Lifelong Learning for Inter-Connected Development

Professor Shirley Walters,
Director, Division for Lifelong Learning,
University of Western Cape,
Private Bag X17, Bellville 7530,
South Africa [1]

Abstract

A challenge in society is the ability to work across different sectors to achieve more integrated approaches to `development`. As society is structured to cater for particular needs, such as health or education, institutional formations often function in isolation from one another. To avoid this, societies use mechanisms, approaches, or strategies to re-connect different parts for greater reintegration. The philosophy and approaches to lifelong learning can potentially assist these processes. Drawing on examples from South Africa, this paper suggests that lifelong learning as `master concept` and `organising principle` potentially can play an integrative role that assists inter-connected processes towards sustainability.

Key Words

Lifelong, life-wide, life-deep learning; sustainability; interconnected development

Introduction

One of the big socio-economic development challenges in any society is the ability to work across different sectors in order to achieve more integrated approaches to `development`. As society is necessarily structured to cater for particular needs, like health, agriculture, education, or environment, institutional formations often end up functioning largely in isolation from one another. To avoid fractured, piecemeal approaches to personal, social, cultural, political and economic development, societies do need various mechanisms, approaches, or strategies to re-connect the different parts in order to achieve greater integration for the good of efficient, effective personal, economic and social progress. This is attempted, more or less successfully, through legislation, regulatory frameworks, cross-cutting projects and programmes, or institutional structures. The philosophy and

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approaches to lifelong learning can potentially assist this reintegration process so that the people do have learning and educational support from ‘cradle to grave’, through their different life stages. Drawing on examples taken from South Africa, this paper suggests that lifelong learning as a `master concept` and an `organising principle` potentially can play an integrative role that assists re-integrative, inter-connected, developmental processes. Lifelong learning, which is also life-wide and life-deep, through the four major stages of people’s development (Schuller and Watson 2009) embodies the need for integrated, inter-connected approaches to human development.

I will begin with a brief discussion of certain social purposes of lifelong learning, and then, through use of examples, argue the potential of lifelong learning to be a master concept for inter-connected approaches to development. I will end by making some observations about the possibilities for lifelong learning to reach its potential in this regard.

Lifelong learning – to what end?

For lifelong learning to be used strategically for the betterment of human and planetary conditions, it is important to rehearse some key social purposes of lifelong learning. An increasingly common understanding is that lifelong learning should contribute to ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable livelihoods’.

Sustainability is a continually evolving concept. One of the early descriptions of `sustainable development` is credited to the Brundtland Commission: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Sustainability is generally thought to have three components: environment, society, and economy, and sustainability is considered to be a paradigm for thinking about a future in which environmental, societal, and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of development and improved quality of life (UNESCO, 2006).

However, there are various critiques of dominant neo-liberal understandings of ‘development’, one of which is seen as having a pre-occupation with only that which is measurable and quantifiable. As Von Kotze (2009: 17) explains, “Along with the accounting mentality goes the production of models and systems that make it easier to reckon, calculate and tally ‘outcomes’. Tick lists allow for easy stocktaking and hence appraisal of hours worked, barrels moved, containers filled, people trained. Assessment is based on the growth, increase and accumulation of whatever

is being counted". Somehow, the majority of ordinary people are excluded from these calculations. In developing economies, also referred to as the political and economic `south`, informal employment represents one-half to three-quarters of non-agricultural employment. (Von Kotze 2009: 17) Therefore Von Kotze argues for a `sustainable livelihoods approach`.

A livelihood perspective takes seriously not just that which is 'to make a living', but also includes those labors and responsibilities associated with reproducing life. As Maria Mies (1986) reminds us that '[t]he aim of all work and human endeavour is not a never-ending expansion of wealth and commodities, but *human happiness*(as the early socialists had seen it), or the *production of life itself*(1986: 212) To this end, Von Kotze elaborates that livelihoods include various kinds of work including housework, childcare, home gardening, fuel collection, as well as community organizing and "the often small acts of reciprocity and solidarity that establish and contribute to social protection" (Von Kotze 2009: 20).

The contexts for lifelong learning in the 'south' include many similar conditions to those in the 'north', however, the scale, for example, of poverty, unemployment, famine, conflicts, illiteracy, poor access to basic health care and other services, ill health compounded by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, environmental degradation, gender inequity, access to and drop-out rates from school, are far more extreme. (See for example, Amutabi et al 2009; Preece 2009; Torres 2004). Therefore lifelong learning cannot adopt a narrow 'skills-for-human-capital` focus, which is the predominant approach driving much of the development of lifelong learning.

The 2009 Bonn Declaration for Education for Sustainable Development, adopted at the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, re-affirmed that through education and lifelong learning it is possible to achieve economic and social justice, food security, ecological integrity, sustainable livelihoods, respect for all life forms and essential values that foster social cohesion, democracy and collective action. However, simply expanding the quantity of education and lifelong learning opportunities would not be sufficient. The quality of education and training, including appropriateness and relevance, would also need to be enhanced. To achieve this, education and training would need to be reoriented to address sustainability and to give more focus to skills, values, and perspectives that encourage active participation for sustainability by all citizens. This leads to the question of core skills or capabilities for sustainability.

Core skills or capabilities can and have been defined in many different ways. The

word `skills` is often interpreted in a very narrow way to mean ways of `doing`; it can be seen only as instrumental. Therefore I prefer to use the concept of capabilities, which have more breadth, ambition and sense of agency. Capabilities can be developed to a high level. However competent a person may be in them, there is always the challenge to develop further. This is appropriate from a lifelong learning point of view.

Amartya Sen's (1999) concept of capabilities, reduced to its simplest terms, constitutes the `capacity to achieve well-being` – it refers both to people's potential to achieve and their actual ability to do so. Sen's fundamental capability to achieve well-being can be generally disaggregated under 5 headings: (1) communication, language and literacy capabilities; (2) cognitive skills; (3) personal development and life capabilities; (4) social capabilities; and (5) work-related capabilities.

All individuals and groups should have the opportunity, not only to realize their full potential, but also to raise their aspirations. Sen's deep concern with reducing inequalities in societies stresses the obstacles to achieving capabilities which different individuals and groups encounter. Sen's approach gives the edge needed to go beyond current potential, with the challenge of recurrently uncovering and developing further potential. His perspective links capabilities directly to freedom. Aspiration is a part of freedom, and will take diverse forms. As quoted in Schuller and Watson (2009: 167), Raymond Williams' analysis of the roles of lifelong learning in a period of rapid change is a relevant counterpart to Sen's concept of capability. Williams' identifies 3 key and different ways in which learning helps people:

i. To *make sense of change*, by acquiring information, ideas,

knowledge and a critical and challenging mind;

ii. To *adapt to change*, by making the most of it, capturing and applying knowledge;

iii. To *shape change*, being agents of change rather than its victims, navigating risk and uncertainty as part of the democratic project.

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The combination of these 3 fits well with the notion of capability as something that enables agency and action as well as understanding. Drawing on Schuller and Watson (2009:167), a selection of capabilities for sustainability are ones which enhance people's ability to exercise a degree of control over their own lives; to take part with others in decisions that affect the context of their lives; and to envisage alternative futures for themselves and their families. These open up space for the creative, aesthetic, spiritual and other essential dimensions of personal and communal development and growth. They are both instrumental and intrinsic.

This leads, in summary, to two quotations which I find useful in thinking about the social purposes of lifelong learning. The first is that lifelong learning:

..connects individuals and groups to the structures of social, political and economic activity in both local and global contexts, and emphasizes women and men, girls and boys, as agents of their own history in all aspects of their lives.

(Adapted from: UWC and UIE 2001)

This quote emphasizes that lifelong learning is about human agency across the life span and in the web of personal, cultural, social, political or economic lives, both locally and globally.

The second quote comes from the 2009 Belem conference, Confintea V1, which was held in Brazil, and expands understandings of the critical relationships amongst all life forms if there is to be an environmentally sustainable and socially just future.

"The planet will not survive unless it becomes a learning planet"

(Paul Belanger, Confintea V1, 2009).

Both of these quotes infer that lifelong learning for sustainability is concerned with interconnectedness – the first one, of people as agents of our own history across generations, and the second, the interconnectedness of all life forms. They suggest that lifelong learning is both about continuity and change which can contribute to interconnected human and planetary sustainability.

Lifelong learning for Inter-Connected Development

As mentioned above, one of the biggest challenges of socio-economic development in any society is its ability to work across different sectors in order to achieve more integrated approaches to human and planetary sustainability. The philosophy and approaches to lifelong learning can potentially assist this reintegration process. Before giving three illustrative, institutionalized examples, I elaborate on my understandings of lifelong learning in the context of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa, which also illustrates the need for holistic, inter-connected approaches to human development. The HIV and AIDS pandemic compels conceptions of lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep learning, which are concerned with the intertwining of the personal, the pedagogical and the political, in times of global uncertainties.

Lifelong learning in HIV and AIDS saturated times

In sub-Saharan Africa no-one is unaffected by HIV and AIDS. It weaves through our personal, political and pedagogical lives. HIV and AIDS highlight difficult social, economic, cultural and personal issues for educators and activists. While it infects and affects children and adults, it is the women who are most susceptible. As Susser (2009: 45) says, '… biology, culture, social organization, low incomes and lack of services conspire to render women extraordinarily susceptible to HIV infection'.

Literature captures the complex interplay between individual behavior, politics, culture, economics, gender relations, power and history in HIV – and AIDS environments. Steinberg (2008: 326) shows how the intimacy of home becomes contaminated and the morality of men is most acutely called into question. Lees (2008) in his study on 'rethinking AIDS education' echoes Freire (1993:25) who states that "Humanization has always been humankind's central problem". Lees' study contends that 're-thinking our understanding of the AIDS pandemic allows us to see that AIDS is about people, not simply about the virus'. He questions how well we understand the lives and behaviors of people – hence the value of turning to a range of fiction, non-fiction and other media.

A book by novelist and poet, Magona (2008) describes the intricacies of gender relations amongst a group of 4 middle class, urban women and their partners, whose close friend, Beauty, has died of AIDS, contracted from her 'unfaithful husband`. The story highlights the deeply gendered nature of HIV and AIDS as each of the main characters struggles to assert their friend, Beauty's gift to them, which

is to take control of their sexual relationships with their partners in order `to live a long life`.

Gevisser (2007), in his penetrating biography of former South African President Thabo Mbeki, analyses the complex interplay of the politics of race, sexuality and global inequality in the shadow of AIDS where 800 – 1000 people die of AIDS related diseases on an average day in South Africa.

The conditions of HIV and AIDS are not a particularly African story, as illustrated in the discrimination against HIV positive people; in 2008, 67 countries still denied right of entry or residence to people simply because they were HIV positive; treating all HIV positive people as if they are intentionally going to infect others. This discriminatory practice drives the disease further underground. However, it is the impact of pervasive trauma and grief that is the focus here – and this can be likened to other environments where trauma and grief are caused by other diseases, substance abuse, poverty, discrimination, migration, and violence, which are often exacerbated in times of war, economic, political or climatic turbulence or uncertainty.

Times of hardship are also about darkness and light, sadness and joy; they are animated by the transformational processes of progressing from ‘near death’ to ‘new life ’. Given the global uncertainties, it is fair to assume that trauma and grief are widespread and therefore cannot be ignored by activists and educators of various kinds. Lifelong learning in these contexts requires a holistic, inter-connected approach which embraces the physical, spiritual, emotional, psychic and material aspects of people’s lives.

I turn now to other illustrations of lifelong learning’s potential to play an integrative role in development. These are national qualification frameworks, learning regions, and a university which has adopted lifelong learning as part of its mission.

National Qualifications Framework

South Africa’s National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is one of the first generation NQFs in the world, and the first in a ‘developing country’. One of the first education and training strategies adopted by the newly formed democratic government in 1994 was to begin to establish the NQF to help achieve access for the previously excluded black majority; integration and progression of learners across the education and training systems, in order to achieve redress for the past injustices.

Lifelong learning was a key ambition to be built through the NQF.

Sixteen years later, with the benefit of hindsight, there is recognition that the ambitions were unrealisable. However, because qualifications are a key currency with which individuals and collectives transact their positions in society, the NQF has been a very important structure to facilitate communication, collaboration and coordination across the systems. The NQF has now entered a new phase and, amongst other things, is highlighting the importance of guidance and counselling for learners across the life span; recognition of prior learning; credit accumulation and transfer of credits; and research based approaches to learning and work.

The NQF is helping build communities of trust across all parts of the education and training system nationally; it is also working closely with counterparts internationally to enable the flow of people across national borders. For lifelong learning to succeed, there must be trust amongst providers, across sectors, across national borders, to facilitate learners' successful access and progress both locally and globally. Lower and middle income countries do not have the rich institutional infrastructures of richer countries; therefore, for South Africa the NQF is playing an important developmental role. (For more information on the background and critical debate on the NQF see for example Lugg 2009)

Insights from the NQF experiences include: the importance of coherent and systemic implementation; the slowness of educational transformation; realisation that qualifications frameworks can contribute to transformation provided they are seen as a platform for communication, cooperation and coordination; guidance and counselling across the system is critical; recognition of prior learning is an important pedagogical bridge; there is need for a strong experimental scientific approach; and the strong move to privilege outcomes based education as a template for the whole system did not succeed.

In summary, NQFs are best understood as works-in-progress and as contestable artefacts of modern society, which can contribute in a modest way to how a society manages the relations between education, training, work and development by finding 'common ground' between distinct forms of learning and articulation with work and development practices. They are useful vehicles for communication, cooperation and coordination across education, training, work and development.

(Walters and Parker 2008)

NQFs which embrace lifelong learning as a master concept and organisational principle, can potentially contribute to inter-connected approaches to development which work across different epistemological and sectoral terrains.

The Learning Cape

The next example of trying to implement lifelong learning on a provincial basis is the Learning Cape. This has not been very successful but it is important to recognize both the possibilities and limitations of creating learning regions or learning cities, as part of lifelong learning for inter-connected development.

The advantages of a `learning region` is that it demarcates a geographical space within which more holistic, integrated possibilities are created to coordinate systems, policies, practices for lifelong learning and development. For purposes here, I will just highlight some of the lessons learnt from the Learning Cape. (For a more detailed account refer to Walters 2007)

The creation of a learning region requires strong political will and long term vision; it needs fundamental shifts in thinking about education, training, work and development, as it must include, for example, issues of transport, safety, the economy, health, education and training, across generations, and across-sectors. As we know, if for example women are not able to get to class because of threats of violence or lack of transport, their learning will be inhibited; or if children are malnourished their abilities to concentrate and study will be limited. Therefore holistic approaches to development are required. The success of a learning region is dependent on contingent conditions which include `communities of trust` amongst institutions, communities, and sectors. There is a constant interplay of pedagogy, politics and organization. A learning region which is to attempt lifelong, life-wide and life-deep learning for all citizens across all ages is an extremely complex undertaking and a very challenging ‘big idea’, but one which is working to varying extents in different regions of the world.

Lifelong learning in a university: University of Western Cape

In order for lifelong learning to move beyond rhetorical ambition, but to a systematic approach to the functioning of an institution like a university, it needs to

recognize that all aspects of the institution are affected. These include: strategic partnerships and linkages; overarching regulatory frameworks; research; teaching and learning processes; administration policies and mechanisms; student support systems and services. (UWC and UIE 2001) Lifelong learning is again concerned with inter-connected development within the institution and between the institution and its surrounding communities.

The approach to lifelong learning within the university will also depend on the social purposes which are seen to underpin the lifelong learning mission. Universities are clearly not politically neutral spaces, neither is lifelong learning.

The University of Western Cape has adopted a lifelong learning mission and it has, over the last ten years or so, been systematically implementing an approach, but as with all developments of this kind, it is not uncontested. The successes have been mixed. The story of the university's attempts has also been captured elsewhere. (Walters 2005)

Key insights

In general terms, if lifelong learning is taken seriously as a philosophy and an approach it does challenge ways of seeing from points of view of individual and collective identities; different understandings of knowledge; and there are shifting power relations which relate to competing social and economic purposes. Therefore lifelong learning can be very challenging to people's identities, to epistemological understandings, and power relations. There are competing social purposes; therefore there will always be contestation. This leads to the importance of national, regional or institutional agreement or overarching policy and legislative frameworks for lifelong learning which can help build towards `communities of trust` – achievements on this in South Africa have been mixed.

If the social purposes of lifelong learning are to encourage greater social justice, environmental sustainability, and fairness in society, then hard choices have to be made and the politics of the endeavour need to be recognised. Sustainability emphasises both continuities and change – people both individually and collectively need enabling environments which encourage their capabilities to understand, adapt and shape change, which can paradoxically, encourage the sustaining or returning to certain traditional cultural practices.

I end with two quotes which signal ways of seeing the world and the purposes of

lifelong learning which demand more integrated, non-hierarchical ways of understanding and approaching socio-economic, personal and planetary development.

The first comes from a woman aboriginal leader from Australia who challenges the common approach to development work where some people are deemed to know while others do not, when Lily Walker says:

“If you come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let’s begin”.

(Myles and Tarrago 1996)

And finally, from the Confintea V1 conference in December 2009 and in the light of the immense challenges being faced (and gradually being acknowledged) by more people and nations around the world:

“The planet will not survive unless it becomes a learning planet”.

Within these two quotes and implicit in their developmental perspectives, lifelong, life-wide and life-deep learning is not an option. At this time of deep environmental, economic, political and social uncertainty in so many parts of the world, working in respectful, inter-connected ways to build `communities of trust` within families, communities, institutions, cities or nations, and then trans-nationally, compels conceptions of lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep learning for sustainability – conceptions which intertwine the personal, organizational, pedagogical and political.

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Notes

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