

# PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT

TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR ITS MEETING ON MAY 22, 2001

## INTRODUCTION

This is the first report on the activities of the Learning Development Institute (LDI) since its inception. The Institute was incorporated as a Delaware nonprofit corporation on March 1, 2000. With effect from the same date, and based on its ruling of July 20, 2000, the Internal Revenue Service considers LDI tax exempt and qualified to receive deductible charitable contributions. It is a public charity, not a private foundation.

LDI has three Directors/Officers, namely Jan Visser (Chairman of the Board, President, and Assistant Secretary); Stephen Anzalone (Director, Vice-President, and Treasurer); and Yusra Laila Visser (Director, Secretary, and Assistant Treasurer). At the present stage, none of them receive financial compensation for the work they do for LDI. Among the three officers mentioned, the President is the only one who has, since his retirement on April 30, 2000, from his previous position as UNESCO Director for Learning Without Frontiers, had deliberate time available to work on LDI issues. The other two officers have full-time employment, respectively full-time employment-cum-study obligations outside LDI. Despite their limited availability, their contributions to the work of LDI during the first year of its existence have been significant.

The initiative to create LDI dates back to 1998. It emerged originally in the context of the current President's work as UNESCO Director for Learning Without Frontiers. Initial efforts, pursued with the authority and support of UNESCO's Director-General, were aimed at establishing LDI as an institute within the UNESCO organizational framework but with the intention that it should later become autonomous. This idea was later abandoned and a course of

action was followed that led to the present status of LDI as an independent not-for-profit organization. As a consequence of the earlier attempts to establish LDI within UNESCO, activities were developed within that earlier perspective, formally as collaboration between LDI and UNESCO, which can be seen as part of the early history of LDI. While they fall beyond the formal scope of the current report, they will be included considering their relevance for what happened afterwards. In terms of activities described, this report therefore covers a period that runs from early 1999 until May 2001.

## **INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ABOUT THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE INSTITUTE**

As mentioned above, the establishment of the Learning Development Institute resulted from UNESCO's Learning Without Frontiers (LWF) program. The latter program ran from 1995 to 2000. Both LDI and its predecessor LWF are inspired by a transdisciplinary concern, namely to understand and give meanings to human learning beyond the traditional conceptions that are derived from the predominant view, held in most societies, that instruction is the major facilitating factor for learning. Such better understanding and enhanced consciousness of meanings, it is believed, will allow a more intelligent use of societal and human resources in caring for learning in a broad sense. While the Institute is fully appreciative of the value of instruction, it sees as one of its important tasks to call attention to the multiplicity of factors that promote and facilitate learning. Within such a perspective of multiple factors that determine the learning landscape, the instructional context is but a sub-landscape. Not only is it necessary to discover and chart the other sub-landscapes that, together with the instructional sub-landscape, make up the learning landscape; it is equally necessary to explore ways to make the entire learning landscape function as an ecologically coherent and organically harmonious whole.

Moreover, the work of the Learning Development Institute is inspired by a broad view of learning, in other words a view that is not restricted to the largely utilitarian perspective that relates learning to the acquisition of particular skills. Rather, learning is seen as a permanent disposition to dialogue. The final purpose of having that disposition and engaging in the dialogue is that it allows human beings to interact in a constructive manner with their ever-changing environment.

Lastly, learning in the sense alluded to in the previous paragraph is not only an attribute of individual people; it is equally an aspect of the behavior of purposefully interconnected groups of

people. The Learning Development Institute therefore emphasizes learning communities, not only as an important factor for the learning it wishes to promote but also as an organizational principle for its own work. It thus seeks to create “communities of mind” that address significant issues related to the Institute’s mission and vision.

## **THE NEED FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES**

The study of learning has to do with many different research areas related to diverse disciplines. For instance, according to Bransford, Brown and Cocking (Eds.) (1999),<sup>1</sup> these areas include, among others, “cognitive development, cognitive science, developmental psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, social psychology, sociology, cross-cultural research, research on learning in subject areas such as science, mathematics, history, and research on effective teaching, pedagogy and the design of learning environments” (p. xxi). There is no particular reason to restrict this set of disciplines to the ones just mentioned. More important than trying to delineate the collection of disciplines that have a bearing on the issue of learning is the realization that, in order to understand and give meaning to learning in the way LDI wishes to promote it, more is needed than just bringing together and letting interact the knowledge and procedures that are part of a variety of disciplines. Consciousness must be raised about issues that transcend the traditional approaches and that require ways of inquiry that keep the worlds of consciousness and reality together instead of breaking them apart and splitting each of them up into isolated entities. To be clear, doing so must not be done *instead of* applying disciplinary approaches but rather *in addition to* the disciplinary modes of inquiry.

## **PHILOSOPHY INTO ACTION**

During the initial phase of the development of the Learning Development Institute, the emphasis has been on building a solid base of credibility and visibility in terms of LDI’s mission and vision, particularly in helping to change the ways in which people think about learning and in creating communities of mind that address significant issues related to the development of learning. To that effect, the following four focus areas have been defined and shortly described, with the exception of one, on the LDI Web site:

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<sup>1</sup> Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L. & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.) (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Report of the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- Meaning of Learning (MOL)
- The Scientific Mind (TSM)
- Problem Based Learning (PBL)
- Learning to Learn and Think (LLT).

There is significant overlap between these four focus areas. They are in no way meant to become yet another way to divide the world of learning up into separate areas nor is it the intention to view the vast range of issues that have a bearing on the development of learning as restricted to these areas. As the information on the Web site states: “The areas of work themselves should be seen as initial foci of attention for LDI. They will serve as growth points for the development of the larger conceptual framework for which LDI stands.”



Creating communities of mind around significant issues related to the development of learning. Presidential session on “In Search of the Meaning of Learning” at the International Conference of the AECT, Oct. 27, 2000, Denver, CO.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF LDI'S TRANSDISCIPLINARY MISSION**

To implement LDI's transdisciplinary mission, the following ways of working were adopted during the reporting period:

- LDI creates communities of mind among people from different disciplines and schools of thought, asking them to individually and collectively address questions that are beyond the reach of their traditional approaches. The clearest example so far is the work that has been

conducted since 1999 on the “Meaning of Learning” (MOL), a reflection of which can be found on the Institute’s Web site.

- LDI engages – and engages others – in research in which the unit of analysis is such that it refuses the world to be broken apart, requiring the adoption of a perspective on the dialogic nature of learning. An example is the “Learning Stories” project on which now, in addition to LDI, two more universities (the University of Northern Carolina and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst) collaborate as well.
- At the more applied level of the development of learning, LDI assists in efforts and advises where people try to create a learning reality that is different from the traditional schooling practice (though it recognizes that forms of deliberate instructional practice are not necessarily alien to advancing learning as a dialogic experience). The Institute is for instance involved in such work in the State of Madhya Pradesh in India, as well as in Mexico, and may shortly get involved in similar developments in Venezuela. The emphasis is on creating the conditions of learning in a broad environment such that they allow learning to evolve as a dialogic experience. A focus on problems and problem areas rather than on content as defined in a disciplinary fashion helps to accomplish the above.
- In line with the above efforts are also LDI’s attempts to create dialogue among practitioners, researchers and thinkers internationally, to develop new visions about the world of learning and knowing. Examples are international colloquia on “Rethinking School” (foreseen for October 2001 in Colombia and perhaps another colloquium in a European country, possibly The Netherlands); “The Scientific Mind” (under preparation); and a recent panel on “Ethics in Distance Education and Open Learning” held in the framework of the 20<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education in Düsseldorf, Germany.
- While LDI is not involved in regular instructional practice, such as through giving courses or issuing degrees, it does engage in – usually short-term – training, which focuses both on awareness building and on creating relevant capacity. An example are the workshops on “Reinventing Learning” conducted around the globe.



**Venezuelan trainees collaboratively constructing a concept map of learning during a LDI-facilitated workshop at Nova Southeastern University.**

## **OVERVIEW OF MAJOR PARTNERSHIP BUILDING ACTIVITIES**

This segment of the report presents an account of some of the major activities, undertaken since the inception of the Institute around the middle of 1998, to build LDI's networked community. A more complete picture can be obtained by browsing through the information available on the LDI Web site. The order in which the various items are being presented corresponds loosely with the chronology of first instances of particular areas of activity. The focus is on activities that were either generated by LDI or those in which LDI played an important role in organizing/shaping them. Particular emphasis is placed on those activities that have contributed to the development of lasting collaborative relationships.

### **1. Forum International des Sciences Humaines**

Since early 1999, LDI has actively collaborated with the Forum International des Sciences Humaines (FISH) in Paris, France. This collaboration was an outgrowth of the earlier involvement of LDI President Jan Visser with the same organization since 1996. In April 1999 an International Colloquium on "New Roles of the School in a Changing Learning Environment" was held in Brescia, Italy. LDI produced the concept paper for the event and played an active role in identifying the invited participants. Following the success of the Brescia colloquium, further colloquia are currently being prepared in the same collaborative spirit between LDI and FISH on the theme of "Rethinking School," to first of which is expected to take place in October 2001 in Manizales, Colombia.

### **2. Overcoming the Underdevelopment of Learning (AERA, Montreal, 1999)**

"Overcoming the Underdevelopment of Learning" was the title of a Symposium held at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Montreal, Canada, April 19-23, 1999. Organizing the symposium was a collaborative undertaking involving both LDI and UNESCO's Learning Without Frontiers. Papers by Jan Visser (Chair), Basarab Nicolescu, Ron Burnett, Cheick Modibo Diarra, Marcy P. Driscoll, Leon M. Lederman, Robert Tinker, and Boris Berenfeld, generated in the context of the symposium were published on the Web sites of both UNESCO and LDI. The symposium marked the taking-off of LDI's focus area on the Meaning of Learning. The set of actors participating in the event clearly signaled LDI's

determination to involve a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds (including in this case experimental and theoretical physics, instructional design, engineering, biology, learning psychology, semiology and communication) in tackling the issues involved.

### **3. Centre International de Recherche et Etudes Transdisciplinaires**

The above symposium on “Overcoming the Underdevelopment of Learning” included the participation of Basarab Nicolescu, President of the Centre International de Recherche et Etudes Transdisciplinaires (CIRET), headquartered in Paris, France. Besides his contribution as a theoretical physicist and prominent thinker in the area of transdisciplinarity, Nicolescu’s participation also marked the beginning of a lasting collaboration between LDI and CIRET. CIRET is one of the partner institutions in the TSM focus area. LDI President Jan Visser was a speaker at the Journée Transdisciplinaire in 1998. Most recently, LDI contributed to the work of CIRET by presenting a case description of transdisciplinary approaches applied by LDI as a documentary input for a CIRET course at the University of Girona in Spain.

### **4. University of Guadalajara**

Since December 1999, LDI has collaborated with the Universidad de Guadalajara (UDG) in Mexico. The UDG organizes, each year, a so-called “Encuentro Internacional de Educación a Distancia.” These events coincide with the International Book Fair in Guadalajara. Keynotes presented at the opening session of the “encuentros” are part of the opening procedures of the book fair. On two occasions, 1999 and 2000, LDI presented this keynote. On May 27, 2000, LDI



**Launching the learning communities network at the University of Guadalajara, May 27, 2000.**

was the formal partner of the UDG in launching a network of learning communities in Mexico. This collaboration is on-going. LDI has already been invited for the “encuentro” of 2001.

## **5. Asociación de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES)**

As an offshoot of the above collaboration with the University of Guadalajara, collaboration has equally developed with the Mexican Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES). A “Reinvention of Learning” workshop was given for faculty of various member institutions of ANUIES in May 2000. A similar workshop is foreseen for 2001.

## **6. Association for Educational Communications and Technology**

LDI has made an effective impact among the community of instructional designers and media specialists who attend the conferences of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). A workshop on “In Search of the Meaning of Learning: A Social Process of Raising Questions and Creating Meanings” was held in February 2000 at the AECT Annual Convention in Long Beach, California. Its success led to a Presidential Session at the AECT International Conference in Denver, Colorado, in October that same year. The session was very well attended and received praise from the AECT leadership. It has led to an agreement with the AECT for a three-day workshop at the forthcoming AECT Conference in November 2001 in Atlanta, GA. A further outgrowth is LDI’s involvement in co-editing a special issue of Educational Technology Magazine on the implications for instructional designers and media specialists of a broadening of the meaning of learning.

In addition to the above, AECT has also been the context for the presentation of the first results of LDI’s learning stories research (Denver 2000); a debate on technology and learning (Denver 2000); and the publication of journal articles in Educational Technology Research & Development (for which an award was received) and TechTrends. The AECT environment has also served as a basis for the development of LDI’s collaboration with the University of Northern Colorado in the area of Learning Stories Research.

LDI has benefited from the consistently dedicated role played by Ron Burnett, President of the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, in the various AECT related events as well as in the context of the earlier symposium in the AERA context mentioned above.

## **7. Shikshantar: The Peoples’ Institute for Rethinking Education and Development**

LDI co-published with Shikshantar: The Peoples’ Institute for Rethinking Education and Development in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, the Web version of a special March 2000 issue of



Vimukt Shiksha on “Unfolding Learning Societies: Challenges and Opportunities.” Like LDI, Shikshantar was created by one of the former collaborators of UNESCO’s Learning Without Frontiers, Manish Jain. Shikshantar is particularly active in South Asia. Shikshantar and LDI see each other as natural allies in pursuing converging interests.

### 8. Aide-et-Action

In September/October 2000, LDI collaborated with Aide-et-Action, a French NGO, on initiating a program of community based learning in the State of Madhya Pradesh in India. In



Liberating School (Bhopal, India).

the framework of this collaboration, workshops were conducted in Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, and in New Delhi. It is expected, by both parties concerned, that the collaboration will continue, contingent upon financing arrangements for the planned developments in Madhya Pradesh.

### 9. Santa Fe Institute

Collaboration with the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, has started to develop following an invitation from SFI to LDI President Jan Visser to join the Santa Fe research



Left to right: SFI founder George Cowan, LDI president Jan Visser and SFI distinguished fellow Murray Gell-Mann (1969 Nobel Prize Physics) in the kitchen of SFI.

community. Among other things this resulted in a stay for Visser as researcher in residence at SFI in October/November 2000. It was decided to develop a joint focus area of interest on “Learning in the Perspective of Complexity.” This area of collaboration is in progress. Recognition is due to the role played in establishing this relationship between LDI and SFI by three members of the LDI network: Marcy Driscoll (Professor at Florida State University); Leon Lederman (Emeritus Director of Fermi National Accelerator

Laboratory and Resident Scholar at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy); and Basarab Nicolescu (Theoretical Physicist at the Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques and President of the Centre International de Recherche et Etudes Transdisciplinaires).

## **10. UNESCO**

In January/February 2001, LDI took part, at the invitation of UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector, in an international workshop on distance learning in the context of UNESCO's collaboration with LearnTec in Karlsruhe. The Learning Development Institute had been invited by UNESCO to participate in the above event through its President, Jan Visser, along with 22 other representatives from different parts of the world. They included five representatives from Eastern Europe; four from Latin America & the Caribbean; six from the Asia/Pacific region; four from Africa; and three from the Arab States. North America and Western Europe were represented by Jan Visser, who was also charged by the workshop participants with the drafting of the report. Collaboration in the area with UNESCO and LearnTec will continue. Moreover, UNESCO and its partner agency ICSU (International Council for Science) are also involved with LDI in the TSM focus area.

## **11. Université de Formation Continue, Algiers**

In March 2001, LDI President Jan Visser was an invitee and speaker at the International Seminar on "The Virtual University: The Challenge for the Third Millennium," organized by the Université de Formation Continue in Algiers, Algeria, on behalf of the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The symposium aimed at providing an opportunity for consultation between Algerian experts and internationally available expertise in the perspective of Algeria's desire to establish a virtual university. LDI provided critical comments on the concept document prepared by Algeria in connection with its plans. The inviting Algerian authorities foresee possibilities for continued collaboration. LDI is ready to respond.

## **12. Ethics Panel at the 20<sup>th</sup> ICDE World Conference in Dusseldorf, Germany**

LDI took the initiative to propose a special session on "Ethics in Open Learning and Distance Education" to the organizers of the 20<sup>th</sup> World Conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) on Open and Distance Learning, held from 1 to 5 April 2001 in Dusseldorf, Germany. The general theme for the conference was "The Future of Learning - Learning for the Future: Shaping the Transition." The proposal was accepted and given special presidential status. It was held on the last day of the conference as part of the closing session.

Despite the unfavorable place in the program it attracted approximately 400 participants who participated vigorously in the debate. The high proportion of interventions from underrepresented groups at the conference (developing countries and women) is noteworthy. The LDI initiative was clearly appreciated. In terms of developing collaborative networks, organizing the symposium itself ensured LDI's links with Nova Southeastern University (USA), the Fundación Cultura de Paz (Spain), the Escola do Futuro at the University of São Paulo (Brazil), and the WorldSpace Corporation (USA), alongside ICDE itself and the organizing Fernuniversität in Hagen, Germany. The session has resulted in follow-up proposals for a special issue of Open Praxis on the theme of Ethics and a working conference to create a "Code of Ethics." In the latter context, collaboration with UNESCO, the Commonwealth of Learning, Nova Southeastern University, the UK Open University, and possibly the Agence de la Francophonie is foreseen.

### 13. Kinsey Dialogue Series at University of Massachusetts Amherst

Collaboration with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst started to develop initially thanks to the interest of two graduate students who wanted to do their doctoral research in areas related to



Jan Visser delivering the 2001 David Kinsey Lecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (April 27, 2001).

LDI's interests. The collaboration was recently strengthened thanks to the selection of LDI President Jan Visser as the presenter of the 2001 David Kinsey Lecture. The latter opportunity, which, in addition to the lecture, also included a workshop offered to faculty, students and outside people, also resulted in extensive discussions with Chancellor David Scott of UMass Amherst about the development of a

Center for Integrative Universities. It was concluded from the discussions that there is convergence among the LDI philosophy and the interests regarding these developments expressed by chancellor Scott.



UMass Amherst students during a social follow-up to the LDI workshop.

## SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

A great number of scientific contributions have been generated since the start and in the context of LDI's activities. The variety of authors and their degree of accomplishment testify to LDI's ability to create effective communities of mind as referred to earlier in this report. Among the authors one finds such names as Leon Lederman (Nobel Laureate in Physics), David Jonassen (Distinguished Professor at the University of Missouri and prolific author and editor in the instructional design field), Ron Burnett (noted author of works on media, images and the imaginary), Basarab Nicolescu (foremost thinker on issues of transdisciplinarity), Paul Nussbaum (University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Director Neurobehavioral Services, Lutheran Affiliated Services), and John Shotter (Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire), to name but a few.<sup>2</sup> Among the multiple scientific contributions generated until the date of reporting, the following three, by LDI's own staff, deserve perhaps mentioning as being of interest in the sense that they underscore specific elements of the LDI philosophy and its approaches to inquiry. They are listed in reverse chronological order of their authoring:

- ❑ Visser, J. (in print). Distance education in the perspective of global issues and concerns. In M. G. Moore and B. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of distance education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- ❑ Visser, Y. L. & Visser, J. (2000, October). *The learning stories project*. Paper presented at the International Conference of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Denver, CO.
- ❑ Visser, J. (2001). Integrity, completeness and comprehensiveness of the learning environment: Meeting the basic learning needs of all throughout life. In D. N. Aspin, J. D. Chapman, M. J. Hatton, & Y. Sawano (Eds.), *International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.



**LDI Vice-President Yusra Laila Visser speaking about the Learning Stories research project at the AECT International Conference at Denver, CO, October 2000.**

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<sup>2</sup> Readers are encouraged to consult the LDI Web site at <http://www.learndev.org> for a more complete overview.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is too early to evaluate in a reliable manner the performance of LDI. The Institute has been in operation formally for less than two years, though in practice a bit longer and it also builds on the experience of Learning Without Frontiers during the five preceding years. We have seen interesting signals of a changing attitude in environments where we did not expect it to happen (such as among the instructional design community that comes together on a yearly basis under the banner of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology). We have also seen that government officials, such as in Madhya Pradesh, showed a surprising openness to the questions we raised, which implied a serious critique of the schooling practices for which those same officials are responsible. Such positive evidence is, of course, no more than anecdotal and much still needs to be done. However, the signs are encouraging.

As is clear from the above description, specific choices were made to do particular things and not to do other things. This was necessary in the circumstances. The Institute had no financial resources to start with. In fact, the legal costs of establishing it as well as the purchase of equipment necessary for its initial functioning were advanced from personal funds by LDI President Jan Visser. LDI officers agreed to provide their services free of charge and no specific office space was rented. The LDI Web site is generously hosted free of charge by AcrossWorld Communications, Inc. Should these conditions not have been in place, LDI would have been obliged to adopt a moneymaking mode from the onset and it would have been in a much weaker position to establish its credibility in terms of the vision and mission it stands for. Both the number of activities developed and the success attained through them warrant a cautious conclusion that LDI has successfully established a recognizable level of credibility within the scientific community and is being listened to. It is recommended that LDI maintain and strengthen that position in the years to come.

It is also clear that it is not feasible for the Institute to continue in the long run to function on a zero-budget basis. Given the credibility LDI has so far established for itself, the Institute is gradually getting in a better position to be a candidate for grants and contracts. It is recommended that, without sacrificing the principles that have driven its initial functioning, LDI should gradually seek opportunities for funded research and development efforts, taking advantage of the advance ruling by the IRS to recognize LDI as a public charity, allowing it to receive deductible contributions. A possible forthcoming opportunity may be the development of the focus area of

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) for which it should be expected that funding could be obtained from sources such as the National Science Foundation. One of LDI's officers, Yusra Visser, is rapidly developing her own expertise in this area as she is expected to soon complete her doctoral work in this area at Florida State University on a study that will also involve another LDI partner, the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy.

The current structure and organizational setup of LDI thrives on leanness. It has allowed the Institute to reach a very beneficial achievement-to-cost ratio. This structure is clearly adequate for the current level of operations. It is therefore recommended that this model stay in place as long as the level and complexity of operations continues to be the same and that it be reviewed and adjusted as operations become more complex and extensive, which will be the case when LDI starts receiving regular funding for its operations.

Tallahassee, Florida, May 22, 2001.

Jan Visser  
President