

Taking all forms of learning into account: some reflections on the future of adult education

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This contribution does not respond directly to the recent Communication on Adult Learning² or to the recently completed EAEA report on adult education³ – which contributed to the reflections underlying the Communication – but rather raises some conceptual issues with which analysts and policymakers must grapple as they seek to contribute to shaping the future of adult education. In which directions is adult education likely to move? What does current social change imply for the future development of adult learning?

The continuum of learning

The conceptual distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning first inserted themselves into high level policy discussion as a consequence of their inclusion in the Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning⁴ and the subsequent Commission Communication on Lifelong Learning.⁵ These terms caught the policy and practice imagination and have since been consistently applied across a range of objectives and action frameworks that have developed in the context of the Lisbon Strategy for Education and Training 2010.

There is nothing new about these distinctions for educational scientists and for policymakers and practitioners working in specific sectors and settings, not least in what is often still called 'development education', that is, teaching and learning in Third and Fourth World contexts. Non-formal and informal learning provision and methods are effectively situational imperatives in countries and regions that are frequently isolated, have poorly developed communication and transport infrastructures, do not benefit from coherent public services networks and are, above all, economically weak with high levels of poverty and deprivation. In these parts of the world, establishing the kinds of comprehensive formal education and training systems that exist in Europe and similarly affluent world regions remains difficult to achieve and arguably ineffective. In order to provide greater learning opportunities for

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² Communication from the Commission *Adult learning: It is never too late to learn*, COM(2006)614 final, Brussels, 23.10.2006.

³ EAEA *Adult education trends and issues*, Report (EAC/43/05) to the European Commission DG Education and Culture, Brussels, 11.08.2006 (<http://www.eaea.org/policy/>).

⁴ European Commission *A memorandum on lifelong learning*, Commission Staff Working Paper, SEC(2000)1832, Brussels.

⁵ Communication from the Commission *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality*, COM(2001)678 final, Brussels, 21.11.2001.

the population as a whole, different *and* culturally appropriate concepts and practices are essential – and in this context, non-formal and informal learning have taken on innovative and empowering role and purpose. The EAEA agenda is global and not local in the sense of restricting its purview to Europe. It is important to recognise this heritage and to benefit from the experience and expertise of development educationalists, as European educational theory and practice rediscovers the potential of the continuum of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

It was probably inevitable that in the first phase of discussion and debate following the launch of European-level policy initiatives on lifelong learning these conceptual distinctions between different forms of learning were treated as if they were discrete and mutually exclusive categories of structures and processes. Some 150 years after the development of modern education and training systems, it takes conscious effort to visualise learning that does not take place in ‘school-like’ settings, in which teachers or trainers do not necessarily adopt a directive and defining role in relation to purpose, content, method and outcome, and to appreciate how other kinds of learning might be recognised and validated in their own terms. The confluence of the institutionalised legitimacy of modern education and training systems and the experiences of generations of people for whom these ‘formal’ systems are part of everyone’s childhood and youth life erects boundaries that colour and constrain the ways we both think and act in relation to teaching/training and learning. In addition, the terms ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ are understood and applied rather differently in different parts of Europe, both culturally and educationally, which continues to generate misunderstanding between specialists from different languages and traditions. In some European countries, considerable resistance exists amongst policymakers and in public discourse to these terms, which can resonate with connotations of ideological manipulation under totalitarian regimes or which are seen to undermine the value and status of education as this has developed in the Graeco-European cultural tradition.

However, these three forms of learning are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive: they comprise aggregated positions along a multi-dimensional continuum between informality and formality. Any specific educational exemplar can be analysed along a series of criteria or features of the organisation and shaping of teaching and learning purposes, relations, processes and outcomes.⁶ In some respects, an exemplar may display highly formal elements (such as taking place in a university setting), yet in other ways correspond more closely to non-formal pedagogy (in using theatrical metaphor as a didactic device) and at the same time represent informality (via incidental learning by participation in student self-governance). This implies that all teaching/learning situations are structured across multiple dimensions between formality, non-formality and informality. Each requires close analysis to understand their educational significance for individuals, communities and societies.

The term ‘lifewide learning’ was also introduced into wider public debate through Commission policy documents on lifelong learning. In the interim, it has often been mistakenly interpreted as another way of denoting the formal/non-formal/formal

⁶ For an extended and grounded account, see: Chisholm, L. et al. (2006) *At the end is the beginning: training the trainers in the youth field*, ATTE Vol. 2, Council of Europe Publications: Strasbourg (also available at: http://www.training-youth.net/INTEGRATION/TY/TCourses/olc_atte/atte_course_pub_vol2.html). See also: Chisholm, L. et al. (2005) *Trading Up: potential and performance in non-formal learning*, Council of Europe Publications: Strasbourg.

continuum of learning. However, 'lifewide' actually refers to learning that takes place across different life-spheres – that is, for example, looking at the workplace as a learning environment in conjunction with family life as an opportunity for competence development. This is an area to which the adult learning sector could usefully pay more attention in the future: how can these different spheres of life and the intersections between them be used more positively for learning purposes?

Adult education – as sector of provision, in relation to its philosophical and political heritages, as pedagogic practice – calls on a history 'at the margins' of modern systems, and this suggests that its accumulated collective intelligence holds rich resources for developing our theoretical understanding of non-formal and informal learning. Adult education is well accustomed – perforce, in many cases – to working constructively with many different facets of learning activities, experiences and settings, few of which are fully institutionalised and integrated into mainstream formal education and training provision. This implies that adult education practice can offer much as a source of innovation to other sectors.

Adult education can hence be viewed as future-oriented in terms of its potential to contribute to a redefinition of what learning is, how it works and what it is for, not simply for adults but also across the lifelong and lifewide learning spectrum of provision and participation. The future development of adult education must therefore move beyond a purely adaptive, reactive response to re-working the institutionalisations and categorisations of first-level modernity. It must take its cue from a critically reflective reconstruction of the highly differentiated cultural and social needs and demands of second-level modernity – and this requires some care, if the sector is to avoid unproductive incorporation into the more directly instrumentally-shaped needs and demands of knowledge-based economies. This is by no means an argument against cooperation and synergy across the education and training terrain as a whole, but much rather an argument in favour of educational transformation over against accommodation.

The architecture of lifelong learning

Virtually no coherent theory and little research knowledge on 'age-independent' learning exist. First-level modernity created education and training systems that are fundamentally structured by age and stage (of life, of development), whereas modern educational theories took their cue from theories of child development and specific historical constructions of childhood and youth. Our education and training systems and pedagogies are built on the assumption that it is the young who need to learn and in principle (should) want to learn. This means, firstly, that the concept and practice of andragogy is underdeveloped and largely invisible in many (but not all) parts of Europe. It also leads, secondly, to the assumption that both learning per se and pedagogies must necessarily differ according to the age and stage of the learners. In other words, we provide differently structured learning opportunities for different age-groups as a matter of unquestioned principle, but at the same time do not devote very much research and policy attention to improving our knowledge and practice when the learners are adults (and do not even really know what we mean by the term 'adult' in the first place).

These assumptions need to be examined more closely and critically. There are undoubtedly situations in and purposes for which age-specific kinds of learning opportunities and methods make good educational and social sense, but this is not always or automatically the case, at least not until proven to be so. Quite the reverse:

excluding the option of age-independent provision and pedagogy can produce educational and social exclusion for given age-groups and individuals in particular life-stages, by restricting access to learning opportunities and by constraining the potential of intergenerational learning processes. The mid-1990s idea of 'second-chance education' conveys this kind of underlying problematic: it assumes that there was a first chance and that those who did not reach the finishing-line at the first attempt are under-achievers or drop-outs who can try once more to run the same kind of race. The term 'continuous chance education' would be more appropriate, particularly if it were to admit that learning aims and outcomes may differ independently of the age and stage of the learner.

A transformative future for adult learning therefore lies in breaking down the barriers between the adult education sector and other areas of the education and training terrain, or, in other words, in consciously pursuing the idea of 'positive borderlessness' as the core feature of the architecture of lifelong learning. For example, the long-established and rigid divisions between what have traditionally been termed 'adult education' and 'continuing vocational education and training' (CVET) are contra-productive from the point of view of contemporary life-course flows and contingencies. By and large, people do not classify their learning motivations, needs and preferences into separate boxes with the labels 'general' and 'vocational'. Nor do they make sharp distinctions between what is 'education' and what is 'training'. Furthermore, those working on the ground in education and training environments know full well that the labels attached to courses, curricula and qualifications do not necessarily distinguish between these two apparent dichotomies once one looks directly at content and the outcomes. The categories overlap, and they do so for good reason with respect to the relevant application of knowledge and competence across the different activity spheres of people's lives. To take the example of competence development as workplace learning (on which I am currently working in the framework of the ASEM-LLL Research and Education Hub, that is, in cooperation between European and Asian researchers and policymakers), one of the important features of such settings is that they are potential sites for low-threshold entry into adult learning in general. The general adult education sector does not take this potential into sufficient account, with many researchers and practitioners preferring to keep their distance on the grounds that the risk of instrumental incorporation is just too great.⁷

Developing an authentic lifelong learning architecture demands direct discursive confrontation with critical challenges for adult education in the contemporary world. In the past, its profile and positioning on the political-professional terrain has been primarily based in arguing for its unique qualities and specificities, and hence for the necessary theoretical and institutional separations between adult education and other 'specialised communities of practice' in education and training. This demands reconsideration on two grounds: firstly, narratives of separation do not sit well with the realities of people's learning lives in second-level modernity. Secondly, barrier-free architectures better suit societies of flows and networks, in which personal, social and professional trajectories – that is: as realised in progression and recognition – are much more differentiated and individualised, at least in terms of their subjective meanings and, in some respects, in view of their objective characteristics.

⁷ Chisholm, L. and Fennes, H. (eds.) *Competence development as workplace learning*, Innsbruck University Press: Innsbruck, 2007 (forthcoming).

Building alliances, rethinking governance

Youth education – one of the fields in which I also work – is also embedded in non-formal and informal learning principle and practices. It, too, has a history of marginality – even the term ‘youth education’ is unfamiliar in English. The more conventionally-used terms are ‘youth work’ (which is not primarily and intentionally educational) or ‘out-of-school education’ (which is only an *ex negativo* description); the term ‘youth training’ (which is preferred by the field’s practitioners to avoid using the word ‘teacher’) is no less confusing for the uninitiated, who will immediately think about the vocational education and training (VET) sector. It, too, is a community of practice that faces continual contestations about identity and positioning over against other learning sites and sectors. It, too, faces the dilemma of legitimation via specificity and separation over against innovation via synergy and connection. Why is there no working alliance between adult education and youth education?

It never fails to strike me that inserting the terms ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ into adult education discourse would make little significant difference to the arguments. Most of the points made in my contribution and those of others at this meeting could equally have been made at meetings of youth studies specialists. I have frequently made this observation on both sides of the fence in the past decade, to date with little effect – and the same thought must have crossed many other people’s minds. Why is there so little cooperation between these communities of practice?

Furthermore, today’s young people are, for the most part, young adults. Youth, like adulthood, is a flexible feast, but in today’s world, talking about young people does not mean 12-16 year-olds. Sociologically, the youth phase now extends well into the thirties, that is, well into what is still unreflectively called ‘adult life’. The concerns of the youth and the adult learning sectors overlap and coincide, and there is nothing ultimately to be gained, theoretically or practically, by strengthening existing structural separations or by arguing for artificial pedagogical distinctions. In view of the rapid development of European-level policy in both of these fields, it would make sense to explore and use the scope for productive alliances and partnerships.

Everyone always says that partnerships are the best way forward, whatever it is one seeks to achieve. Everyone also knows that it is easy to recite the principle and extraordinarily difficult to bring successful partnerships into being. Look at the participation statistics alone: many adults are non-participants in any form of organised learning; many of those (of all ages) who do participate do not do so voluntarily or with much interest; and almost everywhere a significant minority of those beyond compulsory school-age are very clear that they have no desire to participate in anything they would knowingly define as learning.⁸ Without participation, there can be no engagement; and much formal participation is personally and socially disengaged. What future for democratic governance under such circumstances?

The key issue here is simple: learning to take people (of all ages) seriously. When people tell us why they do not participate in education and training, when they tell us that they are not interested in learning, then researchers, practitioners and policymakers should begin from the standpoint that they have cogent reasons. The adult education sector – in alliance with other communities of practice – must take the results of its own studies and analyses seriously, for we do now know about the

⁸ See here: Chisholm, L., Larson, A. and Mossoux, A.-F. (2004) *Lifelong Learning: Citizens’ views in close-up* Office for Official Publications of the European Communities: Luxembourg.

extent of non-participation and disengagement. This is not simply an educational issue, but more pertinently a question of the regeneration of meaningful social participation. Adult education can only have a future if adults want to learn, and this only makes sense for the majority of people if learning is personally and socially rewarding in the broadest sense of the term.

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