Lifelong Learning Beyond the Vast Economic Debacle

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Moving away from providing public funding for education is a norm of neoliberalism, which promotes privatized education primarily intended to advance economic interests. This norm inhibiting the construction of lifelong learning in more holistic terms has perennially frustrated social and cultural educators. In a social democracy, a government should be accountable to its citizens for the provision of accessible and accommodating forms of instrumental, social, and cultural education. Indeed a social democratic government should be a lifeline for encompassing lifelong learning as critical action that emphasizes both self-reliance and social responsibility as it advances learning for work, living, citizenship, and nation building (Grace 2009; Keizer 2009). This does not mean that private interests ought to be sidelined in developing lifelong learning. Since they are one of its beneficiaries, certainly in instrumental and economic contexts, they should contribute to funding this development, assisting the creation of forms and projects that align with a responsible national vision for holistic lifelong learning. To achieve this vision, lifelong educators ought to monitor what is happening, interrogating unscrupulous forms of privatized education that so often emerge in the kind of ‘rumpus-room economic system’ associated with neoliberalism in recent decades (Keizer 2009, p. 12). Within this system lifelong learning has emphasized individuals and their success through competition, with ‘the privilege of disposable income … [as a marker of success appearing to be] contingent on the existence of disposable people’ (Keizer 2009, p. 12). Here there is little or no concern with understanding self-reliance outside the economic context. As well, there is little or no emphasis on social responsibility as a basis for creating just and sustainable communities.

It is from these perspectives I explore contemporary lifelong learning and its possibilities amid the existing vast economic debacle that has normalized bewilderment and insecurity for markets, governments, and ordinary citizens. In this haphazard world, the promise of neoliberalism to advance the social as an outcome of advancing the economic—a promise that may have always been mythical—now appears to lack both substance and possibility. As lifelong educators, it is important
to consider what this grave crisis means for us. Thus in this paper I discuss how the vast economic debacle of 2008 unfolded amid a selfish politics of destruction and denial that shook neoliberalism and forced troubled nation states to act, as financial institutions crumbled and citizens experienced burgeoning debt loads and vulnerability in life, learning, and work. Here I consider Alan Greenspan’s perspectives on the emergence of the neoliberal economic model that contributed to what he calls an age of turbulence. I consider how this model has profoundly impacted lifelong learning for individuals. Next I explore how we might reframe lifelong learning as critical action by emphasizing education for responsible citizenship in this time of converging crises. This would involve helping learners to become political change agents who build abilities and capacities to meet local and larger needs, thus contributing to global homeostasis. I conclude with a historical reflection on the 1996 Delors report, Learning: The Treasure Within, as I consider why lifelong learning for all remains to be achieved.

**The Vast Economic Debacle of 2008**

The vast economic debacle of 2008 is considered the worst financial collapse since 1929 (Zakaria 2009). Greenspan (2008) describes this crisis that began to appear in the United States during the summer of 2007 as ‘an accident waiting to happen’ (p. 507). In the wake of this unwieldy crisis, people grew increasingly appalled as they learned more about ‘Wall Street’s exotic products, outrageous pay, dishonest accounting, and crumbling brokerage firms, as well as the [U.S.] government’s demand for $700 billion and later much more to bail them out’ (Phillips 2009, p. lxxii). Regarding this bailout, Barlett and Steele (2009) recount that the U.S. Congress passed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act in October 2008, enabling the Treasury Department to access bailout funds. They relate that $239 billion was used over the next three months to bail out 296 of the country’s 8,000 banks. Interestingly, they remark that 67 percent of the money went to just 8 of those troubled and troubling financial institutions. On a truly confounding note, they point out that the U.S. government did not track whether or how the banks used this unparalleled financial stimulus to achieve the purposes that it had intended: ‘to buy up defective mortgage-backed securities and other “toxic assets” through the Troubled Asset Relief Program, better known as TARP’ (p. 206).
This incalculable economic and financial crisis has been marked by a series of unprecedented events that, in tandem, have resulted in the most terrible economic slowdown since the Great Depression. This series includes: ‘the destruction of approximately $50 trillion [U.S. dollars] in assets in the global economy; the nationalization of America’s largest mortgage lenders; the largest bankruptcy in history (Lehman Brothers); the disappearance of the investment bank; [and] bailouts and stimulus packages around the world adding up to trillions of dollars’ (Zakaria 2009, p. xi). The cumulative impact has been massive and unrelenting, with Krugman (2009) suggesting that the current financial and economic crisis signifies a move into the domain of depression economics, which is an inadequate private demand for goods and services. This move is indicated by widespread recession induced by incompetent and greedy financial speculators as governments reel, fighting the uphill battle to generate spending to counteract unemployment and other consequences of the crisis.

Referring to this dire state of affairs as the Great Financial Crisis, Foster and Magdoff (2009) consider the immense economic meltdown to be a consequence of the stagnation of the real—investment in production to create tangible wealth—and the concomitant proliferation of the unreal—financial bubbles associated with volatile and unstable paper claims to wealth, which, on rupturing, caused ‘real-world repercussions’ (p. 7). This trend toward financialization has resulted in many changes in the economic character of the United States. One major consequence has been a radically changing work culture. Geoghegan (2009) asserts, ‘Basically, we’re all waiters now; we’re bowing and scraping and working for the banks’ (p. 32). Indeed the power of workers in the financial sector is greatly reduced compared to the glory days in the manufacturing sector when labor wielded power.

Connecting the dots into a world picture, Zakaria remarks that the American-born crisis of 2008 demonstrated the potential of massive debt to create deadly dilemmas dangerous to synchronous global growth. The crisis exposed the downside of globalization as nation after nation succumbed like tumbling dominoes to the impact of the ubiquitous financial and economic crisis. Both developed and developing nations became victims of the interdependence nurtured by globalization and an
international economic system integrated since the 1970s. Zakaria (2009) concludes, ‘The major side effect of all this success—low inflation, global growth, swift technological advancement—was arrogance, or more technically, the death of risk [in a global economy driven by the information revolution]’ (p. xiv). It was the death of risk that paved the way for an extraordinary and extreme rise in debt and borrowing against the future.

**Greenspan’s Age of Turbulence: The Neoliberal Economic Model and its Impact on Lifelong Learning**

The neoliberal economic model has generated a culture of unprecedented and uncaring risk that has profoundly impacted life, learning, and work since the 1980s. To understand this model and its enormous impact, it is useful to consider the standpoint of perhaps its chief proponent, Alan Greenspan. Described as ‘the prophet of deregulation’ (Mason 2009, p. 118), Greenspan has long been a staunch advocate of fiscal conservatism and free markets. During his tenure as chairman of the Federal Reserve Board from 1987 to 2006, he (2008) was integral in transforming the U.S. economy into a sophisticated and resilient neoliberal formation that incorporated deregulated financial markets, highly flexible labor markets, and, as he viewed it, ‘major advances in information technology … [that increased the nation’s] ability to absorb disruptions and recover’ (p. 8). Greenspan helped position the U.S. economy as the hub of global capitalism during the 1990s. He described this mushrooming economy as open and self-correcting in a world where commerce was forever altered by cheap and ubiquitous communications technologies like cell phones, personal computers, email, Blackberries, and the Internet. This technological revolution allowed real-time investing and trading in a milieu of ‘irrational exuberance’ that drove globalization and intensified market growth (Greenspan 2008, p. 177). With his nation driving the global economy, ‘America’s freewheeling, entrepreneurial, so-what-if-you-fail business culture [became] the envy of the world [as] U.S. information technology swept the global market’ (p. 183). Still Greenspan remained cautious. In 1996 in what now seems a premonition of the vast economic debacle to come, he warned, ‘We should not underestimate, or become complacent about, the complexity of the interactions of asset markets and the economy’ (p. 177). In managing the U.S. economy as an inextricable part of a
complex, interdependent global economy, Greenspan knew that the Federal Reserve Board often made decisions that involved dealing ‘with incomplete and faulty data, unreasoning human fear, and inadequate legal clarity’ (p. 196). Thus he concluded, ‘Policymakers cannot reliably anticipate financial or economic shocks or the consequences of economic imbalances’ (p. 528). Incalculable risks resulting in economic and social instability have created what Greenspan calls ‘an age of turbulence’ during which ‘it would be imprudent and immoral to minimize the human cost of its disruptions’ (p. 18).

As lifelong educators, we have been deeply impacted by the workings of the neoliberal economic model. Indeed the power of the model has pressured us to recast lifelong learning in predominantly instrumental terms that have pragmatic value in a world changed by globalization and financialization. As these forces intertwined, the consequences for transitions in learning and work have been phenomenal. Since the 1990s, the technological boom driving globalization and financialization has made job displacement and insecurity predominant concerns for white-collar workers who have been the dominant worker population in the United States since 1956 (Bell 1976; Greenspan 2008). For these workers, instrumental lifelong learning as an expected and necessary periodic venture is now inextricably linked to work, as learning for new work is often necessary once old jobs become redundant. Indeed learning for new work is now normalized for displaced workers, as is learning for new workers who lack marketable skills. For example, Greenspan relates that the ‘corporate university’ is rapidly becoming a permanent fixture in adult job-specific training [as] many corporations dissatisfied with the quality of new hires supplement their education and capabilities, equipping them to compete successfully in world markets’ (p. 402). Job displacement and the quest for new or better work have resulted in job turnover and mobility as contemporary realities in today’s work world. Greenspan explains these changes within the context of Joseph Schumpeter’s idea of ‘creative destruction’—the scrapping of old technologies and old ways of doing things for the new—[which] is the only way to increase productivity and therefore the only way to raise average living standards on a sustained basis’ (p. 268). As Greenspan sees it, this is the probable message of capitalism.
Greenspan’s (2008) perspectives are not particularly helpful as we think about life, learning, and work linked to wellbeing. In his assessment of the design of learning across the discipline of education, he has been predominantly concerned with the instrumental and the pragmatic. While he judges U.S. higher education to be a versatile and world-class formation that advances the economy in practical, creative, and entrepreneurial terms, Greenspan has been quite critical of what he considers dysfunctional and deficient systems of U.S. primary and secondary education that fail to provide graduates with both the capacity and ability to engage in work that would advance his country’s intricate goods-and-services infrastructure. He takes educating down to instrumental basics when he asks, ‘What do we do to their learning process that requires business recruiters to dismiss vast numbers of ‘educated’ applicants for modestly skilled jobs because they cannot write coherent sentences or add a column of numbers accurately’ (p. 399)? Greenspan does not adequately attend to social and cultural contexts shaping this educational outcome. Instead he goes straight to what he perceives to be the neoliberal solution, which is to shape educational policy in keeping with the global forces of competition.

**Lifelong Learning as Critical Action in a Time of Converging Crises**

If we position lifelong learning as critical action to enhance the wellbeing of citizens in lifewide contexts, then we need to engage learners in education for citizenship so they can become change agents. Lifelong learning as critical action can help citizens to be proactive in creating options for life, learning, and work. In the process, this can help to revitalize learning and work cultures, politics, civil society, and the environment in the interest of wellbeing for all. How might we shape lifelong learning as critical action so it incorporates important political and pedagogical dimensions of proactive education for citizenship? Korten (2006) suggests one way when he asks us to respond to the current spiral of converging crises by changing ‘the stories by which we define ourselves’ (p. 18). In this light, he calls for a *Great Turning* in which we convert crises into opportunities by learning ‘to live in creative partnership with one another and the living Earth’ (p. 3). This holistic form of lifelong learning as critical action would 1) accommodate human diversity, 2) focus on the intelligence and ingenuity of human beings, 3) demand that corporations be publicly accountable when they cause social upheaval and environmental damage, and 4) seek
rejuvenation of local communities and their economies and initiatives. Such lifelong learning as critical action would prioritize quality education for all that is linked to quality work and quality life. In this regard, it would focus on the politics and pedagogy of providing health care, eradicating poverty, protecting the environment, supporting the arts and public broadcasting, and meeting the needs of baby boomers (Korten 2006). To enable the Great Turning, lifelong learning as critical action should also have a rearticulated instrumental focus that advances ‘the idea that the proper defining purpose of business is to serve life and community’ (p. 16). As Korten sees it, such a program helps to develop life-serving economies that nurture communities on a foundation of responsible citizenship that adapts to local needs. He describes how prosperity is measured in these communities:

Prosperity is measured by the quality of our lives and the realization by each person of the creative potential of their humanity. A high-performing economic system supports the development of this potential, provides every person with an adequate and dignified means of livelihood, maintains the healthy vitality of the planetary ecosystem that is the source of all real wealth, and contributes to the building of community through strengthening the bonds of affection, trust, and mutual accountability. (p. 303)

In keeping with this notion of creating prosperous communities, lifelong learning as critical action would highlight an ecology for living that nurtures individual agency and betterment; viable and sustainable ecosystems; and strong, interactive communities. Here Korten speaks to the importance of building healthy communities that care for and serve individuals, focusing on their development and wellbeing so they can live intentionally, creatively, and happily. Within these communities, the diversity of individuals ought to be respected, cultivated, accommodated, and utilized. Indeed ‘a diversity of age, gender, [gender identity, sexual orientation,] culture, religion, and race provides an invaluable contribution to the resilience and creative potential of human communities’ (p. 294).

Truly valuing diversity begins by nurturing dialogue and enabling experiences across differences so individuals can create ‘communities of congruence’ that explore relational differences in local learning scenarios such as study groups (p. 317). Here
lifelong learning as critical action can nurture education for citizenship that exposes ‘the political process to a greater diversity of voices and parties’ and alters ‘public priorities in favor of people, families [as individuals construct them], communities, and the planet’ (p. 320). Conservatives and liberals do not have to be at odds in this learning process:

A politics of mature citizenship properly honors both the conservative values of freedom and individual responsibility and the liberal values of equity and justice for all. It brings together a conservative concern for community and heritage with a liberal concern for inclusiveness and the creation of a world that works for the whole of life and children yet to come. It recognizes the importance of local roots combined with a global consciousness. (p. 339)

Within this political métissage, lifelong learning as critical action can be a more intricate construct that engages individuals in learning framed as ‘an active engagement in community life’ (p. 351). Korten maintains that such an engagement has to involve learners in proactive learning, action research, and community-service projects in which they hone skills as writers, analysts, team members, communicators, and citizens who focus on communities and their histories, ecologies, and day-to-day interactions and practices. In this process, lifelong learning as critical action comes alive.

**Concluding Perspective: Déjà Vu**

These days we need holistic and encompassing lifelong learning as critical action to meet the diverse instrumental, social, and cultural needs of lifelong learners and, perhaps most especially, marginalized learners. This idea is not new. For example, it is profoundly reflected in perspectives and themes contained in *Learning: The Treasure Within*, which is the 1996 report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. The fact that we continue to experience much the same complexity of conditions exacerbating educational poverty that this major report mentioned begs the question: Why haven’t we achieved lifelong learning for all? The answer that Commission chair Jacques Delors provided at the time remains pertinent today. Locating education as ‘the necessary Utopia’ in times that witnessed
boom-and-bust crises and increased risk taking (p. 13), Delors focused on the
paradox that governments were devaluing education. He related that they made
sociopolitical choices based on competing demands or the availability of resources.
These choices did not adequately support educational sectors. He concluded,
‘Educational policies are being sharply criticized or pushed—for economic and
financial reasons—down to the bottom of the agenda’ (p. 13).

In the report, Delors also highlighted what is now a perennial concern: the need to
grapple with the complexities of globalization in the quest to solve social and
economic problems. In this regard, in his version of lifelong learning as critical action
he emphasized that educational policymakers needed to link education to sustaining
human development, addressing challenges associated with economic and
technological progress, increasing mutual understanding among people across
differences, and renewing participatory democracy. Delors wanted educational,
social, and economic policymakers to join forces in efforts to resolve the tension
between competition, which drove learning for the economy, and the concern for
equality of opportunity, which drove lifelong learning as a more holistic, flexible,
diverse, and accessible venture abetting self-development, environmental
awareness, and social cohesion. From this lifewide perspective locating education
within larger social democratic and economic concerns, Delors construed education
broadly so it would be a passport and a foundation for future learning. In doing so, he
wanted to (re)present ‘the concept of lifelong education so as to reconcile three
forces: competition, which provides incentives; co-operation, which gives strength;
and solidarity, which unites’ (p. 18). From this perspective, Delors and the
Commission located learning as lifelong and lifewide, associating it with working in
economic and cultural contexts, participating as an active citizen, and performing
other life roles. In this spacious sense, learning is something personal and creative
that is intended to address citizens’ needs and desires in keeping with ‘the changing
time-frames and rhythms of individual existence’ (p. 100).

References

Barlett, D L & Steele, J B (2009, October) ‘Good billions after bad’, Vanity Fair, 590,
pp. 204-209, 261-263.