

# How to survive the lifelong learning as blame policies of the modern world

Ângela Bragança.<sup>1</sup>, José Castro.<sup>2</sup>, Joaquim Coimbra.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Oporto, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, pdpsi08005@fpce.up.pt*

<sup>2</sup>*University of Oporto, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, jcastro@fpce.up.pt*

<sup>3</sup>*University of Oporto, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, jcoimbra@fpce.up.pt*

**Abstract.** Nowadays it can't be denied that we are surrounded by a widespread and global discourse, which asserts the crucial importance of promoting lifelong learning. However, as stated by Edwards, Ranson and Strain (2002), although there was enough debate about the nature, extent and significance of lifelong learning as a political goal - constituting, as Giddens points out (1991, 99), the "new catechism" policymakers - has existed very little theoretical discussion about what specific learning lifelong needed to deal with the processes of change against which is supposed to be an answer. Furthermore, data analysis of the documents produced by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) in 2003, points to the fact that contemporary Western societies find themselves marked by an unequal distribution of knowledge, showing significant level of citizens' qualifications ditches, also highlighting one seemingly paradoxical question: statistics show that the most qualified adults demonstrate a much higher percentage of participation in educational or training activities, compared to less qualified or adults belonging to socially vulnerable groups. In the analysis of facilitators or inhibitors of participation in lifelong learning, we proposed the need to develop an integrative theory of multidirectional influences of several variables, distant from an approach that blames only the person for not being participative.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, individualization, blame policies, integrative theory

## Introduction

Investment in lifelong learning has often been touted as central to the development process of adaptation to a changing scenario, risk and uncertainty, to a world marked by a semantic constellation of instability, insecurity, turmoil, nonlinearity (Casanova, 2010; Casanova, Pacheco & Coimbra, 2010; Coimbra, 2005; Gonçalves & Coimbra, 1999; Martins, 2010; Martins, Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2010), in which subjects are confronted with the seeming inevitability to continually learn, as the only means of survival in today's world. Advocating the importance of promoting lifelong learning, this article intends, however, to develop a critical analysis of the political agendas that underlie the actions implemented on the ground, particularly in Portugal, also reflecting on the factors that might explain the decision to participate or not in adult education and training.

### 1. Is it lifelong learning a magic spell of nowadays?

Indeed, much has been said about the importance of promoting policies and programs of learning throughout life as a way to deal with a world in constant transformation, so that, as regards Lambeir (2005, 350), "Lifelong learning is the magic spell in the discourse of educational and economic policymakers, as well as in that of the practitioners of both domains".

As stated by Edwards, Ranson and Strain (2002), although there was enough debate about the nature, extent and significance of lifelong learning as a political goal - constituting, as Giddens points out (1991, 99), the "new catechism" policymakers - has existed very little theoretical discussion about what specific learning lifelong needed to deal with the processes

of change against which is supposed to be an answer. Therefore it is important to discuss and reflect on the question of for what purposes are learning to be readily available, what ends should it serve?

If it is simply in the interests of adaptability to the world of work and the constantly changing demands of capital or in order to promote the global development of the individual, to create reflexive and critical citizens?

At present, adults seem to understand the challenge of lifelong learning as synonymous with accumulation of diplomas, courses and training activities of short duration, often in a piecemeal and additive logic. This purpose of "collection" of certificates and alleged competences is closely related to the philosophy underlying many of the adult education and training policies implemented today, under the array of learning throughout life. As Lambeir (2005, 351) states, "learning now is the constant striving for extra competences, and the efficient management of acquired ones. Education has become merely a tool in the fetishisation of certificates".

In a context marked by discourses of crisis, unpredictability and exclusion, there seems to be a rampant use of opportunities not only as a way to equip the individual as much as possible, with "tools" to help him or her deal with this scenario, but also as a strategy for social integration, or even survival. The discourse on learning throughout life has been so imperative that the act of participation may at times be seen as more important than the content the individual may be engaging with. Since lifelong learning is presented as having broader social benefits for individuals and communities, people seem to face political and moral pressure to participate in lifelong learning projects, placing pressure especially upon individuals with low-level skills, to engage in learning that takes on the status of a moral imperative: people must learn. Moreover, the non-participation in education and training is thus increasingly understood primarily as individualization of responsibility of the individual, with the same blamed for the consequences that may arise from neglecting the opportunities offered in this field. Thus seems to be an implicit threat that choose not to participate in education-training is to risk facing a situation of social and economic exclusion against which only the individual subject should be held accountable. Ultimately, lifelong learning policies and discourses have shifted the responsibility from the system to the individual, where the learner becomes an entrepreneur of him or herself and, thereby, what he or she becomes depends solely on her or himself and the choices she or he makes. It is the discourse of autonomous and independent individuals who are responsible for updating their skills in order to achieve their place in society. Contradicting this discourse and its blame policies, this article thus seeks to raise awareness of the need to develop a comprehensive and integrated view on participation in structured learning lifelong activities, able to lead the design and implementation of most critical, reflective, and less unifying sector policies, by therefore, more inclusive, within a vision of adult education as a social project for empowerment, emancipation and human development.

## **2. Can we, indeed, all be inhabitants of a genuinely learning society?**

Data analysis of the documents produced by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) in 2003, points to the fact that contemporary Western societies find themselves marked by an unequal distribution of knowledge, showing significant level of citizens' qualifications ditches.

Also, according to the *International Adult Literacy Survey*, as mentioned by Desjardins and colleagues (2006), became visible sections of the population whose gaps in basic skills of

literacy and numeracy puts them in a position risk of social exclusion. These data also highlight one seemingly paradoxical question: statistics show that the most qualified adults demonstrate a much higher percentage of participation in educational or training activities, compared to less qualified or adults belonging to socially vulnerable groups.

What factors might then explain the fact that those who most need to invest in improving their qualifications, are those demonstrating less likely to participate in structured in formal learning activities?

A critical analysis of this question must take into account, first, the importance of assessing whose agenda and whose questions predominate in public educational policies?

In terms of policies implemented, the hegemony of discourses on lifelong learning seems too focused on the supposed immediate answers that they can provide to a job market increasingly competitive - against which is necessary to extend the levels of initial training - and less in the full development of the individual, in promoting their active participation as citizens with full rights, promoting opportunities for education and training throughout life, which, from the perspective of human development ecology, cannot overlook the ways in which learning is inseparable, as a prerequisite and as a result, of intersubjective communities.

The assumptions today are that the world is in constant and rapidly changing and, that, this state of change is something that must be merely accepted. Therefore, learning is seen as the key that enables people to "respond" to change but not as a way to challenge or question the necessity or direction of the change. There is a notion of responding or reactive to rather than questioning. In these terms, learning works as a form of socialization and, thereby, everything that may be considered merely interesting or inspirational is removed and replaced by the knowledge and skills people need to have in order to have a place in society and in the job market.

Paulo Freire famously posed the question about education being the liberation or domestication. The political educational agenda can potentially offer aspects of both. In order to avoid the potential danger of transforming lifelong learning in little more than State indoctrination or domestication, is central to instill in active citizenship a real critical dimension, and help individuals and communities increasing and improving their scope of participation, evolving from a level characterized only by information and consultation, to a more critical and citizen-focused collaboration and (real) empowerment.

Learning must move away from a concern with quantitative addition of cognitive and metacognitive skills to a concern with qualitative transformation of the subject through their active engagement in the democratic process.

Secondly, a critical analysis of the question of the factors that might explain the decision on participate or not in adulta education and training must take into account the importance of assessing the relationship between, on the one hand, the discourses and enacted intentions and, on other, the reality of the actions implemented on the ground.

Portugal is one of the countries with lower levels of qualifications in Europe, and the last years have been marked by high political and financial effort to "combat" this problem. However, both nationally and internationally, and as emphasized by Edwards, Ranson and Strain (20029, the current adult education policies seem to assume that low and unequal rates of participation in lifelong learning arises mainly from problems or cultural gaps that can be overcome or filled with mere increase and diversification of learning opportunities. In this sense, disregard not only an inclusive and sustainable vision of what learning is, but also the life contexts of individuals, in which non-participation in certain forms of learning is

congruent with the logic of their cultural and political overdetermination. The excessive centralization in individualized logical certification and accreditation, the emphasis on a more cumulative than integrative and reflective learning can lead to an unawareness (intentional or not) or even to discredit other forms, means and learning contexts in which subjects may be involved. Moreover, as emphasized by Norbert Elias (1987/1993), when referring to a "society of individuals", and Bauman (2001), with regard to "individualized society," contemporary societies carry in itself a hegemonic mode of socialization (no-normative and focused on the individual) which results in an unbalanced distribution of knowledge and freedom of self-assertion, generating insecurity and uncertainty (vd. also Marris, 1996).

Moreover, in a context of increasing individualization paradoxically policies of lifelong learning seem to have an underlying principle of universality of the impact of permanent changes that current societies face. In fact, as pointed Castells (1996), the processes of change have a different impact on different age groups and professional areas, also inducing different structural changes taking into account the historical and cultural contexts.

Each person builds a unique identity throughout its development, as the result of the relations established with the world. So, the quality of this relations and the opportunities that the "natural" life contexts either provide or prevent influence the commitments within these relationships (Campos, 1989) as well as the level of expectations of the individual in terms of future investments, particularly in context of education and training. It is therefore important to understand the issues of the subject's participation in lifelong learning according to a systemic and developmental perspective, which seeks to frame the building of life paths and, also, in this sense, learning paths in different contexts, including those relating to macrodimensions.

In fact, there are many factors that influence the decision to participate or not in education and training, with a complex network of relationships established between them.

Boeren, Nicaise and Baert (2010) propose an analysis of the determinants of participation structured into three levels: individual, in the sense of the needs and requirements of the labor market that lead the subject to explicitly request training; institutional, ie, on the educational-training offer provided by the education system, understood in a broad sense; macro, with reference to national and supranational authorities governing the relations between supply and demand.

At the individual level, and in general, the authors stress, concurrently with Jung and Cervero (2002), two main dimensions: the socio-economic and cultural dimension and the psychological dimension. In the first , we emphasize a perspective of analysis of cost-effectiveness in relation to the decision to participate or not in structured learning activities. According to this theoretical rationale, underlying the decision-making or choice in pursuing their goals, individuals always seek to achieve maximum well-being or success with minimum cost (Allingham, 2002). Regarding participation in training, for example, Jung and Cervero (2002) identified, as potential direct costs, payment of tuition or other fees, and indirect costs such as those related to the possible need to hire someone to take care the children, or their enrollment in kindergarten, to be able to attend training, possible neglect of some household chores, difficulties in reconciling family life, lower willingness to seek employment if unemployed, ... Regarding benefits, they refer not only those that relate to the work itself, such as a potential career advancement , salary increases, improved productivity and performance, job change, ..., but also those related to a more personal nature, such as the establishment of new contacts and social relationships, leisure time , personal enrichment ,

etc. .. It will also be important to note that some benefits may be visible only in the long term, assuming a character of uncertainty and risk as to its implementation.

Another important issue relates to the fact that the equilibrium relationship between the costs and the benefits vary from person to person, and, in the case of some socially vulnerable groups, this balance tends to refer to a very low participation as where direct and indirect costs associated with participation in education and training exceed largely, its possible benefits.

In the context of the psychological dimension, there are several characteristics that impact on the issue of participation in learning activities. One of the key concepts to keep in mind is, first, *motivation*, which may be characterized, according to Deci and Ryan (2000), as *independent* - when the subject value the process of learning for itself - or *controlled*, when the frequency of an education or training is related to external pressures, namely the acquisition of certain rewards or avoidance of penalties. Apart from motivation, other authors refer to the concept of *attitude towards learning*. Blunt and Yang (1995), for example, emphasize the intrinsic value of training for adult's life, its importance to society in general and the experience of learning for pleasure, as determinant values for participating or not in learning activities.

The confidence of the subject in relation to the frequency of training or their *perceived self-efficacy* is also considered fundamental in the decision-making process about participation. Adults with previous negative experiences demonstrate greater reluctance to participate, to the extent that may doubt their abilities as learners. The "self-efficacy" construct has a special relevance in contemporary psychology, and, since its conceptualization in the context of Bandura's Socio - Cognitive Theory (1986, 1995), perceived self-efficacy is considered the basis of the human agency as understood as a centrally acting factor concerning the self-referencing and self-regulators mechanisms that generate motivation and activity. Among all the constructs related to self, self-efficacy has been shown to be a more consistent predictor of human behavior and behavior change than any other, being also distinct from similar constructs such, self - esteem, self - concept, locus of control , etc..

Taking as starting point the educational and training needs of individuals, education institutions are expected to drawn pathways able to respond to them accordingly. However, there is not always a fit between supply and demand and, often , there is a mismatch between the needs of learners and training plans promoted by the education system, understood here as including all promoters of relevant education and/or training. In addition to the shortcomings highlighted, in relation to processes of vocational development, often some of the obstacles that may contribute to this discrepancy relate to the financial costs of some training courses, the pre-established formal organization of *curricula*, as well as the conditions of admission and frequency, namely age, educational qualification starting level, position with regard to employment , the control system of attendance , etc... In order to minimize the impact of some of these obstacles, or even surpass them, it can be activated some coping strategies. We speak, for example, of the recognition and accreditation of experiential learning, the promotion of structures and services for career guidance, the allocation of social benefits to the frequency of actions training, the networking partnerships between different actors , etc.. Another very important aspect is related to the climate or learning environment created by the educational institution. In this plan, it is noted, for example, the work of Darkenwald and Valentine (1986), whose investigations demonstrated that a positive learning climate was associated with a greater involvement on the part of learners, to a higher level of support from the educator or trainer, a clear orientation to the task, to a more evident achievement of personal

goals, a better organization, and also a greater intervention from adults in their own learning process.

In addition to differences in participation in learning activities between individuals and various groups of the population, the statistics also highlight different participation rates across countries (OECD, 2003).

These differences in participation can be explained to a large extent, whether the policies implemented and, specifically, the different support provided by the Governments concerning obstacles or barriers that adults encounter when faced with such participation, either with the historic development and culture of each country, which influences, in turn, the design and implementation of the policies themselves. In this sense, we can not disassociate ourselves from the heavy heritage of Portugal, in terms of low level of educational and professional qualification, due to the absence, until the mid-60s, any systematic efforts to modernize the education system (Machado & Costa, 1998).

Barbosa (2004 ) proposes an approach to the education of adults in Europe through the analysis of two aspects: one with an institutional systemic character and other with a humanistic and community one. Among several key points , the two perspectives are distinguished, for example, by the fact that the first pursue an logic of education campaign, since it is believed that the adult problems should be solved by central government initiatives, while the second posits that they "must be made and resolved by the communities themselves", being the change "intensified by the awareness and involvement of adults in solving the problems that affect them." (Barbosa, 2004:196). Furthermore, systemic-institutional perspective, "essentially values situations linked to the production system and work , so that the learning arise mainly related to training." (2004, 116), and more severe, is marked by its instrumentality, functionality and immediate utility, not taking into account the importance of community for the integral development of individuals as a fundamental goal of the educational process. Community humanistic perspective emphasizes, on the other hand, the essential role played by the community, highlighting both the importance and centrality of their participation in the needs assessment as well as the accountability and involvement of local authorities in the implementation of joint educational projects as key factors for success.

In Portugal - with the New Opportunities Initiative and the Centers for Qualification and Vocational Education - current policies orientations of adult education can be characterized by a systemic-institutional perspective, which promotes an top-down decision making processes, leading to measures and strategies defined by central power, that do not take into account local decisions guided by local networks and educational actors involved in the teaching-learning process. In fact, the priority has been given to the intervention on the individual, with a logic of quickly certification and processes that do not seem to recognize the power of learners in negotiating their own itinerary of qualification. The guiding humanitarian principles of the national system of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competency have been abandoned. It is noted, in this regard, for example, the Guidelines that support Adult Education and Training Courses, on a secondary level, which does not have a set of skills to develop, but rather a diversity of program content, defined a priori, according to a perspective of an alleged normativity of the shortcomings highlighted by adults, and that, therefore, don't result of any process to select these according to their life history and their relevance and appropriateness in terms of the relationship with the everyday reality or development of its forms to perceive the world.

More than foster the accumulation of skills and qualifications as a way to cope with change and uncertainty - a compensatory or palliative approach targeting the most disadvantaged,

who are transformed into stigmatized recipients of predefined programs - policies and practices of lifelong learning should enhance the reflectivity of learners, organizations and societies, to the extent that only the processes of questioning and critical analysis will allow them to deal with uncertainty and, above all, to form active citizens, able to also promote the change and not be just only her target. As regards Eraut (2000), the processes of education and training should aim at transforming the understanding of the subject about themselves, the world and the relationship established with this, enhancing the sense of personal agency.

One way forward towards a more liberating approach to learning for critical and active citizenship may be to work with local people and organizations to explore, contest and turn what we can call invited or provided spaces and places into claimed ones. By claiming this spaces and places as their own, community members and groups can start to move from being just recipients or users to assume a more critical and collective role by being makers and shapers of the policies that affect their lives, being also able to hold the Government to account regarding the gaps between its rhetoric and its policies.

In the analysis of facilitators or inhibitors of participation in lifelong learning, we, therefore, proposed the need to develop an integrative theory of multidirectional influences of several variables, distant from an approach that blames only the person for not being participative. We must take into account others factors that may influence the processes of decision making: family and peers, the relationship of learning pathways with increasingly unpredictable job trajectories, the available network for training and education, the existence of mechanisms of assistance, the socio-economic context, the values assigned by himself and the community to learning, the importance that society attaches to diplomas, public opinion about the educational policies and adult education, etc.

Then becomes urgent to develop an integrative theory of learning, capable of capturing the multidirectional influences of several variables involved in the decision-making process to effectively participate or not in further education and training process, in addition to the initial qualification, since the research focused solely on individual slips invariably to static and reductive approaches of human behavior and development, that do not regard nor appreciate, the various ecosystems of which the persons are part and that influence their development.

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