

Unmasking the Lifelong learning dispositif: Why we must rethink learning in the digital age

Open Education 2030 | Lifelong learning

Markus Deimann

FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

Markus Deimann argues that Lifelong Learning is indeed a valuable concept and should therefore not solely be understood and issued as an economic imperative but as an empowering tool to enable Bildung and learning in open complex worlds

Introduction

Although lifelong learning (LLL) is one of the oldest stories in the book of education and it would be absurd to believe that learning is bounded to a certain period of life, say until the age of 40, it has become an economical imperative that shape the behaviour of people, institutions and policy makers. Moreover, it is now used in an inflationary way and describes phenomena which have no so much in common. The primary goal has then been shifted towards regulation in order to normalise and standardise learning and its outcomes which has become highly apparent in the form of the “test mania”. This kind of mechanism has been described in great depth by French philosopher Michel Foucault who referred to it as a dispositif.

While during most of the industrial age, working life was pretty much (pre-)determined, i.e. after college or vocational education a life long contract with fixed working time and salary was the common way. Due to the emergence of globalism and digitalisation, the organisation of labour has become much more flexible and individualised (i.e. new forms such as part-time work or home office and the new service sector came into existence). However, there has also been a considerable change in the underlying narrative which now puts the individual in charge of keeping pace with transformations. Part of this narrative is the economical imperative which holds that the economy demands a better skilled work force to deal with the consequences of the changes being triggered by this very economy. In this regard, education is being commodified and replaces classical economical factors culminating in the practice of Human Resource Management (HRM), the management of an organization's workforce, or human resources. The individual is thus of strategic importance and programmes for improving or developing competencies are issued in such great detail so that nobody is overlooked during the course of his/her working life. Education in this form is thwarting the philosophical ideals which are about self-cultivation and self-realisation to the detriment of economic exploitation, i.e. education is now longer an end in itself but a means to an end.

Against this background, the present vision paper attempts the following: firstly the concept dispositif is introduced as a theoretical framework to analyse and unmask the current narrative of LLL. Secondly, it will be shown that the prevailing LLL paradigm entails severe contradictions that need to be resolved in order to empower individuals to fully capitalise on the potentials offered by Open Education and social media. Thirdly, a set of scenarios is

Open Education 2030. JRC-IPTS Call for Vision Papers. Part I: Lifelong Learning

Markus Deimann

Unmasking the Lifelong learning dispositif



presented that are based on a deepened and “enlightened” understanding of learning and education and some recommendations for policy makers are outlined.

The dispositif LLL

In an interview conducted in 1977, Foucault gave the following definition of a dispositif¹: “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogenous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality. In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly, I understand by the term “apparatus” a sort of—shall we say—formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy: there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection of madness, sexual illness and neurosis.”

Following this definition, Agamben (2008) points out three important aspects for the understanding of a dispositif:

1. It is a heterogeneous entity including everything what is imaginable (linguistic and non-linguistic such as discourses, buildings, laws, philosophical theorems etc.). It can be thus conceived of as a net that is built around those things.
2. A dispositif has a strategic function and integrated in power relations.
3. A dispositif is also an entanglement between power and knowledge.

The notion of power and its close relationship with knowledge is a crucial aspect in the quest of unmasking the myths built around LLL over the last decades. Power in the Foucauldian sense is less a repressive force but much more aimed at generating new productive forms. With the help of disciplinary tools like sanction, the human body is exposed to the logic of economical reasoning, i.e. it is aimed at enhancing the economical profitableness. By the same token, economic utility goes hand in hand with individuality, i.e. deviations from the norm “economic utility” are interpreted as individuality that allow differentiation, evaluation and categorisation according to skills, knowledge and achievements. This process of governance has been accelerated due to the hegemony of neoliberalism. The respective narrative holds that the half life of knowledge dramatically decreases so that we constantly are forced to “update” it and to ensure employability. LLL becomes a dictate in the sense of an ongoing self-assessment and improvement of competencies using various forms of HRM.

Another important aspect that is prone to support LLL as a dispositif is the way it includes humans in the course of a lifetime, i.e. learning does not – as it is implied in the meaning of

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispositif>



training – refer to a short-term practice to refresh or acquire skills but to a never-ending activity where the only function is to learn. By stressing the importance of the term “lifelong”, learning loses sight of its educational origins which, however, do not claim that learning is restricted to a certain period but which describes the entire process much more holistically.

Contradictions around the LLL myth

LLL is often associated with the provision of freedom to the individual to engage in training and other forms of education at his/her own terms. However, this is embedded in an economic imperative or dispositif which is almost inescapable for the learner. This leads to a restricted view of education, very similar to the “banking concept” developed by Freire (1996) in which the student is depicted as an empty vessel or a depository and the teaching is the depositor who “instead of communicating (...) issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p.53). Moreover, the range of topics are limited inasmuch as only those are perceived as “valuable” that have are directly profitable which is, for instance, apparent in the programs for further training (e.g. Chamber of Industry and Commerce). Nevertheless, learning and education have emerged in a broader understanding that goes beyond acquisition and utilisation of knowledge and encompassed the processes of self-realisation or self-cultivation. This is reflected in the German tradition of *Bildung* which signals a new value of its own (for a more detailed account see Deimann & Farrow, in press). In its classical sense, *Bildung* refers to the unrestricted interplay between the self and the world in order to unfold all the potentials of the individual. It is a process in which humans acquire general characteristic human features. With regard to Open Education, *Bildung* can be understood as a “kindred spirit” (Deimann, 2013) because it leverages the potentials of openness and digitalisation, i.e. openness and digitalisation are the breeding ground for *Bildung* as they provide unrestricted access to learning and cultural contexts (e.g. MIT OCW) so that the individual can engage in virtually unlimited learning experiences. Yet, on the other hand, learning in open contexts is not without presuppositions, especially when it comes to MOOCs (Kop, 2011). New competencies and skills need to be acquired in order to feel comfortable and be able to master the challenges of open learning architectures. *Bildung* is a powerful tool to derive those competencies such as the ability to navigate or orientate oneself.

Despite this, LLL has so far been restricted to formal educational contexts (which rely on the classroom metaphor) thus neglecting to acknowledge the emerging open educational practices. Consequently, it is argued that in order fully capitalise on the power of Open Education, a mind shift concerning the underlying understanding of learning is inevitable.

An “enlightened” approach to LLL

In keeping with the expanded perspective that has been briefly discussed within the concept of *Bildung*, this section explores an “enlightened” approach to LLL which is based on the following assumptions:

- Learning and *Bildung* are processes which are first and foremost pursued by the individual, i.e. they cannot totally anticipated and planned until certain skills or competencies are achieved in a pre-defined standard. However, “outside interference” is required to support and facilitate the learner especially in open complex worlds.

Open Education 2030. JRC-IPTS Call for Vision Papers. Part I: Lifelong Learning

Markus Deimann

Unmasking the Lifelong learning dispositif



This implies a changed role for teachers because there is a shift towards tutoring or coaching. Constitutive for this role is also a changed self-concept of the learner, i.e. the facilitator/coach should approach the learner with confidence based on the understanding of the unpredictability of learning and Bildung.

- Learning does not only take place in well-structured settings like seminars, workshops or other forms of LLL but to a large extent outside schooling and formal training in the so-called real life. To account for this “Lebenswelt” (a term defined by Habermas) would also help to overcome the prevailing LLL dispositif
- Learners do not usually enter educational settings as a “blank sheet” but have developed various forms of knowledge, skill and attitude that need to be accounted for. There have been a lot of discussions to define and conceptualise the accreditation of prior knowledge, such as:
 - APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) which is generally used as an umbrella term including both prior certificated learning and experiential learning.
 - APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) refers to uncertificated learning gained from experience.
 - APCL (Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning) means learning for which certification has been awarded by an educational institution or another education/training provider.

Moreover, political actors such as the EU have consistently argued that the accreditation of prior knowledge and competencies is a central enabler for LLL, especially for non-formal learning. Therefore, learners should be given opportunities not only to demonstrate that they have developed skills and competencies but also to capitalise on them in various ways (e.g. using Open Badges).

LLL is a precious commodity because it truly helps to raise awareness of the increased importance of education in a globalised and highly competitive world. However, it is equally important to rethink the way it is communicated by political and economical stakeholders. LLL is foremost a pedagogical topic, i.e. it is crucial to take note of the underlying philosophical conceptions that provide a much broader account of learning in the sense of a human property which can be described, in a slightly modified version of Watzlawick's famous principle, as the following: you can't not learn!

References

- Agamben, G. (2008). *Was ist ein Dispositiv?* Zürich: Diaphanes.
- Deimann, M. (2013). Open Education and Bildung as kindred spirits. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 10(2).
- Deimann, M., & Farrow, R. (in press). Rethinking OERs and their use: Open Education as Bildung. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Kop, R. (2011). The challenges to connectivist learning on Open Online Networks: Learning experiences during a Massive Open Online Course. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*.

