases the probability for a learner to demonstrate what they have learned.

While Bandura's social learning theory was developed to explain individual behavior, it can be applied to collectives with great efficacy, too.

As long as learning, by individuals or collectives, involves some form of input drawn from others, I characterize it as social learning. The more salient distinction, I find, is differentiating

between what I refer to as *passive* social learning and *active* social learning. Passive social learning rests on the prior learning of others. It does not require inputs in the form of communication or interaction—direct feedback—from other living beings. Passive social learning includes learning that results from reading a newspaper, watching a blacksmith forge a tool, viewing a movie, listening to a radio program, attending a lecture or poetry reading, searching the internet, or following a recipe. It also includes observing the practices of, and interactions among, others.

Passive Social Learning. Passive social learning has many advantages for cultural evolution over trial-and-error learning because it can lead to the same results at much lower cost in terms of time, effort, and danger. A drawback is that most results must be accepted uncritically—i.e., on trust. Another potential drawback is that it generally requires tacitly embracing the values and assumptions that are encoded in the transferred knowledge. While the passive social learning process may yield important new insights for the individuals involved, it generally has limited applicability for directly spawning substantially new social innovations.

Most learning in our contemporary world is passive social learning. Because it relies on the received wisdom of others (frequently experts), passive social learning can be used to readily propagate behaviors that favor narrow interests over the common good. Such maladaptation is ubiquitous today. An example is the orthodox notion of progress, which supports a general belief that environmental problems do not need to be addressed today because new technologies can always be created to cost-effectively address any problems that might subsequently arise. Vested interests and those unwilling to share power generally have a significant interest in perpetuating such behaviors.

Employing Bandura's framework, ecoculturally sustainable behaviors are commonly seen as less appealing, so they fail to grab our attention. The behaviors are frequently unfamiliar so they are less likely to be retained. They

are also often more involved or more complex, so they are less likely to be reproduced. Finally, the behaviors are routinely perceived as inconvenient, more expensive, more time consuming, not fun or “cool,” unsafe (as with smaller, more fuel efficient vehicles or bicycles), or as activities of the counter-culture, so there is little motivation to try them out.

The motivation for employing more ecoculturally sustainable behaviors is further diminished for two key reasons. First, a behemoth advertising industry bombards us with models of people enjoying unsustainable behaviors, without experiencing any negative side effects or tradeoffs. Second, the negative side effects that do exist are often not readily visible or they are distributed in space and time far away from those causing the impacts.

Maladaptive behaviors are widely modeled in the media and in society. It should be no surprise, as Bandura suggests, that such behaviors are likely to be perpetuated despite widespread information documenting the negative overall consequences of maintaining them. Simply put, our societal emphasis on passive social learning and our proclivity for modeling unsustainable, as opposed to sustainable, behaviors severely hamper the possibility of facilitating a transition to ecocultural sustainability.

Active Social Learning. Active social learning, on the other hand, is built on conscious interaction and communication between at least two living beings. It is inherently dialogical. Active social learning can be broken into three rough categories that are a function of the skills and values of the individuals in the collective and the power relationships that define them:

- (1) *Hierarchical*—based on predetermined, inflexible relationships between established teachers and learners;
- (2) *Non-hierarchical*—based on two-way learning, where each participant, as an “expert” in their own right, shares their knowledge and experience; and
- (3) *Co-learning*—based on non-hierarchical relationships, collaboration, trust, full participation, and shared exploration.

Hierarchical and non-hierarchical active social learning are widely applied and used with great benefit to expand the penetration of existing knowledge. Co-learning, because of its requirements for team building, complete engagement, “learning-by-doing,” and accountability, supports the generation of new knowledge and novel strategies for addressing real-world problems. Co-learning supports positive change by building capacity in three fundamental areas: critical evaluation of existing knowledge and problems, knowledge generation and penetration, and application of this new knowledge to policy, practice, and everyday life.

Active social learning can take place in the context of a conversation, a course employing the Socratic method, dancing with a partner, symphony practice, a community meeting, an open, participatory public review process, and video conferencing over the internet. Opportunities for cross-fertilization and emergence make it much more effective than passive social learning at creating innovations and widely diffusing novel behaviors. Active social learning, because of the opportunity to directly engage both a broad range of perspectives and the whole human, also has the potential to promote more open, equitable, and competent learning processes. Furthermore, the potential to receive direct feedback from other living beings and gain a palpable “taste” for the effects of our own unsustainable behaviors offers a powerful motivation for challenging the desirability of the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions, values, and principles that guide our theories-in-use, routinized policies, practices, and individual behaviors. As such, the highest, most diverse and participatory forms of active social learning appear to offer a viable prospect for combating maladaptation.

I believe these forms of active social learning can be used with great advantage in our learning environments and decision-making processes to promote a societal shift toward ecocultural sustainability—if they also model those principles. Active social learning can support widely different levels of engagement and inquiry. It supports

multiple-loop learning, which can be used to question both existing practices and the values that undergird them. Because active social learning can involve diverse players with competing or even conflicting values and interests, I posit that the most successful forms will result from non-coercive relationships that rest on building a common language, transparency, tolerance, mutual trust, collaboration, shared interests, and concern for the common good. Such forms of active social learning can employ conflict in a positive way by challenging complacency and encouraging “out-of-the-box” thinking.

The more active forms of social learning can also facilitate anticipatory responses by examining routinized practices, such as the creeping escalation of standards for comfort, cleanliness, and convenience. Examples of activities that benefit from these forms include playing in an improvisational jazz band and participating in collaborative, integrated-systems design projects—such as a green building, an organic farm, an ecological design project applying biomimicry, or a green planning initiative. A further benefit of the more active forms of social learning is that their requirement for elevated levels of engagement—especially when diverse constituencies are involved—aids in building critical thinking skills, supports a richer form of rationality that integrates reason and emotion, and promotes contextualization and accountability that are crucial for helping to close gaps between peoples’ values and actions.

Two significant potential weaknesses of active social learning come to mind. First, benefits do not accrue automatically from employing the process—active social learning, particularly in its hierarchical forms, can be used with equal ease and effectiveness to support maladaptation (consider efforts to stimulate ethnic conflict by Hitler and the Belgians in Rwanda). I believe realizing the potential of active social learning rests on the collective’s choosing what level process it will employ, with full awareness of the requirements and demands.

A second significant weakness of active social learning is that its success depends on effective capacity building,

Success rests at least as much on the preparedness, competence, openness, and maturity of the individuals engaging in it as on the rules that guide particular organizational learning, public participation, or decision-making processes. Furthermore, as wise as the decisions that a group arrives at may be, they are only as good as the potential of the new policies and actions to be successfully modeled and embraced by the society at large. Thus, if a society fails to make the educational infrastructure investments to prepare all of its citizens to fully participate in the highest forms of active social learning, it will fail to reap its benefits, and ecocultural unsustainability will likely persist.

A Social Learning Research Agenda

To paraphrase John Gardner, the great proponent of individual and societal self-renewal, we have before us some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems. In an effort to advance the process of turning these ostensibly insoluble problems into breathtaking opportunities, I offer this tentative list of eight challenges for review, discussion, and testing in real-world settings:

1. Develop consistent and coherent working definitions of “social learning.”
2. Initiate a comprehensive, systematic review of existing applications and case studies of “social learning.”
3. Explore the possibility of creating a consistent and coherent working definition of “social learning for sustainability.”
4. Identify well-documented, testable social learning “levers” that have significant potential to help individuals and collectives respond more effectively to situations where they have a general familiarity with a problem but, nevertheless, choose not to respond or respond ineffectively.
5. Create well-documented, testable strategies for applying social learning to “minding the gap.”
6. Develop and evaluate educational strategies to support capacity building for individual learning, so that people are poised to participate in the highest forms of active social learning.
7. Apply social learning to model

strategies for recognizing, understanding, publicizing, and responding to maladaptation—and evaluate their efficacy.

8. Apply social learning to model ecoculturally sustainable behaviors—and evaluate their efficacy.

As noted earlier, there is as yet no widely accepted, clear, and coherent interpretation of social learning. This, however, is no reason to abandon the term—quite the contrary. A modest degree of vagueness and ambiguity can provide an entry point for all and stimulate a process of clarification, questioning, and conversation that, in the end, may prove far more important than any definitional consensus.

The paradox of social learning is that it can result in our ruination or our renaissance. Our goal is not simply to evade collapse. Steady improvement in quality of life for all rests on developing and continually renewing our capacity to bridge the gap between our values and our actions. The secret to making this ostensibly insoluble problem soluble hinges on recognizing that information is not knowledge and knowledge is not understanding. The promise and power of learning for sustainability involves internalizing this distinction and learning to appreciate that understanding results from access to information, the capacity to make sense of it, the opportunity to openly debate its significance,

the sophistication to draw meaning from it, and the wisdom to both put it into context and act on it. This is how we build the capacity and conviction—individual and collective—to bring consonance between our highest values and our actions.

While many of the ideas and concepts embraced by advocates of social learning have tremendous potential to facilitate a transition to ecocultural sustainability, the term currently runs the risk of being perceived as a silver bullet or panacea. At its best, active social learning may very well encourage a deeper, more robust understanding of cause and effect, ongoing moral development, and creative, anticipatory problem solving. I have attempted to add some modest clarity and coherence to our understanding of the meanings and potential of social learning and outline some of the challenges before us—but many questions remain unanswered and considerable work and collaboration remains before us. ■

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NEXT STEPS

Assuming that interest in improving quality of life and concern for the environment are strong and sincere, it becomes important to identify or create well-documented, testable social learning techniques and instruments to help people to:

- (1) better understand these values and concerns,
- (2) put these values and concerns into perspective relative to their other values and concerns (particularly those that are otherwise unstated and taken-for-granted),
- (3) make the difficult to discern impacts of their actions more conspicuous and glaring, and
- (4) test how they link their values and concerns to their daily actions and practices.

If the outcomes of peoples' actions and practices are widely inconsistent with their highest values and aspirations and if after engaging in this process they see these values as fundamental to their world view, then the real work becomes identifying additional, well-documented and testable social learning strategies to promote more consistent individual and public policy decision making for “minding the gap.” Two corollary challenges include applying these social learning strategies to real-world cases and evaluating their efficacy.