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# Learning Disorderly Orderly

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**WHAT TO LEARN, HOW TO LEARN, WHAT VALUE** there is in what we learn are questions that will continue to dog us in the next century.

What lies ahead for learning in the 21st century is far from clear-cut. We can only guess and from where we're coming our guesses may be worlds apart. The Pollyanas among us might say it's terrible but fine. The Cassandras, for their part, might say it's plain terrible and surely an inevitable race to the bottom. The less daring might say reality will probably be something in between.

**E**veryone of us longs for that day when every home, village, town, nation on this planet will be a place of sharing and caring, will be more secure, more happy. What will it take to make that day our everyday reality? Are we not deluding ourselves thinking that day will ever come? How can we feel less terrible and more hopeful of the future? These visionary questions have

resonated from Rio to Hamburg and made the notion of sustainability the 'in thing' of the 90s.

Much has been said about the unsustainability of the present, and equally about the pathways to sustainability. Add to this what's most important for us popular educators—the recognition that learning our way out needs education for sustainability. And yet, still more questions.

What about this kind of education? Education for sustainability is used by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), otherwise known as the Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio, to name that kind of education which is "so critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues". Yes, a kind of education that is so critical but what is it exactly? It's for you and I to define still.

**W**here does this leave us? Rather than feel sorry we are left with open, contested concepts we might be better off celebrating the fact that nothing about the notions of sustainability and education for sustainability is cast in stone as yet. Which only means that the struggle for meanings goes on. What matters most is whether and how we decide to be part of the critical theorizing and practical development of these concepts.

I was asked to present the context and challenges of critical learning which I take to mean the same thing as learning or education for sustainability. And that is, for now, I will try to define simply as a kind of education which enables us to explain the whys of unsustainability, to do something about it, and act on what we believe are solutions that lead to a sustainable future.

Let me walk you through what I see as some of the key challenges of learning today and in the coming millennium.

### **Making sense of order out of chaos.**

We are 6 billion souls on this planet who everyday are getting educated about living and dying. Imagine 6 billion individuals valuing, believing, thinking, doing different things. Can you imagine what they want to learn, why and how? Can you figure out what learning themes, processes and outcomes will suit and result from their interactions?



Let's take MTV which some feared as the Armageddon of cultural diversity. Who would think that MTV itself could be colonized in reverse by indigenous beats, lyrics and images.

Often most plans are wrong. Yes, in the sense that they work only halfway and produce outcomes never intended.

### **Too much to learn, too little time to do it.**

There's just too much to learn, anytime wherever. One need not leave home to learn what happens on the opposite side of the globe. Learning could be real joy.

But many people are so preoccupied with how to meet bare needs as to appreciate the joy of learning. Learning for them is mainly, if not solely, a tool to survive.

What about the quick learners or those who got money to buy time or buy others' brains? They too must find the mass of information and new knowledge simply overwhelming.

Maybe it's not really so much the amount of knowledge absorbed as how one gets to know any new thing at all. Maybe we need only to focus on the why and how of learning and let the learner bother with the what. In other words, the compass to navigate the learning jungle out there.

### **Irrelevant and useless after you learn it.**

Why do we have to put up with too much garbage? Or is it the case that what's garbage for you and me is treasure for others?

The Delors Commission Report says that the value of what we learn may last only for two to three years, or shorter. Which means that we might be functionally or professionally illiterate after graduation from a four-year course. So why bother with formal schooling and waste away precious time and resources?



## **Learning faster to stand still.**

Adults are too busy learning to fit and compete for jobs that disappear fast and don't need so many. The chosen ones must learn more and faster to keep their jobs. The losers have to create their own lives outside the formal job system. But is life for most people better inside or outside of this system?

The liberal mantra is learning to compete. Whether competition is constructive or not is matter of indifference. But we know enough from experience that people compete to win, not to promote competition. The weak and the poor must be foolish or fatalistic enough to play the game of catch-up. But what's the alternative in today's world? Isn't it equally foolish not to play ball?

## **A dignified space for all learners.**

At millenium's end, still about a billion excluded because of basic illiteracy. God knows how many more of those who could already do the 3Rs are illiterate about so many things, about the ways and means of coping with modern life. We have not gone far enough since Jomtien—education for all is still more vision than reality.

Education as usual is a passport to inclusion as much as a means to exclusion.

## **Reclaiming self-determination in learning.**

What will it look like if you and I can decide what and how to learn and why we must learn anything at all? Will the world be a better place to live in if learning shifts away from the formal schooling system to the home, the community, the farm, the neighborhood workshop, to unusual situations hitherto unrecognized and unknown to education as we know it? What will it be like if one were able to choose his/her learning society and to be left alone to go on with their chosen pathways?

## **Learning to care for nature.**

Progressive education, whether of the capitalist or socialist kind, has fed and driven modern life. Will life be better if education turns conservative? Can conservative education help solve the equity and sustainability deficits of the exiting millennium? Is it the same as



education for sustainability? How shall we define education for sustainability? What does it feel like? Do we know enough about existing practices to tell how it looks like? Is it purely homespun and indigenous or a fusion of tradition and modernity? What are the chances of this kind of education getting into the mainstream?

## **Learning to work, live and enjoy together.**

How much have we learned about why people must go to war for the same principles and values? Before, we as political activist-educators had the answer. Then we were no longer as sure. How are we to educate ourselves and others now? Resolve the outstanding deficits we must. But how? Create your own defensible space, make it worthy of caring and sharing, and rebuild solidarities with other societies on this foundation? How's that to happen? If self-sufficient and self-governing communities in solidarity with one another are the hope of the future where will I buy my cellphone?

The turbulence of the closing years of this century was described by George Soros using the imagery of a wrecking ball wreaking havoc everywhere. We also learned from the 1997 crisis how a tiny glitz could trigger and threaten a collapse of the whole system. The world is much, much smaller but seems to be coming apart more than coming together.

The hope is, as always, education will help us through. It helped us read and write the past, it should enable us to read and write a better future.





## About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

