CHAPTER 10

SCOTLAND AS A LEARNING SOCIETY

Identity, Difference, and Relatedness

Key words and themes: learning society, relatedness, paranoid schizoid position, depressive position, splitting, projection, introjection, idealisation, intellectualisation, mass projections, socio-cultural factors of identity, being part of a learning project wider than ourselves, dependence, independence, interdependence, difference, partnership between equal nations, self-government, learning relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since I was asked to contribute to this conference, I have struggled over how to link the theme of identity, difference and relatedness to Scotland as a learning society. Much as I would like to shift the blame on to the conference organisers, I am not in a strong position to do so, since I suggested the theme myself. In that moment of insight, identity difference and relatedness seemed, and still seem, to me at any rate, the key to a whole range of concerns.

I should say in my own defence that I am a practising counsellor and psychotherapist working with individuals, couples and groups, and involved also in the training of counsellors and the use of counselling approaches in other settings. The orientation to which I adhere is known as personal relations theory. It takes the view that we can best understand or help people by attending to the multiplicity of relationships they, and we, have experienced and internalised throughout their, and our, lives.

But first, back to the learning society. Like many colleagues here today, I have worked as an organiser of adult learning throughout my adult life. 30 years ago, adult learning barely figured in the broad canvas of education. We had schools full of children, and colleges and universities full of people in their late teens and early twenties. Only a small number of adults engaged in learning in any visible way through extra mural departments, or the WEA, or night school classes. The mature student was a rarely sighted breed.
Now all that has changed. Popular demand and central government intervention have ensured that colleges, universities, and even some schools welcome adult students of all ages. I want to refer briefly to one or two accompanying changes. There has taken place over the past 30 years a shift from the high valuation of the role of the teacher as teacher to a position where, while the importance of that role and task is not denied, the role is now increasingly conceptualised as the manager of learning resources or the facilitator of learning.

*From teaching to learning*

At the same time there has been a shift away from an emphasis on imbibing knowledge – books, papers, research reports, lectures – to a greater valuation of active learning and reflection upon experience, both structured and unstructured. There has been a related shift from valuing cognition alone to the acknowledgement that emotions, feelings and even relationships have something to do with the process of knowing. All of this – which has been neither smooth nor uncontested – has contributed to a gradual shift of emphasis from teaching to learning.

The notion of the learning society dovetails with and has given succinct expression to some of these changes.

In order to establish the link with the theme of identity, difference, and relatedness, I must refer also to a shift that occurred for me personally somewhere in the mid 1970s. It had to do with becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the impersonal, large-scale and narrowly economistic thinking that had come to dominate politics. It seemed to me – and I know to many others – that human beings, their dignity, their perceptions, their consciences, their feelings, their capacity for both self-reliance and mutual aid, their very existence as persons in relation to other persons, had largely got lost sight of. It was this that led me in the direction of the work of Paulo Freire. He had developed, in Brazil and Chile, what he called his psycho-social method. This emphasised that people should be treated as subjects, not objects, that they had important things to say about the situations in which they lived their lives, and could have key roles in co-determining their own learning programmes and naming and investigating their own themes. And, of course, as you know, Freire regarded himself as a personalist.

But this only takes me a little further forward towards my theme. I am still struggling to make the link.

*Knowing yourself and your country*

Well, two quotations have been coming into my mind, or rather one quote and one motto. I recalled from the 2nd year English class at Glasgow University in 1962 the injunction ‘cognosce teipsum’: know yourself. I remembered I had come across it in a book called *Silver Poets of the 16th Century*. So I dug it out and there it was: a poem called *Nosce Teipsum* by Sir John Davies. After reading the first 20 lines I realised it was not quite what I was after. Its line was: why did my parents send me