Lifelong Learning for All: Challenges and Limitations of Public Policy

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Introduction

With broad promises to solve the economic and social problems facing the industrialised world, lifelong learning is something of a ‘New Jerusalem.’ Any one doubting this just has to take a quick glance at national and intergovernmental policy documents for the last decade which uniformly promote lifelong learning for all as the foundation for educational and training policy.

The concept of lifelong learning is based on three fundamental attributes:

- it is lifelong and therefore concerns everything from cradle to grave
- it is life-wide recognising that learning occurs in many different settings
- it focuses on learning rather than limits itself to education

If taken seriously the lifelong and life-wide aspects constitute major challenges for the present public policy framework. However, nothing is more daunting than the full consequences of embracing the Copernican shift from a preoccupation with education to developing a strategy for learning. Thus, recent policy documents reflect a noticeable change in the interpretation: from a narrow focus on the education and training system, to the broader perspective of lifelong learning.

As reflected in the title of this paper Lifelong Learning for All: Challenges and Limits of Public Policy I would suggest that the shift from the original concept of lifelong education to lifelong learning has created a dilemma in that the concept is so broad it can encompass everything. Because everything from everyday learning to formal education is included, there is a risk of losing sight of fundamental issues like equality and justice and a temptation to move public policy concerns to the background. However, when it comes to the implementation of lifelong learning for all it is important to look closer at the changing understanding of the principle of lifelong learning and critically ask what role public policy can and ought to play.

The move from a preoccupation with organized forms of adult education to a focus on learning is widely applauded in North American adult education circles where recognition of informal learning is seen as one of the main elements in a progressive strategy for lifelong learning. Beginning with Alan Tough’s work on learning projects (Tough, 1971; 1978) and later more fully developed in Nall’s rich and impressive research program on informal learning we are presented with a very optimistic portrait of adults’ engagement in lifelong learning. Nall’s national survey on informal learning practices shows that nearly all Canadian adults (96 per cent) are involved in some form of explicit informal learning activities (Livingstone, 1999). It is certainly appropriate to claim that Canada is a ‘learning society’. The classical law of inequality does not seem to apply to informal
learning as no major differences were found with regard to social class, ethnicity or age. A very different picture of the Canadian Learning Society appears from analyses of participation in organised forms of adult education. Thus, in 1997 only 28 per cent of Canadian adults participated in organised forms of learning (Statistics Canada, 2001). As found in all similar surveys it is those from the middle and upper classes that benefit most. These findings suggest that Canada still has a long way to go before it will become an inclusive ‘learning society.’ It is from this perspective I will look at the role of public policy in a strategy for lifelong learning for all. The discussion will start with a brief analysis of the shifting understandings of lifelong learning and the consequences thereof.

The changing discourse on lifelong learning

As has been pointed out in the literature the concept of lifelong learning was being promoted already in the late 1960s and early 1970s but informed by other forces and ideologies than those that have driven the recent interest in lifelong learning. In the late 1960s, UNESCO introduced lifelong learning as a master concept and guiding principle for restructuring education. For a short period, lifelong learning – together with closely related ideas such as recurrent education, championed by OECD, and éducation permanente, presented by the European Council—received considerable attention. The idea of recurrent education carried a less humanistic and more pragmatic accentuation. Recurrent education was commonly promoted as a system that would yield economic gains, benefit the labour market, lead to increased equality, and stimulate students’ search for knowledge. The emphasis in recurrent education fell on educational institutions, and how resources could be better used by spreading an individual’s education over the life cycle. The first wave of interest in lifelong learning quickly disappeared from the policy debate.

When it reappeared in the late 1980s it was in a different context and in different form. The debate was now driven by a different interest, with the core of lifelong learning structured almost exclusively around an ‘economistic’ worldview. Discussions were framed within a politico-economic imperative that emphasises the importance of highly-developed human capital, and science and technology. Together, these support economic restructuring and greater international competitiveness through increased productivity. The restricted view that has dominated the second generation of lifelong learning has been severely criticized. In fact it has become something of a growth industry among scholars to critically examine the policy documents and to deconstruct the dominant discourse.

In this perspective it is of interest to note that the policy document A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning from the European Union (Brussels, 30.10.2000) seems to signal that a paradigm shift has started to take place. The document, that is based on the decisions taken at the European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000, notes Lifelong learning is no longer one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for the provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts. The task for the member states is to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all. From the assumption that two features of contemporary social and economic change are interrelated the 2001 document stresses two equally important aims for lifelong learning: promoting active citizenship and promoting employability. This is a marked change from the ‘economistic’ ideology that up to now has dominated the EU policy strategy.
From the perspective of implementing lifelong learning, the three generations of lifelong learning reflect different roles for and interrelations between the three major institutional arrangements, state, market and civil society. The first generation of lifelong learning as expressed in the UNESCO tradition saw a strong role for civil society while the second generation privileged the market and downplayed the role of the state and almost totally neglected civil society. It is important to stress that these institutional arrangements are not static but interrelated. The influence of the market on the state-education relationship cannot fully be understood by reference to shifts away from state control towards privatization and decentralisation. With relevance becoming the key concept driving government policies on adult education and training, the interests of business have been privileged. The business sector is given the lead role in defining what competencies and skills the public educational system will produce. Recognising market failures, and growing concerns about large groups not participating fully in social and economic life, the third generation can be read as a shift in balance between the three institutional arrangements. The market has been given a central role but the responsibilities of the individual and the state are also visible. The language is one of shared responsibilities.

A closer reading of the text and the understanding that seems to dominate the present policy debate might lead one to be more sceptical of what looks to be a major shift in the public discourse. Despite the repeated reference to the involvement of all three institutional arrangements, what stands out in recent policy documents is the stress on the responsibility of the individuals for their own learning – something that is underscored time after time. Recognising that the member states are responsible for their education and training systems it is pointed out that these systems are dependent upon the input and commitment of a wide range of actors from all walks of social and economic life. However, with special emphasis on the individual the EU paper goes on to state (p. 4): and not least upon the efforts of individuals themselves, who, in the last instance, are responsible for pursuing their own learning. Similarly, in a fundamental shift from the traditional Swedish Social Democratic position on adult education, the 2001 Bill on Adult Education stresses that it is essential to begin with the needs of the individual as the starting-point for planning social measures (Rubenson, 2002). It is noted that adult education and training has so far been too concentrated on treating the individual as part of a collective with a common background and common needs with teaching organised in pre-packaged forms. Therefore the challenge for state-supported education and training is to cater to everyone on the basis of individual wishes, needs and requirements. The fundamental strategy for the state is to govern the choices of autonomous citizens in their capacities as consumers, parents, employees, managers and investors.

Thus, a fundamental assumption in the second as well as third generation of lifelong learning is that lifelong learning is an individual project. This is a problematic position. As Gordon (1991, cited in Marginson, 1997, p. 83) argues, the idea of life as ‘the enterprise of oneself’ means that each person can be regarded as continuously employed in that enterprise. Consequently it is the responsibility of persons to make adequate provisions for the creation and preservation of their own human capital. Investment in learning and its financing are an individual responsibility. Differences in participation patterns strengthen the role of lifelong learning in the positional competition. An ideology that sees no role for the state in promoting the public-good function of adult education leaves participation to market forces.
An ideology that sees a small or no role for the state in promoting the public-good function of adult education leaves participation to market forces. If this were to happen it would be a major break with the traditional understanding of education as a key societal project.

The obvious danger in regarding lifelong learning as fundamentally an individual project is that as the public good aspect of lifelong learning is pushed to the side, the moral imperative of social needs is being sacrificed on the altar of individual choice. Lifelong learning for active citizenship and democracy can not be reduced to an individual project. Instead civil society refers to how and where the basic values, conduct and competencies of democracy are developed among citizens and puts focus, not on the individual but the relationships between individuals, as well as collective aspirations to create a better society.

This emphasis on the individual project brings up crucial issues around the relationship between the state and its citizens, and what understanding of democracy should inform state intervention into the market and civil society. As Amyarta Sen (1982) stresses, equitable resource allocations are not a sufficient condition for a just society. Instead, he introduces the concept of “basic capability equality.” This refers to the need to take into account, among other things, differences in those abilities that are crucial for citizens to function in society. Nussbaum (1990) discusses the fundamental problem that people living under difficult conditions tend to accept their fate because they cannot imagine any reasonable alternative. She argues that instead of accepting this situation, with due respect to citizens’ right to choose different ways of life, it is the duty of the state to see to it that citizens are in a position to make well-considered choices. This is a topic that I will return to throughout this paper.

In view of the constant proclamations of lifelong learning as an individual project and the optimistic findings on the distribution of informal learning in the Canadian population it is of interest to look closer at Sen’s notion of basic capability equality using findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD, 2000). First industrialised countries with well established and generously financed educational systems have large groups of adults with inadequate functional literacy scores or in the language used here with limited basic capability for engaging in lifelong learning. This shows that for all countries the greatest challenge is how to engage this population in lifelong learning and to provide them with the instruments necessary to be able to fully participate in the knowledge economy and knowledge society. Second, while all countries face serious literacy problems the patterns differ greatly from one country to the other. If we look at the distribution of literacy scores across countries it is evident that there are major differences. The Nordic Countries, Netherlands, Germany and the Czech Republic report high averages and relatively smaller variations while the Anglo Saxon countries show more diversity with larger differences between the lower and upper ends. Further, it is of interest to note that there is a very strong relationship between, on the one hand economic inequality in a country and on the other hand, literacy inequalities. Where one is high the other is also rampant. Second the countries tend to group themselves in three distinguishable clusters. There are the Nordic countries with relatively speaking low economic and literacy inequalities. In the middle we can detect a continental European cluster with Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium with slightly higher inequalities than in the first group. And then there is the Anglo Saxon group which shows the highest level of inequality. With a danger of stretching these quite rough results a bit too far the data seem to suggest that the literacy inequalities are part of national structures and can be understood in terms of various forms of welfare state regimes. The liberal
welfare state with its means-tested assistance and modest universal transfers would see literacy activities mainly as a way of getting people off welfare. Participation would mainly be left to market forces and entitlements are strict and often associated with stigma. The social democratic welfare state, according to Esping-Andersen (1989), rather than tolerate a dualism between state and market, between working class and middle class promotes an equality of the highest standard not an equality of minimal needs. The state will take a more active role and be more concerned about inequalities in participation. The distribution of basic capabilities point to discrepancies in readiness to engage in organized forms of adult learning. The IALS study suggests that public policy can be somewhat effective in moderating inequality in adult education participation. The central role, also the limit of public policy, is evident in the findings on participation in organised adult education which point to the long arm of the job.

The long arm of the family

Results from the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) indicate firstly that participation rates are particularly high in the Nordic countries. Secondly that there is a noticeable relationship between social background, educational attainment, and participation in adult education in all 22 countries in the study. However, in the context of public policy, it is particularly interesting that the relationship is stronger in some countries than in others.

From these results we can draw two conclusions. First the findings of the IALS strongly support previous inferences that adults’ readiness to engage in organised learning activities can be explained by ‘the long arm of the family’. There exists a strong link between an individual’s level of functional literacy and the literate culture of the family of origin. While roots are established during childhood, readiness for learning is further fostered by the education system. The same social and cultural forces that support the relationship between early literacy and family background also influence the distribution of educational attainment in the population. Second while this long arm of the family is at work in all countries, public policy can to a certain degree, lessen its impact.

The long arm of the job

Research on participation in adult education and training shows that a country’s ability to realise lifelong learning for all is more dependent on what happens at work than many of us wish to realise (see OECD, 2000). First, the findings confirm the central role that employers play in adult education and training. In all countries employers are by far the main external source of financial support for adult education. In many countries around 40 percent of those in the workforce that participated reported that they had received financial support from the employer. The data show how closely linked workplace characteristics are to participation in adult education and training. It is of interest to note that the likelihood of receiving employer-sponsored education and training is closely connected with the workers’ use of literacy skills at work. It is also interesting to note that literacy level is a better predictor than educational attainment.

A very delicate issue is the extent to which public policy should address the education and training of the workforce. With the long arm of the job becoming ever more forceful a strategy for lifelong learning for all is as much an issue of labour market policy as of educational
policy. Another distinction that has dissolved is that between adult education for personal
development and job-related training; each contributes to the other. The findings on perceived
usefulness of participation show a blurring of the boundaries between company/industry-specific
training and general education (Statistics Canada, 2001). The new reality creates challenges not
only for public policy but also for adult educators critical to how work has colonised the adult
education sector.

While the findings on the long arm of the family and the long arm of the job point to the
crucial role of public policy as well as its limitations the most fundamental challenge comes
from a reinterpretation of informal learning.

Informal learning as policy

If one fully accepts that learning is the universe the focus will be on the context in which a
person lives her/his life and the question is a) how educational is this context and b) who is
involved in what kind of activities. The data is very clear on this. Thus, looking at involvement in
cultural and political life we can see large socio-economic and ethnic differences in the nature of
the involvement. So for example volunteer activity is strongly related to education and socio-
economic status. The higher the education the more common it is to engage in volunteer
associations (Rubenson, 1996).

Looking at life context as the curriculum for lifelong learning the available data sends a
clear message emerges. Ultimately the development towards lifelong learning for all will
depend on the extent to which society actively engages and makes demands on the skills and
knowledge of all its citizens. Lifelong learning for all is conditional on a working life organised
in a way that promotes the use of one’s competencies, and a society where people are
encouraged to think, act, and be engaged.

An important policy issue concerns the substitution effects between formal and informal
learning. Does involvement in informal learning substitute for a lack of participation in
organized activities? In order to draw far reaching policy conclusions based on the distribution
of informal learning, more detailed information is needed on the extent to which informal
learning impacts a person’s social, cultural, economic and political resources with the help of
which the individual can control and consciously command the life situation. However, the
previous presented data on the distribution of basic capabilities in the Canadian population as
well as the observed general level of inequalities in power, material possessions and command
over one’s life situation suggest that one will have to be careful in uncritically claiming that
informal learning generally can substitute for a lack of involvement in organised learning
activities. It is further of interest to note that the socio- economic differences are related to the
extent the form of learning pays off in income, status, and cultural competence. The better the
pay-off the larger the differences (Rubenson and Borgström, 1981).

In summary, when trying to implement lifelong learning public policy faces major
challenges and limitations. The political project of promoting lifelong learning as an individual
project is undermining the state’s central role in making sure that the ‘Learning Society’
becomes an inclusive society where the public good of lifelong learning is firmly entrenched and
not one established only on individual competition. It is a paradox that the strong commitment
in adult education to the promotion of informal learning that is rooted in an emancipatory
tradition may come to legitimate the present state project that has diametrically different
ambitions.

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