

'IMPRISONED IN THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM' – REVISITED: TOWARDS AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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"Learning pays. Training (at its best) will make nations and their citizens wealthier, societies more effective and content, individuals freer and more able to determine their lives in the way they choose" (Ball, 1992 cited in Longworth & Davies, 1996, p 9).

In the literature of lifelong learning it is not difficult to find such uncritical and laudatory comments about lifelong learning; indeed, it has become a part of this contemporary discourse. It is harder, however, to find statements like:

"In permanent education we are no doubt witnessing a further reduction of the idea of education, this time for the exclusive benefit of the capitalists of knowledge and the professionals licensed to distribute it" (Illich & Verne, 1976, p 13)

Two perspectives, written at slightly different times in history, portraying totally different attitudes to lifelong education and learning. This is not surprising, for human learning is a problem that has confronted philosophers for at least two and a half thousand years. For instance,

"There were two people in a Garden and they were naked but were unaware of it. God told them that they were not to eat the fruit from one of the trees in the Garden, but the serpent tempted the woman and said that if they were to eat the fruit they would be like God. They succumbed and ate and knew that they were naked. The tree was the tree of knowledge and they learned that they were naked – the first sin of disobedience to authority, according to the story, was that of learning. As a result God drove them from the Garden and they had to labour" (The Bible – Genesis).

This is a wonderful philosophical myth about the problems of learning – if the myth were to have been written nowadays in the West, God would have said to them "keep eating the fruits of the tree, consuming knowledge and learning" – but the devil would be saying, "don't bother, be lazy, enjoy yourself". Oral myth changes to reflect the conditions in which it is told, but once myth is embedded in writing it becomes static and loses its

vitality, but it does reflect the time at which it was written. But, it might not actually be learning that is the 'sin', but the circumstances in which it occurs that is at least open to question.

However, the significance of this well-known story here is that moral dilemmas have always been attached to learning, and this is also my thesis. In this paper, I want to suggest that learning is amoral in itself but both what we choose to do with and how society seeks to control our learning, are much more problematic.

Learning is the collection of processes by which we create and transform our experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions, and the senses. It is both individualistic and inevitable. Because we are alive, we learn – or to reverse Descartes' famous conclusion because I am, I think – or learn. Indeed, in this sense, we are all imprisoned in the global classroom – for life itself (from which we can only escape through death) is the basis of all learning. However, the inevitability of human learning means that there is nothing moral about the process in itself (Jarvis, 1997). But the ancient philosophers were not concerned about the actual learning process, they were much more concerned about the context of the process – who controlled it – forces for good or evil. Learning itself can also be seen to be a good thing, or a bad one, depending on the way that it is used by the learners – for good or for bad. These are a part of the paradox of learning (Jarvis, 1992).

PART 1: IMPRISONED IN A GLOBAL CLASSROOM REVISITED

Individuals do not learn in isolation and – as the myth recognises – there have been different groups in society who have endeavoured to control our learning. Illich and Verne make the same point. One of the ways in which learning has been controlled has been through the process of institutionalisation. Learning has been institutionalised. Education systems are institutionalised and, therefore, controlled systems of learning. Bourdieu (1973) wrote:

"By making social hierarchies and the reproduction of these hierarchies appear to be based upon the hierarchy of 'gifts', merits, or skills established and ratified by its sanctions, or, in a word, by converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, the education system fulfils the function of legitimation which is more and more necessary to the perpetuation of the 'social order' as the evolution of the power relationship between classes tends more completely to exclude the imposition of a hierarchy based upon a crude and affirmation of the power relationship" (p 84).

Bourdieu's thesis of social and cultural reproduction was echoed by Althusser's (1972) claim that education is an ideological state apparatus, or Bowles' & Gintis' (1976) thesis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*. It is, perhaps, significant that most of these titles reflect the academic climate of the 1970s, although Giddens (1998, pp 109-110) gently made the point more recently that education is not able to reduce the inequalities in society, and the power of the state is declining in this new global society; these are other reasons for revisiting Illich & Verne. For societies have changed since they wrote, and now we may have slightly more open societies in the West, and education has also changed greatly, but the question remains as to whether education is still serving the same functions in society. Societies have, in fact, placed even more emphases on education since the significance of knowledge has grown and knowledge societies have developed. As a result, education has both been attacked for not providing the type of work force the knowledge societies demand, and also for being economically inefficient. Now, then, is the time to revisit those critical analyses in the light of these changes

Illich & Verne were actually writing at a time when the French were beginning to introduce laws that made corporations responsible for the education and training of their work force, including having to spend 0.8% of their annual budget on education and training, although at that time they were actually spending 1.35% (Caspar 1992, p 149). Illich & Verne claimed that this was money spent on an education and training that the workers neither wanted nor needed, but that it would give the employers a greater control over a work force that was being made to feel constantly inadequate by the introduction of systems that would also serve a function of providing many more university graduates with employment. They wrote:

"Without doubt, deschooling here falls into a well-concealed trap, laid by those who wish to

utilize it to justify the educational megamachine of the year 2000."

"With the spread of industrialization of education, and the commercialization of knowledge, it amounts, basically, to bringing back the hidden curriculum of schooling and confirming the obvious consequences...a guarantee of our permanent inadequacy."

"...education makes existence the subject of a study course."

"...the semi-skilled worker(s) at the Renault works in Boulogne-Billancourt will be given the clear impression that they have at all times the possibility of climbing the social ladder, with the help of education and training and the educational resources which have been assigned to them. They will have the permanent knowledge that the opportunity to reach the top of the ladder is always there, and that it is entirely due to their own deficiencies if they fail to grasp it."

(Illich & Verne, 1976, pp 12-16)

In these quotations, and the one with which we commenced this paper, we see the crux of Illich's and Verne's argument. They were both conservative and radical at the same time. Conservative because while they partially recognised the early emergence of the knowledge society, they did not acknowledge any need for the educational system to change, although elsewhere, in *Deschooling Society*, Illich (1971) had been amongst the first thinkers to suggest that the emphasis should be placed on learning and not on education and schooling. But they were both radical and insightful in as much as they recognised that the capitalist system was taking over education for its own ends, and because they argued that there was something of a conspiracy to ensure that the working people continued to recognise that their 'rightful place' in society was at the bottom. Consequently, when somebody actually fulfilled the promise and made the transition to the higher echelons of society, it was through their own efforts, something that any other able individuals could apparently do if they were prepared to put enough effort into it, etc. Consequently, this reinforced their own feeling that they deserved to be at the bottom of the heap.

It is perhaps significant to note that most of the authors cited here wrote in the 1970s – the same period in which Freire (1972) wrote his most radical work, and that I have cited none who have continued to argue a similar case, such as Collins (1991) and Foley (1999), although I do think that it

is time to return to a more critical analysis of the trends in education. Most of those early critical thinkers were heavily influenced by Marxist thought and were writing at a time when communism existed as an apparently viable alternative to capitalism. But when the Berlin Wall fell, there was simply no alternative (Bauman, 1992 pp 175-186) and, as one leading corporate chairman recently said to me, "Communism has been tried and it didn't work and it is not good criticising capitalism unless you've got something better to put in its place". Of course, he was wrong on at least two counts: communism has not been tried, although a planned and centralised system of government has, and phenomena are not beyond criticism just because there might not be existing alternatives. Indeed, one of the functions of utopian thought is always to provide a criticism for what is. However, I am not convinced that the radical political critique is very powerful when there is no alternative; indeed, there can be no revolution! But the socio-economic and ethical ones are much more important and significant. However, we have to understand the changes that have occurred since these radical theorists of education were writing, and that a new form of global classroom has emerged.

PART 2: THE CHANGING WORLD

These criticisms of the educational and the social system occurred at a time when the confidence of the West had already been dented. The oil crisis of the 1970s occurred as businesses tried a number of different strategies in order to retain their control and profitability. They relocated production in some of the third world societies; forms of protectionism were tried, but GATT operated against it; they attempted to cut costs in order to become more productive, but this was not very successful; they then embarked on company mergers and, later, take-overs in order to reduce administrative costs and enhance their profitability. And as we are well aware, this process is still continuing. This, then, was the period when monetarist economics gained ascendancy in theory as well as in practice.

The world market was also expanding rapidly, and it was the time when the information technology revolution was taking off, with one development leading to another, as Castells (1996, p 51f.) demonstrates. He goes on to make the point that "to some extent, the availability of new technologies constituted as a system in the 1970s was a fundamental basis for the process of socio-economic restructuring in the 1980s" (p 52). However, the global substructure lies in the control of capital, and the communications system – without such economic forces – could not have generated all the changes that have occurred.

This was also the period when the process of globalisation speeded up; corporations were able to transfer capital around the world, seeking the cheapest places and the most efficient means to manufacture, and the best markets in which to sell their products. This resulted in the continued decline in manufacturing industries in some countries in the first world, and the need for new occupational structures to emerge. Some first world countries divested themselves of a great deal of its manufacturing capacity with promises of the knowledge society, the service society, and the leisure society. But this approach was a little short-sighted and we now see politicians seeking to persuade directors of transnational corporations to retain, or even to locate, their manufacturing industries in countries even as wealthy as the United Kingdom. Even so, it did result in the first world becoming predominantly a knowledge society, and this had profound implications for education.

These developments changed the structure of the work force in the West, with a decline in manufacturing jobs and an increasing demand for knowledge-based workers. Indeed, Castells (1996, p 147) suggests the following division of labour – with four main types: the producers of high value (knowledge workers), producers of high volume (based on low cost labour – service and production workers), producers of raw materials (based on natural products), and redundant producers (devalued labour). He maintains that at both the global level, and within the economic regions, there is this division of labour, with differing proportions occurring in each country and region. Knowledge workers are:

"...the creators, manipulators, and purveyors of the stream of information that makes up the postindustrial, post-service global economy. Their ranks include research scientists, design engineers, civil engineers, software analysts, biotechnology workers, public relations specialists, lawyers, investment bankers, management consultants, financial and tax consultants, architects, strategic planners, marketing specialists, film producers and editors, art directors, publishers, writers, editors and journalists" (Rifkin, 1995, p 174).

However, this capitalist market is very competitive and corporations have to invest a great deal of capital into the development of new commodities if they are to survive. The need for new knowledge and new applications of knowledge is intense. Knowledge has itself become a commodity to be generated, but also something to be fought over. As early as the 1970s Lyotard (1984) suggested that:

"Capitalism solves the scientific problem of research funding in its own way; directly by financing research departments in private companies, in which the demands for performativity and recommercialization orient research first and foremost toward technological 'applications'; and indirectly by creating private, state, or mixed sector research foundations that grant program subsidies to university departments, research laboratories, and independent research groups with no expectation of an immediate return on the results of the work – this is done on the theory that research must be financed at a loss for a certain length of time in order to increase the probability of its yielding a decisive, and therefore, highly profitable innovation" (p 45).

However, the demands for performativity also means that many of these knowledge workers, such as consultants, are also producing knowledge in the work place, and this is being stored in company databases for future use. New innovations, new knowledge, and new applications of knowledge are essential features of these large global corporations, as each seeks to sell its commodities and services in the market for the sake of profit. Knowledge, therefore, has to keep on changing in order to develop new commodities which can be sold in the global market, and competition between corporations is intense to make profits.

The work force is having to keep on researching and keep on learning to keep abreast with all of these developments, many of which have not been developed in the traditional university research system. Higher education, which has been the traditional provider of a great deal of this education, has had to change at a phenomenal rate, providing continuing professional education at Masters and doctoral level for the knowledge workers. Indeed, universities are being forced into become institutions of lifelong learning, and adapting all their delivery systems and procedures accordingly – which might be no bad thing in itself! However, the program of courses offered, and much of the research undertaken by the universities, shows that they have been subordinated to the demands of the market, and especially to those of the large corporations. But the universities have not changed sufficiently quickly and, consequently, corporations have also developed their own systems of education and training, and we are now witnessing the rise of the corporate universities (Eurich, 1985; Meister, 1998). Before the Reformation, the churches founded the universities. After the Enlightenment, the state and civil governance did the same; and now, in late modernity, the corporations are the new founders of the universities – but the more

traditional universities are having to compete in this same market, and they are becoming more like corporations.

Illich & Verne were right – the dominant forms of knowledge being generated today are for the benefit of those who control the capitalist system. They demand that their work forces should continue to keep abreast with all of these changes, so that initial vocational education is now no longer sufficient for the workers in the knowledge society. They have to keep on working for the whole of their work lives – they have to be lifelong learners!

PART 3: THE DISCOURSE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The learning society has become part of the current economic and political discourse of global capitalism in which people are human resources to be developed through lifelong learning, or discarded and retrained if their job is redundant. Education has, therefore, become both the 'cause' of the inability of corporations to recruit employees who have the necessary knowledge and skill to perform in the competitive knowledge-based labour market and, paradoxically, the 'hope' that these corporations have that they can produce new commodities in a more efficient manner. Clearly, the decline of the Rover motor company in the United Kingdom, with its much acclaimed corporate training, indicates that too much faith is being placed on learning but, nevertheless, the discourse on learning remains intact. In addition, there is a sense in which it also depends on who controls the learning.

As the discourse for lifelong learning gains credibility, other forms of learning are regarded as less than 'real learning', unless they are accepted through systems of accreditation of prior experiential learning, etc. When the learning has been accredited, then it becomes 'real learning'. The accrediting institution has the power to transform the meaning of the learning with reference to the world.

Learning has become part of the corporate discourse, but discourse is neither about truth nor falsehood, and there is a general tendency to accept what is being proclaimed. Humankind has a will to truth, as it were, we want to know the truth and to believe the discourse. Sheridan (1980), commenting on Foucault's *Discourse on Language*, wrote this:

"It is as if our culture's apparent veneration of discourse conceals a profound fear of it, as if all the prohibitions and limitations placed upon it were intended to master a threat. If we are to

understand the fear, says Foucault, we have a threefold task: we have to question our will to truth, restore to discourse its character as event, and abolish the sovereignty of the signifier" (p 128).

In other words, we have to recognise that we want to believe it and that we give power to those who frame the discourse, rather than merely regard it as a happening. At the same time, those who continue to frame discourses inaccurately do destroy the will to believe it to be truthful, as we are beginning to see with political discourse. But we also need to believe that we must keep on learning so that we will help generate a better standard of living for all, and retain our own jobs in the process; within the confines of the system within which we live, we may well have to believe it.

At the present time, global capitalism controls the discourse about lifelong learning and, in Ball's words cited at the start of this paper, "Learning pays. Training (at its best) will make nations and their citizens wealthier, societies more effective and content, individuals freer and more able to determine their lives in the way they choose."

It is as if the global capitalism underlying this statement is universally good and will produce that good society for which everybody longs. If this discourse is further deconstructed, almost every element is either wrong or only partly true.

- Learning, which is totally undefined here, in itself does not pay – but accredited learning, or learning recognised because it carries a degree or is recorded in a portfolio, might help gain a better job. Learning might also help companies produce new products that might be marketable, and so on.
- Training (at its best) will make nations and their citizens wealthier – but unless the commodities are developed and sold, unless there is a market, unless others can afford to purchase those commodities, etc., nobody gets wealthier. So that at its best, some forms of learning might be a contributory factor in the process.
- But societies might become less effective if people are so learned and articulate that they want to question government and management on every decision and action, or because they recognise that there is much more to life than work.
- Individuals might actually learn that they are not free and are not as able to determine their lives because there are other forces operating, and so on.

This is one of those discourses that we might want to believe because it offers a future that sounds more idealistic, and it might well explain for us some of the events that are occurring in our society, and when government, senior management, or establishment figures make the claim, they might be seen as having the authority to do so. But it is part of the discourse – it is just a tool used by those in power to support and control the present situation. Workers do need to keep on learning, so that we can have a flexible work force able to respond to the demands of their managers so that their company can compete in the global market.

Moreover, those who have the power to frame the discourse have actually captured the more humanistic language of education and learning to support their position. Learning sounds better than training, and it also overcomes the traditional divide between education and training. Lifelong learning sounds better than work-life learning, even though the corporations are hardly interested, for instance, in the learning that goes on in people's later life (see Jarvis, 2000). Corporate training schools do not sound so good as corporate universities, and commitment to one's employing organisation does not sound as grand as corporate citizenship (the values, vision, and culture of the organisation – Meister, 1998, pp 93-98). Citizenship gives the impression of permanence, in which the guarantor of the citizenship provides education and welfare for its citizens, even though in this capitalist market, companies hire and fire almost at will, and employees might be considered as 'guest-workers' on a temporary basis rather than lifelong citizens.

Now, corporations do need highly educated workers if they are to compete in the global market, and they also need to be able to slim down their work forces if new manufacturing techniques are introduced that can make the company more efficient and more profitable. Corporations might have to control the training curriculum if they are to have the type of work force management wants, and if universities are to function within this system (whether they need to is a political decision), then they do need to orientate some of their programs in the direction of the work force. Within this system, it is also necessary to recognise that without profitability many people might suffer untold hardship. But, as we shall show below, because of this system many others also suffer extreme poverty and hardship. Hence, it may be the discourse about global capitalism that needs reframing.

Consequently, in a knowledge-based economy workers might have to continue to learn throughout their work lives, but this is not lifelong learning. Companies may have to keep on providing

education and training, but company education and training schools are not universities in the sense that they are generally understood. The education system might have to help respond to the needs of the economy but people are more than economic animals, and learning is about the whole of human being. But business and industry have captured the language of lifelong learning and have the power to frame the discourse. The hidden curriculum is that there is no alternative to the current economic system. Additionally, while some of the fears Illich & Verne expressed about the nature of knowledge are being realised, they find little or no place in the current discourse, and all the education and learning that relates to our humanity – but not to the economy – is relegated to the margins of corporate and socio-political society.

PART 4: AN ETHICAL DISCOURSE

Learning is a natural process and as such it is amoral – neither good or bad in itself but, as the myth indicated, it is who controls our learning that is more significant, and for what purpose. Clearly, Illich & Verne pointed to the "capitalists of knowledge" and we can see that it is the global capitalist system that is driving the direction of lifelong learning.

It is this system that has to be evaluated, remembering that at present there appears to be no viable alternative. But it does not mean that the system is beyond criticism! Global capitalism is driven to make economic profit, almost at whatever the cost to human beings – it is a system that reflects the teleological ethics that emerged and found favour during the early days of the Modernity project as utilitarianism. Crudely, if the end-product is regarded as a good, then actions that produce the end-product are good. Consequently, work-life learning is good because it appears to help produce the necessary end-product of the capitalist system – profit – which can then be utilised for the benefit of the whole society, so the quotation from Ball implies. But on the morning that I was finishing this paper, a headline appeared in the Guardian newspaper – 6th April, 2000 – about Barclays Bank, which perhaps typifies the system:

"As Barclays closes 172 branches, the boss stands to collect a £30m bonus."

This might be an exaggerated newspaper headline but it captures something of the flavour of the affair, especially as for weeks before the branches were closed, there was representation to the bank of the considerable hardship it would cause smaller businesses in the communities and older people in the villages who were going to lose their banking

facility, and the hardship that the loss of jobs would cause many employees, and so on. Korton (1995) writes:

"...each time a major corporation announces a cutback in thousands of jobs, the Stratos families (those who are wealthy and powerful) get richer and the incomes of thousands of workers whose jobs have been eliminated decline" (p 109).

Elsewhere in this sustained attack of global capitalism, Korton (1995) makes similar points, such as:

"Increasingly, it is the corporate interest more than the human interest that defines the policy agenda of states and international bodies, although this reality and its implications have gone largely unnoticed and unaddressed" (p 54).

This is often because the human interest factor is usually added in the catch-all phrase – 'quality of life'. What, then, are the implications of global capitalism? Clearly, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Bauman (1999) summarises a United Nations' Development:

- consumption has multiplied by a factor of six since 1950, but one million people cannot even satisfy their most elementary needs;
- 60% of residents in developing countries have no basic social infrastructures, 33% no access to drinking water, 25% no accommodation worthy of the name and 20% no sanitary or medical services;
- the average income of 120 million people is less than \$1 per day;
- in the world's richest country (USA), 16.5% live in poverty, 20% of the adult population are illiterate; 13% have a life expectancy of shorter than 60 years;
- the world's three richest men have private assets greater than the combined national products of the 48 poorest countries;
- the fortunes of the 15 richest men exceeds the total produce of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa;
- 4% of the wealth of the world's richest 225 men would offer the poor of the world access to elementary medical and educational amenities as well as adequate nutrition" (pp 175-176).

This is still the same world that Ball was writing about; it is the world in which social inequality is getting greater – but this part of the world's

problems do not occur in the curriculum of work-life learning. Indeed, these are the outcomes of this competitive global world. In ethical terms, the teleological argument is seen to be self-evidently bad if the generation of profit is seen to be a good thing, since the wealth generated through this system just goes to add to the extreme wealth of the rich and powerful. This is the system which education is serving. But education always has been the servant of the system – that is just what those 1970s scholars were claiming about education. The educational discourse is one that does not question the system – but there are individuals who are beginning to do so; we saw this in the demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle; and so on.

And so, it might be asked, is all ethical discourse open to the same strictures as Foucault would claim? This is the fundamental question. Elsewhere (Jarvis, 1997), I have argued that there are two types of moral value – cultural values and universal values. It is the cultural values that are embedded in the contemporary discourses, but I want to focus here on universal value, of which I argue there is only one, and it is a principle, not an action in itself. The universal value, the only universal moral good – is that it is never wrong to be concerned for other people – or as Levinas (1991) argues, 'Discourse is ... an original relationship with exterior being' (p 66). When Ego and the stranger are face-to-face, the distance between them recedes and some form of bond begins to be created, but the very formation of that bond impinges upon their freedom – on my freedom. This is precisely Levinas's position – when the stranger inhibits my spontaneity, there is the beginning of ethics. Bauman (1993) suggests that:

"(m)oral behaviour is triggered off by the mere presence of the Other as a *face*: that is, an authority *without* force. The Other demands without *threatening* to punish, or promising rewards. The Other cannot do anything to me, neither punish nor reward: it is precisely that weakness of the Other that lays bare my strength, my ability to act, as responsibility" (p 124).

Basically, it is people that matter, it is the presence of the Other – the people whom the system ignores or makes redundant – who are not included in the curriculum of the corporate universities, etc. But it is this global market system that controls the curriculum and which seeks to frame the discourse on lifelong learning – this is the discourse to which we have been subjected. But there is another discourse. It may not be an alternative to the global capitalist system, but it does suggest an alternative

value that might guide the capitalist system and help frame this other discourse on lifelong learning.

Learning itself is amoral – we cannot but learn if we are alive – but the discourse on lifelong learning has been captured by those who control the system – just as it was in that Genesis myth. Things have not changed much! Perhaps the Other was the reason why many enter the education system – to respond to the needs of the Other and enable the Other to be free to learn, to grow and develop, and to decide upon what he or she feels is good to contribute to the common good.

We are imprisoned in a global classroom – we cannot escape from it for as long as we live – but it is what we use our learning for that is the moral question that confronts us, recognising that others are constantly seeking to control the context within which that learning takes place, for other ends.

What we need is an alternative discourse, this need not rule out capitalism – indeed I do not, but I do not support its excesses. We need a discourse that is:

- really about lifelong learning and not work-life learning (however important that might be),
- about people and not profits,
- about enriching people rather than utilising human resources,
- about responding to needs and not meeting targets.

This is just a different global classroom in which to be imprisoned but it is one in which the story sounds better and the reality might just be affected as a result.

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