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Lifelong Learning, Active Citizenship, Social Capital and the Human Condition

Abstract:

This paper distinguishes between human potential and the human condition, and it argues that there is a tension between the human potential and the needs of a social system. The argument is illustrated here with reference to the European Commission policy documents on lifelong learning. It is shown that the needs of the system reduce work to employability, public service to a perfunctory role as a citizen and removes the contemplative from learning – and in so doing the human condition is one within which the achievement of human potential is not possible even though it is regarded as one of the aims of lifelong learning, but then will it ever be achievable?

In a recent study of human learning (Jarvis, 2005) I reached the conclusion that all conscious living must involve learning; in other words, learning is a basic element of our humanity. But if we go back one stage further, there are two major considerations: firstly, we are born in relationship and, secondly, we are born in ignorance, so that we have to either ask questions or have our unasked questions answered before we ask them. This is reflected in the Cartesian argument in which we even doubt our existence and then Descartes argued that because we doubt we know that we exist, or *cognito ergo sum*. But there are problems with this formulation, such as solipsism and that it only proves that we exist when we think, so that while it reflects a fundamental tenet of our existence it does not provide an adequate formulation for it. Fundamental to our humanity, however, is the fact that we do not always know and we are born in relationship and those with whom we relate may have some answers to our questions. Consequently, in order to live in relationship we have to learn. From this follows a further quite fundamental point: in order to be, I have to learn to know and how to relate and, as I grow up I have to learn to do. Significantly, this is precisely the formulation of the UNESCO document *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors, 1996) which says that learning is about: being, knowing, doing and living together.

Since I am born in relationship I am dominated by two sets of needs: those of myself qua individual and those of the social group(s) within which I am born and function, and two sets of constraints – those of the physical and those of the social worlds within which I live. Psychologists, such as Maslow (1968) have tried to outline the basic needs of the human being and he specified five in a hierarchy: physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation. This formulation is not without its critics and while there are a number of criticisms, it is beyond the scope of this paper to do more than just point to a few debatable points, such as: safety may not be quite so basic as Maslow assumes, love and belonging may carry an undertone of needing to be accepted by the group whereas the more basic need throughout life might be to relate. He actually does not see learning as a basic need within this hierarchy although he clearly recognises its significance. In addition, I would argue that the greatest human need is to achieve our potential – or at least reach towards it – which is close to his self-actualisation. But since we are born into a world and into a society, the human condition is one in which we have been entrapped. The physical world constrains us and there is always a tension between the needs to achieve and the social situation within which we are born and live. The human condition is such that we have always striven to transcend these constraints and it is most satisfying to us when we are able to exercise our human potential and reach beyond the constraints of the physical and the social worlds. This condition has been characterised over the centuries by the dominant ideologies and institutions so that in the Greek city-state competitive sport and political activities were seen as ways through which humans could begin to transcend these constraints and reach towards their potential, since work and labour were undertaken by women and slaves. Later work, especially creative and productive, was seen as a way through which human beings could reach beyond these constraints. In a sense the human activity through which it has seemed most likely that human beings could transcend the constraints of their condition has reflected the nature of both the society and the dominant group of individuals within that society. The term ‘group of individuals’ is significant here since there is always a tension between individuality and the demands of the social group – hence the criticism of Maslow above – and in order to gain self-esteem, for instance, individuals have to compete in the public arena or accept the dominance of those who do. Those who do, might find self-fulfilment in either their actions or the products being recognised (given value) by those who compete in one or other public domains for, as Arendt (1958, p.164), on whose work I rely heavily in places in this paper, points out, ‘Value is a quality that a thing can never possess in privacy’.

But, it might be asked, where do those who do not find fulfilment in the public sphere find their happiness and the response might well be that, for the majority, they find it in consumption so that the major rationale for a great deal of labouring is in order to consume. Consumption, therefore, fuels society's need to produce and market those commodities which are desired, or it even leads others to create those desires through advertising, so that society needs labourers as much as labourers need to commodities to give them the happiness that comes from living. In precisely the same way as life demands labouring, it has also demanded people who create and those who rule. As an outcome of this social and human condition, life itself, argues Arendt (1958), has become the highest good; a position reinforced by the Christian ethic of the sacredness of life itself.

This argument also points to another that Arendt (1958) nicely makes, when she argues that *viva activa* (the active life) currently dominates over that other form of life which was highly esteemed at times in the past - *viva contemplativa* (the contemplative life). However, she couples action with labour and work as the three fundamental human activities encompassed by the term 'active life' (*vita activa*). She also reminds us that Aristotle (1980 edition, pp.6-7) argued that the goods in life are pleasure, honour and wealth, and that there is a fourth good and that is contemplation. However, she differentiates *vita activa* from *viva contemplativa* which points to the needs for contemplation in the human being. Arendt (1958, p.17), however, goes on to suggest that for the sake of her argument about the human condition she will omit *viva contemplativa* since she prefers 'the modern age's pragmatic assertion that man can know only what he makes himself.' While I appreciate her approach, I feel that she has left something essential from the human condition when she omits contemplation, or essentially thought itself. In my own formulations of the different types of learning (Jarvis, 1987 *inter alia*), I have always included contemplation as one of the forms of reflective learning and, as I have argued elsewhere (Jarvis, 2005) that learning is a human condition, I feel that she has been unnecessarily restrictive. Consequently, I want to include *viva contemplativa* as a necessary condition but not to give it the same significance that the early Greek or Christian thinkers gave it. However, I want to return to Aristotle's formulation and recast it and suggest that personal fulfilment (pleasure) can be discovered through work (wealth is but one potential outcome), public service (honour, self-esteem) and learning (both instrumental and contemplative). The first three of these might be regarded as part of *viva activa* while the fourth might, in part,

also be regarded as *viva contemplativa*. It is also important to note that both the *viva activa* and *viva contemplativa* require learning but learning is a very complex and multifaceted process which manifests itself in both aspects of life. It must, therefore, be life long or continue for at least as long as we are consciously aware of both ourselves and the social groups within which we live: it is fundamental to human existence.

It is, significantly, within *viva activa* that I find myself and through it I become assured of my existence. Consequently, we do not have to start with the Cartesian doubt. Since I know I am, I do not need to prove it to myself. Because I am, I think. Marquarrie (1973,p.125) writes:

But what does it mean to say, 'I am'? 'I am' is the same as 'I exist'; but 'I exist', in turn, is equivalent to 'I-am-in-the-world', or again 'I-am-with-others'. So the premise of the argument is not anything so abstract as 'I think' or even 'I am' if it is understood in some isolated sense. The premise is the immediately rich and complex reality, 'I-am-with-others-in the world'.

In a similar manner we know that we are in the world because we act, as MacMurray (1961, p.17) argued, 'We know existence by participating in existence', or as Husserl said, 'I live in my Acts' (cited in Schutz, 1972, p.51). I am, therefore, I act, but also I act, therefore, I am. But he modifies this slightly a little later when he (p.15) writes, 'the self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other'. Basically, MacMurray(1961, p.24) argues that:

The idea of an isolated agent is self-contradictory. Any agent is necessarily in relation to the Other. Apart from this essential relation he does not exist. But, further, the Other in this constitutive relation must itself be personal. Persons, therefore, are constituted by their mutual relation to one another.

In being and doing I am given a social identity or identities. As a result of this, and through my own experiences of living, I learn who I am and gain a personal identity. Being in relationship, however, curtails our freedom to act and this is one of the paradoxes of the human condition which we shall now explore. Thereafter, we will apply this argument to the European policy documents on lifelong learning and the learning society since they include all of these conditions.

The Paradox of the Human Condition

If I were able to be totally alone, I would be completely free – but this is impossible and so there is a sense in which the Other always impinges on my freedom. This is a point that Levinas (1991) makes clearly when he points out that the Stranger disturbs my freedom but once my freedom (spontaneity) has been disturbed this is the beginning of ethics. It is, therefore, in opening myself to the other, perhaps through public service, that I realise the ethical demands of my existence. However, the body is always constrained by physicality and the self does not have that freedom since we are born into systems that entrap us. He calls this totalising, whereas in a free relationship with the Other we can transcend systems and reach to what he calls infinity. Wild (Levinas, 1991, p.17), in his Introduction, to Levinas' study of Totality and Infinity suggests that the Levinas argued that the good is ultimately to be found beyond metaphysics and in ethics:

As Levinas points out, one answer is given by the totalizers who are satisfied with themselves and with the systems they can organize around themselves as they already are. A very different answer is given by the infinitizers, as we may call them. The former seek for power and control; the latter for a higher quality of life. The former strive for system and order; the latter for freedom and creative advance. This leads to a basic contrast which is ...between totality on the one hand and infinity on the other.

There are some who find themselves by locating themselves within the system and there are others who look to transcend it – who are beyond belonging – for the good lies beyond social life itself, which appears to be a rather different answer than that of Arendt who argued that the highest good lies in life itself. For Arendt, this is the value underlying the dominant ideologies of the modern world. However, there is not a contradiction here since Levinas sees life as an ultimate good but he recognises that the present way that life is lived in social systems may actually inhibit the fulfilment of the individual who is capable of striving to transcend them. For Levinas, therefore, there exists a sense in which we need to be separate from the system because something better always lies beyond it; in freely chosen relationship, however, we can always strive to transcend it.

Two things, a least, emerge from Levinas' position: that people do look beyond the present seeking to create a better world and as he argues that this can only occur if

we transcend the system; the second is that the system binds individuals and those who are totalisers create systems around themselves since they are satisfied with the present. However, I feel that the idea of the transcendent, reaching beyond the present is always present in people, even totalisers who, therefore, seek to create yet more systems that will produce that better world. This, then is a paradox, since they would argue that the better world needs policies and practices and this will bring the wealth and, ultimately, the happiness and fulfilment that people want. But Levinas argues that the ultimate happiness can only be found in the free relationship with the Other, which opens the possibility of transcending systems and reaching beyond them. For him, the system inhibits human beings from achieving their potential and personal fulfilment. In this sense, Levinas looks beyond society for the fulfilment of the human condition, but not beyond life – it is a continual striving for something better.

Most of us, while we have this spark which pushes us towards the infinite, are actually totalisers, or more happy with the totalisers' position, and those who are dominant in society, also totalisers, are those who define and control the system. In the current age with the development of the European Union we are forced back to ask these fundamental questions about the human condition. That this is being done can be clearly demonstrated in the European Commission documents about lifelong learning – for here we are faced with these fundamental elements of the human condition - the active life in which we learn, labour, work and live together in a moral relationship. But, I want to suggest that the Commission's understanding of these concepts is one which actually inhibits human transcendence and it does so because it is bound by the dominant ideology and instrumental rationality of modern society, so that I want now to analyse these documents from the position presented above.

European Commission Policy on Lifelong Learning

In 1995 when it published the White Paper on Education and Training the European Commission has made public its concerns about the need to have lifelong learning within the whole of Europe so that it can assume its place as a global leader in the knowledge economy. In a sense the paper locates the employability, citizenship and education agenda within its view of a better society – a global leader in the knowledge economy was that Lisbon (2000) had set out as its aim:

The future of European culture depends on its capacity to equip young people to question constantly and seek new answers without prejudicing human values. This is the very foundation of citizenship and is essential if European society is to be open, multicultural and democratic (EC 1995, p.10).

Within two years, however, the Commission had coupled lifelong learning and citizenship much more explicitly, whilst still emphasising the need to promote policies to restore the employment situation.

This educational area (Europe) will facilitate an **enhancement of citizenship** through the sharing of common values, and the development of a sense of belonging to a common social and cultural area. It must encourage a broader-based understanding of citizenship, founded on active solidarity and on mutual understanding of the cultural diversities that constitute Europe's originality and richness (**bold** in the original). (European Commission, 1997,p.4)

Two things are clear here: that the emphasis is still on education for citizenship and that the concern is still with citizenship per se rather than with active citizenship. Both of these emphases were to change the following year.

In 1998, however, the Commission acknowledged citizenship could not be taught, since it had cognitive, affective and practical dimensions – it could be learned, however, and learning for active citizenship became an aim of lifelong learning. Here, the teaching of citizenship is not enough – it is the learning of citizenship which is essential...Learning for active citizenship includes access to the skills and competencies that young people will need for effective economic participation under conditions of technological modernisation, economic globalisation, and, very concretely, transnational European labour markets. (EC, 1998 ,p.6)

Learning for active citizenship is still something for young people but it is not an optional extra. But even this reading is a little misleading because we learn through our activities, so that in being an active citizen we are actually involved in lifelong learning. In addition, it is still quite significant that employability (skills) is a key to active citizenship within the EU. Indeed, as Arendt (1959, p. 70) has suggested,

'...we already live under conditions where our only reliable property is our skill and our labour power' and, as with the ancient Greeks it was the ownership of property that enabled the citizens of the city-state to play their public role, now it is skills that enable them to be active citizens and contribute to society through employment. The conditions of *viva activa* are spelt out – learning, work and citizenship and these were further elaborated upon as a result of consultation following the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000). By 2001, the Commission had espoused four aims for lifelong learning: employability; active citizenship; social inclusion; personal fulfilment (EC 2001a). I want to argue that these aims, together with lifelong learning, form the bases for a social policy but since they are formulated within a totalising framework, not only because the Commission has been trying to create a united Europe but also because it is ensnared within the dominant ideologies of economism and instrumentalism, the human condition it postulates is one in which the human potentiality is either unacknowledged or unachievable.

Employability: In the modern world, the classical concept of work (the worker as producer and creator) has begun to disappear although there are still some crafts and professions that are based on work but work has been transformed to labour. Work and the production of our own efforts underlay the rise of capitalism since the end-product of work is the market since a product only has value if it has either exchange value or use value. However, a significant outcome of work is the self-fulfilment and self-achievement of the worker, the creator. But now, the aim of European society, indeed any late modern society, is labour. People have to be labourers – even flexible ones as the system's demands change - but, unlike work, labour has little intrinsic satisfaction or opportunity of self fulfilment. In order to be active citizens people have to be labourers contributing to the common good. Employability is now the key to active citizenship and what we do is how society judges us, values us and identifies us.

In this knowledge economy, consequently, citizens have to be employable and so they have to keep on learning (both in work and in the educational system) that necessary information to provide them with the knowledge and skills (and the necessary certificate) to achieve this end. Lifelong learning is valuable because it provides opportunity for people to be employable and to be active citizens. But labourers can never transcend the system because their labour is not creative work and so even working with others does not provide the basis that Levinas regarded as essential if individuals are to transcend the system, so that the system's aim of

lifelong learning for employability does no more than keep the system going and the human condition so conceptualised is not one that can encourage citizens to achieve their potential; self-fulfilment cannot be achieved through employability.

Active citizenship: Citizenship is a central feature in these documents but so also is the recognition that fewer people have the desire to play that role than they did in the past. Indeed, the White Paper on Governance (EC 2001b, p.7) recognises the fact that not only do people feel alienated from the Union's work but that they have disappointed expectations. Indeed, it could have gone on to say that people no longer trust the politicians who seek to govern. While the White Paper defends the European Union and its achievements (rightly, in many ways), its only solutions are system solutions: the Union must conduct its business openly, in a participative manner, be accountable, be effective and be coherent. And so active citizens should be informed, knowledgeable, and able to participate in public debate and they should also understand the way that the European system functions. In order to be informed, there are opportunities through lifelong learning, both to teach the young but also to enable them to be engaged in practical projects so that they can learn something about active citizenship. Lifelong learning is once again an instrument of social policy. Significantly, the idea that we learn through doing, so that we need to get more people involved, maybe before they would claim to be knowledgeable, so that they can learn in the process of doing – this is what learning from conscious living is all about.

Active citizens then should be involved in the process of governance and through democratic means, as civil society, the voices of the citizens should be heard expressing citizens' needs and warning those in government if its direction is wrong. This is hardly the public service role of active citizens in the city states of Greece when they ruled their cities and through their involvement they achieved both esteem and a sense of personal achievement and fulfilment. But then the citizens were free to play that role since they owned sufficient property to give them security. Now today's citizens' only property is their skill which can keep them in a job for a period of time, and few jobs are lifelong and unchanging and even fewer people have tenure in their occupation that enables them to be secure if they speak out in the common good. Indeed, just look at the negative connotations of the word 'whistle blower' and look how often whistle blowers are forced to leave their employment.

We live in an apparently open society having a form of representative democracy, but

there are opportunities for the few to engage in the process of governing and even for the few, the powers of the economic sub-system of the knowledge economy means that even the power of the State, even the Multi-State, is circumscribed to some degree. It may be that human potentiality might be achieved through being actively involved trying to bring about that better future (infinity) that Levinas described through public service but the type of citizenship described here fails to recognise the human condition since it is framed within a totalising system. The opportunity to achieve and the honour and esteem that comes from this form of active citizenship might best be captured with the phrase 'public service' – but this is not the way that active citizenship is presented within these documents.

Social Inclusion: In a sense the third aim is but one example of the previous discussion since one of the outcomes of governance should be a better society – in this case, one which acknowledges our diversity and seeks to include everybody within the system. In another sense, it is reflected in Levinas' concern that we should welcome the Stranger who inhibits our freedom because when we learn from the stranger we are enriched. The more we are concerned about the stranger the richer our lives and the more we can strive for infinity. Active citizens should work to insure that everybody is included within the system and so lifelong learning opportunities should be offered to all people, whatever their gender, class, age, position in society, and so on. Indeed, those who excluded from the system are actually resources (social capital) lost to it. But this aim, laudable as it is, hardly recognises the human condition of being inhibited with a constraining social system although it does recognise that people need to strive to transcend the present bonds of the system within which they live; it remains totalising rather than pointing towards the infinite.

Personal Fulfilment: This aim is expressed but hardly elaborated upon in these reports, which is not surprising since that fulfilment and sense of pleasure only emerges when we, as human beings, are enabled to achieve through our actions (*viva activa*) or in the depths of our contemplation. Each of the aims of lifelong learning in the paper reflect the requirements of the system and do not recognise the human condition or call upon the human potential which can offer the opportunities of achieving personal fulfilment: work has been transformed into employability; active citizenship into democratic participation: social inclusion recognises that there are bonds but does not look towards the infinite possibilities that exist when we welcome the stranger and learn together. And so, instead of living with the vision of infinity we are confronted with the demands of the system in which we can labour in order to

consume rather than fulfil and ignore the idea of public esteem through service whilst celebrating the social esteem of others through the celebrity culture and hero worship of our current culture.

Each of these aims, within the Commission policy documents, is one of lifelong learning to which we must now turn

Lifelong Learning

Learning is an existential phenomenon which is both instrumental and reflective and the former is essential to *viva activa* if we are to act in the modern world, but reflection can be an element of *viva contemplativa*. But, paradoxically, we have even made reflection instrumental (Schön, 1983) and have left no space for the *viva contemplativa*. In my own studies of learning I have always had a category of reflective learning (Jarvis, 1987 *inter alia*) which I called contemplation although I did not develop it sufficiently but learning is much more than the instrumental understanding that many theories of learning have suggested since they have been formulated within the instrumental rationality of the age. In my more recent work I have tried to break away from this by quite specifically locating learning within the person-in-the-world, i.e. in the human condition. Every time I learn, it is the 'I' who learns and I learn through action, thought and emotion; I have defined lifelong learning, therefore, in the following manner. Lifelong learning is the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

I can, then, achieve personal satisfaction and fulfilment when I transcend my old self and discover new meanings and new ideas and do new things. Herein the *viva contemplativa* still has a place within the wider *viva activa*. Learning is the driving force of humanity, it both underlies our active life but also it offers the possibility for transcending the human condition through reflective contemplation. For learning is at the heart of living. But in contemporary society, lifelong learning is conceived as relating to work life and the social system and while it is defined as something from

cradle to grave 'all learning undertaken throughout life (EC 2001, p.9), it is recognised that:

traditional systems must be transformed to become much more open and flexible, so that learners can have individual learning pathways suitable to their needs and interests and thus genuinely take advantage of equal opportunities throughout their lives (EC. 2001,p.4).

Even the recognition that the systems are curtailing learning, there is still no recognition that learning together we can work to achieve our potential through transcending the system, as Levinas (1991, p.51) indicates:

It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching ...Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain.

Here then in a teaching and learning relationship individuals can be inspired to reach beyond themselves, to look beyond to the infinite. In a relationship of welcoming the other as persons whoever the Stranger is. In a sense, what Levinas is suggesting is not so much about social capital but about the infinite potential for the person to grow and develop and transcend the system rather than treading an individual pathway through an existing, albeit more open, one. Yet there is a paradox here. If we treat the Stranger just as a resource then we lose both the richness of the personhood and, even the inter-personal relationship itself, so that it is in the relationship itself that the potential lies rather than the relationship being a means to an end. And so we can see that even the ideal of lifelong learning, when defined from within a totalising framework, cannot release the potential of the human being and so we not find fulfilment within the system that seeks to offer it to us since it can never provide it.

Conclusion

The idea of capital, be it human or social, suggests that there is a wealth accumulated to be used within the system, and this reflects the philosophy of the age. While the system aims to offer personal fulfilment, it cannot be achieved since the human condition is one in which there is always a tension between the individuals' need to achieve their potential and the constraints imposed on them by the system. This we have shown from the way that the system defines work, active citizenship and lifelong learning and the expectations it has of its members. But in this paper I have suggested it is not what we accumulate that is significant but it is the potential that lies in people in relationship that can be fulfilling. In addition, personal fulfilment can come when employment is actually creative work, when active citizenship means more than performing a perfunctory role within the system but by contributing to the common good and knowing that what one does is worthwhile, when relationship is not merely inclusion but jointly working together to transcend, and when learning is more than just instrumentality but reaching into the realms of the self through action and contemplation in a teaching and learning relationship that points to a potentiality that lies beyond the self and beyond the system.

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