Lifelong Learning and Truth

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I. Introduction

A bewilderingly wide range of scholarly effort has been invested into defining and delineating the breadth and scope of lifelong learning. Still, that range is murky and contested. "The overall picture that emerges from even a sampling of this collection is not pretty; the field lacks cohesion, and there is is a widespread problem concerning the rigour of the work and the depth of the scholarship." (Phillips, D.C. and Siegel, Harvey, 2015) Significantly, this quotation comes from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; the entry under Philosophy of Education. It was written, not about lifelong learning, but about the philosophy of education. But the observation transfers and applies.

This paper is about of the philosophy of lifelong learning as an extension of the philosophy education. Though the phrase 'lifelong learning' is somewhat cumbersome, it encapsulates the direction that the philosophy of education has gone and will likely continue to go. I believe, and here I concur with Leicester et al (p.260), that the philosophy of education has become the philosophy of lifelong learning. That is because it encapsulates the idea that adults learn too. The conceptual inclusion of adults into the mix of philosophical consideration regarding education necessitates the rejection of the idea that education is only about preparation for the remainder of life after education. The greater part of the baggage of the term 'education' is that it is associated with children and young people and that the activity of education happens in an institutionalized setting. Switching to the term 'philosophy of lifelong learning' obviates that issue.

Specifically, this paper will discuss the philosophy of learning regarding one area of epistemology; how the inclusion of adults as learning agents affects how 'truth' is viewed. In

terms of pedagogy, theorizing about how knowledge and truth is conveyed has normally been done from the perspective of the instructor. The concern has been a combination of accuracy of information and the assimilation capacity of the student; essentially, "Is the student 'getting it'." In other words, the teacher 'sets before' and 'brings forth' that which is to be learned and the teacher manages the criteria upon which the evaluation of learning happens. The teacher is a parent figure and, as such, 'feeds the student the truth' that she herself has determined to be important for the wellbeing of the student.

Androgogically, though, this does not work. When we include adults onto the learning mix, we must take into account the agency of that adult, that is, an adult student 'goes and gets' what is to be learned. They have a preconceived understanding of the learning that they need and, to some degree, the truth of the information they receive will depend on whether it answers the questions that they have. Therefore, they themselves set the agenda for the truth that is to be conveyed. So, the truth of the information presented is determined by the questions raised by the student not the questions raised by the instructor. What kind of truth is this?

We must be clear here to distinguish between sociological issues and philosophical ones. We are not interested, for example, in why an adult would continue to learn. We are not interested in whether lifelong learning is mere diversion. We are not even interested in whether lifelong learning is really is of benefit to those who engage in it. What concerns us is the affect that such a sociological phenomenon has on concepts of philosophical interest; in our case, the concept of truth.

As well, we will not engage with mundane or common notions of philosophy – teaching philosophy or business philosophy, for example – nor will we entertain personal creeds where philosophy stands for religion. All these are subjective, at best, and perhaps relativist. Often they

are mere stand-ins for personal opinion. Such sociological phenomena have only one thing that can be of interest to us. They might provide motivation for adults to learn. Strictly speaking, though, we are interested only in the fact that adults actively pursue knowledge and, by extension, truth. They seek true knowledge.

It is the contention of this paper that the truth pursued by adult lifelong learners is different than that conceived by those who do the instruction. Most often adults seek learning as a solution to something. Moreover, I wish to convey an idea that the different reasons why a lifelong learner learns will require different conceptions of truth from the instructor in order to satisfy the learning needs of the student. As such, truth itself can become a 'contested terrain.' Grace's and Coffield's contention is that lifelong learning is 'contested terrain' (Grace, p.128, Coffield, (p.479) is a sociological claim but the metaphor has considerable philosophical traction as well. In theirs the contested terrain is populated by conflicting interests between "employers, unions, and the state." (Coffield 491) They see the world of lifelong learning as an ill-defined hodge podge and, from that same sociological perspective. I do too. The field is filled with truth seekers and truth providers each with varying degrees of integrity: truth seekers more interested in accreditation than knowledge and truth providers seeking profit. But from a philosophical point of view, the contested terrain is quite familiar. They are discourses that have long been contested. So, in our case, we will reexamine truth in light of just one change, the changed nature of the learner.

We will first look at lifelong learning to see that even when viewed as a constellation of concepts it is difficult to grasp. After that, we will examine a variety of theories of truth to see how they, together, might explain the contention stated earlier: that the inclusion of the learner's agency into the learning process complicates the truth of the knowledge learned. I hope that the

conclusion of the paper will show that the path I have chosen has led to exaspiration. Each turn that I have taken has led to more complication, not less. I have been unable to bring enough resolution to this issue for my liking. It seems that I have written only an opening chapter. So, my hope too is that in three of four years, you'll buy the book.

II. Lifelong Learning

In general, lifelong learning has been defined as a combination of a variety of social forces. It is an amalgam of adult education, work learning, and personal interest and personal improvement. And more recently it has come to include e-learning and 'moocs'. Lifelong learning can be defined as learning done throughout life: learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places. Lifelong learning is cross sectoral and promotes learning past traditional schooling and throughout adult life. (llcq.org) Such definitions are common but they do not say very much about philosophical issues.

Aspin and Chapman (2007) state the problem very clearly: "there is so little said about 'lifelong education' in the educational philosophy literature and discourse that there is almost nothing on which we can get a grip in our attempts to give a clear account of those elements that we may discern as being cardinal." (p.19) Although the books edited by these authors go some way in remedying this dearth, much still needs to be done. The chapter that begins their volume outlines the competing visions of lifelong education but is quick to steer clear of essentializing what lifelong learning is (p.21) Instead, they recommend that the myriad of different forms of lifelong learning be examined with a Wittgensteinian eye to find 'family of resemblances' that at least narrow down what we must consider when viewing lifelong learning philosophically.

Aspin and Chapman present two of these competing 'families.' The first they call the 'maximalist' position originally put forward by Kenneth Wain (1987). This position relies on "Kuhnian paradigm theory" (p.24) to describe the competitive arena of lifelong learning. Basically, this strategy attempts to group the many forms of lifelong learning and, thus simplified, "some sort of inter-paradigm intelligibility can…be achieved by reference to a 'touchstone' of rationality." (p.24) But, as Aspin and Chapman point out, such a construct falls prey to issues of internal coherence. (p.29) In other words, "Are there competing paradigms or is there a touchstone?" We cannot have it both ways" (p.29)

They present Bagnall's 1990 account as an alternative. Bagnall accuses Wain of borderline relativism. "This makes the notion of 'education' vacuous." (p.27) But by returning "to the four semantic interpretations of 'lifelong education,'" namely "education as a preparation *for* the rest of…life, education to be distributed *throughout*…life, education *from* life's experience, and finally, that all events in one's life constitute education," (p.26) Bagnall returns instead to common features. In doing so, he tries to distinguish between education and experience. He tries hard to avoid Wain's problem of including every experience as a learning experience, "On Bagnall's account, education proper consists in making distinctions between knowledge and ideology, between educative learning and the simple accumulation of experience, between offering a contingent plurality of programs and simply following one undifferentiated path of cognitive growth, between activities that conduce to worthwhile ends and experiences that are simply had." (p.27) But Aspin and Chapman suggest that Bagnall has steered too close to the essentialist side of things. Indeed, neither position is wholly satisfactory.

The problem identified here is not so much the tet-a-tet that Aspin and Chapman set up. It is not about choosing and defending a position and putting up with accusations of either vacuous

generalization or of dogmatic essentialism. It is, instead, about the mistaken project of trying to understand what lifelong learning is when it is many things. It is, in fact, an ontological fool's errand to attempt to define, as unitary, the many things referred to by their common and powerful metaphoric tag. Lifelong learning can be understood to some degree in the same way that Wittgenstein described games using ideas of 'family resemblance.' but still this is an attempt to propositionally define an entity that is neither singular nor stable.

For this reason, some authors have a strong sense of unease with the notion of lifelong learning; that it is not about truth at all. Frank Coffield's(1999) criticism that lifelong learning is a form of social control is a case in point. He likens the project to be more in line with human capital development than with learning. (p.482) Besides outlining several weaknesses with lifelong learning, he recognizes that the installation of such a culture in a society is, itself, a form of parentalism; that lifelong learning is solidly entrenched in post-modern society is strong proof of a meta-level effort to define what truth is and what its role ought to be. Peter Jarvis (1999) too is skeptical. He observes that " early educators saw learning as enriching the humanity of the learners but the new dominant institutions see it as a means of enriching themselves." (p.256)

In an effort to break free of such a cynical approach, Aspin and Chapman (2012, p.4) outline five philosophical concerns of lifelong learning. The third has to do with "the kinds of knowledge, understanding and skill that people might want to acquire." (p.4) The fifth "concerns the grounds on which lifelong learning programs can be justified and adopted." (p.4) If we are to speak of knowledge, we must also be concerned with truth. But the variety of concerns in lifelong learning make understanding truth difficult. Personal development has its own need for truth. Perhaps a case can be made for an ethical foundation such as the Kantian admonition to continue to improve one's character. Economic opportunity needs a truth that justifies its

activity. Democratic development has its own need form of truth. It seems that each lifelong learner has a different kind of 'fact' in mind that would satisfy her pursuit.

III. Truth

Let's see what the alternatives are. Likely the first 'type' of truth that most people would think of is the correspondence theory of truth. It is intuitive because it works just like how most of us believe we relate to the world around us, that is, we view ourselves as thinking agents in a world that is outside of us. So we think of truth as correspondence between our beliefs about the world and the world itself. If the world is the way we believe it to be, then our beliefs would be true. Much in lifelong learning could be accounted for by this view. Practical things such as work related training would inevitably be tested out on the jobsite. Personal interest learning could easily be verified by cross-referencing with other sources. Theory, though, has a harder time passing muster in this regard. A theory, say, 'the correspondence theory of truth,' would require an already existing entity in the world in order to be true. Clearly this becomes an issue because it renders the theory logically circular. There are other objections to this view (David) but suffice it say, that mundane practical learning can be understood in this light but the corollary is that learning and knowledge that is not mundane or practical cannot be understood using the correspondence view of truth. So, not all truth sought through lifelong learning can be the same.

Truth as coherence is another candidate but this theory is a bit more problematic simply because it runs counter to what most people intuitively think truth should be. Its main claim is that beliefs about the world cannot be verified by comparison to the world because the world itself is in need of verification. Therefore, the only thing that the truth of beliefs about the world

can be compared to is other beliefs about the world. "We cannot "get outside" our set of beliefs and compare propositions to objective facts." (Young) Isn't this interesting. The same thing that cannot be rendered true or false in the correspondence theory can be rendered true or false using coherence theory criteria. Other objects of speech have a similar quality too. Take fictional characters as an example. Within a world ruled by the correspondence theory of truth, the claim that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker street would make no sense whatsoever. With a coherence theory of truth, we can make sense of it. Discussion involving hypothetical situations would work in the same way; so would moral discussions. This, of course, is not without problems for true statements of this kind must always be preceded by a qualifying phrase such as 'In the fiction of…' or 'In the theory of… . So, now we have factual truth and conditional truth.

The favourite among writers regarding lifelong learning, however, is pragmatic truth. The temptation is to say that lifelong learners do not pursue truth at all. Maybe their pursuit is simply usefulness. But this is not to say that the learning that happens is devoid of truth. Truth is just one step removed. What is learned does may not be either true or false. What is true or false is the claim that it is useful. The accuracy of the information is true or false but the activity itself is neutral. Only the propositional claims about the activity can be deemed true or false. Aspin and Chapman (2007) go this route and so do Leicester et al. They believe that there is "more sense to be gained by looking at the difficulties, issues and predicaments, the solution of which different policies of lifelong learning have been conceived to tackle." (p.30) They want to examine the problems that lifelong learning is presumed to address and thereby gain understanding of what lifelong learning actually does. So do I. But whereas Aspin and Chapman's solution is to focus on the three central elements of lifelong learning's purpose: "for economic progress and development; for personal development and fulfillment, [and] for social inclusiveness and

democratic understanding and activity," (p.34) I want to generalize even further and examine what all lifelong learners are after – true answers. The pragmatic test either proves of disproves the truth claim in the learning environment.

Pragmatic truth according to James and Dewey is "Truth is what works." But this is not in contrast to the correspondence theory above. It is part of it. Pragmatism is an attempt to formulate a way of thinking about truth so as to include truth-claims about theories. "To say that our truths must "agree" with such realities pragmatically means that they must lead us to useful consequences." (Pomerleau) In this way they avoid the problem of needing objects in the world to correspond with. So, we see "that the pragmatists' views on truth also make room for the idea that truth involves a kind of correspondence, insofar as the scientific method of inquiry is answerable to some independent world. Peirce, for instance, does not reject a correspondence theory outright; rather, he complains that it provides merely a 'nominal' or 'transcendental' definition of truth, which is cut off from practical matters of experience, belief, and doubt." (Glanzberg)

Pragmatism, however, is susceptible to significant criticisms the most significant of which goes as follows. "Carnap pointed out that 'true'… is a time-independent expression." (Edwards, 6:429) The pragmatist's claim is that truth can describe an idea only after it is confirmed (tried out) in the real world. That would make a claim false until it is confirmed, a troublesome conclusion. As such. pragmatism jeopardizes the law of excluded middle: either a statement is true or its negation is true. But as it has been presented by the defenders of pragmatism the same claim can be true at one time and false at another. So, now we have factual truth, conditional truth, and contingent truth.

None of the conceptions of truth outlined above is immune to criticism. Does logical truth work? Iit is interesting to note that what is common to them all is the analysis of, not truth itself, but instead the nature of truth. Thus, the debate over the relative strengths and weaknesses of each theory is overshadowed by an agreement that truth has a metaphysical underpinning. We all seem to know what truth is when we use the term but in fact the nature of truth is open to question. This is problematic because it implies that truth may have yet more claims to it. Indeed, it does.

We can concede that all of the conceptions of truth outlined so far might have merit in some way. Most assuredly, each is defended. And this is the point. All of the notions of truth are using words. They are all defended in the same way; using the same assumptions as the others. The truth of the statements of defense is understandable as well as assumed to be true by their defenders. The same logical structure is used by all. The same syllogistic structure of logic is employed to defend the different conceptions of truth. The same truth-table verificationism is used by all. In other words predicate logic seems to be the go-to system for the presentation and the defense of its competitors. So the implication is that truth is a predicate and that this predicate can be logically determined. But this road is ultimately closed to us too. Logical truth implies a formal system. Lifelong learning and the truth available is most certainly not a closed formal system and even if it were Goedel's incompleteness theorems would undermine the conclusion.. Even logical truth has its issues. The conclusion we are left with is that truth is a predicate, yes, but not just one.

IV. Aletheia

Heidegger has a view that offers an understanding of truth that is in line with this conclusion. It is a bit radical for it does not conform to the normal channels of thought. Flint and Needham (2007) describe Heidegger's idea as the chasing after truth as if it were possible that it would improve us. They describe "the vicious circularity…wherein lifelong learning valorized by leaders in discourses of lifelong learning provides not only a rationalization for our improvement but the very means of achieving such possibilities." (p.85) The nature of self improvement by adding truth to oneself in the form of additional knowledge is fundamentally problematic in that no matter how much of it one attains there is still infinitely more to attain. Flint and Needham show this to be a conception of lifelong learning "as a means of dealing with and attempting to gain control over change." (p.86) But, they show, this is unsuccessful. Instead, lifelong learning leads to what Heidegger calls 'enframing' wherein we willingly devote ourselves to technological servitude. (Heidegger, 1977, p.25 & 33) Lifelong learning becomes, not a means to enlightenment, but means to self perpetuating pursuit of ever-receding goal. Is it any wonder that the pragmatic approach is espoused, if for no other reason than to exit this treadmill of inadequacy.

The reason, however, for the introduction of this idea is that the truth that is pursued in the post-modern sense of a never ending self-improvement is just the most recent mode of truth. Heidegger also talks about other modes, previous modes of truth. Heidegger speaks of several modes of revealing called aletheia. Each age has its mode. The ancient mode, for example, Heidegger calls bringing-forth. "Modern technology… has its own particular mode of revealing, which Heidegger calls 'challenging-forth.' When challenging-forth one *sets upon* the elements of

a situation in a sense of ordering and in a more rapacious sense" (Wadddington p.569) This is the sense on which adult lifelong learners seek truth; they demand it. The 'framing' that Flint and Needham talk about Waddington describes as "ordered, commanded and entrapped"(p,569) But "since modern technology enables challenging-forth to achieve extraordinary results, thinking in the mode of challenging forth is more dangerous and alluring than at any other time in history." (p.572)

Heidegger uses this notion of truth in The Origin of a work of Art (1971). Truth is a revealing or an unfolding. In the essay he uses the term as one where the mode of revealing is shown through art. But it is not exclusive to art. It is evident in all human productive activity. This requires patience, something few post-modern people can muster. "The great breakthrough of 'The Question Concerning Technology' is that it shifts the focus away from specific technologies and toward the modes of thinking that lie behind these technologies" (Waddington, p.577); towards the different modes of truth revealed. Heidegger's idea that the conception of truth as a changing entity over time leads to my last discovery.

V. Plurality

Heidegger introduced us to the idea that truth is revealed (aletheia) in different ways throughout human history. (Heidegger,1971 p.36) He says that each epoch gives rise to own unique way of providing humankind with truth. He also implies that echoes of previous epochs' conceptions of truth remain with us today. He does not elaborate how the conceptions discussed above fit into his view. What he does say is that for each epoch there is a different conception (revealing) of aletheia. His idea that truth may not be as static as many would believe leads us to

our final point –" that not all (declarative) sentences in all domains are true in exactly the same way. Sentences in mathematics, morals, comedy, chemistry, politics, and gastronomy may be true in different ways;… that the number of truth properties is greater than one." (Pedersen and Wright)

Alas, what once led me down this path (the frustratingly diffuse and complicated nature of lifelong learning) now has ended before a vast maw. I had originally intended to merely seek some understanding of truth in light of a change in the characteristics of a typical student. I began by postulating that a transition from expert (teacher) driven learning to student driven learning might have implications as to the nature of truth. My investigation led me to 'experiment' with several common understandings of truth. These I presented with their typical criticisms. All of them fell short in some way. I also talked a bit about Heidegger's contribution, *aletheia*. But after a little more research on this subject, I discovered that my thesis was about to get unmanageable.

I have discovered that my suspicions about lifelong learning being related to an equally murky truth are somewhat founded though I do not claim to have discovered how. I do not have any justification for believing that a causal relationship between the two ideas exists nor do I have any reason to think that one will be forthcoming. What I do know now, though, is that lifelong learning and athethic plurality are contemporary ideas and I suspect that, because arguments for the plurality of truth appear to be more sound than those that support its poor cousin, relativism, many readers may find it doubly disturbing to have lifelong learning associated with it.

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