

lifelong learning

Lifelong learning (along with ideas such as 'the learning society' have become popular with politicians and policymakers in a number of countries. But what does it mean?

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The
idea of



lifelong education was first fully articulated in this century by Basil Yeaxlee (1929). He along with Eduard Lindeman (1926) provided an intellectual basis for a comprehensive understanding of education as a continuing aspect of everyday life. In this they touched upon various continental traditions such as the French notion of education permanente and drew upon developments within adult education

within Britain and North America. In more recent years we have seen a shift into discussion of lifelong learning and the more problematic notion of [informal learning](#). Here we examine the development of thinking about lifelong education and learning - and highlight some issues with the interest shown by policymakers in the notions.

Education is life

The notion of learning through life is hardly new, as a glance at [Plato's Republic](#) reveals. However, with the development of a self-consciously 'adult education' came the view that education should be lifelong. In what Waller (1956: 22) describes as a report without parallel, the Adult Education Committee of the British Ministry of Reconstruction concluded:

(A)dult 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 national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong. (1919: 55)

The committee's membership was a roll call of the great and good in adult education at the time: Albert Mansfield, [R. H. Tawney](#) and [Basil Yeaxlee](#). Similar themes appeared in [Eduard Lindman's](#) classic *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926). Building on a number of themes associated with his friend and colleague, John Dewey, he argued that:

1. **Education is life:** 'not merely preparation for an unknown kind of future living... The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings. This new venture is called adult education not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits...' (Lindeman 1926: 4-5)

2. **Adult education should be non-vocational:** 'Education conceived as a process coterminous with life revolves about non-vocational ideals... adult education more accurately defined begins where vocational education leaves off. Its purpose is to put meaning into the whole of life' (ibid.: 5).

3. **We should start with situations not subjects:** 'The approach... will be via the route of situations, not subjects... In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum;

in adult education the curriculum is built around the student's needs and interests' (ibid.: 6).

4. We must use the learner's experience: 'The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience... all genuine education will keep doing and thinking together' (ibid.: 6-7) (Extracts from Lindeman can be found in [key texts](#)).

These concerns seem rather idealistic when placed in the context of the emphasis on the acquisition of competencies for employment and upon accreditation that came strongly into force in the 1990s. However, they link very strongly with the concerns and practices of informal educators. It is not only that education carries on throughout life, it also part of living.

Lifelong education

Education as part of living is a theme that Basil Yeaxlee develops in the first book-length exploration of lifelong education in 1929. He drew on the work of Lindeman and others, and upon his own extensive experience within adult education in Britain. He had helped organize the adult learning and social programmes of the YMCA (e.g. around the extensive provision for soldiers during the First World War), and was a pivotal figure in gaining recognition for adult education as a field of practice in the UK (partly through his work for educational settlements and the British Institute of Adult Education.

In *Lifelong Education*, Yeaxlee looks back at many of the themes of *The 1919 Report* and argues for a 'much wider and fuller lifelong education' (Yeaxlee 1929: 34).

Yeaxlee on lifelong education

We discover more, and not less, need of adult education as we make progress. It will not have a fair chance until better preparation is made for it during the years of adolescence. On the other hand, we are unlikely to achieve a thoroughly sound and complete system of -primary and secondary education until the adult members of the community, by continuing their own education, realize how mischievous a thing it is to abbreviate or mishandle the school-education of 'boys and girls. But adult education, rightly interpreted, is as inseparable from normal living as food and physical

exercise. Life, to be vivid, strong, and creative, demands constant reflection upon experience, so that action may be guided by wisdom, and service be the other aspect of self-expression, while work and leisure are blended in perfect exercise of 'body, mind and spirit, personality attaining completion in society. (Yeaxlee 1929: 28)

Attention must especially be given to elementary and informal types of adult education. Insignificant and troublesome to the expert, these have a charm for the common man: he can appreciate them just because they are not elaborate and advanced: they meet him where he is, and do not demand that he shall - take a long journey, or make a violent and unnatural effort, to reach them. They are the only recruiting ground for higher educational adventures on anything beyond the present small scale. But also they are the only ground wherein a very large number of people will ever find themselves at home at all.

Much adult education will never know itself as such, and will be recognized only by leaders and teachers of real insight. It will go on in clubs, churches, cinemas, theatres, concert rooms, trade unions, political societies, and in the homes of the people where there are books, newspapers, music, wireless sets, workshops, gardens and groups of friends. (Yeaxlee 1929: 155)

(Extracts from *Lifelong Education* can be found in [key texts](#)).

Three key features stand out of subsequent accounts of lifelong education:

First, lifelong education is seen as building upon and affecting all existing educational providers, including both schools and institutions of higher education...

Second, it extends beyond the formal educational providers to encompass all agencies, groups and individuals involved in any kind of learning activity...

Third, it rests on the belief that individuals are, or can become, self-directing, and that they will see the value in engaging in lifelong education. (Tight 1996: 36)

The term has come to be applied to a wide variety of different policy initiatives and structures. Lindeman and Yeaxlee were concerned with non-vocational forms, others have looked to quite narrow

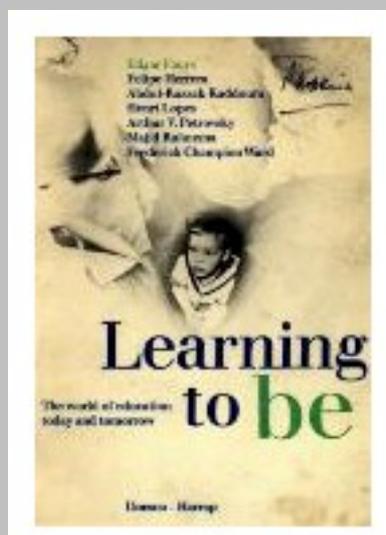
notions of skilling. The vagueness of the notion and its capacity to be used to serve very different political ends has opened it up to considerable critique. Is education life, as Lindeman contends? Is lifelong education simply the distribution of education throughout life, or preparation for learning and so on? As Tight (1996: 37) points out, the practical objections to the notion of lifelong education are also telling. How possible is it to overturn the hegemony of schooling and 'preparation for life'? What are the financial implications of establishing lifelong educational opportunities and entitlements? How are resistances to continuing participation in more structured forms of education to be overcome?

From lifelong education to lifelong learning

Lifelong education was taken up as a central organizing idea by UNESCO in 1970. Perhaps the best known report arguing for the movement was prepared by Edgar Faure and his associates (1972).

Faure - Learning to be

The commission laid stress above all on two fundamental ideas: lifelong education and the learning society. Since studies can no longer constitute a definitive 'whole', handed out to and received by a student before he embarks on adult life, whatever the level of his intellectual equipment and the age at which he does so, educational systems must be thought out afresh, in their entirety, as must our very conception of them. If all that has to be learned must be continually re-invented and renewed, then teaching becomes education and, more and more, learning. If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a



learning society. For these are the true proportions of the challenge education will be facing in the future. It is by no means certain that conservatism of a cultural nature will be easier to overcome than economic or political resistance. But once in a position to measure the stakes against the price, how can we refuse to fight the fight? And the weapons we need for that fight are available. (Faure et al 1972: xxxiii-xxxiv)

As Bell (1996: 156) has noted, *Learning to be*, with its emphasis on each individual's entitlement to organized lifelong education, did not make a real impression with any British political party.

More recently there has been a shift in much of the literature and policy discussions from lifelong education to lifelong learning. There has been an associated tendency to substitute the term adult learning for adult education (Courtney 1979: 19). One of the criticisms made is that in the process little attention has been paid to distinguishing education and learning. One way to approach this is to view learning, as a cognitive process internal to the learner, that can occur 'both incidentally and in planned educational activities', while, 'it is only the planned activities we call.. education' (Merriam and Brockett 1997: 6).

The shift may, as Courtney suggests, reflect a growing interest in learning, 'however unorganized, episodic or experiential' (ibid.), beyond the classroom. In Britain, this has been seized upon by New Labour thinkers like Tom Bentley (1998) (head of Demos and a former special advisor to David Blunkett). He describes 'Labour's learning revolution' as follows:

It requires a shift in our thinking about the fundamental organizational unit of education, from the school, an institution where learning is organized, defined and contained, to the learner, an intelligent agent with the potential to learn from any and all of her encounters with the world around her. (Reported in *The Economist*, October 9, 1999, page 42)

The problem is that the sort of learning concerned is highly individualized and often oriented to employer or consumer interests. There has been little real interest in learning for democracy and community. Where collective advancement is emphasized it is often

with regard to maintaining or gaining economic advantage and, in particular the development of the [learning organization](#).

Field (2000: 35) has argued that there has been a fundamental shift in the behaviour of 'ordinary citizens', 'who increasingly regard the day-to-day practice of adult learning as routine, perhaps so routine that they give it little explicit attention'. Economic, social and cultural changes mean that many now live in 'knowledge' or 'informational societies' that have strong individualizing tendencies and a requirement for permanent learning (reflexivity) (after Ulrich Beck [1992] and Anthony Giddens [1990, 1991]). As a result, Field goes on to suggest, many adults now take part in organized learning throughout their lifespan; that the post-school system is populated by adults as well as by young people; and that 'non-formal' learning permeates daily life and is valued (ibid.: 38-49). Typical of the last of these has been a substantial increase in activities such as short residential courses, study tours, fitness centres, sports clubs, heritage centres, self-help therapy manuals, management gurus, electronic networks and self-instructional videos (ibid.: 45).

(T)he new adult learning is part of a much broader process. As individuals come to rely less on traditional institutions and the authority figures associated with them - church leaders, parents, aristocracy - to guide their behaviour, so they become more [self-directed](#). At least in principle, they can select from a variety of possible role-models; traditional role models certainly do not disappear (indeed, they are an important if little-understood resource for fundamentalist movements), but to select any role model requires that individuals face up to an increasing range of biographical options. (Field 2000: 57)

Changes in work organization and management (so called 'post-Fordism' involving flatter organizations, multi-skilled and adaptable labour forces, and flexible production), married to a focus on markets, consumption and lifestyle, has certainly drawn policy makers to the rhetoric of lifelong learning. Government reports in Britain, such as *The Learning Age* (DFEE 1998), demonstrate how far this movement has occurred. Initiatives like the University for Industry (Ufi) have signalled a shift away from traditional classrooms into 'learning centres' (often situated in supermarkets and community projects) and more intensive use of distance and web-based learning. The shift into individualized learning has also been accompanied by what is, effectively, an educational voucher scheme - the Individual Learning

Account (ILA). Initially, the English government will pay £150 into an ILA after an adult student has registered and pledged an initial £25 themselves. The ILA can then be used to buy a programme of learning. (For a discussion of the idea of ILAs see Smith and Spurling 1999). Just whether the English government (or for that matter any government) has come to grips with lifelong learning is an open question. There has been a tendency to focus on vocational and initial education and a failure to fully engage with the implications of an emphasis on lifelong learning for other arenas (Field 2000: 21-34)

The overall result is a paradox. 'A shift in the responsibility for developing learning opportunities for adults from the state to individuals and employers is taking place at the very same time that there is a growing recognition of the need to move towards the notion of lifelong learning' (Raggatt *et al* 1996: 1). As we have seen, there is an increasing emphasis on individual, rather than collective, learning experience. Where *The 1919 Report* saw adult education resting 'upon the twin principles of personal development and social service', the current concern with [the learning society](#) looks to personal change and economic development (and social control, Coffield [1999] would argue).

In conclusion

As can be seen from the above, 'lifelong learning' is a problematic notion. So is it worth pursuing? Field (2000: ix-xii) provides us with three reasons why we should continue to speak and write about it.

It is important to retain the aspirations it contains.

Learning continually throughout life is vital if we are to make informed choices about our lives and the societies in which we live.

Despite the weaknesses and confusions of current policies something new is happening. There have been significant shifts in policies and these require interrogation; and there have been major changes in the ways in which we approach learning.

Lifelong learning is now a mechanism for exclusion and control. As well as facilitating development it has created new and powerful inequalities. There are issues around access to knowledge; and individualization. In

knowledge-based economy, those who have the lowest levels of skill and the weakest capacity for constant updating are less and less likely to find paid employment. Individualization has also meant that access to social support mechanisms has weakened.

There are all sorts of debates around these questions - but Field's point still stands - the term has entered discourse in such a way that it would be foolish to ignore it. Furthermore, the idea that learning has to be supported and encouraged throughout the life course, as Yeaxlee (1921, 1929) recognized, is of fundamental importance.

Selected texts

Antikainen, A., Houtsonen, J., Huotelin, H. and Kauppila, J. (1996) *Living in a Learning Society: Life-Histories, Identities and Education*, London: Routledge. 136 pages. Looks at lifelong learning and the 'learning society' in daily life and considers change in relation to contemporary society.

Bentley, T. (1998) *Learning beyond the Classroom: Education for a changing world*, London: Routledge. 208 pages. Argues the case for a focus on learning beyond the formal sector and the need to connect what happens in schools to wider opportunities for learning. The book is rather light on theorization, coming, as it does, from a policy perspective (Demos).

Boud, D. and Garrick, J. (eds.) (1999) *Understanding Learning at Work*, London: Routledge. 248 pages. Topics covered include: expectations about learning at work into the twenty-first century; learning theories, practice and performance implications; the relationship between workplace learning and other forms of lifelong learning; the international developments in competency-based approaches to learning and assessment; the influence of language, power, culture and gender upon the 'construction' of learning.

Coffield, F. (1999) (ed.) *Speaking Truth to Power. Research and policy on lifelong learning; Learning at Work; Why's the Beer Always Stronger Up North? Studies of lifelong learning in Europe; Informal Learning*, Bristol: Policy Press. Four reports from the ESRC learning society programme. The first volume contains Maurice Kogan's excellent review of the impact of research on policymaking (precious little as policymakers usually already know what they want - and don't want that disturbed by 'facts'). Volume 2 brings together a collection of material about

workplace learning. Volume 3 brings together cross-national studies and Volume 4 'informal learning'. Coffield's conclusion is that the 'learning society' represents another form of social control.

Cropley, A. (ed.) (1980) *Towards a System of Lifelong Education. Some practical considerations*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Dave, R. (ed.) (1976) *Foundations of Lifelong Education*, Oxford: Pergamon.

Department for Education and Employment (1998) *The Learning Age: A renaissance for a new Britain*, London: The Stationery Office. Glossy Green Paper full of policy speak, that reveals the shift to individualized, market-driven notions of lifelong learning.

recommended Edwards, R. (1997) *Changing Places? Flexibility, lifelong learning and a learning society*, London: Routledge. 214 + x pages. Edwards looks at some of the key discourses that he claims have come to govern the education and training of adults. He looks at the context for such changes and their contested nature. The focus is on how the idea of a learning society has developed in recent years. The usual trip through postmodern thinking is followed by an analysis of the ways in which specific discourses of change have been constructed to provide the basis for a growing interest in lifelong learning and a learning society. Edwards also argues that there has been a shift in discourses from a focus on inputs, on adult education and provision toward one on outputs, on learning and the learner. This shift is linked to supporting access and flexibility. A further chapter examines 'adult educators' as reflective practitioners and as workers with vocation - and how they are being constructed as 'enterprising workers'. The book finishes with a return to the notion of the learning society.

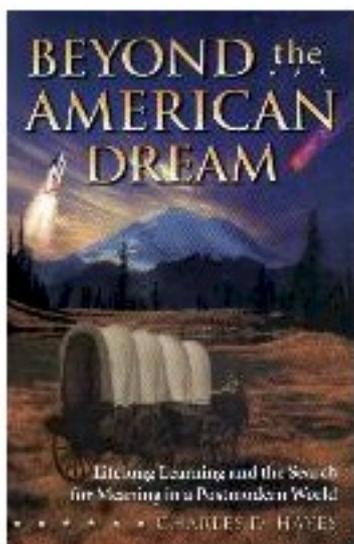
Edwards, E., Hanson, A. and Raggett, P. (eds.) (1996) *Boundaries of Adult Learning*, London: Routledge. 302 + x pages. An excellent collection of readings by writers such as Schön, Boud et al; Brookfield; Knowles; Collins; Sargant. Examines many of the changes taking place in adult education and the shift to the so called 'learning society': disputes concerning adult learning; APL and credit transfer; and inequalities in adult education. Produced for E827 (MA in Education).

Faure, E. and others (1972) *Learning to Be*, Paris: UNESCO. 312 pages. Important and influential statement of the contribution that lifelong learning can make to human development. Argued that lifelong

education should be 'the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries' (p. 182). The first part of the book looks to the current state of education, part two looks at possible futures, and part three examines how a learning society might be achieved. The latter includes chapters in the role and function of educational strategies, elements for contemporary strategies, and roads to solidarity.

recommended Field, J. (2000) *Lifelong Learning and the New Educational Order*, Stoke of Trent: Trentham Books. 181 + xii pages. Extended essay that provides a very accessible discussion of themes and developments. Chapters on lifelong learning; the silent explosion (the development of reflexivity etc.); the learning economy; who is left behind; and the new educational order.

Gelpi, E. (1985) *Lifelong Education and International Relations*, Beckenham: Croom Helm. 216 pages. Argues that lifelong education has a part to play in fostering international political understanding - and the use of the notion of lifelong education to educational planners. See also his (1979) *A Future for Lifelong Education* Volumes 1 and 2, Manchester: Department of Adult and Higher Education, University of Manchester. (81 pages, 110 pages). Both these books are collections of essays rather than a sustained development of theory. Worth looking at as Gelpi has been influential in his role as head of the Lifelong Education Unit at UNESCO.



Hayes, C. (1998) *Beyond the American Dream. Lifelong learning and the search for meaning in a postmodern world*, Wasilla: Autodidactic Press. 365 + xvii pages. Fascinating and distinctive exploration of self-education as the lifeblood of (American) democracy and critique of education as a means to an economic end. Seeks to break through the perceptual barriers of popular culture and new-age doctrines in search of meaning itself. Argues that we affirm the quality of our existence through ideas. Real poverty comes from settling for dreams defined by others while remaining bereft of our own.

Knapper, C. K. and Cropley, A. J. (1985) *Lifelong Learning and Higher Education*, Beckenham: Croom Helm, reprinted (1989) London: Routledge. 201 + x pages. Examines lifelong learning as a paradigm and system. With chapters on learning processes, methods, evaluation

and the significance for higher education institutions.

recommended Lengrand, P. (1975) *An Introduction to Lifelong Learning*, Beckenham: Croom Helm (first published 1970). 156. Clear introduction to the notion of lifelong learning (with an emphasis on self education) and some of the continuing questions surrounding the idea in practice.

Longworth, N. and Davies, W. K. (1996) *Lifelong Learning. New vision, new implications, new roles for people, organizations, nations and communities in the 21st century*, London: Kogan Page. 179 + xii pages. Described by the blurb as 'a pivotal book on lifelong learning' - it is nothing of the sort. Useful as an insight into the sorts of language/thinking that policymakers are picking up in the UK and Europe.

Ministry of Reconstruction (1919) *Final Report of the Adult Education Committee*, London: HMSO. 410 pages. Republished by University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education. Abridged version with an introduction by R. D. Waller published (1956) as *A Design for Democracy*, London: Max Parrish. Stunning statement of the need for adult education - and hailed by *The Times* at the time as heralding a future for 'lifelong education'.

Raggett, P., Edwards, R. and Small, N. (1995) *The Learning Society: Challenges and trends*, London: Routledge. 302 + x pages. Examines the demographic, technical, economic and cultural changes that have led to an interest in a 'learning society'. Produced for E827 (MA in Education).

Ranson, S (ed.) (1999) *Inside the Learning Society*, London: Cassell Education. 294 + x pages. Useful collection of 21 readings that pick over the idea of a learning society. Sections on learning for the world of work; learning for a new society; learning for a new polity; the learning society and public policy; the critical debate.

Schwartz, B. (1974) *Permanent Education. Educating man for the 21st century*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 232 + xii pages. Develops a comprehensive plan for remodelling European education systems around the notion of permanent education.

Smith, J. and Spurling, A. (1999) *Lifelong Learning. Riding the tiger*, London: Cassell. 288 pages. Examines Britain's 'learning divide', lifelong learning (connecting schooling with other forms) and the shifts in policy and behaviour needed to establish a 'lifelong learning

culture'. While there is a nod in the direction of collective experience, the focus is on the development of individualised learning (and in particular ILLAs - individual lifelong learning accounts).

Wain, K. (1987) *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*, London: Croom Helm.

recommended Yeaxlee, B. A. (1929) *Lifelong Education*, London: Cassell. 166 pages. The first full statement of lifelong education including a concern for everyday and informal education and learning. Chapters look to growing up; the permanent need for education; student; the process of learning from life; nineteenth century prophets and pioneers; the adult education movement in the twentieth century; possible developments; emerging problems; and wisdom and understanding. The final chapter 'Wanting is - what?' is of particular interest with its exploration of informal education and association. See, also, Yeaxlee's (1921) book *An Educated Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Other references

Beck, U. (1992) *The Risk Society*, London: Sage.

Bell, B. (1996) 'The British adult education tradition - a re-examination' in E. Edwards, A. Hanson and P. Raggett (eds.) (1996) *Boundaries of Adult Learning*, London: Routledge.

Courtney, S. (1989) 'Defining adult and continuing education' in S. B. Merriam and P. M. Cunningham (eds.) *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Giddens, A. (1990) *Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self Identity*, Cambridge: Polity.

Merriam, S. B. and Brockett, R. G. (1997) *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tight, M. (1996) *Key Concepts in Adult Education and Training*, London: Routledge.

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