EVALUATION: Challenging Boundaries

Theme: Evaluation - Serving the Public Interest

Title: Evaluation of Lifelong Learning: Questions from Three Perspectives

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Introduction

In the 1990s lifelong learning has received a new international impetus and urgency in response to such trends as globalisation, interdependence, rapid social, economic and technological change and the ageing society. Most of the discussion has focused on elucidation of the concept of lifelong learning, the need to promote it, and the means to do so. Less attention has been devoted to exploring how goals for lifelong learning might be evaluated. This paper focuses on lifelong learning in a developed society such as Australia, and identifies three sets of stakeholders: government, learners and teachers. By identifying their perspectives, and collecting data on how far they are being addressed, it may be possible to promote and realise a richer concept of lifelong learning amongst all parties, thus serving the public interest in enhanced quality of life and social justice on both a local and global scale.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning may be conceptualised within a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension focuses on linear time i.e. the sequence of events in one's personal world over one's life. Individuals progress from school to university, from first to second job, or from employment into unemployment, from being single to living with a partner, or from wife to mother. In developed societies, life expectancy of around 78 years for men and 82 for women is now the norm, so that retirement, and entry to the Third Age (Laslett 1989), is an opportunity for many to achieve personal and social goals which they lacked time for when in employment. Each of these transitions involves learning new roles, and, depending upon the nature of the transition, such learning may be facilitated through formal programmes of training and through informal means, such as learning within the family or on-the-job.

The horizontal dimension relates to the range of social roles that an individual engages in at any point of time, for example as a member of a family, a citizen, a worker, and a person with one or more leisure and cultural interests. In the course of a day we may find ourselves moving into, and out of, any number of these roles in a context that is constantly changing due to personal, social and technological change. For example, a young man six weeks into his first experience of fathering, may also be encountering new technology in his workplace, which raises environmental, health, safety and union concerns, as well as having to team up with new co-workers from a different ethnic and cultural background, while his favourite Footy team is languishing at the bottom of the AFL! Learning an appropriate way of handling each of these complex, and to some extent unpredictable, situations may be required so that a sense of personal efficacy is maintained

along with harmonious relations with those within the role-set. The rapidity of change means that such complexities have to be addressed on a continuous basis over the life-span.

Unesco's Delors Report (1996) *Learning: The Treasure Within* identifies four 'pillars' of education which must be renewed on a continuous basis over the life span for human development in the 21st Century: learning to know, to do, to be and to live together. Learning 'to know' and 'to do' relate to the formation of key cognitive and practical skills respectively. The need for their continuous renewal reflects the knowledge explosion, and technological transformation of the workplace and social landscape in contemporary developed societies, but there are thorny questions about which knowledge and skills are most important to acquire at which stage. Learning 'to be' relates to personal realisation, and identification and development of the 'treasure', or hidden talents, within each and every person. Learning 'to live together' is a new goal for education. It involves the cultivation of social responsibility. It is a response to such developments as the triumph of individualism within economic rationalism, the loss of national autonomy through globalisation, the need to establish a new international basis for approaching environmental issues such as the sharing of natural resources, due to population growth, and the tensions generated within societies, which are becoming increasingly multicultural, through migration stemming from natural disaster, war and the search to escape impoverishment. Human development involves renewal of the four pillars within both the vertical and horizontal dimensions over the lifespan.

Initial education, which now extends to 18 years for most young people in Australia and other OECD countries, can develop high level literacy skills which open doors to subsequent education and training. Missing out on initial education, leaving school early, or achieving a low standard within it, are associated with adolescent unemployment, and low earnings subsequently over the lifespan. But it is also acknowledged that initial education may be stressful and boring for many young people, leading to negative attitudes to learning, as reflected in early drop-out, school refusal, or even suicide. It is therefore perceived to be important to promote new skills such as learning to learn, and personal autonomy and creativity in learners, so that learning is both enjoyable and challenging in the short-term, and recognised to be something worth engaging in over the lifespan. Systems of initial education are consequently under pressure to reform.

Post-initial education, which is here defined to include vocational training and higher education, and to extend to between 19 and 25 years i.e. until entry to employment, is also increasingly provided for all. Government supports participation in higher education, for example, through student loans, and it directly provides, subsidises or stimulates the creation of training programmes which will develop marketable skills. Continuing education is here defined as education and training to promote learning over the remainder of the life span. Such learning may occur through formal training opportunities or informally. Formal training (and retraining) is offered by a range of agencies including government, business, voluntary organisations,

private agencies and community groups with free, subsidised or full-cost participation by trainees. An important aspect of this is 'second chance' learning, for example through Adult Literacy schemes, for those who missed out on initial education. Informal learning includes learning through participation in work i.e. on-the-job learning, social and leisure activities, including for example, community action initiatives. An important objective of policy is to promote recognition of informal learning within the context of formal qualifications, and to encourage persons in the workforce to aspire towards these.

In addition to these learning opportunities must be added the fact that we live in a 'learning society' in which there are multiple sources of information, skill acquisition and attitude formation. These include the media, the Internet, and numerous everyday innovations, such as electronic ticketing, which each person may choose to exploit, or is at least to some part exposed, in the course of their daily life.

The relationship between these dimensions, stages of education and Delors four pillars of education is set out in Figure 1.

(Figure 1 about here)

Goals for Lifelong Learning

Japan is the country which first formulated explicit goals for lifelong learning to encourage people to recognise that life offered many means of personal fulfilment beyond work. In OECD countries most Governments viewed lifelong learning initially in terms of reskilling workforces to ensure international competitiveness. However, the evidence of need, and the scale of social change, are now prompting fresh thinking. Hughes (1998), for example, argues that lifelong learning is a means of promoting a new humanism to give people a sense of purpose in life within the community, and to balance individualism and concern for the material.

Within formal provision, the goals of lifelong learning may be expressed as:

- provision of **access** to the desired and available opportunities
- promotion of **participation**, especially by such disadvantaged groups as the unemployed, Non-English Speaking Background, Koories and other ethnic minorities, migrants, and women
- seeking to ensure that participation leads to **achievement** of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that the learning is intended to promote, and
- managing the learning so that individuals are **empowered** to apply their new skills in appropriate contexts, and to seek further opportunities to enhance them.

Evaluating Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning involves three stakeholders: Government, learners and teachers. A comprehensive and multi-level programme is required to evaluate the extent to which goals for lifelong learning are being

achieved, and the factors which retard and promote their achievement. This paper suggests some questions for evaluation from provider and participant perspectives, answers to which would assist holistic understanding of the issue.

(a) Government

Government has responsibility for policy evolution, for ensuring that policy is translated into objectives and practice within an appropriate framework, and for monitoring and evaluating quality of implementation. Government provides many of the resources for lifelong learning, but does not necessarily supply the services. For example, within initial education, Government may encourage growth of 'private' schools, as well as permitting 'contracting out' from its own school system. Government policies may also be designed to stimulate provision of continuing education by other suppliers, such as business, community agencies and NGOs.

With respect to formulation and implementation of lifelong learning policies, Government is likely to be interested in evidence on such issues as extent and quality of provision, attainment of equal opportunities by all groups in society, and social effects. The following questions indicate the breadth of these concerns:

1. How far do all targeted individuals and groups in society have access to relevant formal lifelong learning opportunities at the appropriate stage, and how far do they participate in these opportunities to a level which equips them for the evolving society?
2. How can barriers to access be removed, participation promoted, and achievement facilitated so that learners feel empowered by the process of learning?
3. How far does what is provided at each stage promote a society of sustained economic growth, accompanied by evidence of an improved social condition as reflected in, for example, lower unemployment levels, reduced health costs and crime levels, and enhanced participation in community affairs?
4. From an international viewpoint, how does the society compare with other similar societies, and how far is lifelong learning contributing to achievement of a national consensus on a constructive international approach to such issues as environmental conservation and human rights?

Clearly these questions could be answered only over different time-scales - education is a long-term process where policies take many years to show effects - and to do so would involve different methodologies and data gathering techniques.

(b) Learners

Lifelong learning focuses attention on the learner as the agent of their own learning. In this conceptualisation learning is not something 'done' to you; it is a process you engage in consciously because you are assisted to become aware that, not to do so, means you will live, as many do, in a cultural laager,

out of touch with the dominant forces of contemporary society, endowed with increasingly obsolete vocational skills, life skills and social attitudes.

The individual is both the target and beneficiary of formal education and training opportunities. The target, because societies need skilled and socially conscious individuals if global challenges are to be addressed rationally; the beneficiary, because access to learning creates opportunities for skill development and enhanced quality of life on any number of dimensions. Individuals are also informal learners within the learning society, conscious, to a greater or lesser degree, that they are learning in such different settings as on-the-job or in the community. Their perspectives are likely to reflect their level of consciousness, self-concept and aspirations. They may question the costs and benefits of engagement in learning, the quality of formal learning experiences, the purpose of learning and the terms in which 'success' should be measured.

They may ask questions such as:
1. What are the costs/benefits to me of participation in different forms of learning opportunity?
2. In what terms do I evaluate achievement and 'success' from participation: in individual terms such as career advancement, employability, healthy ageing?; or in social terms, such as developing a greater understanding of the forces which need to be challenged and changed to create a more just local and global society, and of the means of doing this?

But longitudinal, biographical studies of learners (e.g. Alheit 1994) can also illustrate paths to learning, and specifically the relationship between formal and informal learning, within the community context, over the lifespan. For example, studies by Prinsloo and Breier (1997) in South Africa, suggest that the community is an important source of information for adult illiterates. They 'pool' their knowledge and skills, so that those who can 'read' traffic rules and signs share this information with those preparing to take the driver's licence test. Consequently an evaluation of lifelong learning from the learner's perspective may involve seeking answers to such deeper questions as:
3. How do individuals in different social positions learn to respond to the range of life needs and events? What is the contribution of different sources of information and social contexts, and how is such knowledge and understanding translated into action?

The answer to such questions may be found by asking learners to explore their personal development paths. In higher education there is evidence (Perry 1970) that some undergraduates move from simple dualistic - 'right/wrong' - conceptualisations of the world to conceptualisations which appreciate relativism and complexity. How teachers assist this process of growth in moral awareness and civic literacy is a central issue for lifelong learning at all stages of education.

(c) Teachers

A third stakeholder is the teacher. One challenge for lifelong learning in initial education is to assist teachers (and schools) to reformulate their role. With regard to the stage of continuing education, Brookfield (1991) suggests that adult educator 'facilitators' should be concerned not just to promote acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but also to bring about personal transformation of learners through heightening consciousness of the cultural forces which shape their view of the world, and introducing ideas of relativism. Evaluation could explore how widely such a view is held by teachers; research could identify the kind of training and mentoring that would develop the skills required. Evaluators might, through interview, explore with teachers questions such as:

1. What do you see to be the purposes of your work with adult learners? In promoting knowledge, skills and attitudes how far do you accept the view that your role may involve assisting learners to re-examine critically their beliefs and assumptions about their personal and civic responsibilities?

Figure 2 summarises the relationship between goals of lifelong learning policies and stakeholder perspectives.

(Figure 2 about here)

Conclusion

The development of policies and practices for lifelong learning requires to be informed by evidence, reflecting the wide range of goals being pursued and the diffuseness of the concept. There may be other stakeholders, but the three identified would appear to be crucial. Policy evolution depends upon more than 'evidence' from statistical indicators. The viewpoint of learners is crucial. Teachers, too, need to be aware of their obligations to society, and to be motivated to fulfil them. They must be aware of the complexity of factors which influence how and why adults learn, and of the pedagogical and andragogical practices which may make a difference to their conception of the world and their roles within it.

Lifelong learning is seen by many to be the key to creating, in all societies, an informed citizenry who see the world predicament through 21st Century eyes and understandings. Such understandings are essential if the formidable problems facing the global society are to be tackled with hope for success in the years ahead, and a more just and stable world order created. Evaluation, in the sense described here, would seem to be unmistakeably serving the public interest, in both the national and international context.

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Learning Across the Scope of Individual Life	**Learning Over the Life Span**			
	Vertical Dimension			
Horizontal Dimension	**Stages of Education and Training**			
Pillars of Education	**Initial**	**Post-Initial**	**Continuing**	
			Formal	**Informal**
Know				
Do				
Live Together				
Be				

Figure 1: Relationship between dimensions, stages of education and training and the four pillars of education.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Lifelong Learning Policies	**Goals of Lifelong Learning Policies**			
	Access	**Participation**	**Achievement**	**Empowerment**
Government				
Learner				
Teacher				

Figure 2: Perspectives of Government, learners and teachers on different goals of lifelong learning policies.