

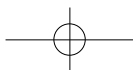
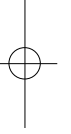
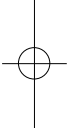


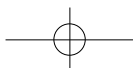
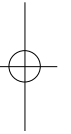
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# Part 1

## Setting the scene

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# 1

## Lifelong learning A social ambiguity

*Peter Jarvis*

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This book is about lifelong learning: every chapter analyses it from a different perspective and this opening chapter raises some of the issues that surround the concept. It does not seek to provide answers, only to set the scene for some of the ensuing discussions.

Lifelong learning is now a common, taken-for-granted concept in the educational and business worlds: it is a term whose meaning has just been assumed but rarely questioned. On the surface its meaning seems self-evident – learning from ‘cradle to grave’ – but beyond that self-evidency there are a number of issues lurking that suggest that the concept and the implementation of lifelong learning are much more problematic. I have called lifelong learning ambiguous for a number of reasons; for example, it is not a single phenomenon – it is both individual and institutional; it appears to be both a social movement and a commodity; it carries value connotations that are sometimes misleading; in one form it is a Western idea that we have tried to universalise in the light of globalisation; it is both a policy and a practice; it might be a gloss on social change or something more permanent. Naturally, in this chapter it is impossible to explore all of these ideas in depth, although I want to open up the discussion about some of them here.

### **Individual and institutional**

Field and Leicester (2000: xvi–xix) pose this issue quite nicely when they ask the question about whether we are dealing with the question of lifelong learning or permanent schooling. However, they do not go on to develop the ambiguity that they focus upon in the title of their chapter. But, it is a question hidden from the debate by the traditional definition of the concept, such as the one given by the European Commission:

all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.

(EC, 2001: 9)

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This is an individualistic definition that is open to question on its instrumental perspective; it suggests that lifelong learning must have an aim. However, I have argued elsewhere (Jarvis, 2006) that learning is an existential phenomenon that is co-terminal with conscious living, that is, learning is lifelong because it occurs whenever we are conscious and it needs have no objective in itself, although it frequently does have a purpose. In a sense, lifelong learning is neither incidental to living nor instrumental in itself – it is an intrinsic part of the process of living that I have defined as:

The combination of processes throughout a life time whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

(Jarvis, 2006: 134)

Since we all live within time in society, there are times when we can take our life-world for granted and act almost unthinkingly within it for so long as we respond to the familiar, but once we are confronted with novel situations we can no longer take that world for granted. It is in this state of disjuncture that we become conscious of the situation and are forced to think about it or adapt to it in some way – that is learning. Disjuncture, itself, is a complicated phenomenon, discussion about which lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but briefly it is the gap that occurs between our experience of a situation and our biography, which provides us with the knowledge and skill that enable us to act meaningfully. When this gap occurs, we are not able to cope with the experience and so we are forced to ask: What do I do now? What does this mean?, and so on. The ambiguity of disjuncture is that it is when we know that we do not know that we are in a position to start learning and, in order to cope with the disjunctural situation, we have to learn something new. Moreover, in a rapidly changing world we can take fewer things for granted and so disjuncture becomes a more common phenomenon; thus, throughout our life time, we are forced to keep on learning – lifelong learning – and it is only when we disengage from social living that the rate at which we learn may slow down.

Traditionally, learning has been regarded as the preserve of psychology, but it is a humanistic phenomenon and we have to recognise the wide range of academic disciplines that examine learning (Jarvis and Parker, 2005). But learning is both individualistic and lifelong, so it is an existential phenomenon: there is no way that it can be anything else since it is one of the driving forces of human living. But, when we read much of the literature on lifelong learning, we are certainly not confronted with an existential phenomenon but a social one, so that we have to recognise that the term is used in a totally different manner. This is the point implicit in Field's and Leicester's title – just how is it related to lifelong education, or even to education itself. While Field and Leicester recognise that lifelong learning transcends schooling, they do not discuss the idea that the term has come to imply attending formal learning sessions for a specific educational purpose, just as that contained in the EC's definition. In this sense, the intermittent attendance at educational institutions throughout one's life time – albeit in policy documents this usually means the duration of the work life until the most recent one (EC, 2006) – indicates that the term is used in a different manner to the learning process but that it also includes that process. In this sense, the non-existential approach to lifelong learning also embodies a form of recurrent education – a concept that was popular with the OECD and other institutions in the 1970s, but it also goes beyond it by including initial education. Lifelong learning, therefore,

includes formal and non-formal, as well as informal, learning. In addition, senior citizens' learning should be included, although it is frequently omitted in policy documents (but see EC, 2006). Consequently, in a recent book (Jarvis, 2007: 99), I also regard lifelong learning as a social and institutional phenomenon:

Every opportunity made available by any social institution for, and every process by which, an individual can acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses within global society.

Both of the definitions refer to different approaches to lifelong learning. In this sense, the second definition might also be indicative of the so-called learning society, or the institutionalisation of the learning process. We are not faced with one term but two, not totally different, but overlapping phenomena – one human and individual and the other both individual and social – or at least institutional; one more likely to be studied by the philosopher and psychologist, although not entirely as, Jarvis and Parker (2005) show, and the other to be studied by both of these and also by the economist, the policy theorist and the sociologist. Certainly, the study of lifelong learning requires a multidisciplinary approach.

### **New social movement and commodity**

In our contemporary society people are frequently urged to return to learning, to get qualifications, and so on. It has become a new social movement, and yet some of the institutions that are urging us to return to learning seem to have totally different motives – they are trying to sell their wares. In some ways this relates back to the two definitions that we have just discussed. It is the first way of viewing lifelong learning that lends itself to being regarded as a new social movement, while the second approach allows for it to be seen as a commodity.

#### ***A new social movement***

The existential definition of lifelong learning is about the process of transforming experience into knowledge and skills, etc., resulting in a changed person – one who has grown and developed as a result of the learning. In this sense, learning is essential; indeed, just as food and water are essential to the growth and development of the body, learning is an essential ingredient to the growth and development of the human person – it is one of the driving forces of human becoming and enriches human living. In this sense, learning assumes value – it is something that is apparently self-evidently good, and something that human beings must engage in if they are going to grow and develop and, as a result, be useful members of society. Learning, then, is a valuable human process and, the more that we learn, the richer we will be as human beings, and the recognition of this has led to many campaigns to encourage learning. However, the main motivator of these campaigns has not always been a concern only to enrich the human person, so much as to ensure that society's needs are met in this knowledge economy. Learning is necessary to ensure that individuals are employable and enable European societies to achieve the Lisbon goals of making Europe a global leader by 2010 – something it now acknowledges it will not achieve. But some who have espoused this more humanistic and individualistic approach to learning have also embedded it in the social context, especially for those who are responsive to the EU's aspirations embodied in the Lisbon Declaration. 'Learning pays!' claims

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Ball (1998). Here we see a pragmatic and instrumental approach to learning and the learning society – it pays to learn, but Ball actually produces no empirical evidence to support his claims, although there is clear evidence to show a correlation between the level of education and the amount of money earned.

But this rather evangelistic approach to lifelong learning, echoed by the writings of Longworth and Davies (1996), reflects more than an academic approach to analysing the process; it has become an ideology and a vision for the future. This same but more measured approach is to be found in Ranson (1994), where he maps out what a learning society should be like. There are also, in the UK, a variety of groups that fervently encourage learning, such as The Royal Society of Arts' project on Learning, the British Institute of Learning, the European Lifelong Learning Institute, and so on, and their existence suggests that lifelong learning has become a new social movement. This is a different approach to that adopted by Crowther (2006), who asks how lifelong learning should be associated with social movements rather than seeing it as a social movement. We read the same enthusiasm for lifelong learning in the learning city network, which has its own aims, means of action and organisation (DfEE, 1998). In addition, there are frequent media advertisements to persuade people to return to learning and many slogans such as 'Learning is Fun' are publicised. New social movements differ from traditional social movements since they are not class-based interest groups agitating for political change. They tend to be broad movements seeking to change society through the political processes. Abercrombie *et al.* (2000) suggest that new social movements have four main features: aims, social base, means of action and organisation.

### **Aims**

The aims of the lifelong learning movement are to create a culture of learning, or intended learning, as learning per se occurs naturally in the process of living, but intended learning is basically vocational, although in learning cities and regions there is a greater emphasis on the non-vocational than there is in learning organisations. The second purpose of learning cities and regions, according to the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 1998) document, is 'to support lifelong learning' and 'to promote social and economic regeneration' (p.1) through partnerships, participation and performance.

### **Social base**

Unlike traditional social movements, the social base of new social movements is not social class, but, in this case, appears to be professional educators, often from an adult education background, who have embraced lifelong learning, and the leadership can stem from one organisation – not necessarily an educational one. For instance, in Hull 'City Vision Ltd is the public/private partnership charged with taking this ambition forward' (DfEE, 1998: 15).

### **Means of action**

Those who propagate the ideas of learning cities do not now need action in the forms of social protest so much as lobbying those who are influential in their the various layers of society in which they function, through international and national conferences, publications and public lectures. In addition, we find that advertising and other ways of spreading the 'good news' of lifelong learning are also employed.

## Organisation

Lifelong learning per se has a variety of organisations, as we have already noted, and, in addition, there are learning city partnerships of educational and other service providers, which includes business and industry. Each organisation acts as a coordinator, having its committee and, maybe, part-time or full-time staff.

Part of what these organisations are doing is trying to create a greater awareness of the advantages of learning and to get educational establishments to provide more opportunities for adults to learn, so that the social movement has social aims that, in an interesting manner, actually coincide with those of the educational organisations and the government. Consequently, one major difference between this new social movement and many other social movements is that it is pushing against an already opened door, whereas most traditional social movements seem to push against closed, and even locked, doors because they oppose the dominant sectors of society, as was the experience of many adult educators until the early 1960s.

### ***Lifelong learning as a commodity***

As governmental funding for the education of adults is increasingly being decreased in many countries, so it has become important that educational institutions continue to recruit fee-paying students, and this has changed the ethos of many of these institutions. They now have to market their courses in order to recruit customers rather than students – I make this difference because an employer can pay for an employee to attend a course and then the employer is actually the customer. However, this changing ethos is one that many academics do not like and it has been attacked in many publications: in higher education, for example, we get such titles from the USA as *The Knowledge Factory* (Aronowitz, 2000); *Universities in the Market Place* (Bok, 2003); *Academic Capitalism* (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997) and, in adult and continuing education, works such as that by Tuckett (2005), amongst others. Each of these titles reflects precisely the same thing – universities are being forced to market their courses, through a variety of means, in order to gain financial income. In other words, lifelong learning has become both a commodity to be sold in the market place of learning and a process of consumption.

Once we see lifelong learning as a process of consumption, we have to recognise the power of the consumers: they will only purchase what they want or what they need, and the more lifelong learning becomes vocational, the more likely it is that only certain teaching and learning commodities will be purchased. Stehr (1994) makes the point very clearly when he points out that the learning society utilises only scientific knowledge, so we can also say that his approach to lifelong learning is generally not a process of learning a very broad range of knowledge – it tends to be instrumental and narrow, which is an impression that the concept of lifelong learning does not in any manner convey. Once it is recognised that the learning society only emphasises certain types of knowledge, then the question must be raised about those who want or need to learn those forms of knowledge that are not emphasised. By contrast, there are those who may not benefit from these emphases. In addition, this raises questions about the idea of social inclusion – included into this form of society and learning knowledge that is only relevant to this type of society? We will return to these questions below.

Significantly, both government and those who espouse lifelong learning as a new social movement want to know who is actually learning and so there are many surveys seeking to show who is enrolling on courses. In the UK, for example, there have been National Learning Surveys (Beinart and Smith, 1997; LaValle and Blake, 2001) and the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) has also conducted surveys of the amount of learning

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undertaken by the population (Sargant, 1991; Sargant *et al.*, 1997; Sargant and Aldridge, 2003; Aldridge and Tuckett, 2004, among others). These surveys provide information for the adherents to the movement and for the policy makers, but for those who are marketing learning materials as a commodity they provide excellent market research.

### The value of lifelong learning

Existentially, learning is a driving force in human living, it is one of the major means by which we become ourselves, and it is a stimulus enriching our lives and making us truly human. In this sense lifelong learning is good. It is impossible to conceptualise a human being who does not learn. Hence both theorists of learning and those who espouse the social movement encouraging learning have a moral foundation to their beliefs and practices. Learning is self-evidently good.

This self-evident goodness of learning has also permeated the other aspects of lifelong learning, often without a great deal of consideration, so that the commodity approach to lifelong learning 'trades' on the value intrinsic to the first approach. There are at least two ways in which we might illustrate that the second approach to lifelong learning is not self-evidently good: the first is the market and the second is seeing lifelong learning as a means of control. First, the learning market is not driven by concern for the learner but concern for the provider and even the provider's profit and own interest. This is the nature of the market system, but the profit's profit is not a self-evidently good concept. Increasingly, however, we are finding profit and loss accounts of educational providers being presented to governors' meetings and university courts, although not to the general public. Second, employers are in a position to expect their employees to learn and to keep abreast of changes as work becomes increasingly knowledge-based. This expectation might entail employees attending continuing education courses at their own expense and at times that are detrimental to other aspects of their and their families' lives. For instance, in the research of Hewison *et al.* (2000), it is recorded that:

Less than half the sample (42%) said that they thought the course was fitting reasonably well with home and family life. Forty-eight percent (n=43) thought that the course was a strain and 10% of the participants (n=9) thought that the course was causing serious detrimental effect to their home and personal lives.

(p. 186)

The authors go on to state:

The rhetoric of the *learning society* is upbeat and positive. It is about 'opportunities' and the benefits that learning can bring. Lifelong learning promises that there will be many such opportunities, following one after another, throughout an individual's career.

To many of the participants in our study, such a prospect would be a threat not a promise. It is not that they lacked the motivation to learn, but rather that learning opportunities were often offered on very disadvantageous terms.

(p. 193; italics in original)

Since Hewison's sample consists of health service employees, many were probably women, so this suggests that, in this still male-dominated world, even lifelong learning is not always attractive to everybody and that an element of this value orientation may be male-dominated,

which calls for a feminist perspective on lifelong learning to be undertaken. There is a whole element of social control in the way that lifelong learning opportunities are presented in some work situations and, as might be seen from these quotations, lifelong learning is no longer self-evidently good. The value of the phenomenon depends on what aspects of lifelong learning are being analysed and the perspective that is being adopted in the analysis.

### Globalisation and lifelong learning

In the first definition of lifelong learning, we recognised that learning is an individual process that happens in a social context. Consequently, if we seek to study lifelong learning in different social contexts, we will see that different forms of knowledge are necessary. The first definition of learning is applicable to every social context and to every type of social living, whether it occurs in the North or the South, in sophisticated urban or traditional and primitive society. Since lifelong learning is almost co-terminal with conscious life itself, it embodies all learning. We continue to learn throughout our lives, but in less rapidly changing societies there may be less to learn, or there may be other things to learn at greater depth, which we have been unable to explore.

But, fundamentally, lifelong learning, as we have currently formulated it in the second definition, is a Western concept, based on formal learning, literacy, individual responsibility for learning, scientific knowledge, and so on. Those who have learned in informal and non-formal situations but have no certificates to prove it and those who are not literate are considered to be uneducated and in need of 'literacy for all', which, in itself, is another aspect of the social movement. It almost assumes that those who are illiterate do not know and have not learned but, as we have already pointed out, knowledge societies tend to emphasise certain forms of scientific knowledge and omit others and so the illiterate may not be unlearned since they have such forms as traditional and indigenous knowledge. Clearly, contemporary Western knowledge has produced a high standard of living for those of us who enjoy it – but it may not have made us a happier people! But one of the main dangers of globalisation is that of homogenisation, in which indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity are neither recognised nor respected. Yet those people who live in traditional societies have their own indigenous knowledge, which is functional to their own context, but which the second definition of lifelong learning might be too narrow to recognise. The UNESCO (2005) study of knowledge societies states:

As we have seen, the information revolution reinforces the supremacy of technological and scientific knowledge over other kinds of knowledge such as know-how, indigenous knowledge, local knowledge, oral traditions, daily knowledge and so on. Oral and written abilities correspond to different written systems, and this plurality mainly accounts for the diversity of cultures.

(p. 148)

The report goes on to note that the 'simple substitution of scientific knowledge for local knowledge would have disastrous consequences for humanity' (p. 148). Indigenous knowledge is extremely functional in its own context and its loss would contribute to the destruction of local cultures and lifestyles. However, the social conditions that have given rise to the idea of lifelong learning are Western and there is an assumption that all peoples on the earth should be like us – but lifelong learning is not such a simplistic concept as this.

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## Policy and practice

In one sense, there can be no policy for lifelong learning because it is an existential phenomenon; it occurs wherever we are, provided that we are conscious of the world in which we live. It occurs because we are alive and it is essential to human living. This is one of the reasons why it is perceived to be good – another being that opportunities can be provided for education and training across the lifespan so that individuals can respond to the needs of society, or perhaps more accurately the needs of the capitalist system that is wrongly often equated with society. This brings us once again to our second definition of lifelong learning – that opportunities for learning are provided across the lifespan. At this level it is possible to formulate a policy for lifelong learning, or perhaps better to see lifelong learning as a guide for policy for education and training (Hasan, 1999). It is significant, however, that when Hasan discusses policy he is actually writing about education and he uses this term rather than lifelong learning. It is interesting to recognise that this confusion of education and learning in this way did not begin with lifelong learning – in the American adult education literature there is almost a synonymous use of adult education and adult learning – see for instance, Long's (1983) study *Adult Learning*, which is actually a study of adult education in America. But the change in term from education to learning is much more profound than just illustrating the linguistic dominance of America; it points to issues of responsibility – the lifelong learner's responsibility for learning is their own but it may be the state or the employer that has the responsibility for providing education. Yet Hasan is right – the ideal of providing as many opportunities for individuals to learn as they need or desire does form a baseline for policy, but the provision of the opportunities, whether it is formal, non-formal or informal, which does form a base-line for policy, does not actually constitute the learning itself.

## Lifelong learning and social change

For many years adult educators campaigned for more opportunities to be provided for adults to learn. In the UK there is that well-known statement by Arthur Smith, chairman of the committee that produced the famous 1919 Report:

[t]hat the necessary conclusion is that adult education must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there, nor as a thing which concerns only a short span of early manhood, but that adult education is a permanent necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong.

(Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919: 5)

Adult educators certainly campaigned throughout the twentieth century to achieve this aim – adult education was certainly a social movement in the more traditional sense. Throughout almost the whole of that period the door appeared to be closed and only limited opportunities were provided for it. But towards the latter half of the century the door seemed to be opening, as business and industry needed a more knowledgeable workforce. Suddenly lifelong learning became important – a new social movement – but it was not the adult educators who forced open the door, because in many ways they have been left behind with the rapidity of the transition. Kett (1994), commenting on this rapid change, writes: 'Today, no one can plausibly

describe adult learning as a marginal activity, but professional adult educators have become increasingly marginal to the education of adults' (p. xviii).

When lifelong learning was growing in significance, usually through the development of professional continuing education and human resource development, adult educators did not recognise the change. It was not education that was causing the change but the social and economic conditions, which we now call globalisation, that were demanding a knowledge economy, and thus rapid social change ensued. In that situation, people were confronted with changing social conditions and were forced to learn (Jarvis, 2007).

In my own understanding of learning, the learning process commences at the point of disjuncture – that is, when I am confronted with an unknown or a novel situation; when I am forced to ask: Why? How? What for?, and so on. At these points my biographical memory no longer provides the answers and I cannot take my existence for granted – I am consciously aware of the social situation in which I find myself and I begin to learn from the experience. The more rapid the social change, the more frequently I learn. This might be called incidental learning – but it is happening all the time with rapid social change; in other words I am continually learning. Our awareness of lifelong learning is an awareness of rapid social change and the fact that, in order to exist, we need to learn. The social conditions have given rise to lifelong learning – following our first definition of lifelong learning.

But the capitalist system upon which our Western society is built is now based upon knowledge – we live in a knowledge economy. In order for capitalism to survive, it needs to produce new commodities to sell and produce older ones more efficiently: both require new knowledge and when the commodities are sold on the market they introduce new ways of living. In order for these commodities to be produced a knowledgeable workforce is necessary – and so individuals have to be given more opportunities either to keep abreast of the changes that are occurring or to prepare themselves to join the workforce. It is essential, therefore, that more opportunities are provided and so we need policies and a culture of lifelong learning – and this fits our second approach.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the second definition of lifelong learning is one that is social – it is one that can suggest that learning can contribute to change, although it is still a response to global imperatives, whereas the first definition, the existential one, is a response to change.

## Conclusions

Lifelong learning is certainly an ambiguous concept: both a causal factor in change and a response to social change; a policy and a practice; something that can sustain and enrich the lives of many and yet undermine and contribute to the decline of other societies and the break-up of families; at the same time valuable, threatening and controlling; both societal and existential. It is a linguistic ambiguity – one with which the English-speaking world has to live but, more significantly, it is one with which the globalising world is confronted and, until our lifelong learning takes a different policy direction and we learn to place value on other forms of knowledge and lifestyles, its self-evident goodness lies only with the existential approach to learning, while the societal emphasis raises as many existential questions as it answers and its value lies open to debate. The ambiguity lies in the fact that, in the first definition of learning, we place value in the learning itself because it is existential and fundamental to our living but, in the second definition, we place value on some of the perceived outcomes of learning but we have not yet learned to place social value on learning itself.

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