Rediscovering the learning continuum: renewing education for democracy

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This conference launches the new generation of EU action programmes in the fields of education, training and youth, which together aim to support, on the one hand, making lifelong learning a reality and, on the other hand, active and democratic participation at all levels of community life. This contribution considers how the rediscovery of the learning continuum and its implications for learning throughout life can set the course for a renewal of education for democracy in Europe.

The learning continuum

The conceptual distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning first inserted themselves into high level policy discussion as a consequence of their inclusion in the Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning[2] and the subsequent Commission Communication on Lifelong Learning.[3] These terms (as defined in the box below) caught the policy and practice imagination and have since been consistently applied across a range of objectives and action frameworks that have developed in the context of the Lisbon Strategy for Education and Training 2010.

Formal learning
Learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

Non-formal learning
Learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

Informal learning
Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random).

Glossary, Lifelong Learning Communication, 2001, drawing on the Lifelong Learning Memorandum, 2000

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[2] European Commission *A memorandum on lifelong learning,* Commission Staff Working Paper, SEC(2000)1832, Brussels, 21.11.2000
[3] Communication from the Commission *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality,* COM(2001)678 final, Brussels, 21.11.2001

There is nothing new about these distinctions for educational scientists and for policy-makers and practitioners working in specific sectors and settings, not least in what is often still called 'development education', that is, teaching and learning in Third and Fourth World contexts. Non-formal and informal learning provision and methods are effectively situational imperatives in countries and regions that are frequently isolated, have poorly developed communication and transport infrastructures, do not benefit from coherent public services networks and are, above all, economically weak with high levels of poverty and deprivation. In these parts of the world, establishing the kinds of comprehensive formal education and training systems that exist in Europe and similarly affluent world regions remains difficult to achieve and arguably ineffective. In order to provide greater learning opportunities for the population as a whole, different *and* culturally appropriate concepts and practices are essential – and in this context, non-formal and informal learning have taken on innovative and empowering role and purpose. It is important to recognise this heritage and to benefit from the experience and expertise of development educationalists, as European educational theory and practice rediscovers the potential of the continuum of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Common elements in existing definitions of non-formal learning
- purposive learning
- diverse contexts
- different and lighter organisation of provision and delivery
- alternative/complementary teaching and learning styles
- less developed recognition of outcomes and quality

Essential features of non-formal learning
- balanced co-existence and interaction between cognitive, affective and practical dimensions of learning
- linking individual and social learning, partnership-oriented solidary and symmetrical teaching/learning relations
- participatory and learner-centred
- holistic and process-oriented
- close to real life concerns, experiential and oriented to learning by doing, using intercultural exchanges and encounters as learning devices
- voluntary and (ideally) open-access
- aims above all to convey and practice the values and skills of democratic life

Non-formal teaching/training and learning methods
- communication-based methods: interaction, dialogue, mediation
- activity-based methods: experience, practice, experimentation
- socially-focussed methods: partnership, teamwork, networking
- self-directed methods: creativity, discovery, responsibility

Source: Chisholm, L. in *Council of Europe Symposium on Non-Formal Education: Report,* Directorate of Youth and Sport, Strasbourg, 2001; reproduced in Chisholm et al.: 2006 [see footnote 5]

The key features of non-formal learning are summarised above. It was probably inevitable that in the first phase of discussion and debate following the launch of European-level policy initiatives on lifelong learning the conceptual and practical distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning were treated as if they were discrete and mutually exclusive categories of structures and processes. Some 150 years after the development of modern education and training systems, it takes conscious effort to visualise learning that does not take place in 'school-like' settings, in which teachers or trainers do not necessarily adopt a directive and defining role in relation to purpose, content, method and outcome, and to appreciate how other kinds of learning might be recognised and validated in their own terms.

The confluence of the institutionalised legitimacy of modern education and training systems and the experiences of generations of people for whom these 'formal' systems are part of everyone's childhood and youth life erects boundaries that colour and constrain the ways we both think and act in relation to teaching/training and learning. In addition, the terms 'non-formal' and 'informal' are understood and applied rather differently in different parts of Europe, both culturally and educationally, which continues to generate misunderstanding between specialists from different languages and traditions. In some European countries, considerable resistance exists amongst policymakers and in public discourse to these terms, which can resonate with connotations of ideological manipulation under totalitarian regimes or which are seen to undermine the value and status of education as this has developed in Graeco-European cultural tradition and its humanist philosophies.

However, these three forms of learning are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive: they comprise aggregated positions along a multi-dimensional continuum between informality and formality.[4] Any specific educational exemplar can be analysed along a series of criteria or features of the organisation and shaping of teaching and learning purposes, relations, processes and outcomes.[5] In some respects, an exemplar may display highly formal elements (such as taking place in a university setting), yet in other ways correspond more closely to non-formal pedagogy (in using theatrical metaphor as a didactic device) and at the same time represent informality (via incidental learning by participation in student self-governance). This implies that all teaching/training-learning situations are structured across multiple dimensions between formality, non-formality and informality. Each requires close analysis to understand their educational significance for individuals, communities and societies. The series of questions listed overleaf indicate significant dimensions of differentiation that such analyses would take into account.

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[4] As cogently argued in Colley, H., Hodkinson, P. and Malcolm, J. (2003) *Informality and formality in learning*, Report for the Learning and Skills Research Centre, London (http://www.LSRC.ac.uk).
[5] For an extended and grounded account, see: Chisholm, L. et al. (2006) *At the end is the beginning: training the trainers in the youth field,* ATTE Vol. 2, Council of Europe Publications: Strasbourg (also available at: http://www.training-youth.net/INTEGRATION/TY/TCourses/olc_atte/atte_course_pub_vol2.html). See also: Chisholm, L. et al. (2005) *Trading Up: potential and performance in non-formal learning*, Council of Europe Publications: Strasbourg.

Criterion clusters for locating teaching/training and learning sites along the learning continuum

Process

Is this planned/structured or organic/evolving learning?

Is this explicit or tacit learning?

Is this compartmentalised or integrated/holistic learning?

Is this individual or collective/collaborative learning?

Are learning outcomes measured or not (and possibly non-measurable)?

Is this teacher/trainer-controlled or learner-centred/negotiated learning?

Location and setting

Is this an explicitly-labelled educational activity or not?

Does this take place in an educational setting or in the community?

Is learning the main and explicit purpose for all involved or not?

Is learning part of a recognised course or not?

Is the learning timeframe fixed/limited or open-ended?

Purposes

Is learning explicitly assessed and accredited or not?

Is assessment of learning summative or formative?

Are learning outcomes transferable/generalisable to other contexts?

Are learning objectives and outcomes externally determined or not?

Does the learning serve the needs of dominant or marginalised groups?

Is access based on explicit criteria or not?

Does the learning preserve the status quo or foster resistance/empowerment?

Do agents of authority mediate the learning or is this a case of learner democracy?

Content

Is the professional/social status of the knowledge to be learned high or low?

Is the knowledge to be acquired prepositional or practical in nature?

Is the learning seen as purely cognitive or more 'embodied'/multidimensional?

Source: Chisholm et al.: 2006: Ch. 1, drawing on Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm: 2003 [see footnotes 4 and 5]

The term 'lifewide learning' was also introduced into wider public debate through Commission policy documents on lifelong learning.[6] In the interim, it has often been mistakenly interpreted as another way of denoting the formal/non-formal/formal continuum of learning. However, 'lifewide' actually refers to learning that takes place across different life-spheres – that is, for example, looking at the workplace as a learning environment in conjunction with family life as an opportunity for competence development. These life-contexts obviously provide learning sites that are predominantly non-formal and informal in nature, but features of formality may equally be present in some of these, especially in workplace learning settings but also in organised youth activities. How can these different spheres of life and the intersections between them be used more positively for learning purposes?

Adult, youth and community education but no less some varieties of workplace learning – as sectors of provision, in relation to their philosophical and political heritages, as pedagogic practice – call on a history 'at the margins' of modern education and training systems. This suggests that their accumulated collective intelligence hold rich resources for developing our theoretical understanding of non-formal and informal learning. Educational practice in these sectors is well accustomed – perforce, in many cases – to working constructively with many different facets of learning activities, experiences and settings, few of which are fully institutionalised and integrated into mainstream formal education and training provision. Such accumulated expertise – itself typically acquired in non-formal and informal ways – can offer much as a source of innovation to educational practice at the more formal end of the learning continuum.

Education for democracy

The phrase 'education for democracy' was the title[7] of a characteristic collection of essays by radical educationalists writing in 1960s and 1970s western Europe and the Americas. It was the era of the 'de-schooling' movement, which took up the progressive education agenda of early 20th modernity and its alternative visions and practices of teaching/training and learning for children and young people. The de-schoolers argued that first modernity's formal education – that is, 'schooling' – had become an expression of institutionalised alienation: Schools instrumentalise human potential for economic and political purposes, and formal pedagogies constrain and deform human capacity. Formal education systems (vocational training systems did not come under similar scrutiny, an interesting oversight) operate on the principle of producing failure by means of repeated rounds of selection and allocation, using normative assessment criteria to do so and referring to legitimated canons of information, knowledge and competence. In so doing, formal schooling reproduces economy and culture together with an accommodating citizenry. This is not education *for* democracy, that is, an education for empowerment that fosters the formation of an active citizenry capable of constructing and reconstructing economic and cultural communities.

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[6] The 2001 Lifelong Learning Communication situates lifewide learning as a dimension of lifelong learning, but it is analytically more useful to regard it as a separate, crosscutting dimension of sites of teaching/training and learning. It is possible to conceptualise education and training practices as lifewide (that is, taking place in different spheres of life) without necessarily imagining that intentional learning would continue throughout life. This would have been the typical experience of the bulk of the population in pre-industrial Europe, with a large proportion learning mainly informally in the family and in everyday life and a significant minority learning not only informally 'but also non-formally as apprentices of many different kinds.

[7] Rubinstein, D. (ed.) (1971) *Education for Democracy,* Penguin: Harmondworth **[check reference]**

Radical educationalists thus proposed and experimented with alternative ways of structuring and supporting learning, all of which were grounded in situating education in contexts of integration, openness and life-relevance, and in placing learners and their personal development at the centre of educational concern. In other words, this school of thought [sic] switched the focus towards the non-formal and informal stretches of the learning continuum. Demanding and choosing alternatives to standard schooling provision have become increasingly popular in the forty years that have followed: parental choice thrives in today's Europe, and where choice is restricted and regulated, parents are vociferous and inventive in overcoming the obstacles. However, most parents want to choose alternative schools, not alternatives to schools. Democracy here resides more in the opportunity to choose, less in contesting schooling as a modality of education for democracy.

The past forty years of policy and practice bear witness to the routinisation of innovation, to the institutionalisation of alternatives: formal education and training options have proliferated, both within and alongside mainstream national systems, both within the publicly funded sector and as purely private provision. The integration of elements of non-formality and informality is undeniably a core feature of this differentiation process. Long-established options such as Montessori or Steiner schools have always actively used the learning continuum as a varied set of principles and methods within the framework of formal learning settings. But Danish 'production schools' build on integrated and life-relevant learning approaches, American 'magnet schools' wanted to address equality of educational opportunities and to engender engagement with learning by catering to special interests, and in The Netherlands public authorities must provide the funds to establish schools with specific profiles whenever a given level of public demand asserts itself accordingly. At the same time, sites of formal learning in mainstream settings have also changed in the past decades, in some countries and regions more than in others, at some levels of provision more than in others (with the university sector probably remaining the most traditional in most respects). In other words, formal education and training settings have long begun to use elements of non-formal principles and methods in a variety of ways, so that in some respects, policy is catching up with practice.

In retrospect, the fact that critical educational analysis has devoted its attention almost exclusively to formal schooling is striking. On the one hand, first modernity defines children and young people as the subjects and objects of education and training. On the other hand, modern societies have not developed mainstream education and training systems for adults – instead, patchworks of interest-led provision have grown up to address specific needs and demands, with diverse patterns of participation. The extension of humanist and emancipatory educational principles to learning throughout life is unquestionably at the forefront of UNESCO reports (Faure in 1972, Delors in 1996), but these are visionary analyses that seek to open up new vistas of educational purpose and to fill existing gaps in developing human potential. Here, education for democracy means opening up access to learning for personal development as a basic social right or, to take up a 1970s term once more, to opportunities for 'self-actualisation' – which, viewed from the point of view of today's lifelong learning policies, might be understood to mean keeping oneself up-to-date in a rather more reduced and pragmatic sense than that originally intended.

The architecture of lifelong learning

Virtually no coherent theory and little research knowledge on 'age-independent' learning exist. First-level modernity created education and training systems that are fundamentally structured by age and stage (of life, of development), whereas modern educational theories took their cue from theories of child development and specific historical constructions of childhood and youth. Our education and training systems and pedagogies are built on the assumption that it is the young who need to learn and in principle (should) want to learn. This means, firstly, that the concept and practice of andragogy is underdeveloped and largely invisible in many (but not all) parts of Europe. It also leads, secondly, to the assumption that both learning per se and pedagogies must necessarily differ according to the age and stage of the learners. In other words, we provide differently structured learning opportunities for different age-groups as a matter of unquestioned principle, but at the same time do not devote very much research and policy attention to improving our knowledge and practice when the learners are adults (and do not even really know what we mean by the term 'adult' in the first place).

These assumptions need to be examined more closely and critically. There are undoubtedly situations in and purposes for which age-specific kinds of learning opportunities and methods make good educational and social sense, but this is not always or automatically the case, at least not until proven to be so. Quite the reverse: excluding the option of age-independent provision and pedagogy can produce educational and social exclusion for given age-groups and individuals in particular life-stages, by restricting access to learning opportunities and by constraining the potential of intergenerational learning processes. The mid-1990s idea of 'second-chance education' conveys this kind of underlying problematic: it assumes that there was a first chance and that those who did not reach the finishing-line at the first attempt are under-achievers or drop-outs who can try once more to run the same kind of race. The term 'continuous chance education' would be more appropriate, particularly if it were to admit that learning aims and outcomes may differ independently of the age and stage of the learner.

A transformative future lies in breaking down the institutional and cultural barriers between education and training sectors and their associated practices along the learning continuum. In other words, it implies consciously pursuing the idea of 'positive borderlessness' as the core feature of the architecture of lifelong learning. For example, the long-established and rigid divisions between what have traditionally been termed 'adult education' and 'continuing vocational education and training' (CVET) are contra-productive from the point of view of contemporary life-course flows and contingencies. By and large, people do not classify their learning motivations, needs and preferences into separate boxes with the labels 'general' and 'vocational'. Nor do they make sharp distinctions between what is 'education' and what is 'training'. Furthermore, those working on the ground in education and training environments know full well that the labels attached to courses, curricula and qualifications do not necessarily distinguish between these two apparent dichotomies once one looks directly at content and the outcomes. The categories overlap, and they do so for good reason with respect to the relevant application of knowledge and competence across the different activity spheres of people's lives. To take the example of competence development as workplace learning, one of the important features of such settings is that they are potential sites for low-threshold entry into adult learning in general. The general adult education sector does not take this potential into sufficient account, with many researchers and practitioners preferring to

keep their distance on the grounds that the risk of instrumental incorporation is just too great.[8]

Developing an authentic lifelong learning architecture demands direct discursive confrontation with critical challenges for education for democracy under conditions very different from those in which progressive and radical educationalists were writing in the 1960s and 1970s. In first modernity, educational sectors and teaching/learning practices developed largely separately, resulting in increasing institutional and cultural differentiations. The political-professional education and training terrain is still primarily characterised by sector-based arguments for their unique qualities and specificities, and hence for the necessary theoretical and institutional separations between 'specialised communities of practice'. This demands reconsideration on two grounds: firstly, narratives of separation do not sit well with the realities of people's learning lives in second-level modernity. Secondly, barrier-free architectures better suit societies of flows and networks, in which personal, social and professional trajectories – that is: as realised in progression and recognition – are much more differentiated and individualised, at least in terms of their subjective meanings and, in some respects, in view of their objective characteristics.

Lifelong learning: from negative to positive?

When lifelong learning resurfaced into the European policy agenda from the mid-1990s,[9] the rationale was manifestly two-fold: economic restructuring (globalisation, technology) and social exclusion (educational failure and high unemployment). The critique of formal education and training was strong, in many respects following similar lines to those taken up two decades previously, but this time the consequences for Europe's economic well-being took centre-stage. Lifelong learning subsequently became closely identified with adult learning and more precisely with continuing vocational education and training, despite consistent references to social cohesion, active citizenship and personal development in the ensuing policy documents, and despite repeated efforts to underline the importance of early and initial education for laying the foundations for positive learning cultures. In short, critical analysts associate lifelong learning with narrowly instrumental, economistic approaches to education (and many continue to regard vocational education and training with a good deal of reservation on principle). The literature contains recurring reference to the idea of lifelong learning as compulsory, 'forced' education and training, imposed upon individuals by the state and employers, constituting the transfer of public responsibilities to individual, private shoulders – and this, moreover, in a context of continued inequalities of educational and social inequalities.

From the point of view of citizens themselves, the overwhelming majority of adults in all Member States say that they are in favour of lifelong learning – and ever more young Europeans remain in some form of initial education and training for ever longer. At the same time, the majority of adults in the EU are non-participants in any form of organised learning; many of those (of all ages) who do participate do not do so voluntarily or with much interest; and almost everywhere a significant minority of those beyond compulsory school-age are very clear that they have no desire to

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[8] Chisholm, L. and Fennes, H. (eds.) *Competence development as workplace learning,* Innsbruck University Press: Innsbruck, 2007 (forthcoming).
[9] With the publication of the 1996 European Commission White Paper *Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society* and the European Year of Lifelong Learning 1996.

participate in anything they would knowingly define as learning.[10] Without participation, there can be no engagement; and much formal participation is personally and socially disengaged. Nevertheless, it is also the case that when adults do take up learning opportunities, they do so for a *mixture* of personal and professional reasons. They equally avow that in their own view, they learn best in non-formal and informal learning contexts (whether at home, at work or in their leisure-time), and they report a considerable variety of self-directed learning activities.[11]

What future for education for democracy under such circumstances? This is not simply an educational issue, but more pertinently a question of the regeneration of meaningful social participation. Education for democracy in today's sense of the term – education that is inclusive, that empowers, that enables the realisation of active participation in society, economy, culture and polity – can only have a future if people intrinsically want to learn, and this only makes sense for the majority of people if learning is personally and socially rewarding in the broadest sense of the term. In principle, it is possible to understand the meaning of education in second modernity as shifting towards qualities and purposes that resonate with the potential for personal and social emancipation, as the list below suggests.[12]

Education...	
...as personal development	**...as subject-oriented knowledge management**
development-oriented	process-oriented
finite	infinite
linear and cumulative	networked and reflexive
safety-oriented	risk-oriented
concrete knowledge	meta-knowledge
skills and knowledge	competences
certainty	ambivalence
systematic	exemplary
text-oriented and sequential	image-oriented and holistic
first modernity	*second modernity*

[10] See here: Chisholm, L., Larson, A. and Mossoux, A.-F. (2004) *Lifelong Learning: Citizens' views in close-up* Office for Official Publications of the European Communities: Luxembourg. See also: EUROSTAT *Lifelong learning in Europe* Statistics in Brief, Population and Social Conditions 8/2005. The 2003 LLL Eurobarometer records that two-thirds of EU15 citizens aged 15+ had not participated in any form of education and training in the year preceding the survey, with marked polarisations by socio-economic status (education and employment) as well as notable differences between Member States. The LFS ad hoc module confirms these patterns and shows that self-reported adult participation in non-formal and informal learning activities is considerably higher than for formal learning activities. The Lisbon 2010 benchmark objective for adult (25-64) participation in lifelong learning (= statistically recorded education and training) is 12,5%. The 2003 EU25 average reaches 5,1% (ISCED 0-2: 1,4%; ISCED 3-4: 5,2%; ISCED 5-6: 8,5%), with large differences in rates between Member States. **[update to latest figures]**

[11] Sources as in footnote 9.

[12] Source: Bonß, W. (2003) „Bildung" in der (Arbeits-) und „Wissensgesellschaft", S. 11-32 in Thole, W./Lindner, W./Weber, J. (Hrsg.) *Kinder- und Jugendarbeit als Bildungsprojekt* Leske & Budrich: Opladen, trans. LC.

Innovative educational practice that puts such qualities into action require more complex combinations of learning features drawn from across the learning continuum. In turn, this means not only recognising the independent value of non-formal and informal learning but more pertinently, making better use of their advantages in combination with those of formal learning. Using the learning continuum to the full offers complementarities rather than oppositions, it opens up access and motivation for people of all ages and circumstances, and it integrates the concept of lifewide learning more satisfactorily.

Making lifelong learning a reality under the terms of first modernity is neither achievable for nor attractive to the majority of citizens: this is a practical assessment and not a political statement. What we now need is more than a purely adaptive, reactive response to re-working the institutionalisations and categorisations of first-level modernity. Rather, established educational theory and practice across the continuum needs to engage in a critically reflective reconstruction of the highly differentiated cultural and social needs and demands of second-level modernity. This is by no means an argument against cooperation and synergy across the education and training terrain as a whole, but much rather an argument in favour of educational transformation over against accommodation. The new generation of European action programmes offers a wealth of concrete opportunities at all levels and in all sectors to address these challenges constructively. These opportunities should be used to the full by all those working in education, training and youth research and practice, so that future policy, too, can learn from the results.

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