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A CULTURE OF LEARNING

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The Bahá'í community is developing a systematic culture of learning that has received little attention, to date, in the scholarly literature on world religions, and has seen no peer-reviewed sociological examination of its functioning and effectiveness. This chapter begins filling this gap by examining salient features of this culture as outlined in Bahá'í authoritative texts, and by drawing on several decades of participatory observations by its authors within Bahá'í communities on several continents.

The culture of learning Bahá'ís are developing is not simply concerned with the acquisition of existing knowledge. It is also concerned with the generation of new knowledge for the benefit of humanity. In this regard, the Bahá'í community seeks to be 'scientific in its method' (Shoghi Effendi, 1933). To explore what this means, we begin by examining the Bahá'í conception of science and religion as complementary systems of knowledge and practice. We draw on insights from the history, philosophy, and sociology of science to sketch what it means to adopt a learning mode that is scientific in its method. We examine, in turn, the origins of the Bahá'í community's culture of learning, key elements of the evolving conceptual framework that guides this learning, the institutional arrangements that support it, and the efforts Bahá'ís are making to foster universal participation—which extends beyond the boundaries of the Bahá'í community itself to include ever-increasing numbers of like-minded collaborators from all walks of life. We conclude with a brief discussion of how the Bahá'í community understands and actualizes the relationship between knowledge and power, and the role of criticism in this context.

Science and religion as systems of knowledge generation

One of the core teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is the harmony of science and religion—a theme examined at length by Steven Phelps's chapter in this volume. In brief, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: 'If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test' (*Promulgation* 103). 'Abdu'l-Bahá thus exhorts Bahá'ís to 'put all your beliefs into harmony with science; there can be no opposition, for truth is one' (*Promulgation* 147). Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that science and religion must both be understood as systems for the generation of knowledge about reality.

> Scientific knowledge is the highest attainment upon the human plane, for science is the discoverer of realities. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both. A bird has two wings; it cannot fly with one. Material and spiritual science are the two wings of human uplift and attainment.
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> (*Promulgation* 138)

Elucidating this theme, the Universal House of Justice describes science and religion as 'two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances' (2013) and as 'the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop' (2002). Though this conception does not exhaust the ways that science and religion are described in the Bahá'í teachings, it has far-reaching implications for Bahá'í practice. Most specifically, it brings into focus the central role knowledge plays in human progress as well as the need to radically expand the circle of those responsible for the generation of knowledge. As the House of Justice elaborates,

> there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. . . . Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities.
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> (2010a)

As Bahá'ís come to view science and religion as complementary systems of knowledge and practice, the responsibility alluded to in the preceding passage takes on profound implications. The systematic generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge is not only a scientific duty. It is also a religious duty. It is in this light that one can understand the Bahá'í community's aspiration to be 'scientific in its method' (Shoghi Effendi 1933). In this regard, Bahá'ís are systematically learning how to apply revealed spiritual principles, with increasing efficacy, to the betterment of humanity. However, to understand what it means to apply scientific methods to this end, one needs to move beyond popular conceptions of science that can be simplistic or naïve.

Drawing insights from science for religious practice

The history, philosophy, and sociology of science provide many insights into the systematic generation of knowledge. Alan Chalmers (2011) and Peter Godfrey-Smith (2003) have distilled key insights from this literature in ways that move us beyond naïve popular conceptions. Many of these insights—which have become objects of study for growing numbers of young Bahá'ís through seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (discussed later in this chapter)—are summarized below.

One basic condition for the advancement of science is rational thought. This includes the ability to employ various forms of logic such as induction and deduction to engage in analytical and synthetic modes of reasoning and to communicate one's thoughts in a coherent and consistent manner. Yet science cannot be reduced to such formal expressions of logic. Science

also requires imagination and intuition. Many of the greatest advances in science required leaps of imagination combined with an intuitive attraction to the beauty or elegance of compelling ideas. Science also depends on the exercise of scepticism, critical thought, and a desire to test truth claims rigorously against reality. This requires, for instance, methodologies for attempting to falsify testable hypotheses along with a willingness to problematize widely accepted theories or even entire paradigms. Science thus advances through a complex interplay of rational, imaginative, intuitive, and critical faculties operating among diverse scientific minds over time.

Empirical observation plays a central role in these processes. Our ability to observe, measure, or detect informs the exercise of our imaginative and intuitive faculties, our efforts to verify or falsify hypotheses, our ability to inductively arrive at reasonable generalizations, and so forth. And yet, the process of observation should not be understood naïvely. Our observations are conditioned by prior assumptions that influence what we notice or fail to notice when we look at the world, how we interpret what we see, and the conclusions we derive.

Furthermore, the progress of science rests on our willingness to make tentative assumptions and commit to them long enough to test them against reality. This is true not only of the assumptions we make regarding what we observe. It is also true of assumptions underlying the methodologies, techniques, or instrumentation we use to make observations. Furthermore, the entire enterprise of science ultimately rests on ontological assumptions—or articles of faith—that the universe has an underlying material order, that this order is governed by laws or principles of some kind, and that human minds can gain insight into these laws or principles, to some degree, by applying the right methods over time. When science, as a conscious human endeavour, was first emerging, these articles of faith were not widely accepted. Nonetheless, these articles of faith have, over the centuries, demonstrated their fruitfulness by providing the basis for enduring scientific theories that have been repeatedly tested against reality under diverse conditions. Ultimately, these articles of faith are widely accepted today because of the obvious fruits they have yielded in the applied sciences—including technologies the entire modern world relies on which would otherwise have been impossible to develop.

Related to this willingness to act on provisional assumptions is the role played by the concepts built on those assumptions. Concepts are like lenses that enable us to see aspects of reality that we otherwise might not notice. They are also linguistic devices that enable us to communicate in reasonably effective ways with others about aspects of reality we are exploring. Concepts, along with assumptions, are essential building blocks of the models, theories, and conceptual frameworks that enable us to explore complex multifaceted phenomena. Yet, even as these intellectual constructs empower us, they also limit us. By focusing our attention on some aspects of reality, or some interpretations of those aspects, they divert us from others. Therefore, the advancement of science also requires the collective human capacity to integrate, over time, complementary contributions from diverse conceptual, theoretical, and disciplinary frameworks. Such diversity enriches the range of observations, insights, and interpretations available to the entire scientific community—to the extent that scientists learn how to seek and share knowledge across theoretical and disciplinary boundaries.

All the conditions outlined are, in turn, contingent on requisite qualities, or virtues, needed for the advancement of science. These include curiosity, honesty and integrity, a degree of detachment from preconceived notions, recognition of the ultimate fallibility of human knowledge, a corresponding posture of humility and open-mindedness, and an avoidance of dogmatism. Efforts to foster these qualities rely on processes of socialization and education; on discourses and structures that encourage scientific integrity; and on sanctions against the violation of methodological norms, the fabrication of data, and so forth. Such processes and measures

are all value-laden. The entire enterprise of science in fact rests on a set of normative principles about how scientists *ought* to be and what they *ought* to do. To the extent that scientists fall short of these norms—which happens frequently—the advancement of science is impeded.

The need to foster these normative qualities and behaviours speaks to the nature of science as a social enterprise. But the social nature of science extends beyond these norms. Science advances as a collective endeavour pursued by communities of scientists. To be effective, scientific communities must strive not only to foster the qualities and behaviours alluded to earlier, but also to develop shared vocabularies that enable them to communicate effectively, leading to shared understandings. They also need to construct complex forms of social organization for circulating, reviewing, refining, and disseminating their findings. Finally, they need to develop systems of material support that enable them to pursue their work. In sum, science requires sophisticated forms of cooperation and coordination, including institutional structures, to advance.

Given that science is a social enterprise, it is susceptible to the corrupting influences of various social forces such as expressions of ego and self-interested ambition, as well as expressions of power and privilege. To the degree that these forces are expressed, they play out in the complex political economy of scientific funding and recognition. This includes, for instance, political and commercial pressures that shape the kinds of research that are funded, determine the amount of funding available, and limit who receives it. It also includes ways scholarly journals are funded and peer-reviewed along with who can afford access to published journals. And it can include political or economic considerations operating within systems of review, tenure, and promotion within universities or other research organizations. The healthy advancement of science is thus contingent on ongoing efforts to minimize, regulate, or overcome corrupting social forces.

In short, science is a remarkably complex enterprise that cannot be reduced to a simplistic formula or a naïve scientific method. And it must always contend with complex social forces. Nonetheless, most people today recognize that the enterprise of science has demonstrated its ability to generate profound insights into innumerable features of reality and, at its best, has demonstrated the ability to apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition. With these insights in mind, one can begin to consider what it means for a religious community to develop a culture of learning that is scientific in its method.

Origins of the Bahá'í community's culture of learning

Since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, which ushered in the formative age of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice have successively operated in a systematic learning mode that has continually derived and synthesized new knowledge from the accumulating experience of the community and all its collaborators. This theme is examined at length by Paul Lample in *Revelation and Social Reality* (2009). As Lample demonstrates, much of this learning initially focused on the growth and internal development of the Bahá'í community. Systematic learning processes were subsequently extended to other domains including, for instance, relations with governmental agencies and human rights organizations regarding the defence of persecuted Bahá'ís, forms of social action aimed at the social and economic development of wider communities of which Bahá'ís are a part, and participation in a range of public discourses on issues of contemporary concern.

As a result of such efforts, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, a culture of learning has been consciously taking root across the entire global Bahá'í community (Universal House of Justice 2003). This culture of learning and the processes it is focused on are open to the participation of all like-minded people, whether they identify as Bahá'í or not.

As the following discussion will illustrate, this culture of learning is increasingly characterized by many of the features of science outlined previously. These include a complex interplay of rational, imaginative, intuitive, and critical faculties exercised among diverse participants; processes of empirical observation exercised within an evolving conceptual framework; processes of socialization and education that foster requisite qualities or virtues; the development of a shared language that enables diverse participants to communicate effectively and reach shared understandings on a global scale; systems for distilling and disseminating new knowledge across an entire global community; and structures of material and institutional support that enable sophisticated forms of cooperation and coordination on a global scale.

For instance, one of the many objects of learning the Bahá'í community is currently focused on is how to foster the latent spiritual and intellectual potential of adolescent youth in systematic ways that empower them to become constructive agents of change in their communities. This is, in effect, a long-term programme of action-research now being pursued by growing numbers of participants in thousands of localities across the planet. This action-research programme emerged from observations regarding the needs and potential of this age group, which became apparent within wider community-building processes. Initially, a small number of people set out to learn how to address this need. Using reason, intuition, and imagination, they formulated some tentative actions that could be implemented on a small scale and they reflected upon the experience thus generated, all in light of the wider conceptual framework guiding the learning processes of the community. Through an iterative, systematic process of action, reflection on action, and consultation about next steps, subsequent efforts yielded further observations, and the programme gradually widened in scope to include a greater diversity of people in different cultural contexts. This provided a richer body of experience from which to draw further insights that could be critically examined and tested against reality in different parts of the world. As the programme continued to spread, some insights proved widely applicable while others did not,and eventually generalizable conclusions could be drawn with growing confidence. A common vocabulary also began to emerge to facilitate this process as relevant concepts were articulated and progressively clarified over time. Collaborative systems were similarly developed, with institutional and material support, to stimulate and expand this field of learning, to disseminate emerging knowledge around the globe, and to train growing numbers of new participants in increasingly diverse settings who could now advance the ever-widening learning process in ways that further built on the growing body of knowledge accumulating worldwide. Through these methods and processes, the Bahá'í world developed the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme (elaborated in other chapters in this volume), that continues to generate knowledge along these lines even as it fosters the latent capacities of growing numbers of adolescent youth to become active protagonists in constructive processes of social change.

Complex, systematic, global learning processes such as this did not emerge in a vacuum. One of the key factors that helped foster this culture of learning was the establishment throughout the Bahá'í world of a network of training institutes begun in the 1990s. The primary purpose of these institutes was training human resources to sustain the ongoing growth and development of communities. The recognition of this need arose from observations made in previous decades when Bahá'í communities experienced rapid periods of growth but lacked the means to consolidate large numbers of new members in ways that empowered them to become active protagonists in community-building processes. One particularly successful initiative to address these needs—the Ruhi Institute in Colombia—generated especially significant insights about training that the global Bahá'í community was able to learn from and build on.

The Ruhi Institute developed an approach to community action-research—based on the systematic processes of action, reflection, consultation, and study referred to earlier—that has

been documented in a publication titled *Learning About Growth* (Ruhi Institute 1991). The insights generated through this action-research process include a recognition that the movement of a population along a path of spiritual development is an organic process that begins with the transformation of hearts and minds, but must soon manifest itself in the transformation of social structures and relationships; that systematic approaches to education and capacity building are needed to support this process; that the concept of a 'path of service' provides a valuable way to organize these processes; that diverse individuals within a population will move along a path of service at different rates; that the advancement of a population must be propelled by unifying and constructive forces generated from within the population itself; and that ongoing processes of study, action, reflection, and consultation that are open to all and are participatory, coordinated, systematic, and free from the trappings of ego—are needed to generate knowledge on all of these fronts. In short, through its action-research programme, the Ruhi Institute developed an approach to training that proved capable of raising up ever-expanding circles of protagonists in ongoing endeavours to advance community growth and development.

Drawing on these and other insights that had accrued from experience throughout the Bahá'í world, the Universal House of Justice, in 1996, called upon the Bahá'ís in every country to establish training institutes to raise up human resources and build capacities for accelerating the ongoing growth and development of their communities. A worldwide network of training institutes was soon operating, with varying degrees of efficacy, at the grassroots in every country. Each training institute, in proportion to its developing capacities, began contributing to, as well as drawing from, a global process of systematic learning, which has been advancing steadily since that time. There are now over 300 national and regional training institutes established around the world, reaching tens of thousands of localities through a decentralized approach to programme implementation (Bahá'í World News Service 2018).

By 2005, the House of Justice announced that insights into community building that had accrued through these global learning endeavours had 'crystallized into a framework for action' that could then be pursued throughout the Bahá'í world with confidence. In brief, its core activities—which are open to people of all faiths and backgrounds—include classes for the spiritual education of children, a programme for the spiritual empowerment of adolescent youth, study circles to develop capacities in older youth and adults to serve a wide range of community-building processes, and devotional gatherings that foster and sustain the motivation for sacrificial service. Such activities multiply within quarterly cycles of activity, an essential objective of which is to invite expanding circles of participants into collective processes of education and capacity building characterized by learning in action. As such capacities develop, and core activities multiply, participants are drawn deeper into the life of society, prompting them to learn about engaging systematically in social action and participating in discourses on matters of common concern (endeavours that are discussed more later).

Expanding the scale and increasing the quality of these efforts, in ways that are suited to cultural conditions in diverse settings across the planet, requires the development of a range of rational faculties among growing numbers of participants around the world. In every case, sound yet imaginative action plans must be developed and implemented, the outcome of actions observed, patterns induced, decisions critically reflected upon, dynamics intuited, hypotheses tested against reality through subsequent cycles of action and reflection, a common vocabulary articulated, concepts progressively clarified, and knowledge disseminated—all supported by appropriate institutional arrangements. Growing numbers of people across the planet—from all ethnic, national, religious, economic, and educational backgrounds—are now developing such capacities and contributing to such processes as they learn how to take initiative within this framework (International Teaching Centre 2013, 2017). As they do, they are becoming

protagonists in a global enterprise that is systematically advancing the frontiers of knowledge about community growth and development.

An evolving conceptual framework

Just as a scientific research programme advances within a shared but evolving conceptual framework, so does the generation of knowledge within the Bahá'í community. At the centre of the Bahá'í conceptual framework is a set of core assumptions, concepts, principles, and methods that derive from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and inform all Bahá'í practice. These core elements have proven to be attractive, enduring, and compelling, and they have given rise to a range of interrelated lines of learning. These elements include foundational assumptions about reality, basic conceptions of human nature and the social order, guiding spiritual principles or normative ideals, and consultative approaches that draw diverse insights into an action-oriented learning process. Many of these elements are examined at length in other chapters in this volume. Nonetheless, a few of them warrant brief examination here.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that, over thousands of years, through complex processes of progress and regress, humanity has passed through stages of social evolution that have led it to the threshold of its collective maturity: the emergence of a global civilization that will embody the truth of the oneness of humanity. The oneness of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed, is a latent spiritual reality that humanity must now work to manifest on a global scale. At this moment in history, simultaneous and accelerating processes of social integration and disintegration are driving humanity toward this evolutionary imperative. Because of our growing social, economic, and ecological interdependence on a global scale, the longer we resist this imperative, the greater will be the scale of human suffering. In this context, Bahá'u'lláh calls for a complete reconceptualization of human relationships and the social structures that sustain them, so that human diversity, cooperation, and creativity can flourish. This flourishing can only be achieved when justice becomes a central organizing principle of society, thus enabling every individual and group to realize their latent potential and thereby contribute to the shared prosperity of all within an emerging global civilization.

These beliefs—or premises—regarding the evolutionary imperatives now facing humanity constitute core elements of the Bahá'í conceptual framework. They are articles of faith that motivate the generation and application of knowledge in the Bahá'í community, while also giving rise to practical questions that frame and guide its learning. Elaborating some of these questions, the Universal House of Justice writes:

> Numerous . . . are the questions that the process of learning, now under way in all regions of the world, must address: how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation; how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege; how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development; how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization; how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings

> of estrangement towards an illusory 'other' or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category; how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups.
>
> (2013)

Efforts to advance these lines of enquiry have also given rise to methodological questions which are routinely analysed in efforts to continually refine the approach to learning referred to in the previous section. In this regard, the House of Justice explains that

> the Bahá'í community has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding. Indeed, how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned these are, themselves, the object of regular examination.
>
> (2013)

Within this overarching framework, a common vocabulary is also emerging that enables growing numbers of people to benefit from accumulated knowledge, progressively clarify concepts, and share emerging insights. Indeed, much of the vocabulary cited in the preceding discussion is rich with meanings that can only be fully grasped by participating in processes of collective study, practical application, and experiential learning—similar to the way a common vocabulary is articulated and takes on meaning in a scientific field of enquiry.

For instance, in discussing the Ruhi Institute previously, reference was made to the emergence of the concept of 'a path of service' as a useful way to conceptualize the advancement of participants through a sequence of training courses that foster progressively more complex forms of service. Some years after this concept was first articulated by the Ruhi Institute, the accumulated experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community enabled the House of Justice to further elaborate this concept.

> The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community. To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration; it may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging further along. And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.
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> (2011)

Studying this passage in the abstract does not convey the rich meaning it begins to hold for those striving to apply it in practice. Only by embarking on this path, inviting others onto it, and

accompanying them in their progress while studying this passage and reflecting on it with others—does one begin to grasp the deeper implications of the concept of a path of learning. And yet the concept is accessible enough that even those new to the learning process find it helpful in framing and providing meaning to their efforts.

A related feature of this culture of learning, made possible by its evolving framework and associated vocabulary, is the capacity to distinguish context-specific insights from universally applicable patterns. Many insights generated by far-flung participants, acting and learning in diverse grassroots settings, are localized or context-dependent. But when countless insights emerging at the grassroots are aggregated and compared, some universal patterns can be identified—as in the example of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme discussed earlier.

This distinction is also illustrated by broader efforts to develop capacities among growing numbers of protagonists to initiate and sustain any of the core activities alluded to previously. Such capacities are not easy to develop. In addition, the process by which people are invited to become protagonists in such activities will vary in different contexts—as will the way activities are conducted—depending on cultural sensitivities, social and economic conditions, the personalities involved, and other factors. Success thus requires the ability to learn about and account for diverse local considerations. At the same time, what has become clear everywhere is that individuals trying to initiate core activities for the first time are more successful when they are accompanied by individuals with more experience who also, in a reciprocal manner, seek to learn from those whom they accompany. The concept of *accompaniment* has thus emerged to convey a universally relevant practice, the need for which the Bahá'í world has come to appreciate. It is, moreover, a practice people everywhere can be trained to understand and engage in. Training institutes have, accordingly, developed curricula to foster this essential element of mutual learning.

In short, Bahá'ís are learning, within their shared but evolving conceptual framework, to distinguish context-specific knowledge from universally applicable knowledge. The former pertains only to the particular conditions of a given people at a particular place and time. Yet this is still an invaluable form of knowledge. As with applied fields of scientific practice, the generation of context-specific knowledge can be very important. In the case of agriculture, for example, though many biological truths are universal, specific ecological conditions vary in ways that require local knowledge as well. In a parallel manner, the Bahá'í community is learning to generate local and universal forms of knowledge while distinguishing them from each other. And, of course, there is a dynamic interaction between these forms of knowledge. Just as universal patterns are identified from many context-specific experiences, local efforts to apply the principles derived from those patterns subsequently generates new context-specific insights. Thus, as the Universal House of Justice has noted, the process 'defies categorization into either "top-down" or "bottom-up"; it is one, rather, of reciprocity and interconnectedness' (2012).

Finally, the evolving curricula of the training institutes, in conjunction with guidance from the Universal House of Justice and other institutions, provide a means of imparting accumulated understanding of universal forms of knowledge to successive generations of participants across the planet, who can in turn make their own contributions to this global body of knowledge while simultaneously expanding their local, context-specific, knowledge base. The former resembles the generational accumulation and transmission of knowledge through the textbooks and peer-reviewed journals of scientific communities. The latter resembles the more informal systems by which knowledge is generated and shared by learning communities at local or regional levels. And all these processes only become possible through the emergence of a shared but evolving conceptual framework supported by a common vocabulary.

Institutional arrangements

Just as modern scientific communities need institutional structures and capacities for the generation and dissemination of knowledge on a global scale, the culture of learning fostered by the Bahá'í community is supported and advanced by a range of institutional structures and capacities. The training institutes, alluded to earlier, are organized through an evolving system of coordination at various geographic levels from the local to the global.

Those who serve in the training institutes' evolving scheme of coordination collaborate closely with another institution—the institution of the Counsellors—comprising Continental Boards of Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members, and assistants, all of whom function under the guidance of the International Teaching Centre (discussed in more depth by Todd Smith in another chapter of this volume). This institution reaches to the grassroots of local communities around the planet and its responsibilities include fostering the culture of learning.

At the level of what are called 'clusters' (i.e., small geographic areas with a shared social and economic fabric), training institute coordinators and Auxiliary Board members collaborate closely with other agencies, such as Area Teaching Committees, appointed by the elected institutions of the community. Together, they stimulate and coordinate collective learning processes that become more complex as the number of participants grow in a cluster. In response, schemes of coordination also grow in complexity.

Most of the institutional arrangements alluded to previously serve learning processes associated with community building. Yet the Bahá'í community has been developing institutional capacities to foster systematic learning in other domains such as social action and participation in the discourses of society.

In the domain of social action, an international Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the Bahá'í World Centre in 1983 to help systematize and support these learning processes—processes which primarily emerge through grassroots initiatives when conditions are propitious. By 2018, the work of that office had expanded to the point that it was reconstituted as the Bahá'í International Development Organization (Universal House of Justice 2018).

Bahá'í involvement in social action dates back over a century when, for example, Bahá'í communities began to establish schools for girls where none existed, and to contribute to other developmental processes in the societies they were part of (Shahvar 2009; Fazel and Foadi 2008). By 1983, such initiatives had become sufficiently widespread, and some had become sufficiently complex, that it was timely to foster more systematic global learning processes to enable them to advance further. Since that time, the Office of Social and Economic Development and, more recently, the Bahá'í International Development Organization, has been fostering evolving systems of coordination in distinct areas of global learning, especially as those areas show a sufficient degree of promise and reach a sufficient level of complexity to warrant such support. These include, for instance, a system of coordination for learning about the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme and another system for learning about community schools (Bahá'í International Community 2018). In addition, in recent decades, some grassroots initiatives have reached such levels of complexity and sustained accomplishment they have developed their own institutional capacities and learning processes, which also enable them to contribute more effectively to wider global learning processes. This can be seen, for instance, in the experience of the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences (Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias, FUNDAEC), which originated as a social and economic development project in rural Colombia and has since made significant contributions to learning processes across the Bahá'í world (Molineaux 2005; Karlberg and Correa 2016).

Likewise, Bahá'ís have been increasing their capacity to make substantive contributions to public discourse for many decades and have been developing institutional structures to support corresponding learning processes (Razavi 2018). On a global level, Bahá'ís have been contributing to discourse within the United Nations system since its inception, along with discourses in other international spaces, currently coordinated by Bahá'í International Community offices in New York, Geneva, Brussels, Jakarta, and Addis Ababa. For instance, the Bahá'í International Community offices have long been engaged in discourses on gender equity, peace, and the environment. In such work, Bahá'ís collaborate with like-minded organizations in meaningful dialogue focused on identifying constructive paths forward.

At the national level, by 2013, the capacity of many Bahá'í communities to participate in public discourses in their respective countries had grown to the point that an international Office of Public Discourse was established to support systematic learning across countries. In some countries, national offices of external affairs had already been established and were engaged in this work, but since 2013, the number of such offices has continued to grow, and they now benefit from and take part in a shared, global learning process. Such offices, increasingly referred to as offices of public affairs, are learning to contribute in increasingly effective ways on issues of national concern such as race relations, gender equality, and social cohesion.

Many Bahá'ís have also historically contributed in substantive ways to their respective professional and academic discourses. In 1975, an Association for Bahá'í Studies formed in North America to support such efforts, and it was replicated in some other parts of the world where conditions warranted. This association is becoming increasingly systematic in its learning and capacity-building processes in recent years through the organization of large annual conferences and smaller seminars, working groups and collaborative initiatives, publications, and other means of contributing to the evolution of thought in academic and professional disciplines.

Likewise, in 1999, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity was founded to build capacity in individuals, groups, and institutions to contribute to prevalent discourses concerned with the betterment of society. Among its endeavours, this institute has raised up a global network of seminars for undergraduate students, as well as for graduate students and young professionals.

The examples alluded to do not exhaust the learning processes and their corresponding institutional structures unfolding across the worldwide Bahá'í community today. But they illustrate the many institutional capacities emerging to support this culture of learning and coordinate its processes on a global scale. Overseeing all these processes is the Universal House of Justice, a globally elected institution invested with the ultimate authority to guide the work of the worldwide Bahá'í community (examined by Smith in two other chapters in this volume). As it exercises this function, its letters to the Bahá'í community continuously bring into focus the accumulating knowledge being distilled from experience around the world.

Toward universal participation

In a letter expounding the responsibility of every individual and social group to contribute to the generation, diffusion, and application of knowledge, the House of Justice wrote that 'justice demands universal participation' in these processes (2010a). The Bahá'í community thus invites everyone—from every ethnicity, class, and creed—to participate in systematic learning processes unfolding at the grassroots of every society.

The growing ranks of those who participate in these processes turn to the accumulated knowledge that is crystalized in guidance from the Universal House of Justice, along with the more tentative but increasingly tested body of knowledge and insights documented in training

institute curricula and other materials. As they do this, they are empowered to contribute to the further generation of knowledge through systematic action, which is in turn synthesized into further guidance from the Universal House of Justice. Through this iterative, reciprocal, organic process, the Bahá'í community integrates grassroots experience with global learning processes guided by an evolving conceptual framework.

Central to such processes is an underlying focus on capacity building—a primary function of all Bahá'í training institutes. This includes a focus on building the capacity to think and act rationally, imaginatively, systematically, and coherently; the capacity to make observations through the lens of relevant concepts; the capacity to reflect on observations in light of an evolving framework; and the capacity to consult with others about subsequent steps on a path of learning. On this latter point, *consultation* is a method of decision-making employed by the Bahá'í community (examined more deeply by Smith and Ghaemmaghami in this volume). In brief, consultation is a unifying and constructive approach to the collective search for truth. It presumes that reality is complex and multifaceted; that human perspectives are always limited and fallible; that diverse viewpoints can offer complementary perspectives on different aspects of the same phenomena; that participants can learn to offer their views with courtesy, humility, and moderation while carefully considering the views of others; and that through such a process, a group can arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. The objective of consultation is to advance toward a more unified understanding of the truth rather than to win an argument or vindicate a preconceived agenda.

As the capacity for action, reflection, and consultation is developed—alongside study of accumulated knowledge as articulated by the Universal House of Justice—any local group can begin systematic cycles of learning directly connected to the processes of global learning. At the local level, doing so often entails developing an initial understanding of current conditions as well as some unity of vision about possibilities for advancement; devising, in accordance with this initial vision, concrete plans of learning in action based on an assessment of local capacities and resources; implementing those plans in a unified spirit; striving collectively to make unprejudiced observations and to fairly assess the results of actions taken; making necessary adjustments as experience is gained, albeit in a manner that does not compromise continuity of action; analyzing insights thus accrued; and refining the shared vision and action plans in view of accumulated knowledge, increased capacity, and new opportunities.

These iterative dynamics of study, action, reflection, and consultation occur at many levels—from a few individuals advancing a learning process within a village or neighbourhood, to larger numbers advancing multiple learning processes across a city or geographic cluster, to even larger numbers advancing complex processes across entire regions. To facilitate these processes, periodic spaces for reflection and consultation are initiated or organized, often on a quarterly basis, but at other points as well. As explained by the House of Justice:

> The impulse to learn through action is, of course, present among the friends from the very start. The introduction of quarterly cycles of activity capitalizes on this emerging capacity and allows it to be steadily reinforced. Although this capacity is specifically associated with the reflection and planning phase of a cycle, especially the reflection gathering that regulates its pulsating heartbeat, it also comes to be exercised at all other points of the cycle by those pursuing related lines of action. We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress.
>
> (2015)

All these processes rely, in turn, on the development of constructive habits of mind among the participants. For instance, in a letter dated 28 December 2010, the Universal House of Justice encourages participants to be

> methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.

Of particular concern is the need to avoid various forms of reductionism and fragmentation. Thus, in that same letter, the Universal House of Justice highlights the importance of striving 'to understand the totality of the vision conveyed' in its own messages because 'difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments'. Toward this end, the House of Justice stresses the need 'to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize . . . to work with full and complex thoughts'. The letter also urges avoiding 'the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none' and warns 'that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another' lest 'false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking'. Finally, the House of Justice encourages participants 'to think in terms of process' and to recognize that 'maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort' (2010b). The community is thus striving to develop these habits of thought, among others, as characteristics of its culture of learning.

In this context, Bahá'ís are also learning how to foster the development of individual capacities without stirring up the ego or self-interested ambitions. This is a priority of all Bahá'í training institutes, which are also focused on nurturing many other spiritual qualities or virtues—a posture of humility, open-mindedness, detachment from preconceived ideas or agendas, honesty and integrity, an ethic of sacrificial service to others, an avoidance of dogmatic thought, and so forth—that people need to acquire to be effective protagonists in the generation of knowledge about social change. All of this is done, in part, by weaving study and reflection on these themes into every component of the training curriculum.

Knowledge, power, and criticism

The preceding discussion highlights some of the most salient features of the culture of learning being developed by the Bahá'í community, as it has unfolded to date. It should be noted, of course, that many of these features are aspirational ideals. The community does not claim to be the perfect embodiment of them. Yet these ideals provide a horizon toward which participants are steadily moving, each individual and group at their own pace.

There have, without doubt, been many challenges on this path. For instance, before a culture of learning began to permeate the community in the last couple decades, many Bahá'ís assumed the way things had been done in the past was the way things should continue to be done. Likewise, some Bahá'í institutions at the local and national levels had settled into inherited ways of doing things. Change is hard. Ongoing adaptation is needed, by individuals and institutions, as the frontiers of learning advance.

As Bahá'ís look forward on this path of learning, they also consciously grapple with the relationship between power and knowledge. As history amply demonstrates, the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge is often corrupted by self-interested expressions of power wielded, consciously or unconsciously, by privileged social groups. This has been the case even

in the domain of science. How, then, can a religious community that is organized around the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge avoid or mitigate this hazard?

The Bahá'í world is now exploring this question. At the heart of the Bahá'í community's learning process, the House of Justice writes,

> is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favour of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. Animating the Bahá'í effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá'u'lláh, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system.
>
> (2013)

In this context, the House of Justice continues by identifying the need to adopt an expanded conception of power that encompasses, among other things, the unifying, creative, and constructive powers of the human spirit (2013). Many features of the culture of learning outlined earlier in this chapter can be understood as ways the Bahá'í community is trying to channel these unifying, creative, and constructive powers toward the generation of knowledge while protecting this process from self-interested expressions of power.

One illustration of this is the Bahá'í community's commitment to universal participation in the generation of knowledge, as discussed earlier. This commitment entails centring historically marginalized groups as protagonists in the generation of knowledge. For instance, Bahá'í training institutes organize their efforts through decentralized study circles led by tutors who have previously completed the core sequence of training courses and then volunteer to take other participants through the courses. In many countries, youth have been at the forefront of this process. Significantly, this includes female youth, who tend to be among the most marginalized social groups in many cultures. And yet, in villages and neighbourhoods throughout the world, one can now find teenage girls and young women facilitating study circles that include older male participants—a dynamic that would otherwise be rare in many cultures. Moreover, in countries with inherited caste systems, one can find girls and women from lower castes facilitating study circles whose participants include male elders from upper castes—a dynamic that reflects an extraordinary form of empowerment in which oppressive hierarchies of gender, age, and caste are simultaneously dissolving. Similar dynamics are playing out in countries with histories of racial discrimination and other forms of oppression. Thus, on every continent, historically marginalized populations are becoming central protagonists in the systematic generation of new insights that are distilled and incorporated into a global process of learning.

Another feature of this culture of learning relevant to the issue of power, alluded to earlier in this chapter, concerns how to quiet the ego in the process of capacity building, along with how to foster other spiritual qualities and social norms. In any social enterprise—including science itself—the presence or absence of effective social norms plays an essential role in regulating or unleashing abuses of power.

Yet another means of addressing the relationship between knowledge and power is the way Bahá'ís are learning to understand and practice criticism. Criticism and critical thinking, as the

discussion of science earlier in this chapter suggests, play an important role in the generation of knowledge. They also play an obvious role in mediating the relationship between knowledge and power. In this regard, critical thinking is encouraged in the process of Bahá'í consultation. The Bahá'í community also has clear channels through which Bahá'ís can express criticisms or concerns regarding institutional decisions or other community affairs. As Shoghi Effendi has clarified,

> it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local community

and, correspondingly, Bahá'í institutions have the duty 'to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them' (as quoted by the House of Justice, 1988). Clear channels for appeal exist when individuals feel their concerns have not been adequately considered.

At the same time, the Bahá'í teachings eschew the divisive and discouraging expressions of criticism that have become ubiquitous in the modern world. The fundamental purpose of the Bahá'í community is learning how to translate the latent spiritual truth that humanity is one into a global social order characterized by peace, justice, and universally shared prosperity. Divisive and discouraging modes of criticism negate this purpose because the means of divisive criticism are inconsistent with the ends of unity. The Bahá'í teachings therefore emphasize constructive modes of criticism conveyed with wisdom and moderation in appropriate contexts. In this regard, critical thinking need not imply finding fault in others, dwelling on failures or shortcomings, name calling, ad hominem arguments, and so forth. Rather, as with Bahá'í consultation with its focus on understanding current conditions, clarifying constructive courses of action, and motivating unified implementation of action in a learning mode, the aim of such criticism is to encourage and empower the contributions of diverse others, to elicit their most valuable insights, to integrate complementary perspectives, and to create conditions in which everyone is eager to abandon their own preconceived views when they prove to be erroneous. None of this is possible in a climate of corrosive criticism that breeds defensiveness, alienation, sectarianism, partisanship, and discouragement.

Critical thinking entails the ability to reflect carefully and thoughtfully on experience, assess the merit of all ideas and interpretations—including one's own—and thereby contribute to a fuller understanding of some object of learning. It is this type of critical thinking that the Bahá'í community is striving to foster and harness at the grassroots of every society. And it is corresponding forms of constructive criticism, exercised through universal participation that centres historically marginalized populations, that the Bahá'í community is striving to practice in order to prevent self-interested expressions of power and privilege from corrupting the generation of knowledge.

In the final analysis, however, the Bahá'í community has faith that the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh—discussed in detail in the respective chapters by Vafai and Heller in this volume—provides a buttress against corrupting expressions of power and canalizes the unifying and creative powers of the human spirit toward the construction of a more just social order.

In this regard, the knowledge-generating processes discussed throughout this chapter need not be understood in an arid secular manner. For Bahá'ís, these processes are imbued with sacred meaning and import; they are aided by spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, fasting, and bringing oneself to account each day; and they draw on spiritual forces—acting not

in magical ways but through the purposeful and systematic application of spiritual principles that, rather like the principles of physics, are understood to be grounded in an ontological reality. These understandings are wedded, in turn, to a profound humility regarding how little is yet known, how much work lies ahead, and how important it is that ever-widening circles of participants, from the most diverse backgrounds across the planet, be invited to contribute to these processes.

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