Globalizing Education or Educating Globalization?

David R. Loy[1]

The English word *education* originally derives from the Latin *e-ducere*, 'to draw out, to draw forth.' To draw forth what? For the sake of what? Etymology already draws us into the essential issue: why do we educate? Why do we believe that education is so important? Needless to say, final agreement has never been reached, and very likely never will be. Today many people in different parts of the world believe that their educational systems are in a state of crisis, but there are very different ideas about what that crisis is, and what is needed to make education better. Those questions become even more important when we consider the double impact of globalization on education, and of education on our globalizing world.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that our educational systems have become so problematic at the same time that we have become preoccupied with globalization. Outlining the larger historical context for both will help to clarify their interconnection.

[1] David R. Loy, PhD. (Singapore National University), is Besl Family Professor of Ethics, Religion and Society at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. He specializes in Asian and comparative philosophy, especially Buddhism

Usually the economic aspects of globalization are most emphasized, which became possible not only because of economic conditions but because of political events. The collapse of communism removed capitalism's competition, so there is no longer any other organized system to interfere with its spreading everywhere. The internal logic of its own expansion means that a capitalist economy seeks access to resources and markets everywhere, without restraint on the commodification process that tends to incorporate everything else into market exchange and monetary valuation. How inevitable and beneficial this transformation is remains controversial, of course (e.g., Dunning, 2003), but if economic globalization can therefore be understood as the global extension and acceleration of capitalism, we can benefit from a simple model that Karl Polanyi (1957) suggested half a century ago to understand how the industrial revolution changed Europe. Today we can use the same model to understand how globalization is transforming the rest of the world.

In most pre-modern and non-modern societies, economic activity is subordinate to social relationships. Although we tend to view the profit motive as universal and rational (the benevolent 'invisible hand' of Adam Smith), it is not traditional to most traditional societies. Instead, market exchange usually played a very circumscribed role, being viewed warily because of its tendency to disrupt social relations. Another way to put it is that such societies make no clear distinction between economic and social activities. Pre-capitalist man 'does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end.' In capitalist society, however, 'instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system' (Polanyi, pp. 46, 57).

The industrial revolution, by freeing land, labour and capital from traditional societal controls, enabled them to interact freely, which gave an extraordinary boost to capital accumulation. But at a price: the 'side effect' was gradually subordinating the needs and norms of the social system to the demands of the economic system.

As the last two centuries have shown, capitalism is extraordinarily dynamic, and communities need to keep re-adjusting to the social changes that dynamism creates. Today the logic of globalization involves extending this same transformation to the furthest corners of the earth and to the most remote human society.

There is another aspect of this historical development that needs to be noticed, indeed emphasized: the changing role of religion in the modern world. It is, again, no coincidence that capitalism developed as the world secularized. Along with nationalism (the nation-state developed at the same time), economic values sprang up to fill the secular space left as religion became more privatized and the Christian God began to disappear into the clouds. I have argued elsewhere (Loy 1997, 2002) that our economic system can also be understood as our religion. If the function of religion is to ground us by teaching us what this world is, and what our role in the world is, the traditional ways of doing this have been largely supplanted by other belief-systems (especially science) and value-systems (moneytheism, consumerism).

This gives us some insight into the tension that exists today between economic globalization and less modernized societies that retain more traditional religious values. Globalization makes c apitalism into a missionary religion that accepts no limits on its mission. This is especially problematic for Islamic societies, since Islam does not accept the secular/sacred distinction that is fundamental to the modern West and its economy. Unlike Jesus and the Buddha, Muhammad was a social and political leader as well as a spiritual adviser, and his legacy includes detailed instructions on how to incorporate one's religious commitment into the social and economic practices of everyday life. For traditional Muslims, our daily life is not secular in the modern Western sense, because our activities in this world are much more structured by divine regulation.

In the developed (I prefer 'economized') societies, however, the success of the Protestant Reformation meant that the sacred has been largely privatized (when it survives at all), which has allowed secular values and pursuits – such as making money – to become liberated from traditional religious controls. As a result, many of those societies are now experiencing a different problem, a tension

between production values and consumption values. There is a basic contradiction between the production values of hard work and deferred gratification, and the consumption values of increasing consumerism. The problem is that our economic system needs both. Earlier societies had a ruling class that soaked up whatever surplus might accumulate; developed countries today, which have developed very efficient production technologies, have more of a problem with selling all the things they can produce. The greater economic challenge, in the economized countries, is how to stimulate ever more consumption among the people who have the money to buy. Hence the enormous resources devoted to marketing, advertising and public relations.

The reason I emphasize this tension here is because the same tension exists in our educational systems, especially in the economized nations. The economic idea of education is to train future workers in the skills they need to make them efficient producers, but at the same time young people are the targets of a large industry that works very hard to make them into consumers, by acculturating them as early as possible into a pop culture involving lots of consumption – music, clothes, style, etc. 'Teenagers' as a special social grouping/stage of life were invented in the US in the 1950s, to soak up the considerable disposable income they were gaining as America became affluent. I have often heard older people complain about young people today, and perhaps I am becoming like them, for many of my students do seem unmotivated and self-indulgent; but if that is true we should be cautious about blaming *them* for that. That is because their lifestyle and values have been manufactured like the products they consume, for the purpose of increasing corporate profits and national GDP. If this is making the values of young people more schizophrenic, it is because we, their elders, are making them that way. Globalization spreads both production and consumption values, of course, so we should expect this tension to increase, as more countries develop a sizable middle class.

All complex societies need an acceptable way to sort young people, to decide who will become factory workers and who will become administrators. Traditionally, this was usually decided by

birth: your parents determined your occupational caste in India, and your social class in Europe. Yet this is no longer officially acceptable in democracies, which, in principle at least, justify themselves as meritocracies. So how is merit to be determined? Initially, by educational success, which explains the increasing importance placed upon examinations, especially the all-important one that finally determines university entrance. In Japan, for example, where I taught for many years, all education is focused on this exam, or follows from it (which means, among other things, that if anyone is serious about changing the Japanese educational system, university entrance exams are the place to start). Because of what those exams test, pre-university education in Japan involves mostly memorization that does not encourage any deep understanding of how things fit together, but rather emphasizes committing to memory information that can be regurgitated for computer multiple-choice tests and then safely forgotten.

Such exams are problematic in several ways, perhaps most of all because it is not clear – at least to me -- what understanding or skills they are testing *for*. In one way, however, that is not the important issue: what is needed is only *a socially acceptable* way to classify young people which, sorts them, into different, hierarchically-ordered, boxes. To do that, however, it is not necessary that the sorting process actually measures anything of value, as long as most people *believe* that it does. The social effect, so far as I can see, is mainly to encourage and reward those who are good at memorizing and following orders, which of course has enormous consequences for the whole educational system and thereby the whole of society. This may also mean, as I suspect, that some of the brightest and most creative young people are lost in the process, because they cannot fit in or refuse to fit in. Even for those who do not drop out, the self-esteem of those who are poor at memorizing is often scarred for life, as they internalize society's view of them: they are *losers*.

By no coincidence, the 'subtext' for this kind of educational system is exactly the same as the subtext for our globalizing economic system: both presuppose and reinforce a particular view of our human nature that has been called *utilitarian individualism.*

Educationally and economically, the emphasis is on individual competition rather than cooperation; the most important thing for me is to use my school/job to advance myself, promoting my own self-interest by doing better than you. In both cases this tends to reduce the sense of community and group responsibility – the feeling that we are all in this together, that by working together we can solve the common problems that we share. Instead, students, like workers, are challenged as individuals, and the result is also individual: one's own upward mobility. In education, too, something like Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' is assumed: that when students do their best to promote their own self-advantage, studying and memorizing as much as they can, then this contributes to the common good of all students, and to the common good of the educational system as a whole, including teachers and administrators; and thereby to the common good of society as a whole. But is this true? Perhaps the defect of this assumption is easier to see as it applies to education, for I, like other university professors in Japan, had to cope with the wreckage left by this exam-orientation.

By the time students get into university, what have they actually learned? A lot of facts, of course, many of which are quickly forgotten. But that is not the main thing that this system teaches them. Most of all, it seems, the lesson they have learned is that (memorizing, exam-oriented) education is stressful, difficult, and boring -- in short, something they are not interested in pursuing any more than they have to, because they are exhausted and need to relax before graduating and going on to perform their (also stressful, etc.) productive roles in society. Just at the time they are (or should be) mature enough to start thinking about the most interesting things – such as contemplating the really important questions for understanding themselves and their society – students are not interested. This is more than unfortunate: it is a personal and social tragedy with enormous consequences, especially now when Japan, like many other societies, is looking for answers to deep-rooted economic and social problems and having difficulty finding them.

I do not mean to imply that Japanese education is unique in these respects. The globalization of education means that this model of individualistic, memorizing, exam-oriented schooling is

becoming more widespread, indeed the accepted standard, because this understanding of education is most compatible with the new international economic order that is being globalized. There is less and less difference between the Japanese model and the educational systems of China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand, to mention only some familiar Asian examples. (Those living in the West can provide their own examples.) Is it a coincidence that the economic systems of these nations have also been converging?

Another way to express my discomfort with this type of educational system is by looking at the 'means-ends reversal' that is built into it by the increasing focus on exam results. Is an exam valuable because it encourages us and helps us to learn, or is learning useful because it helps us do well on the exam? This old-fashioned question reveals my naïveté and nostalgia, I know; insofar as the emphasis of an exam-oriented system is on social sorting, one's exam results are more important than anything one might actually learn in the process. What should be noticed, however, is that this *approach ends up commodifying education in the same way that globalizing capitalism tends to commodify everything else*. Even as nature is raw material for manufacture, and manufacture is for the sake of profit, so any knowledge gained in education is raw material for taking exams, and those exams are to qualify for top universities, and then for well-paid jobs. That is why exam-oriented education and globalizing capitalism fit so well together, each contributing to the success of the other.

Even as our economic system is not 'natural,' so there is nothing 'natural' about this approach to education. It is natural only in the sense that it is the type of education that seems to provide what our globalizing economies need. From that perspective, educational crisis – the fact that so many people believe there is something very wrong with our approach to education today -- provides us with another way to raise questions about how 'natural' economic globalization is. A century ago, Max Weber pointed out that capitalism is an almost perfect example of means-ends reversal: accumulating capital should be the means to a more fulfilling life, but instead it leaves many of us so preoccupied with profit-making that we are unable to appreciate the world here and now. The same

reversal explains why education has become both stressful and boring, despite the genuinely natural inclination of young people to want to learn about the world around them. If we ask why students seem to enjoy learning less and less, why they find their joy in consumption instead, perhaps it is because their education has become another commodified product.

Education as work: Most people do not do their jobs because they like them. They do it for the paycheck. The payback for students is the job they hope to get, not anything they might learn in the process. Education is treated as a means to economic growth and development. All schools, including universities, become job-training centers.

But there is another way to understand education: its *goal is to help the community, and each of its participants, to flourish*. Education should not just prepare us for our economic role; it is what helps us to become fully socialized and fully human. Even as humans without language (e.g., wolf-children) are not really human, so a society without education is not fully civilized. (This does not necessarily mean formal education in the sense of sit-down school buildings, and in fact education should be understood much more broadly, as Ivan Illich [1999] has shown.) In order to flourish, economic needs must be met, but those needs themselves are not the goal; according to this alternative understanding, *economic growth too is valuable insofar as it enables and encourages human flourishing.*

This involves a much larger role for the schooling process, because it means that education should become 'a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing special, civic, economic and moral problems' (Boyer, 1996). This implies very different priorities:

- Instead of cramming facts for entrance exams, what students need most is awakening their desire to learn and then helping them gain the ability to learn; that is, they need to develop the analytic and theoretical skills necessary to investigate the world around them, to appreciate its interdependence and how it is changing.

- Instead of building partnerships with profit-oriented corporations and other market forces mainly concerned with making money, schools should be creating alliances with local communities, volunteer groups, NGOs – with what is sometimes called civil society – in order to better address local and broader social issues.

- Instead of indoctrinating students to make them good members who fit harmoniously into society, we need to encourage those who are able to diagnose social problems and who are committed to improving them, rather than being solely concerned about their own personal career success. If our societies have serious problems, why do we want to inculcate more conformity? We need people who can make the right kind of waves! The choice is not just between fitting in or being selfish. Some young people feel alienated for good reasons, because they sense what is wrong with their society. They are an important social resource, in any society that wants to become a better society.

Another way to make this argument is to look at contemporary cultures. Globalization is transforming the earth's great variety of cultures into consumerist cultures, increasingly a product of the economy, created by advertising and public relations. We forget that there is a difference between a culture and an entertainment industry. 'Culture' becomes distraction or recuperation – it is how we relax after work. We get caught up in a vicious cycle of working hard to get money and then spending that money to recover from work. This production-and-consumption cycle meets the needs of economic growth, but does it meet human needs? The original meaning of 'culture' was quite different, as the etymology of the word and its cognates reveals: *agriculture* involves *cultivating* the earth – again, helping something to flourish. But what does culture make flourish: the economy? To become cultured is to cultivate oneself, for self-development helps to make us more human. Isn't that why we study weird things like literature and philosophy?

William Butler Yeats expressed it well: education is not filling a pail but lighting a fire. When a mind is on fire, it burns to learn. Socrates, we are told, taught by harnessing this *eros* of yearning. Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder. Education flowers in fascination– consider, for example, Einstein's delight in trying to understand the mysteries of the universe. For him, curiosity was not a way to make money. He was not thinking about patents.

Let me conclude by suggesting that there is another reason why modern societies place such a heavy responsibility on education. In more traditional societies, religious institutions provide and support the agreed values, which ground the ways of living that make life meaningful. At their worst, religious values and institutions become a straitjacket, controlling what we are allowed to believe and do. At their best, though, religious traditions encourage a personal self-development and a collective social development, a maturation that involves more than inculcating nationalist or consumerist values.

The process of transmission of religious tradition is potentially the most confining among human institutions, creating for some a kind of cultural prison, or the most liberating because religious commitment permits the individual to stand within a tradition that calls into question all traditions, including ultimately aspects of itself (Williams, 2004).

With the decline of religious traditions in the globalizing contemporary world, however, more of that responsibility for *the tradition of questioning our own tradition* falls on education, which in addition to its economic role now also needs to provide the opportunity and the encouragement for society to ask the larger questions about itself. The educational process becomes one of the important ways within society that basic issues about the meaning and direction of human society are addressed. What makes a good life? What makes a good society? This means, among other things, that higher educational institutions remain among the few places left in developed, economized nations where economic globalization can be interrogated; where its contributions to human flourishing are evaluated.

It is no good replying that education cannot do this, that this is asking too much of educational systems already under enormous stress. Our globalizing civilization must find ways to consider these all-important issues, or it will eventually self-destruct. That is because the commodifying values most encouraged by economic globalization are focused on money, pleasure and power, but a society organized mainly on those principles cannot for long remain a healthy one. It will tend to break down, sooner or later.

If these reflections are pertinent, we end with the realization that a modern society's most important institutions are not economic but educational. They, not its GNP growth, are how a society should evaluate itself.

What role might Buddhism play in assisting such a re-valuation of education? Ultimately, Buddhism is all about education, in the deepest sense of the word, and obviously its teachings are quite consistent with the alternative view that I have outlined. The widespread economic emphasis on commoditization and consumption values can be understood as institutionalized greed, the first of the three unwholesome motivations (the others are ill will and delusion). Utilitarian individualism emphasizes competitive advancement and monetary values, which reinforce the dualistic sense-of-self that is at the root of our *dukkha*.

As Tamas Agocs implies in his article"*Buddhist Education and Modern Education: Compatible or Incompatible?*, the most important issue is the transformation of *motivations*. In place of the three unwholesome motivations, which only work to increase our discontent, a more enjoyable and successful way of life (in the long run) will emphasize generosity, compassion, and the wisdom that recognizes our interdependence.

To encourage this, an ethical foundation is important – for example, the five precepts (not harming, avoiding stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct and intoxicants). But more important is mindfulness training. Teaching mindfulness and other meditation practices – and an appreciation of those practices – at an early age can be the most helpful intervention of all. This could be a problem in some public schools, such as in the United States where church

and state are supposed to be strictly distinguished. But the Buddhist aspect of such practices does not always need to be emphasized: what is important is the training, not the label.

Someone who is more mindful is better able, and more likely, to ask the really important questions about the meaning of his or her life – including the meaning of his or her education. To ask such questions is already to take a big step on the path to spiritual liberation.

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