

## **Is society capable of learning? Beyond a metaphysical foundation**

Ya-hui Su

National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, Taiwan

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*There is an assumption that any contemporary society should become a learning society to maintain stability in the face of change. Although proponents and policymakers take for granted that a society has the ability to learn, can this idea be defended? There is a problem in determining exactly what is meant by a learning society that learns. One response concerning whether a society has the ability to learn is negative, arguing that society lacks agency. In this article, I argue that society has the ability to learn by demonstrating how the negative position is untenable; I also show how the positive position is possible when the idea that a society has the ability to learn assumes a new meaning based on the view that a society is composed of individuals. I present Habermas' view that society can be a learning mechanism on its own, yet I argue that social agency has a distinctive character on its own but not a distinctive character on its own behalf. We need not build a metaphysical foundation, which claims that society can be a learning mechanism on its own in a way that extends beyond the efforts of individuals to construct a self-image.*

**Keywords:** *individuals, society, intersubjectivity; learning; learning society*

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## **Introduction**

Does society have the ability to learn? It would be peculiar to give a negative answer. If a society manages to survive throughout the ages, then its very survival shows that it not only adapts but also successfully learns to sustain itself and thrive. Thus, the mere existence of society proves its ability to learn and change.

The idea of a society that is able to learn is often taken for granted in related policies and literature and is even perceived as more than a narrative, steering policy towards showing preference for the development of ‘the learning society’—a society that consciously aims to learn (e.g., Jarvis 2007; Ragatt, Edwards, & Small 1996; Ranson 1994; Stiglitz & Greenwald 2014). After all, learning suggests a direction of betterment. The development of an educated society becomes valuable, and there appears to be a tendency to assert that any contemporary society confronting change should become an educated society as an important but not exclusive aim (Faure et al. 1972; Husén 1986; European Commission 1996; Kuhn 2007; NCIHE 1997). However, although proponents and policymakers offer their own accounts of educated society and take for granted the idea that a society can learn while proceeding directly to the practical agenda, a learning society is preoccupied with the pursuit of efficiency and quality driven by, in most contemporary cases, economic achievement or civic demand (e.g., Benn 2000; Biesta 2011; Greenwald & Stiglitz 2014; Welton, 2005). Therefore, at the level of implementation, policy and institutional efforts focus on setting supra-individual goals for individuals to meet pre-set, grand directives. Such a top-down vision of a learning society (Su 2007), which operates via systemic planning and regulation, emphasises the primacy of the rhetorical specifications of what must be learned as prescriptive guidelines for individual action rather than developing an awareness of how individuals, as concrete beings, actually act and learn. While relevant policies or institutions try to determine what should be learned, the direction of learning and therefore of action that individuals value is, paradoxically not something entirely decided and directed by policy or institutional demands. Scrutiny of the everyday lifeworld suggests that individuals may follow system-led requirements or guidelines but may also accommodate them, negotiate them, or choose to resist them to create a place for themselves. The power of individuals’ agentic

subjectivities to assert their own perspectives, results in the mobilisation of learning in various and different dimensions instead. Before a commitment to the development of educated society is made, we must determine exactly what is *meant* by a learning society that can learn. The exploration of this idea is important because, as described above, neglecting to explore what this idea actually means could lead even proponents of the idea of a learning society to misinterpret the manner in which the idea is developed.

In the first part of this article, I provide the negative position that society lacks agency and thus cannot learn. Subsequently, I demonstrate how the negative position is untenable. I then present Habermas' view that society can be a learning mechanism on its own, yet in response to Habermas, I argue that we need not build a metaphysical, *zoomed-out* foundation that extends beyond the efforts of individuals to construct a self-image. I draw upon Habermas's (1987a) concepts of system and lifeworld and the colonisation that may occur during individuals' learning processes and interactions to show how difficult it can be for individuals in society to engage their whole person in learning. I also aim to show the importance of viewing individuals as *subjects* in the sense that they learn in a spirit of genuineness rather than as *objects* who learn to fulfil imperatives and therefore to experience reification. Indeed, the idea that a society has the ability to learn assumes a new meaning based on the view that a society is composed of *conscientious* individuals from which a learning society is not reduced to a summation of learning individuals but rather is constituted by individuals' interactive and authentic processes and learning efforts that could not possibly be produced by any single individual. This composition determines the meaning of a society that can learn.

### **The negative position**

One answer that has emerged to answer the question of whether this idea can be defended is a negative answer. This argument lies in society's lack of agency. Learning is a process or activity that necessitates and presupposes agency, given that only agents can learn. To show and confirm whether a society can learn could involve viewing society as an agent. Giddens rejects the view that there is such a construct as social agency. He states that 'only individuals, beings which have a corporeal

existence, are agents' (1984, 220). To state that a society can learn is to perceive society as if it were an agent itself and a distinctive individual entity. Society, according to Giddens, lacks a singular corporeal existence that could exert its agency.

Wall (2000) also objects to the existence of social agency, which he alternatively calls 'group agency', by proposing that society itself has 'internal decision structures' that play a role in making a collective decision that could not be made by any single individual. Wall further argues that 'we should distinguish *having* a decision-making procedure from *making* a decision' (italics in original; 2000, 189). According to Wall, what is produced from the internal decision structures is actually reduced to the decision of the sum of individuals. Society only possesses the decision-making structures; it is the individuals who make decisions. Wall states that 'agents do more than simply behave in a way that can be justified by reference to some rule or policy. They are also *motivated* to act in one way or the other' (italics in original; 2000, 189). Wall contends that how a society acts is not the same as how an individual acts. The latter has thoughts, beliefs, desires, and reasons and can therefore act *for* something, whereas the former lacks cognitive ability and hence cannot produce thoughts, beliefs, or reasons. The aspect of structure is attributed to society, while the aspect of acts, which are motivated by thoughts, beliefs, reasons, and desires, is attributed to individuals. Society appears to act and have motives to act, but for Wall, it is actually individuals who act and have such motives.

Accordingly, the statement that a society can learn is considered meaningful merely in the metaphorical sense. What occurs in reality, according to this perspective, is that society changes but does not learn. As Jarvis (2001, 78-79) explains,

societies and organizations might change but they do not learn. ... It is individuals who learn, but they are social beings. When people learn they sometimes subsequently change their behaviour and/or the procedures of the organization in which they function. This can generate change and the changes introduced into the system might cause other members of the society to learn and change their behaviour or, alternatively, to change their behaviour and learn. But it is the people who learn. The 'learning' might describe a type of society or organization

whose structures are designed to cause or encourage people to learn, and it is only in this sense that we can understand the term ‘learning society’.

This view again claims that only individuals can learn, whereas society can change but cannot learn. The difference between ‘learn’ and ‘change’ is that the former presupposes agency, whereas the latter does not. It makes sense to say that ‘Peter is learning’, which is caused by agency. We do not state that the picture is learning but rather that ‘the picture drawn by Peter is changing’. Peter has agency, whereas the picture that Peter is drawing does not. Likewise, society changes because individuals can learn. This argument can be traced to Giddens (1984, 220), who stated, ‘[a]ction descriptions ... should not be confused with the designation of agency as such’. To claim that a society learns is merely providing a shorthand description of individuals’ learning.

### **The untenable dichotomy**

I argue that the negative position held by Giddens, Wall, and Jarvis regarding society with respect to agency is adopted by reference to the untenable dichotomy between the individual and society. For them, the individual and society appear to be opposing entities, with one being positive and the other viewed as negative. By holding the individual and society in tension based on the dichotomy, ‘[a]ll of these understandings are rooted in a more or less atomistic notion of the individual in which society is simply the sum of such individuals, negotiating with others to secure mutual accommodation of individual preferences’ (Jonathan 1997, 111). Such an atomistic notion of the individual is inadequately premised because what substantiates the existence of the individual is not taken into account. The perception of the individual and society as two separate entities is illusory once the focus is shifted to the *development* of them. The development of the learning individual is ‘penetrated, infected, characterised by the existence of others’ (Bradley 1927, 172). Even self-directed learning does not occur as a psychological and personal activity of cognition but is constructed socially and contextually. In Newman’s words, ‘If I blocked out the world, I necessarily blocked out the self as well’, (2008, 289).

As Urry claims in introducing Latour’s thoughts, ‘[s]ociety on its own does not hold us together, but it is what is held together’ (Urry

2000, 201). Instead of either ‘society against individuals’ or ‘society and individuals’, as if society were an entity of its own and there were two different entities juxtaposed, there exists ‘a society *of* individuals’ (Elias 1991). The ‘*of*’ here is meant in the constitutive sense, seeing the development of the individual and society as two manifestations of the one activity. The individual and society are not excluded or opposed to each other but rather are the *sine qua non* condition of each other (Bauman 2000, 40). The mutually constitutive position shifts the way learning is conceptualised from a psychologistic focus to one that is socially contextual and relational. It is the micro-processes and relationships of individuals, who themselves are socially and mutually bound, that constitute and constantly produce learning effects that no single learning individual could produce. A learning society, based on the sense of ‘a society *of* individuals’, when focusing on its qualitative, holistic sense of development, requires being understood in relational rather than entity-oriented terms (Cooper 2005).

### **Habermas’ view**

Jürgen Habermas, the social theorist who most consciously sees society through a learning lens, places ‘individual and social learning processes at the core of his massive project’ (Welton 1995, 136). In Habermas’ (1987a) paired concepts of ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’, the operation of system, based on a functionalist rationality, ‘integrates diverse activities in accordance with the adaptive goals of economic and political survival’ (Ingram 1987, 115); it progresses towards securing the system’s own continuous operation and functioning. The lifeworld ‘contributes to the maintenance of individual and social identity by organizing action around shared values’ (Ingram 1987, 115). The lifeworld is fulfilled through intersubjective interactions in which individuals learn, communicate, and move based on meaning and value that they achieve and share together.

Habermas’ view, although also characterised by the language of dichotomy, does not describe society as an image with an abstract structure or system, whereas individuals are in the life-world. Habermas rejects the reduction of social agency to the acts of individuals. The distinction Habermas makes between the system and the lifeworld should be borne in mind as ‘theoretical entities describing various levels

of modern society' (Bohman 1989, 392); they are distinct for the sake of analysis but 'actually cut across, and refer to, one another' (Cook 2005, 57). Systems are not simply given; rather, they 'need to be anchored in the lifeworld: they have to be institutionalized' (Habermas 1987a, 154). Likewise, if the development and growth of the lifeworld are to be made possible, systems are required and inherently bound to the lifeworld. 'We all have to live in some kind of system with implicit tensions in its relationship to our individual and collective lives' (Mezirow 1995, 61). The system and the lifeworld are interdependent and intersect in all individuals' life situations and settings.

Habermas does not deny that societal learning is in fact attributed to individuals as social subjects who learn. Society, drawing on the learning capacities of individuals, learns in the derivative form of intersubjective agency. For Habermas, it is 'in a derivative sense that societies "learn"' (1979, 121).

...in a certain way, only social subjects can learn. But social systems, by drawing on the learning capacities of social subjects, can form new structures in order to solve steering problems that threaten their continued existence. To this extent the evolutionary learning process of societies is dependent on the competences of the individuals that belong to them (Habermas 1979, 154).

Such a derivative relationship between individuals and society does not lead Habermas to further conclude that society as a 'learning mechanism' (Habermas 1976, 1979) is reduced to individuals' learning. Rather, society itself gains its own strength, in terms of its own capacity for self-direction, to succeed in 'adaptation and goal-attainment' (Habermas 1976, 5). Some societal aspects, such as norms, systems, structures, or institutions, are self-steering, self-reflective, and self-regulated in ways that are not adequately explained simply in terms of individual agency. For Habermas, there is 'system integration', in the sense that a society as a system has a self-steering mechanism for self-regulation that is distinct from what he calls 'social integration', which is spoken of in relation to life-worlds in which individuals as subjects are socially related. Social integration and system integration are related in the sense that 'the former attaches to action orientations, while the latter reaches right through them' (Habermas 1987a, 150). In

less differentiated societies, according to Habermas, the integration of society is a process whose dynamics are determined by the constituent social members rather than conducted through them to achieve some supra-individual, pre-determined purpose. In such societies, system integration, dependent on learning individuals' efforts and competences and steered via economic and power dynamics, forms systemic societal mechanisms to sustain the material substratum of the lifeworld and make possible and maintain the lifeworld's continued existence.

Habermas considers less differentiated societies first as lifeworlds and then as self-maintaining systems to show that social integration and system integration are actually interwoven (Habermas 1987a, 155). Through social integration, society is construed 'from the internal perspective of members of social groups' (Habermas 1987a, 150) as a lifeworld in which individuals learn and interpret their contexts and relate to others on an intersubjective basis. Through communicative action, they intersubjectively engage in constructing meanings and values and achieving mutual understanding. Concurrently, through system integration, society is necessarily conceived of as a self-maintaining system. From 'the external perspective of an observer' (Habermas 1987a, 150), this system is guided via power and exchanges that objectivate and enable the lifeworld to function and move.

However, with the increasing complexity of modern, capitalist societies, political and economic systems are differentiated and discrepant from the lifeworld, which is the result of 'an uncoupling of system integration from social integration' (Habermas 1987a: 180). Problems arise when the role of systemic mechanisms do not merely supplement the social integration of the lifeworld but intervene in the internal logic of the lifeworld, in which the direction of learning is related to individuals' self-determination about the life they desire to lead. Individuals learn by considering their lives and acknowledging their finitude. Embedding individuals in learning endows them with the opportunity to develop their potential, which fosters human growth. Learning, therefore, is not merely an intellectual activity; it is also an existential activity. However, if society is kept at a distance, as if one were viewing it from a 'zoomed-out', panoramic position and thus adopting 'the external perspective of an observer', it begins to be perceived as a whole via system integration and is assigned biological characteristics, such as the ability to self-regulate and to be recursive. In such a perspective, learning individuals,

as concrete beings coming to terms with and engaging in everyday lifeworlds, become hidden and invisible (Kemmis 1998, 279). As a result of zooming out, the sense of wholeness is realized, and concern shifts to how the whole system can be sustained, making 'function' the primary focus. When wholeness is the prevalent perception of society, individual members are considered to be parts of it, instrumental units that make possible and ensure the operation of the whole societal system. In this way, society as a system tends to be perceived as gaining its own strength, although in a derivative sense, holding individuals together and subordinating individuals to it.

Habermas notes that, as system differentiation in modern societies increases, system forces based on instrumental reason can invade the lifeworld. The system forces override the lifeworld, shifting the action logic of the lifeworld from communicative action to purposive action. Money and power, as the driving forces of the systems that regulate exchange and system interconnections, become central to individuals' motives, causing them to act according to the logic of purposive rationality. In response, individuals in the lifeworld may adopt strategic learning and responses for adaptation and survival; they approach learning not with an attitude oriented to understanding but 'oriented to success' (Habermas 1984, 332). Accordingly, 'the functionally rational subsystems combine the results of these strategic and instrumental actions in such a way that they further the ends of the subsystems themselves rather than the aims consciously sought by their agents' (Cook 2005, 58). Exchanges of money and power in the pursuit of societal efficiency and performance begin to operate 'on their own terms' (Kemmis 1998, 279; Fleming 2002: 4), while the pursuit of mutual understanding and identity formation in the lifeworld 'are made peripheral instead' (Habermas 1987a, 154). Under the domination of system integration and its purposive-rational logic, the vision of a learning society as a self-run mechanism and a macro-system is privileged. The perception of the *necessity* of the maintenance of the macro-system, in dealing with complexity and for survival, could easily be elided into the *priority* of the macro whole that narrows learning individuals' actions and objectifies individuals' learning to meet the society's and systems' ends. The system begins to 'colonise' the lifeworld, in which individuals' learning and life cease 'to be a *subject* rich in experience' (Purcell 2006, 208) and are identified in system terms,

becoming reified as an *object* for system maintenance and recursion. Individuals are reduced to ‘the roles of consumer and client’ (Habermas 1987a, 351), subjecting themselves to economic or specific bureaucratic forces and functions.

### **Society as a society of individuals who can learn**

To de-colonise lifeworld learning requires the dismissal of society as a macro-entity or a ‘social totality’ (Habermas 1987b, 357) and a return to understanding society as intersubjective relationships and actions deriving from individuals as authentic learners. Although system integration is necessary to maintain society as a whole, the system and its integrated dynamics should not be ends in and of themselves. Rather, they should be the conditions that allow the learning individuals in the lifeworld to be sustained. This perspective represents a shift in emphasis away from the premise of society as an independent structure or ‘self-run automaton’ (Bohman 1989), which seeks explanations for a transcending society purely as a distinctive organism with biological characteristics, to a sphere of intersubjectivity that acknowledges the interactions and relationships of authentic learners that form and define what a learning society is. The learning individuals, not the system per se, become the primary consideration in the development of a learning society. Emphasis is given to the internal perspective of the lifeworld, which has ‘to be gotten at by a hermeneutic approach that picks up on members’ pretheoretical knowledge’ (Habermas 1987a, 153). Individuals, from this perspective, would be viewed as subjects with intentions to achieve mutual understanding within their lifeworlds. Individuals, as subjects, learn in a self-directed and interpretive manner; they learn from their specific contexts and lifeworlds and take them into account, rather than being restricted by grand, self-regulated system forces based on instrumental reason. In this way, learning is motivated by individuals’ desire to value themselves as ends rather than as exchangeable commodities. The intersubjectivity of learning individuals is brought to the core of understanding the constitution and development of a society such that society is no longer a higher-level self-run and self-regulated unity, nor is it reduced to any aggregative sum of individuals as parts. Instead society is conceived as a practice that must be anchored in the relationships and actions of authentic learners who create intentional and unintentional learning results that

no single individual learner can produce; it is these agentic and bottom-up intersubjective actions that fundamentally constitute the society's base.

To be authentic learners, individuals are required to acknowledge their status as subjects by developing 'critical consciousness' (Freire 1972) and being sensitive to their learning contexts and their capabilities of transformation. Learning is not a value-free activity. It is when learning individuals realise how the system based on money and power is structured and how it functions that they understand and question the domination of the system's logic and begin to learn in more self-reflective ways. Recognising that this reified learning arises from the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system is the first requirement for undermining the primacy of the purposive-rational learning actions that encroach upon the lifeworld. Critical consciousness or reflection is the key to placing lifeworld learning back in the hands of its individual members for their own ends. Foley (1999, 12) proposes the significance of individuals' learning to recognise the systems and structures of oppression, 'to make sense of what is happening' at the individual and societal levels and to challenge and 'work out ways of doing something about it'. This involves resisting money and bureaucratic power based on instrumental reason and reflecting on the purpose and nature of individuals' learning in the lifeworld through dialogue and discussion. Learning of this kind is bound up in individuals' civic, intersubjective actions. Women's liberation, the adult workers' movement, and environmental protection campaigns are examples of societies becoming learning societies, and learning in such situations 'is tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognised as learning' (Foley 1999, 3). Such learning processes involve Mezirow's (1990) critical reflection that 'triggers transformative learning', and they are in line with Freire's (1972) 'conscientization' that grants learners the capacity to become the subjects that develop knowledge and actions that are significant to themselves. A return to individuals' conscientious reflection matters because it allows the exercise, at least to some extent, of self-assessment, through which learners determine whether their lives are truly their own. This self-evaluation may prompt individuals to learn and broaden the potential of their lives and situations. Individuals 'come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting beings' (Foley 1999, 64) and learn based on what Habermas calls emancipatory

interests. Learning is then not simply a cognitive process but is practiced as a praxis in which learning is action, a ‘cognitive praxis’ (Eyerman & Jamison 1991) that counts as social movement learning that deepens and ultimately shapes knowledge that is localised with a ‘grassroots’ character. Knowledge, accordingly, is not predetermined but rather derives from learners’ awareness of, and actions in response to, unreasonable and unjust situations and norms.

Accordingly, a society that can learn, beyond a top-down epistemology of learning development, is grounded in the agency and efforts of learners who, being authentic, must be empowered as ‘subjects in their own right’ (Purcell 2006, 209), using their capabilities of critical consciousness and action for justice. Through standing back and considering their alternatives, learners value having choices and enabling change by transcending their limitations to transform the interactions and relationships of learning individuals that constitute and shape a learning society. In this learner-based, lifeworld-centred approach, authentic learning, occurring through individuals’ reflections and intentional actions, is assisted and made possible by the system rather than being colonised by the system. Instead of being the primary force directing learning as a strategic endeavour and expecting individuals to be aligned with its purposive aims, the system plays a derivative and supporting role in regulating infrastructure establishment to create favourable conditions for the flourishing of lifeworld learning, in which individuals’ intersubjective learning is central and their conscientious actions towards ensuring lifeworld quality are emphasised. This requires the system to be devoted to fostering internal lifeworld learning and reflection so that a learning society becomes a more reflective and conscientious practice directed by individuals—a society of intersubjective individuals who can learn.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, the idea that a society can learn assumes a new meaning when based on the view that a society is a society of individuals. The dichotomy between society and individual is helpful for the sake of analysis, but it does not reflect the process of micro-lifeworld learning. The separate, atomistic notions of society and individual are abstract and empty because they take little account of how the individual and

society are developed. The development of society depends upon the agency of individuals and is also permeated and characterised by their existence. Either of their developments must result from the exercise of the other.

According to Habermas, while a society dynamic that is understood as a process of system integration explains how society is adapted and maintained, this external systems-focused perspective alone does not account for the complexities of the lifeworld. It does not address how learning is oriented towards learners' particular circumstances. The system-focused perspective is characterised not by the concrete and intersubjective relationships of individuals but by de-contextualised relationships such as impersonality, efficiency and bureaucratic power. The development of a learning society as a system only is incomplete until such development is placed back into the context of the lifeworld to integrate what learning individuals experience. A society that is capable of learning, from the internal perspective of the lifeworld, should be a person-centred practice, not a function-centred practice. This learner-based, lifeworld-centred approach goes beyond system-based epistemology and towards learning for meaningful development in which individuals in the lifeworld, as active and participatory subjects, are placed at centre stage. The learning individuals' critical consciousness and the conscientious actions taken to de-colonise the lifeworld challenge the maintenance of instrumentalised forms of system control. The learner-based, lifeworld-centred approach to understanding a learning society must be considered because it helps us see the development of human learning in a spirit of genuineness and more closely reflects what individuals experience and learn when they treat themselves as ends.

The idea that a society is capable of learning, accordingly, draws on individuals as social subjects who learn. This idea does not mean the reduction of the idea of a society that learns to the sum of individuals who learn. What social agency produces cannot be explained by claiming that what is produced is the addition of any single individual's agency one after another to eventually equal the sum of the individuals. Societal learning, by drawing on learning individuals, does gain its own strength. The existence of social norms, structures, systems, or institutions where societal learning is regulated is not denied. Nor is it denied that

individuals create these collective realities and are also embedded in and influenced by them. What is denied is the attempt to consider beyond the ties of social agency with individuals and to construct a self-image that claims that society, or these collective realities, have some form of agency of their own that may extend or differ from the agency of individuals in certain ways. The strength of societal learning produced is not gained on its own behalf; its *actual* occurrence and development are on behalf of the collective efforts produced by individuals' interactions and engagement. It is the manner in which individuals learn, struggle, and move towards conscientious actions that form a learning society as such. Society is defined less as a wholly stable entity beyond individuals than as a mobile entity composed of interactivity and intersubjectivity between individuals. We do not need to build a metaphysical foundation by looking beyond individuals' efforts to construct a self-image.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the National Science Council, R.O.C., for its support of this work through the grant NSC 97-2410-H-328-007.

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## About the Author

**Dr. Ya-hui Su** is Professor in the Teacher Education Center at the National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, Taiwan. Her main research interest is the facilitation of lifelong learning within school and continuing education systems. She has published articles in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Higher Education*, *Higher Education and Research Development*, *Studies in Continuing Education*, and *International Journal of Lifelong Education*.

## Contact Detail

*Dr. Ya-hui Su  
Teacher Education Center,  
National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism.  
81271 No.1, Songhe Rd., Xiaogang Dist.,  
Kaohsiung City, Taiwan*

*Email: yahuisu@hotmail.com*