Abstract: This paper explores the focus of lifelong learning in Canada, critiques current policies and practice, and calls for research that helps to stimulate alternate ways of looking at the concept of lifelong learning.

Historically there have been two distinct trends in the area of lifelong learning. The first concentrates on the formulations of definitions and models. It is optimistic and utopian in nature and looks at future possibilities in broad terms. The second trend is more critical. It looks at the dual nature of lifelong learning, explores the dangers and the benefits, and argues that lifelong learning can liberate or further enslave. Adherents of this trend believe that lifelong learning, like education in general, has clear ideological underpinnings (Gelpi, 1979; Ireland, 1978). Questions such as “In what direction do we want to move?” “What changes are we aiming at?” “What priorities do we want to establish?” “Who is to decide?” are political questions that force us to look at the political nature of lifelong learning (Ireland, 1978).

Building on a review of the adult education, social work and sociology literature, as well as Canadian government and OECD documents, this paper explores the current focus of lifelong learning in Canada. It looks at government policies and raises a number of questions for adult educators to address. It calls for research that helps to stimulate alternate ways of looking at the concept of lifelong learning.

In order to explore the issue of “lifelong learning”, it is important to understand the political context into which it fits. Historically, lifelong learning in Canada has had a broad base that included learning in a variety of spheres (Selman, Cooke, Selman & Dampier, 1998). With economic globalization, however, this has changed and the ideological shift is clear. According to recent documents (Council, 1999; OECD, 2001; Statistics, 1999), lifelong learning in Canada now is tied solely to skill acquisition. Lifelong learning is considered to be “vital to maintaining competitiveness in a global knowledge-based economy” (OECD, 2001, p. 13). But what has this knowledge-based economy brought the majority of Canadians?

Since the introduction of the Free Trade Agreement in 1989 and NAFTA in 1994, we have seen massive corporate restructuring so that Canada can be “competitive” with the United States. We have seen the emergence of a highly polarized workforce, a decline in full-time employment and a shift toward part-time contingent work. According to Statistics Canada, 25.3% of Canadians who work part-time do so because they are unable to find full-time employment. This figure rises to 33.4% for people in the 25-44 age group, and rises even further to 52.4% for men within this age group (Statistics, 2001). In addition, a report from Statistics Canada showed that approximately 47% of people who are laid off experience an average wage loss of 30% in their new jobs (Beauchesne, 2001), a statistic that speaks to the lack of “good jobs” in the new economy. For most Canadians, the standard of living has fallen considerably over the last decade (Yalnizyan, 1998). Corporate restructuring and layoffs have devastated the lives of many workers.
Campbell (2001) explained:

Successive waves of corporate restructuring — bankruptcies, mergers, takeovers, and downsizing — have been accompanied by public sector restructuring — downsizing, deregulation, privatization, and offloading of state responsibilities. Public sector spending and employment have declined sharply and publicly owned enterprises in strategic sectors such as energy and transportation have been transferred *en masse* to the private sector. (p. 21)

A mindset bent on the privatization of public services is sweeping the country. This privatization frenzy is based on neo-liberal ideology that portrays the public sector as wasteful and the private sector as efficient. It justifies spending cuts for social programs, tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, deregulation and the privatization of public services. Reid (1996) vehemently attacked this approach and said the attacks on government have “turned into an all-out assault on public programs at every level” (p. 271). He argued that privatization, budget cuts and user fees are destroying Canada’s public infrastructure and said “there is no longer a cost-benefit analysis when it comes to providing public services—only a cost analysis” (p. 271).

Instead of focusing on job creation strategies, Canadian policy makers have focused on low inflation and wage control to enhance business competitiveness. The overall result of government policies has been to “transfer power from workers to management and investors, from wages to profits, from the public sector to the market” (Campbell, 2001, p. 25). The supremacy of the marketplace is the ideology that now dominates the globe (Reid, 1996).

Yalnizyan (1998) documented the growing gap between the rich and the poor and showed how government policies contributed to this polarization, a phenomenon that is not restricted to Canada. For example, the OECD Jobs Strategy of 1994 explored the problem of growing unemployment and advocated a draconian approach to job creation and training for its member countries. It was scathingly critical of public sector employment and called for the creation of jobs only in the private sector. It proposed a two-tier employment strategy consisting of high skilled jobs requiring high knowledge and low-wage jobs to absorb the “significant numbers of low-skilled unemployed workers” (OECD, 1994, p. 33). It explored ways to increase the hiring of low-wage workers and called for member governments to cut minimum wages, dismantle employment-protection legislation and lower trade barriers. The OECD issued follow-up reports documenting the degree to which member countries had implemented the strategy. Canada was applauded for not indexing minimum wages, which “allowed increases in average wages and inflation to erode their relative importance” (OECD, 1995, p. 19), guaranteeing a life of poverty for people working on minimum wage. Broad (2000) described the attacks on public sector workers, the restructuring of social programs, the reduction of the welfare state and the devastating consequences. In fact, the attacks on social programs have been so severe that, in comparison with other countries, Canada is now seen to be a “low spender on income maintenance, health and education as a proportion of GDP” (Ross, Scott & Smith, 2000, p. 155). Where once Canada had a social safety net that spanned the country, we now have been reduced to a society of winners and losers. Reid (1996) argued “as the advantages held by the ‘winner’ increase, so, seemingly, does their contempt for the ‘losers’” (p. 231).
Lifelong Learning

Ettore Gelpi, with a background in adult education and social work, was responsible for lifelong education at UNESCO from 1972 to 1993. His works provide a major contribution to the theoretical discussion of lifelong education. Beginning with the premise that “lifelong education policies are not neutral” (Gelpi, 1979, p. 2), Gelpi was clear. He believed that lifelong education could emancipate and encourage democratic participation, or it could be used to repress, manipulate and control. As well, lifelong education could be used either to reinforce the established social order or to be an agent of change, helping people to free themselves from that social order (Ireland, 1978).

It is clear that, in the current political climate, lifelong learning serves to reinforce the existing social order. The mandate of lifelong learning has shifted from covering a broad variety of areas to focusing solely on the development of skills needed for the new economy. Lifelong learning for other purposes has been lost. We are being told that we have entered the age of the knowledge society and that the most important workers in today’s economy are “knowledge workers.” However, Reid (1996) argued that when Wall Street and Bay Street talk about a knowledge society, they are really talking about an economic information society. Reid argued that much of the education people have attained is considered to be irrelevant in our cutthroat economy. For example, he asked, “what are we to make of the new knowledge-based economy when a Vancouver hospital announces it is cutting nursing positions so it can hire less trained and lower-paid nursing assistants to do their jobs” (p. 271, 272).

Shields (1996) looked at the rhetoric around labour-market trends and the direction of public policy and argued that, on the one hand, the value of training dominates public policy discourse. Policy analysts, he said, firmly believe that Canadian competitiveness in the future will be based on the good jobs associated with a highly skilled labour force. On the other hand, he said, labour market trends show that, at the present time, most job creation is in the area of flexible, low-wage and insecure employment.

Swift and Peerla (1996) argued that training as a solution to job insecurity “hinges on convincing the workforce of the need to train and train again” (p. 31). Under the banner of lifelong learning, training will presumably re-tool workers so they will be able to compete for jobs in the high-skill economy. Government studies continue to speak of the importance of education and training as “pillars of …economic growth and of global competitiveness” (Council, 1999, p. 1). However, despite all the rhetoric, the reality has fallen short. Many Canadians with college diplomas and university degrees are unemployed and underemployed.

Contrary to public opinion, a lack of training is not the problem; rather, it is the lack of decent jobs to employ Canadians (Livingstone, 1999). There is no shortage of skills, but there is a shortage of jobs for people with skills. This argument is supported by Statistics Canada information compiled by Ross et al. (2000) which showed that between 1981 and 1997, the proportion of people with post-secondary education who were living in poverty rose dramatically. In essence, the proportion of poor families with a post-secondary education rose to 32.6% while the proportion of poor unattached individuals in Canada with a completed a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree rose to 30.7%. At the same time, as outlined in Table I, the proportion of poor families with 0 – 8 years of education fell by over half.
Stanford (2001) argued that even though Canada has one of the best-educated workforces in the world, millions of Canadians are either unemployed or underemployed. Yet the unemployed are still being told to “get an education.” Stanford (2001) said:

At the policy level...the clarion call to ‘educate, educate, educate’ provides a handy catch-all solution for just about any economic or social problem imaginable: poverty, low productivity, globalization, inequality. (p. 31)

Re-training assumes there will be plenty of work if people develop skills to meet the needs of the new economy. However, it doesn’t matter how well trained workers are if technology is creating a world without enough good jobs to go around (Reid, 1996).

The training myth is largely based on the fact that Canadians with a university education will have a better chance of finding jobs than people without degrees. However, many Canadians are working in jobs totally unrelated to the area in which they studied. They are hired because it’s assumed that they will be more capable than people without degrees. However, training by itself will not solve the problem of disappearing jobs, nor will training create more jobs (Reid, 1996).

The promise of developing skills for the new economy is seen, by many, to be a hoax that is being perpetrated on Canadians in an attempt to deflect attention from the job crisis. However, Dunk, McBride & Nelson (1996) argued that the push for increased training is part of an ideology that sees unemployment as a temporary problem, criticizes the education system for failing to provide adequate training, and blames individuals for their inadequate skills. Within this ideology, once the unemployed receive training, their problems will be solved. If they continue to be unemployed, it will be their fault. Unemployment, then, becomes an individual “deficit” problem. This ideology creates the space “to justify coercion and ‘policing’ of the unemployed” (p. 3).

Dunk et al (1996) argued that training “is being advanced as a substitute for an economic and industrial strategy rather than as part of one” (p. 4). The focus of training is on the supply-side of the labour market and is disconnected to the realities of the labour market. As a result, the question “training for what?” persists. The training as a solution argument provides a rationale for cutting back on income security programs and diverting funds into re-training programs (Dunk et al., 1996), a process used by some provincial governments to force welfare recipients to participate in learnfare programs. Again, we see a blaming the victim approach as learnfare programs have proven to be inappropriate responses to a structural problem.

### Table I

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Families</td>
<td>Unattached</td>
<td>Families</td>
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<tr>
<td>0-8 years</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
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<td>9-10 years</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>11-13 years</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
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<td>some post-secondary</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>university degree</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
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The growing polarization of the labour market is paralleled by a similar trend in training. While a two-tiered job system is widening the gap between the rich and the poor, “lifelong learning” (HRD) is increasing the skills of a small number of workers in the high knowledge, high wage tier. Workers who are underemployed are ignored, and the unemployed are forced into meaningless learnfare programs. Thus, “lifelong learning” can and does serve to reinforce the creation of two classes of workers.

As adult educators, we need to question our role in the “knowledge society.” Are we challenging the ideological underpinnings of market driven lifelong learning policies or are we helping to widen the gap between the “winners” and the “losers”?

Where do we go from here?

A democratic society requires balance. The “new economy” is a lopsided economy that supports big business at the expense of workers. The business community has hijacked the traditional concept of lifelong learning and we are seeing an eschewing of its values. Lifelong learning should go far beyond its current, narrow focus of skills training. Gelpi (1979) believed that lifelong education should question and critique economic, educational, cultural and political domination. He argued:

Lifelong education is based on a dialectical theory. It is not an absolute. It must itself be subject to unceasing criticism. Its declared foundations must be subject to challenge, and studies should help to redefine its theory and its practice. (p. 21)

More recently, Susan George (1997) spoke of the importance of conducting and disseminating research that challenges the market dominated global society. She argued that the left has concentrated on developing projects and programs which have failed because they “exist in an ideological context which systematically counters their aims” (p. 2). She argued that research is imperative in order to counter the neo-liberal policies that have been nurtured through research and outreach funded by right-wing think tanks.

SSHRC now is funding research into both lifelong learning and the new economy. SSHRC program information, on the lifelong learning section, lists a number of research questions it feels are important to address. At first glance, it seems to focus solely on the utopian trend as described at the beginning of this paper. However it is important to be more critical of current lifelong learning policies and adult education practice, and this must be done in the context of the new economy. The two research topics are interwoven and there is a critical research role that university adult educators can play in an attempt to influence government policy.

It is important to use these funds to question the narrow skills focus of current policies. We should explore the positive things that lifelong learning can do for people, for communities and for democracy—not only its supposed impact on our productivity and our competitiveness (Stanford, 2001). We need to conduct and disseminate research that explores alternate perspectives that can be used to develop more progressive lifelong learning policies designed to improve the quality of life for all citizens.
References


