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THE DISCOURSES OF LIFELONG LEARNING: GLOBAL, NATIONAL OR...?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at deconstructing lifelong learning as a concept and idea in Australia, the USA, and Sweden. The study is built on a discourse analysis of different web-based documents. The results of the study are structured round the words: life, long, and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is a concept that at first glimpse seems self-evident, but when the surface is scratched different layers of understanding appear. The concept has been widespread around the world since the United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) first introduced it in the 1960s. Over the years, political organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO have diffused the concept of lifelong learning and its embedded ideologies. Despite this global diffusion of the concept leading to an apparent consensus about the meaning of lifelong learning, there are many interpretations of its meaning, and of its relevance in different contexts. This paper aims at studying some different discursive expressions of lifelong learning, as they appear in different kinds of written documentations, in three national contexts that represent western thinking: the USA, Sweden (as being a part of the European Union), and Australia. The idea of the study at hand is to get a picture of the

discourse formation on lifelong learning as a phenomenon and concept, that is *mapping the talk* (in this case "talk" as it appears in written form) of the users to find similarities and differences among different users and user-groups. The analysis aims at deconstructing the meaning that different users give lifelong learning, and showing how they discuss its usage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lifelong learning as discourse

Lifelong learning is a commonly-used expression in many contexts in many different national and international settings. Politicians, educational planners, teachers, human resource managers, economists, and many others talk about lifelong learning in a variety of situations and contexts. On the surface the expression may seem rather self-evident since it is built up by well known, everyday words, but lifelong learning is likely to be interpreted, understood, and used in different ways by different users in

different contexts. Therefore, there cannot be any absolute definition of lifelong learning. The term takes on whatever meaning the users in different discourses give it.

Discourse is often described as a certain way of understanding and talking about something; the relation between word and world (MacLure, 2003). Through language expressions, lifelong learning is given its meaning, which in its specific context of use, discourse, is also loaded with different sets of values connected to the concept itself. Since the expression lifelong learning is built up by the common words “lifelong”, which in itself is construed by the words “life” and “long”, and “learning”, it is easily associated with the kinds of representations different users and user-groups have made and still make of these words.

Discourse, culture, and context

There are different layers of discourses: international and national discourses, discourses in different sectors, etc. A discourse analysis based on papers on lifelong learning from the International Conference of Lifelong Learning: Global Perspectives in Education held in Beijing (UNESCO, 2001) identified an emerging *metadiscourse* on lifelong learning. According to the study this metadiscourse holds underlying philosophies on human development and theories of knowledge shared especially within western thinking, but expressed as if being a “universal truth”. One of the reasons why a metadiscourse on lifelong learning has emerged is likely to be the importance it has been given by large international political organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Melnik & Tuijnman, 2002). It is often argued that the metadiscourse on lifelong learning celebrates neo-liberal values on rationality, economy, and the individual (Gouthro, 2002; Field, 2000). Adult education and learning is an important imperative of the metadiscourse on lifelong learning. The idea is that we live in a new kind of society, the knowledge society or learning society, where the kind of knowledge learnt in school is not regarded as enough to meet the constantly changing demands of the labour market. Unemployment is, to a large extent, thought of as a result of a mismatch between new labour-market needs and people’s outdated irrelevant competencies (Belanger & Valdivielso, 1997).

Beneath this meta-level, the UNESCO report found a north-south and east-west divide. The south discourse talked about education for all, often in terms of basic education and minimum learning needs; whereas the north discourse focused on learning for all. The different discourses are a result of different structural and economic conditions that, in turn, are due to different historical developments. The east-west divide has less to do with structural or economic conditions and more to do with culture and traditions. Western culture has a tradition of celebrating rationality, and views knowledge as something objective, whereas eastern thinking views knowledge as subjective and instrumental and centred on social morals (UNESCO, 2001).

Each nation has its own history leading to its own traditions and identity. This identity, although not necessarily shared ideologically by all its citizens, is expressed in the language used, in its metaphors, keywords, topics talked about, etc. This could be called a national discourse. That is, the way people in a country talk about a topic such as lifelong learning. Its meanings are taken for granted in the conversation, and if associated ideas don’t come to mind, or are considered politically incorrect, then they are not discussed.

Discourses can also occur within organizations, communities, or other specific groups where people have some kind of communication or commonalities between each other. The way people talk and think about lifelong learning in the industry sector for example, may cross national borders and be an industry-specific discourse rather than a national discourse. Thus, the talk within a particular organization within a sector – for example, within an international company – may carry the same meaning when talking about lifelong learning and thus be part of the same discourse; a discourse that may differ from the meaning the concept is given in a different sector such as the school-discourse across the street.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is built on an analysis of different kinds of documents¹ that represent the discourses of political and governmental groups, education providers of various kinds, and the labour markets in Sweden, Australia, and the

¹ See the reference list – all documents used in the analysis are marked with an asterisk *.

USA – all being part of the western discourse on education and learning. The number of documents representative of each country varies. This is not to be regarded as a problem since the study is based on the content of what is said about lifelong learning and how the concept is discussed, not on how many people discussed it. Most of the texts from the USA are from the Clinton era. When searching the Internet for documentation on lifelong learning in the USA the topic seems to have been “hotter” on the policy agenda during the Clinton administration than for the Bush administration. In Australia, on the other hand, lifelong learning is easy to find on the Internet and therefore seems to be an issue of ongoing importance. Even in Sweden documentation on lifelong learning is easily targeted. There are often references to the European Union lifelong-learning policies since Sweden is part of the union. The Swedish texts used in this paper are dated since the Swedish document study was made in late 2002. My experience tells me, however, that the content of the documents in terms of discourse is still relevant. The texts have been read and analysed in an attempt to understand how the concept of lifelong learning is used and understood by the writers and publishers as a discursive expression of the specific context in which they have been written. The analysis is built on the kind of language used in each document by looking at headlines, keywords (identified by me as the carriers of meaning and importance in the document), binaries (opposites used in the rhetoric to emphasise, e.g., what is regarded as good or bad, desired or not desired), metaphors and phrases, and other characteristics of the documents.

RESULTS

In this paper I have chosen to present some of the findings by relating them to the concept of lifelong learning itself. I have done this by separating the concept in its three parts: life, long and learning. I have grouped the central aspects and themes of lifelong learning found in the documents as they relate to these three words. This kind of approach catches some of the main ideas and values concerning lifelong learning, but naturally leaves out other aspects. The presentation of the results is based on a comparison of the three nations studied. This means that the different kinds of documents representing each country have been weighted and dealt with together, which gives a one-dimensional picture of each country that in some

ways may be somewhat misleading. My attempt has, however, been to catch the main usage and debates of each country. Some of the documents are critical of the policies on lifelong learning in the source country, but in their critique they help identify the heart of lifelong learning as it is used in that country.

Life

The word life, as the first part of lifelong learning, seems to be dealt with in different ways in Australia, the USA, and Sweden. In Australia the emphasis lies on working life and community life. The individual learner is emphasised in many of the documents as being an important resource in society – and in community life as an active citizen. Social inclusion and social wellbeing is stressed within the Australian discourse. Lifelong learning is seen as a means to even out the socio-economic differences in society and improve the social conditions of the less-educated part of the population. Life in the American discourse focuses on working life and citizenry, but somewhat differently than in Australia. Lifelong learning is put forward as a resource for the individual to increase his or her employability on the labour market. By getting a better education, meaning a higher education, the individual is likely to get a better-paid job. Life quality is thus valued in economic terms. The citizenry issue is talked of in terms of as being able to make informed choices, which is supposed to benefit democracy. In Sweden life is also talked of as working life. Many documents also talk about lifewide learning, meaning life taken as a whole, including areas outside the labour market. Lifelong learning for one’s own personal reasons, regardless of immediate company needs, is regarded as having a spill-over effect on working life as well.

Long

In Australia this issue is not discussed as a specific matter – if judged by the studied documents. The documents often refer to adults in general, but do not deal with the issue further. In the USA this seems to be a matter of great concern. It is clearly stressed that lifelong learning is for adults, but not just any adults. Since lifelong learning has, more or less, been given the meaning “adult education” in the USA, it has been structurally separated from compulsory education and regular postsecondary education. To be a “regular adult”, in the sense

of getting access to the lifelong learning resources provided, you must either not attend postsecondary education or, after finishing postsecondary education have a part-time job and, in addition, be “doing lifelong learning”. What it means to be an adult is thoroughly discussed and defined in the documents. In Sweden the *lifelong* aspect has been given extra consideration. As life does not start when one leaves school and becomes an adult, lifelong learning has to start early in life, “already in preschool”, according to the rhetoric. Lifelong learning is something that goes on during one’s whole lifespan, even as an elderly person after having left the labour market.

Learning

The discourses found in the documents on lifelong learning put the strongest emphasis on learning, or rather on one aspect of learning – education. The Australian documents focus on the importance of lifelong learning in terms of learning needed skills for the companies in the labour market. The words re-skilling and re-training are identified as important in the documents since the labour market is said to have changed, providing new kinds of jobs as a result. Besides specific company needs there is also a concern that people gain literacy; numeracy; and information-literacy skills, which are also described as computer literacy skills. Learning includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning, and education and training, all of which are seen as important for becoming a well informed citizen who takes an active social part in learning communities, learning cities, learning institutions, and organizations. Although there is a focus on fulfilling labour market and societal needs, there is a paradoxical emphasis on the individual as a customer. Australia is seeking to build a lifelong learning system, which is described as a network or partnership between different educational providers. It is then up to the individual to “buy” the kinds of educational or learning services he or she chooses. Many of the documents discuss the “problem” that people encounter as barriers to learning. This problem is mainly discussed as inner personal barriers. It is seen as vital for the individual to have a positive attitude towards learning and to have an identity as a “lifelong learner”. The individual is supposed to be self-motivated and self-directed and able to invest time and money in their own competence development.

The American rhetoric is similar to the Australian in emphasising learning through education and training to meet labour market needs, but the individual and his or her future improvement of life chances are more specifically stressed. Instead of talking of reskilling, the term “upgrading of skills” is used. The words may mean the same thing in practice, but may sound different to people representing the different discourses, and to those who are supposed to engage in lifelong learning activities. The implication of reskilling could easily be understood as “all I knew and did before is useless and old-fashioned, I have to start all over again”, whereas upgrading may give a feeling that “I did okay, but I need to learn some new skills”. Learners in the USA are also seen as customers or clients. Educational providers offer learning and educational opportunities, often accessible on the Internet, that people can choose between.

The employability aspect of lifelong learning is clearly visible in the Swedish discourse as well. The direct link to specific company needs is not so strong, however. Education and learning is often regarded as a good in itself, something that gives status on the labour market almost regardless of the subject you may have studied. In Sweden the question about validation of knowledge and skills is a hot issue on the political and educational agenda. The question of upgrading individual competences is emphasised. Lifelong learning is often talked of as a tool in the political rhetoric, a tool that will be essential to gain economic growth and prosperity of the nation, companies, and individuals. Even in Sweden “lifelong learners” have become customers. This is a change in the Swedish identity. As customers, people are supposed to be active and make choices between different alternatives. This is a relatively new situation in Sweden where many people, especially those who are older, are not used to making these kinds of choices. By tradition they have been offered an alternative by the authorities or employers on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Table 1 shows the main trends within the three national discourses and how they are divided between the categories “life”, “long” and “learning”.

DISCUSSION

The metadiscourse on lifelong learning seems to have a powerful impact on the national discourses that were examined in this study. “Rationality”, “Economy”, and the “Individual” are strongly emphasised keywords of the western discourse, and are clearly expressed in all three of the studied discourses. The studied nations all stress the importance of strategic planning of education and learning as a vital tool for economic growth and prosperity. Adult

education is seen as a most useful tool to be used on the national labour market in order to be competitive on the global market. The global economy seems to have become the new god or religion of our time.

Nations, organizations, and individuals give their votive gifts to the global economy in terms of commitment to education and learning – becoming “lifelong learners”. Two old questions about life come to mind: What shall we live for? What shall we live off? The second question has

	Life	Long	Learning
Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working life and community life (social) The individual is responsible for his/her own personal development and is also an important resource within learning communities and learning cities 	Adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapted to company needs and for social and democratic participation in society/community life Literacy, numeracy and information literacy skills Re-skilling/retraining Learners as customers Formal and non-formal lifelong learning systems/networks/ partnerships offers learning opportunities Positive attitudes towards learning and being a “lifelong learner”
USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working life and citizenry 	“Regular” adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful knowledge to be employable on the labour market and having a higher income Literacy, numeracy and information literacy skills Upgrade skills Learners as customers Educational providers offers learning/educational opportunities Knowledge to make informed life decisions
Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working life and personal development (lifewide) 	The whole lifespan from preschool to elderly people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning for employability Lifelong learning as a tool – a political idea of making Sweden a leading knowledge nation, which is argued to lead to economical growth and prosperity of the nation Upgrade skills Learning and education for personal growth Learners as customers Formal and non-formal education offers learning opportunities

Table 1. Patterns in national discourses about lifelong learning.

its obvious answer in the western discourse on lifelong learning by focusing on productivity, competition, and economic planning. Education and lifelong learning in terms of adult education seems to be an appropriate strategy to survive in a world of global competition. The reason for survival, the meaning of life in quality terms seems, to a large extent, to have been left out of today's discourse on lifelong learning, but not entirely. There are at least three reasons mentioned where education and lifelong learning is giving life some sort of meaning: for personal economic improvement, for social inclusion and equity, and for personal lifewide development.

The national differences in defining who is a "lifelong learner" raises a number of questions. Should lifelong learning be for adults only? And if so, then who is considered an adult? Or, on the other hand, should lifelong learning be considered an individual attitude focusing on learning that is fostered at an early age so that it becomes a natural part of a person's life for the rest of his or her days? The different opinions on whom lifelong learning is for reflect the deeper meanings that lifelong learning is given within each discourse. If lifelong learning is seen as something objectified, it is regarded as an article of consumption and may be bought by a customer – a lifelong learner – on the educational market. Today the market selling lifelong learning products only deals with education for adults. If, on the other hand, lifelong learning is seen as an individual attitude or desire to learn more, then it cannot be regarded as a product on the market. In that case, lifelong learning has more to do with *Bildung* and reflection than with the educational structures.

This paper has dealt with the metadiscourse and three national discourses on lifelong learning that are representative of western countries, and has not specifically studied other more specific discourses such as different political discourses, company and organizational discourses, etc. Comparing these kinds of discourses with each other and with national discourses and the metadiscourse would be an interesting challenge for further studies.

CONCLUSION

The three countries in this study, Australia, the USA, and Sweden all represent the so-called metadiscourse on lifelong learning which rests

heavily on western neo-liberal values. In all three countries learning for working life and the global economy are taken for granted in the discussion on lifelong learning. Adult education and learning of different kinds are mostly regarded as products to be bought by customers (lifelong learners) on an educational market. This trend is apparent in all three countries, but in Sweden, and to a certain extent Australia, lifelong learning is also regarded as a personal *Bildung* project, that is development for personal reasons, not "just" to satisfy labour-market needs. Who is regarded as a "lifelong learner" differs between the countries. In the USA and Australia lifelong learning is mentioned in terms of adult learners, whereas lifelong learning in Sweden is supposed to start at young ages and to continue through the whole lifespan.

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