

# **LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE NEW EDUCATIONAL ORDER?<sup>1</sup>**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In this extended essay our first professor of lifelong learning, John Field,<sup>2</sup> brings to his subject what the subject has long been crying out for: a comprehensive knowledge of the literature, old and new, primary and secondary, national and international;<sup>3</sup> an understanding of the terrain that takes in both the larger structural features characteristic of the subject as a whole, together with the multitude of facts attaching to its many parts; and a measured judgement which manages to remain free of the cynicism which finds in lifelong learning nothing but an empty catch phrase, and free also of the insouciance found in those who see in lifelong learning a revolution set to usher in - if it hasn't already - a land of educational plenty.

The subject of lifelong learning is dispiritingly amorphous, and one merit of Field's essay is that he manages within the compass of a mere 155 pages to identify and give shape to a goodly number of its primary elements. Of lifelong learning we may ask: What is it? How much of it is there? How should we explain its development? How are we to assess its importance? Field has something to say in response to each of these questions, but I am unable in a single review to examine all the many facets of his impressive study. Rather, I shall confine remarks to his treatment of the question how we should understand the notion of lifelong learning; for this is a substantial question in its own right, and leads us quickly into familiar philosophical questions about learning, reflexivity, autonomy and knowledge.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF 'LIFELONG LEARNING'**

### **(i) Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> Field, J., 2000, *Lifelong Learning and the New Educational Order*, Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books.

<sup>2</sup> Professor of Lifelong Learning at Warwick University.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography alone is re-assuringly comprehensive.

One might suppose it too obvious to be worth stating that, before embarking upon substantive enquiry into a concept we need a tolerably clear idea of what the concept means. The common abuse of much that is prominent in the educational vernacular demonstrates that this is no so. And no term is more porous than the notion of 'learning', spoken of by Field as a 'rather a loose and all-encompassing term which stretches too far to have much purchase on reality'.<sup>4</sup> He is well aware of the 'linguistic inflation' that follows over-use of the term in question,<sup>5</sup> but we might well ask how the danger is to be avoided now that the prospect of inflation is already with us?

We should distinguish at the outset between the questions 'What is the meaning of a term?' and 'What is the function of a term?' Many theorists, Field included, are in no doubt that the term 'lifelong learning' has a valuable function, and I would certainly agree that it not only denotes a noble aspiration, but also draws attention to the multifarious facets of learning, and, further, signals a readiness on the part of government to treat learning in many of its guises as a priority.<sup>6</sup> But all this - to be discussed later - is quite separate from the question of what lifelong learning *means*.

## **(ii) 'Lifelong'**

The first of the two key words is 'lifelong', and although I do not want to dwell upon the argument here, there is in fact some dispute as to whether it is to be understood as having the unwritten prefix 'post'; whether, that is, we should be thinking of '16', '18' or some other age as the minimum threshold for eligibility. But this suggestion must be rejected. If what we are talking about is indeed lifelong learning then 'life' here means life, and not in the legal sense that often falls far short of a natural life span, but in the sense that, as Coffield puts it, we are to be concerned with everyone from 'those aged nothing to ninety'.<sup>7</sup> Of all the groups falling under the orbit of the new Learning and Skills Council, this is perhaps of greatest significance for older learners, whose place in the educational scheme of things is by no means as secure as it should be. Drawing on research from NIACE, Field comments that older learners may have lost out during the 1990's, following changes to much of their preferred provision, including local authority adult

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<sup>4</sup> Field, J., op. cit., p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, pp. ix-xii.

<sup>7</sup> Coffield, F., 1997, 'Nine Learning Fallacies and their Replacement by a National Strategy for Lifelong Learning', in Coffield, F., (ed.), *A National Strategy for Lifelong Learning*, Newcastle, Department of Education, p. 13.

education, and university extra mural programmes.<sup>8</sup> If nothing else, an emphasis upon the meaning of the word 'life' should serve to remind us that as a category it applies to all human beings without exception.

Though we may agree upon the meaning of 'lifelong', hard questions remain about the implications of chronological age for how we conceive both the curriculum and cohorts of learners. There is the already much debated question as to whether we ought to focus upon those aged between 16 and 19 on the one hand, or those aged between 14 and 19 on the other. But what Coffield's insistence prompts us also to consider is the desirability or otherwise of promoting learning environments for learners of greatly differing ages. We wouldn't want to treat learners of ninety years and above as a discrete cohort but as yet we do not have much understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of teaching cohorts of learners whose ages span different generations. 'Lifelong' may mean anyone from nought to ninety, but that leaves it undecided as to how much we should seek to group together and how much to maintain as chronologically separate all those who fall within its large embrace.

### **(iii) 'Learning'**

If an understanding of 'lifelong' is not exactly straightforward, the concept of learning is notoriously troublesome. As Field points out, 'learning', unlike 'education', entails neither classrooms nor teachers:

[W]e learn new facts, skills, ideas and emotional capacities simply by virtue of enrolling with that permanently instructive institution, the University of Life . . . .In this broad meaning of the term, you cannot stop yourself from being a lifelong learner. It covers pretty much everything - and rightly so.<sup>9</sup>

But a question arises about the utility of a term that 'covers pretty much everything', for if everything is included then - we might as well say - nothing *in particular* is included. For if everything we do can be described as 'learning behaviour' than nothing we do is *not* 'learning behaviour' and that, first, leaves no room for more learning (since learning is already omnipresent) and, second, makes it impossible to distinguish between the world of learning and the world outside learning.

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<sup>8</sup> Field, J., op. cit., pp. 116-7.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, pp. vii -viii.

Rather than writing of 'learning' *in vacuo* we might instead think about the *potential* for learning. Almost every human being has a capacity to learn, as Field reminds us in his account of the learning society:

The learning society has a relatively brief history. Its core idea is the plasticity of the human adult: however much has been invested in initial schooling, the belief is central that untapped potential is the norm rather than the exception.<sup>10</sup>

The central point here is that all human beings are and continue to be learning animals. It may be said that this is obvious and not worth stating. But I disagree. No one would explicitly deny that human beings are learning animals, but in our policy and institutions we may tend to carry on *as if* some human beings are either not learning animals or are barely worth acknowledging as such. Those lacking skills and qualifications are learners too, and it is a merit of recent policy that, in an attempt to recruit into learning those who have previously desisted or fallen away, their status as learning animals is not forgotten. Equally, there is more learning in what is called 'vocational training' than meets the eyes of those for whom all learning is liberal. And again it is a merit of recent policy that much attention is now focused on learning that is possible in the workplace. If it is a fundamental feature of human beings that we have the potential to learn then this is something worth underlining, and all the more so if in our educational policy and institutions we tend to do this truth something less than justice.

### **3. REFLEXIVE LEARNING**

Although the meaning and significance of learning in a generic sense is worth underlining, Field's primary object of attention is the learning characteristic of contemporary lifelong learning. What kind of learning is this? The key features of the learning society as Field sees it are that 'the majority of its citizens have become 'permanently learning subjects', and that their performance as adult learners is at least in part responsible for determining their life chances'.<sup>11</sup> Here one might be moved to ask: have humans not always been learning subjects, and is there anything new in the idea that our performance as adult learners will help shape our lives?

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<sup>10</sup> Field, J., op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 38.

It is the notion of 'reflexivity' that is intended to explain what is novel about the contemporary predicament, and although there are varying conceptions of this notion, Giddens, to whom Field repeatedly refers, provides a representative statement:

The reflexivity of modern life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character . . . . In all cultures, social practices are routinely altered in the light of on-going discoveries which feed into them. But only in the era of modernity is the revision of convention radicalised to apply (in principle) to all aspects of human life.<sup>12</sup>

From the work on reflexivity presented by Giddens, Beck and others<sup>13</sup> Field draws a number of conclusions. First, that 'lifelong can be as much about the 'small things' of everyday life as about the grand objects of conventional discourse'; second, that institutional reflexivity is increasingly the medium of human action and interaction; and finally that an 'emphasis upon human agency, reflexivity and trust is central to [an] understanding of lifelong learning.'<sup>14</sup>

One distinction which is not always clearly maintained in the text is that between the notion of reflexivity as a feature of 'lifelong learning' on the one hand, and as a strand in the explanation of its development on the other. Is reflexivity part of the definition of 'lifelong learning', part of its explanation, or both? I discuss the explanatory aspect later; here I look into the relation between reflexivity and the nature of contemporary learning.

Field's account of 'reflexivity' is located in an insightful examination of recent social and cultural developments whose salient features include the increasing individualisation, privatisation and ephemera of contemporary life. He contrasts the new adult education, which includes such activities as fitness centres, self-help therapy manuals and self-instructional videos, with the non-formal education offered in the past by such bodies as the Workers' Educational Association and the Women's Institute, both created with a 'clearly identified social purpose on behalf of a broader movement'. Certainly 'the new adult learning is markedly less 'collectivist' than the type of informal and non-formal

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<sup>12</sup> Giddens, A., 1990, *Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, pp. 38-9. Quoted in Field, J., op.cit., p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> cf., for example, Beck, U., 1992, *Risk Society*, London, Sage, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Field, J., op. cit., p. 62.

learning associated with industrial working class movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.<sup>15</sup>

It is this social context which Field rightly sees as of great importance for his analysis. And whilst we might regret some of the more pronounced developments - the superficiality of ceaseless fads for example - this should not get in the way of our attempt to understand more precisely the implications of institutional reflexivity for lifelong learning. As one significant example, Field points out that the relationship between education and entertainment is something which the former ignores at its peril:

As education and entertainment borrow one another's clothes, it is inevitable that some of the new adult learning will be lightweight, superficial and transient in its impact . . . If established providers ignore these trends, they may be overtaken by events; if they adopt them, they may be colluding in a trivialisation of knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

This is indeed a concise formulation of the predicament facing many providers of post 16 learning. As Field notes, the ability to spot a trend such as an interest in line dancing is crucial to the management of an adult education programme.<sup>17</sup> The current fortunes of adult education most especially rest on an ability to recognise the importance that now attaches to the development of personal autonomy, and the forms of learning that are best suited to this pursuit. Perhaps of greatest importance is the question what the value of personal autonomy implies for where and how we learn. This is a point Field returns to again and again. The phrase 'autonomous learner' can be applied to a range of cases, including the person who prefers to learn on her own, at her own pace, and without ever having to enter a designated learning environment. We now have to think, therefore, about the range of sites on which learning takes place, above those formally set aside for the purpose. Are schools and colleges to fulfil the same role today as compared with their role in the 19th and 20th centuries? Or is Husén right to argue that the school is no longer as influential as it was, now that it must compete with magazines, film, television and foreign travel?<sup>18</sup> And what should our schools and colleges be offering autonomous learners? Field suggests that far greater priority should now be given to such matters as learning how to learn, key skills, and cognitive and emotional competence.<sup>19</sup> If ever a

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 36; Husén, T., *The Learning Society*, London, Methuen.

<sup>19</sup> Field, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 134-141.

development could be seen as both a threat and an opportunity for post-16 education than the current pursuit of personal autonomy is surely it.

#### 4. PERSONAL AUTONOMY

The concept of 'personal autonomy' deserves close scrutiny here, not least because it is sometimes and wrongly construed as 'negative liberty', which latter is understood as the freedom we have *from* one constraint or another. But I do not acquire personal autonomy merely because I free myself from the constraint of educational intervention, even when I have no choice but to submit to it. We should distinguish between *dispositional* and *occurrent* autonomy. Very roughly, dispositional autonomy is a measure of the capacity to live our lives according to our adopted values and considered preferences, and such a capacity as this may require extended periods of instruction, during which our *occurrent* autonomy - the autonomy we enjoy at any one moment - is severely curtailed. In some cases, *occurrent* autonomy must be sacrificed so that in the longer term *dispositional* autonomy may flourish.

What does this imply for teaching and learning? Field argues that, amongst other things, learning how to learn ought now to be a priority. Quoting from the European Commission:

[T]he established framing of pedagogic practices in most formal contexts has privileged teaching rather than learning . . . In a high-technology knowledge society, this kind of teaching-learning relation loses efficacy: learners must become proactive and more autonomous, prepared to renew their knowledge continuously and to respond constructively to changing constellations of problems and contexts.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time Field observes a change in emphasis, with less emphasis on teaching and training and more on the concept of learning:

By implication, this involves also a switch from a 'supply-driven' view to a 'learner-centred' approach. Rather than focusing chiefly upon didactic skills and the formal education, a new importance must be attached to the creation of *learning environments*, of which the classroom or workshop is but one.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Commission of the European Communities, 1998, *Learning for Active Citizenship*, Directorate General for Education, Training and Youth, Brussels. Quoted in Field, J., op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p. 137.

The UK government has for some time sought to strengthen ties between schools and other learning environments: both 'vertical connections' between schools and educational institutions that take the form of the kindergarten, higher education and vocational training; and also 'horizontal' connections with such 'lifewide' sites of learning as the family, community, employer and voluntary association.<sup>22</sup>

There is in all likelihood much to be gained from a policy that places greater importance than in the past on methods of learning and learning styles, and which seeks to promote environments other than formal educational institutions in which learning may be recognised and fostered. Indeed, there is perhaps no more important research programme than that in which we seek to improve our knowledge of exactly how individuals and groups learn best, from which sources and in exactly which environments.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time there is a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which these developments are conducive to autonomy. Autonomy is not synonymous with the exercise of choice, nor is it equivalent to the development of independence. My autonomy does not increase merely because I recognise that the number of learning sites I can choose between is greater than previously imagined; nor is autonomy enhanced if the independence I achieve from parents and teachers comes at the price of a stunted education and damaged childhood. For the capacity successfully to pursue the projects we value - dispositional autonomy - depends not only upon choice and independence but also on the presence of the requisite dispositions, knowledge and skills. And very often these prerequisites are acquired only after sustained periods of sometimes unrewarding learning in freedom-restricting environments. We have only to think of the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, which Field himself writes of as part of the core function of the school.<sup>24</sup> Here we have a particularly vivid illustration of the sacrifice of occurrent autonomy, on the part of both teachers and learners, whose teaching and learning is meticulously prescribed in what are referred to as the 'literacy' and 'numeracy' hours. We need not approve of existing practice in its entirety to see that the acquisition of such key skills as these, and their potential to promote autonomy, will often first require emplacement in a learning environment which offers much less in the way of freedom and choice than many of us would ideally like.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the impressive American study: Bransford, D., et. al., 1999, *How People Learn*, Washington, National Academy Press, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Field, J., *op. cit.*, p. 139.

It is not only in the area of basic skills to which this general point applies. Consider the area of thinking skills, which in one form or another is a feature of both the key skills programme and other areas of the curriculum (the AS level 'Critical Thinking', for example). One central dimension of thinking skills is reasoning, or the skills of argument. It is reasonable to believe that there is scope for applying these skills in a variety of circumstances, and that they can make a contribution to the pursuit of personal autonomy. At the same time, learning how to identify, construct and deploy arguments is something which follows many years of sustained and sometimes single-minded effort. In the typical case - I am not talking about the unusually gifted - success requires long periods of hard and sometimes unrewarding labour, something which is unlikely to be endured without the supporting presence of a teacher in a far from informal learning environment.

The general point here is this: an autonomous life requires the acquisition of knowledge, competence or dispositions which often themselves demand dedicated learners, prepared during their tuition or apprenticeship to sacrifice a good deal of current freedom and choice for the sake of long term accomplishment. More colloquially: if it is personal autonomy that we want to promote, we should think less about 'lightly-worn' and 'horizontal' learning, and more about the depth of learning that is often possible only after sustained immersion in a confined learning environment.<sup>25</sup>

## **5. SELF, KNOWLEDGE AND CERTAINTY**

We have looked at some of the implications of lifelong learning for the pursuit of personal autonomy. Field has more to say about the implications for the nature of learning, and here he moves between scoring a direct hit and sometimes missing his target. His argument that the new informal learning can be conceived as a form of active consumption is important. More now than in the past individuals elect to work on their bodies, their identity and their relationships as compared, for example, to participation in collective endeavour. Who would choose to argue with any of the following?

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<sup>25</sup> I don't want to overstate the case. The point is that we should think about *both* lightly-worn and deep learning, so that the former does not take up all our attention at the expense of the latter.

[M]uch of the new non-formal learning is seen by learners as part of an extended project of personal development or self-realisation. It is one among many trends that are contributing to, and shaped by, the wider processes of individualisation.<sup>26</sup>

It is when Field moves on to comment on the *value* or *status* of learning that he is less persuasive:

[1] The sheer extent to which economic activities and social values have changed since the 1940s means that old boundaries between 'real learning' and 'trivial learning' are becoming blurred; [2] much that seemed trivial in the past assumes a new significance as we learn to handle fluid social relationships and an increasingly insecure economy. [3] There is growing fluidity to adult identities, accompanied by an increasing tendency for certainties to be replaced by provisional knowledge. [4] Lightly-worn learning, a capacity to live with uncertainty and a preoccupation with the personal and individual are the counterpart of the fluid identities that Bauman sees as characteristic of post-modernity: the life itinerary of most individuals', he writes, 'is likely to be strewn with discarded and lost identities.'<sup>27</sup>

There is much here that deserves close inspection. To begin with the last claim ([4] above), it is easy grossly to exaggerate the number of identities we now assume or discard. And certainly we are in no position to make a judgement on this matter until we learn of the criteria for identity, enabling us to decide when exactly we are, or are no longer, the same person. This obvious point is neglected by some of those sociologists who think nothing of supposing that multiple identities are par for the course. But without the criteria we cannot determine the truth of the matter. I suspect that Bauman is guilty of gross exaggeration, an exaggeration, moreover, that has implications for our understanding of lifelong learning, since it is precisely the fact of our 'fluid identities' that lightly-worn learning is supposed to reflect.

Nor should we accept without question the claim that the boundary between real and trivial learning is becoming blurred ([1] above), and, if it is, it cannot be for the reason that much that formerly seemed trivial may come to assume a new significance ([2]); for [2] preserves the distinction [1] denies. Here it is perhaps misleading to say that the distinction between real and trivial is blurred and better to say that one thing, which formerly seemed trivial, now seems not trivial but important. And of course, from the fact that something seems trivial or important it does not follow that it is as it seems. As Field

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<sup>26</sup> Field, J., op. cit, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 65. Numbers added.

is keenly aware, this is a time, if ever there was one, for the influence of fashionable ideas, and fashion is an unreliable guide to truth. Newtonian physics does not provide us with the whole truth about the physical world. That is true and important irrespective of whether it is understood only by Newton, his followers or by a large and educated populace. Nor is any importance lost merely because a person unversed in physics, and bored by the subject, happens to consider the subject as trivial and irrelevant. Of course, it is our duty to be respectful of the wishes of learners; but the worry is not so much that this duty is insufficiently adhered to - for almost all of us are now avowed adherents - but that at the same time we lose sight of another duty which it also falls to educators to uphold; namely, to enable learners to come to appreciate what is recognised as of lasting value and importance, even if, and perhaps especially if, the subject seems at first sight of little interest and marginal significance.

Finally, what about claim [3], suggesting that increasingly certainties are being replaced by provisional knowledge? This is perhaps seen as a reflection of an evermore uncertain and rapidly changing world, prompting Field to have wondered previously whether the formal education system may offer largely superficial knowledge in the face of many everyday challenges.<sup>28</sup> But from the fact that the world is an uncertain and rapidly changing place we should be careful before drawing conclusions about knowledge. Certainly it does not follow from the fact that the world changes quickly that therefore the state of our knowledge is similarly malleable. For what and how much we know is not merely a product of the rate of change in our environment. And to the extent that our knowledge *is* changing this lies in the *amount* of knowledge that we now have - which is, I presume, very much more than in the past - rather than in the *nature* of what we know. The definition of knowledge does not change merely because we experience social and political upheaval.

On the subject of certainty, and the supposed lack of it: we might think of certainty either in a philosophical sense - roughly, the absence of rational doubt - or in the psychological and subjective sense of 'feeling sure'. From a philosophical point of view certainty has always been in short supply, and from a psychological point of view it is open to question whether we are able to feel sure about any less in our lives today, as compared with a time when either human conduct or the natural world was for ever threatening war,

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p. 51.

famine or unexpected death. I don't wish to imply that the claim that certainty is on the wane is false, only that it is neither obviously true nor easy to assess.

A word about 'provisional knowledge', for it is entirely unclear what this is. On one plausible account of knowledge, a necessary condition of a claim to have knowledge of some proposition  $p$  is that  $p$  is true. And on one plausible account of truth the claim that ' $p$  is true' is timeless: if it is true it is always true, and if it is false it is always false. Hence if I know that  $p$ , the knowledge that  $p$  is not provisional but timeless (even if, as a matter of psychological fact, it comes to be forgotten or discarded by myself and others). And if, after having supposed that I knew that  $p$ , I now find out that  $p$  is false, then my knowledge becomes not provisional but falsehood.

On the 24th February 2001 Leeds United beat Tottenham Hotspur 2-1 at White Hart Lane. This is true, and I know it, and it will always be true. It may be trivial knowledge (indeed it is), and soon to be forgotten, but that is quite different from calling it provisional. The question of whether what is known is either important or remembered is something else entirely.

I do not know whether Field would agree with these last points, but they are of some importance for educators, too many of whom are overly impressed with facts about change and uncertainty, and too few of whom bother to enquire closely into the implications for what we know about knowledge. This is not the place to pursue these topics further save to remark that, perhaps now more than ever, it is important to be clear about the distinction between insightful sociology on the one hand, and the conclusions for epistemology on the other. As educators we ought to be vitally concerned with the questions 'What do we know?' and 'What is the importance of what we know?' And our answers to both these questions owe less to sociology and more to philosophy than it is currently fashionable to suppose.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Field has produced an important and original study of lifelong learning, from which it is possible to gain much in the way of insight and stimulus for further reflection. His

breadth of learning, measured appraisal, and exploration of sociological insight are just three reasons why his work deserves a large readership. But he also leaves us with hard questions that bear on philosophical understanding of learning and education: questions first of all about the intelligibility and contours of a concept of 'lifelong learning'; second, about the nature of 'reflexivity', and its impact upon educational institutions and provision for adults; and, third, about the concept of personal autonomy, its content and the educational circumstances conducive to its development. To have posed and made a contribution to such questions as these is a further reason, if any were needed, for recommending a book which will prove stimulating from beginning to end for all those with an interest in lifelong learning.

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