

Brenda Reed  
Book Critique 2  
Mary Catherine Bateson's *Peripheral Visions*

Reading through Bateson's *Peripheral Visions* for the second time, I was pleased to find myself remembering the ideas and concepts, yet it was as if I were seeing and understanding them for the first time. My experience was a perfect example of Bateson's idea: learn, live, and repeat.

"In all learning, one is changed, becoming someone slightly-or profoundly-different; but learning is welcome when it affirms a continuing sense of self. What is learned then becomes a part of that system of self-definition that filters all future perceptions and possibilities of learning. It is only from a sense of continuing truths that we can draw the courage for change, even for the constant, day-to-day changes of growth and aging." (p. 79) Bateson's words, so poignant and effective, discuss the importance of learning, not only as individuals, but as a global society.

As we have seen in the course readings, as well as experienced in our personal lives, the world is changing at a rapid pace. Donald Schon, in discussing the need for learning in an increasingly changing society, explains that the "loss of the stable state means that our society and all of its institutions are in continuous processes of transformation." Dealing with those transformations requires that we, as a society, "become adept at learning." (Smith, p. 1) In the same article, Dorsten Husen reminds us that learning, rather than occurring only in traditional educational institutions, must be a lifelong activity for all. "Education will not have any fixed points of entry and "cut-offs". (p. 2)

Our society is beginning to realize, mostly out of necessity, that learning and education do not occur only in school. According to Mitchell Resnick, in *Rethinking Learning in the Digital Age*, "Most education-reform initiatives appear to assume that learning takes place only

between the ages of 6 and 18, between 8:00 A.M. and 3:00P.M.—that is, when children are in schools.” (p. 3) The fact is, institutionalized education makes up a very small portion of what is learned throughout a lifetime. Resnick adds, “learning can and must become a daylong and lifelong experience.”(p. 3) Luckily, “learning along the way”, as Bateson calls it, doesn’t come with a prerequisite. Bateson reminds us that “Full understanding is not a necessity for participation.” (p. 167) The author goes on to say that most “people are unaware of the intricate structure of what they have learned from participation, of the intellectual complexity of common sense or the unstated pattern of courtesies...” that are developed simply by living. (p. 150) As online and distance learning become more accessible throughout the world, participant learning will also become more vital. Learning to balance separateness in education with learning from participation in everyday activities will be key for future generations.

Understanding what to “attend” to is a new skill that will need to be learned not only by students, but by educators as well. Resnick argues that there is a need to “ reform school reform” and produce schools where “we should focus on themes and projects that cut across the disciplines, taking advantage of the rich connections among different domains of knowledge. Instead of dividing students according to age, we should encourage students of all ages to work together on projects, enabling them to learn from one another (and to learn by teaching one another). (p. 5) For years the traditional school format has divided classes into time slots and disciplines, often finding little correlation among those disciplines that make the separate facts and figures connect to make sense.. Resnick continues, “Instead of dividing the school day into hour-long slices, we should let students work on projects for extended periods of time, enabling them to follow through more deeply and meaningfully on the ideas that arise in the course of their work.” (p. 5) With the implementation of so much new technology, old ways of learning are

no longer adequate for our societies. Anthony Giddens (1999), in *Runaway World*, remarks that everyone “in the academic world works within traditions” yet he goes on to add that tradition “can perfectly well be defended in a non-traditional way- and that should be its future.” (p. 45) Bateson tells us that “schooling is not the model for all learning, only one of many byways. Learning and teaching are both fundamental for human adaptation, but not all human societies segregate them from the flow of life into institutional boxes.” (p. 196) Resnick tells us that the “importance of a well-educated, creative citizenry is greater than ever before.” (p. 5) Reforming our educational institutions so as to help students learn to learn, think creatively, and embrace diversity is the best way to ensure it will happen.

Since our world has shifted to one in which we now have to worry more about what Giddens calls “manufactured risk” than “external risk”, students of all ages will need to learn to think more creatively in order to be able to solve future major problems that are likely to occur throughout the world. Resnick warns that “until we start to think of computers more like finger paint and less like television, computers will not live up to their full potential. Like finger paint (and unlike television), computers can be used for designing and creating things.” ( p. 2)

Developing a more open atmosphere in which students are allowed to explore, learn and create on a more individual basis will take much more change on the part of educational systems, but that change is vital. Maeroff, in *A Classroom of One*, tells us on the use of individual online courses, that they “are revolutionary because they represent a fundamentally different delivery system that breaks the monopoly of the classroom, forcing an examination of habits of teaching and learning that for too long have defied scrutiny.”(p. 19) Bateson also warns us that “when educational or political systems are frozen into some form that seems good to one generation, they may lose the flexibility to adapt in the next.” She goes on to add that “Rigid standards can

undermine thoughtful education, and sometimes over specific codes of conduct can lead to the atrophy of ethical choice. Only children who are allowed to make mistakes can become responsible adults.” (p. 91)

All though there is a growing understanding of how much the world is changing and that there is a need for educational change, making the changes necessary is not easy. Bateson believes that “all change evokes the terrors of abandonment and dissolution” because of the unknown outcomes that changes produce.(p. 85) Bateson suggests that we learn to “recognize continuity in discontinuity” where we are “able to embrace a radical change in the pattern of our [their] lives.” (p. 81) Learning to focus not only on the change itself, but instead also on what stays the same in our lives throughout that change, will help to overcome the fears of the unknown.

Giddens tells us that “Traditions are needed, and will always persist, because they give continuity and form to life.”(p. 44-45) However, both Giddens and Bateson discuss the fact that traditions, events in which many aspects remain consistent for years, also change over time. For today’s busy and rapidly changing world Bateson tells us that “Learning is the new continuity for individuals,”(p. 83)

What we as readers and students of Bateson’s *Peripheral Visions* are to take away from the book is the recognition and realization that there is an alternate, and perhaps better, way of looking at the world. No longer can we stare straight ahead and keep our eyes on only one goal. Rather, we need to become aware of all that is happening in our periphery visions. Bateson tells us that “Education is less and less preparation for life and more and more a part of it.”(p. 176) Through participation in and understanding of the many new opportunities that modern life now offers such as new technology, and virtually immediate exposure to diverse cultures and ideas, we as a society can learn to work together as a global community to create a better world.

Bateson warns us that the “planet may be the final test of whether we prefer competition or cooperation, for the earth is a home we share with many species, not an asset to be divided up among the human players alone. From one point of view, the ecosystem is a player to which, if we try to defeat it, we will lose, but with which we can cooperate in sustainable systems.”(p. 193) As for changing the face of education and creating a better world, a 1999 Kellogg Commission report tells us, “A new century brings with it new uncertainties. The American people and their educational leaders face many challenges, but they can face the future with confidence if they create an environment with many opportunities for a lifetime of learning: a Learning Society.” (p. 49)

## References

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Maeroff, G. I. (2003). *A Classroom of One: How Online Learning is Changing Our Schools and Colleges*. Palgrave Macmillan.

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***Returning to our roots: A learning society. The fourth report of the Kellogg commission on the future of state and land-grant universities.***

**<http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/Kellogg/Learn.pdf>**

**Smith M.K. (2000). The theory and rhetoric of the learning society. The encyclopedia of informal education, <http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-lrnsoc.htm>**