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Learning, Learning Communities and Globalisation: Policy Development and Its Impact on Implementation

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Introduction

The phenomenon we now describe as globalisation permeates the contemporary discourse about social policy. The language of globalisation features in much of the public debate about the state of the world from the volatility of the world's financial markets through concerns about the environment and wider debates about public health, poverty and more recently global terrorism.

The pervasiveness of globalisation and its influence is particularly evident in the resurgence of interest in environmental issues and climate change and also in the universal scramble for economic success through workforce development. A well-educated flexible, learning workforce has become one of the more generic solutions to establishing a continuing presence in the global market.

Learning and continuous learning are a policy solution for sustaining future economic success. The benefits of learning from an individualised economic perspective are well established. Policy makers however, are also aligning learning with both social and community regeneration.

This assignment offers an analysis of the policy imperative from the perspective of global drivers and moves on to discuss the centrality of learning to both social and economic regeneration. It then argues, through the discussion of a 'learning communities' solution, that an understanding of purpose (of learning and of learning communities as a concept) is from the outset an integral and fundamental part of the policy process; and that whilst social and economic benefits of learning are not mutually exclusive, the pursuit of economic benefit may not be the most appropriate route to expressed social outcomes.

The Global Context

In developing a debate about the links between education and economic growth, Wolf (2002, p.1) asserts that at the start of the 21st Century we inhabit a world in the grip of consensus 'The world's voters think their governments can and should deliver economic prosperity. Their elites agree with them and even agree with each other how to do it. Increasingly they sign up to the same package; free trade, market economics, the virtues of entrepreneurship and education, education, education'.

The universality and high level of consensus about this range of policy imperatives provides a vivid illustration of the phenomenon termed globalisation, or as Giddens, quoted in Field (2000, p.19) notes '...in the tendency towards globalisation'.

Drucker (1995) has proposed that we are no longer living in a period when we could continue to speak about 'western history' and 'western civilisation' but that we were moving into a time where the notion of 'world history' and a 'world civilisation' would dominate our thinking. Drucker (1995, p.67) argues that 'every few hundred years throughout western history, a sharp transformation has occurred. In a matter of a few decades, society altogether rearranges itself—its world view, its basic values, its social and political structures, its arts and its key institutions. Fifty years later a new world exists'.

Given the apparent all embracing nature of globalisation and the rapidity of technological change, Drucker's timescales seem somewhat pessimistic. There is an ongoing debate about the scope, nature, pervasiveness and importance of globalising influences. What seems clear however is that with the onset of rapid, reliable and accessible communications technology the world is becoming smaller. Incidents taking place in one part of the world are rapidly communicated across the globe. Our familiarity with the metaphor of the butterfly's wings embedded within the discourse of chaos theory is readily transferable to the reality of the world's financial markets. Anxiety and uncertainty in one part of the world exerts an immediate and causal effect across the globe. The fuel crisis in the early 70s, and the ecological disasters of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, provided a stark and demonstrable illustration that the world had become more aware of the global interconnectedness that is implicit in the term 'globalisation'.

In an expansion of his concept of McDonaldisation, Ritzer (2004, p.160) defines globalisation as '...the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organisation of social life on a global scale, and the growth of a shared global consciousness'. The idea of a rising global consciousness is most apparent through the increasing evidence of a global voice about environmental concern or the rising tide of protest that accompanies the inter-governmental meetings of the G8.

In addition Ritzer (2004, p.147) develops the idea of homogenisation to describe the almost universal availability of a number of well-known products and brands. McDonalds, for example, is known and recognised the world over, its products

are standardised across the globe. In the same way governments across the world are developing policy responses to a range of problems, learning being one of the more prominent and universal policy areas.

The Policy Response.

Learning, as an issue for policy, at global, national and local levels is in the ascendancy across the whole of the developed world and increasingly seen as fundamental to progress in the developing world. See Holford et al (1998), Longworth (1999), Field (2000), and Field (ed) (2002). From the perspective of problem identification there is a degree of convergence about the issue. Parsons (1995, p.243) terms this 'a convergence of concerns', the concern in this case being global competitiveness. The policy response however, is another matter and there are no universal solutions on the horizon, although the power and pervasiveness of the discourse and the clarity of the policy imperative remain contextually significant. Parsons (1995, p.242) whilst highlighting a globalising influence in relation to agenda setting also states: '... the fact remains that the power of decision and the capacity and will to implement remains largely located within nation states'. Bottery (2004, p.50) cites a degree of resistance in some Continental European countries to the prevailing neo liberal market philosophy, highlighting freedoms and flexibilities at national level when stating that; 'It is important to point out ... that these movements and forces (global in scope) are both culturally and nationally mediated'.

In the introduction to White paper The Learning Age (DfEE 1998), David Blunkett, at the time Secretary of State for Education, wrote in both eloquent and emotive language of the centrality of (lifelong) learning in a modern democratic society. Blunkett's writing in the context of a rapidly changing (global) world gave prominence to links between both social and economic agendas; embracing the idea of learning linked to economic growth and at the same time developing a clear rationale for the positive benefits of learning in a broader social and community context. The following quote from Blunkett (DfEE 1998, p.7) illustrates this point.

'To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite, no matter how highly educated or highly paid. Instead we need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people. As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps to fulfil our potential and open doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings'.

This statement not only raises the issue of rapid change but also binds both social and economic prosperity to citizenship, community and above all learning. Learning becomes an issue that underpins a key policy aim i.e. that of creating a civilised society. I will return to this point later in this assignment.

As previously noted on page 2 of this assignment there is an assumption that one of the roles and responsibilities of government is to ensure the provision of circumstances that deliver economic success. Alongside this there is also a very strong political and policy discourse supporting the link between education and economic prosperity. Wolf (2002, p.5) states this in very strong terms asserting that '... the belief in education for growth runs deep and wide beyond our political classes, replacing socialism as the great secular faith of our age'. The links between public policy on learning and the notion of economic success have become bound together to the extent that, as Wolf (2002, p.13) points out 'in the process we have almost forgotten that education ever had any purpose other than to promote growth'. This idea has become a key driver and justification for the intensification of government involvement in this particular policy arena. If, as stated above, fostering economic success and bringing the benefits thereof to its people is a legitimate area for Government involvement then, the argument continues, Government must surely be interested in the well established and almost incontestable rhetoric of a link between the two. Whilst governments may not necessarily move beyond the rhetoric of the prevailing discourse in order to elucidate and develop a coherent vision for learning, they are most certainly interested in the potential attendant outcomes.

Parsons (1995,p.87) promotes the idea that the 'genesis of a policy involves the recognition of a problem'. The recognition of this problem legitimates the arena as one in which government can (and should) become involved. In addition the discourse surrounding the generation of the issue may also define the parameters within which the 'problem' is addressed and within which the policy is ultimately framed. Thus in terms of generating policy about learning where do we look for the problem?

To an extent the problem is located in the globalising agenda previously outlined and the proposal that in order to ensure a successful economy we need a flexible highly skilled, well-motivated workforce. The economy of Great Britain, whilst currently seen as relatively successful, is in terms of the international community under performing. Our qualifications and skills base remains somewhat impoverished. This apparent lack of a competitive learning edge provides both the legitimising rationale and the 'issue energy' for policy development. The Corporate Plan for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC September, 2003) notes that:

'Of all the OECD countries, only Mexico and Turkey have fewer 16-18 year olds in education and training than we do. An estimated one in five adults in the United Kingdom has difficulties with basic literacy and numeracy...approximately 30% of our workforce is qualified to an intermediate skill level (considered to be a measure of employability) compared with 51% In France and 65% in Germany'.

Government having acknowledged the existence of this problem must be seen to act. Inactivity would provide a very visible message to competitor nations and potential investors. Failure to address the acknowledged skills deficit by implementing remedial policies would signal a nation resigned to its destiny as a low skills economy. For those wishing to invest in this country as a base for future production, or as a home for purely financial investment, a failure to fill this policy vacuum would provide a powerful statement of intent (or in this case

a lack of intent). The problem as outlined above therefore becomes the legitimate territory for policy formulation.

I have previously mentioned that the discourse surrounding policy may limit some of the policy parameters. Parsons (1995, p.89) also notes that 'the way in which we define a problem has a crucial impact on the policy response'. If for example the 'problem', in terms of learning, is defined as being a low skills base, the answer becomes one of providing a means by which the low skills base can be raised. Along with other nations facing similar issues, the solution becomes one that is linked directly to the provision of more learning focused on the workforce and the 'skills required by industry' in a competitive global economy. This is a structural response to a perceived structural problem. An alternative approach would be to consider learning from a broader philosophical base or begin to approach the issue from an entirely social perspective perhaps giving prominence to citizenship.

At one level this somewhat instrumentalist approach is compelling, its simplicity and familiarity are readily understood and implementation does not therefore present the potential destabilising risk of the unknown or unfamiliar. From a different perspective it offers a linear and positivist solution to a (perceived) problem and at the same time has the effect of discouraging any challenges that may re define the problem or that may elicit alternative proposals to the existing (policy) solution. Whilst Parsons (1995, p.17) proposes that '.. in order to develop better policy governments need better information', it seems clear that the source of that information and the means by which it is gathered are a significant influence. If, for example, the initial policy premise is fragile and its justification somewhat tenuous then the information collected in its name will, almost inevitably, reinforce the same pattern.

This approach is illustrated in the information used to support the government's consultation on the 21st Century Skills Strategy (TSO 2003) stated that:

'Output per hour worked is 25 per cent higher in the US and Germany and over 30% higher in France than in the UK. While we compare well at higher education level, our percentage of the workforce qualified to intermediate skill levels is low: 28 per cent in the UK compared with 51 per cent in France and 65 per cent in Germany'.

This focus on quantitative data illustrates a narrow and somewhat instrumental approach to understanding a complex phenomenon i.e. the relationship between economic output at a national level and workforce qualifications/skills base. Field (2000, p.21) proposes that in the arena of lifelong learning, even given the very favourable policy climate, there has been 'a failure to generate much that is new or innovative in terms of specific policy measures' and that measures themselves are focused, almost universally, on one single area, this being '...interventions designed to improve the skills and flexibility of the workforce'.

Field also consolidates the globalised origins of this policy asserting that (2000, p.3) '... public policy tends to be driven, globally, by largely economic concerns: competitiveness, rather than citizenship, is the primary focus for policy'.

Perhaps, and in pursuit of a solution to a particular problem, we are addressing the issue in a way that becomes almost self-defeating. If our understanding of the issue, our definition of the policy context is partial, perhaps even misguided, then supporting research in the form of the policy process and the ensuing policy solution may be equally superficial.

The assignment thus far has offered an analysis of global influences upon the policy arena and in particular focused on national policy related to adult learning. The next section moves on to discuss two particular approaches to a purpose for learning these being 'lifelong learning' and 'lifelong education'. Whilst the terms are often used interchangeably they carry with them quite different sets of assumptions.

The Centrality of Learning

Faure (1972) describes the conditions for the development of a 'learning society' and learning in society in terms of the integration of the age of participants and context within which learning takes place. Thus to achieve a learning society, learning should take place in a range of formal and informal settings and engage across the whole of the age cohort. In this context learning becomes an arena for citizenship and participation. This discourse, according to Boshier (1998, p.13, quoted in Holford et al), is one of education.

The Learning Age (DfEE,1998, p.7) outlines the contribution that learning can make to both social and economic prosperity supporting the development of a 'civilised society' and promoting active citizenship. In addition there are equally strong links to the role of learning in community development, strengthening the family and promoting access to the arts and literature.

The strongest connections in the Learning Age are those which echo the relationship between learning and global economic prosperity. As a generalisation this approach exemplifies the idea of a learning market. In this context undertaking a learning episode becomes a rational decision taken by the learner. The sum total of these individual decisions becomes the impact of policy. This is according to Boshier (1998, p.12) the discourse of 'lifelong learning'

In many publications the language of learning and that of education are used almost interchangeably. However in the context of the two publications above, learning and education, represent quite different perspectives which, to an extent, illustrate the question that is central to this paper i.e. that purpose of policy and the approach to policy development and implementation are inextricably linked.

Boshier (1998, p.8), in an article reflecting on the 25 years since Faure, summarises the tensions between these views as follows:

'Practitioners should be wary because lifelong learning denotes a less emancipatory and more oppressive set of relationships than does lifelong education. Lifelong learning discourses tend to render social conditions invisible. Predatory capitalism is unproblematic. Lifelong learning is nested in vocationalism. Learning is for acquiring skills that will enable the learner to

work harder, faster and smarter and, as such, enable their employer to better compete in the global economy'.

On the one hand education is seen as emancipatory, a route to freedom and choice, and on the other primacy is given to the skills required to sustain a successful and competitive economy. The needs of the business community and of the economy seemingly merit a higher value than those of the individual.

Accepting the idea that learning and success in learning can have positive implications for the individual is not problematic. I have alluded to this at an earlier point in this paper. There is a positive association between time spent in learning and future earning power. Wolf (2002, p.15) notes that:

'Whether or not education is financially good for their country, the past half century teaches that it is certainly good for the educated. The more education you acquire, the higher your income is likely to be, and the less likely you are to experience long periods of long or even short term unemployment'.

From a policy perspective and in the context of sustaining a highly skilled and flexible workforce able to compete in a global economy, encouraging and embedding the notion of lifelong learning would appear to be essential

Successful learners are not only better off financially, they are more engaged and more connected. Successful learners are more likely to engage in learning in the future. Those who are not so successful illustrate a different picture. Only half the adults with poor literacy skills have a job compared to four out of five adults with the best literacy skills.

The terminal age of initial education is also a key and consistent predictor of participation in learning as an adult. Sargent (2002, p. xiv) states that 'Seventy eight percent of those who are current learners are likely to take up learning in the future. Whilst only 13% of those who have not participated since leaving full time education expect to participate in future learning'.

Whilst the policy focus is on workforce development and the economy we have already noted that there is also a social context. This social context aligns learning with the a wider notion of a civilised society embracing social regeneration, community and the arts.

Given this tentative elaboration of purpose what are the imperatives for implementation and change? One of the policy solutions proffered by government is the development of learning communities. This proposal features in 21st Century Skills Strategy (TSO, 2003, p.105) and is worthy of further examination.

Learning Communities.

Griffin (in Holford et al 1998, p.22) states that:

'As in the case of other desirable social objectives there is often a perceived gap between the ideal and the reality, the theory and the practice, the promise and the performance.'

Ivan Lewis notes (2004, p.12) that "learning communities" is a concept whose time has come. This statement echoes that attached to a number of related, and from this perspective, linked themes. The learning society for example could sit adjacent to the notion of learning cultures and could also be seen as the overarching outcome from the development of learning communities. According to the Longworth (1999, p.109). a Learning Community is: ' a city, town or region which mobilizes all its resources in every sector to develop and enrich all its human potential for the fostering of personal growth, the maintenance of social cohesion and the creation of prosperity'.

Again the link between social and economic issues is central. The term learning community also offers something of a comfort zone. There is a synergy between the two words and a sense of added value in the combination of learning and community. Learning and the idea of continuous learning is seen as beneficial to both the individual and, in the context of economic competitiveness and social cohesion, to society as a whole. Boshier (1998, p.4) suggests that :

'there is considerable enthusiasm for learning (lifelong) which, in its most exaggerated or utopian elaborations, is touted as the New Jerusalem which leads to a bountiful and promised land'.

The term community can itself have a number of meanings ranging from the defined geographical area in which people live, through groups that share common cultures, race, ethnicity or religion or group with common interests and concerns such as sporting interests or political beliefs. Meanings also overlap. The defined geographical area may also be the location of a particular culture, ethnic group or disadvantaged community. Importantly the term itself may offer benevolent or malevolent undertones—i.e. some communities may be malevolent – others may be exclusive.

Putnam's (2000) analysis of community and the range of support and affiliation potentials within communities offer insights about the mutual obligations that are generated and sustained through social networks. For example Putnam proposes (2000.p. 20) that : 'social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand, companionship or a shoulder to cry on' and also for '...the rules of conduct and mutual obligations they sustain'.

Learning communities, as a concept, can appeal to a range of different groups for quite different reasons. Policy makers and politicians can link the idea to the flexible and dynamic economy required to be competitive in the globalised market place of the 21st Century. Learning community can also be linked to the regeneration of social capital, community networks and some of the more intrinsic and democratic aspects of learning.

Thompson (2002, p.9) in a booklet designed for community learning practitioners describes community in the following terms:

'Community is a word that unlike group, area or neighbourhood has a tremendous feel-good factor associated with it. Community is about feeling secure, being on the same wavelength...being able to count on each other especially if you are poor or a member of a relatively powerless minority'.

Similar assertions have previously been made about lifelong learning to the point that its benefits and worth are almost without challenge. Who, for example, would disagree with the statement that 'Learning Pays' and who would contest the benefits of 'community'?

A Question of purpose

Ivan Lewis, in his role as Parliamentary Undersecretary for Skills and Vocational Education, links learning and community within the context of relative exclusion and the need for honesty about the immensity of the restructuring taking place in the world.

Lewis believes there is a need to raise the status of learning in communities in which low aspirations are endemic. In an article published in *Adults Learning* (2004, p.12) he observes that: 'People trapped in these circumstances need to feel that they are members of a learning community right down to the affiliation and recognition of a membership card'.

'You can get better leadership, better support.. but if you don't tackle the fact that in many areas there is a sort of culture of low aspiration which permeates that community in every sense there will always be a glass ceiling in terms of what you are able to do to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their potential'.

Thus, by developing and implementing the concept of the learning community, aspirations are raised and the idea of learning becomes part of a way of living, '...ingrained in the psyche of every individual, family and community, every workplace'. Lewis (2004, p.12) The Learning Community in this context becomes the answer, not only to economic success, but also to exclusion, social division and regeneration.

Individuals working together, share success and gradually build networks and confidence within the community. Success may increase individual and community esteem, having the effect of lifting the collective aspirations of the whole 'community'.

By encouraging learning and developing and sharing approaches to learning individuals and groups of individuals achieve success. The extent to which these successes are shared and celebrated, the extent to which supportive networks are formed and the extent to which the knowledge gained by individuals is then transferred into the community, for mutual benefit, is a measure of the success of this approach to the development of a learning community.

The diversity of potential approaches to the concept of learning communities mirrors the equally diverse range of potential routes to implementation. The following two extremes on the implementation continuum are offered by way of illustration.

Approach 1 (a target driven market forces approach)

One approach that appears to have gained favour, is to parachute the learning solution into a community with a high profile 'funding defined' initiative. In this case the funding body and its agencies become the source of the initiative. The community is, at some point, invited to participate in the development of a learning community, the needs led aspect of this approach being defined by the funding agency. The needs of the individuals within the community are in reality defined by the perceptions (and targets) of the funding body. Needs become a function of potential funding streams, external and short term. Access to opportunity becomes a function of what is fundable, formulaic and reductive. For example if the perception is that of high unemployment then employability skills would be defined as a need, employability skills and the supporting curriculum would become the solution. The focus of the learning community becomes vocational learning

The targets of the funding body are transferred as a deficit into a prescribed model of a learning community.. In this circumstance, the solution is 'my' solution for 'your' future. Once the initial pump priming period is completed ownership of the 'learning community' is 'transferred' back to the community.

I would relate this approach to the more market driven models for learning where need purports to relate to the individual and is often championed as such. In reality however need is institutionally located. Definition of need at individual and community level takes place within a context defined outside the community. There is little doubt that in a world of short term funding and funding driven targets this approach can (indeed will) be successful. Evidence will be collected, targets will be met, the programme evaluated and success announced in an appropriate and timely way

Approach 2 (a social inclusion model)

A second approach would be to adopt a lower key, ground up process, working with existing community groups, perhaps in a multi agency setting. This would facilitate building coalitions and relationships from existing budding points, developing the discourse over time, and building confidence, trust and esteem between individuals and groups within a given community. This would entail working in the communities with greatest need and working with the individuals with greatest need. These processes are by definition slow. Building cohesion, building social capital and facilitating the development of learning opportunities, which, for want of a better description, are needs led, needs driven and based on the emergent individual and community aspirations.

This is not a short-term cyclical imperative, but a longer-term approach based on a vision that embraces and encourages inclusion, participation and sustainability. The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998) points out that successful regeneration involves working with communities and not parachuting in solutions, not giving our solutions to your future. (1998, p. 40) ' For local regeneration to be effective communities need to be involved. Too often the notion of community involvement is given cursory attention whilst the pressures to implement policies quickly have meant that bureaucrats fall back on their own assumptions rather than consulting the community'.

Change in this context becomes a mirror of the learning process. Change is about learning and in particular being given the opportunity to learn new meanings, and importantly, an understanding of choice and personal responsibility. The opportunity to learn is part of the process by which the learning community develops. Learning becomes intrinsic to individual and community development. There is a degree of consistency between purpose and the methods by which that purpose is taken forward and implemented. The community itself is part of the reflexive learning experience and as it learns, changes. Ranson (1998, p.255) ' a learning society (and community) is one which has to learn to become a different form of society (community) if it is to shape the transformation that it is experiencing'.

Summary

The policy of 'learning communities' has been traced from the influence of drivers linked to ideas inherent in the notion of globalisation through the importance of learning within the discourse about successful global economies and the workforce qualities required for development and sustenance. Learning in the context of a deficit is cast as a problem and becomes legitimate territory for policy formulation.

The idea that learning is important to future economic development has become almost universal. The solution of more learning is equally dominant. However within this discourse there is choice about a number of things perhaps the most fundamental being the purpose of the learning that is being promoted.

A second and linked choice then becomes the type of learning that we validate in support of the economic/social agenda. Paradoxically many of the qualities that we highlight as desirable relate to the more social aspects of learning. Many of the benefits of learning are couched in terms of social and community regeneration, citizenship and the notion of a civil society. Yet the policy drive, its implementation and funding framework remain firmly embedded in a model based on economic benefits, a market forces paradigm. The language of policy as I have described outlines a more unified and integrated approach.

The concept of learning communities clearly has utility when attached and aligned to purpose. The government's current approach appears to define that purpose in relation to reducing disadvantage and raising achievement and aspiration. However the means by which this policy is implemented translate into

actions and experiences that link directly to a very narrow definition of learning linked, almost exclusively, to workforce development.

In practice when the concept of learning communities is applied in this way the dominant approach to implementation is best described as a deficit model. In these circumstances 'learning deficits' within an identified community (or society) are corrected by the imposition of externally validated learning solutions. The initial learning deficit may also be the trigger for the identification of a 'problem' that then requires a policy solution. Solutions are imposed on communities and the individuals within those communities. Current funding models are inflexible, perhaps even blind to individual and social contexts and tend therefore exacerbate the notion of a deficit. Yet policy, as it is written and outlined, supports individual and community need and best practice would appear to define a clear and important role for democratic engagement.

Purpose and an understanding of purpose are key aspects of this debate. In order to achieve sustained and sustainable change that makes a difference to the lives of individuals and communities, models that are genuinely needs based and which promote local democracy, community ownership and engagement from the outset appear more likely to be successful.

Models of learning communities based on external validation of need and which, to that extent, lack integrity, authenticity and consonance will, almost by definition, have the effect of reinforcing the status quo --- on the way to meeting high quality, world beating targets.

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