

Chapter 3

Lifelong Learning: A Language Game in Search of Its Rules

Peter Gilroy*

Introduction

Any novice to the literature of lifelong learning cannot help but discern two threads that weave their way through the material. The first is what appears to be the inherent ambiguity of the term, and the second the focus on learning, however defined. In this chapter, I will address both of these aspects of the concept from an epistemological perspective, though not necessarily resolve them.

Extreme Definitions of Lifelong Learning

It would be difficult, if not philosophically imprudent, to set out to understand the way in which epistemology might connect to the concept of lifelong learning without first clarifying what one means by lifelong learning. This is no easy task. As Aspin points out, it can mean ‘different things not only in different contexts but also in the same context to different people’ (Aspin 2007, p. 4).

At one extreme, we have the simple assertion that ‘Learning is what we do from before birth’, followed by the conclusion that ‘formal and informal learning will be needed throughout life: hence the term “lifelong learning”’ (Cottrell 2003, p. 5). It is probably best to leave aside for the moment the questions that would certainly be of interest to a Hindu or Buddhist philosopher and that contain echoes of the epistemology of the middle-period Plato, of quite what is learned before birth and how the objects of such learning are to be identified. What Cottrell presents is what

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P. Gilroy (✉)
School of Education, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK
e-mail: d.p.gilroy@btinternet.com

has been termed the ‘cradle-to-grave’ approach, which Jarvis et al. (2006, p. 545) rightly dismiss as incoherent. If every aspect of life is to be included as the focus of lifelong learning, then the term’s meaning is stretched beyond breaking point to be literally life-long.

Another all-encompassing (and which therefore prohibits any differentiation) approach is that of Longworth (1999, p. 8), who, *qua* President of the European Lifelong Learning Organisation, defines lifelong learning as ‘principally about people and the way in which they can develop their own human potential’. The difficulty with this putative definition is that, as with Cottrell, it covers far too much to be meaningful and, in effect, reduces to the same point that lifelong learning refers to no less and no more than all the experiences that can, or might potentially, define a human being.

At another extreme, others have simply adopted a very narrow definition of the term and assumed that lifelong learning refers to adult or further education. Thus, Lifelong Learning UK (defining itself as an ‘independent employer-led sector skills council’) sees itself as addressing the needs of just one particular sector of the population, namely those working in career guidance, community learning and development, further education, higher education, libraries, archives and information services and work-based learning (LLUK 2008).

This restricted use of the term ties it very much to adult education and, despite its proclaimed independence, inevitably connects the Council to current policy debates regarding formal adult and continuing education programmes in the United Kingdom. Thus, one UK university’s Director of Lifelong Learning bemoans the fact that ‘lifelong learning programmes across the country are closing...we are losing evening courses...which allowed those who could not study in any other mode to gain a qualification’ (Sperlinger 2009, p. 24).

To Sperlinger, and others who accept this definition, lifelong learning is a formal process taking part in an institution, which results in a qualification.

By ‘others’ one would have now to include UNESCO. Initially their understanding of lifelong learning in the 1960s was the ‘cradle-to-grave’ approach, one which was subject to stinging criticism (Bagnall 1990). Subsequently, their Lifelong Education Programme, organised through their Institute for Education, morphed in May 2006 into the ‘Institute for Lifelong Learning’ (UNESCO 2006, p. 56). This institute has recently stated that part of their remit is to ‘promote lifelong learning and adapt the educational system in order to meet changing economic, social and demographic conditions’ (UNESCO 2010, p. 1). To do so, they will support programmes that address the need ‘to maintain economic growth and standard of living’ (*ibid.*), and they make it clear that these are formal programmes delivered through adult training, basic education, further education and universities of the third age. The only reference to their earlier position is a tangential one, to something rather awkwardly termed ‘the life-course approach’ (*ibid.*, p. 2). It is clear that in the twenty-first century, lifelong learning for UNESCO relates primarily to economic development, with the OECD also making an explicit connection between lifelong learning and the need for society to develop its ‘human capital’ (OECD 2007a, p. 7) through lifelong learning.

In fact, it is interesting to note that the original terminology for this field was not related directly to learning but to education. Thus, Knapper and Cropley (1985) move between the use of lifelong *learning* (which is in fact part of the title of their monograph) and lifelong *education* (an early example would be on p. 15) as if the two were merely synonyms. This allows them to reach a definition that ties the two concepts together, whereby lifelong learning ‘embraces a set of guidelines for developing educational practice...in order to foster learning throughout life’ (ibid., p. 18). It is their acceptance of ‘education’ as a synonym for ‘learning’ that leads them to distinguish the ‘spontaneous, day-to-day learning’ from what they term ‘deliberate learning’ (ibid., p. 38). By doing so, they are led to narrowing the focus of lifelong learning so that it applies to education, which then allows for the next step, whereby lifelong learning is connected to more formal approaches to education. If, however, the point of talking about lifelong learning is to distinguish the activity from formal education, then their elision lends support to what appears to be a category mistake, in that an all-encompassing general term (lifelong learning) is being used as if it can refer to, what is for them, a much more specific formalised process (education).

The obvious difficulty with this approach to defining lifelong learning is that at one level, it is no more than what we currently understand by formal education, but with the age profile of those being educated extending beyond the traditional the first 21 years or so of a person’s life. At another level, it appears to be harking back to a Victorian, conservative, instrumentalist approach to learning, whereby learning throughout life (i.e. ‘lifelong’) is tightly connected to producing a workforce that will support and develop further the economic productivity and well being of society. It could be argued that this is precisely why UK universities, since 2009, are now no longer represented at policy level by a Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, but rather by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Nevertheless, such an approach is, to say the least, at some considerable level, removed from the ‘liberal and humanitarian ideals’ (Bagnall 1990, p. 6) of lifelong learning.

What then to make of lifelong learning? Whatever else can be said of it, the view that ‘Lifelong learning is a beautifully simple idea. It is obvious that people learn throughout their lives’ (Field 2006, p. 1), and seems, given the points made above, somewhat optimistic. Field does continue by accepting that lifelong learning is ‘a loose and all-encompassing term’, which has the danger of being used by policy makers to develop their own ‘narrow agenda...the development of a more productive and efficient workforce’ through post-16 formal provision (ibid., p. 2), which neatly captures the two extremes discussed above. However, whilst accepting that lifelong learning is ‘pervasive’ (ibid., p. 145), his own definition is simply that lifelong learning is ‘the recognition that learning may stretch out across a lifetime – is the new educational reality’ (ibid., p. 9) seems to add only a temporal dimension (and that an obvious one) to our understanding of the term.

The temptation, contra Field and Leicester (2000, p. xvii), would be to accept that the term is so broad as to be a meaningless ‘slogan’ (Elliott 2001, p. 26). Another

is to argue that any attempt to pin down *the* meaning of lifelong learning is inevitably to take part in an essentialist approach to meaning, an approach that has long been discredited in philosophy, in general (see, e.g. Wittgenstein 1953 and Gellner 1959), and philosophy of education, in particular (see, e.g. Gilroy 1982 and Chapman and Aspin 1997).

Succumbing to this temptation would leave those involved with the theory and practice of lifelong learning with the embarrassing problem of appearing to be involved with a subject domain that they cannot meaningfully identify. There are at last two ways of resolving this difficulty. The first is to identify the source of the ambiguity of the concept not with the first term ‘lifelong’ [which seems to be a temporal concept with, as Field (2006, op. cit.) asserts above, an ‘obvious’ meaning], but rather with its second term, ‘learning’. The second is to identify a nonessentialist theory of meaning that provides a cartography that would allow for the meanings of lifelong learning to be mapped. I wish to argue that, as it happens, both resolutions can be connected through an appropriate epistemology.

Lifelong Learning’s Epistemology: To Infinity and Beyond

Learning, whatever else it might be, is a term in search of qualification. ‘To learn’ is to take part in some sort of activity, physical or mental, deliberate or accidental. However, simply to assert that ‘X is learning’ begs the question, ‘What is it that X is learning?’; hence, there is the need to qualify ‘learning’ in a manner which identifies the focus of that learning. As I will now argue, it is precisely this lack of an acceptable qualification that has left lifelong learning open to a plethora of meanings and the potential for some to re-define the concept to fit their own conservative agenda.

The lifelong learning literature, as we have seen, does attempt to provide some sort of qualification or condition for its use of ‘learning’. In general, this approach can be seen as connecting, though not explicitly, with traditional accounts of epistemology. Briefly, traditional epistemologists shared a common feature, in that they attempted to identify a referent for knowledge, physical, or mental, couched in the technical language of Ideas and sense data (see Hacking 1975). This led them into associating knowledge either with Ideas generated from without (traditional empiricism) or from within the self (traditional rationalism).

Thus, as was noted earlier, Cottrell appears to be accepting, if not middle-period Plato’s epistemology directly, some sort of traditional rationalist epistemology in asserting that learning takes place before birth. However, Plato himself rejected this account of knowledge in both Plato’s *Parmenides* and his *Theaetetus* as incoherent, in that it generates an infinite regress of pre-births (see Gilroy 1996, p. 21), and so it is strange to see it re-surfacing here. If one then turns to the ‘cradle-to-grave’ approach, whereby lifelong learning relates to all of life’s experiences (mental and physical), another aspect of infinity, of experiences, is generated. Leaving aside the mix of both traditional rationalism and empiricism that is

required (where perhaps Kant's synthetic a priori is being hinted at – Kant 1787), the infinity of experiences results in an epistemology with, by definition, no specificity to give it meaning. Here, an epistemological approach to some accounts of lifelong learning can be seen as indicating they are doubly incoherent: first, they produce regresses that, *qua* infinite, cannot be halted and, second, *qua* personal experience they are irreducibly private to the individual. It follows that Jarvis et al.'s (2009, p. 288) recent suggestion that to understand the nature of lifelong learning one should focus on 'the nature of the person' has the potential to recreate the incoherence of the double jeopardy that entrapped traditional empiricists and rationalists. That is, if by 'person' Jarvis is referring to some sort of empiricist approach to clarifying the concept, then the empiricist's meaningless infinite regress of experiences is necessarily invoked; if to some version of rationalism, then the incoherence of private experience is resuscitated.

Modern Epistemology: Lifelong Learning in Search of Its Language Game

It would be philosophically naïve to assert that there is an inevitable connection between learning and knowledge, as this would simply transfer the burden of explanation from 'learning' to 'knowledge'. However, modern epistemologists have made a link between the two concepts, arguing that 'epistemology in its new setting... is contained in natural science, as a chapter of psychology' (Quine 1969, p. 83), where 'psychology' is used to identify relevant learning theories. This is not the place to examine Quine's modern version of empiricist epistemology (see Gilroy 1996, Chap. 4 *passim*). One merely needs to notice that for modern epistemologists, a connection exists, however tenuous, between knowledge and learning (between epistemology and how to acquire/learn what epistemology is of, knowledge).

Two questions remain. What might such a modern epistemology look like and how might it connect to understanding the nature of lifelong learning? One way of understanding modern epistemology is to see it as rejecting the objectivism of the past, where traditional epistemologists, assuming knowledge to be objective, thus attempted to find some secure, objective basis for identifying such knowledge. This essentialist approach to knowledge also underpins an essentialist approach to meaning, referred to above in relation to attempting to identify *the* meaning of lifelong learning.

An alternative, holistic, account of knowledge, which grew as a reaction to the essentialist approach, can be found initially in Frege's work, but was developed much further by Wittgenstein. Frege argued that knowledge relates to 'the entire declarative sentence' (Frege 1892, p. 214), thus moving epistemology away from private individual units of meaning. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, takes this holistic approach much further, eventually arguing that the total social context is what gives words their meaning and knowledge its foundation, where 'the use of a word *in practice* is its meaning' (Wittgenstein 1933–1935, p. 69). The argument is

complex (see Gilroy 1996, pp. 102–134), but two interconnected elements are particularly relevant to the issues under consideration here, namely language game and criteria.

Wittgenstein's conception of the way in which social context relates to meaning and knowing is expressed in terms of his well known analogy of a 'language game', in that the rules of a game provide a means of understanding the actions that are part of the game. Moreover, these rules are part of a background, implicit, agreement about their nature, form and function (Wittgenstein 1949–51, p. 28e, §204). What is perhaps less well known is the connection made between language game and criteria.

The various rules for different language games, and by analogy the different uses of language, are to be found in criteria. However, these criteria exist in different forms. They can be explicit, or implicit, clearly differentiated, or somewhat indeterminate (Wittgenstein 1945–1948, p. 83e, §466), learned by being informed unequivocally what they are or by just being used (*ibid.*, p. 77e, §190).

Here is an epistemology that is based on social understanding and yet, through rules and criteria, is not wildly subjective. It brings with it a contextual approach to understanding meaning, but again avoids meanings being incoherently subjective as they are rule and criteria dependent in subtle and complex ways. Given this approach what sense can be made of 'learning' in the context of 'lifelong learning'?

The material so far examined would suggest that there are a number of ways for identifying the context within which the term is used and that, *ceteris paribus*, there are significantly different meanings to the term. Provided these are internally consistent and rule dependent, then it would seem that one problem with lifelong learning, the attempt to provide a narrow and clear-cut definition, with 'learning' qualified in a once-and-for-all manner, is doomed to fail, as the actual use of the term shows that it has different and not always compatible meanings. Another, related, problem is that the various uses of the term shows clearly that there are no obvious rules for its appropriate use, nor are there criteria provided for those rules' appropriate use. This allows for the concept to drift in meaning from one context to another, with nothing to anchor it epistemologically to any particular context.

Such a situation allows for those with power to enforce, if only by default, their definition of lifelong learning. This is precisely what we have seen where 'lifelong learning's' sense of 'learning' is literally qualified, being tied to institutions that provide the qualifications others perceive as relevant to the activities they believe are appropriate for adults. As such, lifelong learning is likely to be understood, as noted previously, as nothing more than an extension of existing formal educational practice, with the power provided by the bureaucracy of formal educational institutions to legitimate their (limited) understanding of lifelong learning.

What is required to take our understanding of both the policy and practice of lifelong learning beyond what already exists is for the language game of which it is a part to accept that what is urgently required are rules, and the associated criteria for the operation of those rules, which would then act to create an appropriate technical language for the field of study concerned. This might sound as if an epistemological essentialism, with a concomitant essentialist account of meaning, has resurfaced. Far from it.

Conclusion: A Dumb Technical Discipline

What I wish to argue is that there is an important difference between ordinary language use and technical language use. To revert to Wittgenstein's analogy, there are at least two language games here. The first is that of ordinary, everyday use, and the second the use in a language game we might best term 'the technical'. It is lifelong learning's fate to be used in both contexts and without any clear differentiation between them. In passing, it is worth noting the uncomfortable fact that the subject domain of education in general is deeply compromised by being encumbered with language that is used every day, but which its practitioners often wish to use in a technical sense.

One example, from amongst many, illustrates this point. Teacher educators have been criticised in the past as having failed 'to construct a unified body of knowledge from which educational practice evolves' (Roth 1972, p. 9). One response has been to appropriate Schön's explanation of reflective practice and assume not only that it is meaningful, but that it can be connected to educational practice. Both of these assumptions have been subject to extensive criticism (see Gilroy 1993; Newman 1999), but more than a decade later, they continue to be used as if they were uncontentious. What is worse, the technical sense of the terms 'reflective' and 'practice' is blurred, because they have perfectly common ordinary uses. As a result, a government body in the United Kingdom such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted 2008) has been happy to make reference to reflective practice, ignoring the fact that if the term were properly applied, their own existence would sooner or later be the focus of teachers' critical reflection (with all that such criticism might mean to Ofsted's review of those teachers with the courage to publicise their critique of its performance).

If this example is reinterpreted, we can see that it can be argued that those concerned with lifelong learning have, with Roth (op. cit.), failed 'to construct a unified' set of expressions, policies and practices to identify their conception of appropriate lifelong learning. In the absence of defining the technical terminology that make up the language game of lifelong learning, there are no rules and criteria against which to test appropriate use. Thus, Lifelong Learning UK and OECD/UNESCO (as discussed above), paralleling the behaviour of Ofsted, have simply asserted that their use of 'training and testing systems...aimed at ...the development of human capital' to identify lifelong learning is *the* use of the term (OECD 2007b, p. 1).

Education, unlike say other practitioner professions such as nursing, civil engineering and the like, appears to be a discipline without a technical language. In the absence of such a language, it struggles to identify clearly, through a set of explicit stipulative definitions, its unique knowledge base. It is in an important sense dumb: attempting, and often failing, to refer to its technical subject matter with non-technical (and therefore ambiguous) everyday language. As part of the education subject domain, the more open, democratic, value-laden aspect of lifelong learning also finds itself silenced, unable to identify through an unambiguous technical language the knowledge, rules, criteria and practices, which would uniquely identify it.

Accordingly Elliott's plea for 'a social theory of learning that gives due weight to social, economic and cultural influences' (2001, p. 26) can, it has been argued here, be met through an epistemology that is based firmly in social context. What is now required is for the distinct social contexts that make up the Education language game to identify what makes their practice discrete and then to use that identification to stipulate criteria for meaning. Such an approach to epistemology and meaning theory would provide a justification for stipulating meanings in exactly the same way that other technical subjects justify and identify their subject-specific, practice-identifying, terminology. By doing no more (and no less) than creating and abiding by rules of meaning that would establish when a term was being used or misused in that particular practice's context, it would be possible to establish a technical language which would properly and clearly identify the kinds of practices (and thus policy) that the term lifelong learning currently only implies. One trusts that this collection of papers will provide precisely that identification.

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