LIFELONG LEARNING – SIGNS, DISCOURSES, PRACTICES

Lifelong Learning Book Series

VOLUME 8

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Aims & Scope

“Lifelong Learning” has become a central theme in education and community development. Both international and national agencies, governments and educational institutions have adopted the idea of lifelong learning as their major theme for address and attention over the next ten years. They realize that it is only by getting people committed to the idea of education both life-wide and lifelong that the goals of economic advancement, social emancipation and personal growth will be attained.

The *Lifelong Learning Book Series* aims to keep scholars and professionals informed about and abreast of current developments and to advance research and scholarship in the domain of Lifelong Learning. It further aims to provide learning and teaching materials, serve as a forum for scholarly and professional debate and offer a rich fund of resources for researchers, policy-makers, scholars, professionals and practitioners in the field.

The volumes in this international Series are multi-disciplinary in orientation, polymathic in origin, range and reach, and variegated in range and complexity. They are written by researchers, professionals and practitioners working widely across the international arena in lifelong learning and are orientated towards policy improvement and educational betterment throughout the life cycle.

Lifelong Learning – Signs, Discourses, Practices

by

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Springer

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EDITORIAL BY SERIES EDITORS

This volume is a further flowering from the *International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*, which was jointly edited by David Aspin, Judith Chapman, Yukiko Sawano and Michael Hatton, published by Springer (formerly known as Kluwer Academic Publishers) in 2001. In the *International Handbook* we laid down a set of agenda for future research and development, analysis and expansion, strategies and guidelines in the field of lifelong learning. It had become clear that the domain of lifelong learning was a rich and fertile ground for setting out and summarising, comparing and criticising the heterogeneous scope and remit of policies, proposals and practices in its different constitutive parts across the international arena. Certainly the scholars, researchers, policy makers, and educators with whom we discussed this matter seemed to agree with us that each of the themes that were taken up in the individual chapters of the original *International Handbook* would merit separate volumes of their own – to say nothing of the other possibilities that a more extended mapping, analysis and exploration of the field might quickly generate.

This volume is a further development of important issues that were raised in the *International Handbook*. It is the work of our colleagues Robin Usher and Richard Edwards. Their intention in writing this book was to foreground and examine the semiotic complexity of the phenomenon of ‘lifelong learning’ particularly within policy discourses. Their focus on semiosis involves regarding everything as if it is a “text”: in other words, they see semiosis as the task of attempting to understand and interpret everything as in some way a phenomenon of communication and as involving representation. They argue that the common feature of any mode of ‘meaning-making’ is that no sign has intrinsic meaning: anything can be a sign, anything can carry meaning, so long as it is interpreted as signifying something. Their position is that semiosis is a social phenomenon and, when it is deployed, human social ‘meaning-making’ practices are foregrounded. Their emphasis is on how meanings are fashioned and mobilised, as against the search for foundations and the discovery of truth. Their presupposition is that there are no single or eternal truths, since all truths are related to a certain time and place in history, in culture and in discursive systems.

Accordingly in this book Robin Usher and Richard Edwards seek to examine possible significations of learning, alternative ways of signifying learning, and thus alternative codings of lifelong learning. They note that policy-makers at national and supra-national levels are incorporating lifelong learning into the discourses and practices of economic rationalism, where the needs of the economy and of the labour-market are to the fore. On this account lifelong learning discourse is

incorporated into being an adaptive strategy through which to respond to change and through which a knowledge economy can be brought into being and maintained. While recognising the significance of this discourse, Usher and Edwards argue that there is a need to go further if the full complexities and multiple significations of lifelong learning are to be understood. As a counter to what they see as the limiting and limited economic discourse of lifelong learning, they argue for a more expansive way of conceptualising and understanding it, that goes beyond economic discourse, to locate lifelong learning in a variety of practices – social, cultural and political.

Many will see this as highly provocative and contentious contribution to the debate about the nature, character and work of lifelong learning discourse, policies and programs. But we believe that Robin Usher and Richard Edwards have done us all an important service in the preparation of this text. They have argued powerfully that there is no such thing as a ‘grand meta-narrative’ of “lifelong learning”, that should determine and dominate what is to count as a valid and allowable lifelong learning policy, program or practice. They have made a major contribution, we believe, in sharply challenging the domination of the economic in fashioning understandings, policies and practices of lifelong learning. They do not suggest that they are presenting the “true story” of lifelong learning but they do present what they call “various takes” on lifelong learning, which are highly challenging and conceptually rich, rewarding and thought-provoking.

We are pleased that this work by Robin Usher and Richard Edwards helps carry forward the agenda of the Springer Book Series on Lifelong Learning. We thank the anonymous international reviewers and assessors who have considered, reviewed and assessed the proposal for this work and the final manuscript and who have played such a significant part in the progress of this work to completion. We trust that its readers will find it as stimulating, thought-provoking, challenging and controversial as we ourselves have found it. We commend it to all those working in the field. We are sure that this further volume in the Springer Series will provide the wide range of constituencies working in the domain of lifelong learning with a rich range of new material for their consideration and further investigation. We believe that it will encourage their continuing critical thinking, research and development, academic and scholarly production and individual, institutional and professional progress.

March 2006

David Aspin and Judith Chapman

FOREWORD

Texts can often have a long genesis. They also reflect the shifting emphasis in the work of the authors. Since the early 1990's we have worked together on how best to conceptualise the changing arenas of adult education and lifelong learning in the context of wider practical and conceptual changes in the world of which we are part. Such a task is inevitably always itself incomplete and we have been learning as we have gone along. The initial encounters with poststructuralism and postmodernism caused much consternation. This was added to by our more recent work with others giving a positive 'spin' to rhetoric. In this text we have taken this interest in a further direction with a broad focus on semiosis.

Underlying all these writings is a concern with meaning-making and meaning-taking in education; how these are understood and the implications of understanding them in particular ways. The meaning of meaning is therefore our focus and thus the reflexivity that has become an important part of our texts. This continues to motivate our work together. In some ways, this interest has become more pronounced as the discourses of adult education have to some extent and in certain spaces and places become displaced or replaced by those of lifelong learning. Why and how has that occurred? With what significance? What are the implications? How can we engage with such a shift? These are questions we have begun to address in this text.

Such a text has inter-textual traces and much of this text has been trailed and trialled elsewhere. Some of it has been on our own, some in shared writing and some with others. We are grateful to all those who have contributed to the work that has gone into this text. We would particularly like to thank the editors of this Series for their support for this work, as we are aware that our concerns are not always mainstream to the educational community. Richard Edwards would also like to thank his colleagues at the University of Stirling for covering for him for a semester while he was helping to complete this text. He would also like to thank staff at the Organisational, Vocational and Adult Learning Research Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney for providing an alternative home for him while writing. He also acknowledges financial support from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland during his trip to Australia. Robin Usher would like to thank Professor David Aspin for his support and encouragement and his colleagues in the Research Training Group at RMIT University for making his "day-job" so unburdensome thus allowing this and other work to be completed.