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Lifelong and Lifewide Learning - a Perspective

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Recommended Citation

Reischmann, Jost (2014): Lifelong and Lifewide Learning - a Perspective. In: Suwithida Charungkattikul (ed): Lifelong Education and Lifelong Learning in Thailand. Bangkok, p. 286-309.

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Reischmann, Jost (2014): Lifelong and Lifewide Learning - a Perspective. In: Suwithida Charungkattikul (ed): Lifelong Education and Lifelong Learning in Thailand. Bangkok, p. 286-309.
download: <http://www.reischmannfam.de/lit/2014-Baifern.pdf>

Jost Reischmann

Lifelong and Lifewide Learning - a Perspective

Abstract

This paper complements the concept of “lifelong learning” with the concept of “lifewide learning”. “Lifewide learning” is understood as the every day happening continuous life process of adults, which builds and changes personalities, caused not only by formal and self-directed intentional learning, but also by unintentional, but nevertheless important and effective learning. It is argued that the learning of adults - in contrast to traditional children school learning - is typically based on many situations and sources merged and mixed “widely” into concrete life. By focusing on this type of learning this chapter seeks to broaden the understanding of learning and asks about the consequences for the theory and practice of Adult Education/Andragogy.

1. The long, short history of “lifelong learning”

Learning in adulthood - lifelong - is a fact, occurring since ancient times. Practical needs (i.e. changes in the family situation, assurance of food supply, changing political authorities), as well as religious orientation (to serve better the divines), cultural challenges

(being enriched by the world of art and intellect), and pure curiosity (inbuilt into the human nature) have always provoked adults to learn and change throughout their path through life.

Writing and theorizing about lifelong learning reaches back a half millennium. In the European tradition Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670) was one of the first to describe in his "Pampedia" (1657) explicitly the whole life as a sequence of eight "schools", spanning from pre-birth time to the "school of dying". Alexander Kapp, a German educator, coined in 1833 the term "Andragogik" and described the need of learning as practical necessity in the whole life of adults. The American author Eduard Lindeman in his 1926-book "The Meaning of Adult Education" asked for a form of education that "was not bound by classrooms and formal curricula. Rather it involved a concern for the educational possibilities of everyday life; non-vocational ideals; situations not subjects; and people's experiences" (Jackson 2012, p. 3) - and Jackson concludes: "Many of his ideas and beliefs are as relevant today as they were in the rapidly changing world of the 1920's and they provide foundation principles for our contemporary view of lifewide and lifelong learning and education" (ibid).

Around 1970 in Europe a new chapter in the discussion of lifelong learning began - new in dimension and by new actors. Using the French terms "Education Permanente" ("Permanent Education" in English) the Council of Europe, an international organization promoting co-operation between all countries of Europe, initiated a "Committee for Out-of-School Education". This committee collected and documented in a series of publications ("Studies on Permanent

Education”) the status in European countries as well as general topics, i.e. “New Trends”, “Future Shape”, “Financial Aspects” or “Fundamentals for an Integrated Educational Policy”. Here the interest of states and governments in adult education became evident.

UNESCO had years earlier (1949 in Denmark) started an international world-meeting on adult education, the CONFINTEA („**Conférence Internationale sur l'Éducation des Adultes**“), which took place every 12 - 13 years. The 1997-conference in Hamburg, Germany, “marked a turning point in the global recognition of and commitment to adult learning and non-formal education” (<http://www.unesco.org/en/confinteavi/background>). Now using the American term “lifelong learning” adult education became defined in a wide sense as the “entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society”. Adult education takes different forms (formal, non-formal, informal). It is provided in different places and set-ups (community learning centres, folk high schools, on-the-job, evening classes, etc.), for different purposes (general, vocational) and at different levels from primary to post-doctoral (adult basic education, continuing education, higher education, etc)” (http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIIL/confintea/pdf/Flyer/FlyerConfintea_English.pdf). Lifelong learning in this understanding now included non-formal education as indispensable element of human and social development; adult and

lifelong learning were claimed to be key tools for the global challenges of the 21st century: For democracy, peace and human rights, respect for diversity and conflict resolution, economic and ecological sustainability and workforce development.

But this rich and complex understanding of lifelong learning became in the following years more and more narrow. Politics and economy narrowed it to market- and company-centred continuous retraining of the workforce. Hake (2008) analyzed a UNESCO-study "Making Lifelong Learning a Reality: Emerging Patterns in Europe and Asia" (2002), including case studies from Australia, China, France, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. He found overwhelming statements that paralleled lifelong learning with employment-related activities; this "lead to the conclusion that the prevailing policy narratives in a range of Asian and European countries constitute a dominant discourse of 'learning to acquire employability', or what has been referred to as the 'learning for earning' narrative" (p. 176).

In the practical field even 200 and more years ago the idea of adult learning was not unusual, neither in Europe (enlightenment movement, reading-societies, workers education, educational work of churches, vocational training, agricultural retraining), nor in America (Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, Lowell Institute in Boston, Lyceum movement, town libraries, museums, agricultural societies). But what historians of adult education always documented and described was learning in and through institutions; they did not look for situations in which adults learned, but searched for institutions and organizations

that enabled adults to learn, mostly in groups. Adult learning was paralleled to adult schooling.

2. Lifewide Learning - the concept

I was in some way thrilled by the concept of “education permanente”/ “permanent education”/ „lifelong learning“, but I also felt threatened: “Lifelong Learning” often has the connotation of “lifelong schooling”: an activity planned and organized by specialists for others. As I (like many others) was not a too successful learner at school, I did not feel comfortable with the perspective that I should do it now “lifelong“ (“lifelong” is used in German if someone gets for a serious crime a lifelong sentence to jail). This subjective negative feeling became confirmed when lifelong learning later often became synonymous with company-centred continuous retraining of workforces.

On the other side: I recognized more and more how interesting and challenging it was learning every day, “here and now“ - “lifewide“ - this seemed to me much more real and appealing than the idea of having to learn continuously for the next 10, 20 or more years (a lifelong sentence to learn!).

a. self-directed learning

The restricted focus on *organized* and *intentional* learning gained in the 1970^s criticism in a growing number of scientific discussions in adult education. It became increasingly evident that education and learning of adults occurs in many situations different

from those offered by *organizations offering teaching*. In a theoretical perspective, the international discussion about de-schooling society (e.g., by Illich), and humanistic psychology (e.g., Rogers), and in an empirical perspective, experiences from self-help groups and citizen initiatives widened the perception and made clear that learning not always depends on teaching.

In the 1980th an intense discussion, overcoming the limitation to this type of „intentional education organized by institutions”, started about *self-directed* learning in the USA and many other countries of the world. One triggering input came from Allen Tough (Tough 1971, 1979) with his book “The Adult’s Learning Projects”, a truly “fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning” (the subtitle of his book). He changed the perspective from the schoolmaster's perspective “How do I teach them?” (equals *construction* of learning by teaching) by asking “What did you learn last year?” (equals *description* of learning intended by the learner himself). Tough showed in his research that most learning projects of adults are motivated, started, conducted, and evaluated by the learners themselves; 80 percent of the learning projects were performed without any professional help.

The traditional, school like concepts started from a deficit-orientation: The learners have deficits which have to be corrected by teaching in institutions. This made Malcolm Knowles, sometimes called the “father of the American adult education, complain: “It is a tragic fact that most of us know how to be taught; we haven’t learned how to learn” (1975, p. 14). The overwhelming insight of the

new approach was: “They do learn!” Now the learner could be seen in a positive way, having potential to learn by himself. Trusting in this potential supported the change of interest “from teaching to learning”. With “self-directed learning” a new and additional type of adult learning was discovered (Reischmann 1997).

This new type of adult learning offered outstanding new perspectives for adult learning and education. But still the focus was on intended activities (Tough had asked only for intentional learning adding up to seven hours or more), taking an extended time, leading to planned and expected outcomes.

b. learning en passant

Still not much attention was given to other types of learning: the “not intended” learning situations and outcomes. Even the terms used for this learning mostly described what it is not: not intended, non-formal, informal, out of school; UNESCO used in the citation above the vague term “formal or otherwise”. This may indicate that learning and education in adulthood was seen still in a traditional and pedagogical way. But looking back in our own life (“introspection”) we easily can identify plenty of significant learning situations that emerged from situations not planned, not undertaken for learning, lasting sometimes just moments. Through these accidents and incidents (often not wanted, expected, nor planned), life teaches us by “passing by” the lessons we have to deal with, making us into the persons we are.

If we want to understand the specifics of the comprehensive learning of adults (“becoming a person”) in theory and praxis, it seemed necessary to overcome the hermeneutic blindness being fixed to a pedagogy that limited thinking about learning to the learning similar of children in school (this motivated me to use the term “Andragogy” for the academic discipline that deals with the lifelong and lifewide learning of adults). Taking serious that in the life of adults often accidents and incidents, the “walk through life” changes and forms the adult to what and who he is - personality, spirituality, feelings, values, knowledge, social and technical skills- , then this demanded a paradigm-change for the academic and practical field of adult education.

To describe these additional learning situations I decided to use the term “learning en passant”. “En passant” is a French phrase and means “by passing by”. This properly describes situations in our “walk through life” that are not primarily meant for learning, but challenge us to actively “go through” (here the term “en passant” emerged) and change our knowledge, values, and personality. This change can be open and immediate; it can also be hidden and become visible much later. This learning encompasses the whole person, develops the person to his individual “form“, including all the “wide” possibilities a person can reach, and leads to a unique personal “composition”. In this way each individual forms himself out of his ongoing life in each minute. With “learning en passant” I referred to the lifewide here-and-now learning challenges that come “through life”, not through intended learning/teaching situations, and the options they offer in the presence for the future.

c) lifewide learning

These reflections make clear that intentional learning in adult education institutions and self-directed learning is only a segment of the learning and education of adults. Learning of adults happens not only lifelong, but also *lifewide* in a multitude of traditional and nontraditional, formal and informal settings (workplaces, leisure-time, families, churches, market-places, television, „the life” ...). This insight came through manifold research and discussions throughout the world; leading to the above cited definition of UNESCO (1997), describing adult education (not using the term “lifewide learning”, LWL) as the “entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people ... develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society’.

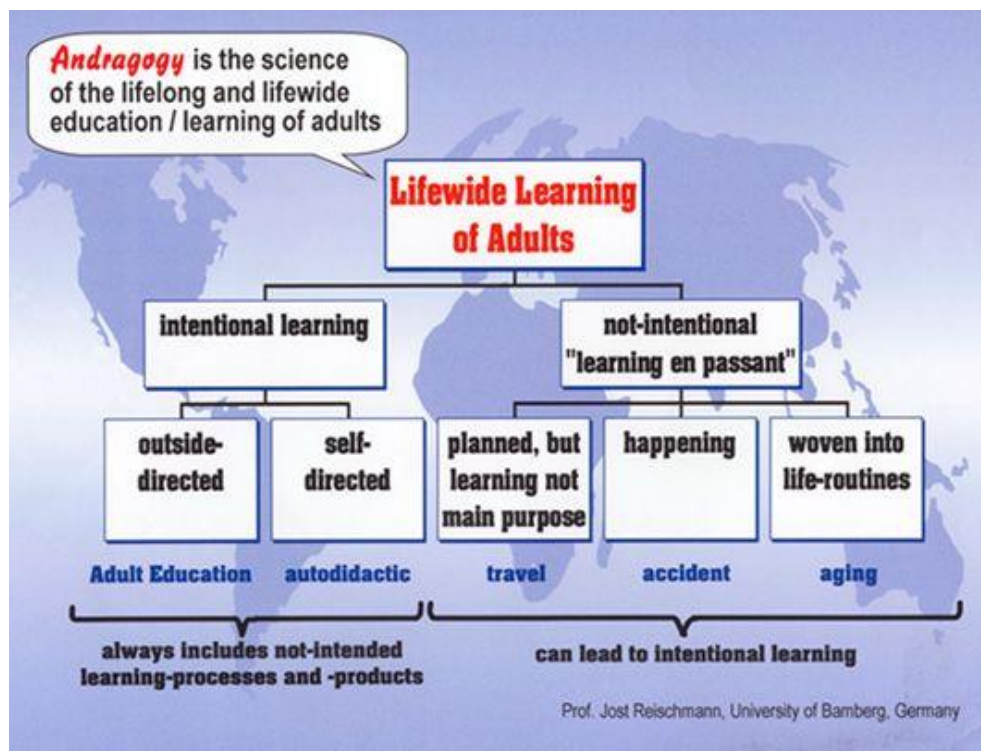


Fig. 1: Structural scheme of adult education and adult learning

This expanded understanding of “lifewide learning” of adults I tried to structure in the “scheme of lifewide learning”: In this scheme “lifewide learning” of adults encompasses the two types of intentional learning (outside-directed by institutions and self-directed/autodidactic), as well as three types of partly intentional and unintentional learning that occurs simultaneously with activities not primarily aimed at learning. I discriminate three different types of “learning en passant”:

- Learning en passant can happen *parallel to other planned and intended activities* (visiting a museum, taking a tourist trip, participating in a cultural, political or social activity), but learning is not the main purpose: A planned, intended, organized activity includes learning. The primary motivation is not to gain knowledge, but perhaps entertainment, doing business, or curiosity. Parallel to these activities new information and insight is found. In these situations it is not clear in advance that something will be learned or what would be learned. The main activity is perceived, but the learning segment remains hidden.
- *Single event learning* (equals “*happening*”): Sometimes learning is initiated by a clear describable life situation that forces us to learn (i.g. accident, death of a relative, falling in love, or getting a traffic-ticket). An outside event happens, not planned and not expected, making old experiences obsolete and bringing new perspectives into deliberation. These change-triggering situations can be accompanied by shock as well as by pleasure, the changes can be minimal to dramatic, the coping time can be seconds to years.

The level of threat, stress, and frustration might be low, even a feeling of success, interest, and thrill can be observed. But it also might be highly painful, and people may wish they never had to learn that lesson. But the triggering situation will later on be clearly identifiable.

- *Mosaicstone learning-outcomes, woven into life-routines* resulting from various unidentifiable life-events: We observe that a person knows or is able to do something or behaves in a certain way (e.g. aging, behaving as parents, leading a group), but we can not identify the situation when it was learned. Long term complex competencies in profession, family and other fields are composed of numberless learning events, while the learning events leading to this remains often not identifiable. Reading books, magazines, newspapers, watching TV, talking to colleagues, observing others and exchanging with whomsoever, forms a universe of small scale learning experiences up to the gestalt, character, and competencies a person finally represents. Here we observe the result of the wholeness of lifelong and lifewide learning. The picture of a mosaic is appropriate in the sense that an endless series of learning has formed the whole image. These mosaicstones do not swing around in random chaos but are incorporated and organized into a gestalt.

“Learning en passant” in its different shapes, makes us aware that in coping with life-situations learning is always included, life-integrated. Some general aspects are: This learning is low compulsory and highly individualized. It can happen - or not. Different people learn different things from the same situation. This type of learning cannot be produced in advance; there is nothing like a

prepared curriculum; it only can be identified by looking back. Often this learning is holistic; it includes not only knowledge, but also reality-handling, emotions, valuing, perspective transformation. By being integrated into reasonable activities it is meaningful and useful in itself, it is not only stored for “later” use. It is successful without much effort (with increasing explicit effort we move over by definition to self-directed or formal learning). It uses a wide variety of support (people, media, objects, institutions), educationally prepared as well as natural. Often it uses and continues and re-activates and builds on previous learning. This learning teaches answers as well as opens questions when incorporating it into the set of experiences the person has already had. All of these situations can be used as a basis for further learning. And they can be a starting point for intentional learning.

d. compositional learning

Like all graphic structures the above structural scheme is limited to two dimensions. The “boxes” in the graphic structure seem to signal distinct and closed borders. But the reality of learning is more complex than this scheme can show: So, for example learning in intentional, outside directed adult education is not limited to the official curriculum, but includes other cognitive, social, ethical, and emotional learning-processes and -products. These different dimensions compose / construct highly individualized learning outcomes.

In addition to „learning en passant” I will use the phrase „compositional learning” to make aware that learners compose many

sources together during a learning experience: Intentional learning by participating in the local adult education institution or self-directed learning, as well as combinations with different forms of learning en passant - trial and error, some help of a friend, reading a book/journal, talking to friends and family, watching television, exchanging with experts in hardware shops or pharmacies, “google-ing”, or talking to their children - the list is endless. Adults compose their learning by bringing their knowledge together from many different sources and connecting, combining and integrating it in ways that are meaningful to them. The different “boxes” in the above structural scheme of adult learning and education open a deeper understanding of learning in adulthood; but even important are the interactions between the “boxes” - how they are “composed”.

3. What is it good for?

At first the idea of “lifewide learning” seemed to be just a surprising discovery. By reflecting more on it, it began to grow into a concept, perhaps a “theorette” (naming it a “theory” seemed too big to me). But still it seemed to have not much practical value, because these life-changing accidents and incidents seemed not to be didactically organisable (equals a typical thinking in traditional school-learning-categories). It took some years before I discovered the analytical as well as the practical value of the concept.

Analytical value: The concept of “lifewide learning” opens a new perspective on adult learning and education. It allows us to

better *explain and understand* (both on a macro as well as a micro-level), why and how adults have learned that it is important (or not) to invest in society, a specific workplace, a volunteer engagement (macro); and, why and how they are able (or not) to operate a machine at the workplace, a bicycle or a new cell-phone (micro). Recalling lifewide experiences - often told as stories in the breaks of a seminar (an „en passant“-situation) – assisted in understanding why a person behaved and valued in a certain way. Often, recalling lifewide learning experiences helps to make evident *how* those experiences blocked or supported new learning. Taking in account this history of en passant learning makes it possible to better explain and understand why adults are successful learners or not.

Practical value: Explaining and understanding does not by itself lead to practical action. Once the perspective on these complex learning chains and interactions was gained, methods were discovered how to support lifewide learning. Techniques being developed in the consulting / counselling field (i.e., Carl Rogers client-centred speech therapy and other directions of Humanistic Psychology), or in the field of coaching and moderation, provided practical *methods* to help people clarify, work on, and understand the lifewide influences that blocked or supported them, perhaps leading to changes in their desired direction. Counselling/consulting-competencies became a core competence for professional andragogues. Another practical way to prepare, offer, trigger, and support learning-opportunities is to make use of organizational means: Information flyers at historical monuments, experts on market places or in shops available for advice, internet

based exchange of questions and answers, or offering spaces for exchange (for example around the coffee-machine). Creative organizing of learning-supportive environments became an additional challenge for professional andragogues.

For professionals working in adult learning and education 'lifewide learning' means additional roles and tasks beyond teaching. In lifewide learning, more attention in action and reflection is paid to learning in non-traditional settings outside institutions, to learning merged into life-, leisure-time-, or workplace-activities, to self-directed learning of individuals and groups, and the mix resulting out of this all for new learning. This expanded view of education shifted the focus „from teaching to supporting learning”.

4. Limitations and dangers of „learning en passant“

Explaining and justifying learning en passant and lifewide learning must also reflect the limitations and dangers of this concept. Certainly it sounds like a romantic idea that all adults are lifelong and lifewide compositional learners. But it has to be taken into account that this learning has also weaknesses.

For example: This learning happens - or not - by chance, by luck, or by contingency - it is not a reliable learning. The results are highly individualized without standards and comparability in a group. Scope, content, dimension, and quality are highly dependent from the individual learner. Like in a music composition there are virtuoso as well as foul results. No help is available

- if learning problems come up,
- if a learner goes in the wrong direction,
- if he/she misunderstands things and/or learns false things.

In all these cases nobody helps with feedback and advice.

Worse than the above, there is not only the danger of false learning results, but also negative, evil things are learned en passant: political fanaticism, religious fundamentalism, political correctness, resignation and hopelessness, sexism and discrimination, that lying and stealing are acceptable.

5. Lifewide Needs for Learning: Challenges for Andragogy and Adult Education

The basic assumption of this paper was: It is helpful for Andragogy (academic discipline) and Adult Education (field of practice) to complement the concept of “lifelong learning” with the concept of “lifewide learning”. What are the challenges resulting from this assumption?

Challenge #1: „discover”. Overcoming the older, more narrow concept (“Adult Education is the institutionalised education of adults”) opens the eyes for more situations, forms, functions, and locations that trigger learning as main effect or as side effect (“entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, intentional or en passant”). To “see” when learning happens in life - and when and why not - is for professional andragogues a necessary prerequisite for understanding, valuing, and using all chances for supporting adults on the path of their learning life.

Challenge #2: “accept, value, respect”. The characteristics of learning en passant - individualized, by chance, no standards, not certificated, without control by teachers - makes it in traditional school categories difficult to accept it as “real learning”. So challenge #2 means a paradigm shift from “How to we teach them?” to “How did they already learn - and how can more learning be supported?” Educational thinking focussed on teaching loses sight of and underestimates the value of the learning results gained out of traditional and institutionalized offerings. Accepting that education and learning of adults in all its forms of expression is valuable in the context of the individual life and biography of adults puts the focus on the competencies of the adults, not the deficits, and reduces the danger to treat them like incapable infants. Accepting, valuing, and respecting support a new educational perspective to adults and their lives.

Challenge #3: “differentiate”. Three terms were offered: “lifewide learning”, “learning en passant”, and “compositional learning”. These terms help to differentiate in future research and studies different learning events. Seldom one single learning event changes much. May be it will be fruitful to observe and describe: What learning situations compose a successful process, and what composition makes it a failure?

Challenge #4: “use, support, arrange“: The concept of lifewide learning and education opens many new possibilities for practical methods and arrangements. One important perspective is “looking back” before planning forward: Which competences are already developed, and how can they be used for the needed steps

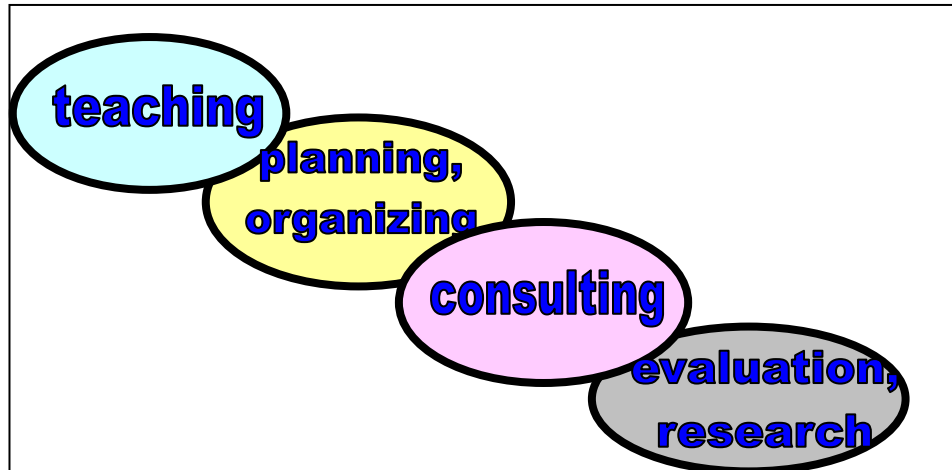
in life? This identification and **use** of prior learning results sometimes needs support from an outside person having the professional skill to make aware the values that are already achieved – and how to proceed on from there. Another practical strategy is to offer *support* when change-challenges demands learning in life; institutions can make available consulting services that help learners to find and arrange the best way to start or proceed on in a learning project. Such consulting offerings can compensate the danger that someone gets stuck without external help. But in learning en passant it is even possible to *arrange* learning situations: An exhibition, an open door at an institution, a festival, free flyers, explaining billboards want to motivate for more intense learning. This organizing and arranging of triggering motivators is often used by cultural institutions. Arranging a learner friendly world will mean additional tasks both for adult education institutions, and also for companies, museums, churches, political institutions, administrations, hotels, and leisure time organizations.

Challenge #5: “Interaction theory/practice”. These theoretical concepts - “lifewide learning”, “learning en passant”, and “compositional learning” - have the function to open our eyes to make us understand (theory) and develop (practice) activities or programs as being educational in a wider scope. The theoretical reflections about lifelong and lifewide learning help us to better perceive different sides of practical phenomena in adult education. But looking in the other direction is also helpful: By looking at a practical example we better develop and understand the theoretical concept of lifelong and lifewide

learning. Theory helps practice, and practice helps theory. And the concept of lifewide learning shows great potential to connect to modern andragogical theories as for example post-modernism, biographical approach, constructivism, and life world-approach.

Challenge #6: Professionals needed. Around the world university programs became developed educating specialists for the manifold fields of adult learning and education. Economics and politics become more and more aware that investing in education is an investment in the future. For this challenging task professionals and specialists are needed to support, arrange, and develop the complex needs for learning in adulthood. Following the reflections about lifelong and lifewide learning this is [today] much more than teaching. Besides teaching competence these professionals also have to be able to plan and organize learning, and they have to have at their disposal communication skills for counselling and consulting, for problem solving and conflict management. Finally, they must be able to perform evaluation and research, i.e. such as needs assessment and problem identification. University programs have to qualify for these competencies.

This article avoided the term “adult educator”, because this could be misleading to the narrow understanding of “teacher activities”. Professionals in adult education are better seen as change agents who can influence and improve in manifold ways, serving changes in individuals, institutions, companies, and society in general. The concept of lifewide education and learning helped make aware that in a world full of change specialists are needed to effectively manage these changes in the interest of individuals as well as the society.



Core competencies for andragogical professionals

This complex understanding of adult lifewide learning became in the last years deeply developed in Britain by Jackson; he published 2012 “The Lifewide Learning, Education & Personal Development e-book”. He initiated the Lifewide Education group, “a community of interest formed around the ideas and educational practices that promote and support lifewide learning and personal development” with a journal since 2011, many activities, and a challenging homepage (<http://lifewideeducation.co.uk>).

6. Perspective for practice and theory

This paper intended to complement the concept of “lifelong learning” with the concept of “lifewide learning”. This concept reminds us that learning and education in adulthood is much more complex than just teaching events. This new and widened learning-concept has consequences for the practice and theory of Adult Education/Andragogy:

- Institutions and professionals have for their practical work now a much wider pallet at their disposal to identify, use, and support learning processes in change situations. But much more has to be done to learn about this pallet, to develop more strategies, to exchange what has been developed, and to collect experience what composition of activities are most successful in which situations. A British initiative can be used as an example of how lifewide learning can be developed and supported (<http://lifewideeducation.co.uk/home>).
- Andragogy as the academic discipline dealing with the lifelong and lifewide learning and education of adults has to perceive, research and support the multifold learning situations in the life of adults and to develop theories that give deeper insight in the challenge change processes in the life of adults.

Learning and education happen in the interaction between outside (could be challenged by a teacher, or the life) and inside (the readiness and ability of the individual to assimilate these challenges). The idea of lifewide learning and education allows us to perceive and use manifold learning sources and opportunities. It also helps us to understand how blocking or negative learning results were learned en passant.

This contribution focussed mainly on the different types of learning en passant. This does not criticize or devalue organized teaching/learning through institutions or intentional self-directed learning. But it is important to see that these types of organized and intended learning is not all. One of the main differences between

traditional children school learning and learning of adults is that adult learning is mostly related to direct and “immediate” use in concrete situations within the context of their life. Life situations provoke learning. These life situations do not start or end within an organized learning program in an institution, but have many more motivators, supporters, testers, threads, reinforcement, control, informators, criticisers, training situations, correctors that are scattered through different life situations and together compose the individual learning biography. When an adult finds him being on a learning path then it may be most interesting to know how he or she composes all the different learning options to make sense in his or her unique life situation. Professional andragogues can support this process, the academic discipline Andragogy has to include this wider learning concept in the theoretical framework.

In addition to lifelong learning the concept of lifewide learning offers practical and theoretical chances for the future of adult learning and education regarding the specific way learning in adult age is merged into life.

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ข้อมูลทางบรรณานุกรมของสำนักหอสมุดแห่งชาติ

National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data

สุวิธิตา จรุงเกียรติกุล.

การศึกษาและการเรียนรู้ตลอดชีวิต = Lifelong Education and Lifelong

Learning.-- กรุงเทพฯ : ศูนย์ตำราและเอกสารทางวิชาการ คณะครุศาสตร์

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย, 2557.

456 หน้า.

1. การศึกษา. I. ชื่อเรื่อง.

370

ISBN 978-616-551-834-5

พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 1 พ.ศ. 2557

จำนวนพิมพ์ 1,000 เล่ม

จำนวนหน้า 456 หน้า

ราคา 300 บาท

จัดพิมพ์และจัดจำหน่ายโดย

ศูนย์ส่งเสริมการพัฒนานวัตกรรม ตำราและเอกสารทางวิชาการ

ชั้น 1 อาคาร 4 ห้อง 106

คณะครุศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

ถนนพญาไท แขวงวังใหม่ เขตปทุมวัน กรุงเทพฯ 10330

โทรศัพท์/โทรสาร 0-2218-2604 ต่อ 128

พิมพ์ที่

โรงพิมพ์แห่งจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย [5711-145/1,000]

254 ถนนพญาไท แขวงวังใหม่ เขตปทุมวัน กรุงเทพฯ 10330

โทร. 0 2218-3557, 0-2215-3612

อีเมล: cuprint@hotmail.com

เว็บไซต์: www.cuprint.chula.ac.th