

# **CIEA 2004**

**Lifelong Learning: A stocktaking**

**Prof. Christopher Knapper  
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada**

**Monday, 16 August 2004**

**24th INTERNATIONAL COURSE ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION  
AND TEACHING IN AGRICULTURE**

## **Lifelong Learning: A stocktaking**

### **LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE WORLD OF WORK**

Historically we have made rather clear distinctions between places where people learn (schools, universities) and those where we earn our living. Yet human beings learn throughout their lives and in almost all situations: at home, in their leisure activities, and at work. Some of this learning is incidental and largely unconscious, but a large amount of learning is planned and purposive. This is what is meant by the notion of lifelong and life-wide learning.

The term lifelong learning was first used 30 years ago by Edgar Faure in his seminal work for Unesco, *Learning to be*. When my colleague Arthur Cropley and I first began writing about lifelong learning in the 1980s the term was not widely known. By 2001 it has become a ubiquitous slogan that has come to mean whatever its users want it to mean, with little understanding of the original concept or knowledge of the underlying factors that caused Unesco to put forward the notion of lifelong learning as a blueprint for universal education.

#### **The need for lifelong learning**

Why was this blueprint thought to be needed? Its origins were in fact quite idealistic and reflect goals for education that stressed the need for democracy, equal opportunity, and individual self-fulfilment, which would only be possible if the tools for learning were available to all, and not restricted to a privileged elite.

A second impetus for lifelong and life-wide learning came from the increasing complexity of people's lives and the rapid pace of change, both social and technological. Such change is both profound and rapid, and its pace has accelerated as we enter the third millennium. For example, the Canadian academic Thomas Homer-Dixon has commented that as the world, and our lives, becomes more complicated and faster-paced, we have a need for different ways of learning – ways that stress our ability to come up with creative solutions to problems we have never seen before. Homer-Dixon refers to this ability as “ingenuity”: we need such ingenuity to change the way we organize ourselves, solve problems, and deal with the world around us.

One of the most profound areas of change in most people's lives occurs in the world of work. Knowledge and skills learnt in school or university rapidly become obsolete in an environment where practices and processes change so rapidly that industries and jobs that have existed for centuries can disappear almost overnight. In this context our conventional notions of “education by inoculation”, through years of formal schooling at the start of our lives, is no longer sufficient, and traditional continuing education through formal courses is often inadequate.

## **Dimensions of Lifelong Learning**

Knapper and Cropley have described the characteristics of a lifelong learner as someone who is strongly aware of the relationship between learning and real life, recognizes the need for lifelong learning and is highly motivated to engage in the process, and has the necessary confidence and learning skills. These skills include the following dimensions.

### *Lifelong learning:*

- People plan and monitor their own learning
- Learners engage in self-evaluation and reflection
- Assessment focuses on feedback for change and improvement

### *Life-wide learning:*

- Learning is active, not passive
- Learning occurs in both formal and informal settings
- People learn with and from peers
- Learners can locate and evaluate information from a wide range of sources
- Learners integrate ideas from different fields
- People use different learning strategies as needed and appropriate
- Learning tackles real-world problems
- Learning stresses process as well as content

It is important to state that lifelong learning is not lifelong schooling. Rather, the concept stresses the importance of having people take responsibility for their own learning, while the task of educators is to provide an environment in which this can be done most effectively.

## **THE WORKPLACE AS A SETTING FOR LEARNING**

It is clear that the characteristics of a lifelong learner described here are highly relevant to the people's work lives, especially in the complex and rapidly changing work environments that are increasingly typical of the modern world. It has been suggested that successful work organizations, including rural organizations such as farms, should themselves "learn". A learning organisation is one that is responsive to the larger context or environment, promotes discussion, team learning and collaboration among employees, empowers employees towards a "collective vision", develops systems to monitor and share learning, and creates ongoing learning opportunities for workers.

These characteristics are certainly consistent with the idea of lifelong and life-wide learning, but in fact a good deal of the discussion of the learning organisation is at a conceptual level. It is much more difficult to operationalise the idea in order to show what types of workplace learning occur, how such learning takes place, what contextual factors encourage or hinder such learning, and what effects this might have upon workers' attitudes, morale, and effectiveness. Although there is considerable information about formal training programs in business and industry, there has been rather little empirical research on the ways employees typically learn in the workplace. It is likely that some information or skills are acquired through courses or manuals, but it also seems plausible that a great deal of learning takes place much more informally, for example by trial and error, by seeking the advice of a colleague, searching the World Wide Web, and so on.

## Measuring workplace learning

Is it possible to measure lifelong learning in the workplace? This was a challenge that some colleagues and I undertook in a series of studies that have focused on approaches to learning at work and the factors that encourage effective workplace learning. Our focus has been upon lifelong and life-wide learning in the broad sense of those terms described earlier, but with a particular focus upon what we have termed “deep” learning and the characteristics of organisations that encourage its development.

By deep learning we mean learning that emphasises the pursuit of meaning and understanding. Deep learners are intrinsically motivated to learn, and the act of learning is itself rewarding. The major goal is to integrate new learning and ideas with existing understanding. Surface learners on the other hand are primarily motivated to meet minimum task requirements, and they see learning as mainly a matter of memorising and reproducing information without any particular interest in its meaning. Of course all of us frequently engage in surface learning just to get through the many tasks we face in our everyday lives, and surface learning may indeed be appropriate for many routine tasks at work. But to meet the challenges of change and complexity workplaces today will increasingly require approaches to learning that stress depth -- in the sense of conceptual understanding and integration of new knowledge with existing ideas in order to solve complex novel problems.

My colleagues and I have developed instruments that measure approaches to learning in the workplace and the organisational climate affecting learning, using adaptations of instruments originally devised to measure learning in school and university. The two scales (the *Approaches to Work Questionnaire* and the *Workplace Climate Questionnaire*) have now been refined in a series of studies involving many hundreds of respondents. These have included bank employees, nurses, physicians, and Queen’s University alumni working in a wide range of settings.

The Approaches to Work instrument measures three dimensions: there is a single scale that measures “Deep Learning” and two further scales that measure a surface learning approach. The first we have called “Surface-Rational” (routine surface-level tasks necessary to get the job done) and the second we have named “Surface-Disorganised”: here the individual sets very low learning goals and struggles to achieve them. For example, an item characteristic of a deep approach would be “In my job one of the main attractions for me is to learn new things”. A surface-rational item would be “When I learn something new at work I put a lot of effort into memorising important facts”. And a surface-disorganised item would be “Often I have to read things without having a chance to really understand them”.

The Workplace Climate Questionnaire also has three scales. The first we called “Good Supervision” (the extent to which supervisors or managers encourage independent learning and creativity), the second was named “Workload” and is self-explanatory, and the third is termed “Choice-Independence”, and reflects the amount of freedom employees enjoy to organise their own program of work, including learning new tasks and skills.

We have used these scales to investigate links between employees’ learning approaches and workplace characteristics, and we found that there are indeed significant correlations between workplace climate and workers’ approaches to learning. For example, having more choice and independence in ones job is positively associated with deeper learning and negatively associated with both types of surface learning. Good supervision is related to deep learning and negatively to surface-disorganised learning. Finally, there is a strong association between surface-disorganised learning and a perception of heavy workload. In a recent study of Canadian physicians we have also found that workplace climate and learning approaches are meaningfully related to doctors’ pursuit of continuing medical education opportunities. For example, those with a deep approach prefer to pursue further education

independently, rather than taking traditional courses. They are also strongly inclined to be self-motivated for continuing professional education, whereas those with a surface approach respond primarily to externally imposed requirements.

## **SUMMING UP**

The research I have briefly summarised above has tried to set out some characteristics of lifelong, life-wide and deep learning that might help individuals cope with an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. While lifelong learning skills are helpful for all aspects of people's lives, they are especially appropriate in the workplace where the demands of complexity and change are often felt most urgently. Emerging empirical evidence from my own research seems to confirm that workplaces are also environments where learning does and should take place. It is clear that most employees already spend a good deal of their time at work learning new tasks and solving new problems. Their success in meeting these challenges is partly within the control of the individual employee, but also greatly affected by the organisational climate. For workers, employers and society at large this involves trade-offs: tradeoffs between authority and autonomy, between workload and depth of learning, between efficiency and creativity. If the world needs more ingenuity then the empowerment of workers as lifelong learners will be an important prerequisite.

---

Gr



## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Knapper, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Christopher Knapper is an international consultant on educational development, and Professor of Emeritus of Psychology at Queen's University, Canada. He has been a professional academic developer for 30 years, and founded two of Canada's major instructional development centres, the first at the University of Waterloo in 1977, and later at Queen's University. He also helped to found Canada's national organisation for educational development, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), of which he served as first president from 1984-88. In 2002 STLHE created the "Christopher Knapper Lifetime Achievement Award" in his name. He was also part of the group that established the International Consortium for Educational Development in 1992, and for the past 10 years has been co-editor of that organisation's *International Journal for Academic Development*, published by Taylor and Francis.

Prof. Knapper has written many books, book chapters, and scholarly articles, with a special focus on teaching and learning in higher education. His book *Lifelong learning in higher education* (London: Kogan Page, 2000), now in its third edition, was recently translated into Chinese. Other recent books include *Fresh approaches to teaching evaluation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), and *Using consultants to improve teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). He is also in great demand as a workshop presenter, and has presented many hundreds of seminars and workshops on teaching and learning all over the world, including North America, Europe, Asia, Australasia, and Africa.

He is the recipient of many awards, including the Fellowship of the British Psychological Society (1975), the STLHE 3M Teaching Fellowship (2002), and the McKeachie Career Achievement Award of the American Educational Research Association (2004). In 1999 the Queen's University Alma Mater Society established the "Christopher Knapper Award for Excellence in Teaching Assistance". Prof. Knapper is listed in many national and international reference books, including *Who's Who in Canada*.