Learning is good, learning is the future! But what should we be learning, and how should we be learning it? Who – and what – are we learning for in the first place? ‘Real-life’ doesn’t start once learning stops: learning has become a condition of life itself. Volume takes a first dive into the mechanics and horizons of learning.
We reached out to Peggy Deamer to hear what she had to say about the relation between learning and education. What we received was a lesson about the state of the academy in the United States and a wake-up call to the fact that not all ‘post-academic’ learning initiatives are quite what they seem...

from: na@archis.org
to: peggy.deamer@yale.edu
date: Wed, Jun 24, 2015 at 12:18 PM
subject: Volume Magazine on Learning

Dear Peggy,

I hope this email finds you well. We at Volume Magazine are currently planning an upcoming issue around the subject matter of ‘Learning’ and I thought to reach out to you and inquire whether you might be interested in contributing to the issue with an article. I believe that your experience could be an incisive contribution and offer profound insight into the contemporary significance of learning. I’ve included our editorial blurb below, and would be very pleased to hear your thoughts.

Sincerely,
Nick

Volume #45: Learning

Education is in crisis. This, we know. Over the past decades schools around the world have become increasingly financialized, standardized, over-academicized austere personal debt machines. If the hyper-economization of education is a sign of just one thing, it is that schools have a social hegemony over learning. Learning, on the other hand though, is not in crisis; learning is flourishing. Even before the internet, cultures of learning such as radical pedagogies, self-teaching and tinkering, have been some of the most influential and forward-thinking contributors to contemporary history.

One of the biggest and most noticeable differences between Education and learning is that Education is generally conceived of as a phase in one’s life, whereas learning is a life-long condition. Furthermore, Education occurs in a self-contained place whereas learning is a process that takes place everywhere and at all times.

In this sense, thermodynamics, cybernetics and ecology are important turning points when thinking about the history of learning. The flat ontology of systems and their symbiotic conviviality posits learning as a necessary and constant dynamic process of adaptation and equilibration. This also means that we humans are not the only things that learn: learning is an essential process to all things in the world, from fleshy beings to metallic artifices and beyond.

The third industrial revolution is framing learning as an active agent not just of change but of good. The problem was, they say, that we humans were too, well, as it goes, human, too convinced of our liberation, to recognize our relational dependency and vital interconnectedness with others and our surroundings. Technology, they say, of a smarter kind — materials, machines and systems that can learn from (and about) us and that we ourselves can learn from — is the solution. Really though? Let’s just assume for now that the social convergence of materials, machines, systems and more have led to a new condition to work with, a new, more interactive, responsive, and intelligent reality.

This issue of Volume is the inauguration of an extended research project dedicated to the territories and horizons of learning. Let’s go back to basics: What is learning? How does it happen? By who, or what? Where, and why? When, and when not? What are the implications of all of this, it’s opportunities, the sacrifices? Whatever age it is that we’re on the verge of, we know two things about it: one, it is squarely built on the foundation of learning, and two, we want to know how to get there.

from: peggy.deamer@yale.edu
to: na@archis.org
date: Wed, Jun 24, 2015 at 3:32 PM
subject: Re: Volume Magazine on Learning

Wow. Sounds interesting. If there is anything more I need to know, send it my way.

It will be good to think about this.

from: peggy.deamer@yale.edu
to: na@archis.org
date: Mon, Aug 3, 2015 at 5:13 PM
subject: Re: Volume Magazine on Learning

Here:

“... all experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.”
Alfred Lord Tennyson, Ulysses

Have we heard the call for the primacy of learning over its stagnant rival education before? We have indeed, most clearly in the work of John Dewey, who worked on Experience and Education from 1896 until its publication in 1938 and who throughout mined poets like Tennyson.
for their confirmation that learning is ongoing, challenging and rarely equated with school. Dewey champions ‘experience,’ something not actually contrasted with education – it is a subset of experience – but seen as the equivalent, positive, ‘learning’ entity. Dewey’s *Experience and Education* makes clear that we have overlooked the former in our search of the ‘right’ latter. He emphasizes the ‘continuity’ of experience that insists that ‘growing’ needs to be continuous; that experience must be dynamic: “Every experience is a moving force.” Dewey’s insistence that experience is not held ‘inside’ us but exchanged with the animate and inanimate context is deeply aligned with Actor-Network-Theory, which the editors – “learning is an essential process to all things in the world, from fleshy beings to metallic artifacts and beyond” – clearly references. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

But things do change. The editors suggest that something else is at stake. The image of ‘education’ – packaged and imposed from above – endures, but ‘learning’ implies something different today.

Open-sourcing, social media, and internet technology, things that Dewey never dreamed of, are its new conduits. The editors rightly indicate that we should not automatically embrace these technologies/platforms as the key to the ‘good’ life, but they put them squarely on the list. Bibblio (www.bibblio.org), an “intelligent discovery platform” designed by “a band of Knowledge-hungry idealist based in London and Capetown ... [who] are determined to transform how the world’s knowledge is catalogued, related and ultimately discovered” comes to mind as the paradigmatic case in point.

Clearly espousing learning over education, Bibblio wants to make knowledge accessible, organizable, and marketable. It indeed seems like an excellent addition to the open-source world: with it, you can “curate your own content”; “We can automatically process your content, curate it and align it to domains, saving you time and money on the donkey-work”; “get your content discovered”; “once processed, you can redeliver your content through your own products with improved powers of discovery and recommendation”; and “populate your platforms”: “got a product but need content? No problem. Increase stickiness and engagement with the constantly-updated, quality knowledge feeds.” Bibblio complicates Volume’s argument as much as it exemplifies it. One way to interpret the editorial statement that “schools around the world have become increasingly financialized, standardized, over-academicized austere personal debt machines” is that the cost of tertiary education now is ridiculous: either one’s parents are broke or the student, as is rightly indicated, is saddled with long-term debt. But another way to interpret this “increasingly financialized” statement is the ‘Stanfordization’ of contemporary university education. The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, which encouraged federally funded research in universities to obtain patent rights over their inventions, changed what universities researched. Grantable and patentable technology and science became privileged over the humanities – and brought universities and industry closer. The *Economist*, which had originally supported the act, wrote in 2005, “Many scientists, economist, and lawyers believe the act distorts the mission of universities, diverting them from the pursuit of basic knowledge, which is freely disseminated, to a focused search for results that have practical and industrial purposes. Whether this is a bad thing is a matter of debate. What is not disputed is that it makes American academic institutions behave more like businesses than neutral arbiters of truth.” The complication is that this bonding of industry with academia is precisely what spawns platforms like Bibblio. The link between IT start-ups, entrepreneurialism, and the venture capitalism and universities is, to say the least, intimate.

This complication is partially about whether this university/industry ‘incubator’ system is good or bad for society at large. Start-ups and entrepreneurialism don’t make everyone money and the rhetoric of ‘innovation’ and creative risk can be seen as repackaging freelance labor, precarity, hyper-individualism, competition, and the inability to identify as a class in need of common security; entrepreneurialism might be neo-liberalism’s dream child. But more pertinent to this issue is that fact that open-source industries like Bibblio depend on the universities as much as the other way around. We might want to think that ‘learning’ can operate without universities, but we can’t forget that Facebook started at Harvard and Google at Stanford. It is not merely that universities gather intelligent individuals but that they also provide the expensive infrastructure – instructors, websites, computers, licensing advisors, grant-sourcing – indispensable to start-ups, idealist or otherwise.

All of this brings us back to Dewey who, in addition to espousing experience over traditional education, argued vehemently against thinking in dichotomies. A positive solution never comes from opposing an identifiable ‘other’; the terms of the dichotomy themselves need to be overturned. It isn’t helpful, in other words, to set a term like ‘learning’ against that of ‘education’. The editors surely know this, but this anti-oppositional point should be made clear for a healthy debate on this topic to flourish.

This isn’t to say that there isn’t need for identifying ‘good’ and ‘bad’. What it is to say that nothing on this earth is pure; all is animated and contaminated by capitalism. Althusser would have chuckled to think that ‘learning’ is outside the ideological state apparatuses. In learning, we are shown how to be the productive, obedient citizens that capitalism requires. This observation is not meant to be a downer. Rather, it aims to place the judgments ‘good’ or ‘bad’ not on abstractions but on the use to which they are put. Freedom, autonomy, self-fulfillment, social consciousness, creativity – these all are conditions of agency, action, and vigilance. They are a plan of action. As Dewey says, “Like any plan, it must be framed with reference to what is to be done and how it is to be done.”

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2 Ibid., Dewey, pp. 31.
5 Ibid., Dewey, pp. 17.