CONDITIONS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning, I suggest, is dependent on and can be encouraged through the development of certain conditions. I describe these conditions as resulting in capacity, including awareness and understanding of both one's self and their environment. In this paper these conditions are introduced, based on an holistic approach to learning.

KEYWORDS

lifelong learning – capacity-development – self-awareness – identity – situational understanding

INTRODUCTION

In keeping with the theme of this conference, 'reflecting on successes and reframing futures', I begin with a very brief overview of some of the key aspects of the development of the concept of lifelong learning to recognise where we have come from and how it shapes our way forward. As Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch (2001, foreword) note,

> The philosophy of learning throughout life is anything but modern. Ancient societies all over the world have emphasized the need to learn from the cradle to the grave.

This is evident, for example, in Plato's, *The Republic*. Despite its ancient roots , a new paradigm of lifelong education was introduced to the world in 1972 in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) publication, *Learning to Be: The world of education today and tomorrow*. This 'new' approach (at least to education, on a world basis) placed lifelong education in a humanistic framework, emphasising personal fulfilment. The general theme was education as a means of creating self-awareness.

More recently, however, there has been a shift in focus in much of the literature from education to learning. This is reflected in a key follow-up report released by UNESCO in 1996, *Learning: The treasure within*. This report identified four 'pillars' of learning for supporting lifelong learning in the twenty-first century: Learning to know, Learning to do, Learning to live together, and with each other, and Learning to be. Regardless of the terminology, in this report the focus on the role learning plays in personal development with repeated reference to self-knowledge and self-understanding is again striking. Lifelong learning, according to the report: "…should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social roles at work and in the community" (UNESCO, 1996, p. 19).

Without getting into a detailed history of the developments with regard to lifelong education and learning in countries around the world, it is suffice to say that significant activity has taken place around this concept, and how it can be embraced. Burns (2000, p. 44) describes this activity as a "growing mandate from the late 1990's for lifelong education to integrate a constellation of individual, social and economic goals".

Despite this growing acceptance and enormous activity with regard to lifelong learning it seems there is still a long way to go given the continual discussion of lifelong learning and repeated affirmation of the need for the basic changes first outlined in 1972, both in reports produced by organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Union (EU), as well as individual countries.

One reason for this may be that while lifelong learning has increasingly been cited as one of the key principles in the educational and development fields, there is no shared understanding of its usage. The diversity of understanding of this concept has been shaped by historical, political, economic and geographical factors.

Increasing, however, the dominant factor in these different characterisations of lifelong is the economic perspective. The economic based argument leads us to believe that skilled workers directly leads to improved performance and ultimately achievement of organisational goals, that is, that there is a direct correlation between the two. This is problematic because it leads to regulation, structure and formalisation of learning. This typically includes competency-based training systems and generally an over-formalising of learning. Hager & Halliday

(2006, p. 4) argue that we need to 'recover' informal learning and to do that we need a: "…different conception of rationalism which is much less deterministic than commonly supposed".

Additionally, the overall result of drawing the attention of policy makers to the rhetoric of lifelong learning, is the paradoxical shift in the responsibility for developing learning opportunities for adults from governments to the individual and organisations. That is, an emphasis on individual, as opposed to a collective, learning experience. And as the lifelong learner concept has evolved into the idea of a learning society, this concept has also been raised in that context (Raggett, Edwards & Small, 1995).

Rather than approach lifelong learning from a systematic, structured, formalised and increasing individualistic perspective, I propose a more holistic approach, based on *capacity-development*. This notion requires that we leave behind the deterministic and reductionist approach to learning and take into account all factors at play in a persons' life; it gets us back to where lifelong learning (and education) started, a beginning point centred in personal development, self-awareness, self-directed learning and generally, individuals with capacity to adapt and learn in different situations throughout their lives. This approach not only truly prepares a person for lifelong learning but also more fully enables workers to make better use of learning, especially informal learning. Consequently, regardless of the factors that shape the support and need for lifelong learning, it can in fact become a reality.

Capacity in this context can be thought of as a condition for lifelong learning – a condition necessary for attracting a person's attention to learning, enabling them to learn, and benefiting from what they learn (individually and/or in a broader sense, such as socially or within an organisation)[13].

This, in principle, is not different to what has been advocated before (by UNESCO and others researching learning in the context of higher education and work). However, rather than imagine that this will occur as a part of lifelong 'education', I suggest specific focus must be placed on first developing capacity as a pre-condition to lifelong learning, so that people are

able to learn gainfully throughout their lifelong. Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, the departure or innovation in my proposal lies in the (holistic) approach in which I suggest this capacity is developed.

In this paper I introduce the concept of capacity-development based on a holistic approach, so as to achieve lifelong learning. To begin, I first outline what I mean by an holistic approach to learning. I then discuss the idea of capacity-development in terms of learning, to explain why it is a pre-condition to lifelong learning. Finally, this paper ends with some concluding remarks regarding the implementation of these ideas.

Holistic approach to lifelong learning

Learning is a dynamic phenomenon, involving a range of variables, and therefore can only be truly understood by considering the whole and acknowledging associated complexities. The idea of an holistic approach to learning is as ancient as the concept of lifelong learning but has not yet happened in practice, although the support for it is strong throughout the literature on learning.

The essence of these ideas was the basis of Dewey's (1896) explanations of learning, which he described as 'organic' and 'environmentally embedded'. Dewey's 'organic learning' refers to a non-dualistic approach to learning, meaning it engages the whole person. Beckett & Hager (2002, p. 165) more specifically describe this organic type learning as having an holistic, integrative emphasis on learning that,

> *aims to avoid other dualisms common in educational writing such as mind/body, thought/action, pure/applied, education/training, intrinsic/instrumental, internal/external, learner/world, knowing that/knowing how, and process/product.*

Holistic learning involves: the recognition that all the variables are relevant and important. This allows one to accept and acknowledge research resulting from a reductionist approach and based on 'false dualisms' (Hodkinson, 2005), but only such that they help advance an understanding of aspects of learning that are then considered as part of a whole. Indeed, "[h]olism accepts that a whole is constructed out of many smaller parts, but it considers that those smaller parts create, via interaction, more than the sum of the separate parts" (Baets, 2006, p. 20). It also raises awareness of the interdependent nature of the learner, whose self is characterised by a process of becoming, and the activity-based nature of learning which is experiential and collaborative (Beckett & Hager, 2002).

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13 I note the use of the term 'capacity' is deliberate; refer McManus (2007) for a discussion of the meaning of the term and a comparison to other similar terms.

An holistic approach to learning exposes and embraces the complexity of learning and indeed the risks associated with it. The increasing support for an holistic, embodied approach to learning is partially founded in the recognition of the weakness in isolating issues and promoting them as focal points of a general theory. When simplicity and equilibrium are emphasised in research, problems or phenomena are studied in isolation from their context and mostly ignore mutual interactions (Prigogine, 1997).

The central problem with the fragmented, segregationist approach to learning is rooted in the decreasing relevance and validity of the current view of learning (for example, as described by Beckett & Hager, 2002, pp. 96-100). A segregationist and reductionist approach allows learning to be configured and re-configured in temporary and unhelpful forms, always ignoring relationality; an holistic approach overcomes this problem, as it is a more integrated approach. An holistic approach incorporates individual behaviour, emotion, social and cultural aspects of learning.

One main risk in taking an holistic approach is that every situation is rendered unique, and therefore difficult to generalise or theorise, that the whole becomes unwieldy and unmanageable, and that nothing will be gained but confusion. However, one cannot make sense of part of the picture or adequately address a small part without knowing and understanding the whole. Wheatley (2006, p.5) suggests that: "[t]he layers of complexity, the sense of things being beyond our control and out of control, are but signals of our failure to understand a deeper reality of organizations, and of life in general".

Dealing with the complexity of an holistic approach

The traditional scientific view or "reigning paradigm of observation" (Baets, 2006, p. 37) has been the basis of the belief that people's decision processes can be captured in rules (for example, with respect to human capital theory). Baets (2006, p. 37) suggests this has been overstated and infers the paradigm of objectivity has been brought into question as a result. Complexity theory, he claims, affords us new insight to better understand the dynamic relation between subjectivity and knowledge, extending educational discourses to cultural and ecological levels. These new discoveries (founded in science) must be incorporated into our approach to lifelong learning.

Complexity theory is the study of complex systems; and chaos is a particular mode of

complex behaviour, as is order. A complex system can at one time behave chaotically but on other occasions appear perfectly deterministic, a simpler behaviour. As a result, complex systems are described as unpredictable (Baets, 1998).

Complexity theory fundamentally questions causality, as it provides an explanation of the non-linear. It applies where there are many uncontrolled, unobservable variables which undermine any attempt to claim a cause and effect relationship. The individual components of a complex system adapt themselves in a process that is not centrally controlled and that ultimately leads to a whole of which the sum cannot be traced back to the behaviour of the individual parts.

Applying this theory to organisations as systems (Waldrop, 1992) and individuals (Maturana & Varela, 1980), as living systems, creates a new perspective: under this scenario, organisations are a group of components (people) which are interacting with each other and pursuing their own individual goals (self-organising). That is, these systems create order by themselves, by apparently modifying know-what and know-how as a consequence of interaction with the environment and its effects on actions and beliefs of the living system and others (Holland, 1995). Every process contributes to all other processes. The entire network is engaged together in producing itself (Capra, 1996, p. 99). And change is prompted only when someone decides that changing is the only way to maintain themselves (Wheatley, 2006, p. 20). Taking this perspective enables one to approach learning holistically in a manageable way.

Stacey (1996, p. 264) explains the implications:

> *What the science of complexity adds is a different theory of causality, one in which creative systems are subject to radical unpredictability, to the loss of the connection between action and long-term outcome. The purpose of the theory and the research is then to indicate how conditions might be established within which spontaneous self-organisation might occur to produce emergent outcomes.*

Capacity-development and lifelong learning

Acknowledging that we exist within complex systems, and that individuals themselves are a form of a complex, self-organising system, necessitates that we accept that there is not a direct causal link between learning and performance as briefly outlined above. Instead, it is shown that individuals will set their own goals and operate in a self-organising way

(through their actions) to achieve them (Baets, 2006, p. 69),

Consequently, what is required is a means for encouraging, as far as possible, awareness and means for, and benefits of, alignment of individual workers' goals and their employer organisations. The critical learning that must take place then, must be about oneself and the situation one finds themselves, and how one can develop or grow to meet the challenges within that situation. I describe this process as capacity-development.

The link between capacity-development and lifelong learning is established through focus on enabling the learner to improve their self-awareness: an understanding of who they are, how they learn, what motivates them, and why they do what they do (in the context they are operating in, such as social or work, although this would necessarily encompass personal issues). This may require the learner to be able to deconstruct their predispositions (Heidegger, 1962) so that they can better understand why they interpret a situation as they do and be more aware that others may see it differently. That is, by coming to know oneself, it helps to know others and ultimately the environments and situations one finds themselves. Hinchliffe (2006, p. 107) explains this 'situational understanding' as:

> *...providing the dimensions through which situations can be researched – in respect of meaning and flourishing. Moreover, by giving the activity of research a situational focus it is transformed from a pursuit undertaken by the discrete individual into one that is a shared, joint endeavour whereby persons can test and try out their different understandings.*

As such, capacity-development draws the learners' awareness not only to themselves, but to their situation or environment (on various levels) and encourages them to begin to rationalise how the two function together – and if they do not function well together, how the differences can be minimised or eradicated.

So not unlike the existing literature relating to lifelong learning, what I advocate for capacity-development includes development of 'skills' around learning. What, however, is evident in the literature is a narrow conception of skills largely based on an atomistic view of learning, focussing on either the individual or an organisation (social). The *relationality* of these is not addressed. Additionally, we are generally operating based on the flawed assumption that there is a direct causality between training or

learning and being effective (at whatever it is we are learning about). For capacity-development (and designing learning using an holistic approach) there is a need to focus on linkages, giving prominence to relationality; the individual and social dimensions necessarily are inextricably linked throughout the development process.

As noted above, an emerging body of work which applies complexity theory to organisations and individuals provides an explanation for, and ultimately a way to deal with, this relationality and interdependence (refer for example, Antonacopoulou, 2006; Baets, 2006; Stacey, 2007; and Wheatley, 2006). Applying this concept enables actions and experiences to be used in developing capacity in learners. A more recent focus on agency and its relevance has begun, which contributes to the application of these ideas in practice. Beckett's (2006; also refer Beckett & McManus, 2006) work enables a better understanding of agency, a more 'holistic agency' theory, where the whole is presented in such a way as to understand context and 'will-ful action'.

The benefits of understanding the role of agency in learning can be reaped through holistic and integrated enaction of relevant learning strategies promoted in the literature on learning. This approach does not isolate one specific idea as key, but embraces the core of each of these ideas, reconnecting them in a situationally specific way to the whole – the whole person and the whole situation (for example, the workplace). Thus agency is shown to be inextricably linked to self-awareness and thus identity. That is, it is designed such that learners can be inwardly focussed, and develop as individuals, within their outward context, thus developing capacity in a particular context. This capacity is four fold: capacity in the sense of potential, capacity to grow and adapt, capacity to be more attuned to one's environment, and capacity to better focus efforts on activities that will create positive outcomes (and in the workplace this includes benefits for the worker and the employer).

In consideration of developing this capacity then, the connection between action and self-awareness or identity must be taken into account. In the context of workers' identity in an organisation, Stacey (2003, pp. 331) presents ideas regarding learning as the activity of *interdependent* people, where he claims learning: "can only be understood in terms of self-organising communicative interaction and power relating where identities are potentially transformed". As a consequence, Stacey points

out that learning gives rise to anxiety because it challenges the learner and their identity.

The essence of the foremost argument in support of recognising the significance of agency, is that learning changes the learners. Notions of the self, especially as these revolve around self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-belief, are shaped by learning and potentially educative practices. In short, these practices are agentive; they imply and invoke identity construction and re-construction, not merely for the individual, but also inter-subjectively. And consequently, it is argued that agency shapes selfhood, or identity, in ways that have a direct bearing on certain educative practices for adults (Beckett & McManus, 2006).

The idea of capacity-development then, encapsulating agency and identity in an holistic way, shifts us closer to the goal of achieving lifelong learners; learners with self-awareness and situational awareness.

CONCLUSION

The core focus of this paper has been to present an argument that lifelong learning is best achieved by first developing capacity in a learner to learn, and continue to adapt and learn as their circumstance change. The argument is premised on a claim that an holistic approach to learning is essential. That is, all aspects of learning need to be addressed. Typically this position is supported but not applied in practice, due the widely held belief that to do so would be unmanageable. It is proposed, however, that if we shift our understanding of people and environments in which they operate (such as organisations and communities) to take account of complexity theory then this is in fact possible. Complexity theory provides an explanation of the driving forces of complex systems and thus provides a way of understanding them as a whole such that we can impact on them. Not in a direct cause and effect way, but by providing the learner with an understanding of how they operate and why, and thus an opportunity to reflect on that and adjust it, if desired. Critical to this approach is to understand that individuals are self-organising, they set their own goals and act for the purpose of fulfilling them.
The next crucial step is to explore ways of applying the notion of capacity-development presented in this paper in a range of situations. It has been implemented, with great success thus far, in the workplace (Beckett & McManus, 2006). This could be expanded to other situations in life. But ultimately, with wider acceptance of the need for capacity to learn throughout life, I hope that the necessary

conditions are developed early in life, beginning with primary and secondary schooling.

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