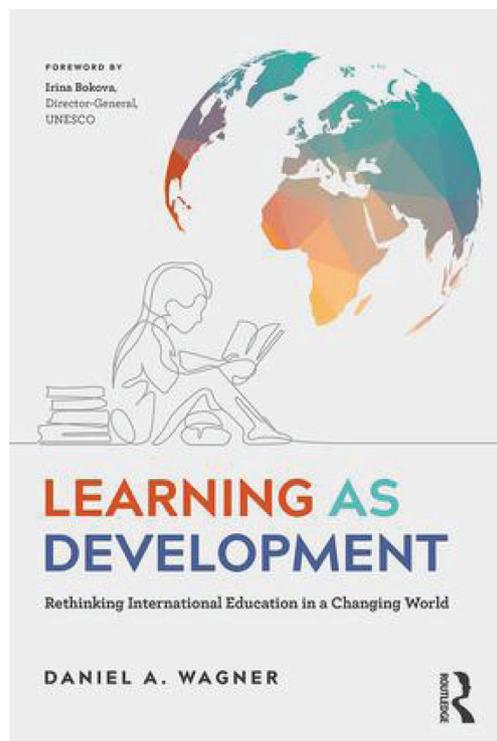


Book review

Jennie Golding* – *UCL Institute of Education, UK*

Learning as Development: Rethinking international education in a changing world, by Daniel A. Wagner

New York: Routledge; 324pp; 2018; ISBN 978-1-848-72607-9 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-848-72606-2 (hbk); ISBN 978-0-203-11530-5 (ebk)



This book is premised on a conceptualization of learning as the foundation of the human experience – and so the basis of both individual and international development. It draws on the US-based author's extensive experience and knowledge, including in 'developing' countries, to argue that inequities in access to, and outcomes from, learning, both formal and informal, impact on both economic and personal health and well-being. The author situates his arguments in historical and geopolitical contexts, informed in particular by a historical lens on international development that traces its path from pre-colonial origins through the expansion of economics-based approaches, to emergent learning equity agendas. In doing so, he draws on a range of case studies in Asia, Africa and Latin America to bring a sobering immediacy to consideration of the challenges of meeting the United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. His key conclusion is that we need to rethink and reinvest in international education if we are to meet twenty-first-century environmental and geopolitical challenges of unprecedented scale.

Wagner brings forth a lifetime of UN-involved work around the world to situate his argument that international development, if it is to respect cultures and traditions, as well as limits growth in a global society, must move beyond human economic capital to embrace human psychological capital at a deep level – and that global disparities in learning access and outcomes have unacceptable implications for quality of life, especially for the poorest. In doing so, he draws on a wide range of resources that he uses to survey the field, bringing both a breadth and a humanity to his thesis.

The book as a whole aims to survey the state of learning within and across nations, with a view to asking hard questions about equity of learning opportunities across life phases, about how institutions can serve to address or perpetuate inequities in such opportunities and about the trends and challenges that accelerating urbanization, technology and globalization bring for the learning necessary to productively address related issues. In order to do so, Wagner very clearly distinguishes between education and learning, analysing structures of learning along orthogonal axes of formal/informal and of structured/unstructured, with 'education' sitting in the formal, structured quadrant but flexible responses to modern challenges needing a range of different learning opportunities.

Early in the book, Wagner points to the respect needed for what developing countries bring to 'learning as development' in terms of perspectives and priorities for sustainable global learning. This is a theme Wagner returns to repeatedly, yet throughout, there is implicit valuing of Western approaches to education and wider learning, so that although dealt with constructively, education systems in developing countries are often described as deficit models, and a rich-world notion of 'learning' sometimes presented as an unexceptionable 'master discourse'. On p. 145, we read: 'for parents, schools provide a safe place ... where their children can learn about morality. And, for development agencies, schools represent the most efficient place where they can assist in government efforts to build a skilled and knowledgeable citizenry'. This is a very Western-centric view, with skills and knowledge often rich-world-valued knowledge, 'delivered' in global languages and accepted as uncontested 'good'. I am reminded of a Tanzanian head teacher I visited who proudly showed me her school's library: 15 digital tablets provided by a wealthy charity, pre-loaded with eighteenth-century English literature, impenetrable to many well-read English teenagers, delivered in an American accent, and often inaccessible given unreliable electricity: what is the agenda, and whose choice is that? Even when Wagner considers the enormous challenges associated with persistent growth models of globalization and environmental degradation, there is an apparent complacency that the rich world's approaches to learning will find solutions. Simultaneously, he points (for example, on p. 212) to indigenous responses to climate change that build environmental adaptation as a community response to the world in which they live. His arguments would be stronger if he were able more consistently to step outside his own culture to point to the strengths inherent in such learned symbiosis with the environment: we have much to learn by seeking out the perspectives of our fellow men and women, and listening to their values, as Wagner himself argues.

Nevertheless, Wagner achieves an impressive, well-referenced overview of many of the pressing issues related to learning when considered on a global scale, although the breadth of scope sometimes leads to superficiality (for example, on p. 165, when he addresses pedagogy). The approaches he embraces, while derived from a Western lens and often privileging education without full consideration of informal, or less structured, opportunities, offer a constructive and optimistic way forward, and challenge much-received 'global development' wisdom. He points to the paradox of rapid growth in

school attendance often leading to lower standards of attainment, especially in primary education, but balances that with well-constructed arguments about the importance of focusing on in-context equity through a range of available means. Importantly, he considers the potential contribution of technology, often regarded as either a panacea or an irrelevance, in a refreshingly balanced and evidenced way, calling for enhanced and purposeful design for learning, rather than 'hype'.

As a whole, the book appears to be directed at graduate students of international education, offering as it does an overview of a range of related issues together with copious evidence for the arguments made, but it would equally be enlightening reading for policymakers seriously interested in learning equity – within or across nations, whether first world or developing. The main strength of the book, to my ('first-world') mind, is that it repeatedly stresses the need for individual jurisdictions – and communities within those – to develop their own priorities for learning, including through local languages so central to identity, access and empowerment. The chapters focused on measurement of learning and on addressing inequities of opportunity offer bespoke analysis, and contextualized tools and approaches, that can support raising of floor learning attainment so that learning equity can become a reality within communities, whatever the inherited support. In parallel with enhanced and active addressing of between-jurisdiction inequities, with rich-world funding offered in conjunction with rich-world listening, he offers a measured hope for the development of a wiser global population.