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What's New about Lifelong Learning, and What Does it Mean for Working Lives?

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INTRODUCTION

The two fundamental human processes of working and learning are interwoven in concepts of lifelong learning. Both find expression in and across contexts of home, community, family and businesses and through purposeful activity, whether voluntary, paid or unpaid. The question 'What's new?' has been prompted by revivals of lifelong learning in policy debates, which are set to intensify globally in efforts to respond to societal upheaval and disruptive change in the 2020s and beyond.

In the years between 1995 and 2001 an international wave of public policy support for lifelong learning gathered force. On the crest of the wave, in the United Kingdom, new policies formed around the idea of a Learning Age (in England and Wales) which acknowledged not only the increasing importance of lifelong learning to working life in a modern economy, but also its contributions to personal development, family life, civic life and active citizenship. The counterpart in Scotland, promoted through the newly formed Scottish Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Council, was based on the idea that the lifelong learning goal of enabling learning to permeate peoples' lives cannot be realised without substantial engagement with

working life (Moodie 2003). Across Europe, there were plans to create a European lifelong learning area (European Commission 2001) with the aim of creating strategies to maximise opportunities for people of all ages to participate actively in working life and as members of their communities. UNESCO took steps to remodel its Institute for Education as the Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg, and the GRALE (Global Report on Adult Learning and Education) was set up to monitor developments around the world at five-yearly intervals. But as waves rush to the shore, they create their own undertow. In the case of lifelong learning, the undertow took many forms:

- Questioning by economists of the returns to the economy of investing in access for individuals to non-conventional modes of learning in adult life, compared to the returns from investment in, for example, early childhood education.

- Questioning by international development influencers who viewed lifelong learning discourses as rather utopian, with inadequate operational frameworks, leading them to ascribe higher priority to more concrete and realisable goals.

- Resistance (often from adult educators themselves) to the narrowness of employability drivers behind much of the policy rhetoric.

In England, the tide went out on government funding support for lifelong learning around 2010, although research investment continued through the independent Research Councils, notably the Economic and Social Research Council who funded major research programmes in the field. It has taken another 10 years for lifelong learning to start rising up the public policy agenda again in new and more concrete ways, going beyond the lip service and rather vague statements of intent that have characterised previous policy pronouncements. An article in a mainstream national newspaper with the eye-catching title ‘My dad studied late in life – he wouldn’t get the chance now’ (Hinsliff 2019) was prompted by two significant Reviews

published in 2019, one retrospective, one prospective. The first marked the Centenary of the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction report on adult education, produced in the immediate aftermath of the 1914–18 War. The report famously described the education of adults as a 'permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship'. The journalist contrasts the present impoverishment of adult learning opportunities in England with the inspirational aspirations and commitments of that landmark century-old report, while looking to the 2019 Augar Report for hope for the future. The latter review, commissioned by government, proposed the introduction of lifetime learning loans coupled with a right to free study for every adult who does not already have an intermediate level (EQF 4) qualification. This proposal was translated into a 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee' policy in 2020, linked to existing national retraining plans (DfE 2020) and spurred on by the employment crisis arising from combined effects of the global pandemic and the UK's exit from the European Union.

The Economist, in a timely Special Report on Lifelong Learning titled 'How to survive in the age of automation' (2017) has contrasted the speed and scale of private sector initiatives with the slowness of governments everywhere to support the development of ecosystems that facilitate lifelong learning coupled with fair access. If such prominent coverage in serious journalism is an indicator of the salience of the topic, then the renewal of lifelong learning is well underway. But for long-term traction the weaknesses that have undermined legitimacy of the concept and its translations into policy and practice development demand renewed attention.

The will to move beyond rhetorical statements of intent is unevenly spread at the level of national governments, but the pressing need for concrete actions seems to be universally endorsed by international agencies and organisations (OECD, ILO, UNESCO, the European Commission) and is now enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals. It seems that there

are now more tools at the disposal of those who seek to re-frame educational priorities according to tenets of lifelong learning. But those tenets are themselves subject to debate.

NEWNESS IN EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Of course, lifelong learning is not a 21st-century idea. Western versions of the concept are often traced back to Plato, although Solon, a reforming Athenian statesman and poet who pre-dated Plato is credited with relatively enlightened views on the benefits of learning throughout the life course and the merits of older adults learning from younger generations. Eastern versions rooted in Confucian traditions developed in parallel, emphasising the search for harmony through lifelong learning.

For Aspin et al. (2012), introducing the *Second International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*, human learning is characterised by endless curiosity and inter-communication over 'puzzles, problems and predicaments' coupled with strivings to master change and improve lives.

Yet modern conceptions of lifelong learning have often narrowed in ways that have divided proponents of learning throughout life, and their practical uses in educational planning have fallen so far short of aspirations that the cause itself has become tarnished in the eyes of many. The search for newness in contemporary debates has called into question the narrowing effects of a dominant economic rationality model, in which one-dimensional 'homo economicus' is driven to engage in lifelong learning by the need to adapt flexibly to inevitable labour market turbulence and change. Of course, contrasting discourses co-exist in the present time; the dominance of one discourse at any one time does not mean that other ways of thinking about learning throughout the life course have disappeared. They are alive

and well in a range of critical traditions and perspectives that retain their power to engage and persuade.

At least three discourses or sets of ideas are at play in debates about what lifelong learning is, what it should be aiming to achieve and why it should be supported. The discourse of lifelong engagement with the ideas and practices of democracy has its roots in the emancipatory movements of the early 20th century. This version of lifelong learning found expression in the UK in the 1919 post-war report on Adult Education and has been forcefully re-asserted in the 2019 report of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education. Another powerful discourse, centred on a humanistic view of human flourishing and captured in the Fauré Report *Learning to Be* (UNESCO 1972), emphasises the universality of untapped potential in the population and the purpose of lifelong learning as personal fulfilment through the flexible organisation of learning 'which should last the whole life for individuals' and not just be tacked on to school or university for the privileged or specialised few. The prescient research of E.J. King (King et al., 1975) gave a strong comparative social scientific basis to these ideas, developing a framework for the international analysis of newness that has considerable 21st-century salience, emphasising the lifelong interplay of life, work and learning in all its forms. A third powerful discourse revolves around employability and evidence that the 'more we learn we more we earn', both of which are dominant drivers of the human-capital-inspired approaches to lifelong learning. The EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2001, set out an agenda for lifelong learning for the first two decades of the 21st century, based on analyses that emphasised the ways in which the nature of work and working lives are changing, the need to reform dysfunctional systems rooted in the norms of the past, and the search for innovation coupled with new skills for new jobs.

In turbulent times, broader conceptions are brought into view when we ask deeper questions about the lifelong processes of learning that can link, rather than separate, the older

and younger generations and address the realities of widening inequalities in lengthening working lives. Capturing lifelong learning in frameworks of skills and competences might make lifelong learning manageable but the approach also 'pins the butterfly' and is ostensibly not quite up to the multi-faceted uncertainties of changing times. The time is ripe for re-imagining lifelong learning in ways that embrace more generous and rounded views of human capabilities.

A TRIADIC CONCEPTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING LEADS TO INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

A triadic conception recognises the multi-faceted nature of lifelong learning (Aspin et al. 2012) and embraces the view that lifelong learning is differentiated and animated by the interplay between three dimensions: (1) educating for a more highly skilled and knowledgeable working population; (2) supporting personal development that activates inquiry and embraces what life has to offer; (3) creating conditions for a stronger and more inclusive society.

Interdependencies of the three dimensions are critical to the triadic conception; if any one of the dimensions fails, the centre cannot hold. Thus, for example, if education for higher skills and knowledge in the workforce is also accompanied by growing inequalities between the knowledge rich and knowledge poor, the conditions for the strong and inclusive society are undermined. For the centre to hold, wider distribution of higher skills and knowledge in the adult population is necessary, but sufficient for sustaining a stronger society only when accompanied by the personal attributes of inquiry and learning that support lifelong engagement with the ideas and practices of democracy. Moreover, strategies for workforce development and channels for enhanced social participation will not be sustainable in the longer term unless powered by curious and capable people who have been supported in their personal development. This triadic concept is further captured in the approach to inclusive

development advocated by Brewis (2019), who links fair access to learning opportunities with a broader goal of social equity, using a socially embedded framing of personal growth.

This view of lifelong learning as triadic and integral to inclusive development offers, I argue, a fresh conceptualisation. New conceptual tools can open up novel angles that are potentially powerful but are they any more able to gain and sustain traction than their predecessors?

Inquiry into what's new about lifelong learning must go beyond fresh conceptual thinking to consider newness of evidence, technologies, tools and contexts, which are all in play in the theatres of educational decision-making. In focusing on the theatre of educational decision-making for the changing realities of work and working life, my argument turns to new sources of evidence that counter old tropes (about learning in adult life); the possibilities and limits of technological facilitation of adult learning and citizen participation and the interplay of work and learning in the context of the rise of non-permanent work.

NEW SOURCES OF EVIDENCE ON ADULT LEARNING CAPABILITIES AND THE SOCIETAL RETURNS OF SUPPORT FOR ADULT LEARNING

Assertions by proponents of lifelong learning about its life-changing effects are easily dismissed by critics as reflective of vested interests and therefore over-stated. But it is equally likely that the best estimates of effects and learning propensities have been systematically under-estimated. It is well known that such knowledge is always provisional and that prior studies have been limited by the unavailability of data and adequate methodological tools.

In the field of cognitive science, for example, developments in neuroscience combined with cross-disciplinary collaboration between neuroscientists and social scientists are

generating new evidence and ways of thinking about learning capabilities in adult life. Plasticity is shown to be an intrinsic property of the brain. Continual development is recognised as part of the brain's normal function, implying a 'permanent learning capacity' (OECD 2009; Royal Society 2011). While neuroscientists focus on the changes in the physical connections and networks of neurons, social scientists focus on the ways in which systems of representation are built up in ways which govern modes of thinking and acting in the world. While there are undoubtedly sensitive periods for learning specific types of skills and knowledge, most can be learnt at any time of life, albeit with differences in the time and cognitive resources involved. The popular notions of declining mental abilities as brain size reduces in later life are challenged by evidence that age-related reductions in grey matter do not mean that increases in neural numbers cannot occur, including new evidence announced in the *Scientific American* with the headline: 'The adult brain does grow new neurons after all' (Weintraub 2019).

Neuroscientific advances combined with social scientific insights into the social, psychological and cultural dimensions of adult learning and active ageing (Formosa 2019) indicate the need to jettison deficit models that equate ageing with cognitive losses. Competence and capability models that focus on the diversity of changing abilities in adult life and on concepts of active ageing now have better fit with the emergent evidence. While many adult educators would claim that this is merely a case of neuroscience catching up with their practice-based knowledge, that could also be said of recent evidence gained from brain research into the performance of tasks. Brain imaging has shown that a curious approach to activities, also known as the need for cognition, correlates with improved capabilities in undertaking new or different tasks (Gruber et al. 2014). This finding, held by the authors to have applications in workplaces as well as classrooms, corroborates earlier social scientific developmental work research that has demonstrated the importance of deep investigative learning for adults in changing work environments (Engeström 1995). A key feature of

investigative learning is curiosity, the embodied need for cognition in solving apparently intractable workplace problems. The significance of neuro-scientific corroboration of the role of curiosity in expanding workplace capabilities has not been lost on human resource developers and is manifested in the search for ways of measuring 'curious' approaches to problem-solving that can be incorporated into recruitment, training and assessment in adult working life. This point of connection could be given much greater emphasis in addressing the long-standing and much debated education–employment divide (Fettes et al. 2020). Education's undisputed mission is to develop curiosity and the need for cognition – developing such capabilities is at the heart of education. This is what education does. Greater mutual recognition of the direct relevance of this core purpose by employers and recruiters as well as educators arguably opens up conversations about education–employment co-operation that make more sense than expecting education to 'deliver' people who are work-ready in terms of narrowly defined work tasks and competences.

Turning to the quantification of the benefits of lifelong learning, a substantial body of research evidence on the wider benefits of learning through the life course has built upon the platform of OECD and 'Wider Benefits of Learning' studies initiated by Schuller et al. (2001) and Feinstein et al. (2008), with increasing sophistication of method. However, empirical research on the economic returns of learning beyond initial education and conventional, front-loaded further and higher education undertaken end-on to initial schooling, has been more limited in scope. Up to 2012, few studies had the sophistication to capture economic benefits of adult learning, although some had started to indicate sources of variation. For example, Jenkins et al. (2003) showed little immediate earnings benefit from qualifications obtained in one's thirties but indicated that enrolling for adult learning has a significant association with the likelihood of unemployed adults re-entering the labour market.

Dorsett, Lui and Weale (2016) have made methodological advances in addressing questions of the economic returns of lifelong learning, leading to the findings of more substantial benefits from lifelong learning than had previously been demonstrated. Their analysis suggests that 25-year old men who gain additional qualifications, without increasing the overall level of qualification from their initial level to a higher one within the national qualification framework, increase their remaining lifetime earning power by 5–6%. The benefits are lower for older people, but for men aged forty without nationally recognised qualifications the earning power increase associated with participation in any substantial course is still at least 5%. The benefits when the national qualification level is upgraded are much higher, at just over 20%, for someone who initially has no qualification and 12–13% for someone who initially holds an intermediate level of qualification and increases it to a level equating to higher education. These benefits are similar at age 25 and age 40 and arise largely because an increased qualification level is found to have a substantial favourable impact on the probability of employment. Similar effects are found for women.

The research which has led to these findings has contributed to newness in the field on both substantive and methodological fronts. Substantively, the results have advanced our understanding of the effectiveness of lifelong learning. Methodologically, the research has examined effects within a mover-stayer model that factors in the wage effects of moving between jobs, allowing for the fact that people are job movers at some time and job stayers at other times. The new analysis has allowed for the possibility, which was supported by the data, that while, in most cases, people's earnings are closely related to those of previous periods, they are subject periodically to large disturbances. Such a disturbances might arise, because people lose their jobs or because they are able to take advantage of some particularly favourable offer which arises. Dorsett et al. (2016) have been able to identify the routes by which lifelong learning might affect wages, and specifically whether it has a role in assigning individuals to be movers or stayers and thereby have their wages subject to differing sets of

influences. The results pose a challenge to the conventional views of low social and economic returns that too often assign low priority to enhanced investment in adult learning in the trade-offs of policy-making.

Researchers from a range of social scientific disciplines are increasingly focusing on the complex dynamics of change in learning and work histories and on the multiple factors involved in individual actions such as moving jobs, making life changes or engaging in forms of lifelong learning. New avenues for policy are identified as research substantiates dimensions and effects of learning that are often insufficiently recognized in public policy incentives (Evans, Schoon and Weale 2013; Boeren 2016). Statistical modelling of these relationships (e.g. Bynner and Parsons, 2009) is complemented by qualitative accounts of 'learning lives', also based on longitudinal analyses that bring different dimensions into view and develop insights into the experiences and situations of diverse groups as well as the antecedents and consequences of life events. For example, Biesta et al. (2011) argue that it is the *quality* of involvement in lifelong learning that determines how that learning might influence life chances, through its effects on identity development, personal agency and action. It may indeed be that the 'deep learning' is the most significant element that keeps adults both mobile and employable, rather than the increase in qualification level *per se* and its recognition in the labour market. It is more likely to be a combination of depth of learning and qualifications that support the transformative potential for life chances.

The new evidence drawn from disciplines ranging from neuroscience to sociology and economics challenges dominant beliefs about the efficacies of adult learning but is insufficient in itself to transform the landscape for adult learning. Add to the new evidence the scope for large-scale technological facilitation of adult learning, and the transformation possibilities multiply.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGICAL FACILITATION OF LEARNING

Newness in education, in King's (King et al. 1975) future-oriented analysis, was predicated in terms of a new technological idiom, that of a communications society in which all engage in potentially educative communication and thereby in teaching and learning from others throughout their lives. The new technological idiom envisaged communication technologies that enable multiple modes of lifelong learning that constantly evolve and change, as today's technologies become our grandchildren's archaeology (King 1999). In the 21st century, emerging technological innovations have already included the integration of blockchain technology in MOOCS, the development of augmented and virtual reality learning environments, and the use of digital and micro-credentials and micro-learning (or 'bite-sized') learning.

The tendency to over-estimate the potential for transformation of each incremental advance is manifest. Field (2006) had some telling observations about the utopian and dystopian possibilities of advances in learning technologies. Then, as now, the utopian and dystopian possibilities co-exist and it is important to keep both in view. The problems of hyper-inflation and the proliferation of micro-credentials are already with us, generating a search for ways of combining them in 'stackable credentials'. The more hyperinflation and proliferation occur, the more important the anchoring of the learning programmes in trusted institutions becomes, in the interests of those taking up the learning opportunities and those whose lives might be affected by their ripple effects. The idea of creating central banks of credentials organised, with a common language, into skills levels (*The Economist*, 2017) starts to look like reinventing the distinctly 20th-century wheel of generic competence frameworks, with all the attendant measurement problems and tendencies to advance the most easily measured technical skills at the expense of more complex capabilities. This putative solution

also has the same inherent problems of validation of the credentials of the assessors. And the whole enterprise arguably has to be anchored in institutions that can reliably assure quality and can also be charged with making access feasible and affordable for the mass of citizens. Otherwise the runaway credentialism fuels still further the gulf between the learning rich and learning poor, with the societal consequences that were graphically envisaged by OECD in 1997 and are now increasingly apparent in citizen disengagement and the phenomenon of the 'left behind'.

The development trajectory of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) yields some insights into the realities of technology-enabled learning. Over-hyped initially for their potential to replace conventional forms of higher education at a global level, the consequential MOOC scepticism grew and then abated somewhat. The focus in MOOC development has now shifted towards employment applications, adapting the use of MOOCS to the necessity of combining online learning with the embodied, relational and situated aspects of workplace learning. To build on the earlier example, while habits of mind that facilitate a curious approach to learning can potentially be cultivated through online tasks and assessments, the deep investigative learning that leads to transformations in workplace practices is embedded in workplace activities that are deeply context dependent (Engeström 1995). In a specific example, the EmployID project, funded through the EU's Seventh Framework ICT Programme, used IT applications to support practitioners with online reflection, coaching and use of labour market information (LMI) in practice. In co-operation with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in the UK, two blended learning programmes were aimed at supporting identity transformation for employer advisers and work coaches, to improve the effectiveness of public employment services. Coaching staff took forward the development and adaptation of online tools and learning support staff used ideas and skills developed in the blended learning programmes to feed into the DWP's online learning support. A related international MOOC claimed success in facilitating a dialogue

about the effects of changing the world of work for the professional identities of careers and employment practitioners in Europe (Brown and Bimrose 2018).

In similar ways, the Commonwealth of Learning (2019) has highlighted the teacher education applications of MOOCS that have made it possible for teachers in low- and middle-income countries to engage in collaborative school-based professional development enabled by message-based offline and online platforms that encourage collaborative learning in communities of practice. Moves to capitalise on innovations in adult learning technologies generally lead to the identification of needs for improvement that extend far beyond the technological innovation itself to include the embedding of cultures of continuous learning, encouraging mentorship and coaching, and supporting excluded groups while ensuring polyvalent routes into learning and retraining.

Anchoring in trusted providers appears crucial if the downsides of proliferation of digital badges and hyperinflation of credentials are to be avoided. These dystopian possibilities, which are inherent in a loosely regulated market in credentials, have been highlighted over many years, as evidence accumulates of the need for credible measures to validate courses, experiences, learning gains and those who assess and accredit them. Moreover, ensuring equitable and affordable access for adults in disadvantaged life situations and communities is fundamental to longer-term sustainability. The economic, societal and political consequences of neglecting this aspect are already painfully clear.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGICAL FACILITATION OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The applications discussed so far have focused most strongly on the triadic dimension of lifelong learning that uses information and communication technologies to promote higher levels of knowledge and skill in the working population, with a warning that sustainable models also depend on the fair distribution of these opportunities, on inclusivity and on trust. The potential of the same communicative technologies to activate citizen engagement in new ways brings to the fore the participatory citizenship dimension of the triadic conception of lifelong learning. According to Noveck (2015, 2016), the applications of communication technologies in social media are enabling a wider range of people to engage in finding solutions to community and societal problems. When we make expertise of all kinds systematically findable, she argues, 'participation has the potential to become robust and commonplace, citizenship has the potential to become more active and meaningful and institutions have the potential to become both more effective and more legitimate' (Noveck, 2016: 8).

For the many who already use LinkedIn and similar platforms to search for expertise and to participate in mutual interest groups, these possibilities are readily envisaged.

Noveck, too, points to digital badges as signals of expertise. Yet here also, the utopian and dystopian possibilities co-exist, perhaps even more markedly. Not only is there the recurrent issue of proliferation, but the question of who accredits and who accredits those providing the accreditation becomes even more pressing and requires strong public accountabilities, including a sense of the interests that lie behind the drive to find and use expertise. How can the sharing of expertise for the common good be ensured when powerful

interests of corporations, state power or ideological campaigns are involved? Digital rights – the rights to ownership and use of one's own data – become crucially important aspects of participative citizenship, particularly when connected to innovative initiatives in establishing data co-operatives for the public good, such as those being trialled in European cities such as Barcelona.[1]

While these applications are both novel and thought provoking, a moment's reflection on what it takes to actively participate reveals their remoteness from the realities of many impoverished communities and individuals whose lives are constrained by insecure employment. The disconnect between enthusiastic espousal of technology-enabled advances and the everyday experiences of large parts of the working population cannot be attributed wholly to time lags between innovation and take-up. It is rooted in profound disconnects between perspectives that focus on the possibilities generated through changes in the social organisation of learning and those which bring into view the actualities of individuals and families navigating the social landscapes of education and learning.

THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF LEARNING AND THE LEARNING INDIVIDUAL – TWO LENSES

Two distinct analytic lenses can be used to frame and articulate the case for lifelong learning. The first of these is the lens that brings into focus the changed conditions in work and society that have rendered educational systems and practices dysfunctional over time. This focus on the societal organisation of learning and imperatives for reconfiguring means and modes of learning pervades the lifelong learning literature. A societal organisation of the learning perspective, for example, arguing for adjustments to changed conditions in work and society, typically leads to demands for greater flexibility of provision and universal recognition of prior

and informal learning. Work- and community-centred discourses within this perspective focus on the creation or strengthening of 'learning organisations' and communities of practice.

The second analytic lens has gained more recent prominence in the lifelong learning literature. It takes as its starting point the learning individual, with an emphasis on conditions and opportunities for people as 'social actors', giving attention to inequalities in the social structuring of the life course and the accompanying accumulation of risk. In this view the individual is both embedded in structures while able to act in an agentic way through educational, work and community networks and environments. The second lens also examines the ways in which education and learning are organized, asking a different set of questions: how do these possibilities for learning look to individuals who are socially positioned by gender, age, ethnicity and social class; which learning opportunities or pathways are perceived to be open and available to them; which possible outcomes are understood and felt to be achievable; and how far does each step taken limit or open up future options?

The first lens tends to over-estimate change by under-appreciating the extent to which superimposing new forms of learning on old often reproduces the same limitations, as systems and structures interlock to shape the course of lives. The social organisation of learning lens also tends to fuel competition between education sectors through calls for redistribution of resources along 'age and life stage' lines (Watson and Schuller 2009). By contrast, the second lens focuses on continuities in the experiences of individuals as they move over time in the changing landscapes in which diverse educational providers increasingly compete for their participation, through youth and adulthood and into the later years. In this regard, the popular depictions of lifelong learning by journalists are telling. Graphics accompanying the two journalistic sources cited earlier portrayed the lifelong learning of an individual using successive images in which the person passes through a version of the 'seven ages', with head bowed and eyes trained on books or hand-held devices in a

series of images in which the person become increasingly stooped and infirm. These depictions certainly embrace the 'individual' part of the learning (and ageing) person but fundamentally miss the essentially relational nature of learning and development at all ages. The learning individual negotiates both continuities and change not only in the organisation of education and learning opportunities but also in the shifting terrains of employment and in all aspects of their personal and communal lives.

NEWNESS IN THE CONTEXTS OF EMPLOYMENT: THE RISE OF NON-PERMANENT WORK

Exploring work and learning in the context of the contemporary rise of non-permanent work requires both lenses and an appreciation of insecure work as part of the 'newness' that demands educational as well as political responses. For Western societies, which have been geared throughout the 20th century to improvement of systems for permanent work, increases in non-permanent work are often equated with precarity and retrograde steps in employment practices. In societies that have a long history of insecure work, platforms of the kinds associated with the 'gig economy' have also introduced new elements into the dynamics of labour markets (Sadik 2018; ILO 2019). The rise of non-permanent work is emblematic of labour market transformations that entail profound shifts in the interplay of life-work-learning in people's lives.

Support for the learning and development of contract-based, self-employed and freelance workers has too often been a side issue in public debates about the rise of non-permanent work, if it is present at all. The lifelong learning challenges, when seen from the social organisation of learning perspective, focus most readily on the lack of internal pathways to learning and qualification for non-permanent workers who are constantly on the move in

the labour market, in contrast to those that are readily available to employees in large corporations. When questions about the support for learning do come into view, debates tend typically to focus on the need to provide frameworks of employability skills. Generic frameworks are typically proposed for use by training providers and other users to devise training opportunities that render workers better equipped to meet the challenges of frequent lateral moves between different types of job. The accompanying need to make courses available for 'reskilling' is a standard policy response. Yet scant attention is given to the situations of the intended users of these courses, for whom sustained, effective participation is dependent upon having sufficient control over working hours as well as financial, personal and family resources. It is unsurprising that for many lower-paid contract-based, agency or so-called 'gig' workers even the most flexibly provided avenues to learning, retraining and qualification are, in practice, closed off. Finding adequate social and educational responses to the rise of insecure employment in changing labour markets thus presents major new challenges for lifelong learning. These challenges are highly differentiated according to political economy (Sadik 2018) yet important shared characteristics are revealed as the experiences of these workers are better understood.

THE INTERPLAY OF WORK AND LEARNING IN NON-PERMANENT WORK

Even with a shift globally towards greater recognition of workplace learning, the questions of how effectively to support the learning and development of non-permanent workers assigned to multiple, serial, fixed-term project-based or task-based activities pose problems with few obvious solutions. It is not difficult to envisage the negative effects of repeated exploitative, routinised or corner-cutting assignments on skills development. The risks of skills atrophy in growing sections of the working population are societal risks when scaled up, and at odds with espoused policy aims for a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. And where non-

permanent workers who seek development opportunities do so 'under the radar' or beyond the scope of workforce development provision, it is important to understand their reasons for doing so.

Continuing research into 'How non-permanent workers learn and develop' is showing how non-permanent workers actively look for forms of support that enable them to become, and continue to develop as, knowledgeable practitioners in ways that work for their everyday life and work realities (Bound, Evans, Sadik & Karmel 2019). Negotiating the demands of non-permanent work requires many intersecting capabilities. Contract-based and freelance workers are, according to their own narratives, faced with continuously having to reinvent themselves to sustain their place in shifting labour markets. It is not their craft and technical skills alone, nor even mastery and recognition, but their combination with entrepreneurialism that generates necessary meta-learning. How these workers use their knowledge and capabilities is connected to how they think and feel their ways into occupational and social identities as they move between different sites of practice. In initial vocational education and training in occupational sectors with a high probability that graduates will be employed in non-permanent work contracts (for example in creative industries where such contracts are the norm), learning activities can be designed to support the development of craft, enterprise and meta-learning capabilities in an integrative way. For example, during placements, learners can explore with work colleagues how they have gained work and negotiated contract-based work and how mentorship has worked for them; they can also be helped in identifying suitable role models. Moreover, they can inquire into challenges others have experienced and how they learnt to overcome difficulties. They can observe and record critical incidents to share and explain to others. Educators can keep in view the three dimensions of deepening craft, exercising enterprise and learning as they guide processes of inquiry, questioning and review (Rushbrook et al. 2014; Bound et al. 2019). These integrative forms of practice can lay foundations for the long-term processes of becoming knowledgeable practitioners.

Beyond initial VET, how can continuous professional development enable non-permanent workers to become knowledgeable practitioners with a sense of who they are, a working knowledge of the occupational practice communities to which they belong and confidence in the capabilities they can offer to the organisations that use their services? Benefits that permanent workers can gain in the context of an expansive workplace environment are not easily replicated for non-permanent workers without an organizational anchor. How the learning and development of these workers might be enlarged, or constrained, depends only partially on the workforce development policies of the employing organisations. As important, and at least as urgently in need of improvement, are the wider organizational and societal terrains for employment regulation and for lifelong learning. As well as focusing on access for non-permanent workers to learning resources and platforms that are independent of the employers to whom they are contracted at any one time, it is necessary to attend to the situations, contextualised preferences and learning dispositions of the workers themselves; the quality of work assignments and environments in which they are carried out; the entitlements and obligations that define the employment relationships between the workers and contracting employers; and how the public interest can be ensured.

The Economist special report on lifelong learning (2017) highlighted the example of a company supplying agency workers for temporary work across many industries in the United States. The work assignments potentially provided a conduit for the workers to earn qualifications by 'iterative learning and working', as workers combined learning in three or four temporary positions with a learning programme provided through partnership with a publicly funded higher education provider. It is claimed that the agency's programme has allowed its 'army of temporary workers in America to earn a degree … at no financial cost to them' (p. 14). The design of the programme is guided, it is claimed, by the agency's overview of the skills and attributes that can lead to well-paid jobs (p. 14). This example highlights one dimension of the problem and a potential solution – the development of pathways to

qualifications that mirror those that might be available to more privileged permanent workers in larger corporations, with company support and institutional anchoring in a trusted university-level provider of education and training.

The Centenary Commission Report on Adult Education (2019: 44) makes a similar observation in identifying large organisations that provide for staff development and adult learning of their permanent, directly employed staff but not the workforce employed by subcontractors. In these companies, the Commission has recommended to the UK Government that 'contract compliance' should be used to ensure the same opportunities are available to all. The wider public good will be better served by ensuring that those in insecure forms of work, including in the so-called 'gig economy', can access education and training without loss of earnings. In England, the Report recommends that the costs should be covered by Individual and Community Learning Accounts or education maintenance allowances. Again, the public accountabilities are crucial, with the need for suitable educational provisions to be quality assured and geared to the realities of working lives. As noted earlier, lifelong learning cannot rely wholly on the agentic action of individuals. Equitable frameworks of support are in the wider public interest and must be reimagined in the 'new normal' of disrupted patterns of work.

CONCLUSIONS – WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT IS NOT?

In his celebration of newness in education, E.J. King was careful to observe that 'lifelong education makes all-round re-orientation of all education possible, but first we have to recognise how captive we are to our inheritance' (1999: 114). Lifelong learning strategies are widely espoused but what actually changes and how it changes depend on inheritances and existing traditions. Working with the grain of what already exists can make for incremental

evolutionary advances, but such adaptations have arguably been very slow in many societies, leading to critiques that only lip service is paid to such movement. Moreover, market-led changes in many countries have had mixed outcomes, and chronic under-funding has proved difficult to reverse in the context of competition with other policy priorities, under conditions of economic cut-back. This typically applies in England, to take an example, where despite national statements of intent and proposals for greater investment in lifelong learning that attracted popular support over 20 years or more, a series of national inquiries and commissions have observed that insufficiency of funding and action has continued to allow educational inequalities to accumulate over the life course to an unacceptable extent (Schuller and Watson 2009; NIACE 2014; Centenary Commission 2019). A high-skilled economy is much talked about but not yet in prospect. The system has not yet given adequate recognition to increasingly diverse employment pathways and the extent of horizontal movements in the labour market, as people seek changes in direction. The situation has been exacerbated by lack of integration in the infrastructure of buildings, technologies, data and services.

Despite considerable variation internationally, these weaknesses in lifelong learning systems resonate widely. Yet there is new promise for change globally, through explicit inclusion of lifelong learning, for the first time, in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in the political leverage they represent. The prospects for lifelong learning to be embraced politically have never been stronger. When the Chief Economist at the Bank of England (Haldane, asserts, in the preface to the Centenary Commission's (2019) Report on Adult Education, that 'the economic benefits are crystal clear' (p.2) in the context of social problems looming, we know, in the UK, that renewal is not just wishful thinking. Creating the framework conditions for successful implementation requires political commitment to levelling up resources available to the sectors involved, a case previously argued more than a decade ago by Schuller and Watson (2009). This, in turn, requires lifelong learning to be conceptualised as complementary and mutually enhancing. No longer characterised as 'second chance' nor

merely channelling the forms and practices of initial education, it requires a long view of the learning individual alongside developments in the social organisation of learning. Moreover, proponents of both lifelong learning and adult education have to come to a rapprochement in embracing the view that work is integral to adult life and that the goal of extending learning throughout the length and breadth of peoples' lives cannot be achieved without engaging critically with work in all its forms.

Development is never a linear process. Lifelong learning has already demonstrated its resilience in changing times (Schuetze and Casey 2006). It is one thing to have staying power. It is another matter to become resurgent. A degree of circularity can develop as old challenges re-emerge and solutions are re-invented. The challenge is to create a spiral of development as lifelong learning strategies are re-imagined, strengthened by an integrative, triadic concept, fresh evidence and new tools. Evidence and tools that move the field forward include stronger analyses of the societal returns of continuous investment in lifelong learning; innovative methodologies for identifying how human capacities for learning develop throughout the life course; and technologies that can support a variety of means and modes of participation.

Advancing the field depends not only on digital world solutions to mass participation, important though these may be, but more crucially on support for the lifelong development of educated attributes across our populations. The rise of populism and responses to the pandemic of 2020 are stress-testing public services and organisations around the world. Educated attributes are social necessities if demagoguery is to be challenged with rational argument and citizens are to be actively engaged in debates on how work and working lives can be re-imagined. In a digital age, the support of lifelong learning through publicly accountable institutions that serve the public good has never been more important.

NOTE

[TS: Please insert end note here]

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[1] European project for citizens to re-appropriate data. Barcelona is placing emphasis on the use of data, the City Data Commons, which is a large social pact designed to guarantee sovereignty and privacy.