Ignoring Diversity: Lifelong Learning As Cultural Imperialism

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Abstract: Lifelong learning is often seen as self-evidently good and directed primarily at individual personal growth, career development and self-actualisation. In this paper, equity practitioners at Central Queensland University will argue that despite the contemporary focus on Lifelong Learning, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of the ways formal learning settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive. Attention needs to be paid to the way **self** is understood within different cultures and the extent to which this may influence different conceptualisations of lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning should be about human development rather than merely for human resource development. To learn what is good, learners must identify for themselves what values are central to human development and well being, and how such values are transmitted and distorted in the interests of the powerful. Lifelong Learning should not be about coercing certain groups in society to meet the heights of achievement demanded by the dominant group. The dogma that institutionalised learning never ends places unfair and unreasonable pressure on learners, especially those who are already under pressure.

Educators need to be prepared to accept strong philosophical and ideological differences in how lifelong learning is legitimised in different cultures. Institutionalised lifelong learning may not be the bridge to community values. Instead of seeking to rationalise lifelong learning within the familiar, we need to accept new ways of thinking. We need to draw on traditional learning systems to enhance formalised learning. Not to do so will perpetuate the lie that Lifelong Learning is superior to traditional learning systems.

Introduction

There are three assumptions underpinning my presentation this morning, these are: one that Lifelong Learning can be a mechanism for exclusion and control, two that institutionalised lifelong learning can create new and powerful inequalities in pluralistic societies and three, that those who have the weakest capacity for constantly updating their formal qualifications, are less and less likely to have access to marketable knowledge thus further reinforcing the divide between the haves and have-nots.

The purpose of this paper is to share some reflections on how lifelong learning can be conceptualised beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills to meet the human resource needs of an ever-changing world. Much has been said and written about continous change requiring continous learning. In this context, lifelong learning has become commodified, a product of economic determinism and is lacking in commitment to social justice and equity.

The opportunity to access and participate in continous learning, especially at institutions such as universities, is increasingly dependent on the ability to pay. How would this evolving 'for profit' institutional paradigm affect lifelong learning? How do we nurture those who, even if they can pay, have not experienced success in learning in formal systems?

If we accept that lifelong learning is self-evidently good and has the potential to contribute to the greater good of communities, then we need to motivate learners to learn throughout their lives. This would require adequate socio-political arrangements to enable institutions and community agencies to promote and support learning both in formal and informal contexts.

> **"Lifelong Learning is about creating literate and learning environments so that women and men and their children can develop their learning potential and sustain that learning to become lifelong learners. For lifelong learning environments to become a reality, institutional arrangements on the basis of new alliances and coalitions are essential; learning and education strategies need to go beyond conventional education frameworks, and the multiplicity of learning contexts, experiences and competencies need to be recognised and promoted."**
> A.Ouane, Director UNESCO Institute for Education, 2002

We need to also accept the legitimacy of different conceptualisations of lifelong learning other that of institutionalised continous learning with its economic and vocational orientations. The vision for lifelong learning should be for sustainable development of people and their communities. In the words of Agenda 21 – Programme of Action for Sustainable Development: UNESCO

> **"Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues".**

More and more people are believing that a full and meaningful life is possible and are ready to harness their energies to protest against unethical developments that perpetuate the unequal distribution of wealth and resources in the world. Both formal education and non-formal education are indispensable to changing people's attitudes so that they have the capacity to assess their sustainable development concerns. There is growing recognition that lifelong learning should be more than human resource development. It should be about human development. The contribution that adult learners can make to alleviating poverty, participating in decision-making, to protecing the environment, to contributing to the development of their communities, to promoting gender justice, to ensuring peaceful co-existence and increasing understanding among people in pluralistic societies all point to a multifaceted approach to lifelong learning.

In exploring different conceptualisations of lifelong learning, it is critical to acknowledge how the concepts of **schooling and education** are differentiated in some cultures, how **learning that happens outside of the formal systems** is considered significant and how the development of **'self'** is mediated by family and socially directed priorities. Consideration of these concepts may highlight the need for educators in the business of providing life long learning to consider the diversity of learning needs that need to be addressed. It should also highlight the need to acknowledge that formal learning can complement and sustain informal learning.

Concepts of schooling and education

Schooling is accepted as the provision of learning opportunity in a formal setting for some predetermined length of time. Many non-western nations, especially those in Asia, make the distinction between formalised learning and the ongoing learning through every day lived experiences. School or formal learning happens in designated places called schools, often characterised by set curricula, pre-determined learning activities, entrenched instruction methodologies and pre-ordained accreditation requirements.

In a traditional sense, an individual is 'educated' by one's family and relatives, by religious elders, people at the workplace, the street, the union, libraries, sports, the media, cultural pursuits and a whole range of stimuli. Hence, it is very important to pay attention when one is referred to as being 'schooled' rather than 'educated'. The former descriptor is meant to convey that though one is learned, the individual is somewhat limited in ability to see the world through the eyes of wisdom that is accorded to the individual who is 'educated'. The learning of the 'schooled' is school focussed while the learning of the educated is considered to be life focussed. It is believed that formal and institutional experience does not adequately equip people to cope with life's challenges. (Refer to Maiden S 2004 'Uni graduates lacking basic skills', The Australian June 10 2004)

Prophet Mohammed urged his followers to 'seek knowledge from cradle to the grave'. Mahatma Gandhi considered education as 'liberation' well before Paulo Freire. Gandhi considered education as a moral path, as a service to the self, the community and the nation.

The differentiation between formal schooling or institutionalised learning and real life learning is clearly understood by ethnic minorities and cultural groups who have to learn another way of learning in institutional settings. At the most fundamental level, they have to learn English, learn in English and learn about English. They have to internalise the formal curriculum provided by the institution and another layer of education, sometimes referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' that is provided by tacit messages of society and culture, particularly by the mass media of the dominant culture.

> **"Institutions tend to demand the most passive response from those most oppressed by the economic and political system and allow the most active participation and learning that is unlikely to change the status-quo.'** (Carnoy 1974:19).

This reinforces the division between the excluded and those who seek to exclude.

The challenges of institutional learning are by no means confined to individuals from linguistic and culturally different backgrounds. It also applies to people who do not have the right 'cultural capital' and are excluded from lifelong learning, which is defined and designed by the more powerful and privileged; by educational leaders who were themselves successful in the system. There is a readiness to deem **difference as deficit and disadvantage rather than as diversity.** A large group in society, the unemployed, those with disabilities, those with heavy family burdens, those from a low socio-economic background, women, the aged, those in care are positioned as effectively incompetent, unless they participate in institutionalised programs which will lead them to lifelong learning status. Many adults have resisted participating in what they consider 'alien' learning systems, or after a short sampling have dropped out of organised institutional learning activities. Contrast this with research that is showing high participation in community based learning activities such as computer literacy, personal health management and crafts.

Learning outside of formal systems

Delors in 'The Treasure Within' a report presented to UNESCO, describes the four pillars of education for the 21st Century. The four pillars are **learning to know, learning to do**, **learning to be** and **learning to live together**.

The world today is characterised by turbulence, dangers, crisis and relentless change. This can create panic and feelings of inadequacy for those struggling to keep on top of changes. Societies are in need of individuals to shoulder the responsibility of building safe and healthy communities. Governments, organizations and institutions alone cannot meet the challenge. The Delors Report placed a strong emphasis on renewal of knowledge, skills and learning abilities of individuals to adapt to changing environments. This adaptability requires self-management, individual responsibility, interpersonal skills, how to teach and learn from others. We need individuals who seek to contribute to positive living experiences for themselves, their families, their communities and the nation. More and more people are believing that they can make a difference by learning through reflecting upon everyday experience and by combining their lived experiences in formal and informal learning situations. Institutionalised learning which stresses the individual and learning for its own sake,

seems incapable of being flexible, innovative and ready to overcome ingrained assumptions and attitudes to remove the barriers of fears constructed out of ignorance.

'Self" and human development

Educational providers in institutionalised settings need to critically assess to what extent they are working on ethnocentric and anti-social understandings of the self. Is it enough to be simply focussed on individual development or should the individual's capacity to avail themselves of various resources, both personal and external, to resolve difficulties in everyday life be a meritorious outcome? To learn what is good, learners must identify for themselves what values are central to human development and wellbeing. Individuals should be prepared to participate in decision-making at the local and national level, to contribute to the well being of the local community, to protect the environment, to promote peace and understanding among different social groups, to strive for social inclusion and build on social capital of the nation. Institutions need to promote learning based on humanistic values that is respectful of cultural, social, economic and political differences. Human development is about access to means and resources to enable individuals through personal and collective actions to improve their lives and transform their societies (Delors, 1999)

Let's now briefly consider the student profile at Central Queensland University. We are still operating with current descriptors of equity groups, the department of Education, Science and Training is at present considering the continuation of these groups as equity target groups. (CQU: Equity Indicator data Summary-2004). Central Queensland University's enrolment is distinctively comprised of learners who are mature-aged, from low socio-economic background, from rural and isolated areas; often the first generation to attempt tertiary studies in their families and may have a medical condition or disability. Some may be from language and cultural backgrounds other than English and female and male students could be enrolled to study in non-traditional areas. It is widely recognised that while there is significant under-representation of some of these groups as compared to national representation, once enrolled, students from equity groups perform just as well as their counterparts. While some of these students' background can be described as disadvantaged, they should not be considered as needy of attention associated with the deficit model of learning.

Generally, Central Queensland University needs to improve its retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.There is high attrition rate among some cohorts of students. While there may be a number of factors to explain this situation, it is nevertheless useful for us to ask ourselves the following.

1. What are the skills involved in lifelong learning? Are they intellectual skills, personal skills or adaptive skills?

2. How could such skills be acquired by an individual?

3. What is the relationship of the home environment and the family to lifelong learning?

As a lecturer or facilitator of adult learning we may like to ask

- do I know the ways that students from various social and cultural backgrounds experience institutionalised learning?
- am I prepared to test my assumptions and stereotyped beliefs about the learners in my program?
- does the content of my course incorporate diverse, social and cultural perspectives?
- do I consider prior individual competence and prior collective learning experiences of learners in designing my course?
- do I incorporate a broad range of pedagogical methods to address learning styles of learners from different social and cultural backgrounds?

Conclusion

In summary, lifelong learning should reach out to the disadvantaged so that the gap between the privileged and the powerless can be narrowed and that conflicts, wars and crisis can be prevented. So that the base of critical and creative citizenry that can clearly identify values fundamental to human development can be broadened. The authentic provision of lifelong learning should provide learning opportunities that allow for the expression of the knowledge and social learning grounded in the lived experiences of marginalised and excluded groups. We must be prepared to ask ourselves how much are we working within systems that transmit another form of imperialism where powerful vested interests reduce human values and the aspiration of marginalised groups to the economic bottom line. If lifelong learning is to foster greater social cohesion and peaceful co-existence in increasingly pluralistic societies, there must be a commitment from providers of institutionalised learning to unlearn mislearnings and a preparedness to relearn. It is often said that lifelong learning is the future growth area in the education business, however this is dependent on lifelong learning becoming a reality for **all**.

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