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Challenging the common theory of lifelong learning

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EDITORIAL

Challenging the Common Theory of Lifelong Learning

This special issue of the journal commemorates the second Lifelong Learning Conference held at University College Worcester, United Kingdom, in July 2001. The conference was marketed to a broader range of public and private sector organisations and individuals than would normally be the case for an 'academic' conference. The reason for this was that the conference aimed to celebrate the diversity of approaches to lifelong learning, in particular the range of contexts in which policies, strategies and initiatives operate. In this respect, the opening article sets an appropriate and authoritative tone for two reasons: first, its author, Chris Minter, is based not in a formal educational institution but has an adult learner development role in a local authority; second, its subject is the need to re-conceptualise the common theory of lifelong learning, a theory that has straitjacketed policy and practice in this area for so long, particularly that emanating from formal education institutions. This theory claims to reflect a 'commonsense' view; however Minter properly asks: whose commonsense? His answer is that what tends to be reflected in widening participation debates is a well-educated, white middle-class view that reaffirms what the centre claims to know about the world, but that fails to acknowledge the participation – typically in informal learning settings – of individuals and groups of people who are 'unlike us'.

Amongst the flaws in the common theory of widening participation exposed by Minter's article is that of blaming the 'non-participants' rather than facing up to the inadequacy of what is being offered as learning. This theme is further developed in two short articles, by Lynn Martin, Alison Halstead & Julie Taylor, and Ron Kirby, which explore the contribution of information communications technology (ICT) to lifelong learning in rural areas and youth work respectively. Martin's work is based on research from two ESF funded projects which took place in the West Midlands region of the UK between January 1999 and December 2000. The projects targeted women, the unemployed and those without ICT access and awareness. Despite popular conceptions, the West Midlands contains extensive rural areas with severe infrastructure limitations. These have led to the award of rural regeneration zone status to the Marches with effect from April 2002, covering a population

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of 224 000 people spread thinly through Herefordshire and some parts of Worcestershire and Shropshire. The impact of rural deprivation upon participation in formal and informal learning opportunities, and the subsequent blunting of aspirations and life chances, has been all but ignored in successive national government policies and initiatives, whilst at regional level authorities compete fiercely for meagre resources. Martin calls for improved access to internet facilities to increase learning opportunities for disadvantaged groups; crucially she points out that these should be contextualised in terms of home family or community rather than jobs or skills – the latter being in short supply in unregenerated, unmodernised and disconnected villages and hamlets.

Kirby's article examines the possibilities and possible pitfalls of using ICT in informal education. Some of the possibilities demonstrate the value of non-traditional, democratic approaches to learning in truly challenging settings. He cites the examples of conversations between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast that could not have occurred without the use of email, and a lesbian and gay youth group that secured a safe contact mechanism via an Internet website. Some of the disadvantages of new technology are listed, however I have not yet come across any work that fully explores negative impacts whilst balancing these against learning benefits.

Once described as the 'cinderella sector', further education (FE) plays a significant, although still variably recognised, part in meeting industry's education and training needs. The third article in this issue to examine the impact of ICT on lifelong learning describes the development of a European funded Advanced Technology Centre in Stourbridge, in the most industrialised part of the West Midlands region of the UK. Unusually, Stourbridge College, as the FE centre leading the project, funded a project researcher to assist in identifying the barriers and opportunities associated with the introduction of ICT into the construction industry. Le Gallais observes changes in the conception and practice of learning and teaching, with the benefits to students seen to be in terms of building their capacity as independent learners and researchers. Interestingly, though, the comments of disgruntled scaffolding students that they felt 'short changed' after being referred to a machine, point up the importance of human intervention in ICT-based learning.

Continuing the vocational theme, Brodie's article explores the professional development needs of those employed in the avionics industry. His research highlights two key cross-cutting themes within vocational lifelong learning: the tension between the needs of the industry and the needs of the individual. A number of issues flow from this, including employees' access to training in order to remain up to date, the desirable educational baseline for new recruits, the capacity of trainers to reorganise and update training schedules and syllabi, opportunities for progression to advanced education and training, and the ability to alter certification processes when necessary.

Dave Greenwood is the Post-16 Officer for the London Borough of Ealing. His article describes the formation of a Borough-wide learning partnership, and how it approached mapping post-16 education and training as

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the basis for its development plan. The map depended on the collection of data: national, regional and local, down to ward level. The information collected enabled the Borough to obtain and allocate resources to geographical areas where learning needs were seen to be greatest. Greenwood acknowledges, however, that many obstacles may obstruct the delivery of effective education services, no matter how compelling the demographic data. These include: identifying data sources and gaining access to data sets; obtaining support from colleagues and partners to progress ideas; access to funding to develop and fund initiatives; availability of suitable premises for planned activities; and time to pursue potential developments while maintaining existing provision.

Equally challenging, and similarly written from outside academe, is the contribution by Doug Bourn, who makes a strongly argued case for a global perspective on lifelong learning. The challenge he presents is to question how far what is presented in our schools addresses the issues of Interdependence, Citizenship and Stewardship, Diversity, Sustainable Development, Social Justice, Values, Perceptions and Human Rights. This is a direct challenge to the parochialism of what passes for lifelong learning in some UK government reports to have emerged in recent years, in which lifelong learning appeared to be merely a convenient and fashionable code or mantra for poorly thought out policies that looked no further than current industry skill needs. Global perspectives entail looking beyond the immediate, imagining and enabling a different future, one that recognises the complexity and challenges of an interdependent civil society beyond the nation-state.

One of the major factors that will influence future higher education (HE) demand is the extent to which GCSE/GNVQ pass rates and school staying on rates can be improved. If the UK government's target of one in two young people participating in formal higher education by 2010 is to be achieved, the Curriculum 2000 reforms will need to have a far-reaching impact. The influences that come to bear on the decision to stay on at school are thus of the highest significance if we are to understand the processes involved and thus make appropriate interventions. The impact of family background, schools and ability have been heavily researched and are the factors most frequently cited. However, the important article by Wayne Thomas & Don Webber investigates the role played by peer groups in this process, and they detect significant gender differences at work that should inform policy making and organisational arrangements alike.

John Payne's article asks 'What do trade unions want from lifelong learning?' He explores whether the renewed interest in education and training on the part of the trade union movement in Britain is a new direction in trade union work, or an attempt to achieve older trade union objectives in a new way. There appear to be elements of both parts of the equation in operation, and Payne argues that whilst concerns such as development of workplace basic skills can be traced through trade union history, broader, and possibly more conflictual, agendas are emerging, including control (or lack of control) of workers over the labour process, negotiations around the content and meaning

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of workplace education and training, the globalised economy, and new technology. Given the emerging significance of work-based learning – a central plank of the UK government's strategy for Foundation Degrees – Payne's call for comparative research on lifelong learning as a trade union issue is both relevant and timely.

The range and scope of articles selected for this special issue accurately reflect the conference itself, at which a large proportion of presentations were made by people working beyond universities. If lifelong learning is not to be colonised by the university sector, or government, ways must be found to involve local authorities, schools, further education colleges, companies, trade unions, health workers, and the voluntary and community sector in moving the agenda forward. The academic conference and the academic journal can play a part by manifesting inclusive approaches; to be sure, these will at first seem strange and unfamiliar. I hope, however, that this special issue has highlighted the potential contribution that a broader spread of stakeholders can make to a wider understanding of lifelong learning, and how that might improve educational policy and practice to the benefit of learners in formal and informal settings.

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