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James E. Thornton  
*University of British Columbia*

Shauna Butterwick  
*University of British Columbia*

Thomas Sork  
*University of British Columbia*

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## Communities of Lifelong Learning [2]: Social Dialogue: Exchanges Shaping Learning Experiences

James E. Thornton, University of British Columbia, Canada  
Shauna Butterwick, University of British Columbia, Canada  
Thomas Sork, University of British Columbia, Canada

***Abstract:** Social Dialogues discussed in this paper are the learning exchanges that develop in structured adult learning activities and essential communities of lifelong learning. Social dialogues, Social Justice and Social Territories and Borders (Session 1) are topics essential to the development of communities of lifelong learning. They provide the scaffolding critical to the professional and policy discourses shaping lifelong learning and educational opportunities over the adult life course in diverse social communities of practice.*

### Introduction

Adult education and its partners are engaged in challenging professional and social discourses on ways to enhance and extend lifelong learning options in diverse social, cultural and community groups. The discourses are exploring ways to bridge boundaries between various educational partners and community, ways to exploit new approaches for sharing information, and ways to remove social, economic and cultural barriers. The discourses are shifting social and educational perspectives of the learning experience from layered or tiered programs and policies into collaborative learning experiences in communities of lifelong learning. The discourses must tackle complex professional issues and deep-rooted public education programs and policies. Concurrently, the discourses must critique the social dialogues in adult learning experiences and critically assess the methods and technologies for new ways of communicating, networking and performing. In this paper, social discourses and social dialogues are considered as separate ways to share knowledge or information and to describe practice or performance. Social discourses are the formal discussion and debates on professional, organizational, and policy topics. Social dialogues are open conversions and discussions among two or more people about a topic of common interest. Social dialogues among professionals do occur, but usually move up a notch into formal discourses regarding the social factors shaping lifelong learning and communities of practice, or questioning effectiveness and ways of sharing professional views. However, our professional discourses and dialogues must be informed by adult learners' learning reports based on their social exchanges in learning experiences in their social communities. This paper is a professional discourse on social dialogues among adult learners in community-based programs that embraces lifelong~wide~deep learning. But the paper ends as an open discourse among adult education professionals on their conceptions of communities of lifelong learning.

**Communities of Lifelong Learning.** The metaphors embedded in the phrase 'communities of lifelong learning' shape the social discourses and dialogues on diverse social groups, social territories and social learning activities from specific places into and across multiple community places. Other phrases are found in the literature, for example, community schools, learning communities, neighbourhoods of learning, villages of care, collaborative networks or innovation networking, community of learners in the classroom, the learning society, and community education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The phrases suggest the potential scope

of lifelong learning and community, but little on our professional territory and educational or social policy. Metaphors can imaginatively reconfigure conceptions of the adult education landscape, but metaphors must as well actualize the exchange and flow of information among participants into meaningful discourse and dialogues across diverse territories of lifelong learning in complex communities of practice.

**Lifelong Learning ~ Wide and Deep.** I must confess my long held view (some 30 years) of lifelong learning was of an educational slogan, a philosophical point of view, which was difficult to bring into practice. Now I sense it has developed concrete reality and is operable and it is developing on current knowledge of adult learning and development. Adult learning activities and educational programs across communities of lifelong learning must stimulate an individual's growth and social development within diverse groups and communities. Lifelong learning in practice is embracing new knowledge of an adult's developmental capacity over the full life course based on mature and older adults' dialogues about their learning experiences that are memorable, wide and deep. The National Research Council (2009) noted: "The idea of lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep learning has been influential in efforts to develop a broad notion of learning, incorporating how people learn over the life course, across social settings, and in relation to prevailing cultural influences (Banks, et.al., 2007)". Describing learning as lifelong~wide~deep should take our learning activities beyond "knowing what" and "knowing why" into broader conception of "knowing that" and "knowing how we know" in changing social experiences that are essential to adult's search for purpose and meaning. Our approaches to adult learning over the full life course depend on stimulating and developing the body~mind~brain's embodied abilities and behaviors associated with social experiences. The body~mind~brain responds to sounds, images, smells, motions and emotions embedded in these experiences, and concurrently the body~mind~brain develops abilities of moving, talking, reading, writing, creating images and objects and much more. The adult learning and development literature are exploring aspects of these complexities, particularly in theories of explicit and implicit learning, tacit knowledge and practical intelligence, collaborative and situated learning, and learning as embodied experiences (See, Merriam, 2009; Smith & Pourchot, 1998). In adult education practice, lifelong learning will gain width and depth in collaborative social dialogues among peers in diverse communities.

### **Social Dialogue**

In adult learning methods, social dialogues emerge out of tentative conversations that are guided into more structured exchanges. These initial conversations and discussions become dialogues when goals and guidelines are known and shared among peers (not students) and facilitators (not teachers) in temporary social venues (not classrooms) and based in collaborative groups. The dialogues initially begin in grounded discussions on issues, information and personal knowledge of greatest relevance to all participants. This bottom-up approach situates the dialogues as socially relevant exchanges in collaborative group processes. The bottom-up approach is the foundation on which width and depth emerge in the social dialogues. Social dialogues are appropriated to adult learning activities among individuals in temporary social learning groups, for example, peers groups, focused social groups, the workplace and community-based activity groups. Social dialogues are basic to most social theories of learning for individuals and their social developmental transitions and transformations. Social dialogues are constructed with guidelines and goals shaping participants' involvement and responsibilities,

identifying issues and information to be explored and exchanged, establishing methods on how these are exchanged, and acknowledge ‘what’ and ‘how’ and ‘that’ information was exchanged. Fundamentally, social dialogues in adult learning experiences are designed to enhance the social experience, to trigger developing learning capacities in the activity, and to promote an individual’s overall development. Learning is a developing and a developmental dialogue and narrative – we are creating a story about why and what we know, about that which we are presently experiencing, about how we are imagining that which we seek, and about what we know about where we’ve been. Learning as narrative has a past, a present and anticipated next steps and is a self-dialogue that we may share with others.

Reedy & Birren (1980) identified these dialogues as ‘developmental exchanges’ within ‘social group perspectives’ among participants who described the ‘coupling effect’ in sharing personal reflections and stories within guided autobiographical group experiences. The coupling dynamics create a ‘temporary social community’ in small work-groups within the larger guided autobiography group. As the coupling effect developed the conversations developed and more experiences are exchanged depending on group guidelines. Learning occurs in these developing self ~ other dialogues becoming developmental exchanges among participants in the group (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). The learners’ dialogues become “dancing partners” in sharing common (and universal) experiences that enhance the flow of ‘developing learning’ experiences (expanding and consolidating), while the developmental directionality of individuals and the group is forward. Increasingly, this becomes a value-added sharing in the group. Often, there is a common ‘Aha!’ feeling which individuals express as ‘that was therapeutic’ or ‘bonding’ in the group. The phrase ‘developmental exchange’ suggest three perspectives about (a) an individual’s psychosocial development that is emerging over the life span or life course as increasing complex behaviors or differentiation of functions; (b) the type and amount of information generated and the language used to express it; and (c) social dynamics among the participants and the interpersonal feelings and relationships in the group.

Randall (1995) illustrated the social dialogue in an ‘individual perspective’ that provides an inside ~ outside view as a learner reflects on experiences, expressions and impressions of existence into dialogues with others. Randall explained his perspective in these words:

In general, if the outside story [Existence] is what happens to me, then the inside story [Experience] is what I make of what happens to me and what I tell to myself. The inside-out story [Expression] is what I tell (and show) to others of what I make of what happens to me, while the outside-in story [Impression] is what others make of me on their own, with or (usually) without my consent (p. 57-58).

Randall’s called these developing learning dialogues and exchanges in self ~ other interactions the ‘poetics of learning.’ There is no logical progression suggested in this flow of an individual’s experiences or expressions, nor should there be in social learning. The social coupling that develops in most group learning situations begin in the ways in which individuals imagine and reflect on the scope their life story (autobiographical memory) and it progresses as they reveal, share, and take in, and begin the dialogue at different places in their story. There are risks in these intra- and interpersonal couplings, certainly, as there are in all learning activities and social dialogues involving personal and social experiences. This learning territory with its therapeutic effects is fuzzy, increasingly so in our professional approaches to life transition, transformative activities and transcendence experiences.

The developmental exchange occurring in guided autobiography activities is a prime example of the complexity of social dialogues. Developmental exchanges involve writing,

reading, telling and listening and their embodied abilities that we use to review, shape and reorient ourselves in our world. Developmental exchanges created in small group learning activities use social dialogues to explore (1) who we are and are becoming, (2) the knowledge and experiences that brought us to where we are, (3) the purposes and goals shaping our present, (4) the pathways and possibilities for developing our future, and (5) the developing embodied learning abilities of telling, writing and reading. In these activities meaning-making is achieved and our social world expands. During all of these activities and various narrative stages, complex learning processes are continuously engaged, challenged, and expanded. But, without dialoguing with one's self and with others in a social context, the narrative floats in time and our essential developmental growth is suspended or thwarted. Technology shapes social dialogues by making them inclusive or exclusive, by enhancing presence and voice, and by disseminating information within communities, across territories and over borders. Technology, however, can fragment learning exchanges and social dialogues into intensive information exchanges that are fleeting and hovering over the learning territory in which purpose, meaning, and social growth are sought. In social dialogues, technologies must be relevant to the learning experience and are purposefully identified tools available to all.

Social dialogues in developmental exchanges can be illustrated by data from an on-going study of adult learning in community-based guided autobiography workshops (Thornton & Collins, 2010). In the study, 114 participants, ages from 42 to 92, both women and men, were asked to respond to the question "What am I learning in this guided autobiography workshop?" as a self-dialogue. Their 'learning reports' reveal a great deal about the impact and value of their learning experiences in the workshops. Their reports corroborated two recognized axes of adult learning: processes and outcomes ("learning how" and "learning that") and distinguishing between learning which is developing and expanding into new interest areas and learning that is consolidating prior life events or current experiences. The reports are revealing learning topics or themes focused on three major domains : (1) learning about themselves (self-value, well-being, new learning, beliefs and values, meaning-making, reminiscing, goals-tasks-plans, and mental health,); (2) learning about others while sharing their life stories (communicating, family, legacy, trust-openness, and universality); and (3) learning which derives from workshop structures and activities (developmental exchanges, small-group work, guided autobiography value, writing, triggers and primers, and thanks (Thornton & Collins, 2010: <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/>).

### **Developmental Exchanges and Adult Learners**

The thoughts outlined here are discussed in a paper titled: The Developmental Exchange: What's in IT for Me? (Thornton, Birren & Svensson, draft). As outlined in that paper, developmental exchanges and social dialogues shaping learning activities use structured themes, goal directed conversations, framed by guidelines of trust and responsibilities. The guidelines and rules provide a framework for individual learning and group development insuring equality of access to information, shared norms of inquiry, meaning-making, and validation of diverse experiences. With guidelines and rules, we are better at listening, sensing emotions, observing body language, exchanging images and information, and finding commonality and universality in our social exchanges. These stimulate new words or actions, perceptions, thoughts, and reflections; and we learn. We share experiences that are real, some perceived, others often imaged: the details, however, are seldom the same over time, consequently as they change during the exchange, we change, and our story changes. Social dialogues in developmental exchanges

become value-added learning experiences facilitating personal transitions and transformations (Thornton & Collins, 2010). These complex dialogues and exchanges were identified as a ‘transformative exchange’ by Vella (2000), the ‘reflective discourse’ by Schugurensky (2002), and ‘popping conversations’ by Van Stralen (2002). Within these structures of learning, Yorks & Kasl (2002, p. 6) suggested that four ‘ways of knowing’ are activated and the shape learning dialogue and experience: experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical.

The diversity in social dialogues in developmental exchanges is created by seven major components that provide context for the reflection and recall of personal experiences and knowledge: goals; context; collaboration; time; themes; voice; medium; (Thornton, 2007). These shape the listening, telling, writing and reading in the dialogues, enhancing language development and social interactions as lifelong learning experiences appropriate at all stages and ages over the life course. Reminiscence, reflection, imagination and language do not happen in a vacuum or arise on a blank slate in our mind ~ brain, but are accomplished in a layered social complexity in our self ~ other relationships. We seldom talk about them as the foundation of our everyday learning experiences or in our social relationships with others in expanding communities of lifelong learning (Thornton, 2008). As adult educators we are beginning to understand the plasticity of the body-mind-brain nexus – its embodied abilities for growth, its changeability and sociability. We lag in our understanding of the body-mind-brain’s embedded capacities, their resilience and development over the life course. Facilitating learning over the life course can be greatly enriched and guided if we explore through social dialogues the learning potentials of all adults in expanding communities of lifelong learning. We need to explore what community places are needed in which lifelong learning capacities are enhanced and developed in life course perspectives. And we need more extensive social discourses on how adult education and adult educators might socially function in these places to sustain us all as adult learners.

### **Closing Discourse on Communities of Lifelong Learning**

Adult education is a work in progress from pedagogy (teaching) evolving into andragogy (teaching adults) with interests in gerogogy (teaching the elderly) and something new called sociology (teaching in networked environments). These initiatives are knowledgeable strategies on teaching and learning and they all offer alternate views of learners and learning venues while attempting to broaden lifelong learning’s scope and social purposes. Education and teaching traditionally lags behind in responding to changing social dynamics and diverse populations which constantly reshape communities and the need for new learning initiatives. Further as social territories expand and become diverse, our professional discourses as adult educators and dialogues with adult learners have become more complicated and fragmented while new theories, practices and technologies enhance the possibilities. Certainly, critical thinking will help open the debate on lifelong learning including its width and depth and will shape the discourse on learning and educational options achieved and needed. The emergence of ecology and eco-friendly-responsible-communities is certainly influencing critical thinking on social sustainability of environments we live in and what we need to learn. Clearly, our global village is changing and challenging our dialogues and discourses.

Social justice, social territories and borders, and social dialogues were selected as topics that are reshaping adult education spheres of professional practice in changing communities of lifelong learning. Social learning issues must be addressed regarding age, gender, race and

culture in the context of the core principles of adult education's purposes and practices to insure equity, diversity, universality and communality. These issues were outlined by Shauna Butterwick's paper on *Social Justice* and by Tom Sork's paper on *Social Territory and Borders* in the first session on *Communities of Lifelong Learning*. This paper on *Social Dialogues* in *Communities of Lifelong Learning* ends by opening the discussion as both a social dialogue and professional discourse in a final open forum. There are common issues embedded in these topics that also shape adult educators' professional practices in communities of lifelong learning that will influence our discourse, for example, flexibility, evolving formats, ethical principles, trust and sharing, knowledge accessibility, transparency and accountability, and critical reflection.

What are your comments?

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