

# Lifelong Learning: Concepts and Contexts

*edited by Peter Sutherland & Jim Crowther*  
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"Lifelong learning" gained currency when it was adopted by UNESCO in the 1970s as a promise of access to learning for adults who, because of poverty, life circumstances, and national underdevelopment, were unable to benefit from initial-stage educational opportunities. Conceptualized as a means to deliver individual, family, and social development, by the 1980s this ambition was set aside in favour of a dominant discourse of lifelong learning that centred on job training and re-skilling for flexibility in the new knowledge economy.

In this book, Sutherland and Crowther have gathered 21 diverse voices who present a critically reflective view of lifelong learning as a "signifier of hope: how the lifelong learning imagination as an informed and critical activity can contribute to change at personal, professional, institutional, and structural levels of society" (p. 4). According to the editors, the purpose is to argue that changes in people's experiences of formal education are needed if lifelong learning is to achieve its potential for personal and societal change. Rather than define lifelong learning, they encouraged the contributors to their book to focus on the varied contexts of people's lives and to draw upon the power of imagination to envision thoughtful and creative approaches to more inclusive and participative societies. The contributors are predominantly from the United Kingdom, but others from the United States, Australia, South Africa, and Denmark impart an international perspective. These diverse voices speak not only from the higher-education sector but also from community and social-action settings. Four themes provide the organizing principles: (1) adult learning differs from learning in childhood; (2) learning is cognitive, affective, and contextual; (3) lifelong learning has implications for the purpose and process of learning in educational institutions; (4) subordinate discourses of lifelong learning can enrich and deepen the dimensions of lifelong learning.

Part One of this anthology's three parts sets the stage with five perspectives on adult and lifelong learning. Illeris counterposes the drive of adult learners to be responsible for their own learning against the dynamics of institutional settings where instructors are only too willing to control the learning. He proposes that formal learning break away from over-defining learning tasks and practices and, instead, engage learners in a collaborative endeavour. A more cerebral and individualized aspect of lifelong learning is contained in Mezirow's essay, in which he outlines his theory of transformative learning. Critics of transformative learning identify its lack of attention to emotion and imagination, its de-emphasis of social action, and its model of decontextualized learning. Yet, although a rich literature has grown up around transformative learning since it was introduced by Mezirow in 1978, he remains committed to a rational process of assessing assumptions that support problematic frames of reference. The editors' inclusion of his essay suggests, although it is not explored by Mezirow, that transformative learning occurs many times across the lifespan, triggered by events, relationships, or personal dissatisfactions.

Whereas the affective domain receives little attention from Mezirow, the emotions, especially anxiety, are fundamental to learning, writes West in the following chapter. Using a psychosocial perspective, West illustrates how lifelong learning provides transitional space in which learners can constructively engage with disruptive circumstances and resistance to change in order to negotiate new relationships and identities. More than a cognitive process, learning is sustained by the social relationships in which we are embedded, but neither West nor Mezirow addresses the extent to which social relationships can impede lifelong or transformative learning.

An essay by Murphy and Fleming moves to a social and political critique of lifelong learning as servant to the capitalist agenda. In examining Habermas's notion of discursive democracy and its potential for lifelong learning, the two authors turn to Mezirow to note that transformative learning can include "collective action to make social institutions more responsive to the needs of those they serve" (p. 54). Later, in Parts Two and Three, narratives of learning in voluntary organizations and in social action exemplify Habermas's vision of lifelong learning as providing the means to develop the capacity of civil society to counter the instrumental rationality of the state and the market.

At the heart of this anthology lies Edwards and Usher's perspective of lifelong learning within a post-modern analysis as a "troubled space of possibilities." Learning in the post-modern condition takes place in a diversity of social practices beyond the boundaries of formal learning institutions. The hegemony of institutionalized education as the sole site for knowledge production and assessment lies open to challenge. Amid the skepticism of

authority and the role of researchers and teachers as the exclusive custodians of knowledge production and transmission has arisen questioning of modernist claims for mastery of either knowledge or self through learning.

The authors appear ambivalent about the smorgasbord of learning opportunities that cater to diverse learners. Although they address the commodification of knowledge within this post-modern paradigm, they do not address the concomitant commodification and marketization of learning delivery modes and the impact on accessibility and participation based on ability to pay. Their discussion of Lyotard's concept of performativity (learning that prioritizes corporate and state goals, rather than those of people) and mastery helps us to recognize the troubled spaces around lifelong learning. The authors see the modern and post-modern as layered and enfolded in complex ways and suggest: "Rather than a route to mastery, lifelong learning might be better considered a condition of constant apprenticeship—one that is mobile, flexible, and adaptable" (p. 65). Much like a piece of origami, this "constant apprenticeship" dovetails neatly with the reconstructed modernist project of lifelong learning, providing the flexibility to meet the technological and socio-economic changes required as a consequence of market competition and economic globalization.

Evison's chapter, "Changing to Learning Cultures that Foster Lifelong Learners," provides the theme that unifies the eight chapters of Part Two. Institutional structures and practices (Walters), curriculum (Bamber), and pedagogy (Trigwell) are examined and found wanting in a culture of lifelong learning. Transforming higher-education institutions into cultures that foster lifelong learning requires shifts in power relations, epistemology, and the teaching-learning transaction. Bamber describes a process of experiential, problem-based learning inclusive of both workplace and university ways of knowing, through which mature non-traditional learners developed as active learners engaged in critical analysis of their situations and their lives.

Beyond the institutional setting, several of the contributors look at the needs of the lifelong learner in higher education. Repeatedly, the role of the instructor is identified as vital to the learner's success. Whether this role lies in deliberate instruction in self-regulation strategies (Cassazza) or in offering different teaching approaches according to the learner's stage or level of cognitive development (Sutherland), the importance of instructors having a wide range of pedagogical and interpersonal skills is an overarching motif throughout this section. All of the recommendations have considerable merit to help reconfigure higher education for lifelong learning.

If Part Two can be characterized as explorations for transforming established traditions to new potentialities within formal learning, Part Three opens up recognition of new sites and ways of engaging in lifelong learning. Purcell observes that collaborative learning for social action promotes

the unlearning of dominant oppressive norms and leads to more critical awareness of self and community. Because such social movements generate dissent about dominant social and cultural values that inform the everyday, they are frequently excluded from the official discourse of lifelong learning. This anthology challenges us as adult and continuing educators to broaden our understanding of lifelong learning. The contributors urge us to move beyond statist discourse of economic renewal and social cohesion and to make lifelong learning part of wider redistributive struggles for participative democracy, inclusive of dissonant voices and diverse perspectives. This thoughtful and carefully organized collection of essays can serve as a text for university students of lifelong learning to explore both philosophical underpinnings of lifelong learning and its realities in everyday life. It is also valuable to those of us who practice daily in the domain of lifelong learning, inspiring us to lift our heads from the technical rationality of planning, organizing, and delivering programs to reflect on our goals and methods, to recognize the paradoxes that shape our work, and to revitalize our dreams of a better world. We must choose whether lifelong learning represents a sentence of perennial incompetence, a vehicle for adjusting to the demands of the neo-liberal economy, or a vision and set of principles for imagining and sharing in a truly egalitarian society.

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