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The Lifelong Learning Project Revisited: Institutionalizing the Vision

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In this article, I want to accomplish four things:

- describe the vision of the “learning society” put forth by the Lifelong Learning Act;
- describe the activities of the Lifelong Learning Project;
- critique the effectiveness of a political effort based on a slogan, “lifelong learning”;
- describe the way one institution, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, has operationalized the slogan and incorporated the concept into our mission as a research university.

In so doing, I will be recounting a bit of my own personal history. I went to Washington, D.C., in 1976, believing in the vision of the “learning society” expressed in the Lifelong Learning Act. While coordinator of the Lifelong Learning Project, (the study group assembled to make recommendations about implementation of the act) I experienced the difficulties of turning an apple-pie-and-motherhood slogan into policy recommendations. Since then, as professor of higher and adult education, I've participated in one higher education institution's attempt to define and institutionalize lifelong learning through making lifelong learning a fourth priority of the university and creating an institutional structure for accountability, oversight, policy leadership, and incentives.

A Vision of the Learning Society

The legislation that brought the lifelong learning concept into the arena of study and debate was the Lifelong Learning Act passed by Congress in 1976 (Public Law 94-

482) as Title I-B of the Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965. It was proposed by former Sen. Walter F. Mondale, who subsequently became vice president of the United States. Whereas earlier European uses of the term “lifelong learning” had emphasized a “cradle to grave” educational vision, the American version emphasized education during the adult years (an emphasis some critics felt distorted the true power of the concept). The legislation reflected the interest of many legislators in greater equity and access to education for all adults, especially the economically and socially disadvantaged.

As is shown by testimony by Mondale in support of the first draft of the Act, the Act incorporated the “social conscience” tradition so fundamental to American thought, Mondale said:

Lifelong learning offers hope to those who are mired in stagnant or disadvantaged circumstances—the unemployed, the isolated, elderly, women, minorities, youth, workers whose jobs are becoming obsolete. All of them can and should be brought into the mainstream of American life. Lifelong learning is a necessary step toward making the lives of all Americans more rewarding and productive.

It was hoped by its supporters that lifelong learning would offer a conceptual framework for conceiving, planning, coordinating, and implementing activities designed to facilitate learning by all Americans throughout their lives. In the “findings” section, the following arguments were brought forth:

- the need for lifelong learning to help the American people to adjust to social, technological, political, and economic changes;
- lifelong learning's role in developing individual potential in personal life, worklife, and in civil, cultural, and political roles in the nation;
- lifelong learning's role in meeting the needs of older and retired persons;
- lifelong learning as delivered through formal and informal instruction, conducted by public and private education; institutions, through independent study, and through business, industry, and labor;
- lifelong learning as needing coordinated planning through national, state, and local levels, in light of changing characteristics and learning needs of the population;
- lifelong learning as encouraging more effective use of the resources of the national educational institutions to assist in the solution of community problems: housing, poverty, government, recreation, employment, youth opportunities, transportation, health, land use;
- lifelong learning as a goal of American society for all citizens without regard to restrictions of previous education or training, sex, age, handicapping conditions, social or ethnic background, or economic circumstance.

In short, lifelong learning was seen as the solution to a massive array of issues. The vision was of a society in which all problems of individuals and communities would be addressed by a great array of learning resources, formal and nonformal, coordinated by wise policy-makers and utilized by proactive, dynamic, lifelong learners.

The scope of lifelong learning was deemed to be the following: “Lifelong learning includes, but is not limited to, adult basic education, continuing education, independent study, agricultural education, business education and labor education, occupational education and job training programs, parent education, postsecondary education, retirement and education for older and retired people, remedial

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education, special education programs for groups or for individuals with special needs, and also educational activities designed to upgrade occupational and professional skills, to assist business, public agencies, and other organizations in the use of innovation and research results, and to serve family needs and personal development."

Thus we see that the term was used simultaneously to refer to societal goals, formal and informal educational delivery systems, widely varying learner needs, and instructional processes and outcomes. It reads almost like a laundry list of education interest groups, and indeed its developers had taken some care not to leave anyone out whose support was to be sought in passing the legislation.

The Activities of the Lifelong Learning Project

When the Lifelong Learning Project study group assembled, our tasks were the following, as specified in the legislation: to carry out a program of planning, assessing, and coordinating projects related to lifelong learning; to assist states to plan for and assess the status of lifelong learning; and to improve a wide range of activities that affect the availability of opportunities for lifelong learning. For example, tasks falling in the category of "planning, assessing, and coordinating" were these:

- foster improved coordination of federal support for lifelong learning programs;
- act as a clearinghouse for information regarding lifelong learning;
- review proposed methods of financing and administering lifelong learning;
- review lifelong learning opportunities provided through employers, unions, the media, libraries, and museums, secondary schools and postsecondary educational institutions, and other public and private organizations to determine means by which the enhancement of their effectiveness and coordination may be facilitated;
- review existing major foreign lifelong learning programs and related programs in order to determine the applicability of such programs in this country;
- identify existing barriers to lifelong learning and evaluate programs designed to eliminate such barriers; and
- to seek the advice of appropriate Education Division agencies in so doing.

Our coordinating tasks, in consultation with appropriate states, were these:

- assess whether each state had an equitable distribution of lifelong learning services to all segments of the adult population;
- assess appropriate roles for federal, state, and local governments, educational institutions and community organizations;
- consider alternative methods for financing and delivering lifelong learning opportunities.

And finally, the specific demonstration activities we were to engage in were these:

- research and development activities;
- training and retraining people to become educators of adults;
- development of curricula and delivery systems appropriate to the needs of any such programs;
- development of techniques and systems for guidance and counseling of adults and for training and retraining of counselors;
- development and dissemination of instructional materials appropriate to adults;
- assessment of the educational needs and goals for older and retired persons and their unique contributions to

lifelong learning programs;

—use of employer and union tuition assistance and other educational programs for the support of lifelong learning;

—integration of private and public educational funds which encourage participation in lifelong learning;

—coordination within communities among educators, employers, labor organizations, and other appropriate individuals and entities to assure that lifelong learning opportunities are designed to meet projected career and occupational needs of the community.

We were to report to Congress at the end of the year the results from the activities conducted. Unfortunately, only minimal funds were available to assist us in these tasks, since no appropriation for the act had yet been made. So we had to accomplish it with staff and dollars borrowed from other agencies.

The Problem with a Slogan

Not surprisingly, our products were modest. We produced a report to Congress, "Lifelong Learning and Public Policy," (1978) based on some 50-odd research papers we had generated. In it we defined lifelong learning as "the process by which individuals continue to develop their knowledge, skills, and interests throughout their lifetimes." To do so, they need access to many learning opportunities, available through the workplace, on campus, at home, in communities, through formal or non-formal organizations, through traditional or non-traditional methods, or through the self-directed efforts of an individual. Accomplishment of a learning society required these three elements: individuals who foster their own growth and development; local providers who collaborate in offering learning resources; and federal, state, and local governments which pursue policy strategies directed toward encouraging individual growth and enriching learning opportunities. Our report to Congress applied these principles to four groups with special needs: women, older adults, urban disadvantaged youth, and displaced workers.

That was all well and good, as far as it went, but it didn't go far. Our report suffered from the same problem as the act itself: lumping too many problems together and proposing for all the same vague but upbeat solution, "lifelong learning." As I later pointed out in a critique of the slogan, "lifelong learning is a fuzzy, shorthand, politically expedient term, offered as a solution to a clump of ill-defined problems which would be thought about more usefully if they were kept separate: age discrimination, worker alienation, rapid social change, the knowledge explosion, poverty, illiteracy, and a host of related educational and social inequities" (Richardson, 1979).

Fred Baldwin (1977), in a paper developed for the Lifelong Learning Project, summed it up this way:

"It is not just that the phrase provokes disagreements about details—any generalization does that—but its implications for different users are strikingly inconsistent. It is used as a slogan by those advocating expanding institutional programs and by those who want to 'deschool' society; by those who emphasize recurrent education to help workers adjust to their jobs and by those who emphasize education as a means of self-fulfillment; by those who attack over-reliance on degrees and credentials and by those who want to expand the system of degrees and credentials via continuing education units; by those who perceive schools as ori-

ented too little toward the job market and by those who wish to maximize interaction among different age groups within the same classroom setting. To be sure, these positions are not in every case contradictory, but they pull in opposite directions."

In short, though the phrase "lifelong learning" is more likely to make the heart leap up than "adult education," inherently it has no particular theory of societal or individual good, and it offers no guidelines for policy makers or decision makers at any level. The phrase reminds us that in a changing society, to focus all educative efforts on youth in schools is shortsighted, and to ignore the resources of family, church, workplace, community, and mass media is wasteful. But it is left to the individual interpreters of the phrase to make the difficult choices that will turn the clichés into a plan of action.

What has the University of Southern California Done?

Does this mean that I'm disenchanted with the importance of the lifelong learning vision in improving education? No, it's just that each institutional provider has to be very clear about what its definition of lifelong learning is, and more importantly, what operational strategies it will employ to ensure that the phrase brings about more than satisfying rhetoric and a warm feeling.

The University of Southern California, for example, has made "lifelong learning and continuing studies" a fourth priority of the university (in addition to undergraduate studies, graduate and professional studies, and research). It's a sharply focused priority, which includes these emphases:

- assisting undergraduates to become self-directing lifelong learners;
- providing excellent continuing professional education through its graduate and professional schools;
- bringing USC alumni back to campus for a program in liberal studies.

The university is not attempting to serve all the needs of the learning society, but it has a vision of its particular role in that society, and has created special institutional mechanisms to ensure that vision is accomplished. To ensure that the continuing studies activities carried on reflect the academic priorities of the faculty, the university has disbanded its College of Continuing Education and decentralized its continuing education function, putting programs under the jurisdiction of each academic dean. It has created

some centralized functions, to ensure policy leadership, oversight, and accountability:

—A vice provost for Continuing Studies, operating at the same level as the vice provosts for Undergraduate Studies, Graduate and Professional Studies, and Research, provides administrative leadership.

—A policy-creating faculty committee, the Committee on Continuing Studies, parallels similar committees for undergraduate and graduate studies, and participates in the University Curriculum Council.

—A Council for Continuing Studies Administrators with a representative from each academic unit meets regularly for planning and staff development.

—A Fund for Research and Innovation in Continuing Studies provides seed money for faculty and staff who wish to advance the state of the art.

These nitty-gritty organizational arrangements may seem a far cry from visionary rhetoric about "lifelong learning in a learning society," but the point is, it's one institution's attempt to define and support the concept, in terms of its own institutional priorities.

Conclusion

Each institution must articulate its own vision of the learning society, define its own mission, and develop the strategies to accomplish that mission. Most of the activities set forth in the Lifelong Learning Act remain to be accomplished, and there's work to be done by institutional providers with a range of missions, goals, strategies, and clientele. Slogans like "lifelong learning" and "the learning society" don't do any harm and in fact can be quite useful as motivational devices. But to be implemented, they need to be operationalized. Turning rhetoric into reality remains the true challenge of those who share the vision.

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