

ADULT EDUCATION – CONCEPTS

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Lifelong Learning

Rewriting the History of Adult Education: The Search for Narrative Structures

Lifelong Learning

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Lifelong learning has become a dominant theme of education and training policies across the advanced industrial nations. Besides a wide range of national governments, it is endorsed by a wide range of intergovernmental policy actors, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Commission (EC), the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Schemmann, 2007). For governments, lifelong learning is an overarching policy framework which offers solutions to a number of common economic and social challenges; globalization and competitiveness often dominate the policy discourse, but promoting lifelong learning is also seen as relevant to social cohesion, demographic change, active citizenship, migrant assimilation, and public health.

Lifelong learning therefore has broad application across a variety of policy domains. It is also widely discussed by educational professionals and by academic researchers. Some claim that lifelong learning is such a broad concept that it has virtually no practical value (Gustavsson, 1995: 92). While its meanings are many and varied, they usually emphasize learning as a ubiquitous process, which takes place throughout the lifespan, and across a variety of life contexts. The recent focus among policymakers, educationalists, and researchers on the ability to learn continuously after the phase of initial education, and across a variety of contexts of which educational institutions are one among many, distinguishes the debate over lifelong learning from more conventional policy discussions of education and training as levers across a range of economic and social policy domains.

From Social Optimism to Economic Survival?

In recent years, lifelong learning has moved steadily toward the center of the policy stage. International governmental

bodies have played a particularly significant role in popularizing lifelong learning as a policy concept. While the term was in occasional use before the mid-1990s, it received huge impetus when the European Commission declared 1996 to be the European Year of Lifelong Learning, an idea first floated in the Commission's White Paper on competitiveness, employment, and growth (Commission of the European Communities, 1994). This context neatly exemplifies the way in which it is economic concerns that dominate policymakers' interest in lifelong learning. Particularly in the older industrial nations, policymakers argue that successful adjustment to a knowledge economy and society requires a highly skilled, knowledgeable, and flexible workforce as a key to sustained national and corporate competitive advantage; individuals equally need to invest continuously in their own competence in order to maintain their employability in an ever-changing labor market. This reflects and is expressed through a policy discourse that is centered on a human-capital approach to social inclusion and economic growth (Borg and Mayo, 2005; Coffield, 1999; Gustavsson, 1995).

This strong economic bias distinguishes the current debate over lifelong learning from earlier policy attempts to promote learning in adult life. Superficially, the idea of lifelong learning closely resembles notions of lifelong education, which were widely discussed in the 1970s. The idea of lifelong education was promoted particularly actively by UNESCO, who in 1972 published *Learning to Be*, a report by an international expert panel chaired by Edgar Faure, a former politician who had served in France as Minister of Education and Prime Minister (Faure, 1972). Faure's report was essentially humanistic in nature, arguing in favor of wider access to higher levels of education and greater support for and recognition of informal and non-formal learning in order to encourage personal fulfilment and development. Faure's report was enormously influential in stimulating debate, and in infusing that debate with an optimistic view of educational innovation and reform (Knoll, 1998). Its core ideas were taken up by the

OECD, which developed a parallel debate over recurrent education, the aim of which was intended to provide governments with practicable means of realizing the overarching goal of lifelong education (OECD, 1973).

In practical terms, the activities undertaken by UNESCO and OECD mainly helped focus policy attention on the educational needs of those who had benefited least from the front-loaded approach to initial education. In industrial nations, this often involved developing educational entitlements for workers, with laws on paid educational leave in a number of countries. In some, there was a broad entitlement to leave for general purposes (as in Sweden, and in state-level laws on *Bildungsurlaub* in Germany); in other cases, educational leave was guaranteed for specific purposes, such as vocational training under the French law on *congé de formation* or British laws on health and safety and workplace representation. Many more countries experienced a growth of adult basic education, with particularly impressive innovations in adult literacy provision and women's basic education.

By the 1990s, a concern with personal development, or worker participation as public policy goals, had not disappeared altogether, but was found far less frequently. Much more common has been a primary concern with lifelong learning as a means of underpinning economic competitiveness and growth. In a globalized economy, where material resources are more or less ubiquitous, skills and knowledge are said to be the only sustainable sources of competitive advantage (Commission of the European Communities, 1994; Reich, 1993; Thurow, 1994). Insofar as policymakers also share an interest in equity and social cohesion, lifelong learning's importance is often valued primarily as a means of re-insertion of vulnerable individuals or inactive workers back into the labor market, leading in turn to improved income and security for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The current debate over lifelong learning is therefore distinctive in a number of ways. It is characterized by the breadth, and sometimes vagueness, with which the concept is used; it is derived more from the policy domain than from the educational field; and its dominant usage tends to be primarily economic. Yet, more positively, the concept can also be taken to emphasize and recognize the many ways in which people build up new skills and capacities throughout the lifespan and across different life spheres, including workplaces, communities, homes, and voluntary associations. It gives a central place to people's learning, as opposed to education, teaching, and institutions. To use what has become a common abbreviation, current policy concerns are with education that is lifelong, and also life-wide. For these reasons, it has often become more or less synonymous with adult learning; however, it has powerful implications for all phases of the lifespan.

Initial Education as a Platform for Learning through Life

Initial education, including early-years development, is important in its own right. From a lifelong perspective, though, it is additionally important because it provides a platform for learning later in life. A number of commentators argue that family and neighborhood influences in the early years are particularly significant in determining patterns of learning across the lifespan. From this perspective, high-quality education during the earlier years is important primarily because of its role in providing the abilities and motivation to engage effectively in learning later in life (Hargreaves, 2004; Gillies, 2005; OECD, 2004). Sociologically, many of the factors that are associated with adult well-being are already present in the early years. One recent longitudinal analysis of adult learning in Wales demonstrated that most of the factors that affected the probabilities of participation in adult life were present by the time that the child entered primary school for the first time (Gorard *et al.*, 1999).

Education and well-being have often been associated. The idea that education can promote individual well-being indirectly, by improving earnings and promoting social mobility, is an old one; so are notions of education helping to promote the good society by contributing to economic growth and equality of opportunity. Recent debates about the wider benefits of learning have added a new dimension to the relationship, linking education to other facets of individual and collective well-being, such as health (including mental health), security from crime, and political tolerance (Schuller *et al.*, 2004). Through strengthening self-identity, learning is also said to help people develop a sense of authorship over their own biographies and take responsibility for their life choices (Côté, 2004).

Theoretical Perspectives

The 1970s debate over lifelong education was a broad one. While OECD's work on recurrent education was primarily concerned with the balance of resource distribution as between secondary and tertiary education, combined with an interest in worker participation in enterprise management, the work of UNESCO was profoundly influenced by the radical educational thinkers of the 1960s, along with the concerns of liberation theology and Third World development. The dominant voices in the 1990s debate, by contrast, came primarily from writers on globalization and economic change, and were almost entirely based in the economically advanced nations of the West. In a global knowledge economy, these new growth theorists argued, sustainable competitive advantage could only come from an ability to innovate continuously, and in turn this required a highly

skilled and flexible workforce (e.g. Porter, 1990; Reich, 1993). Neo-Schumpeterian concerns with innovation as a basis for economic growth came to be aligned with human-capital perspectives on skills development, as well as with an interest in regional and national innovation capacities. More organizationally focused analyses have tended to emphasize the importance of organizational learning and knowledge management as strategic responses to complexity and change (Smith and Sadler-Smith, 2006).

The dominant theories of lifelong learning, then, tend to be concerned with developing workers' abilities to innovate and respond to change, and therefore contribute to sustained economic growth. Many governments, particularly those led by social democratic or Christian democratic parties, also see lifelong learning as a means of promoting equity and inclusion. Again, this is associated with a strong focus on employability as an important active measure to promote social cohesion, and equity concerns are therefore closely related to economic goals. Finally, this dominant view takes a capitalist economic order as a given; lifelong learning is not seen as a way of changing society, but at most as a way of including the least advantaged in the existing order. Particularly in its most recent phase, which may be conveniently marked by the European Commission's *Memorandum on lifelong learning* of 2000, it is a highly pragmatic concept (Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner, 2007: 693; Commission of the European Communities, 2000). However, there are also significant critical voices, albeit from a range of differing perspectives.

Some take a broadly radical, anti-globalization stance. Thus the Maltese writers Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo suggest that the primary economic focus of dominant theories is tied to a neoliberal agenda for welfare reform (Borg and Mayo, 2005). Others have asked whether the whole concept is not associated with Western interests, and question whether, at least in its current manifestations, lifelong learning presents opportunities for or is a distraction from adult basic education as a force for development and democratization in the majority of the world (Torres, 2003). Certainly, the current policy climate tends to assume that individual workers must assume at least partial responsibility for ensuring their own employability and invest in new skills in order to maintain their labor-market value. However, this is often accompanied by incentive regimes, which seek to encourage workers to invest in new competences and improve existing skills; in some cases, workers' own organizations have promoted skills improvements as a way of protecting collective security (Payne, 2005). It is also possible to see welfare regimes as themselves bureaucratic and unresponsive to diverse needs; even in adult education, devolution and autonomy may be viewed as a form of privatization, but some will also experience it as emancipatory. In other words, there is no necessary connection between an emphasis on continuous learning and the dismantling of the welfare state, but radical perspectives do

draw attention to both global and local inequalities that are material and structural, and which may be perpetuated by current lifelong learning policies.

Feminist writers have also made a significant contribution to critical debates over lifelong learning. From a feminist perspective, the radical expansion of post-compulsory education since the 1960s has brought rather ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, considerable growth in women's access to higher education has formed part of the remarkable transformation in the role of work in women's biographical trajectories (Spano, 2002). Like many radical writers, feminists tend to be sharply critical of policies and forms of provision that are driven primarily by market forces, though they go beyond the majority of radicals in identifying clear and practicable ways in which education and training might better meet the needs of women (Gouthro, 2005; Burke and Jackson, 2007).

From a feminist perspective, the invisibility of gender in a patriarchal society masks the fact that women face particular barriers to participation in learning, and much provision fails to address the diversities of women's identities; working-class women in particular are trapped in a cycle of low-paid and low-status jobs, whose skill content is barely acknowledged in public discourse about a learning society (Fenwick, 2004; Jackson, 2003). Gouthro goes rather far, suggesting that the language and ideas of lifelong learning represent a major incursion of public policy into the private sphere, as the identification of the homeplace as a site of learning is little more than a colonization of part of the lifeworld that has particular resonance for women (Gouthro, 2005).

A third alternative body of theory derives from post-structuralist and post-modernist writing. In particular, a number of writers have drawn on the thinking of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher/historian, to frame their analyses of power and knowledge and the construction of the learning citizen. Foucault's influence can be particularly seen in studies which treat knowledge as a social practice, governed by relations of power that may be expressed through various classificatory schema and their institutional manifestations. This might be seen as a relatively superficial reading of Foucault's work, and it has been supplemented more recently by studies that take Foucault's radical decentering of the human subject as their starting point. Here, instead of studying learners as agents, the focus is on studying the specific practices that constitute learning, the discourses produced by and producing these practices, and the different subject positions that are made available through these discourses and practices. These subject positions usually include the other, and discourses of nonparticipation and nonlearning are therefore analyzed as processes of othering, so that practices and discourses of lifelong learning always constitute subject positions that are excluded from the dominant framing (Fejes, 2006; Nicoll, 2006).

Finally, a number of writers have explored connections between lifelong learning and sociological theories of reflexive modernization. Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens both take human agency as the core of their accounts of late modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). There are distinct parallels between theories of reflexive modernization and core elements of the debate over lifelong learning. Beck and Giddens lead us to explore the socio-cultural forces that are shaping the demand for continuous learning, rather than seeing lifelong learning as an expression of economic forces alone. Their work also draws attention to learning and change in everyday life; people may well be confronting experiences of globalization and technological change, but they are also required to take an active approach to their own biographies, including the ways in which they negotiate intimate relationships and construct identity and social resources (Alheit, 1990; Field, 2006: 68–73).

Institutional Structures for Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a highly complex area for policy, yet its current prominence is largely due to the interest of policy-makers. This paradoxical position reflects the challenges that current economic, social, cultural, and political changes pose to the policy community, particularly in the Western nations, which therefore require new approaches to governance (Field, 2006: 29–43). While policymakers are still able to resort to direct intervention of the traditional kinds, the most important actors in lifelong learning are usually non-governmental – primarily enterprises and individuals, but also trade unions, families, voluntary associations, and neighborhoods. Even within government, lifelong learning policies span the interests of a range of ministries, and a variety of layers from local and regional to national and supra-national. Lifelong learning therefore poses serious challenges of coordination of a range of actors of different kinds, besides bringing risks of unintended consequences. It also poses challenges to many of the existing institutions, particularly those providing opportunities in adult learning.

Although the current debate over lifelong learning has only been underway since the mid-1990s, governments have not had to write policies on a clean sheet of paper. Rather, they have sought to modernize and systematize existing patterns of provision of adult learning, and review existing institutional structures, with a view to raising levels of participation and attainment, usually right across the lifespan but with a strong concentration on learning in and for working life. Comparative researchers have identified a number of variations in post-compulsory education and training structures, in spite of the convergent pressures of globalizing economic forces and the modernization of

education systems. Particular attention has been paid to the roles of three distinct components of the lifelong learning systems:

- systems of transition between initial education and the labor market;
- higher education systems; and
- arrangements for adult education and training.

These components have attracted attention from policy analysts as well as academic researchers (see, e.g., the OECD's thematic reviews (OECD, 2005)).

The three institutional dimensions of national lifelong learning systems differ significantly from each other. The most complex, from both a policy and an analytical perspective, is the adult learning system, which involves a variety of actors and stakeholders, including a wide range of non-government organizations as well as individual citizens. Youth transition systems are only slightly less complex, as well as institutions, which may or may not be publicly funded; the key stakeholders generally include employers and sometimes trade unions, as well as varying degrees of state provision and regulation. Some national studies note that military service may also affect youth transition processes (e.g., Tsai, 1998), and schools are also often influential actors in their own right. Initial education systems at first seem relatively unproblematic from a policy perspective; the major players are usually publicly funded schools and the state itself (though policy implementation is often influenced by teachers, particularly where the latter are able to exercise a significant degree of professional autonomy). However, initial education is often less straightforward than it first appears; particularly in early years, nongovernmental providers are often involved in nursery-level education, and families and communities exercise significant influence over children's cultural capital and social capital.

Green *et al.* (2006) identify three distinct regional models of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy. Two of these – the Anglo-Saxon, neoliberal model, and the continental European, social market model – are relatively well established, and are clearly based on conventional social policy models of welfare regimes. Green and his colleagues add a third, Nordic model, which combines high levels of social cohesion with strong support for economic competitiveness. The Nordic model has recently been subjected to particular scrutiny because of its perceived relative success in combining comparatively equal participation with high overall participation in adult learning (Tuijnman, 2003; Rubenson, 2006; Milana and Desjardins, 2007). Overall participation rates in all the Nordic countries are consistently close to or over 50% of the population of working age (OECD, 2000). Further, Nordic participation rates are high both for job-related adult education and training and for non-job-related learning (Eurobarometer, 2003).

The roots of this pattern have been traced back to the 1960s, when governments and the social partners identified

adult education as a distinct and significant field of policy, linked closely to labor market policy, which itself was geared primarily to securing full employment and industrial consensus (Rubenson, 2006; Milana and Desjardins, 2007). Typically, the Nordic countries have a wide range of providing institutions, including well-established non-statutory providers (such as trade unions) and community-based providers accountable to local government. Rather than seeking to restructure the institutional system, public policy instruments since the 1960s in the Nordic nations have increasingly included targeted-funding measures aimed at engaging disadvantaged groups in the adult education system (Rubenson, 2006).

These measures have had some success in terms of overall participation. Nevertheless, despite high overall participation, and relatively high participation by disadvantaged groups, Milana and Desjardins (2007) note in a systematic review of international survey data that the same broad distribution is found in the Nordic countries as in other nations. The least likely to participate are older workers, those with lower skills levels, unemployed people, migrant workers, and those with weak initial educational qualifications. Nevertheless, on the basis of data from the International Adult Literacy Survey and a survey conducted by the EC in 2003, published by Eurobarometer, they conclude that the Nordic nations have created popular adult education systems that have led to “the attenuation of differences among these otherwise disadvantaged groups”, particularly older adults of working age and less-educated workers (Milana and Desjardins, 2007: 3). They further analyze Eurobarometer data to show that although adults in the Nordic countries reported similar constraints on participation as did respondents in other European Union (EU) member states, the average incidence of the constraints was generally lower in the Nordic countries, and adults in the Nordic countries were more likely to participate even if they faced these constraints (Milana and Desjardins, 2007: 6). Interestingly, this was true for dispositional barriers as well as for more material and institutional constraints.

Milana and Desjardins conclude that public policy has been particularly significant in producing high levels of overall participation, first by maintaining a strong public adult education system, and second by adopting special targeting measures to ensure that an open and broad system of provision is not simply colonized by the already well educated (Milana and Desjardins, 2007: 14–15). In addition, Nordic economies are typically characterized by forms of organizational networking that are likely to promote informal learning. Peter Maskell and his colleagues have demonstrated that high levels of informal exchange of information, techniques, and skills are critical to the competitiveness of Nordic enterprises, particularly those who are affected by high labor costs and low levels of technological development and must therefore compete on grounds of quality and added value (Maskell *et al.*, 1998).

Supplementing various studies of national policy, Michael Schemmann has conducted a detailed systematic analysis of the policies developed by inter and supranational government bodies such as the World Bank, UNESCO, EC, and OECD (Schemmann, 2007). Of these, the EC has been most influential in practice, since it is responsible for implementing policies directly, while UNESCO and the OECD exercise a more indirect influence. Nevertheless, Schemmann traces a number of common themes, as well as marked differences, across these four bodies; above all, he believes that they have established a global lifelong learning discourse with a number of shared reference points. In turn, of course, these common themes reflect the dominance of a neoliberal policy agenda at national level, with governments seeking similar solutions to similar problems. This includes a marked trend toward employer involvement with delivery, in order to promote responsiveness to economic demands, and the adoption of active approaches to labor-market training, particularly through welfare-to-work measures.

Schemmann also notes a pronounced tendency for international governmental bodies to seek to influence national policy by compiling comparative indicators and promoting policy borrowing and transfer, trends that he finds typical of the new governance that is being applied to complex policy areas like lifelong learning (Schemmann, 2007: 246). Both the OECD and the EC publish benchmarking data, compiled on the basis of selected indicators of educational activity; the OECD’s publications usually attract high levels of media coverage. In 2003, the EC set its member states the target, by 2010, of at least 12.5% participation in learning by adults aged 25–64, though the Commission has few powers to enforce such targets other than by publicizing the results. The EC has also been charged by the European Parliament with developing a European-qualifications framework covering all areas of lifelong learning. Such developments have led some commentators to question whether there are tendencies toward an international standardization process in adult learning, particularly within the EU (Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner, 2007: 699–700).

Conclusions

Since the mid-1990s, ideas of lifelong learning have been widely debated in policy and research circles. The idea itself rose to prominence in the mid-1990s when it was embraced by a number of international policy bodies and by several countries. While there were often exaggerated claims both for the novelty of the policies, and for the likely contributions they would make to a whole plethora of economic and social challenges, these policies did indeed mark a shift in policy focus, away from instruction toward learning and away from childhood and youth toward

learning through the life span. This shift reflected policy-makers' preoccupations with the consequences of globalization and rapid economic and technological change, as well as business leaders' recognition of the contribution of upskilling to competitive strategies. However, it also reflected wider sociocultural factors which were also leading to a new emphasis on continuous learning as a way of coping with the demands of everyday life in a risk society.

Conceptually, the idea of lifelong learning appears neatly to parallel influential sociological conceptions of institutionalized reflexivity and risk. The task of lifelong learning, it has been argued, is therefore to enable people to regain a degree of control over their existence, and develop a learning elective biography:

When flexibility constitutes the crucial capacity that work organizations and the unpredictability of life demands, having a stable identity can be a disadvantage. . . Questions such as 'Who am I?' and 'Whom do I want to be?' can become quite haunting existential questions (Glastra *et al.*, 2004: 294).

Others, however, view such a concern with promoting flexibility as potentially damaging and negative to the individual and community, and at worst as collusion with the excesses of globalized capitalism.

Policies for lifelong learning have tended to concentrate on learning in and for working life. Yet, particularly when compared with the innovations of the 1970s debate, most governments have notably shied away from the challenging and difficult issue of policies aimed at increasing the skills and knowledge content of jobs, especially in sectors and regions that rely on low relative labor costs as a basis for competition. Some attention has been paid to the implications for initial schooling as a preparation for learning in later life, as well as to the development of parenting skills, usually for mothers, with a view to raising their capacity for supporting their own children's learning (Gillies, 2005). Relatively little attention has so far been paid to support for learning in later life, even in countries like Scotland where population aging presents acute social and economic challenges. Patterns of participation in adult learning, even among people of working age, tend to mirror existing educational and socioeconomic inequalities. There is therefore a risk that market-led approaches to lifelong learning will simply accentuate and help to entrench the social hierarchy, as the knowledge-poor lag ever further behind in the shift to a knowledge economy. While no policy models have successfully combined uplifts in overall adult participation with a marked impact on inequality, the Nordic societies have been relatively successful in moderating the impact of existing patterns of disadvantage.

Lifelong learning is, then, a rather ambiguous concept which has been used for a range of policy purposes, mainly economic in nature. Yet, it is at heart extremely simple and – from a normative point of view – potentially rather

attractive. The vision of a society where people have broad opportunities to learn across and throughout their lives is an attractive one for many educationalists – particularly those with a background in adult education. More to the point, the broad social and economic trends that have brought lifelong learning to centerstage are not short-term ones. At least in the medium term, then, the debate is likely to continue.

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