Any Curriculum will do: Achieving adult well-being in the instrumentalist skills agenda

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Introduction

This paper focuses on students of Post Compulsory Education, who chose and have completed a course of education of between two and four years, and which was undertaken to improve their employability. It sets out to explore the adult experience of lifelong learning through an examination of the affective dynamics of contemporary Tayloristic curricula (Wayne 2011). Bringing together the voices of those who had mustered the courage to return to learning, in adulthood and amongst an empirically mechanistic prescription (Golby 1989; Habermas 1984), the paper critically evaluates the outcomes of the skills development curriculum whilst focussing on the adult student’s perspective and the impact it had, on their affective notions of well-being.

Curricula were understood by the adult students in the research, in the narrow context of being a list and description of what they had to know, and do, by the end of their period of learning. At the beginning, what they were hoping to achieve, was to enhance their respective curriculum vitae with authenticated competence for a vocation, via the certification of an authoritative body.

The research interviews used semi-structured questions with six participants, which had been tested out by a limited pilot, refined and then applied as a prompt to hearing participants’ narratives.

Informing Literature

In 1981, Mezirow provided the term “meaning perspectives”. Later, he defined this as “the structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one’s past experience” (Mezirow 1991:2). This term is of unique relevance when considering how adult students achieve well-being through
educational pathways. Consciousness management and critical self reflection factors
developed by Mezirow (ibid) are equally resonant amongst the works of Habermas
1979; Weinstein 1985; Kuhn 1962; Kelly, 1963; Knowles, 1975; Kolb, 1984; Piaget,
1953, 1972 and Vygotsky 1978, all of whom also see consciousness and reflective
capability change, as fundamentally party to the positive transformational effects
leading to well-being. Such theoretical perspectives seem immediately at odds with
the contemporary style of curricula on offer. It seems adults seeking to make life
meaningful are expected to employ an educational system that is intent on turning
out graduates using production line methods, and product-based outcomes.
Institutions might thus be accused of becoming part of an economics led ‘Groupthink’
culture (Janis 1972) with little regard to the inclusive delivery of education, or for the
affective and cognitive needs of their student clients.
Available curricula in lifelong learning have been increasingly colonised by the skills
agenda promoted by Central Government. The Teaching and Learning Research
Project (2008b:11), for example, reported “the segmentation of expertise based on
talent” and that digital Taylorism “may shape the future of education and education
systems” (p12). Those courses of education which are related to developing the
skills needed for employability are thus unquestionably funded by a hegemonic
culture which sees global competition as a threat to collective British well-being.
Moreover, because such education becomes affordable through grant, student loans
and subsidy, institutions have little economic choice, but to focus on the profitability
provided by larger cohort sizes created by this political manoeuvring. For the adults
participating in the research, their world had become one of intensifying
competitiveness in the job market, low educational esteem, feelings of inadequacy
and bad memories from past compulsory schooling; in short, a disabling predilection
to their future prosperity and well-being.

Being Made to Feel Unwell: Participants in Synthesis with Theory

At European policy making level Lifelong Learning has become a theme used to
address the changing economic balance between countries of the world. In Britain, it
has become a governmental call for all to engage with continuous learning (Field
2006; Edwards 1997; Coffield 2000). In such rhetoric, it is an imperative for adults to be competitive; to build security from being a desirable asset to employers: an imperative to seek self-development, for the purposes and end goal of personal and national economic stability and to achieve economic growth through personal and national economic self sufficiency (Crowther 2004). Driving the agenda of improving the skills of the nation is the contention that the world is a competitive place; that we are enduring “an increasingly competitive environment where old and new competitors consistently ‘up the ante’ in pursuit of competitive advantage” (TLRP 2008a). “Creating a war for talent” and “ripping up the level playing field” (ibid) are used when describing the growing economies of the second (developing) and third (under-developed) countries, and their impact on the first world (developed). The view that economies with lower cost labour and resources can reduce the standard of living and lifestyle of the wealthier states thus becomes the diktat of change where threat, and not well-being, is employed as the purpose and subject of individuals’ reflections; where not getting any worse off, rather than becoming better off, is the objective.

Well-Being as a complex research theme

The research set about identifying what participant well-being might be; the analysis proposed the existence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The first factor was the soma: what the participant felt in bodily affective fashion, the research question being, “What somatic transformations could be established in the participant’s post educational text? The second was the psyche; how the participant felt in a cognitive fashion; the research asked, “What transformations to the participant’s psyche were apparent in their post educational narratives? Finally the sociality; how did the participant gain a voice in wider society, become more aware of community-based affairs, realise the need for egalitarianism in wider society, and asked, “What transformative social changes had occurred in/to the participant as recounted by analysis of their post educational responses? It seemed that what constituted well-being was not only complex but uniquely individual, the constituents being defined not just by an intrinsic sense of self worth but also by an extrinsic sense of regard by others. This ranged from the personal to the professional, the specific to the abstract, the real to the imagined, the reflexive to the subjectively habitual.
Toward Somatic Well-Being

Literature in the field suggested that contentment, challenge, authenticity and psycho-social well being in life were important issues. It appeared that participants’ pursuit of educational challenge emanated from a range of reflections upon past life, and was more meaningfully concentrated, during epochal episodes. Distinctive data said;

Jane

*I felt I wanted to work with children in a career, so I did the Access course, really because, if I wanted to be a teacher, then I would need it, because I hadn’t got A levels at school; I didn’t do them at college either, I would need to go down that route, and it would enable me to apply to University then.*

In terms of epochal episode;

David recounts

*I was sat in the cab of my lorry, having lunch at Port Isaac, and I had just done the deliveries to the fishing boats. I’ve got two live crabs scuttling on the floor of the cab, these are to take back for my boss, and it was like, this light bulb thing, what are you doing here?*

It seemed that epochs can also be meta-cognitive, where feelings of ‘stuckness’ (Lynch and Field 2007) call for increased personal responsibility to drive change (Mezirow 1990). Clive recounted that he was stuck in a rut where his boss wasn’t likely to move on to make way for his development and that challenges amongst the familiarity of his job had waned. For another, going back to a hum-drum nine to five job following a child-rearing break was anathema to her. Another had encountered dissatisfaction with a marriage, a critical illness and the departure of a fledgling child within a short period of time, all of which concentrated reflections upon the need to move and change. Analysis proposed that recurring moments of negative reflection prompted corrosion of the soma: their chosen way out, was to reach for the challenge of an educational transformation to ease the pain felt by such unsettling
inner dialogues. Synthesis indicated that they wanted to take back personal control, to tackle their own socio-cultural and psychic distortions.

**Structuring a Pathway to Cognitive Well-being**

The research set about analysing the narratives for evidence of any discernible pattern that education might provide.

Clive recounted how his multiple identity of father, manager, breadwinner perspectives had been revised from the purely experiential role he occupied at work to becoming more academic when saying:

> I am a lot more likely to sit down and work through the implications of where things are taking the organisation. I have got a lot more time for the academic side as well. You know, there is a lot of really good stuff out there which you just have to go and look for it, actually, just having access to the University Library alone has opened a new world.

David credits education with helping him to find a range of new identities; a journey from directionlessness and drifting, into work in education, finding friends and into an association with a new partner.

> It opened my eyes to so many things, just being in education, let alone what education did for me professionally, and stuff like that, but it was the social side of it. I was learning..I was in my thirties; some of my colleagues well they were something like twenty years old, stuff they take for granted. My life would not..I would not be with who I am, if it wasn’t for my Access course.

Shirley talked about how education had revised her former identity;

> I think it made me more reasoned, more logical, a much more educated approach I suppose, much more liable to listen to both sides, and not just take the one thing that I was passionate about and force it. Much wider, much calmer way of looking at things.

Synthesis of the full range of responses suggested that a pattern was emerging and that participant action included a range of steps toward cognitive growth; these included:

1. Reflection on past and present status
2. Realisations of a personal sense of inequity
3. Establishment of a priori evidence upon which to base the decision for personal change
4. “Unmasking” of (Brookfield 2005) the demons causing inactivity
5. Consideration of how life would be better without the demons
6. Seeking out (voluntarily) of a curriculum that seemed relevant (at the time)
7. Engagement with the subject matter of the curriculum as a deflection from present feelings of inadequacy
8. Accessing serendipitously the liberating aspects of the hidden curriculum
9. Using the educational space as a shield from everyday life, participating with like-minded others to conquer the possibilities of failure
10. Connecting with the motivation to take change actions by receiving and working with disruptions to present understandings (Snyder 2008) in both an instrumental and communicative way (Mezirow 1981; Habermas 1984).
11. Achievement of realisations that their opinion of self was held without adequate reason
12. Making an evolving commitment to self and consciously considering alternatives (Reisetter et al 1995) and their consequences.
13. Achieving realisations of the need for commitment to self
14. Experiencing feelings of emancipation in the emerging psyche
15. Acceptance of the challenge of on-going and resilient commitment to self.
16. Planning a course of action (based upon the curriculum undertaken)
17. Trying out the course of action
18. Integration of (via deeper reflective capacity) a new (positive) perspective into the persona and psyche

This stepped movement was solidified by Julie who had not only moved jobs but had also asserted her own need to be authentically self guided when saying;

*It (education) has made me realise how far I have come; when I go back to where I was as an X, I knew that I enjoyed the job but there was something missing, and back then which would be eight years ago, nine years ago, I didn’t realise what that missing thing was, now I do.*

Unmasking the demons, realising what they are, conquering them and feeling good about it, was Julie’s stated journey. From synthesis, it seems that the psyche of the adult participants were engaged in the flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1996) of a
recognisable other self; that of being a student. This ‘new other self’ permitting the
view that the individual comprised multiple selves; that the transformation of the
psyche was what Dirxx (2000) called the process of individuation through
perspective’s transformation (Mezirow 1991).

Social Well-being: Taking Responsibility for What we Are and Know

Participants saw themselves initially as an ‘other’ in the world, distinctively different;
observing themselves in psychogenic fashion; seeing and imagining themselves as a
Shirley draws a vivid picture of what she thought others saw when they looked at her
saying;

*I expected someone to tap me on the shoulder and say, come on sussed you
out, come on sling your hook*

And;

*I am always looking for what I am doing wrong, I’m always looking for.. why
did that mistake happen.. that must be my fault. I’m always looking
for..something to happen*

And when painting a picture of her expectations in earlier life said;

*My sort of class went to factories, to shops, to cleaners.*

David characterises himself when saying;

*I always felt intellectually outgunned, that’s my upbringing. I’ve only recently,
in the last few years, been able to stand up straighter and be proud of who I
am.*

He further recounts that in the past, he conceived of others’ expectations
inaccurately, using an incident to illustrate how he acted upon what he had come to
think of as appropriate behaviour, and which caused him personal embarrassment,
saying
I had heard about an open evening for an Access course, and this was pre any kind of internet or anything like that, so I put on my best suit; a tie, I was the smartest person there, I was brought up very old-fashioned, I felt so overdressed, and I queued up, and I told them what I wanted to do; to become a teacher.

For participants to see themselves as a changed person after the educational encounter was a challenge for the research; notions of change noticed by others, was achieved by asking them what their conversations with important others (to them) had revealed to them. Synthesis established that they were labelled as more assertive and forthright in their views and opinions and more evidentially able to make sense of their life. Boyd and Meyers (1987) suggest this movement is the growth of individuation; Freire (1970) might explain this transformation as realising emancipation through gaining a voice (in a political sense) and Jung (1995) as the growth of (political) consciousness. It seems that participants were being drawn by their motivated need to gather knowledge, primarily for career development, but incidentally and somewhat serendipitously, through curricula which encouraged general expansion of their intellect (Dirxx 2001). More importantly, learning how to learn was intentional; the adult participants unconsciously making the learning worthwhile. Through such raised perception they found justificatory relations between the subject matter of study and their own experiences, and through the process acquired “publicly assessed and valued knowledge” (Crick 2007: 138). Participants saw self in society as different rather than similar; inferior rather than equal. Freud (2002) argues that this distortion of reality is repressive: that we cannot truly know how we project ourselves, so we invent a story which seems to ring true out of self analysis. This invention was evident in participant psyche even though they had not experienced adequate feedback from others. Kelley (1972), in this respect says that attribution theory explains how we attach this causal relationship however Kelly (1970) would go further and point to the student’s past experiences as the pre-defining factor upon which causation was defined. Until the participant’s new educational experiences were able to shift the attribution, the dominant place for their blame appeared to be the inadequacy of the self. In this sense participants expressed how educational engagement with others provided these new emancipatory experiences.
Interpretations and Discussion

Mezirow (1978; 1981; 1991) suggests that most of what we learn revolves around solving our own problems. The early research results contend that educational curricula are employed by adult students, as problem-solving devices. It seems that the subject of study employed by participants becomes secondary to the experience of doing learning. Having a sense of pre-organised purpose (supplied by curricula) is vital as the very grounding mechanism which (re-) delivers organisation and structure, lost by otherwise endured life encounters. In this way, well-being was achieved by employing education as a ‘safe haven’ or an ‘eddy’ in life where the individual stepped out of the chaotic world of day to day living and into the coherently structured world of study.

Participant accounts of a changed sense of self through learning were characterised by narratives of the journey from, and out of chaos; where not being in control of their lives and/or being ill-equipped to be self-sufficient and self-reliant had come to be reflexively and reflectively known as problematic. This inner reflective dialogue of inadequacy, or unpreparedness for self-sufficient progress, became an individual search for purpose in a curriculum, to realise a metamorphosis of the self and to solve the chaotic yet inter-connected range of problems inhibiting progress.

Biesta (2006), suggests that students have “little influence on the content, purpose and point of their learning” (Biesta 2006:177), yet whilst participants in this research all started out with blockages to their ability to transit from a sense of discomfort with life’s progress, all were able to lose themselves and their worldly feelings of inadequacy, in self directed and empowered educative action. Moreover, critical re-evaluation of self, required structure through which meanings could be assessed (Mezirow 1985): where “the aetiology of (past) actions” (Kitchenam 2008:114) and factors yet to be unveiled “transformed (future) meaning schemes”(ibid).

Evidence so far suggests that the curriculum overt and hidden can deliver significant perspective transformations which revise “habits of mind” (Mezirow 2000:119) and through ‘perspectives management’ the educative experience, can alter participant points of view about self, career and the potential to cope with the future; thus deliver a sense of well-being.
Conclusions so far

There is evidence from the research that adult participants conceived of the role of the curriculum as providing both a subject focus and a sense of purpose for their lives. Becoming immersed in something which took them out of their self-inflicted perceptions of chaotic disposition, became an imperative. Lost in these affective notions, they recounted how they were searching for something that was an escape route but which equally reified and gave a sense of structure, direction and purpose to their lives. From initial job prospect improvement to epochal participant realisations, participants came to know that they could not escape “The exercise of their liberty” (Ranciere 1991:23). In critical terms, the role of the hegemonic technocratic curriculum (Golby 1989), as understood in contemporary dialectics, which comprises a competence-based list of things to learn, was decentralised as the singular aim, and subconsciously hijacked by the participants, for the purpose of realising diverse and individual degrees of self-respect and self-esteem transformations.

It seems that any curriculum will do when it comes to achieving well-being through education, and where curricula can be more accurately described as an instrument for getting participants out of the senselessness of chaotic familiarity and into a new and challenging structured environment, where (some) past educational failings can be corrected and personal agency in life recaptured. A sense of controlled well-being over one’s own adult life is not, it appears, a simple task. Education it appears, can be the place where head, heart, mind, body and spirit (Covey 2004) can have an unencumbered space for (re) development and reconnection; a place where inner dialogue can be nurtured back to health and where the worth of an improving and improved self, to self, in monastic fashion, can be reacquainted. The role of any curriculum is thus to feed back to the participant the personal agency that has been removed by life and provide a range of coping tools which can both sustain and reinvigorate reflective self-esteem and well-being.

References.