

Lifelong learning policies, paradoxes and possibilities

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Abstract

This paper argues that there are many ways of conceptualising lifelong learning and examines EU and Scottish lifelong learning policies in order to identify their underlying assumptions. Through an analysis of these policies, it is demonstrated that they draw on a number of inter-related fallacies that prioritise lifelong learning mainly in relation to its economic value. Three fallacies are identified: economic success equals eradication of deprivation and exclusion; failure is the fault of the individual; access to education is fair. These fallacies are then deconstructed in order to suggest ways of interrogating their contradictions so that opportunities for more radical educational action can be found.

Key words: (EU and Scottish policy tensions; employability discourse; social inclusion)

Introduction

There are many ways of conceptualising lifelong learning as these two contrasting quotes illustrate:

We should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – ‘learn to be’ (Fauré et al, 1972: vi).

According to one estimate, the mismatches between the supply and demand of labour cost the European Union 100 billion Euro each year. Therefore, more needs to be done to implement lifelong learning. We need to raise the levels of investment in human resources (Van der Pas, 2001: 12).

In the first quote, lifelong learning (LL) is seen as an inherent aspect of democratic life and focused on personal growth and there is an explicit reference to education no longer being 'the privilege of an elite' (Fauré et al, 1972, p.160). In the second (from an EU Commissioner), LL is regarded as an investment in those that do not have the skills required by employers in order to ensure economic development.

What is seen as legitimate in terms of policy and practice, privileges particular interests that embody claims to speak with authority in ways that shut out other possibilities. Ball (1998) suggests that 'policies are both systems of values and symbolic systems ... [so] policies are articulated both to achieve material effects and to manufacture support for those effects' (124). This means that a particular conception of what the problem is and how it is to be solved becomes dominant. So, if the problem facing governments is conceptualised as responding to an economic and employment climate that requires the constant updating of knowledge and skills, then learning for work will be prioritised. This approach leads to a discourse that emphasises the formation of human capital and the economic importance of knowledge. This illustrates that, whilst the commitment to LL brings many opportunities for development and fulfilment, it can also serve to reinforce inequalities by providing a narrow conception of education that does not focus on the whole human being.

How are contemporary policies positioned within these discourses? This paper examines lifelong learning through an analysis of EU and Scottish LL policies. The EU has been chosen in order to identify the overarching framework of policies throughout the member countries and Scotland because, since devolution in 1999, its policy rhetoric has been focused on promoting greater social justice for all its citizens (Mooney & Scott, 2012) in ways that 'reflect the universal values of fairness' (Salmond, 2012).

Method

In order to interrogate how lifelong learning is conceptualised EU and Scottish policy documents from 2000 onwards have been examined using critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is particularly useful because it combines linguistic analysis with social analysis, where the relationship between policy texts, social practices and institutions is seen as a dialectical one:

... that is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned ... It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997: 258).

In terms of the policies examined, this meant identifying how particular issues were framed in terms of the knowledge, values and norms as well as the ideology that informed the documents.

The first step of the analysis was reading and re-reading the policy documents, noting down how lifelong learning was conceptualised and represented. The next stage involved looking at how the issue was framed both through the use of rhetoric and metaphor and also in the ideological work of the texts in representing, relating and identifying particular values (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Habermas (1977) makes the point that 'language is also a medium of domination and social force. It serves to legitimise relations of organised power. Insofar as the legitimisations of power relations ... are not articulated ... language is also ideological' (p 259). This makes the interrogation of policy essential in understanding how social justice is framed and how those in power seek to achieve their ends.

EU lifelong learning policies

After the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2000 education became a key element in the new 'Knowledge Economy' goals of the EU (Lawn & Grek, 2012). The first Commission paper, Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (CEC, 2000), stated that there were 'two equally important aims for lifelong learning: promoting active citizenship and promoting employability'. The paper also argued that 'both employability and active citizenship are dependent on having adequate and up-to-date knowledge and skills to take part in, and make a contribution to, economic and social life' (ibid: 5). Following the Memorandum there was a focus on the development of 'benchmarks' and 'indicators' that would enable the EU to measure and assess progress in LL on a consistent basis across the Member States (Holford, et al, 2008). The indicators, constructed in 2004, included 'spending on human resources' and 'investment in the knowledge-based economy' with the overarching goal of 'becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world ... with more and better jobs and greater social inclusion' (CEC, 2004: 10). However, the difficulty of reaching this goal was acknowledged as 'immense' in the 2005 Report from the Commission (CEC, 2005: 12).

In 2006 the EU issued a Communication entitled *Adult Learning: it is never too late to learn* (CEC, 2006) which emphasised that ‘general levels of competence must increase, both to meet the needs of the labour market and to allow citizens to function well in today’s society’ (p3). It also suggested that ‘not only does adult learning help make adults more efficient workers and better-informed and more active citizens, it also contributes to their personal well being’ (p5). The Commission argued that adult learning led to many benefits including greater employability, reduced welfare expenditure, better civic participation but suggested that it ‘has not always gained the recognition it deserves’ (ibid: 3). Holford and colleagues argue that this paper ‘represents a significant shift in the rhetoric of lifelong learning policy’ (2008: 61) because there is less emphasis on the knowledge economy. However, they also suggest that there was little evidence of a major change in the action that Member Countries were expected to undertake. Moreover, there was little acknowledgement that ‘adults bring something that derives both from their experience of adult life and from their status as citizens to the educational process’ (Jackson, 1995: 187). Instead, the purpose of education and training was generally constructed as increasing ‘the participation in the workforce of young people and extend[ing] that of older people’ (CEC, 2006: 4).

One key method through which the EU influences policy implementation is through the setting and measurement of competences and outcomes (Lawn and Grek 2012) as part of the ‘open method of coordination’ (OMC). Eight key competences for lifelong learning were published in 2007 and it was argued that:

[They] are all considered equally important, because each of them can contribute to a successful life in a knowledge society ... Competence in the fundamental basic skills of language, literacy, numeracy and in ... ICT is an essential foundation for learning, and learning to learn supports all learning activities (DG-EAC, 2007: 3).

However, in the next major document on lifelong learning (CEC, 2010) Member States were asked to collect data on ‘outcomes, drop out rates and on learners’ socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in vocational education and training, higher education and adult education’ (CEC, 2010 p9) thus emphasising participation in formal learning rather than ‘learning to learn’.

This policy embodied the tension in EU policies between its twin aims of ‘edu-

cation ... for productivity, efficiency and competitiveness on the one hand, and education for broader personal development and “social inclusion” on the other’ (Holford & Spolar, 2012: 39), because it also argued that: ‘education and training systems contribute significantly to fostering social cohesion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment in European societies’ (CEC, 2010: 3).

There was a particular emphasis on the social dimension of learning and Member States were asked to give priority to enabling ‘low-skilled, unemployed adults ... to gain a qualification or take their skills a step further ... and broaden the provision of second chance education for young adults’ (CEC, 2010: 8).

Two documents were issued in 2011. The first ‘on a renewed agenda for adult learning’ (CEC, 2011a) identified ‘promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning’ (p5) and ‘enhancing the creativity and innovation of adults and their learning environments’ (p6) as key priority areas. In the second, however, ‘on the role of education and training in the implementation of the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy,’ the Council suggested that education and training had a ‘fundamental role to play in ... equipping citizens with the skills and competences which the European economy and European society need in order to remain competitive and innovative’ (CEC, 2011b: 1).

In this document the main purpose of education and training was seen as:

Strengthening lifelong learning opportunities for all ... is essential, notably by improving the attractiveness and relevance of VET and by increasing the participation in, and the relevance of, adult learning (ibid. 2).

It appears that the tension between the social and economic objectives of the EU remains so far unresolved. It is noteworthy, however, that the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy (CEC, 2011b), which is guiding Europe’s overall response to the challenges of the knowledge economy, has a stronger focus on employment than it does on inclusion.

Scottish policy documents

Despite a rhetorical commitment to ‘fairness’ (Mackie & Tett, 2013) the Scottish policies show a similar focus on international competitiveness but with fewer references to social cohesion. A key policy document, *Life through learning; learning through life*, emphasised the personal effects for those that miss out on learning, as well as the impact on the economy, and suggested that:

In ... Scotland we cannot accept: the opportunity gap between people who achieve their full potential and those that do not; the skills gap between people in work and those who are not ...; the productivity gap between Scotland and the leading economies of the world (Scottish Executive, 2003: 1).

In contrast to this broad view of lifelong learning, however, the six indicators that measured the success of the strategy focused either on young people with low qualifications or on increasing the level of qualifications in the workforce. In addition, the perceived associations between exclusion and anti-social behaviour and the emphasis on a 'flexible and adaptable workforce' (ibid) made it easy to justify the compulsory requirement to participate in vocational training for those that were unemployed.

The stress on economic development was even higher in the Skills for Scotland: a lifelong skills strategy (Scottish Government, 2007) policy, where benefits 'such as social justice, stronger communities and more engaged citizens' (ibid: 10) were expected to flow from economic development rather than the other way around. Throughout this, and subsequent policy documents, reference is made to the requirement to keep Scotland competitive. For example:

A skilled and educated workforce is essential to productivity and sustainable economic growth ... [because] the skill level of the workforce is likely to impact significantly on the effectiveness of capital investment and the ability of employers to adopt innovative work practices (Scottish Government, 2007: 13).

Both innovation and commercialisation are key drivers of productivity and competitiveness, particularly in an increasingly interconnected global economy. (Scottish Government, 2011: 47).

Moreover, work is posited as the remedy and the catalyst for increasing 'equity', 'solidarity' and 'cohesion'. For example:

We will set out plans ... for improved employability and skills services to Scotland's black and minority ethnic communities. (Scottish Government, 2008: 12)

...placing a renewed focus and flexibility around the skills required to accelerate economic recovery and to sustain a growing, successful country with opportunities for all. (Scottish Government, 2010: 9)

Increased equity – through improving opportunities and outcomes – across Scotland has the potential to engage large numbers of people and communities who face disadvantages into the mainstream economy (Scottish Government, 2011: 89).

Such rhetoric, Fairclough (2003) suggests, is part of ‘the neoliberal discourse of economic change ... which demands “adjustments” and “reforms” to enhance “efficiency and adaptability” in order to compete’ (p.100). Moreover, it is clear that if economic development is concentrated on the already highly skilled workforce, then inequality is likely to be exacerbated as changes in employment patterns will lead to differentials in income (see Hudson, 2006). It also means that people are under pressure to constantly update their skills in order to take their place in a competitive workforce that is ‘focussed on the individual fitting into the culture of educational systems, rather than developing different environments to meet individual needs’ (Mosen-Lowe et al, 2009: 473).

Underpinning fallacies

This brief survey of EU and Scottish policies shows that they share a number of underpinning assumptions that need to be challenged if opportunities for more radical action are to be identified. These policies draw on a number of inter-related fallacies that cumulatively give the impression of a commitment to lifelong learning only in relation to its economic value. However, if these fallacies are separated and examined it becomes easier to see how those that are committed to a more inclusive education might challenge them. In order to do this each fallacy is explored.

Fallacy: Economic success equals eradication of deprivation and exclusion

Within the policies outlined inadequate skill levels within the unemployed and unskilled population were seen as the causes of disadvantage, whilst engaging in learning was identified as the solution. This implies that education and training provision must become more responsive to the needs of employers as otherwise they will not meet the needs of the economy. However, the link between education, training and economic development is complex and participating in education and training does not necessarily drive prosperity for all. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have shown a strong connection between low levels of inequality in a society and positive educational outcomes, and the OECD (2013) has demonstrated that inequality in skills is strongly associated with inequality in income. In addition, if education is to be effective for economic development, it is crucially dependent on complementary inputs from business

and government. These inputs include new investment, new methods of production, new technologies, new managerial approaches, relationships that are based on trust, and sufficient customers.

Equating participation in learning with economic success also ignores the sharpening polarisation in income and wealth that can lead to a fundamental split in societies. When paid work is seen as the best way of averting social exclusion and people are treated only in relation to their potential contribution to the market economy, a value is placed on each individual only according to that contribution. This could result in a system that deems some people to be 'costly investments with unlikely pay-off', as Darville (2011: 167) argues happened in Canada. In these ways, social exclusion is intensified rather than reduced.

A final issue is the impact of globalisation that has been regarded as reducing the nation state's powers, and so there is little opportunity to intervene except through promoting education and training as a source of sustainable competition (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). This leads to the assumption that governments have no choice but to introduce policies to 'up skill' their workforce. Such a view forgets that skills are not neutral but are socially constructed by, for example, trade unions negotiating higher pay for those jobs that are held predominantly by male members or employers offering good quality education and training only to their permanent, highly paid employees (Riddell & Tett, 2006).

Fallacy: Failure is the fault of the individual

This fallacy is intimately related to the preceding one. If the market is perceived as fair and equal, then failure to succeed in a market structure cannot be the fault of the system, but rather is rooted in the failings of the individual to engage appropriately. Within the policy frameworks offered for LL, issues such as non-participation, educational under-achievement, lack of knowledge of the range of opportunities, are not perceived as structural failures but rather issues of individual attitude or ability. However, as Jonker (2005, 123) notes, 'schooling can ... saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail. Schooling, in other words, is part of the complex process of shaping and reshaping the self'. So many adults do not participate, not because of low motivation but because of powerful constraints that arise from cultural and social-class divisions. School creates sharp divisions in society, by conditioning children to accept different expectations and status patterns according to their academic 'success' or 'failure'. Through the use of imposed standards and selection, the education system traditionally rejects large numbers of the population that

may subsequently consider themselves as educational failures (Crowther and Tett, 2011). It is hardly surprising that people do not want to engage in a process that is portrayed as 'learn or else' rather than a contribution to human flourishing (Biesta, 2006).

In many ways lifelong learning is regarded as a 'moral obligation and social constraint' (Cofield, 1999: 488) by the state and employers, and legitimates the shifting of the burden of responsibility for education, training and employment on to the individual. At the same time, the term 'employability' also hides the tensions between training workers to meet the short-term needs of employers and the preparation for frequent changes of job for which general education may be more useful. In addition, 'the identification of personal merit with economic success, productivity, consumerism, competition, salesmanship, deception and egocentrism are examples of capitalist values, beliefs and modes of behaviour capable of penetrating all spheres of social life' (Moutsios, 2010: 136).

If it is the structure of society that creates inequalities, then why should individuals participate in a system in which they know they start at a disadvantage? It is insufficient simply to recognise inequality and strive for greater inclusion; rather we need to look at the causes of that inequality. Moreover, if we regard education as being about responding to individual need, then no attention is paid to the ways in which these 'needs' are politically constructed and understood (Crowther et al, 2010). By personalising the characteristics, such as a lack of basic skills, that justify employers and others treating people differently, LL encourages fragmentation and individual solutions.

The fallacy that individual failings lie at the heart of either educational failure or economic success creates a convenient scapegoat for structural inequality justified through the workings of the market. This means that LL becomes one more way of legitimating existing inequalities. However, 'the relationship between education and work is dialectical, composed of a perpetual tension between two dynamics, the imperatives of capital and those of democracy in all its forms' (Carnoy and Levin 1985: 4). For too long the economic has dominated the democratic and so a struggle lies ahead for those who wish to redress the imbalance.

Fallacy: access to education is fair
Brine (2006) has pointed out that the discourse of the EU is premised on a two-

track approach to the knowledge rich, who are entitled to investment, and the knowledge poor that have their learning needs identified by others. She further suggests that this leads to an 'individualised and pathologised learner that is simultaneously constructed as "at risk" and "the risk"' (ibid: 656). This discourse also pervades policy documents from Scotland, and overall it suggests that the state's role is to facilitate the active citizen who should be engaged in securing their own welfare (Holford et al, 2008). EU and Scottish policies also suggest that access to education is fair because it is the individual that has failed to engage in it. However, the education and training that is available to the most disadvantaged is the least well funded and accessible. For example, only 24.72% of those accepted to university in the UK were from the lowest social classes (Reay, et al, 2010) but this is the sector with the highest investment per student. Conversely, adult literacies education lies at the other end of the investment structure and in addition this provision is highly vulnerable to cuts (Tett, 2014).

Another way in which access to education is unfair is because those who make decisions about the opportunities that are available are drawn from a narrow group. One effect of this class, gender and 'race' imbalance is that facilities that could increase access for everyone, such as family-friendly services, or opportunities that are geographically and culturally accessible, are seldom prioritised. Moreover, privileging vocational and work-based training has tended to benefit men more than women, partly because of women's predominance in part-time work where the majority are responsible for paying their own fees (Aldridge & Hughes, 2012).

In addition, an emphasis on new technologies as a way of advancing learning opportunities risks exacerbating divisions, resulting in a society divided between the information-rich and the information-poor (Schuller & Watson, 2009). The classed, gendered and 'raced' nature of participation in education and training is often disregarded and instead 'equal opportunities' policies based on a meritocratic model are implemented. This model ignores the process whereby opportunities are defined, interpreted and applied by those already in positions of power, which means that LL becomes one more way of reinforcing the status quo. Education is not neutral and if people are treated only in relation to their potential contribution to the economy, then a market value is attached to each individual according to that contribution. Rather than education becoming an individual and social force for emancipation, it becomes instead an 'investment' on the part of employers and governments.

Conclusion

I have suggested that, whilst lifelong learning policies present a powerful policy steer that is mainly focused on improving individuals' employability skills, the potential exists to interpret the policies more radically. This is because the contradictions within policies have the potential to reveal the spaces that are available for action and so can challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that education must become more responsive only to the needs of employers. Knowledge, skills, understanding, curiosity and wisdom cannot be kept in separate boxes, depending simply on who is paying for or providing them. This means that, although much of the funding that is tied to lifelong learning policy implementation is linked to programmes that focus on narrow skills that are expected to increase people's employability, there are still spaces for action.

When people are excluded from participation in decision-making, as well as access to employment and material resources, then individual action that will change their circumstances can feel as if it is almost impossible. Working together on local issues can, however, lead to the development of a political culture that focuses on the fundamentally unequal nature of society rather than people's individual deficits. This more radical approach to education will involve learning and development that builds on experience and emphasises the wealth of people's knowledge, rather than their deficits, and is grounded in their life situations. Using knowledge in this way can also enable the development of a curriculum that emphasises the critical understanding of the social, political and economic factors that shape experience, using a 'problematizing' approach (Freire, 1972).

The challenge for us is to capture the positive belief in the power of learning and in the potential of all people that comes from engaging in more democratic decision-making about what is important knowledge. Doing this is risky because it requires courage and spirited conviction for people to learn and educate against the view that some people and some kinds of knowledge are worth more than others, but the other side of risk is hope. Engaging with others in mutual learning is both a source for, and potential outcome of, hope and is closely bound up with the willingness to experiment, to make choices, to be adventurous. This type of education moves away from inequitable, individualised, deficit models of learning and brings about change in understanding both self and society. As William Butler Yeats suggests: 'Education is not filling a pail, but lighting a fire' and this fire is able to illuminate the way ahead.

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