

Three perspectives on ‘lifelong learning’

This year, we make an explicit connection between ‘lifelong guidance’ and ‘lifelong learning’ because they are linked in policy and practice. In this mini-lecture, I will introduce the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ by presenting a comprehensive definition that is based on the adoption of three distinct perspectives. Doing so provides us with a theoretical framework which we can use to come to an understanding of the various ways that the concept is used in society.

‘Lifelong learning’ is a somewhat elastic concept. In everyday language use, it refers to *the learning that takes place throughout life*, from the time we are born until our death. About 50 years ago, it was established as a concept in education discourse. At that time, education was primarily viewed as being concerned with children’s development and was focused on classroom education. The concept of ‘lifelong learning’ sheds light on the fact that: (1) learning is an ongoing process at *every age* of the person; and (2) learning takes place in *every context*, not just within the confines of the school classroom. So based on this, a general definition of the concept ‘lifelong learning’ is *a learning process which takes place continually, throughout the duration of a person’s life, and such learning occurs in every context where the person may find themselves*.

This basic definition is in agreement with several different perspectives on lifelong learning. In this lecture, I will examine ‘lifelong learning’ from three overarching perspectives. These perspectives are the following: (1) lifelong learning as policy; (2) theories of learning throughout life; and (3) the structure of education systems. Although these areas are intertwined, they are distinct enough from each other to allow us to examine the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ from different viewpoints.

The first perspective, lifelong learning as policy, is concerned with how *political intentions* are expressed in policy and how the significance of lifelong learning has changed over time. We note that a holistic view of human beings, professional life, and citizenship has informed our society during the past 50 years. However, notwithstanding this, researchers have reported that a shift has taken place from a humanistic approach, where the individual as a human being and citizen is at the core of policy, to a capitalist approach, where the individual is primarily seen as a source of labour.

The second perspective, theories of learning throughout life (i.e., lifelong learning as theory) is concerned with examining theories about human learning processes, with focus on adult learning. There are several well-known authors in this field. One pioneer in this area is Peter Jarvis, who has presented a holistic theory which is based on a fundamentally existential point of view. His theory can be understood as a *philosophy of education* which awards the individual’s learning a central position. Jarvis argues that this must be our starting point if we are to properly understand what learning is about. At the same time, the theory indicates that learning takes place continually in relation to a situation-bound context. Lifelong learning, according to Peter Jarvis’s theory, is thus based on an understanding of the individual’s internal development, and the interaction between the individual and her environment.

The third perspective, the structure of education systems, is concerned with interrogating the *practical arrangements* whereby different institutions provide educational content. It is common to encounter a *linear model* for how education should be provided; a model where one level can be seen as preparation for entry into the next level. An education system might be instantiated by a national education system within a particular country but it may also consist of education systems that have been developed under the aegis of different organizations. Currently, we find an ongoing debate in

Europe about establishing a system whereby an adult's prior learning experiences are recognised, in an effort to acknowledge the learning which takes place in every person's life, but may not be formally documented in the form of grade scores or degree certificates.

If we compare these three different perspectives, then we recognise that 'lifelong learning' is assigned somewhat different significance in each perspective. At the same time, it should be noted that there exists a degree of consensus between these three perspectives, so that they are not entirely in contrast or opposition to one another. An important similarity that we should take note of is that they are all necessary for building a democratic society.

The multiple interpretations associated with the concept of 'lifelong learning' may, however, give rise to some confusion. This should be taken into account since different interpretations will direct focus on different areas. For example, if 'lifelong learning' is equated with an education system, instead of a philosophy of education, then this approach places focus on the institution instead of the individual's learning. In summary, the three perspectives that I have presented here, (1) lifelong learning as policy; (2) theories of learning throughout life; and (3) the structure of education systems enable us to appreciate how the concept is used in different contexts.

In this summer school, we will continue to discuss how 'lifelong learning' and 'lifelong guidance' are connected to each other by exploiting the insights that adopting different perspectives brings to us.

Thank you!

Cecilia Bjursell, PhD, Professor of Education at the School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, and Director for the National Centre for Lifelong Learning (ENCELL), Sweden.