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# Life Long Learning and Collective Experience

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**Abstract:** *The paper examines two aspects of collective experience and lifelong learning and invites a cross cultural discussion. The first theme concerns the historical conditions for Life Long Learning, especially in work. The second deals with the conceptual differences between German critical theory and post-modern discourses of lifelong learning.*

In educational debates lifelong learning has again acquired the status of a key issue. Lifelong learning seems to be a meeting point between different critical traditions sharing an emphasis on examining education and learning in a context of societal and cultural historical development. In this 'cross cultural' setting I found it especially interesting to compare my own background in critical theory – rooted in German tradition – and the approaches attached to post-modernism in the Anglo-Saxon context. In particular, I want to bring the writing of German sociologist and political philosopher Oskar Negt – from whose work I have taken a lot of inspiration – alongside that of Michel Foucault, whom I identify as a primary inspiration in the post-modernist traditions of the other side. Both deal with the close interrelation between social institution, knowledge, and power, basically emphasizing repressive aspects of social structures and social discourses. Both relate bodily based understanding of repression and emancipation to these social processes. Both have inspired critical thought in education, but in quite different traditions. Are they alternative approaches? Or maybe alternative theoretical bases for a similar educational discourse?

Both traditions more or less systematically refer to lifelong learning. Lifelong learning seems to be the explicitly acceptable framework for a critical thinking, which on the one hand wants to free education of the institutional and ideological optimism invested in schools, pedagogy and educational policies, and on the other hand views a decentred, open ended learning process as an essential field of political reflection.

Paradoxically life long learning achieved its position as a theme partly due to the fact that 'human resources' appear more and more essential in terms of economic growth and structural innovation. What was some decades ago idealistic, wishful

thinking, that was slowly worn down by the absence of practical implementation, now seems to be a concern of power elites throughout the capitalist world (Rubenson, 1996).

However, as a discourse of education, lifelong learning has a radical built-in assumption, which is also fed by the economic concerns: it assumes that learning takes place in all spheres of life, not only in schools and institutions. ". . . and Life wide . . .," sometimes added into lifelong learning, completes the topical metaphor. It relativizes the importance of schools and intended education, on the one hand emphasizing the limits of the modern disembedding of learning from basic social structures and on the other hand also opens our eyes to the immense potential of self-directed learning outside schools.

Only the fact that economy and work need human resources, and the fact that qualification demands include subjective involvement makes lifelong learning *a societal programme*. The change in the form of these rationales, and the fact that they are still separate, reflects the contradictory role of education in capital driven modernization. It is both a vehicle of humanistic political programmes for social autonomy and empowerment, and a necessary adaptation of human beings to their role as commodity labour. Lifelong Learning may now be seen as the dead end for the educational ideas of modernization – or you may see it as the framework for a new idea of democratization and learning. The answer depends on the way learning is conceptualized. A central issue is the understanding of collective experience. To what extent is it a part of the learning potential, and to what extent a part of a societal coercion? I will make some comments on the historical context before making some exploratory comparisons based upon the conceptual framework.

### **Life Long Learning - A Critique of Institutions**

In adult and continuing education there seems to be two covert processes going on. The first is an institutionalizing process, adding schools for adults to the schools for children and adolescents, which continues a basic trend in modernization – institution building. The second is a de-institutionalizing process, broadening the concept of learning beyond the boundaries of school. The emphasis on learning rather than education has lately sometimes been seen as an educational drawback – and sometimes it also is part of neo-conservative dismantling of welfare policies. But it may also be integrated in a critique of the illusionary expectations that are put on institutional education, both in terms of efficiency and in terms of their emancipatory potential.

This criticism of institutions makes clear that the existing educational institutions are unable or inadequate to fulfil their promises, and may be an obstacle to learning. The post-modernist critique of educational optimism takes the analysis one step further, as a critique of the basic humanist educational programme. Referring to Foucault among others, it points out the inner relation between institutions, knowledge, and power. Educational institutions, by means of knowledge, exercise control and restriction on the potential experience of the protagonists, allowing for some ways of organizing knowledge and blocking others. The term discourse in this context has the critical implication that all organized knowledge and communication excludes certain forms of knowledge related to practices and bodily experience and reproduces power relations.

But what is the relation between this critique of the processes of modernization and enlightenment, or rather the construction of their reverse side, and the utopian message that lifelong learning will take place everywhere, and throughout the entire life period? When educational institutions are overthrown or at least relativized, which other structures for learning emerge instead?

### **The Humanization of Work and Human Resource Development**

It was stated above that the socio-economic need for human resources, and the insufficiency of the educational provision, was an important condition for the present concern with lifelong learning. But is this a true societal programme, a civilizing force? What happens when learning is “reembedded” in real life, such as in work?

You could begin with the optimistic question of Kern and Schumann (1984): *Ende der Arbeitsteilung?* Even within a qualification concept informed by industrial sociology Kern and Schumann demonstrated empirically that the human potentials of labour were becoming decisive, and absolutely necessary to capitalist reorganization of industrial development. The subordination of labour to qualification needs affected not only more generalized skills and knowledge, but the demand for subjective qualities more than anything else. Even industrial workers must be cooperative, responsible, creative and autonomous.

Several other structural trends have reinforced the assumption about the declining importance of general qualification experience – and a critical analysis seriously questions the optimistic implications in the trend – both new modes of social control and new forms of marginalization make the changes in work quality more dubious. Is the qualitative change of work process and the new demands/options for “humanization” and subjective involvement the end of the alienation (*Entfremdung*) of work? Is general qualification a take off ramp for “living work” to reintegrate and take control over the societal organization of life processes? It may be a good question, even if it is foolish to offer an answer. It may be a good question because it calls for new ways of dealing with it, theoretically at least.

In the discussion of the 70s neo-Marxist influences, at least in a Danish critical education research concept of qualification, related education to the production of societal labour force (Andersen, 1992; Salling Olesen, 1996). Qualification was meant in a double manner – as a term of critical/Marxian theory and as a term of empirical industrial sociology. Education produces a societally objectified exchangeable asset based on the use value of this labour in a capitalist (re)production, and from this follows a functional subordination of the learning processes in educational institutions to the necessities of producing a labour commodity. The seemingly new and contradictory quality of human labour we called ‘general qualification’. I have a feeling that “qualification” has a somewhat more limited meaning, and a technocratic flavour in English.

The notion of qualification was a contribution to a critical theory of education and work. And also a critique of the (idealistic) educational thought and

of progressive educational practice (reform pedagogy, humanistic enlightenment), explaining the structure and function of education which is independent of, and may be also invisible for, the educational actors. But it ruled out the question of educational practice, and even more important in this context, it paid little attention to the contradictory concrete production process of the use value of the living worker and the living work.

In the discourse of human resource development lifelong learning is integrated in ideas like 'organizational learning' and 'workplace based learning', which refer to an organizational culture approach. Workplace identification may well support some learning processes that would otherwise – in an institutional setting for example – not be possible. We also find examples where unskilled workers, sceptical about education, become active learners within a workplace embedded process. Most often these concepts link lifelong learning to more or less narrow management strategies, which are able to and willing to establish compromises with more or less narrow individual concepts of the social interests of workers/employees. Apart from the political consequences I will take up shortly, this is a somewhat ambiguous development. In so far as work qualification is rooted in collective habitual experiences and in collective consciousness connected with workers' collective and a craft or professional identity, they are excluded from the learning process. Even from a managerial point of view this may present a problem in change processes in craft based industries (resistance of workers, loss of habitual and tacit knowledge) and in professions (resistance, de-qualification, loss of quality standards).

This takes us to the more important, and more political, aspect of this "divide-et-impere" – the cultivation of corporate spirit. What is the alternative view of lifelong learning? The re-embedding of learning into work life may be very restricted in the sense that only some aspects of learning is called for, and only some aspects of learners' potential are activated. It may be an reflection of the general disaster of modernization that technical and instrumental development is pushed forwards once more by an enhanced mobilization of human resources, while at the same time civilizing and enlightening development is repressed. A belief in the humanizing potential arising from new types of work organization and the consequent need for learning must be created.

The re-subjectivation of work does not mean taking work back to its original "subjective quality" like traditional craftsmanship. It means inviting, demanding, and allowing new forms of cooperation and/or new types of autonomy, which can be developed in relation to the social and societal context of work and technology today. And it means enhancing the scope of social interests of the work place. The demands on labour are closely linked with developments linking work and production more directly with societal questions at large. You need only to mention ecological threats, the globalized economy, and the increasing proportion of service work relative to commodity manufacturing to see that the content and direction of work place learning is closely related other spheres of life – and to general political issues as well.

So lifelong learning means also a new politics of learning across essential spheres of everyday life. There is a need for a *politicization of work* in the Greek sense of the word: Making work a domain of cultural action.

#### **Lifelong Learning and Individualization**

The hope of lifelong learning depends on building collective experience that can encompass and develop the potentials in new work forms without losing the orientations and insights of previous work identities. In the classic era of industrialism you would find masculine, bodily oriented, and collectively controlled wage labour socialization and culture. The British cultural sociology, "anti psychiatry," and M. Vester's great historical study have accounted in different ways for the historical creation of the subjectivity of wage labour. It is useful to make clear that also this "classic" subjectivity, though historically shaped by capitalism and maybe distorted by it, also involved learning processes – new skills, new social insights, new levels of self regulation – as compared with previous historical phases. It was the product of a lifelong learning process in a comprehensive collective context (Salling Olesen, 1998; Vester, 1972).

Today the arena of a collective experience seems devalued as a consequence of modernization, at the same time as the individual becomes the subject of his own liberation. This goes hand in hand with a broader cultural shift in the core cultures of the modernizing project, from social solidarity and collectivity to individual orientations and emancipation strategies, a change accompanied by a multi-

plication in values and life strategies. In the sociological discussion there are both theoretical arguments and empirical evidence that people develop new life strategies and attitudes, less oriented to welfare state solutions, social institutions, and collective values.

There are, however, also arguments that this shift in attitudes is not in the direction of less solidarity, but in the direction of a new form of solidarity (cf. Zoll, 1988; Zoll et al., 1989). The meaning of these changes is not only an empirical question, nor a question about theoretical interpretation – it depends on an ongoing historical process. I see these processes of reshaping solidarity as a learning process of modernization still taking place. It may provide new capacities to handle things individually, that were previously delegated to the union or to the welfare state, and a new tolerance of uncertainty and ambivalences.

When we study subjective learning stories of adults and their subjective relation to learning we find examples of the new solidarity. Beside “training” for work, “education” for citizenship, and leisure “activity,” we find “hybrid” learning processes uniting separate life spheres and motivation domains and going across the institutional functions of education of capitalist modernization. They are motivated and informed by the life history of the participants, and the subjective meaning transcends the boundaries between the life spheres of capitalist modernization.

The opportunity for labour movements is the development of a new organisation and political culture that can encompass new individualized life styles, an independent membership expecting democratic organization, and new types of “enlightened solidarity.” In this context it means individuals willing to take responsibility beyond their own everyday life without a traditional or top-down definition of this responsibility. But what is the basis for the collectivization of this common but individual experience? And what about its links to the collective experience of work? Does collective experience play a significant role in learning? There seems to be some significant differences – in spite of many similarities – between critical theory and post-modernism in the conceptualization of these questions.

### **The Subject of Lifelong Learning**

The concept of lifelong learning in itself, empha-

sizing *learning* instead of institutional education, addresses an individual perspective on learning, but different Life Long Learning discourses do it in varying ways.

The post-modernist view emphasises the ever-changing individual acquisition of new life conditions, seeing life as one long learning process. Postmodernist critiques of modernist educational idealism emphasize the situational quality of learning, located in multiple cultural settings, and appears to focus on the individual subject as the historical pivot.

Critical theory, however, would pay attention to socialisation, the basic production of human subjectivity as a capacity to define yourself in an active emotional and cognitive acquisition process. Subjectivity as a “means of production” for late modern/post-modernist life is itself a product of a modernized childhood and includes the experience of modernization. Of course, you might find essentialist humanists in a critical theory tradition, who would ground subjectivity in a “food package” prepared in early childhood, situated in a dichotomy between external social coercion and inner strive, but this is reductionism. Oskar Negt and others with a synthesized background in critical theory and psychoanalysis, emphasize the socially produced and historically dynamic character of human subjectivity, and its inner contradictions. It is seen as a product of individual life history with the contradictions of social life subjectively acquired, but subjectivity is also a capacity for a self regulated reconciliation or mediation between desires and social reality.

If Foucault sees subjectivity as a social inscription onto individuals it may not be entirely different from this view of a historical and life history production of subjectivity. Basically the development of subjectivity depends on cultivation of desires as a process of experience building in a communicative space where utopian imagination and reality can be handled in a conscious and collective way. Learning is a factor in the social production of subjectivity, and collective experience is a central component in understanding individual learning.

Foucault does not attach only negative connotations to power – and so the inscriptions are also empowering – but it seems as if his overall view on civilisation as disciplining of the body and desires leaves little space for a reconciliation between desires and power. Is the cultivation of desires compa-

rable to a concept of production of subjectivity? And is this cultivation basically an individual outcome or is it also a collectively mediated process?

### Knowledge and Collective Experience

Since learning has to do with some transformation of an individual in a condition already mediated by knowledge in some sense, another comparable and differentiating theme is the conceptualization and understanding of knowledge and its role in learning.

With Foucault post-modernists universalize the experience that modernization processes have largely discredited knowledge in spite of the fact that modern ideas assign to knowledge the expectation of enlightenment, emancipation, and autonomy. Discourse as described by Foucault is a pervasive societal fact exerting definition power over communication and thinking, and is becoming a common framework for learning. Lifelong learning seems to contain the potential to continuously deconstruct or play with several discourses. Knowledge is discursive and powerful, but I wonder if this way of putting it allows for learning as a construction of collective experience?

In critical theory knowledge is an ambiguous phenomenon. On one hand it is a historical product which may have the same definition power implied in the notion of discourse, and the de-constructive approach is echoed by 'Ideologiekritik'. On the other hand critical theory is fundamentally modernist in its concern with the ambiguous relation of knowledge and reason. Reason is immanent in the modern enlightenment project, but it has also been undermined by the modernization itself.

Habermas' work may represent a means to conserve modernist humanism as a normative base of reason (communicative reason), whereas Negt has stated a more clearly materialist way of asking the question. Reason can only be produced in a learning process, which is mediated by collective experiences, and transferred in the medium of symbolic representation, knowledge, habits, and practices. Learning is enabled by, but also critically 'deconstructs' previous cultural treasures of instrumental-

ized or reified knowledge (cf. Habermas) but it can only take place in the everyday learning of "real historical subjects" who emerge through this process of subjective acquisition. That's where lifelong learning comes in.

Using the process-concept "modernization" rather than "modernity" relates learning and experience directly to the *production process of "reason" and knowledge*, – collective experience links socio-structural developments and their appearance as conflicts in the everyday life of ordinary people. Critical study of lifelong learning must study the subjective experience of the connections between societal development and the conflicts set by it. Where this will take us is a political question – but the political process in its widest sense is extremely dependent on collective learning processes.

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