



Learning as development: Rethinking international development in a changing world

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Dan Wagner has an impressive pedigree, and this book comes with a plethora of enthusiastic endorsements. The immediate past Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, tells us that it “greatly advances our knowledge and understanding of how to improve learning for all – especially for those who have been most marginalised, such as the poor, girls and women, indigenous populations, migrants and those impacted by climate change.” Moses Oketch, of the University College London Institute of Education, tells us that “Learning and Development is a great read. The depth of discussion and the literature it draws on has a wealth of resources. My students really need this.” Marlaine Lockheed of the World Bank argues that the book is refreshing and accessible, and “humanises and broadens the discussion of education and development”. Finally, Mali’s former Minister of Education, Adama Samassékou, tells us it is an excellent book that policy makers should read, since “it is time to walk the talk”.

Reading all this, I came to the text with a combination of anticipation and trepidation. Would the book help reinforce or challenge current policy priorities? How would it deal with the gap between the grand aspirations of global agreements and the disappointments of so much delivery? As an adult educator I wanted to know what lessons it might offer on how to overcome the marginalisation of adult literacy and wider adult learning programmes. How far would it endorse the development of standardised measures of progress, how far would it recognise the extent to which really useful knowledge is grounded in lived experience, and that different contexts and different aspirations generate different priorities on what is worth learning, and how it should be done?

What I found was a fascinating mixture. A core dynamic informing the book is Wagner’s view that too much attention has been focused on simply ensuring increases in school participation, and too little on the quality and relevance of what is learned – hence the insistence of the title that we should focus on *learning* as

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development. He highlights the challenges of tutor absenteeism, the resource gap between urban and rural schools, the impossibility of securing adequate attention for each child when up to a hundred children crowd into a single classroom. He recognises the concern of aid agencies that if money is to be well spent, there needs to be effective monitoring of the learning undertaken. And he also recognises that standardised measures applied across continents may have the benefit of consistency, but lack responsiveness to context:

We now recognize that the scientific basis for understanding the who/what/where/why/when/how of learning has been based mainly on research undertaken with middle-class children and sophomores in wealthy countries (p. 2).

He notes that so much of international discourse is limited solely to a concern with the growth of income, as against the focus of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), informed by the thinking of Amartya Sen, on “the enlargement of all human choices – whether economic, social, cultural, or political” (p. 43). But as he reflects on the tension between the needs of decision makers for clear evidence of what works to inform national and international development partnership funding, and the presenting needs of the poorest and most marginalised communities, he recognises a key set of dilemmas:

What then constitutes the right kind of learning for those in poor contexts? How much and what types of learning are necessary for future employment, and for which types of jobs? These are so much more difficult questions to answer than they appeared several decades ago when continued economic growth seemed assured (p. 134).

As several of the endorsements note, Wagner employs an impressive range of evidence, of scientific studies, international reports, and national and local evidence in reviewing approaches, to development, sectoral and institutional contexts. Understandably, he is stronger on structured education than on informal learning (though he does give it some attention), on schools rather than adult learning. He is impressive on the challenges posed by multilingual learning contexts, perhaps less so in the chapter on the possibilities and limitations of technology. He recognises that:

While children are taught to read in classrooms today, achievement levels are often determined as much by out-of-school factors (such as the country’s language policy and parents’ education) as they are by in-school factors (such as teacher training or textbook quality) (p. 124).

This is, however, almost as close as he gets to a recognition of the relationship between learning and power, or the way that power elites protect and replicate their privileges. Paulo Freire’s thinking is covered, and left behind, after a few cursory sentences. Gender perspectives are scarcely addressed – though he does recognise that women are over-represented among the world’s people with the lowest level of literacy. Major frustrations with Western perspectives on development, as evidenced by the rich and diverse discourses of the World Social Forum, with its

slogan “Another world is possible” are outside the purview of the argument – though there is a slightly jarring reference to the energies released during the Arab Spring. And despite the rich range of reference to development experiences in Africa, the Middle East, and to a lesser extent Latin America, there is no discussion of the extraordinary commitment of China to securing literacy for its adult population, nor an analysis of how South Korea, or for that matter Singapore, made education central to their rapid and transformative development trajectories.

As a result, and notwithstanding all its strengths, the book reads, like so many of those critiqued by Edward Said in *Orientalism*,¹ as a perspective, albeit enlightened, shaped by the concerns of the international salariat and by Western educational science. Yet part of its real attraction and strength lies in the exploratory journey Wagner describes, from the certainties of the international comparative assessment business, and of rigorously designed research paradigms, to the messier engagement with the demonstrable needs of the poorest. The book’s conclusion that we should focus our thinking and priorities on what works best for those at the bottom of the economic and educational pyramid, to make sure no one is really left behind, is wholly to be welcomed. The challenge is to work out how that is to be achieved.

¹ Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.