

Chapter 1: A New Agenda for a New Society

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THE POLICY CONTEXT: THE LEARNING SOCIETY AND KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Across the world a number of trends in economic and social change has highlighted the need for policy makers and educators to reconsider their approach towards education. Factors such as the changing nature and patterns of employment, population and demographic change, labour force participation rates, changing types of jobs and their availability, changes in workplace skills and competences, technological change, the question of wages and remuneration, and globalization – have all set up a series of imperatives that are above and beyond the possibilities of their being addressed simply within the confines and time-scales of traditional patterns of learning, and the 'front on' provision of education & training.

In particular, the association between the skills and competencies of workers and the performance of individual enterprises and national economics; the effect of education and training on labour market experience, especially in respect to the higher risk of unemployment and the likelihood of lower earnings for the least qualified; the widening of the skills gap; and the growing disadvantage for the least educated [OECD Jobs Study 1994] have all provided a strong rationale for a life-long approach to learning.

THE CONCEPT OF LIFE LONG LEARNING

Although the concept of 'life-long learning' is used in a wide variety of contexts and has a wide currency, its meaning is often unclear and its operationalisation and implementation has not been widely practised or achieved. Such application as it has, is to be found primarily on a piecemeal basis.

One approach to conceptualising life-long learning lays it down that life-long learning is concerned with the promotion of skills and competences necessary for the development of general capabilities and spe-

cific performance in given tasks. Skills and competences developed through programs of life-long learning, on this approach, will have a bearing on questions of how workers perform in their tackling of specific job responsibilities and tasks and how well they can adapt their general and specific knowledge and competences to new tasks.

This approach is, of course, highly dependent upon two prior assumptions: one, that 'life-long education' is *instrumental for* and *anterior to* some more ultimate goal; and secondly, that the goal in which governments are primarily interested is highly job-related and economic-policy-dependent. Clearly this presents us with a very narrow and limited understanding of the nature, aims and purpose of 'life-long education'.

Another approach to the idea and value of life-long learning is predicated upon different assumptions. Instead of 'life-long learning' being seen as instrumental to the achievement of an extrinsic goal, 'education' may be equally seen as an intrinsically valuable activity, something that is good in and for itself. Here the aim would be to enable those engaging in it not to arrive at a new place but 'to travel with a different view' (Peters 1965). The point here is that those engaging in educational activities would be enriched by having their view of the world continually expanded and transformed by the increasing varieties of educational experience and cognitive achievements that education would offer them for their illumination and enrichment throughout their lives.

A side-benefit of such experiences and achievements would be an increase in people's capacity for more varied and heterogeneous types and styles of cognitive appraisal and judgment with which they were able to approach the problems, topics and issues that beset them. The capacity to frame solutions of such problems or to engage in informed reflection upon such issues is an outgrowth of education's commitment to an expansion of the range of people's cognitive capacities and the diverse modes of experiencing the world that education brings them. This kind of additional benefit is contingent upon the prior assumption that education is to be seen as *an end-in-itself*, and not merely an expedient towards the reaching of other ends.

This kind of argument reaches its full flowering in the realisation that, for those engaging in life-long learning, there is continually being made available and expanded a rich range of additional options, from which they may construct a satisfying and enriching pattern of activities and life-enhancing choices for themselves (cf. JP White 1982). For all people life-long learning offers the opportunity to bring up to date

their knowledge of and enjoyment in activities which they had either long since laid aside or always wanted to do but were previously unable; to try their hands at activities and pursuits that they had previously imagined were outside their available time or competence; or to work consciously at extending their intellectual horizons by seeking to understand and internalise some of the more significant cognitive advances of recent times, that have done so much to affect and transform their worlds.

Some might consider this argument to be highly individualistic, concentrating on the view that life-long learning is something that is only presented to and engaged in by people individually. But this is to mistake the potential for collective endeavour and a growth in the sense of community offered by such experiences: anyone who has observed at first hand the sense of shared excitement and accelerated advance exhibited by classes studying advanced mathematics or foreign languages in a University of the Third Age cannot fail to be aware of the way in which a sense of community involvement is extended and deepened by undertakings of collective educational activity and growth.

This is not to suggest, however, that life-long learning, seen from this perspective, is an activity restricted solely to those who have past the age when education in formal or institutional settings has ceased. For it is clear that the expansion of cognitive repertoire and the increasing of skills and competences is an undertaking that can – and indeed, on either argument, *must* – continue throughout one's life, as an ineliminable part of one's growth and development as a human being *and* as a citizen in a participative democracy, *as well as* continuing to be a productive and efficiently operating agent in a process of economic change and advance.

The fact is, of course, that none of these aims and undertakings can really be separated from the other: all three elements interact and cross-fertilise each other. A more competent and highly-skilled agent in the work-force has more of an interest in and responsibility for contributing to the improvement of institutions and their point in a set of democratic political arrangements; both are in turn enhanced by the affective satisfaction experienced and achieved by those who have expanded their life-horizons in cognitive content and skills in complex forms of intellectual operation on which, upon reflection, they now prefer to spend their non-working time.

There is a complex inter-play between all three, that makes education for a more highly-skilled work-force *at the same time* an education for better democracy *and* a more rewarding life. That is why the whole

notion and value of ‘life-long learning for all’ has to be seen as a complex and multi-faceted process, that begins in pre-school times, is carried on through compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and training, and is then continued throughout life, through provision of such learning experiences, activities and enjoyment in the work-place, in universities and colleges, and in other educational, social and cultural agencies and institutions – of both a formal and informal kind – within the community.

In respect to the development of policy, this approach, this triadic emphasis, requires a far greater, more coherent and consistent, better co-ordinated and integrated, more multi-faceted approach to learning and to realising a ‘life-long learning’ approach *for all* than has hitherto been the case. This is not to say, however, that there has been little previous attack on this problem. On the contrary, international agencies, such as OECD has been engaged in the analysis and discussion of the idea of ‘life-long learning’ for many years. The concept of ‘recurrent education’, for example, as a proposed *entitlement* that would give adults as well as young people the opportunities for personal fulfilment and professional improvement, that result from further learning, figured large in the Activities of the OECD during the 1970s. That concern has not disappeared. More recently, however, the notion of ‘life-long learning’ has taken on a far more complex and protean character, especially in policy discussions.

The central elements in what we have described as the triadic nature of life-long learning –

- For economic progress and development
- For democratic understanding and activity
- For personal development and fulfilment

– are now seen as fundamental to bringing about a more democratic polity and set of social institutions, in which the principles and ideals of social inclusiveness, justice and equity are present, practised and promoted; an economy which is strong, adaptable and competitive; and a richer range of provision of those activities on which individual members of society are able to choose to spend their time and energy, for the personal rewards and satisfactions that they confer. To bring this about nothing less than a substantial re-appraisal of the provision, resourcing and goals of education & training, and a major re-orientation of its direction towards the concept and value of the idea of ‘the learning society’ will be required.

PROVISION OF LIFE LONG LEARNING: THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN CONCEPTION AND PRACTICE

In his summary of the themes, challenges and issues raised at the *First Global Conference on Life Long Learning* held in Rome, December 1994 Sir Christopher Ball highlighted one of the main findings of the conference – that the present configuration of institutional provisions, public policies and prevailing practices militate against the realisation of the learning society and a life long approach to learning for all. Sir Christopher Ball commented:

Our traditional and inherited systems of education and training have failed to create ‘learning societies’ in which everyone is motivated and enabled to practice life long learning... Existing systems of education and training tend to favour an elite of fast learners to focus on teaching rather than learning and to overemphasise initial education at the expense of life long learning. What is required is not more of the same. If we are to reach the unreached and include the excluded, more must mean different. The key principle governing provision in the future must be the primacy of personal responsibility for learning, encouraged and enabled by the support of the whole community... For organisations the fundamental requirement is the development of the idea of learning organisations. For governments the threefold task is of setting targets for learning, gradually transferring the resources for learning from those who provide teaching to those who undertake learning, and developing in cooperation a global system of qualifications, guaranteed by reliable arrangements for quality assurance.

A conference held jointly by OECD/CERI and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Tokyo in October 1993 highlighted the importance of policy makers' grappling with a number of administrative and organisational questions and issues if they are to realise the goal of life long learning for all.

First, there is wide agreement that governments need to assume a significant role in coordinating the provision of life long learning: for example, it is clear that governments have a role in providing the best possible information and guidance on the options available as well as validating them through a solid and well articulated qualifications