Lifelong teaching: should ‘the teacher’ scare adult educators?

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As researchers and practitioners in the general field of adults learning a phrase in the preamble of the 2008 SCUTREA ‘call for papers’ attracted our attention:

... there has been a remarkable explosion in individualised, self-directed and autonomous forms of learning that have occurred without involving adult educators.

While we do not wish to take on an argument against such an explosion in this paper, we wonder whether, when autonomous learning is mooted, this is always the case. Common usage implies that in individualised, self-directed and autonomous forms of learning the learner is learning by him or her self. However, in our own collective research we are noticing how often learning that might seem to be autonomous is necessarily occurring in relationships with others, and might be fostered indirectly by yet others: particularly as it pertains to learning at work. Imagining these as quasi-pedagogical relationships, and ‘the others’ as quasi-teachers, leads us to ask: should ‘the teacher’ (in scare quotes) scare adult educators?

Generally the use of scare quotes (i.e., ‘... ’), like we use here with ‘the teacher’, draws attention to the way a term is being deployed. Often they flag that the term is taking on a different meaning or that the meaning has been modified from its commonly understood one. Our modification here is that ‘the teacher’ is deployed in a much broader sense than is generally accepted. Our point in doing so is not to make the ‘adult educator’ redundant, rather to imagine what a broader view of ‘the teacher’ might (or might not) mean in a new configuration of lifelong learning.

Background/s

Our shared, as well as our differing, research interests provide fertile ground for such a discussion. One of us (David) has written extensively in the area of workplace learning. The other of us (Donna) has recently submitted a doctoral thesis concerned with learning in New South Wales' neighbourhood centres. Both of us are currently working on an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project that is exploring integrated development practices in workplaces. Similarly, both of us worked on an earlier ARC workplace learning research project.

The earlier project was concerned with everyday learning at work. In that project we noticed that while some workplace learning comes from documentary sources like books, manuals and the Internet, much more learning involves other people. These other people include trainers in structured activities specifically designed to address a particular need. It also includes specific mentoring, coaching and peer programs. However, a surprisingly extensive amount of learning comes from co-workers, and these others are not typically considered human resource professionals, supervisors or adult educators (Boud and Middleton, 2003).
The doctoral research (referred to above) was concerned with the provision of learning in neighbourhood centres. This project employed multi-methods and found the majority of provision of learning in centres did not include those who were educational authorities. Moreover, qualitative results included many examples of people learning from (as well as about) others who were not typically understood as adult educators either (Rooney, 2007).

Finally, our current research project ‘Beyond training: integrated development practices in organisations’ has a particular focus on work practices that are; (1) part of the everyday practices of organisations; (2) involve people learning; and, of interest here, (3) practices that are not facilitated by people with an explicit training or development role. Like the earlier two, this project is also uncovering much learning not prompted by the interventions of adult educators, teachers or trainers or supervisors – yet prompted by others all the same.

In all, our shared research interest in learning that is not situated in educational institutions cuts across our various sites. Despite these organisational sites’ non-educational status, and despite the non-educational roles of facilitators and supervisors, we nevertheless have ‘found’ significant learning. We have been calling this ‘everyday learning’ (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2006).

**Everyday learning**

In the current climate, the notion of informal learning is attracting new attention. There are several definitions of ‘informal learning’ available. Most consider ‘informal’ as a polarisation of ‘formal’. Some definitions of informal learning rely on the absence of a recognisable teacher. Sometimes the place where learning takes place classifies it as informal (eg. college or kitchen). And sometimes, intent plays part in the definition (eg. to gain a qualification). Informal learning has largely been understood as in opposition to formal learning (for example in the case of structured training). This maintains a binary that is embedded not only in debates around workplace learning but also in learning debates more generally.

More recent understandings of learning suggest (rightly in our view) that using the terminology ‘informal’ to describe learning is problematic (Billett, 2004; Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcom, 2003; Eraut, 2004). Some, like Eraut (2004), keep an active distinction between the two but add that rather than informal and formal learning being understood in a binary sense it is more useful to think about them on a continuum (pp.250). Colley et al. (2003), on the other hand, describe the complexities of assuming easy definitions between informal and formal learning, and suggest that traces of formal and informal can be seen in each. Similarly Billet (2004) suggests that describing workplace learning as informal is ‘negative, imprecise and ill-focused’ (2004, pp.313).

We use the term ‘everyday learning’ here in recognition of the problems associated with formal/informal binaries. The usefulness of thinking about everyday learning is that it is configured both within, and in opposition to, the various types of learning. Moreover, everyday learning serves to normalise learning, and through this process helps us to look anew at what until now has been considered peripheral to legitimate workplace activity. A further advantage of using the term everyday learning is that it couples easily with ‘everyday work’. In doing so suggesting that working and learning are compatible and can be integrated. It conceives learning as a normal part of work, rather than as an adjunct.

It is not, however, as easy as simply replacing the term ‘informal learning’ with the more preferable ‘everyday learning’. As has been suggested, naming workplace activities as
everyday learning can have its own danger (Boud and Solomon, 2003). Moreover, to insist
exclusively on ‘everyday’ learning is to deny the obvious currency of informal learning
among organisations. However, at the same time it opens up space for us to imagine new
roles of teaching – and particularly so for those whose primary role is not specifically linked
to learning. This is possible because exploring everyday learning draws our attention to
the relationships and identities on which this learning relies.

Learning relationships and identities

For the most part, learning is a social act: from Freire's dialogue (1972) to Lave and
Wenger’s communities of practice (1991), learning is embedded in social relationships.
Indeed, an important aspect of much workplace learning is that it is embedded in
relationships and it is through these relationships that learning is realised. Local
relationships are needed to carry out broader initiatives into everyday work practices and
these local relationships can provide opportunities for everyday learning. Thinking about
learning at work draws attention to the variety of relationships needed to facilitate the
social processes of everyday learning at work. If learning is facilitated in these
relationships then these relationships can be conceived as quasi-pedagogical. Thinking
about these quasi-pedagogical relationships draws attention to those involved: the most
obvious being ‘the learner’.

Unlike educational discourses where the identities involved are more clearly demarcated,
identities within learning discourses are more ambiguous. With that said, the various
discourses of lifelong learning have heightened our awareness of learners. As
researchers, we have occupied ourselves with looking toward workplaces in an effort to
name activities as learning, and to name workers as learners. This naming has come
about partly by recognising the quasi-pedagogical relationships that include learners.

On the whole we have little trouble naming the learners, but there is more difficulty when it
comes to naming the counterpart, ‘the teachers’. To date we have tended to call them work
colleagues, or peers, or workmates and so forth: stopping short of naming these others as
‘teachers’. For the most part ‘the teacher’ is reserved for the exclusive use of ‘legitimate’
and ‘professional’ adult educators. This tendency is summed up nicely by Sandercock who
says that ‘all professions tend to draw tight boundaries around their identities for the
purpose of staking out their knowledge claims, for quality control, and to establish a

Learning, without the intervention of educators, or at least with only a modest intervention,
has been named as autonomous or individualised. However, in doing so ‘teaching’ is
rendered invisible. But if we imagine learners as being in relationships that in part must be
asymmetrical, then the other of learner is ‘the teacher’. To define and name teaching, we
can look towards how learning is defined and named, and while there are many definitions
to choose from, most refer to some sort of change. If change in one person can be
attributed to the intervention of another, then this other must be in some sense, ‘the
teacher’. Defined in its broadest sense teaching is bringing about learning. In these quasi-
pedagogical relationships, teaching and learning are interdependent: the act of teaching is
reliant on the presence of a learner and vice versa. So, can we now think about teaching in
a similar vein as learning, that is ‘everyday teaching’?

A prevalent theme in the burgeoning work on identity suggests that identities are not
singular, fixed or static. Rather there is some agreement that we each have multiple
identities. Some have noted that in workplaces this can mean hybrid worker-learners
(Chappell et al., 2003), but we want to extend this to worker-learner-teacher. This is
because not only can workers be learners, but also, as our research is suggesting, many or most workers are also de facto teachers.

Indeed, everyone is involved in learning at work. When workers are faced with a problem, for example, they often first approach a peer or someone they believe to have experience in a particular area, rather than a supervisor. What is significant is that very few people that are actively sought by workers to help them learn are people who are typically understood as people with 'official' roles in promoting learning. The findings of our various research projects highlight the importance of relationships for everyday learning as well as foregrounding everybody's potential role in the development of everyone else. In other words, from administrative staff, senior managers to field workers and support staff, everybody at work is involved in everyday learning, no matter what their job description: and everybody can be and often is both learner and teacher.

The discussion now leads us to imagine ‘lifelong teaching’, although not in the sense that others have evoked (i.e., in the sense used in educational institutions). For example there have been calls for lifelong teaching in order to, ‘confirm the vocation, the calling, and then [demand] an ongoing reflexive interrogation of the nature of this calling (‘professional development’) (Bleakley 2001, pp.115). It is not teaching (as a calling or vocation) that we refer to here, but teaching as it pertains to supporting others’ learning. ‘Teaching’ then is also embedded in everyday work. In the same way that the notion of ‘the learner’ has escaped from the academy, so too we suggest must follow ‘the teacher’. Like everyday learning, everyday teaching is responsive and ongoing. It is not a grand calling, but is local and specific and, because of this, it can not only fill the gaps left by ‘education’, but more importantly provide the sources of knowledge unimagined by conventional teachers.

In drawing attention to the notion of lifelong teaching, we should be mindful of some of the differences that may exist between this and teaching as commonly accepted. The most significant of these is an altered emphasis on planning. The classic teacher holds a normative position and has a strong view of what the learner should learn, not just in the present moment, but over a course or curriculum. The lifelong teacher holds a contingent position that is more strongly dependent on the emergent needs of the learner. This is not to say that they might not have a clear view of what the curriculum should be in any given case (eg. that there is an appropriate way of learning how to do this kind of work), but that their response may be more contingent on local circumstances and the expressed desires of the learner.

The identity of ‘the teacher’ is similarly contingent. It is not something configured by a profession or a role, but comes into being within settings that are inevitably about something that is not about teaching and learning. In the same way that everyday learning is generated by context and need, so too is that of teaching. While there are some workplaces in which there is a person to whom everyone goes to understand how to do the work, and this person might take on the local identity of ‘teacher’, by and large, this is not the case because everyday learning and everyday teaching is extensively distributed.

**Imagining ‘lifelong teaching’**

Against the learning monopoly of education, lifelong learning advocates recognise that learning takes place in a variety of sites (ANTA, 1999; Brown, 2000; Harrison, 2003; OECD, 2004). This is not to suggest a general or universal consensus about what actually constitutes lifelong learning. Rather, meanings of lifelong learning are not entirely fixed. This serves to retain some space for negotiating meanings that encapsulate important differences as well as similarities.
This argument is perhaps more pertinent in Australia, where the discourses of lifelong learning are yet to be embedded in the landscape with the similar fervour as some other OECD countries. Some suggest the term in an Australian context is little more than a ‘hollow motherhood statement’ (Axford and Mayes, 2003, pp.vii). Aside from an intermittent take up, ‘there has been little evidence in Australia of [an] overall or widespread adoption of [a] more integrated, multi-faceted approach towards lifelong learning’ (Aspin, Collard and Chapman, 2000, pp.173). Hence, while the concept has gained momentum elsewhere, the Australian response to the calls of ‘lifelong learning’ has for the most part been a deafening silence (Aspin, Collard, and Chapman, 2000; Watson, 1999). This leaves us in a privileged space that is open to imagining ‘lifelong teaching’.

But what might ‘lifelong teaching’ look like? If nothing else it would pose ethical questions about responsibility to others over and above that formally expected as part of job roles or descriptions. What are our obligations to peers within a learning relationship? Do relationships with counterparts in learning need always to be reciprocal and what might be the circumstances in which they are not?

Perhaps too imagining the concept confirms calls for a focus on soft competencies that can facilitate social relationships. There are features of effective ‘lifelong teaching’ that likely have yet to be elucidated. At the very least the concept of lifelong teaching might sit alongside lifelong learning discourses that recognise learning occurs outside educational institutions. If we are to become more effective lifelong learners, we need necessarily to become more effective lifelong teachers for others without carrying all the baggage of conventional teaching expectations with us.

**Conclusion**

Within this view of lifelong teaching we can begin to ask questions like: *is everyone equipped for the responsibility of helping each other learn?* And if not, *what might be done to assist this? What might the circumstances be in which this was necessary or appropriate?* It is also through consideration of the concept that managers and supervisors can ask: *how can we promote a variety of relationships that will enable people to make the most of everyday learning?* And, *what is the particular role of managers and supervisors in helping people learn from each other?* Worksites and workgroups, and the workers that constitute them, foster everyday teaching by making use of local relationships. Part of this is about recognising both the learning and the teaching that these relationships embody. It is also about recognising the teacher and the learner, and their needs. Is it here the adult educator (and researchers) might have something to offer ‘the teachers’. But first, we need to understand more fully what the role is of ‘the teachers’ in such situations. It is clear that learning workplaces are far from didactic classrooms, but what are the features of such learning conducive settings and what is the nature of the relationships within them? There is building evidence about the former (e.g. Ellström, 2001; Skule and Reichborn, 2002; Fuller and Unwin, 2003), but much less so about the latter.

So here now is the question for adult educators, which is *what is the role (if any) of adult educators? Do they have a place, and if so, what might it be?* Or should they, as Burbules suggests, simply get out of the way (1998, np)? Should we be scared about ‘lifelong teachers’, and if so, what is it that should worry us? We don’t have answers (assuming there are some), but like the SCUTREA organisers we regard it as an interesting point for discussion.

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