

Chapter 3: Lifelong Learning and Personal Fulfillment

ROBIN BARROW AND PATRICK KEENEY

INTRODUCTION

The argument of this chapter will be that the concept of lifelong learning (as opposed to the rather ill-favored phrase itself) has a long and honourable history and should be actively promoted. However, this is on the important assumption that the concept is interpreted in such a way as to imply self-fulfillment through education, rather than in a narrowly utilitarian way that looks through an economic lens and sees no further than skills and training.

Certainly, the idea of lifelong learning must have seemed a given to Plato, and the suggestion that it is intrinsically tied up with personal fulfillment would surely also have occurred to him. In the most literal sense, the education advocated for the Guardians in the *Republic* is a lifelong process, with explicit reference being made to the (adult) ages appropriate for various studies. Indeed, Plato states unequivocally that “education ... commences in the first years of childhood and lasts to the very end of life” (*Protagoras*, 325). It is also clear that, while recognizing, even emphasising, the social utility of well educated persons, as we shall do below, (for the careful attention to the upbringing and education appropriate to all citizens in the *Republic* is intended to contribute to the harmony and happiness of the whole), for Plato a crucial part of the point of all this education is to realise or fulfill the individual to the utmost (Barrow 1975). What particularly characterises and distinguishes Plato’s view, especially judged in the context of his times, is his argument that education is an intellectual and character-forming business, rather than a mere acquisition of skills or mastery of a trade, and that its ideal length or scope is not to be estimated by reference to any amount of information to be ingested, but to the need to ascend to ever higher and more abstract levels of understanding. It is true that Plato’s epistemology inclines towards the idea that ultimately the world and all things in it can be known and hence that in principle there might be a finite limit to the answer of the time it takes to become educated. But the fact remains that, in practice, Plato saw the business of education as a thing of wonder and of the first importance, and something that would never actually be complete in this life.

The idea, then, of lifelong learning is nothing new. Our concern will now be with its role in a contemporary context.

THE ECONOMY AND THE KNOWLEDGE EXPLOSION

The phrase “lifelong learning” is very much a part of contemporary educational discourse, and as an idea it currently plays a significant part in a great deal of planning

and practical activity. To this extent at least, our views are closer to Plato's than to those entertained at many other historical periods and in many other cultures. There seems to be a general sense, if not necessarily a well articulated claim, that, just as Plato thought, we should be doing a great deal more than apprenticing people to a trade, initiating them into a priesthood, conditioning them, indoctrinating them, or equipping them with various mechanical skills; we should be nurturing the personhood and cultivating the minds and manners of individuals, and this is not something that can be done by and completed in formal schooling alone. But given the ubiquity of the phrase and the popularity of the idea, it becomes important to examine and argue for a defensible interpretation of the concept. To make sure, in particular, that the general sense referred to becomes a reality when we put lifelong learning into practice, so that what we are subscribing to is truly worthwhile and educational.

Why should there be, at this time, such particular explicit and widespread concern with lifelong learning? In large part the impetus behind the emphasis on the idea is surely a consequence of various social, in particular economic, arguments. Cynics may no doubt attribute it more to the self-importance of theorists and the self-serving of educationalists. But, whatever the tendency of academics to latch on to some temporarily forgotten idea and run with it until it has turned to cliché, there are some fairly obvious reasons why we should be focusing on lifelong learning: many, perhaps most, individuals today change their job more than once during a lifetime; their circumstances in other respects (personal, social, economic) are equally likely to vary. To put it simply, it is no longer the case (if it ever was) that the body of understanding acquired by the end of formal schooling can possibly hope to see the individual through life.

In addition the so-called explosion in knowledge, the rapidity with which our understanding in certain fields advances, equally quickly renders yesterday's learning obsolete. Development in scientific knowledge is most commonly cited as the example here, but even archeologists or historians can be left behind if they fail to come to grips with new modes of collecting, sifting and analysing data.

That having been said, it is, in our view, possible, and in fact quite common, to overplay this particular point. First, there are clear differences between various disciplines, or types of inquiry, most notably that between those that are in some way necessarily progressively developmental and those that are not, such that it barely makes sense to talk of an explosion of knowledge or even (which is very different) a deeper understanding in respect of some of them. Science, for example, does build upon and advance on its past in a linear way, so that it both makes sense and is true to remark upon our vastly greater scientific understanding as compared with, say, that of the Greeks, and to point out that there is simply a whole lot more (and for many of us probably a whole lot too much) to be known. But mathematics is in a slightly different case: here our understanding is (we believe) refined and improved as we advance from our past; it is, we may say, a greater understanding. It may also be the case that this greater understanding implies in a literal sense something more to handle and that to rise to the heights of mathematical knowledge now takes longer than at any earlier time in our history. It may be the case, but it is not actually obvious that it is, and it does not seem to be logically necessary that it should be. When we turn to a form of inquiry such as philosophy or the performing arts, talk of an explosion of knowledge seem very inappropriate. Of course,

in a trivial sense there is more knowledge: the historians of philosophy, or painting, or practically anything, have more data or material to sift through. But philosophy should not be defined in terms of the books written on the subject, but rather of the ideas that are its subject matter. In this sense, while some would say our philosophical understanding was greater than Plato's, others would not, and in either case there is absolutely no reason to suppose that it must have taken A.J. Ayer longer than Plato to master the subject, or that the former's task was somehow more demanding than the latter's. (Both claims might be true, of course, but not for the reason advanced!)

The above digression seems to us worth making in order to deflect a rather too glib and misleading tendency to assume that, such is the state of the "knowledge industry" today, the sheer amount of what there is to be known is a sufficient reason for investing time and money into lifelong learning. The claim is generally vastly exaggerated and in any case pushes us down a dangerous path on which we identify education with acquiring knowledge in the sense particularly of information. It is understanding rather than knowledge in that sense that is our goal in education, and while there is in general probably more that is understood today than there was two thousand years ago, and while some subjects at least are considerably more complex and require more subtle understanding than before, it is not at all clear that it makes much sense to claim that the trouble is that it will obviously take a person longer today than two thousand years ago to educate themselves. To become a poet or a philosopher doesn't obviously take more time today than it ever did before. That having been said, and with this corrective in mind, it may of course be acknowledged that, broadly speaking, such facts as the ubiquity of new ideas and information, changing modes of communication, developing understanding, and the sheer extent of activity in some intellectual areas, may make one in some respects outdated in one's understanding in a conventional sense, if one ceases to advance at the end of formal schooling. Furthermore, it is the case, though it is not clear that it is primarily, if at all, for justifiable epistemological reasons, that the formal curriculum is under constant pressure to include more. Thus, the need to develop new understanding, the advances in understanding in some areas, the tendency for new emphases and approaches to be widely disseminated, and increasing demands on schooling (both formal and informal), combine to place the individual (where learning ceases with the completion of formal schooling) at an obvious disadvantage.

This is not only fairly uncontroversially the case, but it is in practice also probably the main reason for the current emphasis on lifelong learning. Pressure, whether direct or indirect, conscious or otherwise, from industry, business and government has led to the orthodoxy that individuals need to continue to learn, to retrain, to retool throughout their lives, if they are to serve their purpose as economic units.

SKILLS

Bearing the argument of the previous section in mind, one can say that during this century there has been a change of emphasis from the idea of specific training and the development of particular skills, through a belief in so-called generic-skill development, to the current focus on lifelong learning. This amounts to a shift from the assumption that

acquiring a trade (whether manual or intellectual) would suffice for life, by way of an assumption that one could learn how to be adaptable, to the assumption that one needs to continually learn new trades or re-learn one's trade (at the same time keeping one's information base up to date).

Thus, at the beginning of the century, the broad assumption was that one learnt enough to be a bricklayer, an accountant, a priest, a classics Don, and that, combined with learning certain social behaviours, attitudes and so forth appropriate to one's condition in life, would see one through. Little would change sufficient to render one's learning out of date. It is worth noting that adult education, which became a serious matter at the end of the last century, does not represent any real departure from this generalisation and is therefore not properly to be seen as the precursor of today's interest in lifelong learning. It was essentially no more than the provision of education to adults who had missed it (or part of it) as children, whether it involved instruction in literacy, handicrafts or whatever.

Perhaps the first major step in this century towards something like a concept of life-long learning in a broader sense came with the widespread adoption of a belief in the possibility of cultivating generic skills such as that of learning how to learn or critical thinking. American psychologists of education seem to have been subconsciously wedded to the idea of generic skills for the longest of times, but it was in the sixties that the idea became more or less a part of progressive educational orthodoxy. Part of the thinking that was common at the time is not to be scorned: this was an ardent desire to replace the view that the learner was a passive receptacle into which the teacher placed information, with a view of the learner as an active agent who needed to be helped to process information and understand; a learner who thought critically about the material in question. And the idea that schools should be concerned primarily to cultivate such general abilities as that of being critical, of being caring, of learning how to learn certainly suggests some belief in education as an on-going business; for presumably the main purpose of focusing on learning how to learn is so that individuals will be free to go on learning for themselves through life. Indeed, much of the broader rhetoric of child-centred education at the time echoed the view that schooling was but a step on a journey that lasted for life and that the individual was a natural being (rather than a passive receptacle) that could and would continue to grow in a favourable environment such as the educative society it was hoped would be.

This is not the place to go into a detailed critique of a body of thinking that might be crudely summarized as: "right idea, false premise, wrong conclusion." But the "false premise" in question is the idea that there is such a thing as a generic skill of learning how to learn (or critical thinking or caring) that can meaningfully be taught to people. Broadly, as has been argued in detail elsewhere (Barrow 1990) there are serious problems in seeing intellectual abilities as skills (at any rate in anything like the same sense as say, discrete, physical skills), and more importantly in the idea of them as generic skills. There is also very often a confusion between tendencies or dispositions on the one hand and abilities or skills on the other: part of what it is to be a critical thinker is to have the inclination and tendency to look at things critically. This inclination, this disposition, is certainly neither an ability nor a skill in any sense, and is, incidentally,

quite compatible with being very bad at actually thinking critically (as anyone who has taught undergraduates probably knows.)

The argument in essence is as follows: the ability to think critically about, say, art is not some monolithic quality, some single indivisible attribute. The ability consists in various dimensions or facets. Secondly, some at least of these facets are clearly not skills such that they can be developed, exercised and trained on analogy with a physical skill (or set of skills) such as serving at tennis or riding a bike. For example, as already noted, the tendency, the disposition to think critically about art is clearly not a skill in this sense, but something to be nurtured by some means or other, as distinct from trained. Thirdly, and for our purposes much more crucially, the ability to think critically about art is one thing, the ability to think critically without qualifiers is quite another. In fact the latter is well nigh incoherent. The point is not that it doesn't make sense to conceive of someone thinking critically without reference to what they are thinking critically about, although this is also true. The main point is that, assuming critical thinking is good critical thinking and involves such things as understanding, being logical, and being clear, then critical thinking about art will be different in form from critical thinking in, say, science, politics, or philosophy. In each case the thinking needs to be logical, clear, and so on, but what constitutes logic, clarity, coherence, etc. "the form they take" are determined by the nature of the discipline or type of inquiry in question. In other words, in order to develop someone's capacity to think critically about art or science, it is logically necessary that they exercise their critical disposition (which may be, though need not be, generic) while studying art or science. The idea of a generic ability such that wherever I go, whatever the subject, even if completely new to me, I can be critical (other than in the different sense of disagreeable or antagonistic) is absurd.

There is still debate revolving round some of these views, but provided that it is understood that we are here only concerned with a partial verdict, we may say that the debate is effectively over. To put the matter in positive terms: the desire to develop individuals, who are both inclined to or have an aptitude for continued learning and critical thinking, and are able to continue learning in a critical fashion, will require developing understanding of both generic points of logic and reasoning, and also disciplined understanding of various types of inquiry and conceptual frameworks.

Thus, on this account, the sixties saw a movement towards the goal of a society of learners (particularly when we consider more specifically political educationalists' views such as those of the deschoolers), but it failed to deliver much, largely because the central ideal that there is some specific way(s) to equip the individual to carry on learning is incoherent (and, it may be added, the practical proposals to turn society into an educational environment were naive and unrealistic).

But while the view that one can learn to learn may have been in various respects confused and misconceived, and while the main impetus towards lifelong learning may be socio-economic, the paradox is that today we have a great opportunity to achieve the aims of those who believed in generic intellectual skills. For educationalists may reasonably argue that it is not the direct utility of learning that should be considered, but the intrinsic value of education, its value to the educated person, and its indirect utility that matters. The forces that have put an emphasis on lifelong learning have

<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