

From Policy to Pedagogy: Widening the Discourse and Practice of the Learning Society in the European Union

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This paper explores the policy turn of the *learning society*, and how the academic world is responding to new social and political demands. It highlights some of the criticisms levelled at the learning society, as well as the voices of support. The paper also showcases the European Language Portfolio and the Transferable Skills project as two examples of good practice.

Cet article examine le tournant de la politique de la société du savoir ainsi que la réponse du monde intellectuel face aux nouvelles exigences sociales et politiques. Il met en lumière certaines des critiques soulevées par la société du savoir ainsi que par les voix favorables. L'article s'appuie sur deux exemples pratiques, à savoir le Portfolio Européen des Langues et le Project des Compétences Transmissibles.

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Introduction

There are three ingredients in the good life: learning, earning and yearning. (Christopher Darlington Morley, 1890–1957)

Current literature in the field of education studies is dominated by a strangled cry, as educationalists grapple with a new world order, one filled with strategic plans, clients, stakeholders, outcomes, competitiveness and measurement, replacing the humanistic values which characterised the socialist order of the mid-20th century. The neo-liberal agenda, which is one of the drivers of the 21st century's unfolding as an unbridled capitalist culture in a globalised market, appears to have reduced the individual to a functionalist resource, one of human capital with a value in the market place.

This scenario harks back to an era, 150 years ago, when the first industrial revolution was in full swing, carving out the contours of modernity, where machines began to replace humans in the creation of material goods, and the speed of production accelerated at an incredible rate. That era had its voices of protest as well. Charles Dickens created the infamous character, Gradgrind, to epitomise the 'hard' times and how education was responding by creating factory classrooms, where hard facts were beaten into the heads of the pupils:

... after eight weeks of induction into the elements of Political Economy, she had only yesterday been set right by a prattle three feet high, for returning to the question, 'What is the first principle of this science?' the absurd answer, 'To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me.'

Mr. Gradgrind observed, shaking his head, that all this was very bad; that it showed the necessity of infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge, as per system, schedule, blue book, report, and tabular statements A to Z; and that Jupe 'must be kept to it.' So Jupe was kept to it, and became low-spirited, but no wiser. (Dickens, 1854, 1969: 95)

Malcolm Tight (1998) opens a discourse on the Learning Society with the words 'Welcome to the Treadmill', sending the message that the impetus to track, chart and measure all forms of learning, and to link them directly to the world of work, makes us 'run the danger of destroying [their] individual, emotional and delightful elements' (Tight, 1998). It would appear that we are, yet again, in an era of uncertain times, where the dominant forces in society mitigate against the quality of life of its members.

This paper explores the policy turn of the learning society in Europe, looking at the contextual backdrop, which has led policy makers to adopt certain agendas, and how the academic world is, in turn, responding to the new social and political demands. The story has a positive perspective, however. In this paper, I argue that educators are rising to the challenge, and that the 'new educational order' (Field, 2000) is yielding creative, innovative and rich actions, with educators seeking to redress the balance of power by forging ways to allow social justice to flourish. We are, however, reminded that the ills of our time cannot be cured by educators alone; rather, the political will from the most powerful agents of state, the politicians, needs to be harnessed. (Coffield, 2002; Hughes & Tight, 1995). To achieve a healthy, flourishing society, there is a need for educational policy to be integrated fully with enterprise strategy and with 'a well-resourced, community-focused, anti-poverty campaign' (Coffield, 2002: 194).

The Learning Society Debate

Ranson (1998a; 1998b) describes learning as a process that deals with how we interact with our world, based on Dewey's theory of 'being in the world' (Ranson, 1998a: 10). He highlights the procedural nature of the interaction by defining learning as *becoming* (Ranson, 1998b: 269), where, through developing an understanding of who we are as individuals and what makes us unique, we can begin to grasp how we can turn that uniqueness into agency, to change our world, ostensibly, for the better. This development of sense of self and agency takes time, needs to be nurtured and, hence, should be encouraged to develop over the lifespan of the individual.

A seminal work from the 1970s commissioned by UNESCO, *Learning to Be* (Fauré *et al.*, 1972), was one of the first texts to describe the concept *learning society*, with its focus on lifelong learning as well as diversity of learning for all actors in society. While the prose is, at times, outmoded, the policy

implications are not; the authors write that lifelong learning should be 'the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries' (Fauré *et al.*, 1972: 182).

As individuals learn to take more control of their lives – although some would argue that in the world of Big Brother this sense is delusory – so too they are encouraged to seek out their own pathways of learning, to establish goals for themselves and to utilise strategies best suited to their unique disposition. In order to facilitate a change from system to learner-centred curricula, learners are encouraged to *learn how to learn*, thus freeing them to engage in learning of their choosing in both formal and informal contexts. A critical approach to such a turn (Coffield, 2002) would highlight the fact that human capital theory shifts responsibility from the state to the individual, blaming the individual for not achieving rather than the state. The work of Giddens (1991) on structure and agency is useful here, as it helps explain our social world by using the term structure to demonstrate that our lives are framed or bounded by societal and institutional structures, which can have a limiting effect. However, the individual is not rendered completely powerless, but has his or her own sense of agency, or acting in the world, which can help transform the individual and his or her lifeworld.

Turning now to look at the societal context of the learning society, much has been written about the post-industrial, technological revolution, where the impact of information and communication technologies has transformed the way we interact with the world. In the dimensions of time and space, according to Castells:

the *space of flows* and *timeless time* are the material foundations of a new culture that transcends and includes the diversity of historically transmitted systems of representation: the culture of real virtuality where make-believe is belief in the making. (Castells, 2000: 406)

The move towards a more globalised society in late modernity has quickened its pace, thanks to such technological innovations as the World Wide Web, email and other tools, which facilitate the space of flows and timeless time. Globalised markets, networked societies, outsourcing of work, and competition on a grander scale have all affected how individuals and society are expected to operate at micro, meso and macro levels. The new world order has led to a life where risk-taking is a daily activity shouldered by the masses (Sennett, 1998: 80) rather than, as in the past, by the heroic few. Tight (1998: 261) views the constant pressure to update and develop skills and knowledge increasingly more of a duty and burden rather than a pleasure, where, 'At times, in truth, it seems like the fun will never start'.

There are many critics of the policy *learning society*, notably Hughes and Tight (1995), Coffield (2002) and Field (2002), although the latter case is more an attempt to explain why the policy is finding it difficult to bed itself down, rather than criticising it in its own right. Hughes and Tight (1995) are most sceptical of the enterprise, terming the policy a myth, with its *raison d'être* being to hoodwink individuals in society into thinking they are being looked after, whereas, in fact, they are being manipulated to serve the greater good of the state by fuelling economic, technological and scientific competitiveness in a

game of power politics. They attempt to debunk a series of ancillary myths, which together comprise the greater myth of the learning society: productivity, change, lifelong education and the learning organisation. They say

As a banner under which a diversity of interests – politicians, educators, industrialists – can gather, the learning society embodies an alliance between state, professions and capital. Such an alliance seems likely to marginalise the interests of the individual in pursuing learning for their own self-fulfilment. (Hughes & Tight, 1995: 297)

Hughes and Tight's claims are problematic; in the first instance they seem to misconstrue the function of myths in society as being dubious devices to deceive people. I would argue rather that myth-making is, in many cases, a healthy means by which a people can project or visualise their hopes and aspirations for the future; the strategies, which are then engaged to realise these aims, are another matter. One can choose to see a purely instrumentalist move at play, but one can also choose to look at a broader picture and welcome initiatives associated with the learning society, such as learning to learn techniques or transferable skills as being powerful tools which affect the structuration of the individual.

Coffield (2002) is another voice warning us to beware of what lies beneath the policy rhetoric of the 'cosy consensus', which constitutes lifelong learning. He takes the proactive stance of calling for new social contracts to be formed between the state, business, trade unions and education in a bid to bring social justice in from the sidelines. He also indicates that informal learning is being undervalued and that it should be taken more into account.

The picture, thus far, leads one to believe that the learning society is failing as a policy, or alternatively that the policy is a dishonest one, and does not serve the interests of civil society. In the next section, we turn to examine some of the work and results, which are beginning to emerge which tell a more optimistic story.

European Policy for Lifelong Learning

The European Union is, relatively speaking, in the early stages of identity formation and, thus, is, to a large extent, an *imagined* political community (Anderson, 1983). Bodies, such as the European Commission and the Council of Europe, are in the business of myth-making and policy formation, as they endeavour to harness and create a new political entity with a set of shared goals, customs and values. Given the heterogeneity of the collection of nation states which currently comprises the European Union, with their due respect of subsidiarity, this is no easy task. The concept of the learning society serves a useful purpose in drawing together the disparate strands, by encouraging all citizens to buy into this dream, one which promotes social inclusion, respects diversity, and encourages economic growth. As a block, the EU is pitching itself against and comparing itself to its competitors, notably the USA and the Pacific Rim, in a wide range of areas, including education.

A seminal white paper, written in 1995 as a key text to support the launch of the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996, The European Commission's

Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society (EC, 1995), became a policy document which brought the learning and education agenda to the forefront in the European Union. The report states that individuals' place in society would increasingly be determined by their capacity to learn and master fundamental knowledge. There is a focus on the development and measurement of skills, the move, which, as we have seen, is much derided by the critics of the learning society turn. However, the White Paper does emphasise the more socially oriented dimension of the proposed changes when, in bold type it claims:

To examine education and training in the context of employment does not mean reducing them simply to a means of obtaining qualifications. The essential aim of education and training has always been personal development and the successful integration of Europeans into society through the sharing of common values, the passing on of cultural heritage and the teaching of self-reliance. (EC, 1995: 3)

The current EU Commissioner with responsibility for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism, Mr. Ján Figel, is focused on the competitive dimension of the global economy rather than the wider dimensions of lifelong learning, as the list and content of speeches delivered this year attest. His main message to the university sector is that it must undertake reform in three key areas: *attractiveness* (the EU compares unfavourably with US universities on the Shanghai and Times Education Supplement indices); *governance* (improving partnerships between the university and public authorities sectors); *finance* (a call to increase private sources of funding). http://europa.eu.int/comm/commission_barroso/figel/speeches/speeches_en.htm

Policy in the EU is followed swiftly by funding calls: Framework, Interreg, Asialink and Socrates, to mention but a few. Under the terms and conditions of these calls, applicants are expected to engage in research and development in keeping with the policy guidelines laid down by the EU. In the case of the learning society, there is a growing body of work which is beginning to showcase attempts to improve learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, in response to the call from the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 for the EU to become the 'most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world'. Member States, who doubt that the Lisbon Agreement will be achieved in the given time span, acknowledge this myth with scepticism.

In a comprehensive report, Colardyn and Bjornavold (2002) compare and contrast the ways in which different countries in Europe regulate standards and link informal and non-formal learning to formal learning. Their survey demonstrates that much work has commenced across different sectors and communities, and that there is a desire for EU countries to work towards increasing levels of shared principles and common goals.

Given the diversity inherent in the EU, however, there are problems in how meaning is made and how policy is translated in practice. Wenger states:

understanding is always straddling the known and the unknown in a subtle dance of the self. It is a delicate balance. Whoever we are,

understanding in practice is the art of choosing what to know and what to ignore in order to proceed with our lives. (Wenger, 1998: 41)

In a recent study of how policy is having a difficult time being delivered in the European context, Edwards and Boreham (2003) describe how the process of renegotiation and recontextualisation, which takes place as each local actor 'translates' or understands policy directives in the light of their own context, can lead to confusion and dilution of implementation. Edwards and Boreham describe this complex scenario as a 'failure' of collective sense-making (Edwards & Boreham, 2003: 419); however, I would not necessarily agree. In order for diversity and subsidiarity to be supported and maintained, there needs to be an allowance of different interpretations of core principles by individual Member States. In good time, such differences are bound to diminish in any case, given the homogenising nature of the forces of globalisation.

Many academics are now engaging themselves fully with the quest to enhance active democratic citizenship as a means of countenancing the more instrumental dimension of the learning society turn. Ranson (1998b) and Ranson and Stewart (1998) advocate strongly for a learning democracy, where the agency of citizens, individually and collectively, can shape the world we live in. In order for this to happen, a new policy is called for which 'expresses a new vision of the public domain' (Ranson, 1998b: 24). In Part Three we will look at examples of such policy being implemented, where citizenship values are fostered through projects associated with the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and Transferable skills.

European Policy in Practice: A Tale of Two Projects

The Council of Europe has, as a central aim, the facilitation of direct interaction of people coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By encouraging Europeans to take more responsibility for their lives, and thus promoting a unique sense of agency, a desired outcome of a policy informed by learner autonomy is the nurturing of an increasingly democratic active citizenry, with enhanced capability to respond to external demands and directives, and make more informed choices about their work and social welfare. The Council of Europe supports the concept of lifelong learning insofar as formal educational contexts cannot predict future linguistic and intercultural needs of individual learners. 'The main weight has to be carried by individuals as they face the challenges to their communicative abilities posed by situations as they arise' (Trim, 1997). Thus, they directed that a European Language Portfolio (ELP) be developed to assist the language learner to reflect on, and account for, learning processes and outcomes, both as a means of gaining greater control over the learning event, as well as being able to showcase samples of work to other interested bodies. The principles, which underpin the ELP, include amongst others: the deepening of mutual understanding and respect among citizens in Europe; the protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity; the promotion of life-long language and intercultural learning (CoE website <http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/>).

The portfolio remains a document wholly owned by the learner, and he or she is encouraged to maintain it throughout their learning career, not just while following a given module or programme of study. The ELP consists of three sections, which operate interactively as well as standing alone: (1) the language passport, (2) the language biography and (3) dossier of work.

The passport functions in a similar way to a travel passport, in that it gives a brief account of the identity of the bearer, in this case in relation to linguistic and intercultural competence. The biography, the second section of the portfolio, comprises a number of learning activities which are designed to assist the learner engage with the process of learning to learn in an active way. It asks the learner, for example, to write about their reasons for studying the target language or why they plan to spend a year abroad in a given destination and what they hope to gain from the experience. Short term goals are plotted, with the assistance of a series of 'I can do' statements, and the learner is encouraged to keep a learning journal as they progress with their learning. The final section of the ELP, the dossier, bears the closest resemblance to the notion of the artist's portfolio, with its function of showcasing work in progress. Learners can choose to include drafts of work, collaborative projects, audio and video materials, whatever they wish to choose as an expression of their capability. Again, the importance here lies in their ownership of their own work. The dossier can be used in a job interview situation or if a language learner is moving from one institutional setting to another, and those who would view the learning society as an instrumental turn to enhance employability and flexibility could choose to view the ELP in this light. This, however, in my view, is a narrow view of the full range of capabilities inherent in such a document.

In its 2004 call for submissions under the Lingua 2 banner, the Socrates action of the European Commission invited networked groups to submit a bid for funding to support language learning. The project Language On-Line Portfolio Project (LOLIPOP) was awarded funds to create an electronic version of the portfolio for dissemination in eight countries throughout Europe.

The project's aims are: the development and implementation of the on-line portfolio, the piloting of the tool in local environments, and the dissemination of the final product throughout Europe. As well as the innovative features of interactivity and online use, the LOLIPOP project is currently developing and implementing a comprehensive intercultural dimension to match the linguistic profile more commonly associated with ELPs. In most portfolios, the intercultural dimension is paid lip service to, rather than exploited to its full potential (Bruen *et al.*, forthcoming).

Another initiative focused on the language learner, the Transferable Skills project, is conducted by a consortium of third level colleges in Ireland, under the direction of the Careers Services of Trinity College Dublin, Dublin City University and Waterford Institute of Technology. The project looks at the skills that a language learner may develop – or at least has the potential to develop, given the right pedagogical environment. These skills are not the traditional ones associated with language learning, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, but are often seen as rather covert ones. They include skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, learning how to learn, etc.; and the

learner may be acquiring them without fully realising it. The following five skills were highlighted for specific development in the Transferable Skills pilot project undertaken: time management, coping with multiple tasks, planning, decision-making, and problem solving. Results from the pilot conducted lead to the conclusion that 'explicit development of transferable skills in academic programmes is a valuable pursuit as it can contribute to increasing students' self-confidence and provide them with a practical value-added element to their learning' (Sherry & Curry, 2005: 54).

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the myths, phantoms and promises of the learning society, a social construct which is currently being promoted by policymakers in the European Union in their bid to enhance economic competitiveness, while at the same time promoting social justice and democratic citizenship. The concept has entered the lexicon of many languages and the mindsets of many people, but it has its critics, who are sceptical that the twin aims will be achieved, predicting, rather, that the policy will be played out to the benefit of the captains of enterprise at the expense of society. The agency of educators, individually and collectively, is beginning to tell a different story, however. Samples of 'good practice' include, I would argue, initiatives, such as the ELP and the Transferable Skills project, which have been handed down to us by the policymakers so that we can turn their mythical constructs into reality. However, it is important to continue to listen to the critical voices, which serve us well with their reflexivity.

Science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths. (Karl Popper)

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