# Considering Learning Futures: Educating Educators for Tomorrow

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## Abstract

The concept of Learning Futures has far-reaching implications for lifelong learning as a field of practice. In particular, the challenges of Learning Futures underscore the need for professional educators to update their knowledge and skills so that they may be better equipped for their pivotal role in their students' learning and development.

This paper considers the problem of educating educators about Learning Futures. It focuses on the design, development and implementation of a postgraduate course in Learning Futures. Considering the challenges posed by globalisation, technological evolution and forces of change, and building upon fundamental work in the area of Learning Futures, this paper examines the strategies used in teaching and learning about theories for Learning Futures. In particular, the paper highlights strategies used to operationalise a variety of learning theories within a single course in order to provide participants with situated experience with these approaches and identifies key questions which indicate shortcomings in the course.

## Introduction

Learning Futures is a perspective on education and learning which is concerned with preparing individuals and groups to respond to the challenge of life in contemporary global society (Gouthro, 2002). It is about responding to change. Now, more than ever before, individuals are affected by increasingly rapid change in the form of migration (Osler & Starkey, 2003), career and job shifts, reorganisation of corporations (Gouthro, 2002), the rise and fall of governments, expansion and restructuring of urban areas, changes in societal mores and a host of other subtle adjustments in families, local communities and larger institutions (Starkey, 2002). These changes are taking place on a scale of hours and days, not years or decades.

While these changes can be beneficial, there is a significant downside to rapid continuous change (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004). The increased rate of change undermines stability. Social institutions which have provided structure and support are eroding. Individuals cannot depend on the fact that their jobs, the societies in which they live, the organisations to which they belong or the communities in which they participate will remain stable in their lifetimes. There is also growing concern about the imbalances between participants and non-participants in global economic, political and social processes.

## Posing the Problem

In this context of a rapidly changing global society, learning, and more particularly *lifelong learning*, takes on special significance:

> The emerging "global village", where events in places we have barely heard of quickly disrupt our daily lives, the dizzying rate of change, and the exponential growth of knowledge all generate nearly overwhelming needs to learn just to survive. Indeed, it might well be said that learning is an increasing *occupation* for us all; for in every aspect of our life and work, to stay abreast of events and to keep our skills up to the "state of the art" requires more and more of our time and energy….But perhaps most of all, the future learning society represents a personal challenge for millions of adults who find learning is no longer "for kids" but a central lifelong task essential for personal development and career success. (Kolb, 1984, pp. 3-4; *emphasis in original*)

Education offers a potential response to the need for lifelong learning. Educators are charged with delivering educational programs which provide opportunities for the development of knowledge and skills applicable in contemporary workplaces and society in general. The importance of education as a response to these challenges cannot be overstated:

> As the foundation and essential driving force of economic, social and human development, education is at the heart of the change that is dramatically affecting our world in the areas of science, technology, economics, and culture. It is the reason behind social change and scientific progress, and in its turn, it is subjected to the results of progress that it itself has engendered, both with regard to content as well as methods and established aims. (Saada, 2000, p. 115)

However, there are serious questions about the ability of education, as a field of practice, to respond to these needs. Traditional venues for learning such as schools, colleges and universities are often ill-equipped to respond to rapid change. Moreover, non-traditional venues for learning such as workplaces and training centres have struggled for recognition as legitimate educational institutions (Saada, 2000). Continual learning for democratic citizenship is being usurped by corporate and commercial interests (Gouthro, 2002). The educators themselves are challenged: first, to equip themselves to participate in technologically driven global societies; second, to integrate their newly acquired knowledge and skills into their educational practice in order to prepare today's learners for the challenges of a complex and ever changing society (Birzea, 2000; Gouthro, 2002). Together these issues highlight the challenge posed to educators by Learning Futures.

The emergent problem is about responding and adapting to change. How can education respond to the challenge of Learning Futures? Specifically, how can we prepare educators not only for participation in contemporary global society but also for professional activity (i.e., teaching and learning) which cultivates these abilities in their learners?

This paper examines a response to this challenge in the form of one postgraduate course, Theories for Learning Futures. The approach to this examination is a form of heuristic evaluation which seeks to reflect upon the experience of the course participants to identify and explicate the meaning that is contained within those experiences (Padilla, 1991). The examination is based on a combination of three sets

of key considerations: the historical background of Learning Futures provided by a study of globalisation; the theoretical foundations of Learning Futures provided by the lifelong learning community; and the key issues in Learning Futures as identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The paper briefly describes the strategies used to operationalise a set of learning theories which have been identified as appropriate approaches for futures-oriented lifelong learning (Zukas & Malcolm, 2002). The discussion includes the identification of both positive outcomes of the course which exemplify the quality of this response to the challenge at hand and also questions which inform the further development of the course.

## Context and Situation

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a regional Australian university which provides both on-campus and internationally recognised distance education programs to approximately 20,000 students. According to statistics provided by USQ's administration, distance students outnumber on-campus students by more than three to one and students are located in over 100 countries around the world. This profile indicates a rich mix of local, non-local domestic and international students in the university community.

In particular, USQ's wholly online courses in education have attracted a very diverse group of students. Nearly all are professional educators situated in a range of contexts across all sectors of education and in a variety of roles. Over 20% are non-Australians located outside Australia and an increasing number of those are not living in their country of origin. Many more are Australians living abroad. While learners in these programs are culturally diverse and geographically dispersed, they are connected by the technological and social infrastructure of the online learning system (Kehrwald, Reushle, Redmond, Cleary, Albion & Maroulis, 2005). In short, these students are living the challenge of Learning Futures: They are seeking to develop personal and professional skills and abilities which allow them to respond to the daily challenges associated with living and working in global communities which cross the boundaries of culture, language and nationality.

Because the USQ online programs cater to such a diverse group of learners, participants in those programs are uniquely placed to respond to the challenge of Learning Futures. These programs afford the opportunity for learners to study the effects of globalisation and technological change on education as part of a global cohort of like-minded learners in a technology mediated environment. Moreover, they allow the principles of lifelong learning which underpin Learning Futures to be operationalised in the ongoing development of professional educators as citizens of global communities.

## An Approach to Learning Futures: Three Frameworks

As noted above, the examination of Theories for Learning Futures is informed by a combination of three frameworks:

- the historical progression of globalisation and the resulting needs for lifelong learning;
- the pedagogical foundations provided by the lifelong learning community; and

- educational imperatives identified by UNESCO which inform the application of appropriate pedagogies for Learning Futures.

## *History: Globalisation and Learning Futures*

Learning Futures sits against the backdrop of globalisation as a driving force of change. The breakneck pace of technological development, including advances in computing and communications technology, has effectively shrunk the world, making economic, political and social action on a global scale not only possible but also practical and convenient (Castells, 1996, 1998).

This has had a profound effect on institutions such as community, government and society. Notions of community and society as static concepts have been called into question (Osler & Starkey, 2003). Communities are no longer defined by physical proximity but by common beliefs and goals (Anderson, 1998). Likewise, whole societies which have relied on the stability provided by static and homogeneous populations, history, tradition and ritual have been confronted by a rising tide of change. Culture crossing has become the norm. National boundaries have become blurred. Continual migration and the rise of heterogeneous, cosmopolitan societies have made citizenship a complex issue (Gouthro, 2002; Osler & Starkey, 2003; Starkey, 2002). Meanwhile, there has been a rise in global organisations, such as multinational corporations, which compete in the global marketplace. These organisations dominate the global economy, trading knowledge as their most valuable commodity (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004).

These changes have also affected individuals. Globalisation has complicated the "pursuit of the good life" (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004). Lifelong employment in a stable environment has become increasingly rare. Also, as distinctions among local, national and international communities blur, the structures of social support have eroded, leaving individuals responsible for their own long-term welfare. This has resulted in increased competition among individuals. However, it has also given individuals greater freedom to pursue their own interests. In order to remain competitive in volatile labour markets, individuals have had to come to terms with a lack of economic and social stability as they have been cast in the role of human capital as part of the global knowledge economy.

These forces of change highlight a group of particular needs which help us understand the relationship between globalisation and Learning Futures and highlight also the motives for lifelong learning:

- the need for individuals to participate as active and informed citizens in the global societies (Birzea, 2000; Osler & Starkey, 2003; Starkey, 2002);
- the need for individuals to participate in the global knowledge economy (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004); and
- the need for individuals to act as functioning professionals in ever changing work environments (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004; Hard, 2000).

These needs not only underscore the importance of lifelong learning but also provide the foundation for a study of Learning Futures within which these needs are explicitly addressed.

## *Theoretical foundations from lifelong learning*

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the key questions posed by the challenge of Learning Futures and responding to change relate to learning, namely: (a) What outcomes do we hope to achieve in our learning programs to meet these needs? (b) What pedagogical approaches should be use to achieve these outcomes? Emergent notions of best practice from the field of lifelong learning provide a response to both of these questions.

### Learning outcomes

In 1996, UNESCO outlined some of the key issues in Learning Futures, identifying four pillars of education:

- *Learning to know* implies 'learning how to learn' by developing one's concentration, memory skills and ability to think. This also includes [the] development of self awareness and the ability to think more deeply and critically.
- *Learning to do* is closely associated with the issue of occupational training and the needs identified above. It addresses the needs of industry for workers with skills and abilities applicable in the workplace.
- *Learning to live together* relates to the notion of cosmopolitan global citizenship discussed above. This implies learning to deal with diversity and change while maintaining the humanistic and democratic ideas of freedom, equality and tolerance.
- *Learning to be* underscores a developmental view of education. The aim of development is the complete holistic fulfillment of a person, in all the richness of her personality, the complexity of her forms of expression and her various commitments – as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and producer. (Delors, 1996)

These four pillars identify desired outcomes of the education process. These outcomes are supported by the growing body of research in lifelong learning which links outcomes to learning processes and learner attributes. In particular, Brookfield (2000) and Goodyear (2002) identify processes and outcomes which characterise successful learning in adult or higher education programs. These include:

- *Academic learning,* which is a traditional view of learning of conceptual and declarative knowledge.
- *The development of generic competence,* which includes general skills necessary for individuals to participate in the contemporary knowledge economies and knowledge societies. These include numeracy, various literacies, communication, foreign language, collaboration, technology skills and leadership, among others (Goodyear, 2002).
- *Dialectical thinking,* which allows learners to move back and forth between subjective and objective frames of reference. It is the mechanism by which learners seek resolution to the conflicts that they experience by stepping outside purely subjective thinking (Brookfield, 2000).
- *Practical logic,* which emphasises learners' ability to think and reason contextually and to respond to the particulars of a given situation. This allows learners to make the transition from formulaic thinking to responsive thinking because it establishes the 'rightness' of a course of action as related to the context in which the action is situated.

- *Knowing how we know,* which involves learners becoming aware of personal learning styles and being able to adjust these according to the situation.
- *The development of critical being and reflexivity,* which is related to an individual's ability continually to question his/her own world and then to identify the assumptions and tacit conditions which lie within our taken-for-granted realities. Barnett (cited in Goodyear, 2002) argues that these skills are necessary to deal with a world which is essentially "unknowable" owing to continuous change.

Together these outcomes indicate a holistic view of lifelong learning for adults. Moreover, they are consistent with the four pillars of education (Delors, 1996), particularly with regard to learning to know, learning to do and learning to be.

## Pedagogical approaches

As Zukas and Malcolm (2002) point out, there are no "pedagogies of lifelong learning" *per se*. The lifelong learning community has employed an eclectic mix of pedagogical approaches in pursuit of innovative practice in highly complex and ever changing educational environments. Despite this lack of clear pedagogical preferences in lifelong learning programs, in their review of the literature Zukas and Malcolm were able to identify a number of "pedagogic identities" of educators in lifelong learning. These included roles for the educator as:

- critical practitioner
- psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning
- reflective practitioner
- situated learner within a community of practice
- assuror of organisational quality and efficiency; deliverer of service to agreed or imposed standards
- participant in Vygotskian sociocultural learning environments
- disciplinary thinker, researcher and actor.

Notably a number of these identities can be linked to pedagogical approaches grounded in learning theory. When combined with the desired outcomes, learner attributes and learning processes identified above, this list can be used to identify pedagogical approaches that are appropriate for lifelong learning programs and, more importantly, applicable to the challenge to educators posed by Learning Futures. Pedagogical approaches implied by the list include critical theory and pedagogy, reflective practice, situated learning (particularly in communities of practice), Vygotskian sociocultural approaches and discipline-based learning. While these five pedagogical approaches are not mutually exclusive, they represent a range of approaches for consideration and provide a *de facto* framework of pedagogical approaches to lifelong learning.

### *Educational imperatives*

Looking beyond both the history which defines the challenge of Learning Futures and the pedagogies which are meant to help address this challenge, an effective response to these challenges must engage with a number of critical issues which have emerged in the field of education in the wake of globalisation.

UNESCO has identified issues which relate to the future of education (and learning) in the global community today. The highest priority issues have been linked to special initiatives which address these needs and focus on improving education throughout the world. These include *Education for All* by 2015 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005a), the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005c) and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005b), which highlight the issues of inclusivity, literacy (and multiliteracies) and sustainability respectively.

## Inclusivity

UNESCO defines inclusive education as a developmental approach to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults, with a particular focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005a). The question of inclusivity begins with the recognition that education is a basic human right. It follows then that it is unacceptable to exclude any person from opportunities for education for any reason. Furthermore, when considering the democratic values underpinning Learning Futures (Aspin, Chapman & Wilkinson, 1994), questions of equity, access and inclusion come to the fore. Given the diversity of the human species, the complexity of human relations and the speed of change in the world today, addressing issues of inclusivity is not a simple task.

The key question when considering the application of pedagogical approaches for Learning Futures and responding to issues of inclusivity is: Who is excluded and why? A critical examination of contemporary learning programs invites a host of other questions: How can special needs be accommodated by the concept of Learning Futures? Are some theories of Learning Futures more applicable to the purposes of inclusivity than others? How does each of the learning theories accommodate diversity? Any response to the challenge of Learning Futures must account for inclusivity in the design, development and implementation of programs.

## Literacy

Education and learning have long been associated with literacy. However, notions of what 'literacy' means are different in different contexts and traditional notions of 'reading and writing' no longer encompass more current notions of literacy. In addition to traditional literacies, there are emerging literacies of technology and information central to commerce and communication in contemporary societies. Literacy, once a static concept, has itself been changed by the forces of globalisation.

Illiteracy is not only a personal issue but also an issue for families, communities and nations. According to UNESCO's website (http://www.unesco.org), more that 860 million adults around the world are illiterate. More than 100 million children have no access to schools. The implications of these questions of literacy are a primary concern of Learning Futures not only in terms of individuals' learning but also for the development of active and participatory societies, growth in developing nations and the future of groups struggling to participate and compete in global economies. The future of society is closely linked to the ability of its citizens to participate in the institutions which constitute it.

## Sustainability

The issue of sustainability highlights the relationships between the global economy and the notion of 'futures'. While the focus of these efforts is firmly on development, questions of sustainability highlight the interdependent nature of individuals, of communities and of the global networks which now bind all of the earth's inhabitants.

The issues are complex and address a range of activities:
- equitable development on a global scale which addresses existing disparities in the distribution of wealth;
- health and welfare concerns including epidemic and pandemic disease, general health, infant mortality and nutrition;
- gender equality for sustainable futures;
- promotion of cultural diversity in increasingly homogeneous global arenas;
- preservation of the quality of the environment; and
- establishment and maintenance of peace and security. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005b)

Education is seen as a critical aspect of the development of sustainable production and consumption in a world with limited resources.

## Discussion

Theories for Learning Futures was designed to respond to both dimensions of the challenge of Learning Futures identified above – namely, to cultivate the knowledge and skills required of lifelong learners responding to continuous changes in contemporary society and to equip these participants as professional educators to cultivate lifelong learning skills in their own students. In order to achieve these aims, the course was focused on learning about these theories, learning how to apply them and learning to be both a lifelong learner and an educator in futures-oriented learning environments (Brown & Duguid, 2000).

Drawing from contemporary notions of best practice in online learning (e.g.. Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Hung & Chen, 2001, 2002; Jonassen & Land, 2000; Mayes & de Freitas, 2004; Steeples & Jones, 2002), the course Theories for Learning Futures employed a constructivist, learner-centred approach to learning. Whole course activity was structured within a course community within which course participants assume a variety of roles as part of subgroups within the community. This community provides the infrastructure for a variety of learning tasks based on sociocultural, situated and critical reflective approaches to learning (Hung & Chen, 2001, 2002). Consistent with both constructivist learning process and notions of good practice in online learning (Steeples & Jones, 2002), learner activity was the key focus of the course design, with learning tasks developed to stimulate knowledge construction and refinement through a variety of approaches. Course assessments included a combination of individual and collaborative work to acknowledge the significance of both of these types of learning activity in developing individual and distributed knowledge structures. The assessment scheme included assessment of both directed activity to emphasise the importance of in-process learning and deliverable products which represent the results of the learning process. Assessment submissions included a range of both written and non-written submissions to cater to a wider variety of learning preferences.

Evaluation of the initial offering of the course highlighted a number of positive outcomes of the course which indicate strengths in the course design and implementation. Most significant amongst these is the utility of the course in operationalising the learning theories which form the majority of the course content. As part of this learning process, learners engaged in a number of the learning activities which characterise adult lifelong learners, including: academic learning related to the content of the course; the development of generic competencies including academic literacy, collaborative skills and problem solving; dialectical thinking related to the tuning and refinement of knowledge structures; practical logic included in context dependent situated approaches; and critical reflexivity. Moreover, because the course was able to utilise the theories which form part of the course content, the course incorporates an experiential dimension to the learning. In this way, the course provides opportunities to move beyond learning about these approaches to learning to incorporating learning activity and experience which emphasise learning how to apply them and learning to be a futures-oriented educator.

However, feedback from the course has also identified a number of questions which indicate areas for further development of the course. These questions include:

- What strategies can be employed to maintain the currency of the course in the light of continuous change? What timelines are appropriate for ongoing redevelopment?
- How can the limits of the current learning platform and bandwidth limited, text-based, online delivery be overcome to cater to a wider variety of learning styles?
- How can the course accommodate discipline-based learning approaches and appreciate the role of domain-specific knowledge structures? Do different disciplines require different approaches to the challenge of Learning Futures?
- Given resource constraints and the ongoing rationalisation of course and program structures, is this response to the challenge of Learning Futures sustainable for the faculty or the university? Moreover, given the demands of highly interactive community activity, is this approach sustainable for learners?
- How does the course articulate with other offerings in the relevant program? Is attention to Learning Futures a wider concern than that of one course? How can these concerns be integrated into program and faculty-wide structures?
- How can the assessment scheme be improved to appreciate the holism of the learning experience and the non-traditional learning activities included in the course design?

Generally, these questions relate to the educational imperatives of inclusivity and sustainability identified above. Given the complexity of inclusive and sustainable education with diverse global cohorts, these questions indicate the need for further development of the course as exemplar of inclusive and sustainable practice. There is a role for stakeholders at all levels of the institutional provider to consider the ongoing development of this course as a response to the challenge of Learning Futures.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the course evaluation feedback and the experiences of the course leader that the initial offering of Theories for Learning Futures has succeeded in

creating a positive learning experience for participants. Feedback from learners was overwhelmingly positive and some identified this course as the highlight of their programs of study. Perhaps more importantly, the quality of learner activity and assignment submissions indicated that a number of course objectives related to the development of skills, attitudes, abilities and beliefs which characterise successful lifelong learning have been realised. Indeed, the articles in this theme issue of this journal are a testament to that success.

However, it is equally clear that, as a response to the challenge of Learning Futures, this course is incomplete. In particular, a number of questions about the inclusivity of the course delivery and the sustainability of the approach and the design of the course remain. While the general approach may be considered successful, the survival of the course will depend on the effectiveness of the course and the institution which supports it in adapting in response to continuous change.

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