Lifelong Learning: International Perspectives on Policy and Practice

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Abstract: This paper provides a critical reflection and assessment of the contemporary state and status of lifelong learning internationally. Specifically, it explores aspects of lifelong-learning discourse shared at new millennial gatherings in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Introduction

The advent of a new millennium provided impetus for critical reflection and assessment of the state and status of lifelong learning internationally. During the years 2000 and 2001 instrumental, social, and cultural perspectives on policy and practice—variously pervasive and variously taken up—were discussed at gatherings focused on the conceptualization and implementation of lifelong learning. At these gatherings, educators deliberated with policy makers and practitioners about the parameters and possibilities of lifelong learning. The upshot of these deliberations is that lifelong learning remains contested terrain in terms of its meanings, purposes, and desired outcomes in relation to learning for life and work. In this paper I explore aspects of the deliberative discourse of three international new millennial gatherings: (a) the 1st International Conference on Lifelong Learning, which was hosted by Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia in July 2000 (hereafter called the Australia gathering); (b) the 2000 Global Colloquium Supporting Lifelong Learning and the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA 2001), which were parts of the UK Festival of Lifelong Learning (hereafter called the UK gathering); and (c) the International Conference on Lifelong Learning as an Affordable Investment, which was held in Ottawa in December 2000 and hosted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Canada (hereafter called the Canada gathering).

I use these conferences and colloquium as resources to investigate parameters and possibilities for inclusive, holistic learning for life and work. I begin by considering how lifelong learning has been conceptualized in a techno-scientized information society. Then, drawing on the discourses of the three international gatherings, I discuss three themes pervasive in the discourse of international lifelong learning. I conclude with a perspective on developing notions of critical lifelong learning.

Conceptualizing Lifelong Learning in a Techno-Scientized Information Society

In recent decades as corporate and government interests operated to meld the social and the economic into a new economics of survival that advanced their agendas, instrumental forms of learning have increasingly gained currency as learning with most worth. However, the products of such learning in a techno-scientized information society are all too often knowledge with time-limited worth and skills with time-limited utility. In his keynote address at the Australia gathering, Jarvis (2000) ties this state of affairs to the commodification of knowledge and the concomitant growth of knowledge societies in recent decades. Knowledge has become the instrument of advancement of national and global economies. Jarvis situates this emergence in terms of pivotal events in the 1970s and 1980s. He depicts the 1970s as a period of rapid expansion of the world market when the information technology revolution emerged to redefine
trade and commerce. He portrays the 1980s as a decade when the process of globalization gained momentum, and the social and the economic were at least partially reconstituted in response to global corporatism and new technological advances that gave knowledge priority over skill. With these changes, the crisis in education has been posed as an economic one (Wexler, 1992). Education’s viability is tied to the production of info-literate lifelong learners able to compete in and contribute to national and global economies. Education with most worth is education that aids and abets this production. Educators and learners operating in this milieu regard teaching, learning, and work as transactions where the preoccupations must be efficiency, accountability, and performativity. Apple (1988) has argued that overload and the erosion of inducements and privileges associated with teaching, learning, and work mark and mar these transactions. He asserts, “The process of control [and] the increasing technicization and intensification of the teaching act [amount to] the proletarianization of … [learning and] work” (p. 45).

This assertion suggests that the crisis in education is more than a crisis of the instrumental. It is a crisis of the social and cultural as well. Wexler (1992) maintains that, since at least the 1980s, the crisis in education is mainly a crisis of public life, a crisis of society and its institutions. He believes that education’s most important role is in resolving the larger crisis in social life. In this light, educators, learners, and workers cannot merely run on learning treadmills where one transaction leads to another, where one lifelong-learning endpoint marks the start of another learning episode. Indeed this very activity can reduce lifelong learning to another burden, another source of anxiety. Thus lifelong learning should be about something more than building new time-limited techno-scientific knowledge and skill sets. While such an instrumental focus is important to help individuals put food on the table, lifelong learning also ought to be socially and culturally nourishing. From this perspective, Aspin and Chapman (2001), speaking at the UK gathering, highlight the need to rearticulate lifelong learning as inherently good learning that is prerequisite to holistic life and work. In other words, lifelong learning has to be located fundamentally as “a public good, for the benefit and welfare of everyone in society” (p. 39). This requires intersecting instrumental, social, and cultural learning to provide learners with broader knowledge and skill sets that advance work and life. Aspin and Chapman believe this is possible within what they call “the triadic nature of lifelong learning: for economic progress and development, for personal development and fulfilment, [and] for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity” (pp. 39-40). Working with such multiple purposes for lifelong learning, we can work against essentialization of the concept’s meaning as we focus on desired learning outcomes. We can begin this process by surveying how others use the term lifelong learning, examining “the circumstances in which various theories and policies of lifelong education have been articulated, developed and applied” (Aspin & Chapman, 2000, p. 13).

Three Themes Pervasive in the Discourse of International Lifelong Learning

Theme 1: Debating Private versus Public Responsibility for Lifelong Learning

In contemporary times, lifelong learning finds itself the subject of a private versus public debate regarding who is responsible for assuming the cost of lifelong learning. Providing a background paper for the Canada gathering, Verry (2000) discusses the basic argument shaping this debate: Lifelong learning for all will only be a reality with increased private funding in the face of more restricted public-sector financing and provision of lifelong learning. Verry also outlines the complexities of strategically and resourcefully enabling lifelong learning for all in OECD Member Countries.
In contrast to other far-reaching reforms or new initiatives in education, the lifelong learning mandate changes many parameters at once. It implies quantitative expansion of learning opportunities; qualitative changes in the content of existing educational activities; qualitatively and quantitatively different learning activities and new settings, and changes in the timing of learning activities in the lifecycle of individuals. These developments imply, in turn, a strong likelihood of changes in the costs of providing and participating in education, training and learning activities, and increases in the total outlays by society for such activities. Constraints on and competition for public resources combined with the presence of substantial private returns to certain aspects of lifelong learning imply a need to increase the private share of the overall finance burden. (p. 6)

This dollars-and-cents debate only helps to reinscribe instrumental performativity as the raison d’être of learning for life and work. After all, it is a common perception that instrumental forms of learning offer learner-workers the kinds of knowledge and skills that help them at a micro-level to put food on the table and at a macro-level to support national and global economies. Providers of such economistic learning occupy a special place in these economies and, of course, they reap financial rewards. However, subscribing to this mindset can undermine opportunities for more inclusive, holistic lifelong learning. This is because the benefits of social and cultural forms of lifelong learning cannot always be measured in dollars and cents. As well, the possibility of reductionistic lifelong learning has been exacerbated by a post-9/11/01 climate of fiscal uncertainty and constraint pervasive throughout OECD Member Countries.

**Theme 2: Positioning Lifelong Learning as a Permanent Global Necessity**

In another background paper for the Canada gathering, Burke and his associates (2000) stress that the determination of resources, costs, benefits, and the burden of finance for lifelong learning poses an ultimate socioeconomic challenge. They provide this reason, “In contrast to initial formal education in OECD Member Countries, adult learning is open-ended with respect to the timing, venue, and duration of learning, the targets of policies, and their beneficiaries” (p. 6). Yet Burke and his associates are clear that this challenge has to be met. They list developments that increase the importance of learning for life and work. These developments include: (a) an aging workforce, (b) techno-scientific change forces, (c) globalization of the market, (d) the changing nature of work and new work patterns, and (e) underemployment or unemployment due to mismatches between supply and demand in terms of skilling the workforce. As well, they observe that the face of the workforce is also changing. White-collar work is now more prevalent than blue-collar work in the face of increased educational levels of workers that, ideally, increase chances of being employed and making higher wages.

The strongest growth in employment [in OECD Member Countries] has been in producer and social services. From the mid-1980s through the late 1990s, the fastest growing subsectors of these have been Business and professional services and Health services with Educational services the next fastest. (p. 8)

Burke and his associates relate that these developments have been accompanied by a range of risk factors that include reduced standards of living, a decline in social cohesion, increased fiscal drag as a consequence of increased economic dependency, and constraints on the potential of economies to grow. These risks add to the blurring of any dividing line between the social and the economic. Perhaps the sorriest consequence of these changes and risks in many OECD Member Countries is the increasing alienation of a growing contingent of unemployed or underemployed individuals. Persons in this group can be seen to experience an erosion of their citizenship since being an active and supporting member of a nation is usually
considered synonymous with being employed and paid. We need to ask: How will they find a way out of a dilemma created by absent or inadequate qualifications and competencies as they mediate a lifelong-learning maze marked by diversity in policies, programs, and institutional arrangements?

**Theme 3: Rethinking the Composition of Education in a Techno-Scientized Information Society**

There is an international trend to combine vocational training and academic studies in education in order to produce graduates with more extensive qualifications (Doughney, 2000; Verry, 2000). For example, in her paper for the Australia gathering, Doughney (2000) discusses how a higher education sector and a vocational education and training (VET) sector comprise tertiary education in Australia. She relates that this composite education attracts a much expanded, diverse body of learners who want to realize broader educational as well as vocational goals. However, supporting and implementing cross-sectoral lifelong learning has conditions for success. It requires particular policies that would enable the systemic and institutional frameworks needed to aid and abet such learning. For Doughney, such policy development involves deliberation about competing conceptions and philosophies of lifelong learning. It also involves interrogation of hegemonic utilitarian and economistic models of lifelong learning that have had currency in government and policy communities of Western nations during the last two decades. The effort may be worth it though. Cross-sectoral lifelong learning could offer a way to intersect instrumental, social, and cultural learning so that broader economic purposes may be considered in relation to inclusivity, active citizenship, and redistributive justice.

As educators, policy makers, and practitioners think about the parameters and possibilities of cross-sectoral learning, they need to focus on an important contemporary learning need: the need for information literacy in a techno-scientized information society. In her keynote address to the Australia gathering, Senn Breivik (2001) asserts that learners need to be able to access, evaluate, and productively use information to address issues and solve problems in their personal, civic, and work lives. She discusses information literacy as an encompassing concept and process that can include building computer, library, media, network, and visual literacies. Senn Breivik challenges institutions of formal learning to assume responsibility for preparing graduates who are info-literate and able to function in the many informal and nonformal learning situations where adults need to be able to discover, analyze, and problem solve. She believes that assisting graduates to build information literacy skills is a way to respond to calls from government, employers, professions, and students themselves for learners and workers who can “communicate well, think critically, [problem solve,] work well in teams, be flexible, or be lifelong learners” (p. 3). However, this is only one side of information literacy: Here information literacy is an enabler of lifelong learning as an instrumental, pragmatic response to contemporary institutional and professional interventions that seek to shape lifelong learning as a support for an emerging global economy. Information literacy, as Senn Breivik attests, should also be about people empowerment that locates an information literate citizenry as a discerning citizenry that demands universal access to technology and quality information.

**Concluding Perspective**

Lifelong learning has become a large-scale phenomenon in contemporary international education and culture. While knowledge and skills with most worth are often tied to issues of worker performance and productivity in this milieu, a contingent of critical educators, policy makers, and practitioners argue that lifelong learning has to be about something more. And many of them have made it something more by broadening its purposes and roles. In the process they
have developed inclusive, holistic forms of education that meet the social and cultural as well as instrumental needs of lifelong learners who take on multiple and varied roles at home, at work, and in their communities. Moreover, they have shaped lifelong learning as a critical, deliberative space where culture-language-power issues are mediated from contextual, relational, and dispositional (attitudes, values, and beliefs) perspectives.

Developing a notion of critical lifelong learning in his colloquium contribution to the UK gathering, Griffin (2000) is part of the contingent that conceptualizes lifelong learning as something more. He presents contemporary meanings of lifelong learning as policy, strategy, and cultural practice. As policy, Griffin suggests that the meaning of lifelong learning can be partially linked to more measurable outcomes such as employability, human resource development, technological accreditation, and global competition. He sees this instrumental component of the meaning as coterminous with the advancement of public education and training. However, Griffin contends that the meaning of lifelong learning as policy also needs to be linked to less measurable outcomes like social inclusion, active citizenship, and the quality of life in sociocultural sites like educational institutions, families, communities, and workplaces. From this perspective, Griffith speaks to lifelong learning as strategy and as cultural practice. As strategy, Griffin locates the meaning of lifelong learning in the realm of individual responsibility and choice. Here the desire is to minimize state interference in individual life. The role of government is not to mandate education, but to provide the means and create the conditions to enable individuals to maximize their own learning across the life span. As cultural practice, the meaning of lifelong learning is found within cultural practices that are tied to disposition (attitudes, values, and beliefs) or behaviors (lifestyle practices). Here “the idea that learning is sited in everyday experience, and in the social relations of family, community and work, effectively distances it from public education and thus removes it from the realms of both policy and strategy” (p. 12).

For me, thinking about lifelong learning in terms of inclusive, holistic learning for life and work generates themes that are useful to (a) heed Paulo Freire’s (1998) call to think the practice and (b) shape lifelong learning as a critical, composite learning project that supports adult learners as they negotiate changing life, learning, and work terrains. Four of these themes are: (a) Lifelong learning is an inclusive, holistic educational project shaped in the intersection of instrumental, social, and cultural education in home places, workplaces, and learning places; (b) Lifelong learning is a cultural practice where the influences of history and politics have to be taken into account as we deliberate lifelong learning for what and lifelong learning for whom; (c) Lifelong learning is an inter-disciplinary learning project shaped by discourses in areas of study that include not only the traditional (history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy) but also the transgressive (women’s studies, queer studies, and cultural studies); (d) Lifelong learning is an educational project where matters of context, relationship, and disposition contour the learning terrain and frame its inclusionary and transformative characteristics.

References


