The Concepts and Practices of

Lifelong
Learning

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Chapter 1
Introduction

The scope of lifelong learning

It is difficult to overstate the significance of lifelong learning (LLL) in contemporary society. The scope of lifelong learning includes policies on and practices in schooling as well as adult education, and much besides including aspects of informal as well as formal learning across the life course. As a strategy, it is applied to aspects of social policy as in the encouragement of single parents to return to work or education and to interventions in families designed to raise the educational attainment of children. Moreover, educational institutions themselves have expanded their boundaries in many instances, as in community schools in Scotland and in England there are proposals to make some form of education and training compulsory for 16–18-year-olds who will face sanctions if they do not comply. Governmental, institutional and individual commitment to lifelong learning does not mean more of what we had before and has brought changes in the meaning and significance of learning across the life course, new teaching and learning practices and institutional change. The vision of the learning society that is unfolding is also increasingly contested. In this volume, we explore some of these contestations, meanings, practices and institutional changes.

It is clear then that lifelong learning is not simply a 'voguish' term for the activities associated with adult learning of various

kinds. Indeed, some writers have sought to distinguish between lifelong learning and adult education indicating that 'lifelong learning' and the 'learning society' are contested concepts.

What we need, paradoxically is less lifelong learning and more adult education aimed at increasing the individual and collective autonomy of communities. It is misleading to see the current fascination for lifelong learning as a more popular form of lifelong education. Something new and more pernicious is happening. (Crowther, 2004, 127)

Here Crowther is arguing that lifelong learning has little in common with previous 'visions' of the 'learning society' such as 'lifelong education'—a concept advocated by the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in the 1970s and which entailed a focus on the provision of opportunities to learn throughout life including informal as well as formal learning rather than simply being focused on initial education. The concept of lifelong education is associated with social justice concerns particularly access to education and Crowther believes these concerns are missing in current lifelong learning practices.

The rather general focus of the UNESCO concept has been criticised as impractical and leading to little in the way of policy development.[1] It was not the only vision of that period, however. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe advocated the concept of 'recurrent education' in the same period. Recurrent education envisages regular participation across the life course in order to foster (mainly) career and skills development. This concept is related to human capital theory which emphasises the value of investing in education and training since this is assumed to bring returns in economic development and growth for individuals and also for society.

Lifelong learning, economy and politics

The current formulations of lifelong learning and the learning society originate in economic changes in Western democracies in the 1980s and in new directions in social and economic policies in the 1990s. Briefly, the 1980s were characterised by a renewed focus on the economic; partly as a result of the rise of neo-liberalism in Western politics and partly as a result of the effects of economic restructuring. The central tenets of neo-liberalism include a belief in the efficacy of free markets, competition, individual freedom and, crucially, a critical account of the public sector as largely a drag on economies and as inevitably characterised by inefficiencies. From this perspective, the role of the state should be strictly limited in order to ensure that the market is free to operate effectively.

Much of the political debate of the 1990s continued to focus on economic change and this was dominated by a concern that technological change in communications and production brought increased international competition. The challenge identified here is that of 'globalisation'. Globalisation is seen as particularly challenging because as distances shrink and information technology allows individuals and business to achieve more in given time frames, economic competition should sharpen significantly. Moreover, this implies the acceleration of everyday life and greater uncertainty in a global world where national governments have less control over multinational corporations. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, given the perceived threat of globalisation and the political legacy of the 1980s, the political rhetoric of the 1990s moved away from that of the 1980s. In the UK, for example, with the election of New Labour in 1997, there was a move to 'Third Way' politics. The nature of 'Third

Wayism' and the extent to which it differs from the politics of the 1980s is contested. However, broadly it is concerned with the social dimensions of healthy and competitive societies including a concern with strong communities, equality of opportunity, individual responsibility and accountability. There is a reappraisal of the role of the state, a commitment to reform state services and a commitment to partnerships between the public and private sectors of various kinds—as opposed to simply expanding the public sector.

Lifelong learning as a strategy is first fully articulated in the European Commission White Paper *Towards the Learning Society,* published in 1995. This paper identifies the major challenges as the impact of the information society, the impact of internationalisation (or globalisation as it is commonly referred to) and the impact of the scientific and technical world. Also of concern is the problem of social exclusion in European societies. The White Paper suggested two main responses to these challenges including a focus on a broad base of knowledge and building employability in the new knowledge or information society. In addition, five general objectives were identified: encourage the acquisition of new knowledge; bring schools and the business sector closer together; combat exclusion; aim for proficiency in three community languages and treat capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis.

Towards the Learning Society is significant because it marked a turning point in the development of the idea and strategies of lifelong learning and the learning society. It was followed by a plethora of policy and strategy proposals at national level.[2] These had varying emphases across Europe. Common themes included the 'need' to respond to globalisation by improving employability and a focus on individual as well as state responsibility in achieving this. This meant upskilling and reskilling and therefore participation in education and training, but there was also a focus on the need for flexibility (adaptation to a changing workplace in

terms of workplace practices as well as skills). In the preface to the English Green Paper *The Learning Age,* the new focus on learning is encapsulated by Tony Blair when he writes that '… education is the best economic policy we have' (DfEE, 1998).

The notion that learning throughout the life course is a good idea was not new in adult education circles but it became commonplace across society in the second half of the 1990s. As Field (2006) notes, the Cinderella status of adult education made this new emphasis and any new funding[3] associated with it attractive to the adult education sector. By 1999, a significant expansion of post- compulsory education and training was well underway in the UK and Coffield (1999) was able to write of a 'new consensus' on lifelong learning in the UK.[4] This consensus was characterised by a number of assumptions including the following:

- The idea that a nation's competitiveness depends on the skills of the labour force
- Globalization compels governments to respond
- Education as it stands cannot address these issues and must be modernized
- Individuals must take responsibility for 'upskilling'
- Educational institutions must become more efficient and responsive by following the model of British business (Coffield, 1999).

Coffield criticised many of these assumptions. He thought that the concentration on *human* capital ignored the relevance of other forms of capital including social capital[5] and that the economic models and models of change informing lifelong learning strategies were crude and questionable. They also deflected attention from more difficult issues such as inequality. Finally, he argued that lifelong learning policies may be seen as a form of

social control because of the way in which they emphasise the need for individuals to adapt to change (as opposed to questioning the direction of change).

Reorganising education and training

It would be a mistake, however, to focus solely on economic issues such as the imperative to address the 'problem' of skills. Significant is the emphasis on individual responsibility and also individual choice[6] signalling a new relationship between the individual and the state characterised by an emphasis on individual agency and the state as empowering others (or, more minimally, extending choice) as opposed to providing services in all cases. Other aspects of social change are highlighted by Edwards and Usher (Edwards and Usher, 2000; Usher and Edwards, 2007), such as greater uncertainty, the advent of a post-traditional culture where there is greater plurality and uncertainty in all aspects of life (for example in patterns of family life), greater cultural diversity and greater heterogeneity of values.

These new diversities alongside the new emphasis on vocationalism in life-long learning strategies presented a particular challenge to the liberal framework of values that had characterised the educational establishment, including adult education.[7] This included a commitment to progressive sentiments (and, less often, practices) such as equality of opportunity and the notion of education as emancipating particularly where it is broadly defined. Lifelong learning by contrast is less clearly aligned to any one particular set of values. Indeed, Bagnall (2004) in an analysis of the ethics of lifelong learning has defined it as ethically promiscuous. What emerges here then is a picture of education at the turn of the century with the rug being pulled from beneath it (perhaps for good reasons depending on your point of view). In

that sense one aspect of lifelong learning as strategy is the reorganisation of education and training. This has included, for example, expansion of tertiary education, diversification of institutions, restructuring of the academic year and courses of study in tertiary education, facilitation of adult learning, support for inter-institutional working between institutions and sectors, changes in funding regimes, comprehensive rethinking of learning in schools, greater focus on the individual as in personalised learning (PL) in schools, changes in governance at almost every level of the education system and so on.

Such changes are achieved in a variety of ways, for example by setting targets, adjusting funding regimes and other policy levers to particular ends and setting national standards and benchmarks as in National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) which regulate institutional curricula. We discuss aspects of these policy levers in this volume. Aside from such mechanistic devices, change whether of institutions or individuals is also realised and constructed in discourses embedded in policies and educational practices.

Reconstructing learners

One example of this is the way in which the concept of flexibility is deployed in ways that create imperatives for institutional and student action of various kinds. Institutions are expected to be more responsive and a positive notion of flexibility is constructed in 'responsive' activities such as the accreditation of prior learning. Here, a discourse of increasing global competition creates the 'necessity' of 'flexibility' which is constructed as emancipatory in practice, at least for students, and possibly also for teachers since it opens up the possibility of new types of practice. At the same time, the concept also creates a situation where students flexibly combine learning with work on their own responsibility, thus accelerating the pace of life and possibly intensifying teaching

workloads. Moreover, as Nicoll (2006) points out, notions of responsiveness and flexibility are deployed in ways that promote institutional change such as the marketisation of education and training (since this may be argued to extend choice and responsiveness). Similarly, adjacent to the concept of responsiveness are the concepts of access and learner-centredness which are linked with humanistic notions of learning and social justice but which may also be deployed in ways that mean individuals manage themselves in ways that are aligned with particular lifelong learning strategies as we argue in Chapter 2.

The point here is that lifelong learning practices and discourses have wide social significance. So far, we have suggested that they are implicated in the shifting relationship between the state and the individual—some writers argue that the emphasis on individual responsibility in lifelong learning practices and policies is undermining the welfare state, for example (see Crowther, 2004). There is a renewed emphasis on the vocational and on markets and a questioning of old certainties such as the liberal framework of education. These are controversial ideas. Nevertheless, the imperative for change has led to the reorganisation of aspects of education and training often in the name of responsiveness and access. While these are seductive goals, individual and institutional changes inevitably reflect shifting power relations and possibly new patterns of inequality. In other words, they are not necessarily emancipatory even if they are effected in the name of learner-centredness or student access. These changes will involve the exercise of power and new types of surveillance for both learners and teachers. This is what Crowther is referring to as 'something new and pernicious'. We do not mean here that naked coercion is being exercised and encouragement to participate in education and training may of course bring positive benefits as we discuss in this book. Nevertheless, far-reaching changes in education and the meanings and discourses found in lifelong

learning policies paint particular visions of the learning society. Inevitably, these are contested.

Visions of the learning society

A wide range of criticisms have been made of current moves towards a learning society. For example, there is a concern that there is too much emphasis on the vocational and the economic and not enough on the social benefits of learning and the relevance of informal learning.[8] This has led to a new interest in the social benefits of learning and a renewal of interest in the concept of social capital and its role in learning (Schuller *et al.*, 2004; Field, 2005). This perspective has been particularly influential and we discuss this in some detail in Chapter 3.

There is also criticism that lifelong learning policies and practices increase government control over individuals and institutions. These criticisms have been made from two main perspectives. First, there are those who wish to return to the social purpose tradition in adult education. Here education is seen as emancipatory only when it is broadly defined and linked critically with politics and political struggle. From this perspective lifelong learning is 'part of a hegemonic project to internalise compliance…. Learning to learn is part of the process of instilling self-discipline…' (Crowther, 2004, 131–132).

Second, there are postmodernists who argue that lifelong learning is the postmodern condition of education. (Usher and Edwards, 2007). The argument here is that the current changes in education reflect the greater heterogeneity, diversity, uncertainty and fluidity of postmodernity. While these two perspectives are often presented as diametrically opposed, both are interested in changing patterns of control and power relations, for example Usher and Edwards are interested in '…the relationship between

certain discourses of lifelong learning and changing exercises of power and forms of governing the social order' (2007, 170).

What these criticisms imply is that while it may be possible to identify the processes, practices and meanings of contemporary formulations of the learning society, these are contested and that there are potentially many visions of the learning society. In this volume, we explore the diversity of meanings and practices in lifelong learning.

In Chapter 2, we discuss learner identity and the ways in which this is socially shaped. Different theories about learning construct learners in particular ways and the chapter discusses the way in which explanations differ. It argues for an explicit focus on social aspects of identity and the relevance of identity and cultural capital is discussed. It is argued that lifelong learning discourses and practices help to construct particular identities such as the self-optimising entrepreneurial self. This raises the question of how individuals will resource these identities and indeed whether or not they are desirable.

Chapter 3 focuses on the social dimensions of lifelong learning. There has been increasing interest in the social benefits of learning and the discussion in this chapter reviews the debate on social capital theory considering some of the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. One of the key questions is the extent to which it is a resource that can be relatively easily accessed by the socially excluded and deployed by them to their advantage. The chapter argues that the ways in which we understand the social nature of learning are highly context-specific and the social purpose tradition in adult education is compared with social capital approaches.

In Chapter 4, we discuss the economic dimensions of lifelong learning and the way in which economic imperatives have been at the forefront of lifelong learning strategies and policies most notably in the Lisbon Strategy for the Council of the European Union. The chapter considers the perennial concern with skill

deficits in the 'knowledge economy' and the economic costs and benefits of participation in learning throughout the life course for individuals and also for society.

Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which lifelong learning strategies and discourses are now applied to schooling and are driving particular changes. The chapter considers a number of key changes facing schools and examines personalised learning; greater connectedness between schools and a range of other stakeholders and partners and community schools. We conclude the chapter by considering possible future scenarios for schools in the learning society.

Chapter 6 discusses aspects of formal post-compulsory education. A key element of many governments' strategies for lifelong learning has been the expansion of participation in tertiary education and this has led to expansion and diversification of this sector. The chapter discusses differences between types of institutions and changes in student populations. In the UK, widening access to tertiary education has been a perennial feature of policy for some decades and we discuss the changing focus of policy over time and a range of different types of 'access' initiatives.

Chapter 7 considers the different dimensions of learning and work including learning for work, learning at work and learning through work. The first of these addresses the issue of skills for work and reviews some of the debates on the idea of 'generic skills'. It is argued that approaches that are too mechanistic may fail to consider other issues. Also discussed is the way in which the relationship between skills and gaining in work is complicated by other issues such as cultural capital for example the kind of university attended. The discussion of learning at work notes that economic benefits while tangible are not the only important factor in engaging learners in continuing professional development. The dimension of learning through work raises some of the challenges posed by accreditation of prior learning. Finally the chapter ends

we still know relatively little about brain functioning, we know enough to bet on the fruitfulness of personalised learning with one way of getting started to be through a neuroscience-based understanding of education' (Spitzer, 2006, 61). We do know some useful things about the brain in relation to lifelong learning. However, it is worth beginning with a warning that this is a rapidly developing science. It would be rash to make premature predictions about the implications of recent research findings or future discoveries (though many do) and we have therefore refrained from doing so. Finally, our account is a highly simplified one, which avoids technical detail, interesting though that is.

Research has shown that learning is achieved through the growth of synaptic connections or the strengthening of existing connections in the brain (OECD, 2002). Since these connections continue to grow throughout the lifespan, then it is reasonable to assume that there is no biological impediment to lifelong learning. The brain's capacity to change over time is referred to as plasticity. The plasticity of the brain is popularly illustrated by the fact that the hippocampus (which stores information on spatial representation) is significantly larger in taxi drivers than non-taxi drivers, and the longer the period of taxi driving the larger the relative size (Hall, 2005). We accumulate synaptic connections throughout the lifespan; equally, we also appear to lose or prune some as part of new learning. This implies that experience is important and that it is possible that young and old may learn in different ways (Spitzer, 2006). It also highlights the connectivity and complexity of the brain. The separate structures of the brain do not operate in isolation and the popular idea of right or left hemisphere dominance is characterised by Hall (2005) as one of many 'neuromyths'. This complexity of function also implies that it is dangerous to rush into inferences about educational practices.

Different writers place different emphases on the issue of whether or not there are critical periods for learning. There is general agreement that the notion that the first few years of life are