Global perspectives in lifelong learning

This article is based on a report given by Jane Thompson on behalf of NIACE to the Steering Group of the DEA’s Global Perspectives in Lifelong Learning project. The report argues that although there are currently opportunities to influence the curriculum and pedagogy of lifelong learning to embrace global perspectives, there are also a number of obstacles that need to be recognised and tackled if policy bodies and learning providers are to fully integrate global perspectives into lifelong learning.

Opportunities

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is now the major policy context in which the British government seeks to encourage, promote and fund learning for those who are over the age of 16 outside of the university sector. In common with other, similar countries in Europe and overseas, considerable significance is afforded to the importance of globalisation in relation to the economic, social and cultural changes currently taking place on a world scale and to the implications of these changes for education.

At a time when the major sources of economic power, transnational corporations, are rapidly extending their power and influence in ways that make them richer and more powerful than individual nation states, with economic interests that are more concerned with extending corporate profits than defending social justice, there is an urgent need for all of us to examine the issues and responsibilities involved in living in a global society.

Equally, the dramatic developments associated with the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon underline the complicated and shifting nature of allegiances, alliances and hostilities between different nation states, in which citizens are everywhere at risk, and governments are not always accountable to those over whom they have authority.

Whilst different countries have different experiences of the advantages and disadvantages associated with globalisation, all appear to recognise its economic implications and social consequences for the provision of education. In Britain, in the forward to the Learning and Skills Council Prospectus: Learning to Succeed, the former Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett (DfEE 1999), makes it clear that

in a knowledge driven economy the continuous updating of skills and the development of lifelong learning will make the difference between success and failure and between competitiveness and decline

But he also confirms the government’s recognition that

lifelong learning is essential to sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, in which people can develop as active citizens, where creativity is fostered and communities can be given practical support to overcome generations of disadvantage (ibid)

In addition, since its creation in 1997, the Department for International Development (DFID) has put considerable emphasis on education as part of its strategy to secure greater public awareness and understanding of international development ‘in order to strengthen public confidence in, and support for, the fight against global poverty, acceptance that it matters to our future, that great progress is possible and that the behaviour of each of us can make a difference’ (DFID 1999)

Educational connections such as these, made in relation to economic changes, international conflicts and uncertainties on a global scale, and to questions of social equity and civic responsibilities, have enormous implications for those entrusted with the responsibilities of conceiving, funding, delivering, managing and measuring what counts as adult learning at national, regional and local levels. And this at a time when new national and local structures are being established in accordance with the recent Learning and Skills legislation to manage the funding and delivery of post 16 education and to guarantee its quality and performance. What is developed in relation to these structures will hugely determine the kind of learning society that Britain is able to become.

It is essential, in all of these respects, that a systems-led definition of lifelong learning is sufficiently responsive to the broader, democratic significance of learning for life in a global society, at a time when the main focus of government and educational policy makers is rather narrowly preoccupied with improving educational standards and developing vocational skills.

The Government’s social agenda

The government has declared its commitment to a national policy agenda concerned with reducing poverty, tackling social exclusion, promoting neighbourhood renewal, widening participation in lifelong learning and encouraging more active citizenship and participation in civil society. These agendas can be read as an attempt to respond locally to global concerns in ways that partly illustrate the notion ‘thinking globally’ and ‘acting locally’.

The other part of the local-global connection, of course, is about acting locally ‘in relation to’ issues and events that take place globally, in ways that acknowledge the inter-dependence (for good or ill) increasingly associated with globalisation. In this context DFID has committed the government to international development targets including...
the reduction by one half in the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015.

To be successfully achieved, these policies depend upon the allocation – even the redistribution – of material resources, but they will also be supported by a culture of recognition, social awareness, educational empowerment, informed debate, popular commitment and engaged activity by all of those involved. In this respect all relevant government departments should be made aware that education for sustainable development, involving global perspectives, in the context of lifelong learning, has much to offer.

**Sustainable development**


The change of government in 1997 undoubtedly added fresh impetus to these recommendations. Improving core skills, developing employment training in socially deprived areas, encouraging responsible civic and global citizenship and perceiving the political process as stretching beyond the formal parliamentary process to include active citizenship and community empowerment are integral to the current government’s own reform project and to ESD.

The Sustainable Development Education Panel (SDEP), established in 1998 for ten years and sponsored by DfES and DEFRA has developed a set of key principles for its work:

- sustainable development is the responsibility of everyone
- education for sustainable development needs to pervade every aspect of life
- the UK’s prosperity in the long term depends on our capacity to learn about sustainable development

Three years on, the panel argues that its work is more relevant than ever (SDEP 2001).

Partly as a result of the panel’s submission to the National Curriculum Review, ESD now has a much higher profile in the national curriculum for schools. The panel is now keen to make progress in other areas including teacher training, the monitoring of ESD in schools, the inclusion of ESD in all appropriate qualifications for the 14-19 age range, and the support and encouragement for schools to become sustainable institutions.

Sustainable development is also now recognised as a mainstream issue for the further and higher education sectors. In 1999 the panel commissioned the Further Education Development Agency (now LSDA) to develop a guide *Towards Sustainability* which sets out a strategic framework to encourage and help FE colleges to manage sustainable development. In 2000 the panel and the FEFC collaborated on the development of a *Sustainability in FE* initiative helping 10 colleges to develop best practice for sustainable projects. Also in 2000 the panel developed proposals for a major *Life Skills for a Sustainable Future* initiative, which emphasises links with social inclusion and citizenship agendas and has the potential for wide application in FE and other sectors.

But whilst the panel recognises that it has made a substantial contribution in relation to formal education, it is now time to tackle education and training in relation to work and informal education amongst the population at large. Workplace learning and adult community based learning are the open doors through which ESD and development education could enter the curriculum and consciousness of learners, but it will be important to ensure that policy, funding and accreditation bodies, providers and practitioners are alert to the values and issues involved and are properly equipped to take them on. The panel assumes that as the importance of lifelong learning increases, it should be closely related to learning about sustainable development.

**Providers**

There are a number of ways in which colleges are able to promote global citizenship within their communities. As educational institutions they now have responsibility to broaden the curriculum to promote the citizenship agenda at local, regional and international levels. Through their promotion of lifelong learning colleges also have the opportunity to influence individual learners and their families, employees and those with whom they are in partnership. This influence, if harnessed effectively, could lead to exponential growth in awareness about sustainability issues.

Adult and community learning – in the context of lifelong learning – also has an important contribution to make to this agenda, especially in relation to its pivotal role in widening participation, combating social exclusion and supporting neighbourhood renewal. Curriculum development concerned with citizenship, family learning, work based learning, cultural action, community empowerment and capacity building are all natural homes for the inclusion of ESD and development education but it is important that they are not simply regarded as curricular ‘add ons’. Global perspectives should be implicit within and across the lifelong learning curriculum.

Some voluntary organisations such as the WEA, NIACE and the DEA, as well as some trade unions such as the T and G and Unison, are already active around the educational, social and political agendas associated with global learning and ESD. This includes the recognition that tutor training is essential if the work is to be understood and developed beyond the enthusiasm of committed individuals. There is evidence of good practice and considerable enthusiasm in some quarters but this must be expanded – in the spirit of a
movement— as well as being more widely communicated and inter-connected.

It is clear that governments and structures respond to pressure, supported by evidence. The integration and embedding of global perspectives and development education in lifelong learning will be advanced most effectively by the orchestration of an effective groundswell of support, at a time when the policy climate is conducive, in ways that encourage structures to respond positively.

**Learners and potential learners**

Those who are poor, from socially excluded groups, or who are the residents of run down neighbourhoods have much to gain from the elimination of poverty and social exclusion. In many understandable respects they have lost trust in local service providers. They are most likely to be on the front line when it comes to structural adjustment, unemployment, the casualisation of labour, in conflict with neighbours over scarce resources, on the receiving end of racism or discrimination and vulnerable to poor health and feelings of hopelessness. They have had the least benefit from the formal education system and little participation in post-compulsory education.

But communities in crisis also demonstrate enormous resilience, impressive courage and the desire to make a difference to their lives. Their members have considerable knowledge about the lived experience of inequality and social injustices. More people—especially women—join community and self-help groups than either political parties or trade unions. The philosophy and practice which underpin development education and ESD—committed to these approaches are to learning for life, progressive and relevant social change, solidarity, critical thinking and participatory democracy—have much to offer and to inspire reluctant learners. They also have much to teach complacent providers and practitioners about an alternative approach to education that does not depend on reinforcing the culture of social exclusion.

In other respects, the growth in public awareness and concern about environmental and global issues also provides scope for lifelong learning to connect with the untapped potential of informal, family and opportunistic learning about global perspectives and sustainable development.

**Obstacles**

**Government priorities**

The 2001 General Election campaign, which resulted in the return of a Labour government but on the basis of a relatively low electoral turn out, had very little to say about poverty, social exclusion or neighbourhood renewal.

Whilst David Blunkett’s understanding of lifelong learning— to include the wider benefits of personal and social development and citizenship as well as vocational skills— may be shared by Estelle Morris, it seems certain that Morris was appointed primarily to focus on securing changes and raising standards in relation to secondary comprehensive education. It will take a lot of persuasion— supported by evidence and pressure— to move the Treasury from its utilitarian preoccupation with the skills agenda towards funding the kind of adult learning that can’t be measured in terms of narrow performance outcomes. This is a challenge for adult learning generally and will likely be waged in terms of a big tent approach rather than in relation to specific support for particular agendas such as development education.

Innovations and changes in the curriculum and pedagogy of lifelong learning, especially work based learning and community based learning, to include global perspectives and an ESD approach, will require the wholesale support of all sectors of government.

**Employers and trade unions**

According to SDEP’s 2000 Annual Report, the level of active concern about ESD and global learning issues among employers and their workforces remains low. The learning and skills agenda does not, as a matter of course, concern itself with such matters and is in the ascendant. Whilst the development of the University for Industry (UFI) and its management of learndirect offers potential opportunities to connect the learning and skills agenda with that of ESD and global citizenship, it is naive to imagine that this will be seen as a priority unless there is some requirement from government and/or pressure from below to do so.

Whilst the government is actively courting the support of employers and business interests in a whole range of social policies, including lifelong learning, the characteristic independence of the private sector from government direction or coercion poses something of a contradiction. Local employers are not in business to support education—especially education that encourages critical thinking and engagement with social and political issues— unless they can make a profit from their involvement or be persuaded that the skills being learned will be of use in the workplace.

Equally trade union education is a pale shadow of its former self. John Field (1988) criticised the trade union movement for the loss of its radical edge or critical concern with the underlying economic causes of workplace issues in favour of more instrumental and technical preoccupations with bargaining skills and role education.

More recently this trend— with a few notable exceptions— has intensified and has been exacerbated by increasing government investment. The Labour Government’s Union Learning Fund, for example, is geared to union activities which support the government’s objective of creating a learning society (DfES website) in ways that turn unions into learning organisations, rather than providing support for critical citizenship or ammunition with which to counter the bad effects of globalisation.

Today’s trade unionists are much more likely to be white collar workers or employed in the service sector— including financial services— than in the manufacturing sector. Their trade unions are more likely to operate as professional associations or service organisations, concerned to supply learning opportunities, health insurance schemes, retailing discounts and sports facilities etc. to their members in...
exchange for regular subscriptions, rather than critical political muscle in defence of their members terms and conditions of employment or any sense of internationalism-from-below in the context of global capitalism. As with adult education more generally, the notion of workplace learning has been redefined in the interests of the state, with an emphasis on instrumental outcomes and competitive individualism, assuaged by accreditation and progression. These are not developments which incline providers or learners to engage with questions or activities that interrogate social values or ethical and political learning in the context of their relationship to the global labour market.

**Providers and practitioners**

The example set by the WEA in developing approaches to tutor training in ESD and global learning is an important precedent, especially the intention to develop global perspectives across the entire WEA curriculum. The citizenship curriculum in FE is also important in this respect. But in other areas, eg: workplace, community based, non-formal and informal learning and in learning associated with culture, media and sport there is considerable work to be done to raise awareness about the connections between local and global concerns and to re-think the wide ranging curriculum of adult learning to encompass and reflect these considerations.

Tutors tend to be committed to their own discrete subjects. In addition they are expected to fulfil administrative responsibilities. They are coming to terms with still more changes as a consequence of the introduction of new structures and inspection procedures. A concentration on systems and processes in recent years has sidelined professional discussions about curriculum content and pedagogy. Those who attend training courses and conferences are much more likely to be talking about relating to new structures, funding regimes, accreditation levels and evaluation methods than about what constitutes ‘really useful knowledge’ for global citizenship, or how teachers can build on the authority of ordinary people’s lived experience and informal learning through participatory learning activities related to social change (Thompson, Shaw and Bane 2000). There is consequently considerable work to be done to change the culture of educational provision and perception.

**Learners and potential learners**

Whilst participation in lifelong learning among managerial groups has increased from 53% to 67% in the last 5 years, according to NIACE’s most recent participation survey (Aldridge and Tuckett 2001), the learning divide in Britain is not being reduced. Only 28% of social groups D and E are currently engaged in learning. Women are less likely to be involved than men; older people less likely than younger people; those without access to the Internet less likely than those who have access. Not surprisingly, those from minority groups experiencing discrimination or deprivation are least likely to be engaged in adult learning. These are also the groups who are most affected by what is often referred to as the democratic deficit. Their potential jobs and actual living standards are most at risk from the consequences of globalisation. If the disturbances which took place in northern cities at the beginning of the summer of 2001, and in Glasgow and Hull against asylum seekers, are anything to go by, these are some of the communities most vulnerable to racial violence and social conflict.

Whilst their members have an abundance of informal knowledge and learning to be harnessed, the culture of adult learning – with some notable exceptions – has largely failed to engage the most excluded citizens. In these circumstances, the government’s conviction that ‘individual responsibility’ is ‘the key to social order’ and ‘the duty’ of citizens is to ‘make the most of the chances they get’ (Tony Blair, 8.02.01) sounds more like reprimanding and reforming people than promoting social justice and reassessing the social balance of power. There is not much discussion about what the American Declaration of Independence once called ‘the pursuit of happiness’ – what we might call quality of life – in New Labour’s modernising and somewhat moralising tendencies.

The failure of adult learning to engage with active citizens in social transformation and political education, together with the co-option of the social inclusion and regeneration agendas by the state in the interests of social order and duty, means that community based education is much less about critical thinking and local activism around issues of local and global concern and more about meeting institutional targets, getting people onto accredited courses and chasing short term funding. If lifelong learning continues to front this agenda, in ways that smack of behaviour modification or crowd control, it will further alienate those already feeling distant from what education and learning has to offer.

**References**


DfID (1999) *Building Support for Development*


Thompson, Shaw and Bane (2000) *Reclaiming Social Purpose*, NIACE: Leicester


**Jane Thompson** is Development Officer, Combatting Social Exclusion, at the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE)