

## Lifelong Learning: A Third Way in Education?

Daniel VULLIAMY, University of Hull

### Abstract

A new model of lifelong learning as generator of social capital in the New Economy is discussed. This newly proposed, alternative view on adult education emphasizes on the following aspects: the student's own experience, the need to demystify the academic language and practice, the participation of students in the process of design and negotiation of curricula, the problems of transferability of skills and usefulness of knowledge. The author draws attention to the responsibilities of the providers of adult educations and the multiple individual and social expectations they have to face.

Education emerged as at the centre of New Labor Strategy in 1997, and Lifelong Learning, traditionally the poor relation within education, as near the centre of education strategy, most clearly in the 1998 Green Paper, *The Learning Age*.

Before the election, in October 1996, Tony Blair asked at the Labor Party Conference, 'Ask me my three main priorities for Government, and I tell you: Education, Education, Education'. In other policy areas, there has been much talk within the Labor Party and amongst political scientists about the 'Third Way', often defined in terms of what it is not - 'neither capitalist nor communist' or 'neither workers nor bosses'. New Labor political speeches have certainly embraced Third Way rhetoric.

In employment relations it is easy to identify the key aspects of the Third Way:

- Don't restore trade union rights removed by Thatcher;
- Don't encourage collective bargaining in the workplace;
- Restore floors of rights (minimum pay, rights to individual representation, etc)
- ...But only so far as they don't conflict with labor flexibility

Some of us see the so-called third way in employment relations as the first way with a human face. In Marxist terms, 'the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. New Labor largely follows the business agenda in employment relations. Can we identify three ways in Education? And is Lifelong Learning the Third Way? Coffield has identified 19 different definitions of lifelong learning. Here we work with just three. All are based on the notion of responding to the new world economic order post 1989.

Key features of the New Economy

- Productivity and competitiveness come from knowledge generation and information processing
- New information communication technologies enable unprecedented mobility of capital;
- Capital mobility inevitably widens inequalities within and between countries;
- Individual nations are unable to significantly challenge these processes.

### Lifelong Learning as a Generator of Human Capital

From the 1960s, economists have promoted the view that investment in workers' knowledge and skills is just as important in wealth creation as investment in plant and machinery. But investment is always made where it is most likely to generate the highest returns. It follows that the prospects for the poor and weak are grim. But the prospect of failure and its consequences is essential to encourage enterprise and risk-taking.

What sort of lifelong learning is implied by this model? The driver is economic self-interest as defined by employers' needs of labor. The highest returns come from investment in the most able, from short focused interventions, like work-based training, heavily vocationally oriented. There is little point in investing in the lame, stupid and feckless, except to the extent that it might avoid the state having to support them in their unproductive lives. The methods of learning are likely to be top-down and controlled.

Much of the human capital debate is based on the assumption that employers know their labor skills needs and are willing to invest in developing them. The evidence suggests otherwise. That has not stopped all governments in recent years giving increasing control over education resources to employers and resisting calls for financial and legal pressures on employers to support the education of their workforce.

### Lifelong Learning as Generator of Social Capital

Under capitalism, labor markets fragment and work is deregulated, with consequences for social cohesion. Lifelong Learning may be a route to mitigating the worst effects of that fragmentation, supporting shared values and understanding, and cementing human relationships through citizen participation. Scandinavian approaches to liberal adult education as a key element in a strong welfare state offer the strongest example of lifelong learning for social capital.

However, we should remember that social capital can be promoted in a negative way, particularly when one group's cohesion is based on the active exclusion of others as in Apartheid South Africa or Nazi Germany.

What sort of lifelong learning is implied by this model? At the extreme, I would offer liberal adult education. There are variations, but key aspects can be identified:

- The starting point is the student's own experience. This is built upon with critical thinking to generate new thoughts and ideas;
- The language and techniques of academic practice are not ignored, but demystified;
- Students learn together and as equals, practising the skills and concepts they have developed;
- The relationship between teacher and student is of mutual respect, and often bordering on equality; the curriculum is negotiated as far as external circumstances allow;
- The learning skills developed are transferable, and allow further development;

- Key aims are to diffuse knowledge and extend democracy by involving as many people as possible in society's decision-making processes.

### **Lifelong Learning for Social Transformation or Social Control**

Economic self-interest as the sole driver for learning is too reductionist. Deregulated labor markets imply frequent job changes for workers, reducing the search for identity through work. People are also motivated by the desire for self-fulfillment and personal growth. They may even focus on their identity as learners.

There are important traditions within radical movements now and the past within the UK and elsewhere (socialist, feminist, environmental, peace) of using lifelong learning to acquire 'really useful knowledge', to challenge inequality and oppression as well as allow personal growth. Examples include the Workers Educational Associations, Freirian education, Fourth World Movement and liberation theology, acting as catalysts for change. On the other hand, Coffield has reminded us that Lifelong Learning can also be used as a means of reinforcing social control. Post-16 training for young adults is not about upskilling but keeping them out of 'anti-social' activities, by filling their time. Attendance is not based on improvement but avoidance loss of benefits. The courses are frequently not appropriate to individual needs or employer needs. But provision enables nations to blame the victims for failing to upgrade their qualifications to ensure employability.

What sort of lifelong learning is implied by these opposites of social transformation and social control? Crudely, social transformation will not be achieved by telling people *what* to think, but by helping people learn *how* to think. It follows that methodologies close to liberal adult education will be most favored. Meanwhile the content and methodology of learning for social control is relatively unimportant.

### **Conclusions**

The resources being found for lifelong learning in most countries in recent years are impressive. But there are substantial risks attached.

- When adult learning was a marginal poor relation, it had space; what happened in the classroom was often largely the prerogative of students and teachers.

- What happens when lifelong learning fails to deliver the large promises and expectations made of it?

In the UK, after the heady days of 1997 and 1998, education policy has stuttered, most of all in the post-compulsory sector. ILAs have been suspended. The University for Industry has not had the expected impact. A rash commitment by Tony Blair that 50% of the eligible population under 30 should have experienced Higher Education by 2010 has resulted in his civil servants expressing disinterest in proposals for provision for those over currently over 23 because those individuals will be over 30 in 2010! The 50% target is not regarded as likely to be achieved without creative counting. Quality assurance systems are being redefined and reduced. Policy on adult education within Higher Education is muddy and shifting; what counts and how much it is worth is again under review. HE's role in lifelong learning is viewed with doubts by Government. Policy on student funding is being urgently reviewed. Last week's budget clearly prioritised health services over education. Recent statements have emphasized the importance of training over social capital and of young adults over others.

On the other hand, there are positives. There is a clear international government consensus in support of lifelong learning, usually with a broader definition and more generous policies than the UK. The OECD and European Union both have strong commitment and are clearly far more supportive of social capital approaches to lifelong learning than a decade ago. There are interesting developments from outside the main education ministry as the Department for Trade and Industry promotes statutory (trade) union learning representatives and the Department for Local Government, Transport and the Regions funds learning projects for economic and social regeneration (an issue with important parallels for this debate).

### **References**

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