

# Chapter 1: Towards a Philosophy of Lifelong Learning

DAVID ASPIN and JUDITH CHAPMAN

## THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL

### INTRODUCTION

In the daily life of those working in all kinds of educating institutions these days there is always so much to do connected with the realities of the financing, staffing, delivering and evaluating educational programs that there seems little time to concentrate on anything else. It is not surprising therefore to find that questions of a more profound kind are generally put to one side, either to await those rare opportunities when there will be an opportunity for more serious reflection or to consign such matters to the advice of “experts” or “theorists” whose time can be given over to such matters, separate and aside from the “real” problems. This is particularly so with philosophical questions. In this chapter we hope to show that attention to the philosophical questions that are part and parcel of thinking about lifelong learning is not only a crucial and indispensable element of the framework within which lifelong learning programs and activities are conceived and articulated, but also that the conclusions that are reached as a result of philosophical enquiries have *practical* implications for developing programs, curricula and activities of a lifelong learning character.

Philosophy is often thought of as “urbane and cultivated sermonizing” (O’Connor 1963) about the nature of reality and the place of human beings in relation to it, much in the sense that people speak of their “philosophy of life”. This implies a set of beliefs, values and attitudes to what are seen as the weighty questions of life and death and/or the principles to be followed in our relations with other people. A similar sense of “philosophy” is found in uses where people talk of ideologies such as Marxism or economic rationalism, codes for living such as Bushido, or religious systems such as those of Islam, Judaism or Christianity. Such approaches to philosophy are widely known and much practised, but we think they have little to offer us here. However, neither do we feel that we ought to fly to the other extreme and apotheosize the model of philosophy associated with exponents of it such as Ayer (1936) and Austin (1962), which involves a highly technical and rigorous exercise in the analysis and clarification of the meanings of words.

As we see it, the adoption of an appropriate philosophical approach to enquiries about lifelong learning will depend, as much as anything else, upon the nature of the problem being looked into, the intellectual histories and interests of those tackling it,

the outcomes at which they are aiming, the considerations that make their selection of particular categories, concepts, criteria and procedures significant or determinative in the framing of questions, the conduct of enquiries and the judgment of what shall count as valid answers or good theories, and the reflections that make certain moves in their arguments and theorising decisive.

Thus, in attempting to put into play our own version of philosophy, we need to be clear about the questions that we believe will loom large in our consideration of life-long learning and the things that we hope will emerge from philosophical enquiries into it. Our own work in this area leads us to think that there is a number of topics, issues and problems that ought to be looked into and that these are concerned, among other things, with the planning, provision and assessment of activities in educating institutions concerned to promote and expand opportunities for lifelong learning experiences for all.

The first of these questions concerns the ways in which lifelong learning might be defined, characterised and understood; the second concerns how lifelong learning might be brought about; the third concerns the kinds of knowledge, understanding and skill that people might want or need to acquire and what the status of their claims to have acquired such knowledge might amount to; the fourth draws attention to the ways in which people will be able to learn, understand and make progress in their lifelong learning endeavours; and the fifth concerns the grounds on which lifelong learning programmes can be justified. Any or all of these will also therefore probably make some demand on a wider framework of philosophical, methodological, epistemological, pedagogical and ethical concerns within which lifelong learning undertakings are more generally to be understood and the ways in which substantive theories about them may be appraised, compared, criticized and, if necessary, improved or corrected.

In attempting to show how one might go about framing answers to such questions we shall need to draw upon the insights offered by a range of philosophical approaches. For example, the deeply held beliefs, values and attitudes, to which everyone is committed, are often hidden and only become explicit or “public” through the expression of our preferences, ambitions, political, economic or moral decisions, and through our observable involvement in a particular pattern or certain “form of life”. It is, however, those hidden, underlying assumptions and preconceptions that are crucial in determining the influence of our theories not only upon our undertakings in promoting lifelong learning but also upon the aims and content of the kinds of programmes and activities we believe should be offered under the heading, in the name and for the purpose of preparing, promoting and providing opportunities for learning across the lifespan.

One element in our approach, therefore, will be some attempt to identify and throw light on some of the presuppositions that underpin and serve to define the ‘form of life’ within which we believe that lifelong learning enterprises are most appropriately located and take place. Such analysis is not undertaken simply for its own sake, however, but for particular reasons. It is undertaken, for one thing, in an attempt to promote clarity and soundness in our theoretical understanding. This is a task which we regard as being of vital importance, for it is obvious that one cannot promote clarity of thought, soundness of argument and rational decision-making among purveyors of and participants in lifelong learning programmes if we as policy-makers and educators

are unaware of or unclear about those elements, principles and criteria which lay the basis for decision-making about our own work, especially when these may not be self-evident but require public expression and justification.

Such analysis is also undertaken in the attempt to provide us with the second element in this study, which is devoted to the endeavour of developing a theory or set of theories and constructing a theoretical framework against which present day programmes and activities of lifelong learning could be tested to see whether the practice matches the principles. In this way we should be able to discover where there are weaknesses, deficiencies, omissions or errors and thus be able to determine what amendments, refinements or even wholesale restructuring might be needed in order to bring about a close “fit”. The purpose of this kind of investigation, then, is to consider the theories with which we or other people active in the field are working and to engage in the crucial task of theory examination, theory comparison, and theory criticism, correction or even replacement. Philosophy viewed in this way becomes not merely an exercise of analysis for the purposes of clarification but an undertaking of theory criticism and construction in order that the undertakings themselves shall be based upon sound principles, such as those of economy, simplicity, coherence, consistency, fecundity and capacity for successful prediction (see Lycan 1988).

We see, then, two main characteristics in the version of philosophy with which we shall be working in this chapter. First, we see a need for a rigorous analysis and elucidation of those concepts, criteria and categories that are embedded and embodied in any lifelong learning undertaking, together with an examination of the presuppositions underlying them (the kind of activity described by Strawson (1958) as ‘descriptive metaphysics’; see also Trigg 1973). Secondly, however, we are inclined to believe that there is a practical “pay-off” or creative element, which is concerned to point to the implications of such analysis – to settle what ought logically to follow from it with respect to putting on programmes of lifelong learning. And this will mean ensuring that the theory/ies embodied in those programmes will be the temporary best theory that fits the phenomena and helps us to answer the problems at the time when we look at them. In this respect our approach has much in common with the notion of philosophy as a process of tackling and attempting to solve problems (Popper 1972).

### *A Note of Caution*

It is important to be clear about the nature and purposes of such a philosophical examination and indeed of the various approaches to these questions that follow. None of them purports to provide *the* answer to any of the questions raised therein; indeed this would not be a philosophical enterprise if that were to be the outcome aimed at. The analyses we engage in and offer, the elucidations of presuppositions, the comparison and criticism of competing theories presuppose canons of intelligibility and corrigibility that are not themselves immune from further criticism. Our willingness to put up hypotheses and conjectures that criticize or claim to refute the views of others is based upon the expectation that these will themselves be subjected in turn to rational criticism put forward by others. Any conclusions that we draw can only stand until such time as

they in turn are subjected to and refined or refuted by further rational and relevant argument. Such is the nature of this kind of activity.

However, just because such an activity is regarded therefore as only provisional in nature will not mean that it is pointless or unimportant. Any policy, undertaking or enterprise that attempts to influence the lives of other people for the better counts as, potentially at any rate, an intrusion into and an interference with these lives and as such it needs to be justified publicly if it is to be accorded any weight or acceptance, whilst the presuppositions on which such a policy is based ought also to be laid bare and rendered subject to scrutiny, rather than left hidden or unexamined. It is this public examination of such policies and the rigorous scrutiny of their implicit principles or explicit recommendations for action that we see as the prime responsibility of the philosopher.

In the language we have been employing, therefore, the questions about lifelong learning that we believe need to be tackled and, it is to be hoped, answered (even if only provisionally), may be categorised, at least initially, into the following:

- questions of meaning and definition
- questions of methodology
- questions of epistemology
- questions of the philosophical psychology of pedagogy/learning
- questions of ethics.

In the rest of this chapter we shall try to deal with the various issues arising in these areas of enquiry and to come to some tentative conclusions that might form a useful basis for theories of lifelong learning

## THE PROBLEM OF MEANING AND DEFINITION

It is with the question of meaning that the problems of developing a philosophy of lifelong learning begin, for if we cannot easily understand or agree upon the terms being employed in our discourse in and about the topic, then we cannot proceed further to an examination of the validity of arguments employing or theories embodying them. Thus the analysis and clarification of terms becomes a prior stage in the conceptualization of lifelong learning matters, for it is upon them that all else that follows will depend.

Gelpi, one of the early writers on the topic of lifelong education (Gelpi, 1984), argued that there was a need for a clear definition of the term ‘lifelong education’. The problem, he maintained, was that, while one could be reasonably clear about the meaning and applicability of such terms as “vocational education”, “technical education” and “nurse education”, no such clarity could be found in the case of terms with much less specific points of application, such as “lifelong education”, particularly when a range of other apparently similar terms – “*education permanente*”, “further education”, “continuing education” and so on – were often used interchangeably with it and with each other.

Other writers on the topic have maintained that there is no point in trying to apply the term “lifelong education”. They claim that such a term seeks to generalize the

reference of the notion of “education” to such a wide set of parameters as virtually to empty it of all meaning. Still others have acted as though the term “lifelong education” were simply another way of alluding to those educational endeavours and opportunities that were offered after the end of formal schooling and thus was interchangeable and synonymous with terms that had wider currency, such as “adult education”, “careers education” or “recurrent education” (Stock 1979). Yet another group have commented that, while there may have been enough examples around in the history of educational philosophy of such key ideas as “liberal education” or “moral education” to offer discussants a reasonably firm point of purchase, there is so little said about “lifelong education” that there is almost nothing on which we can get a grip in our attempts to give a clear account of those elements that we may discern as being cardinal to or indicative of its meaning and application.

There is an important point to be made when one is considering the positions that have been taken in the past in respect to the concept of lifelong education and the arguments that have been put forward by various proponents of these positions. For it seems to us that differences in and between various versions of “lifelong education” are functions, not only of particular educational, moral or political commitments, but also of a particular meta-theory at work in the philosophy of lifelong education.

In some versions of the term, and in various attempts to produce a clear account of it, we may discern the presence and operation of a particular preconception. In many writers’ work on lifelong education, for example, there is an implicit acceptance of the idea that (a) it is possible to arrive at some uniform descriptive account of the term “lifelong education”, which all could then accept and take as a kind of *primum datum*; and that (b) if there were not such a definition already available, then there ought to be. The common postulate shared by many writers – particularly the earlier ones – seems to be that unambiguous agreement on the meaning and applicability of the term “lifelong education” or “lifelong learning” is conceivable, possible and attainable. In our reading of the various books, chapters and papers on this topic we find plenty of evidence that many writers seem to share this assumption and operate according to the logic and dictates of an empiricist approach to concepts and meaning (see Dave, 1975; Cropley, 1979; Gelpi, 1985; Lengrand, 1975, 1986; and Richmond and Stock, 1979).

The main feature observable in the work of such writers is their holding of preconceptions about definition that may be described as “essentialist”. This is the notion that it is possible, and indeed philosophically proper, for participants in discussion about any term in educational discourse to employ the methods of etymological derivation, dictionary definition, or the sharp-cutting tools of conceptual analysis (looking for those cases that all can agree to be “central” or “peripheral” to allowable utterance employing the terms in question), in the endeavour to arrive at some kind of agreement about the separately “necessary” and conjointly “sufficient” conditions that will underpin and define the direction of discourse employing this term.

The notion that the quest for “essential” definitions was legitimate was held in an earlier era where students of education accepted the academic tenability and conformed to the dictates of the empiricist paradigm, tending only to engage in activities of conceptual analysis, pursuing philosophical enquiries and developing and applying research designs and instruments exclusively based upon it. This view – a

<http://www.springer.com/978-0-7923-6815-1>

International Handbook of Lifelong Learning

Aspin, D.N.; Chapman, J.D.; Hatton, M.; Sawano, Y.  
(Eds.)

2001, LVIII, 820 p. In 2 volumes, not available  
separately., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-7923-6815-1