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Lifelong Learning, Global Social Justice, and Sustainability

Leona M. English
Peter Mayo

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"This book provides a fascinating account of the emergence of current concept of 'lifelong learning' from its origins in UNESCO's notion of Lifelong Education and as subsequently transformed through the work of the OECD and the European Commission. What was originally an expansive and essentially humanist idea, the authors argue, mutated into a narrower and more instrumentalist concept with pervasive influence on global education policy. This critical account is distinguished by giving due attention to the meanings of lifelong learning in the Global South and makes a forceful case for a new vision of the concept geared towards a global citizenship. It is written in an accessible style and is likely to resonate with a wide audience of adult educators."

—Andy Green, *Professor of Lifelong Learning, University College London, UK*

"This excellent study reconnects us with the multidimensional theory and praxis of lifelong learning: a book that lifts the spirits in a time of crisis."

—Maren Elfert, *Lecturer in Education and Society, King's College London, UK*

"This book is an important and wide-ranging critical exposition of the prevalent contemporary neo-liberal discourse of lifelong learning in the EU and the Western world in general. It narrates the appropriation of the UNESCO-based humanist agenda of lifelong education in the 1970s and 1980s by an agenda intended purely to serve the ambitions of economic competitiveness and the labour market. In this context it can be read as a passionate appeal to progressive educators in the contemporary world to serve the true purpose of education—learning to be. As such it is as much a must read book for them as for scholars."

—Kenneth Wain, *Professor of Education, University of Malta, and author of* The Learning Society in a Postmodern World (2004)

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In memory of Anthony Mayo (1961–2019) and Ted English (1952–2019)

Acknowledgments

This book was written during 2020 when the world was dealing with the aftermath of Brexit, the turmoil of Trump, the continued effects of mass migration, and the panic of Covid. Yet, many global actors were working persistently to facilitate and cultivate lifelong learning strategies, theories, and policies, all in an effort to contribute to a more robust civil society. We dedicate this book to those who continue in the face of adversity and who really believe, along with Irish poet, Derek Mahon that "everything is going to be alright."

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction Lifelong Learning: The Serpent Beneath the Innocent Flower?

Abstract This chapter introduces the topic of Lifelong Learning/Education giving prominence to people and movements who advocated education and learning as a lifelong process. It is argued that although the concept of Lifelong Learning seems a harmless concept, this cannot be further from the truth. It has been twisted in such a way that it reduces learning to a set of narrow competences suited to a Neoliberal economy.

Keywords Innocence · Insidiousness · Social purpose · Reductionism · Popular education

This book addresses one of the most pervasive concepts in current educational discourse: Lifelong Learning. This concept is more commonly used in Europe than the Americas where, in the Southern cone and the rest of Latin America, the terms *Educación de jóvenes y adultos* in Spanish and *Educação de Jovens e Adultos* in Brazilian Portuguese (education of

Lady Macbeth urges her husband Macbeth to dissemble in Shakespeare's eponymous 'Scottish play': "Look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it" (*Macbeth*, Act 1, Sc.5, l. 64–65).

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youth and adults) are preferred. The story is different in Europe where lifelong learning is used interchangeably with different sectors of education, most notably in reference to the education of adults and even older adults.[1] In North America, the term is more likely to be adult education or occasionally, learning across the lifespan.

Of course, the term lifelong learning looks all so innocent, so straightforward, bordering on "stating the obvious." It looks like a rallying "wishy washy" call to be inclusive of all persons. And indeed it might well prove to be. One of us vividly recalls a *tête-à-tête* with a high-ranking university official during a reception at the end of a book launch in 2007. He said something to this effect: "Can anyone disagree with lifelong learning? No room for discord here…?" The occasion warranted a diplomatic silence with the mere utterance of a "hmmm." A more elaborate retort would have been: it depends on one's interpretation. As critical educators, we are wary of terms that appear disarmingly innocent when they serve a hegemonic purpose. Depending on one's perspective, they might well, in the scheming Lady Macbeth's words, "look like the innocent flower but" be "the serpent under it."

The more widespread and pervasive the term lifelong learning becomes, and the more policy-inducing it is in the process, the more likely it is to serve a hegemonic purpose. By hegemonic purpose, we mean, echoing Antonio Gramsci, that it garners consent, popular consent, for a given state of affairs, as we shall show and argue in this tract. Hegemony, in Gramsci's elaboration of this ancient Greek word, implies leadership and direction, the intertwining of force and consent (Gramsci 1975).

Lifelong Learning plays an important role in spreading consensus for a project that has become all pervasive to the point that it is part and parcel of "common sense," the way many of us make sense of the world without noting the contradictions rendered visible by the stark reality of everyday lives and the research which serves to dispute the assumption in question: the concept of a lifelong approach to education and learning. It might not have been so pervasive in its earlier, non-hegemonic conceptualization as Lifelong Education (Faure et al. 1972). It was expansive in scope and was born out of the necessity to promote, recognize, and validate education in its different formats—education for and of all, if you will. Lifelong Education was also born out of a post-War sense that education in all its forms must be promoted to combat negative forces (Elfert 2015, 2017). Other than either simply rhetoric or, in its most profound variety of meanings, the subject of scholarly, philosophical debates, exegeses, or

ruminations, it had little direct effect on policy, save for policy documents provided by, for instance, UNESCO. The term could be bandied around with little consequence.

Maybe it was genuinely the term's innocence-exuding apparel which lent credence to the university official's statement that we can all agree on it. We can all agree on a concept that seems "harmless," often deceptively so. We will show, in the later chapters of this book, that Lifelong Education had positive dimensions, beginning with its focus on education in broader terms. The parameters were widened. And, a possible reason for this widening of the parameters is provided in a chapter that follows. All fell in synch with the politics of a major organization that promoted it then. That was UNESCO with its "Third World" (read: majority world) orientation. We will show that the nature of membership and superpower presence in UNESCO had much to do with this.

The concept was, of course, not perfect. As with most concepts, it had its flaws and, despite its overall left-wing tenor (Wain 2004, p. 17), had contradictory individualizing sub-concepts that lend themselves to easy appropriation by forces with interests that seemed at the furthest remove from those of UNESCO (Borg and Mayo 2007, Bauman 2013). We would say they were eventually mercilessly exploited for a specific ideological end. This is when LLE/LLL took on a stronger, yet narrower, socioeconomic meaning and was tied very closely with labor market goals. Prior to that, as far as UNESCO is concerned, it had the virtue of helping us see education more expansively. It helped affirm education beyond schooling, although the latter remained important, and beyond the time-conditioned state that we associate with the more traditional notions of schooling.

This promotion of lifelong education coincided with emphasis being placed on different forms of popular, Indigenous and nonformal education. Significant amounts of literature in these areas were produced especially in fields such as adult continuing education and comparative education[2]. One might argue that this helped further growth in these areas. Latin America and Africa gained greater visibility, especially as many African countries attained their independence in the very late 50s and early 60s. Some were odd formations through colonially devised boundaries in the shape of neat rectangles or quasi-rectangles that were far removed from Indigenous boundaries. Conflicts arose around different groups lumped together (e.g. the late 60s and very early 70s conflict in and around Biafra). We read about the colonial legacies and decolonizing

possibilities for several aspects of life in these relatively new nation states, including, we would argue, education. We began to read about Nyerere, Cabral, and Nkrumah regarding an education that never ends. We became familiar with works on Africa, with regard to nonformal education (it provided a Southern dimension to Out-of-School Education), by African and non-African scholars, such as Paul Wangoola, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Joel Samoff, Frank Youngman, Ali Abdi, Peter Rule, Ruth Modipa, and Catherine Odora Hoppers. As for Latin America, Paulo Freire is undoubtedly the key figure and major source of inspiration for education as an integral component of a lifelong *praxis*, although his links with LLL are tenuous, as will be shown and argued later. The list of scholars who have contributed to the literature on nonformal education in Latin America promoting or critical of lifelong education/learning, or a notion of ongoing education that would fit such a discussion, includes Rosa Maria Torres, Carlos Alberto Torres, Daniel Schugurensky, Nelly Peñalosa Stromquist, Thomas J. La Belle, Timothy Ireland, Rebecca Tarlau, Gustavo Fischman, Vanilda Paiva, Liam Kane, Luis Gandin, Maria Teresa Muraca, Carlos Ornelas, and Moacir Gadotti, to name but a few. They all wrote on nonformal education and, while not all invoked LLL/LLE, they provided those, who sought to internationalize them, with much grist for the mill.

We read about broader conceptions of education through revolutionary and post-independence projects, some actually gaining UNESCO awards. Cuba, Tanzania, Nicaragua, and Grenada came to the fore. While easy to romanticize, especially when revolutions were concerned, particular interpretations of ongoing education were provided, as figures, contemporary or historical, such as Ernesto "Che" Guevara, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Augusto Cesar Sandino, Josè Marti, Simon Rodriguez (the teacher of Simon Bolivar), and *José* Carlos *Mariátegui (La Chira)* were heralded as people who advocated and, in the case of some, embodied "praxis" as a lifelong process. It is common for those staging revolutions to invoke figures from the countries' past and present them as the precursors of the revolution. The revolution is often presented as the continuation of a process that these figures started (e.g. Augusto Cesar Sandino in Nicaragua, Emiliano Zapata in Chiapas, Mexico, Omar Al-Mukthar in the post-1969 Gaddafi-ruled Libya, more recently Simon Bolivar in Chavez-led Venezuela). It is not uncommon to see them referred to as advocating education on the lines of a lifelong process.

Those of Marxist inspiration would regard revolutionary praxis as a lifelong concern and hence a form of ongoing lifelong education. In other parts of the world even Jesus Christ was presented as a lifelong educator to those embracing the Christian faith, and this would not be at odds with popular images in Latin America where there is often a juxtaposition between the suffering Christ and Che Guevara with the concept of the *Sangre de Cristo* (Blood of Christ) having great resonance.[3] One of us recalls a text on display at the Catholic center on campus (St. Joe's College) at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, heralding Christ as the Lifelong Educator which connects with the view of Christian formation as an ongoing process of lifelong learning and transformation as professed by Lisa Kimball (2014) from Virginia Theological Seminary, Ronald Habermas (2008), or even Habermasian scholar (Jürgen Habermas, of course), Michael Welton (1993).[4]

As for countries emerging from colonialism or in the throes of a revolution, popular and informal/nonformal education provided an appropriate context for Indigenous and revolutionary learning which would fuel the imagination of those writing about LLE. There was a charm and mystique about UNESCO's then master concept for education. Recall that UNESCO itself was very much involved in a transition to civilian rule in at least one Latin Arc European country, Portugal. Popular education, couched as Lifelong Education, inspired by Latin America, was at the forefront of the democratic reaction to the former authoritarianism of the Salazar-Caetano military junta. The "revolution of the carnations," brought about by the "Captains' Movement" acted as a spur for the flourishing of popular culture in the context of Lifelong Education in Southern Europe (Melo 1985). A paper outlining popular culture efforts in Portugal was presented at the 1984 international conference on Mediterranean initiatives in Lifelong Education for participation (Melo 1985).

This exciting and imagination-fueling proposition had to coexist however with the *realpolitik* of economic development, which entailed the reality of acquiring the skills for survival, as individuals and as a nation, in a competitive global environment (Carnoy and Torres 1990). With the notable exception of Cuba, the revolutionary aspect of one type of lifelong education petered out or was suddenly halted through such circumstances as: (1) the crushing of a revolution—Grenada (2) the toning down of a potentially anti-statist adult education (Bhola 1988,

p. 31) and, because of this, the suspension of a Freirean popular education coordinator—Portugal (Lind and Johnston 1986, pp. 61), (3) the 1990 electoral defeat and the eventual "selling out" of a once inspiring force—Nicaragua and the Sandinistas (Borg and Mayo 2007), (4) a change in leadership and economic direction—Tanzania. Much of this was precipitated by an important global event that was the collapse of "actually existing socialism" best exemplified by the fall in 1990 of the Berlin Wall and the demise, following the short-lived coup, in 1991, of the Soviet Union. It had an effect on revolutionary politics in Latin America, as did the eventual demise of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua (Borg and Mayo 2007, p. 38).

The democratic and revolutionary imaginary of alternative lifelong education was severely jolted by these and other events and developments. Once again, the above projects were not necessarily heralded, with the exception of Portugal (Melo 1985), under the rubric of LLE but they would easily have fitted the kind of thinking that falls in line with UNESCO's expansive view of the concept. This is often manifest in the writings of exponents such as the then Head of UNESCO's Lifelong Education Unit in Paris, Ettore Gelpi (Gelpi 1985, 2002), to whom we dedicate a separate chapter.

In the 1990s, a new all-pervasive philosophy "called all in doubt" with the bloodiest of its birth pangs having occurred much earlier, precisely in contexts which would have constituted fertile ground for popular nonformal education, namely Chile first, Argentina second and Turkey third, but which was rendered more universal by Thatcherism in the UK (1979, the year ironically marking the Sandinista revolution) and Reaganomics (1981 onward). Lifelong education was still a much bandied about concept at the time, still part of an appealing *doxa*, but that was gradually to change, especially as we entered the 1990s. This was the decade in which UNESCO tried to reclaim its slipping status in the international sphere. Threatened by the increasing power of the instrumentalist OECD, UNESCO upped the ante in inviting EU Commissioner Jacques Delors to head up a commission to study education for the new millennium, which was just around the corner. The Delors Commission was late to the party, as instrumentalism had already taken hold and there were few traces of the humanism and hope of the Faure days. When Delors' *Learning: the Treasure Within*, was released in 1996, it continued the rhetoric of UNESCO's emphasis on citizenship

and claimed a space for learning across the lifespan, but it was too late, too philosophical and too removed from what was happening globally.

The global milieu in which Delors was writing was not reflected in his document. The creep of neoliberalism into education had long begun. This neoliberalism was a concept that was to change the view of LLE drastically; it worked in pandemic like ways to infiltrate all movements and connections. And, as in all pandemics, our language shifted to meet the challenge. Rather than LLE, we were exposed to an all-pervasive concept of Lifelong Learning (henceforth LLL), a not politically innocent change in terminology as will be explained in the chapters that follow. We argue, with others, that the old concept of LLE was disfigured almost beyond recognition. It became the "Trojan Horse," as many critical educators labeled it, for ushering in a market-oriented notion of learning from cradle to the grave, well suited for fortifying the workforce in the 20–65 age bracket and beyond. Under neoliberalism, the individual assumed far greater responsibility for the cost of education and the state assumed far less. Private donors and foundations were invited to take over education and to control it (Field 2001). The reasons for this change in the discourse will be provided in the relevant chapter. All we would state at this stage is that, for those like us who adhere to an expansive, broad humanistic and ecologically sensitive notion of lifelong learning, in the spirit of Faure, the concept while, for some, still looking like the innocent flower, became, for others like us, the serpent under it.

It is this trajectory that the Pivot book traces, from the initial UNESCO discourse to the neoliberal conversion and hijacking of the concept to the hope and possibilities offered by an alternative conceptualization or series of conceptualizations. We talk of UNESCO at one stage having a Utopian vision of LLE (at least in the 1960s and 1970s), as will be argued.[5] In reality, even in alternative forms (alternative to the hegemonic neoliberal one of LLL), it would make more sense to talk of heterotopian visions. This affects learning within justice-oriented social movements. In this regard, we will look at LLL from a gendered and intersectional perspective and, in addition, from the perspective of how a nation state, a member of the "supranational state" that is the European Union, sold on to an economy-oriented view of LLL, seeks to articulate ideas "in and against" this hegemonic discourse to broaden the agenda. It does so, in our view, in an attempt, at the level of a policy document, to respond to national concerns, an approach that resonates with other nations also having regional concerns.