International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Powering a Learning Society During an Age of Disruption, edited by Sungsup Ra, Shanti Jagannathan, and Rupert Maclean (Springer, 2021)

Pradeep Kumar Misra

Citer ce compte rendu

Book Review: Powering a Learning Society During an Age of Disruption

Reviewed by: Pradeep Kumar Misra, Professor & Director, Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, India

Learning, one of the most discussed terms across different sections of society in the 21st century, is an integral part of our lives. Humans' association with learning keeps evolving and changing. The starting point of this association was to make provisions for the learning of young individuals, which shifted later to the learning of all, including adults. We have now reached a stage where learning is discussed in terms of learning societies. Governments, international organizations, and policy documents across the globe have started viewing and analysing every aspect of society through the learning lens. Realizing this turnaround, this volume, *Powering a Learning Society During an Age of Disruption*, edited by Sungsup Ra, Shanti Jagannathan, and Rupert Maclean, discusses the concept, modalities, and realities of learning societies from a 360-degree perspective. This open access book, containing 21 chapters and covering 321 pages, presents readers with various shades and patterns of learning societies. Importantly, the book also assesses the impact of COVID-19, one of the most devastating pandemics of our times, on learning societies and offers solutions for the future.

The editors of this book define a *learning society* as "a continuum that takes place well beyond the early stages of school, secondary, and postsecondary education, and in formal and informal settings outside institutions" (p. 3). Accordingly, the editors have presented the stories, experiences, and challenges of and about learning societies under six sections: Introduction (two chapters), Learnability and the Learning Crisis (four chapters), Future-Proofing Postbasic Education (four chapters), Communities as Learning Platforms (four chapters), Learning Societies and Industry 4.0 (four chapters), and Technology Solutions to Build a Learning Society (three chapters). The authors of different chapters include policymakers, academics, industry experts, and practitioners from nongovernmental organizations, professional organizations, and international development organizations. These authors differ in their qualifications, experiences, and professions but unite on one front; that is, they all critically discuss the roles and benefits of encouraging and actively promoting learning societies during a time of all-pervasive change.

As a whole, the 21 chapters of this book present thought-provoking and engaging stories of learning societies. The book (a) discusses the roles of schooling, higher education, teaching, training, and assessments on learning; (b) talks about formal, non-formal, and informal sectors offering learning opportunities; (c) details different initiatives of governments, nongovernmental organizations, enterprises, and business sectors to promote learning; and (d) tells stories of learning from India, South Korea, the European Union (EU), and Singapore. There are discussions on the benefits of

learning, improving learning, quality assurances in learning, learning assessments, and learning crises. Further, the book tackles issues such as learning in professional and technical sectors, workplace learning, technologies for learning, the learning crisis, the role of teachers and communities in promoting learning, lifelong learning, and the need to and benefits of nurturing learning societies. The message from this book is clear: any nation, community, or sector cannot remain isolated from discussions on learning societies, as learning has far-reaching influence and impacts on philosophical, social, political, and economic aspects of individual and collective lives.

The arguments and descriptions presented in most chapters include relevant and recent references, data, figures, and prevalent practices. While reading the chapters, one comes across certain remarks and observations that are helpful in reflecting, fresh thinking, and remaining both cautious and positive while supporting or propagating new avenues for learning. The chapters included in this book show directions and suggest ways to build learning societies out of cities, communities, and regions. For example, in Chapter 8, the authors argue that "a learning society is not only about having isolated educated and skilled citizens. It takes multiple and complex interactions to grow an ecosystem that connects, supports, and makes the best out of individuals' learning" (p. 116). Another author adds that "a learning society can only be possible when everyone can learn throughout their lifetime to change and adapt as the context requires, and empower others to learn as well" (p. 186). In addition, perspective is also given. For example, "most world leaders and officials in ministries of education are extremely well educated. … However, the education that they have received, to a high degree, is an academic curriculum, and therefore they have less experience in relation to vocational subjects" (p. 141).

Powering a Learning Society During an Age of Disruption is also full of visions and practices from which any individual, institution, or nation can learn. As an example, Chapter 14 states that the half-life of skills is only about 5 years means those embarking on a 30-year career will have to update and refresh their skills at least six times throughout their working life (p. 198). Chapter 7 offers a lesson for universities across the globe. The discussion about the National University of Singapore's policy, where enrolment is valid for 20 years from the point of undergraduate admission, making alumni automatically eligible for continuing education courses at any time in 20-year period, emerges as a must-adapt policy for every university. Similarly, based on the discussions in chapter 8, nations outside of Europe can think about reframing their education policies in light of the European Commission's "twin transitions" vision, which advocates for a green EU and making the best use of digital and technological advancement.

A few chapters focus more on advertising what they are doing rather than detailing how their practices can be emulated and adapted in a broader context. Then some chapters forget that this book is about learning societies, and they have to justify or align their discussions accordingly. Barring these few deviations, the chapters as a whole assure us that even the worst of crises (e.g., COVID-19) comes with opportunities and "opens the door for us to challenge and reframe education systems to become more inclusive and equitable" (p. 84). The book also makes clear that the fate of future learning societies will depend on governments and private sectors but also, most importantly, on us (individuals), by rightly stating, "nothing about us, without us" (p. 81)

With hearty congratulations to the worthy editors, I recommend *Powering a Learning Society During an Age of Disruption* as a must-read for all those who believe that "learning is for life" or go further to claim that "learning *is* life."

Athabasca
University