Technische Universität Berlin

Sozialwissenschaften 44

Thomas Stöckli · Samuel Weber

The Role of LifeLearning in Promoting Social Development

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Thomas Stöckli · Samuel Weber

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Preface: Challenging Education and Schools

In 1972, a UNESCO commission found that informal learning accounts for 70 percent of all human learning. Named after the commission's chairman, Edgar Faure, the Faure report sparked off a debate on the function of informal learning both inside and outside the classroom. Forty years on, this debate is still swirling. Over the years, the academic discourse on the subject has become ever more complex, as educational scientists have tried to sharpen the distinctions between informal and non-formal learning, as well as those between incidental and implicit learning. Meanwhile, a group of scholars spearheaded by Swiss educator, Thomas Stöckli, has sought to rechart the territory mapped out by others. Taking his cue from educational reformers like John Dewey (1859-1952), Stöckli takes the current system of institutionalized schooling to task, criticizing not only its fragmentation of knowledge into distinct disciplines and subjects but also its neat separation of school from "real life."

In this booklet (a full version of which was accepted as a Ph.D. dissertation by the department of humanities at the Berlin Institute of Technology), Thomas Stöckli argues that our school system needs to be fundamentally transformed in order to become more responsive to the needs of young people coming of age today. Rather than simple reforms, Stöckli maintains, we need a new paradigm of learning. The solution he offers is a new form of learning that seeks to integrate theory and practice, thinking and acting, academic and experiential learning into a holistic learning experience called life learning.

The very word Stöckli has coined to denote this new concept of learning—LifeLearning—is a neologism that (at least, in the sense he uses it) is yet to enter the German and English

literature. A shorthand for “learning in life and for life,” Life-Learning seeks to bridge the centuries-old polarity between schola and vita, school and life. In order to achieve this, Stöckli draws from the wellsprings of Waldorf education with its long tradition of experiential learning through internships and field projects. What is more, LifeLearning is not only suitable to the industrialized world as the authors’ discussion of successful development schools and the Fundaec (Foundation of the Application and Teaching of the Sciences) model makes abundantly clear.

This booklet challenges traditional thinking about education and schools; it calls upon readers to take a clear stand. It questions whether we will be able to meet the many challenges of the twenty-first centuries by relying on recipes from the twentieth century. And it shows a way out of the current crisis by staking a road that was first indicated by German natural scientist and poet, Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), when he advocated a holistic approach to, and view of, nature more than two-hundred years ago.

The English philosopher and father of modern scientific method, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), called for the dissection of nature as a way to discover the truths that he thought were hidden behind the resulting fragments. Bacon’s dissecare naturam approach continues to inform most scientific research. However, in order to detect the phenomena that arise in our schools and to discuss and, possibly, solve the problems with our students, we need new approaches. A promising approach, one that deserves wide exposure and attention, is Stöckli’s life-skills model which seeks to involve everyone concerned in discussions and debates about how to reform our schools. Discussing

the future of our schools with students, parents, teachers, and everyone else with an interest in education will be challenging but—since their participation will undoubtedly enrich the debate—also extremely rewarding.

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Introduction

Un- or underemployment: a social ill

Among the many social ills afflicting the developing world and the so-called NIC (newly industrialized countries) today, the widespread un- or underemployment of young people is particularly troubling. What is at stake for those concerned is much more than economic security and independence. In addition to providing them with a decent livelihood, a good job is one of the key factors giving young people's lives meaning. Not only does a good job allow them to grow, mature, and learn as individuals; it also enables them to become productive members of society and full-fledged citizens. As historian Nancy MacLean (2006: 6) puts it in her study of racial minorities' and women's quest for better jobs over the past half-century, "Employment is, after all, a key site in determining personal well-being and communal power."

Given the importance of employment, it is hardly surprising that unemployment can have devastating effects on the unemployed (see Fox 1996). As the word itself suggests, unemployment conveys a feeling of being useless. When they are unable to pursue work they consider socially useful, most people almost implicitly feel they are a burden on society. Many retreat from society, and this marginalization entails depressive disorders and similarly debilitating diseases; others resort to crime.

When young people are affected, unemployment should give rise to particular concerns. Naturally predisposed to shape and change the world they are growing into, the inability to pursue socially useful work can potentially ruin a life. When young people are told, as many are in the developing world, that there

is no use for them in the community, this can easily draw them into a downward spiral from which they are unable to escape. The young people coming of age today in many countries of the global South may well turn out to be a new lost generation. The current situation, then, calls for more than criticism, whether it comes in the guise of political speeches or scholarly papers. This is not a time for words but for concrete actions.

Is there a solution? The UNESCO-Report

This booklet aims to spur people to action by offering a concrete solution to the problem of youth unemployment in the developing world: LifeLearning. The concept of LifeLearning—the concept of learning from, and in, life—was developed by Thomas Stöckli as part of doctoral research conducted at the Technische Universität (Institute of Technology) in Berlin. LifeLearning takes its cue from UNESCO's 1997 report, *Learning: The Treasure Within.* In it, numerous experts in the field offer a powerful indictment of the current education system with its one-sided focus on academic learning. Students today, they argue, need an education that "contribute[s] to the all-round development of each individual—mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic sense, personal responsibility and spiritual values" (Delors 1998: 94). To this end, the education system needs to be revamped on the basis of the dual system as practiced in countries such as Germany and Switzerland. Specifically, the experts argue that schools need to move away from their exclusive focus on academic learning and create "synergies between theory and practice," instead, allowing students to benefit from "the complementarity of the [various] types of education and educational environments" available (Delors 1998: 109).

What will you find in this booklet?

LifeLearning is an attempt to overcome the current education system's bias toward academics by broadening students' learning experience. Specifically, it is a holistic approach to education combining academic, experiential, and artistic learning in a bid to provide youths with the practical, creative, as well as intellectual, knowledge and abilities they need to face the challenges of the twenty-first century with flexibility and creativity.

The first part of this booklet builds on Thomas Stöckli's Ph.D. dissertation, a German version of which has recently appeared in book form (see Stöckli 2011). The second part, by contrast, addresses a question that was only touched upon briefly in the concluding chapter of the dissertation: how could youths in the developing world benefit from LifeLearning—a paradigm of learning originally devised for Central European youths? In this publication we make the case for what might be called the "universalization" of LifeLearning. Specifically, we argue that, if adapted sensibly to the local context, LifeLearning is potentially of even more relevance to the developing world than to the industrialized countries for which it was originally devised. Although we are keenly aware of the pitfalls associated with transposing a concept such as LifeLearning to different political, economic, social, and cultural climes, we believe that the benefits ultimately outweigh the risks. In this spirit, we close by offering a few suggestions to committed protagonists interested in adapting and transposing LifeLearning to the non-European world.

Part I: LifeLearning

The Context: The Inadequacy of the Central European Education System

To the extent that LifeLearning is a response to the shortcomings of the education system in Central Europe, it is sensible to first briefly describe the context from which it has emerged. Unlike most other European countries, Germany and Switzerland still use a strongly tracked education system: a student's performance in primary education determines the nature of the secondary education they will receive. In practical terms this has meant that a majority of twelve-year-olds have been launched on a vocational career, whereas a privileged minority has been selected to attend college preparatory schools.

In recent years, the tracked system has come in for considerable criticism. Firstly, critics have argued that the age of twelve is too early a stage in a child's life to take such a life-altering decision as choosing a career. This is especially true if one considers that these decisions are, at worst, irreversible and, at best, hard to correct at a later stage given the significant curricular differences between vocational and college preparatory schools. Secondly, critics have challenged the official notion that progression is based solely on academic merit. A number of studies have, in fact, shown that the current system, rather than rewarding dedication, simply reproduces existing socio-economic inequalities. With a primary education clearly biased toward middle-class children, students of working-class and minority backgrounds are far less likely to be admitted to college preparatory courses than their middle-class peers (see e.g. Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2010).

Thirdly, and perhaps most fundamentally, critics have drawn attention to the growing discontent with the status quo among the students themselves. Students attending college preparatory schools complain about high levels of stress. The almost constant pressure to excel stems from the fear of being downgraded to vocational school students, a decision that is, as we have seen, irreversible in most cases. Outright protest has so far been muted by the prospect of a still relatively secure future in return for a few years of hard work. Yet in more recent years even the students who were once thought of as the elite-to-be have faced ever-more precarious conditions. This has led some commentators to describe recent college graduates as "generation internship": a generation with few prospects of stable employment drifting from one low-paid, temporary job to the next (see e.g. Hartung and Schmitt 2010).

The bleak job market awaiting most college graduates in the foreseeable future is already a reality for a growing number of vocational school graduates. They are already living with the consequences of an education system that has proved altogether inadequate to meet the challenges of today's post-Fordist economy. Set up at a time when industrial production was humming and the economy was in dire need of large numbers of skilled workers, the school system still prepares large numbers of young people for the industrial jobs that have long been outsourced to overseas. Coming of age in a radically altered economic landscape, a growing minority of youths with a vocational school diploma have few other prospects than remaining forever trapped in service jobs. Where a vocational school diploma was once a virtual guarantee for a solid lower-middle-class lifestyle, young people today realize that this is no

longer true in the brave new world of low wages and little job security.

The prospect of almost inevitable downward social mobility has had a depressing effect on students' motivation. Not surprisingly, this trend has been more pronounced among vocational school students; discontent among college preparatory school students is still a relatively isolated phenomenon. The symptoms of the rising frustration at the status quo are many: the perhaps not-so-obvious one is a rising incidence of mental illnesses that range from depressive disorders to borderline personality disorders and eating disorders to school-related alcohol and drug abuse (see e.g. Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen 2007). The increasing abuse of cognitive-enhancing drugs is also a particular cause for concern (see Greely *et al.* 2008). Other manifestations of discontent with the status quo include an increase in violent behavior, bullying and other forms of antisocial behavior as well as a dramatic rise in truancy and dropout rates (see e.g. Thimm 2002).

Young People's Needs

This resort to non-verbal forms of protest bespeaks a widespread voicelessness. When they are able to articulate their grievances, however, vocational school students and college preparatory school students alike complain about the irrelevance of their education. School, both argue, is "out of touch" with "the real world" or "life." Clearly, these statements must be construed as meaning that schools have become self-contained entities and what is taught in them is only partially reflective of the outside world as youths perceive it.

While both parties often lack the theoretical understanding to express their discontent, college preparatory school students and vocational school students alike are critical of the one-sided nature of their education. College preparatory students often bemoan the theoretical nature of their education making it difficult for them to cope with the more mundane demands in the workplace and the world at large. When asked if she feels school prepares her well for life in general, one student replied, “If you look at our textbooks, this is definitely not the case. […] You have to learn so much garbage in school, things you forget almost immediately when the exam or high school is over because you don’t need them in life” (Stöckli 2011: 123). Meanwhile, vocational school students feel their practical training does not prepare them sufficiently for a job market in which academic skills are often taken for granted. As one student with a migration background said, “I have applied for more than 150 jobs, but nobody has ever gotten back to me. My grades weren’t that great. And I’m a foreigner. With a name like mine you’d need excellent grades or good letters of recommendation to get a job” (Burkard 2010: 69). To sum up, while some get too much theory, others get too much practice.

Their discontent with the status quo notwithstanding, young people are not generally in favor of the radical deschooling of society once advocated by Ivan Illich (1983). Knowing that this would have serious repercussions in a society that values academic learning above all else, they usually accept that, in order to succeed in life, they need a good formal education. Thus, rather than abolish it altogether, they want a school that offers them academic learning but also opens up new spaces for experiential learning. As one student puts it, “There are

things you simply cannot learn in school. In school you learn math, English, French, stuff like that. In life [as opposed to school] I think you learn a lot of social things, how to act in groups or you learn to see what others need, what you need, what is important to you […]" (Stöckli 2011: 141). Although they are often unable to articulate their wishes, college preparatory school students and vocational school students alike yearn for a less specialized, more holistic education. What we as educators need to offer them is an education that enables students to become both thinking *and* working human beings, regardless of their later career prospects.

Solutions:
A Holistic Education for the Twenty-First Century

The idea that students need both theoretical and practical learning is not a particularly revolutionary one. In training future workers, vocational schools in Central Europe have long relied on the so-called dual, or sandwich, system. In the dual system, as practiced in Germany and Switzerland, vocational school students having completed mandatory education continue their training in two places of learning: they acquire the skills pertaining to a particular craft by spending up to three days a week in a real workplace where they are trained by professionals. At the same time, they attend school where they receive a basic general education. As such, the authors of UNESCO's 1997 *Learning* report argue, the dual system is an attempt to ensure the cross-pollination of theoretical and practical learning (see Delors 1998: 116). It certainly is an interesting point of departure for those who want a comprehensive education that integrates academic and experiential learning.

In fact, we emphatically believe that the dual system could serve as a blueprint for a secondary education for the twenty-first century. If we offered youths a comprehensive education based on an overhauled dual system, we believe, students from all walks of life could receive an education that is more in line with the necessities of contemporary society. For the dual system's characteristic mix of academic and creative learning constitutes a solution to today's problems as perceived by college preparatory school students and vocational school students alike. Whereas creatively-gifted students would be given the opportunity to expand their "academic" skills, more academically-minded students could benefit from regular exposures to the world of work.

We believe that schools combining academic and experiential learning will become more and more common as the twenty-first century progresses. After all, life today is characterized by such opposites as thinking and acting, individualizing and socializing, academic and vocational learning and youths today want, and need, to be allowed to be exposed to such dualisms. Peter Schneider (2006: 45-104), a former professor of education at Paderborn University, has even gone so far as to argue that individual development springs from engaging with, and eventually mastering, such dualisms. If offered a framework within which they can create synergies between academic, practical, and artistic learning, young people can develop what Schneider (2006: 84) has called an "integral self".

LifeLearning

LifeLearning is one such framework. It seeks to address youths not just as students but as human beings with creative, as well as cognitive, needs. In order to achieve this, schools committed to LifeLearning combine academic and experiential learning. By bringing practical and creative learning experiences back into our schools, LifeLearning does not just seek to enrich existing curricula. LifeLearning is an attempt to subvert the primacy of deductive learning. It maps out a path of learning that leads from practical first-hand experience and learning in life to individual reflection of one's learning to the theoretical consolidation of knowledge acquired in the "real world" in school.

All this suggests many similarities with the current vocational school system. Yet schools committed to LifeLearning differ from schools based on the dual system in important ways. Firstly, LifeLearning programs are centered on the school rather than the workplace where students receive practical training. LifeLearning, argues Michael Brater (2000: 5) in his analysis of a school committed to this type of education (see Stöckli 2011: 235-244), turns the traditional dual system on its head: It does not conscript academics into the service of an apprenticeship in a company. On the contrary, it seeks to treat students' practical work experience as an important part of their education: real, serious "work" is not only recognized and appreciated as a means to hone students' personality but is used as a welcome addition to entrenched educational practices.

Vocational schools view students' practical work experience as a preparation for a specific job or career and treat academic learning in school as an addition to students' practical training. Conversely, schools committed to LifeLearning do not

prioritize one form of learning over the other. What lies at the heart of LifeLearning is the recognition that only the cross-pollination of experiential and academic learning allows students to acquire the emotional maturity, as well as the practical and theoretical knowledge, they need to face the challenges of contemporary society.

The “de-specialization” of students’ training in LifeLearning is a necessity of our times. As we have seen, the dual system is a product of mid-century Fordism and, as such, it rests on certain assumptions that no longer apply to the current economic landscape. The most important one of these is the notion that young people, once trained for a particular job, will be able to remain in it for the rest of their working lives. This is no longer the case in our fast-changing, flexibility driven age. Hence “preparing students for life” does no longer mean imparting them a few years’ worth of highly specialized knowledge and skills. Today, the sum of what one has to know can no longer be squeezed into a few years of formal schooling. Learning has become a never-ending, lifelong process. When someone progresses from formal education to working life today, this is not the end of learning but the beginning of a continuous process of “learning from and in life” (Brater 1998: 16).

As a result of these profound changes, schools today must enhance young people’s mental and emotional flexibility so as to prepare them to face unforeseen circumstances with creativity. Youths must be given the conceptual skills, as well as time and opportunities to develop the emotional maturity, to acquire the ability to plan their careers in such a manner that allows them to adapt to life’s twists and turns (see Brater 1998: 51-52). In this sense, education has come to mean teaching

students, not what, but how to learn new things. In our view, this is best achieved by giving students as much exposure as possible to the "real world," including the world of work. Instead of forcing students to specialize, and thus remain forever trapped, in a narrowly defined professional field, youths need time and opportunities to experience as many types of professional activity as possible.

There is a second major difference between vocational schools and schools committed to LifeLearning: unlike vocational schools, schools committed to LifeLearning are open to students from all walks of life and regardless of their ultimate career goals. LifeLearning schools are perforce comprehensive schools: the intermingling of creatively-gifted and academically-gifted students is the inevitable outcome of a curriculum that gives equal weight to academic and creative learning. In that they offer each student the same education, these schools can be seen as an attempt to overcome the socio-economic divide that the current system fosters and exacerbates. Certainly the effects of bringing students who are normally launched on different career tracks together in the same learning and experiential environment are beneficial for all concerned: academically-gifted students and their creatively-gifted counterparts alike become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as well as of those of the other group.

In addition to the more tangible objective of enhancing students' flexibility, LifeLearning's most ambitious goal is to arm students with essential "life skills." As we have seen, youths today need to be taught flexibility and courage to make the right choices in a world that offers them an often dizzying array of options. An obvious case in point for teenagers is choosing a

career. As so much else, one's professional career used to be predetermined by one's socioeconomic background. In many cases, young people's professional lives used to be a reproduction of their parents' experience. However, as old social barriers continue to crumble, choosing one's career has become a highly individualized and, thus, difficult process that Michael Brater (1998: 17) has described as the "pain of becoming an individual." Youths need guidance in this painful process.

And yet, choosing a career is only one area that requires us to make potentially life-changing decisions. Since life clearly holds challenges that transcend that of finding a well-paid job, students today need an education that makes them not just fit for a job but actually fit for life. Youths today are troubled by profound questions about the purpose of life. Young people often face difficult moments, even crises, such as domestic violence, fatal illnesses, divorces, or the bereavement of friends or family members, giving rise to intense questioning. But even if they are spared such tragedies, questions about life's meanings are still relevant.

That youths should search for meaning is hardly surprising. As Viktor Frankl (2006: 106), the founder of logotherpay, has argued "man's search for meaning" is "a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century." Having lost both their "animal instincts" and the "traditions which buttressed [their] behavior" and, by extension, the "security" they provided, humans now "ha[ve] to make choices." All this can result in a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness—an "existential vacuum"—prompting humans either "to do what other people do (conformity) or [to do] what others wish [them] to do (totalitarianism)."

Schools have a vital role in preventing youths from falling into either trap and helping them fill their existential vacuum.

To this end, schools need to offer spaces where youths can search for meaning and, more importantly, teachers willing to engage in discussions and conversations on such private issues. In addition to this, schools need to foster and strengthen young people's personality, allowing them to become independent decision-makers. "The development of self-concept and self-identity," argues Hanns-Fred Rathenow (Rathenow 1989: chapter 3), "should be given priority; intuitive, emotional and spiritual experiences should be part of the learning process, and divergent thinking and creative learning should be encouraged."

This vision for a new education for the twenty-first century is supported by the authors of UNESCO's 1997 *Learning* report. They maintain that youths today need an education that encourages them "to develop independent, critical thinking and form their own judgement, in order to determine for themselves what they believe they should do in the different circumstances of life" (Delors 1998: 94). The central function of school in the twenty-first century is no longer "to prepare children for a given society" but "to continuously provide everyone with the powers and intellectual reference points they need for understanding the world around them and behaving responsibly and fairly." (Delors 1998: 94).

Whereas these decisions are often dictated by the needs of society writ large, LifeLearning encourages youths to make them based on their inner promptings. As Michael Brater (1998: 57) has argued, youths need to find their inner selves where they find guidance that allows them to pursue a career "in ac-

cordance with their own biography," i.e., what is already in them. Schools have a crucial role in helping youths discover their inner impulses (see Stedtnitz 2003) and learn to give heed to them rather than the demands of society.

Lest we be misunderstood, we do not mean to suggest that youths plan their lives and careers arbitrarily. What we suggest is that schools should prepare students to deal with the competing demands coming from themselves and society. Although many fundamental events in life happen because of outside influences, young people need to be encouraged not to simple give in to forces beyond their control and, as Michael Brater (1998: 36) puts it, muster "the strength and dignity" to find their own way in spite of the obstacles that they may face.

Encouraging students to pursue one's own goals in life despite all the odds that may arise along the way is, of course, an important feature of Waldorf education. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education, put it thus:

We shouldn't ask: "What does a person need to know or be able to do in order to fit into the existing social order?" Instead we should ask: "What lives in each human being and what can be developed in him or her?" Only then will it be possible to direct the new qualities of each emerging generation into society. Society will then become what young people, as whole human beings, make out of the existing social conditions. The new generation should not just be made to be what present society wants it to become. (Steiner 1982: 37).

In order to assist students in channeling their new qualities into society, Steiner developed his "education toward freedom." To this end, students need to be initiated to what we call LifeLearning. Rudolf Steiner argues that small children need to

be protected from the direct influences of modern life. As this results in an “abyss between [them] and the world,” they need teachers to “bridge that gulf” for them (Steiner 2003: 41). However, this is only temporary. Whereas small children need teachers to “bring to [them] what is out there in the world,” adolescents need to discover the world for themselves (Steiner 2003: 41). From the age of fifteen forward, young people need to start “stand[ing] face to face with the world in a way such that [they] can learn directly from” it (Steiner 2003: 41). For these students, teachers become less and less important as “life” pure and simple slowly takes the place of the “great teacher” (Steiner 2003: 41). The teachers’ main focus should now lie on guiding students’ transition from the protected environment of the classroom to the “real world” by offering them opportunities to become “student[s] of life” (Steiner 1991:195). What becomes vital for this age group is “an educational method where people can learn how to learn, to go on learning from life their whole life long” (Steiner 1991:195).

The ability to learn from and in life is particularly pronounced among Waldorf students. In a representative study of Waldorf alumni, Peter Loebell (2007: 346) found that most respondents believed that Waldorf education had helped them develop “a positive attitude toward life,” a strong “confidence in life,” as well as “the ability to adapt flexibly to adverse circumstances.” Waldorf alumni, Loebell (2007: 346) concludes, “have acquired the fundamental prerequisites to ‘learn from life.’”

However, it is important to note that Rudolf Steiner’s understanding of life transcends the narrow notion of “functioning” in an ever more flexible economy. Anthroposophy—the spiritual worldview undergirding Waldorf education—enables teachers to

shepherd students away from exclusively pragmatic life choices and help them focus on choices that are much more crucial. As a prospectus from a British Steiner school puts it, Waldorf education "foster[s] a wider understanding of the world, not only in terms of knowledge and information, but also in the cultivation of feelings and awareness, where the intellectual achievement of a child is important, but not more so than her or his social, physical, emotional, spiritual and artistic development" (quoted in Rathenow, 1989, chapter 5). Waldorf education, in short, is informed by a spiritual dimension that takes youths seriously, not just as students, but as human beings.

Because of this holistic approach to secondary education, LifeLearning is much more than just another attempt to bring experiential learning into our schools. In other words, LifeLearning differs fundamentally from various other projects, such as service learning, which have treated experiential learning as a fancy add-on to otherwise unchanged curricula.

Case Study: Roj High School in Switzerland

In order to illustrate how LifeLearning differs from service learning and similar projects, we would like to briefly describe a secondary school where LifeLearning has been put into practice over the last 20 years: the regional high school Roj in Solothurn, Switzerland (full disclosure: Thomas Stöckli is the co-founder of Roj; Samuel Weber is a former student). Roj was founded in 1992 as a comprehensive secondary school for students who have graduated from grade 10 at the surrounding Waldorf schools. In this high school traditional schooling is linked with experiential learning through internships and field projects. In addition to covering a regular academic curriculum,

students spend 2-3 days a week as interns in a company or institution of their choosing.

Again, there are many parallels with the traditional vocational schools. Yet there is an important difference: both training components of a vocational school—practical and theoretical learning—are geared toward providing students with a highly specialized education. At Roj, on the other hand, the interplay of the same two components is meant to ensure students receive a broad general education. As a result, both students' practical and theoretical learning are informed by a strong "despecialization."

At Roj, students' theoretical learning in school differs fundamentally from the education traditional vocational school students receive. Traditional vocational school students generally receive a strong theoretical background that allows them to pursue a particular craft or job. However, as we have seen, this narrow specialization at an early stage leaves vocational school deprived of the academic education they need to face the contemporary world of work. In recognition of this, Roj students are taught a curriculum that has much more in common with the curricula of Swiss college preparatory schools than vocational schools. Subjects taught include languages, sciences, the humanities, and the arts. The curriculum is identical for all students regardless of the career they envisage. The reasons for this are twofold. First, Roj is indebted to Rudolf Steiner's egalitarian concept of education: "everyone," the founder of Waldorf education believed, "must have the opportunity for the same general education, regardless of whether he/she is eventually going to do manual or professional work" (quoted in Rathenow 1989, chapter 4.3). Secondly, the school's comprehensive edu-

cation is beneficial to creatively-gifted as well as academically-gifted students: whereas the former embark on their professional careers with a strong intellectual background, the latter start college with at least some professional experience.

The practical component of the curriculum, much like its theoretical counterpart, aims not so much at providing students with narrow specialization as a broad general education. Since they need to acquire the knowledge and skills pertaining to a single job or craft, vocational school students usually spend the whole duration of the course they are enrolled on (usually three years) with a particular company. Roj interns, on the other hand, do not stay in the same company or institution for the whole time they spend at Roj. In fact, they are encouraged to change companies and, if feasible, fields of activity every six months as this allows them to be exposed to as many occupations as possible. This is because at Roj students' work in the firms and institutions is not seen as experiences preparing them for a specific job. Rather, these internships constitute an integral part of students' general education, providing them with opportunities to experience what they refer to as "real life," as well as to hone their personalities. Thus, rather than launching students on a specific career track, these internships serve the purpose of empowering young people to mold their own future as well as that of society writ large (see Brater 2000: 3).

Ensuring the amalgamation of practical and theoretical learning into a broad general education has been a particular challenge. The most difficult part of this process has been creating a network of companies, firms, and institutions sympathetic to the school's ideology and aims. This was not a foregone conclusion. After all, most companies still look for traditional vo-

cational school trainees who want to spend up to four (rather than two or three) days a week and the whole duration of the course they are enrolled on (usually three years as opposed to six months in the case of Roj interns) in the company as this allows them to assign them greater responsibilities. What is more, potential supervisors need to be won over to the ideology governing Roj, which views the practical component of student training not as preparation for a specific job but as an important addition to the students' general education. In order to assist supervisors in this task, the school has set up a special committee comprising a number of teachers who liaise between the school and the companies. This has ensured that all parties involved—students, parents, teachers, and supervisors—have acted in concert over the years.

Theoretical and practical learning also need to be reflected in the school's mode of assessment. From the start the Roj diploma has sought to give adequate weight to the two key components of the curriculum—academics and experiential learning. Teachers assess students' performance in the single academic disciplines, i.e. what students learn in school. Since internships are part of a student's general education, internship supervisors assess not so much if the student has acquired the skills pertaining to a specific job; hence their assessment focuses on transferable attributes and skills, such as team work, reliability, flexibility, and empathy.

Academic learning and experiential learning are, of course, important aspects of student learning at Roj. However, the most important thing students learn at Roj cannot be as readily attributed to a particular area or site of learning: life skills. By this we mean the ability to cope with the tension,

pressure, and contradictions that have become an important part of our day-to-day lives. At Roj students learn to deal with, and grow, thanks to, the contradictions in two important ways. First, as we have seen, offering a comprehensive education is one of the trademarks of Roj. The heterogeneity of a student body comprising future handicraftsmen as well as would-be academicians allows young people to think of themselves as part of a multifaceted community with its inherent tensions.

Secondly, and more importantly, students experience the discrepancy between school and the workplace. School officials do not actively seek to smooth students' weekly transition from the world of school to the world of work and back. Nor do teachers try to blend academic and practical learning within the single disciplines. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, most students wish that there be a clear division between school and the workplace. On the other hand, school officials recognize that there are real and often irreconcilable differences between the world of school and the world of work. As a result, they have tried to make a virtue of necessity. Inspired by Peter Schneider's polarity education (see above), they have come to see the contradictions between the world of school and the world of work as an important experience for students. In his study of Roj, Michael Brater (2000: 133) highlights this aspect: by exposing students to these discrepancies and letting them bridge what may at first glance look like unbridgeable differences, the school provides young people with an unprecedented opportunity to hone their personality in real-life situations, allowing them to grow and mature in the process. Learning to grapple with dichotomies such as those between school and

work, academic learning and creative learning, is perhaps the most important skill students acquire at Roj.

Qualifications have always been a thorny issue. For a long time this school-specific diploma was a viable qualification. This has changed in recent years. As training programs, such as those for nurses, midwives, and kindergarten teachers, have been moved from vocational schools to professional colleges and universities, more and more students needed a university-entrance diploma (*Matura*) in order to pursue their career goals after graduating from Roj.

In order to be able to award this diploma, Roj had to make two major changes to its curriculum with a view to expanding the academic component of student learning. First, the school set up a second track for academically-gifted students. Most disciplines are still taught to all students regardless of their academic aptitude. However, in order to ensure that those wishing to go on to higher education meet college entry requirements, it has been necessary to split up students on the basis of their performance in certain subjects, including math and foreign languages. In addition to this, the school needed to introduce so-called concentrations, allowing students to major in a professional discipline (journalism, I.T., painting and drawing, music, social work, education, applied psychology, health studies) in preparation for college. With the same goal in mind, Roj also offers students opportunities to engage in independent projects in their future field of studies. While these are undertaken outside school, they are closely supervised by teachers. Hence, these field projects constitute a bridge between the academic learning in school and the experiential learning outside school.

As a result of these changes, Roj is now allowed to award officially recognized school-leaving diplomas. These reflect the students' strong preparation in their respective concentration but also give pride of place to the internships and practical field projects as a vital component of students' general educational. Since the diplomas were first awarded in 2007, numerous Roj alumni have graduated from various colleges and universities. The school sees their success as proof positive that LifeLearning is not just a dream of utopian educators but actually empowers young people to take on the challenges of contemporary society and succeed in it.

Part II: Global LifeLearning

The Global Relevance of LifeLearning

As the example of Roj shows, LifeLearning is not just an abstract idea but a concrete response to young people's longing for a school that values both their thinking and acting. While such examples are important, they do not mean that all LifeLearning projects have to look the same. What makes LifeLearning special is that it can be applied to all sorts of contexts. LifeLearning allows for carefully calibrated, hands-on interventions on the ground. As a consequence, the concept, though originally geared toward the problems of young people in advanced capitalist societies, could easily go global. In other words, if sensibly adapted to local circumstances, LifeLearning could be transposed to less developed nations and become an important force for social change.

Why? The issues that LifeLearning seeks to address are more relevant to the developing world than the highly industrialized parts of the globe for which it was initially devised. The key problem of a formal education that is "out of touch" with day-to-day realities, for example, is far more pronounced there: Although the country's economic makeup is preindustrial, the education system is often based on the experiences of the industrialized nations and, thus, inadequate to meet the needs of the majority of the local population. As a consequence, the generally well-educated citizens, enticed by rewarding employment offers in the industrialized north, leave the global south. And this brain drain, in turn, is at the root of the slow economic growth in the developing world (see Delors 1998: 73). The developing world thus needs an education system that is able to meet local

needs, i.e., an education that gives ample room to acquiring practical skills.

In order to make clear what we have in mind, we would like to briefly describe the Fundaec "development schools" in Latin America, which could serve as a blueprint for similar projects. Fundaec[1], which stands for Foundation of the Application and Teaching of the Sciences, was born in 1970 in Valle, Columbia. Investigating the causes of the massive rural exodus then underway in Latin America, researchers of the local university had found that the continent's education system was geared almost entirely toward the needs of city-dwellers. The result was not only a debasement of rural life but an education that failed to train rural Latin Americans in accordance with their everyday needs.

In recognition of this, the researchers set out to change commonly held notions about schooling and education, laying the foundations of a "system of tutorial learning" in "development schools" in the process (Spiegel 2009: 189). Based on a realistic assessment of the development of the local economy (preindustrial agriculture), these "development schools" offer a wide range of vocational courses for future peasants and other workers in the rural community.

Fundaec tutors are recruited from the local peasant population. After a short induction, they become "full-fleshed teachers" who start tutoring others, with this hands-on teaching experience constituting an important part of their own learning (Spiegel 2009: 192). In order to prevent "alienation from learning," tutors travel to the countryside on a regular basis where they are encouraged to integrate their students into their own

[1] See http://www.fundaec.org/en/index.html

learning as part of a “systematic and participatory approach to research” (Spiegel 2009: 188).[2]

In recruiting new tutors, Fundaec has relied heavily on the so-called snowball effect. In the process of being tutored, peasants acquire knowledge that they can then impart to others. Since its inception Fundaec has thus trained approximately 3,000 tutors who have in turn taught more than 60,000 students.

This is just one example. Developing new ones depends on the enterprising spirit of committed protagonists who do what they think is necessary where they are. For it is by so doing that they will convince others, including political and economic leaders, not only of the need for radical change in the way we educate young people but also of the effectiveness of LifeLearning.

What will be of help is the involvement of young people from the industrialized North. Young people there could benefit from these exchanges. By getting involved in social projects in, say, Brazil, young people could not only build bridges between cultures but also help those less fortunate.

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[2] The main reason why students are taught on their farms rather than in a formal institution is that most of them are unable to leave home and attend “school” on a regular basis.

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Afterword

Dear Reader:

Your critical comments are greatly appreciated. We would be particularly interested in hearing your views on the following points: What do you believe would be the possibilities associated with the process of “exporting” the concept of LifeLearning to the non-European world? To what extent, and how, would LifeLearning need to be adapted to local circumstances? What is already being done in this respect? Considering the general situation on the job front in these countries, do you think it’s realistic to find companies willing to take on interns?

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We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Thomas Stöckli
Samuel Weber

Switzerland, 12th of February 2012