

EDUCATING UNIVERSITY BRIDGING STUDENTS AND OCCUPATIONAL TRAVELLERS: INTERROGATING THE GENERIC SKILLS APPROACH TO LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on two groups of educational consumers: mature age university bridging students, and occupational Travellers. Drawing on Campion's (1997) notion of de-differentiation and Giroux's (1990) concept of border crossing, we argue that the generic skills approach to lifelong learning is potentially antithetical to these learners' specialised educational needs.

INTRODUCTION

The process whereby students proceed through the education system in a series of clearly defined stages can, in some ways, be compared to a conveyor belt. They can disembark at the end of the compulsory schooling level or they can complete Year Twelve and be rewarded with an Overall Position (OP) or equivalent tertiary entrance number which defines their degree of success. The assumption is that these students have attained certain knowledge, understanding and skills – generic and particular – and OPs within a certain range, bestow the right of access to university education to the most successful.

There are others who are located outside the 'norm' of educational consumers – who are not even on the conveyor belt. This paper is concerned with two clearly defined groups within this category: mature age university bridging students (over the age of 35), and occupational Travellers. For a number of diverse reasons these people are unwilling or unable to travel the educational conveyor belt until the end of their senior year of secondary schooling, and therefore, without an OP or equivalent tertiary entrance score, they are considered ineligible for university entry. The bridging students are a heterogeneous group, but a common factor in their experience of formal education is that it has been, in the main, negative (Coombes et al., 1997). Many may be described as damaged learners who are only too eager to leave school as soon as legally possible. Occupational Travellers, on the other hand, apart from those who are educated at boarding schools, are interrupted learners (Danaher, 1998). Circumstances have prevented them from remaining at a particular school for prolonged periods of time, and their formal schooling has included distance education and spasmodic periods in the classroom. This may be regarded as learning on the run. Both these groups, university bridging

students and occupational Travellers, have been extraordinarily successful in overcoming their educational barriers.

It is our contention that, despite what may be perceived as a paucity of generic educational skills, both university bridging students and occupational Travellers are familiar with, and have engaged in, the process of lifelong learning: and that they have been doing so for some time. The adult learners, particularly those over the age of 35, with whom this paper is concerned, have an abundance of experiential knowledge – the life skills that have enabled them to meet a variety of challenges since leaving formal education in their mid teens. The children of occupational Travellers are, for the most part, closely involved in their parents' businesses and have received on-the-job training as a matter of course, from a very young age. The responsibilities and life skills of these two apparently disparate groups have covered a much broader range than those associated with post-compulsory schooling.

For the purposes of this paper, we understand the generic skills approach to lifelong learning to refer to those elements of formal learning with the most general and widest possible application. We contrast this approach to one that emphasises life skills (Coffield, 1999; Field, 1999; Tight, 1998). By this we mean that, whereas life skills are situated, contextualised, specialised, differentiated and related to the learner's life-world; generic skills are abstracted, decontextualised, generalised, de-differentiated and isolated from the learner's life-world. To exemplify how we understand the difference between generic and life skills in this framework, we consider the example of electronic mail communication. While a generic skills approach might teach learners how to send and receive e-mail messages, a life skills approach would consider the equity issues of who has access to the technology, the kind of discourses and hence

social mores that are and are not 'acceptable', and how that form of communication does or does not fit within the learner's broader pattern of interactions with others – including fellow learners, family members and friends. From this perspective, activities such as analysis, argumentation, critical thinking, evaluation, interpretation, lateral thinking and verbal, visual and written communication skills, are not generic skills but rather 'meta-literacies' because they are situated practices rather than decontextualised skills (Webb et al., in press). We regard life skills as closer than generic skills to such 'meta-literacies'.

Our intention here is to interrogate the generic skills approach to lifelong learning and to determine whether over-emphasis on this framework, at the expense of life skills, might hinder rather than help the interests of two particular groups of educational consumers considered here. The question to be asked is whether such an approach might disavow the groups' life skills and thereby push them onto the edge of the conveyor belt that they have only just entered. Two recently developed educational concepts will provide the foundation for this interrogation: de-differentiation and border crossing.

CAMPION'S THEORY OF DE-DIFFERENTIATION

"... the story begins with the market. As a variety of social spheres have become increasingly 'market dependent' their different modes of operation and calculation have been subsumed under the overriding logic of one form of rationality: the 'economic' ... The 'levelling function' this process performs ensures that formerly diverse institutions, practices, goods and so forth become subject to judgment and calculation almost exclusively in terms of market-based criteria; in other words, the process of de-differentiation or implosion involves increasing dominance of what Lyotard (1984) terms 'the performativity principle'" (Du Guy, 1994; cited in Campion, 1997, p 58).

Access to university education is no longer the prerogative of a wealthy elite. This is undoubtedly a very positive development, but one of the problems is that universities now have to compete with one another for funding. Institutions of higher learning today can be compared to market places where criteria for success are seen in terms of the dominant economic principle: supply and demand; profit and loss. Market dependence according to Du Guy, 1984 (cited in Campion, 1997) has had a levelling effect. Whereas differentiation was once

the guiding principle whereby diverse institutions were valued as distinct spheres of influence, de-differentiation implies dependence on the prevailing ethos of enterprise.

Campion (1997) provided at least two illustrations of how this concept of de-differentiation applies to higher education. Firstly, citing Marcuse (1995), he argued that "it is in government's interest to use a common vocabulary to account for activities in different sectors in order that comparison between them can readily be made" (p 60). The generic skills approach could be relevant in this instance whereby the wide-ranging multiplicity of processes that make up diverse academic disciplines in universities would be narrowed, reduced, and flattened to facilitate comparisons among courses and faculties in order to evaluate their performativity. Furthermore, the good intentions of proponents of generic skills would not prevent the co-option by government of the results of generic skills tests to 'measure' the skills base of students at particular institutions and thereby to create 'league tables' across institutions. The result would be misleading comparisons of a 'lowest common denominator' approach to learning and an elision of markers of the rich diversity of knowledge and understanding that ought to make up lifelong learning:

"The idea of enterprise has been added to supplement agendas formulated in terms of economic rationalism and managerialism all of which leads to the ongoing de-differentiation between differing spheres of activity" (Campion, 1997, p 60).

In his second example of the effect of de-differentiation, Campion (1997) demonstrated how the principle of enterprise can serve to extend the marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups at a time when higher education has become more accessible. He referred to "an increasing polarisation ... between the seduced and the oppressed where the seduced are enterprising consumers and the oppressed are non-consumers – those who fail or refuse to take on the enterprising role" (p 61). To carry Campion's analogy further, the "seduced" may be perceived as the normal educational consumers, those who remain on the conveyor belt until the end of Year Twelve. The "oppressed", by contrast, are those who leave the educational system before the conveyor belt has completed its circuit: students whose results are deemed too poor, or interrupted learners, such as Travellers. In other words, generic skills, by abstracting and isolating certain pre-defined educational competencies, might actually contribute to de-differentiation, by devaluing the diversity of contexts and situations in which the

"oppressed" learn, and making it more difficult for them to acquire and practise the generic skills held to be their 'passport' to lifelong learning.

GIROUX'S THEORY OF BORDER CROSSING

In 1990 Henry Giroux presented a compelling theory. It was his contention that the challenge for educational consumers is to engage in a form of critical pedagogy that will enable them to transcend the traditional disciplinary boundaries that have imposed barriers to intellectual thought and discussion. Giroux depicted a social vision whereby students from all walks of life (both the "seduced" and the "oppressed" in Campion's (1997) terminology) would be enabled to cross the borders of pre-defined structures by questioning pre-existing and taken-for-granted structures, assumptions and disciplines:

"...students must engage knowledge as a border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power ... These are not only physical borders; they are also cultural borders historically constructed and socially organised within maps of rules and regulations that limit and facilitate particular identities, individual capacities and social forms" (Giroux, 1990, p 34).

For Giroux, the purpose of border crossing is to make society more democratic through an educative system that would enable and facilitate social betterment. Border pedagogy considers questions of difference, since for Giroux, democracy is a celebration of difference. Border crossers are empowered to challenge existing beliefs and ideologies and are encouraged to value their own personal experience as an accepted basis for issuing such challenges. If border pedagogy can be perceived as a vision of social transformation, it can be argued that border crossers are engaging in transformative learning (Cranston, 1994). From this perspective, de-differentiation can be seen as oppositional to the intended outcomes of border crossing, through its elision rather than its celebration of difference. So de-differentiation is anti-democratic to the extent that it makes it more difficult for the "oppressed" to participate fully and equitably in education.

Giroux's proposed approach to education was a critical pedagogy whose crucial role was to encourage and enable students to question. Thus, for example, a pertinent query might relate to who determines what knowledge should or should not be disseminated through the education system. A broader question might relate to whether

educational structures have, in the past, served to oppress or exploit those outside their borders. This question could be refined to ask whether the life skills that for us are a pre-requisite of border crossing can be readily accommodated within a generic skills approach to lifelong learning.

If border crossers are to engage in effective dialogue in the process of questioning established structures, a vital element, according to Giroux (1992) is language. Students need to move across different situated languages (Webb et al. in press) in order to engage in political debate, and to provide themselves with a strong sense of identity. Such a process goes well beyond acquiring an extended vocabulary; it necessitates new and creative ways of seeing, thinking and expressing ideas. Language can be a powerful tool when used to facilitate border crossing and transformation. It can also be used to obscure or disguise the policies of those who wish to confuse or (as in the case of de-differentiation) to reduce a diversity of thought to a common level. Border crossers, therefore, will need to be aware of the multiple nuances of meaning operating in the cultural territories they visit, and to become adept in adapting this language to their own purposes. This point again raises the question whether generic skills function to make dominant discourses in lifelong learning broader or narrower, and therefore whether the two groups' life skills (including their uses of language) are ruled 'in' or 'out' according to the rules of the game.

UNIVERSITY BRIDGING STUDENTS

During the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, far-reaching changes have occurred so far as access to university is concerned. In the quest for educational equity, the government and institutions of higher learning now recognise the need to provide opportunities for those people who left school before completion of senior secondary schooling, or whose achievement levels were considered insufficient to engage in tertiary studies. Accordingly, university bridging courses have been established, including one operating at Central Queensland University: Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) (Coombes et al. 1997). It is proposed to consider the advantages and limitations of the generic skills approach to lifelong learning so far as these students are concerned in the light of the theories of de-differentiation (Campion) and border crossing (Giroux).

Lifelong learning, it is generally agreed, takes place throughout the life of an individual, and can occur in formal, semi-formal, and informal educational settings. It can lead to the systematic acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes in response to

changing conditions. Lifelong learning depends for success on the learners' motivation, which should result in self-directed learning, and promote self-fulfilment. Mature age STEPS students (over the age of 35) for the most part have been engaged in the process of lifelong learning in a multiplicity of ways long before they enrol in the course, though perhaps they may not be aware of this fact. They certainly bring with them a vitally important element, experiential knowledge; it is the business of the bridging course to supplement this experience with the skills necessary for undergraduate studies. Whether these life skills can be readily accommodated within a generic skills view of lifelong learning is debatable.

From one perspective, the market orientation of higher education that promotes de-differentiation assists STEPS students, by constructing them as potential educational consumers. For such students, there is economic capital to be gained from participating in lifelong learning. It is certainly preferable, from the point of view of society and the individual, to enable people to become knowledgeable, skillful and productive workers rather than owners of failed businesses, unskilled or semi-skilled workers or unemployed (common situations for STEPS students prior to enrolling in the course). Bridging students do not remain on the bridge. They constitute future university undergraduates, graduates and postgraduates, and, because mature age students usually exhibit a high degree of commitment, they can interact with the university to mutual advantage.

From another perspective, however, the risk for STEPS students in participating in higher education is that the diversity encapsulated in their life skills can be perceived as a worthless – or perhaps even dangerously subversive – rather than a valued commodity. Increasingly, government policies are tending to focus on the narrower perspective of vocational education rather than the broader view of lifelong learning as a process of fulfilment. Vocational education is clearly not, in itself, opposed to students' interests; far from it; but it needs to be considered as part of a whole, not as an educational entity in itself. Systems that focus on vocational education and invalidate liberal education might well recapture students who are engaged in a transformative process and re-assign them to the role of the "oppressed" identified by Campion (1997). That is, too narrowly conceived an approach to lifelong learning can replicate existing social class inequities by promoting the interests of a powerful elite and ensuring the compliance of the less powerful masses.

It would seem that many bridging students are engaged in a form of border crossing. Certainly for

most of them, the university culture is completely different from their previous life-world. The STEPS course does, to a certain degree, provide students with the required pedagogical conditions to cross borders and to question and challenge the dominant power relations. The paradox, as Giroux (1992, p 15) himself acknowledged, is that pedagogy is always related to power – someone who knows instructing someone who does not know. To what extent is it practical or even desirable for lecturers to enable students to challenge dominant power relations? It might be argued that it is the central focus of universities to uphold rather than to challenge the status quo (Bourdieu, 1988).

Challenging the status quo for its own sake can be counter-productive. However, where moving between the spaces of old and new experiences enables a degree of socially transformative learning to take place, students become involved in a rewarding and self-fulfilling process. Social transformation cannot be created merely by the acquisition of generic skills, and indeed might be prevented from occurring if those skills are linked to de-differentiation. Social transformation allied to border crossing, by contrast, involves students' engagement in critical self-reflection, the development of new or revised assumptions and beliefs, self-directed learning, and an emergent confidence in their value as learners. It also facilitates their passage on and off the educational conveyor belt as and when they wish.

OCCUPATIONAL TRAVELLERS

For occupational Travellers such as circus and fairground people, the educational conveyor belt has traditionally passed them by. The key to understanding this situation is their perceived deviance from the 'norm' of fixed residence on which educational provision is predicated, whether that provision is face-to-face or at a distance (Danaher, 1998; Kiddle, 1999). The result of this 'deviance' is that Travellers have had to choose between practising an occupation and lifestyle that have been passed down through successive generations, and having access to a fully developed formal education.

This situation has been exacerbated by a mismatch between the highly refined life skills practised by the Travellers and an education system that has traditionally not recognised or valued those skills. For example, Kiddle (1999) identified some of the skills developed by British fairground people: "accountancy, administration, advertising, book-keeping, business management, carpentry design, diplomacy, driving, electrics, electronics, engineering, law, mechanics, painting, public

relations, sign writing, welding" (p 103). Yet, as Kiddle pointed out:

"Many teachers are not aware of the responsibilities, experience and skills that the Fairground Traveller children are acquiring during their travelling season and so fail to build on those strengths and that knowledge within the school" (p 103).

So for occupational Travellers, lifelong learning is nothing new. They have had to engage in such learning as communities over generations to ensure the survival of their livelihood. Their ambivalence about formalised lifelong learning – primary and secondary school, vocational education, higher education – derives from their concern that such formalisation forces them to 'go over to the other side' and become enlisted by the forces that have constructed them as marginal in the first place. On the one hand, they accept that they need formal recognition of skills that they have traditionally taught one another, in order to engage in border crossing – having the capacity to come on and off the itinerant circuits as they wish. On the other hand, they sometimes fear that their children will be "seduced" by an education system that devalues their occupation and lifestyle and that contributes to their status as "oppressed", through its alliance with de-differentiation.

In relation to a generic skills approach to lifelong learning, with its focus on abstraction and decontextualisation, and its isolation from the Travellers' life-world, this ambivalence is thrown into stark relief. Learning the mechanics of reading and writing an essay would have far less currency and meaning than understanding the specific implications of the introduction of a goods and services tax for road transport and insurance rates. Learning to apply the principles of problem solving in the context of negotiating with animal liberationists makes far more sense for traditional circus performers than being taught how to surf the Internet (particularly when regular Internet access is largely non-existent for Travellers). The point is less that these generic skills are not grounded in the situatedness of the Travellers' life skills than that those life skills are not acknowledged or valued in the generic skills approach to lifelong learning. The likely outcome is that, by facilitating de-differentiation rather than border crossing, such an approach makes it more, not less difficult, for Travellers to join the educational conveyor belt.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on lifelong learning from the perspectives of two groups of educational consumers: mature age university bridging

students, and occupational Travellers. These two groups share the fact that they are not included in the conveyor belt system of education and are therefore considered to be outside the norm. We have explored two educational concepts – de-differentiation (Campion, 1997) and border crossing (Giroux, 1990) – in relation to their impact on the two groups of learners. These theories have led us to interrogate two clearly-defined ways of preparing for lifelong learning: generic skills and life skills. De-differentiation, with its emphasis on market dependence, performativity and the lowest common denominator, would seem to favour the generic skills approach. Border crossing, on the other hand, celebrates individualism, difference, and the need to question established beliefs and ideologies. This concept values the learner's life experiences as an integral part of the learning process. We conclude, therefore, that for mature age students and occupational Travellers, the life skills approach needs to be at the forefront of lifelong learning. This is necessary to prevent the potential limitations of the generic skills approach that we have noted here from obstructing rather than addressing those groups' specialised educational needs.

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