

Diluted Wine in New Bottles: The Key Messages of the EU Memorandum (on Lifelong Learning)

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The Lisbon European Council of March 2000 declared the European Union's target to be that of becoming the "most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world"(CEC, 2001, 6). Eight months later, and in response to the conclusions reached in 1996, designated the European Year of Lifelong Learning,¹ the European Commission issued a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning which was to serve as a set of guidelines for educational policy making in member states, the EEA and accession countries, each of which carried out a broad consultation process (CEC, 2001, 7). This process involved a variety of actions including seminars in which the Memorandum was disseminated and efforts to develop national strategies for lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning has been on the EU agenda for quite some time (see Murphy, 1997, 362). Its related concept, 'lifelong education'² has been around for an even longer period including the late sixties and early seventies when it was promoted by UNESCO as its 'master concept' for education. The UNESCO version of Lifelong Education was promoted through a body of literature comprising books and papers by a variegated group

¹ Council Conclusions of 20 December 1996 on a strategy for lifelong learning (97/C 7/02).

² For excellent discussions concerning the genealogy of the concept, see Field (2001), Tuijnman and Boström,(2002) and Wain (2004, forthcoming).

of writers (ranging from Liberal to Marxist) with a strong humanistic base. The names of Lengrand (1970), Gelpi (1985), Dave (1976), Suchodolski (1976) and Cropley (1980) come to mind, not to mention the authors of *Learning To Be* otherwise known as the Faure Report (Faure et al, 1972). Some of this writing had its basis in Scientific Humanism with which Julian Huxley, UNESCO's first Director-General, was associated (see Finger and Asún, 2001, 22).

At the risk of generalising from among the work of a motley group of writers, one can say that this movement provided an expansive and humanistic view of the entire process of human learning 'from the cradle to the grave'. This movement however faded away in the late 80s while the concept of lifelong learning had by then already been used by the OECD. Note however the OECD's emphasis on 'learning' rather than 'education' in what seems to have been a far from innocent discursive shift. The emphasis is placed less on structures of educational provision and more on individuals taking charge of their own learning (Tuijnman and Boström, 2002, 102-103). The concept was eventually embraced by the EU where 'Lifelong Learning' was made the overriding educational concept for a concerted effort to lead member nations to pool their resources to become competitive in the new global scenario. The origin of this particular adoption of the concept has been traced back to the publication of *Education for Life: a European Strategy* by the European Roundtable of Industrialists (Murphy, 1997).

These economic imperatives were reflected in the Memorandum 's definition of lifelong learning: "...all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence" (CEC, 2000, 3). This definition was formulated within the context of the European Employment Strategy

launched at the Heads of State European Council, Luxemburg, 1997 (CEC, 2000, 3). The definition was criticised during the consultation process on the grounds that it placed too much emphasis on the employment and labour market aspects of learning (CEC, 2001, 9). It was subsequently modified to read thus:

“all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and or/employment-related perspective.” (ibid.)

The Memorandum has six key messages. These are: a) new basic skills b) investment in human resources c) innovation in teaching and learning d) valuing learning e) guidance and information and f) bringing learning closer to home. We shall view each of the messages in some depth and provide critical comments.

Message 1. New Basic Skills for All

The report published by Cedefop, Eurydice (2001), reveals a range of interpretations of the term "basic skills".³ However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the dominant discourse on "basic skills" is labour-market oriented. The net result of this orientation in curriculum reform is that

Arrangements for guidance, support and identification of skills needed by the labour market, in cooperation with the social partners, are highly significant aspects of curricular provision (Cedefop/Eurydice, 2001, p.15)

This trend towards the marketisation of curricula is echoed by Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Education and Culture, in her Preface to the above-

³ For a broader discussion of the actions surrounding Message 1, and therefore 'Basic Skills', contained in the 2001 Cedefop/Eurydice document, see Walters, Borg, Mayo and Foley, (2004). For a broad discussion of the actions in connection with all six key messages, presented by the 2001 Cedefop / Eurydice document, see Borg and Mayo (2002).

mentioned document. Reding asserts that it is crucial to "adjust our educational systems to the requirements of the economy and the knowledge society." (p.5)

Missing from the Memorandum's section on "basic skills" is the notion of what Freire and others (Lankshear and McLaren, 1993, Shor, 1999) would broadly term 'Critical literacy' defined in Freire's sense of 'reading the word and the world.' This attribute would render the discourse on new skills, in the Memorandum, less dominated by the ideology of competitive individualism. Also included in this message is the skill of being able to take charge of one's own learning, a key concept in the work of the UNESCO lifelong education movement. This is an important skill that can render the learner less dependent on others and an active seeker of learning opportunities and resources at different stages of his or her life. This concept of 'self-directed learning' was also to be found in the old UNESCO literature on Lifelong Education. As with the old literature, however, the notion of 'taking charge of one's own learning' is conceived of in simply individualistic terms that can result in placing the entire responsibility for learning on the individual, often at great financial expense, with the danger that failure to achieve can be explained away in 'blaming the victim' terms. In these stringent Neo-liberal times, the notion of self-directive learning lends itself to a discourse that allows the State to abdicate its responsibilities in providing the quality education to which every citizen is entitled in a democratic society and shift them entirely onto the learners or larger entities such as NGOs etc. As indicated earlier, the shift from lifelong 'education' to lifelong 'learning' accommodates this discourse.

We reiterate the view that learning is a social act and so one should therefore add the 'collectivity' dimension to the concept of self-directive learning by calling for an

educational approach that allows people to learn how to take charge of their own learning both individually and collectively. Once again, we can perhaps begin to speak in terms of self and collectively directed learning. In this context, the Memorandum's term "social skills" assumes a broader meaning.

Key Message 2: Investment in human resources.

This message's objective is to "Visibly raise levels of investment in human resources in order to place priority on Europe's most important asset - its people." (CEC, 2000, 12). This section emphasises the need for a culture of shared responsibility for the education of present and prospective employees. This takes the form of individual incentives such as the opening of learning accounts, subsidised study leave and the affirmation of one's right to training opportunities. It also emphasises the need for more flexible working arrangements that allow employees to learn and upgrade their profile. Once again, the education of workers, in this section, is presented in a manner that suits the interest of the employer by rendering employees partly responsible for their professional upgrading and by relieving employers of part of the responsibility for the provision of training, making the other social partners share the burden. There is little in this section on the rights of employees and their representatives (important social partners) to negotiate paid educational leave for studies in areas which extend beyond the narrow focus of vocational preparation, in the way that, for instance, the steel-metal workers in Italy, through their union representatives, negotiated the right to a 150 hrs paid educational leave for a general education (Yarnit, 1980) and, later, the Canadian Automobile Workers successfully negotiated paid educational leave for their members

which is used for courses in the broad domain of workers' education (Marshall, 1997, Livingstone, 1997, Spencer, 1998a,1998b).

Key message 3: Innovation in teaching and learning.

This message's objective is to "Develop effective teaching and learning methods and contexts for the continuum of lifelong and lifewide learning." (CEC, 2000, 13) The Message calls for "a major shift towards user-oriented learning systems with permeable boundaries across sectors and levels." It refers to the need for "individuals to become active learners" with the implication being that there is a need to improve existing practices and "take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT and by the full range of learning contexts." (CEC, 2000, 13). It adds that the "Learning systems must adapt to the changing ways in which people live and learn their lives today. This is especially important for achieving gender equality and catering to the increasingly active 'Third Age' citizenry." (CEC, 2000, 14) It also places the emphasis on upgrading the skills of those engaged as educators in formal and non-formal learning environments, be they paid professionals, volunteers or those to whom teaching is a secondary function. (ibid.)

There is much in this section that resonates with the literature provided by authors associated with the Lifelong Education movement. Quite commendable is the sensitivity shown towards social difference based on the recognition of the way traditional teaching ignores such differences and reinforces normalizing discourses regarding femininities, masculinities and age. Ethnic difference is, however, not included here. The whole issue of difference is nevertheless couched in the language of equality rather than equity that reflects much of the consensual politics that underlies the entire document. There is an emphasis throughout this and other lifelong learning and lifelong education literature on

the need for educators to serve as facilitators, resource persons etc. While this no doubt results from a dissatisfaction with traditional pedagogical methods that are alienating to various categories of students (in terms of class, ability/disability, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other forms of social difference), rendering them ‘objects’ rather than ‘subjects’ of the learning process, one must guard against the danger of the pedagogical approach involved degenerating into *laissez faire* pedagogy which inevitably favours those who enjoy greater access to resources.

As Paulo Freire has cogently argued, educators should not shirk their responsibility to *teach* while rendering the teaching-learning process *interactive*. Teachers should not be denied *authority*, which ought to be distinguished from *authoritarianism*. The authority referred to here derives from their competence in the area being tackled and as pedagogues. The challenge is for both educators and learners to render knowledge *dynamic*, rather than static, through an interactive process in which the matter at issue becomes an object of *co-investigation* by the educator and learners, a process which, in Paulo Freire’s terms, would help arouse “epistemological curiosity”.

This section of the Memorandum should be applauded for recognising that a whole variety of settings can be conceived of as educational settings - different sites of educational practice.⁴ They include schools, training centres, universities, museums, churches, mosques and other religious institutions, the workplace, libraries, the media, youth centres, hospitals, old people’s homes and others - the list cannot be exhausted. This recognition is in keeping with the ideas concerning lifelong learning expressed in the ‘old’ UNESCO sponsored literature, as is the idea that the personnel engaged in these

⁴ The remaining parts of this section on key message 3 are reproduced from a short paper delivered by Peter Mayo at the National Consultation Conference on Lifelong Learning held in Malta in May 2001.

settings can be conceived of as educators in the broadest sense. They contribute, often directly, to the education of those making use of their services in various settings.

Pedagogical preparation should therefore constitute a feature of initial and in-service courses in their specific area of specialisation (e.g. journalism, librarianship, university teaching, gerontology, social work, health care, museumology etc.). Furthermore, traditional academic certification provides no fit to the reality that there are different ways of learning/knowing that emerge from the multitude of learning settings (formal, nonformal and informal) to which a person is exposed, and this type of certification is increasingly being regarded as one that provides an inadequate measure of a person's capabilities and profile (Tuijnman, 2002).⁵

The use of ICT in education is one of the realities facing educators in different learning settings. E-networking is an important development that allows possibilities for collective learning, often with a social purpose, across the globe. On a less optimistic note, however, excessive use of ICT in education can continue to render learning an isolated and individualistic activity. It can diminish the element of human interaction between teacher and taught, regarded as key to a dynamic learning process, one in which knowledge is created and recreated through co-investigation between educators and learners.

⁵ Albert Tuijnman (2002) provides an interesting discussion in this regard, arguing for the development of a comprehensive and inclusive set of lifelong learning indicators that account for the existence of different and complex sources of learning. However, in keeping with the dominant discourse concerning lifelong learning, he develops this argument in the context of learning for the 'new economy.'

Key message 4: Valuing Learning

Message 4's objective is to "Significantly improve the ways in which learning participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning." (CEC, 2000, 15). The message stresses the need to address the current situation where it is stated that "The rising demand for qualified labour by employers and increased competition between individuals to gain and keep employment is leading to a much higher demand for recognised learning than ever before." It also states that there is a need to do more in terms of "transparency and mutual recognition agreements, especially in the higher education sector and for regulated professional and technical occupations." It also stresses the need "to develop high quality systems for the Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) and to promote their application in a wide variety of contexts." (CEC, 2000, 15)

The concerns regarding APEL are worth taking on board given the need to recognise different forms of learning especially those occurring in different sites of practice, including sites that, *prima facie*, do not strike one as being 'educational.' To what extent is the APEL process inclusive, on the lines suggested by Tuijnman (2002)? Other questions that arise here are: Who decides whether an activity is deemed educational or not, and according to what criteria? How real is the danger that these criteria are determined solely by current and powerful industrial interests? Is there a danger, often highlighted with respect to NVQs, that only competence-based learning (often involving a limited range of skills) gains recognition within this process of assessment?

These questions arise as a result of the vocational bias that characterises this particular section. The point regarding the increase in demand for learning, cited earlier in this section, is one perfect example. One would have expected to find, in this section, the kind of broad philosophical discussion concerning the “value of learning” reminiscent of the ‘old’ lifelong education literature. One writer who has commented on Message 4 is Kenneth Wain, author of important books on the issue of lifelong education (Wain, 1987; Wain, 2004, forthcoming). In his paper, presented at Malta’s National Consultation Seminar on Lifelong Learning, held in May 2001, he states:

Indeed the whole tenor of the section could send out the wrong message to governments, institutions, and individuals, that what is valued is *only* this kind of learning, vocational learning for the purposes of the economy and the job market. While it recognises the great importance of such learning, the committee feels that learning for other than vocational purposes should have been duly recognised and given space in the memorandum especially since the memorandum itself speaks of ‘promoting active citizenship’ as ‘equally important.’⁶

Message 5: Rethinking Guidance and Counselling.

The objective of Message 5 is to “Ensure that everyone can easily access good quality information and advice about learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout their lives.” (CEC, 2000,17) This message is of great importance for countries in Europe that still restrict guidance and counselling facilities to schools and tertiary institutions, as well as labour market public and private entities. Given the variegated and broad nature of the field of education, comprising the formal and nonformal sectors, not

⁶ Short paper on message 4 delivered by Kenneth Wain at the National Consultation Conference on Lifelong Learning held in Malta in May 2001.

to mention informal learning, a holistic and lifelong approach to guidance and counselling is being advocated in European Commission documents (Sultana, 2003).

The net result of this strategy at the European level is that more and more Guidance and Counselling provisions are: following citizens throughout life; enhancing social inclusion by engaging reluctant learners in educational and training experiences; presenting up-to-date information that responds to client and employer needs; networking with NGOs to address specific needs; and exploiting the potential of technology-based infrastructures for guidance and counselling purposes (Sultana, 2003).

The Memorandum should be applauded for attaching importance to the development of such a service intended to be accessible in terms of cost, location and suitability for people of different ages, young and adult alike. The notion of outreach is extremely important in order to target adults who would not normally seek such advice on learning opportunities in the first place. Any genuine attempt to render learning opportunities at all stages of life accessible to the greatest number of persons possible should entail a considerable amount of outreach activity.

The emphasis on placing “the client’s interests in the forefront” (CEC, 2000, 17) is quite appropriate given the learner-centred approach that is continuously advocated in the context of lifelong learning. One ought to be wary of the danger, especially when private agencies are involved, that the entire exercise can develop into simply a market-driven approach that continues to convert education from a public to a consumption good. The Memorandum itself points to this danger when it states: “Over the past thirty years, market-based services have mushroomed, especially for the highly qualified. In some Member States, many guidance and counselling services are wholly or partially

privatised.” (CEC, 2000, 18) Rather than simply “define entitlements” and “set agreed minimum standards,” the public sector should take it upon itself to increase provision in this vital area, quality provision accessible to one and all. There is also a role for trade unions in providing a quality service in this area, targeting education, training and employment needs of the adult members of the communities they serve.⁷

Key message 6: Bringing learning closer to home.

The objective of this message is that of providing “lifelong learning opportunities as close to learners as possible, in their own communities and supported through ICT-based facilities wherever appropriate.” (CEC, 2000, 19) This is a very interesting section of the Memorandum that again stresses the notion of outreach, which requires that one draws on the experience garnered in this area by organisations and educators involved in the related fields of community education, action and development, education in prisons, education of older adults and education of the disabled. The issue of mobility impairment is relevant to each of the last three areas. The section deals with the use of ICT in offering “great potential for reaching scattered and isolated populations.” (CEC, 2000, 19). It also deals with developing the idea of “lifelong learning as the driver for local and regional regeneration” and the creation of “appropriate kinds of learning centres in everyday locations where people gather.” (ibid.)

As with the rest of the document, there is an over-emphasis on the use of ICT which no doubt has its merits but, if not used carefully and creatively, with educators and learners as important mediators and, better still, co-learners using ICT equipment as a complementary resource, it can serve as the vehicle for the transmission of pre-packaged material. This would render the process of learning a perfect example of what Freire

⁷ We are indebted to Professor Ronald Sultana, from the University of Malta, for this point.

calls 'banking education.' It can also continue to render the learning process an isolated activity.

The idea of having "learning centres in everyday locations" is also to be commended since it is based on the recognition, very much a feature of the earlier writings on lifelong education, that learning takes place in a variety of settings, many of which constitute sites of much of what passes for 'lifewide education.' (Cropley, 1980, 4). The idea of transforming schools into community learning centres is also commendable especially in view of the situation obtaining in some of the smaller member and accession countries that are compelled, in view of the higher costs per capita of facilities such as schools, to make multifunctional use of these resources (Baldacchino and Mayo, 1996). It is imperative, however, that sites such as schools, which can evoke, in some, memories of past failure in their formal education, are refurbished and restructured to contain areas that appeal to learners of different ages, particularly adult learners. The traditional school culture must not be allowed to impinge on these multipurpose settings. The adult learning provision involved should not be allowed to constitute another example of adult schooling. Otherwise, we would argue, taking liberties with the title of Illich and Verne's (1976) work, that the people involved would come to be imprisoned in the community classroom.

The Memorandum refers to lifelong learning as serving as the vehicle for local and regional regeneration. The EU's initiatives in this regard are interesting and include the very recent Learning Region initiative, officially referred to as the "Regional networks for Life-Long Learning - *R3L*" pilot initiative (CEC, 2002).

Initiatives connected with Message 6 allow scope for partnerships to develop among formal and non-formal, including grassroots, organisations. The question that arises is: on whose terms does this partnership occur? Such partnerships are justified on the grounds that some of the formal institutions, such as universities, are public institutions supported, for the most part, by public taxes, the taxes of those living within the region. To what extent would an institution of formal learning such as the University change its ways as a result of its partnership, or more likely the partnership of one of its centres, with grassroots movements? To what extent would the efforts of the grassroots movements improve through greater access to the university's resources? Finally, there are limits to the kind of regional regeneration and development that is possible in certain contexts given that uneven levels of development are widely held to be endemic to the capitalist mode of production.

Conclusion: Neo-liberalism and a market-oriented definition of social viability

The Memorandum's messages ought to be read against an economic backdrop characterised by a market-oriented definition of social viability. As educational change is becoming increasingly linked to the discourse of efficiency, competitiveness, cost effectiveness and accountability, socio-economic inequalities and corresponding asymmetrical relations of power continue to intensify. In general, the Memorandum is found wanting in its analysis of the effects of neo-liberal, socio-economic policies on educational change. Therefore, while the document refers to 'community,' 'citizenship' and 'solidarity,' the content is, for the most part, framed by capitalism's latest re-organizational needs: flexibility, mobility, job-related counselling and basic employment-related skills. Rather than rupturing the process of the global auctioning of human

services, the Memorandum reinforces the idea that closer links between education and the economy are inevitable.

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