Lifelong Learning: A Human Capital or Social Capital Endeavour?

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Crowther (2012) states that “there are few educators who would disagree with the principle that lifelong learning is a good thing but the important questions are about the types of learning that the concept promotes, the life that it encourages us to lead, who benefits from this and the nature of the society that it upholds” (as cited in Bierema & Merriam, 2014). I thought that I knew what lifelong learning meant and what it accomplished. At least I knew personally what it meant to me. In order to examine this multi-pronged quote I realized I needed to embark on a quest for alternate viewpoints, which led me to the question: is lifelong learning a human capital or social capital endeavour? These two different theories of lifelong learning have different implications for the learner and teacher.

Objective

Pressures of globalization and technological changes are creating a need for countries and individual institutions to invest in human capital (Kerka, 2000). The institutions want more skilled and educated workers to meet the goals of their organization. And the governments want educated and skilled workers that can add to the creativity and innovation in their society to reduce unemployment rates and to situate themselves in a better position in the competitive global market.

Human capital is now seen as the most important resource to achieve these outcomes. Organizations are thus investing in “continuous upgrading of skills” (Coffield as cited in Kerka, 2000, p. 3) to create a culture of lifelong learning to improve the quality of their human capital. This is causing an increase in expenditures of education endeavours of institutions (Livingstone as cited in Kerka, 2000) and is turning learning into a commodity.

Baptiste, Coffield, Hake & Oliver identify four main deficits of adopting the human capital theory of life long learning. They are as follows: a) it moves education from a public good to a
private good; b) the responsibility for learning shifts to the individual; c) the instrumental and vocational purposes of learning are overemphasized; d) the importance and value is on the quick and visible return of learning (as cited in Kerka, 2000).

The other perspective of lifelong learning is the social capital theory and the outcomes are measured by social well-being. The goal is working for the common good, enriching individuals and society and is achieved through relationship building and trust (Kerka, 2000). It is grounded in the humanist perspective that learning is moving a person towards humanness to realize their potential or self-actualization (Bierema & Merriam, 2014).

**Reflective**

As more educational institutions are adopting the philosophy that learning is a private good then access to these learning opportunities becomes limited due to a variety of barriers. People of higher socioeconomic status, those with more secure employment with employers that invest in training for their employees have an advantage from the start. Research has even found that “those who have higher educational attainment participate more in lifelong learning; professional, managerial, and college-educated workers are more likely to receive employer-sponsored training” (Coffield as cited in Kerka, p.4). Some other barriers to accessing these educational opportunities include: lack of time due to family obligations, geographic availability of the courses, self esteem of the learner, literacy issues, and cultural implications. Governments are trying to limit some of these barriers in post-secondary institutions by providing supportive measures (monetary and other) to improve accessibility. Training in other institutions is not as well funded and the broad spectrum of barriers to all educational opportunities are not addressed sufficiently. From personal experience one example at the college where I teach is despite the attempt to address some of the barriers of learning for the Aboriginal communities the attrition
rate is high which in turn perpetuates their socioeconomic struggles. Lifelong learning endeavours should be accessible to everyone, as learning is a “global human right” (Su, 2010).

This dichotomy of paradigms of lifelong learning moved me to reflect on what learning is, where it happens and its outcomes. Kerka (2000) thinks that the human capital perspective should use the term worklong learning as it is viewing learning only in the one realm of the person’s life; the workplace. Learning is much more than just acquired knowledge, set skills and educational qualifications. Learning is a process, it can be a change in attitude or emotion, human disposition or capacity (Gagne, 1985 & Hill, 2002 as cited in Merriam & Bierema) and therefore outcomes of learning aren’t always tangible and quantifiable. In the human capital theory learning outcomes can be more easily measured “in terms of income, productivity and other economic indicators of success” (Kerka, 2000, p. 3). Learning can change who we are as people and can morph slowly over time. Learning isn’t always “planned, purposeful and intended” (Coffield as cited in Kerka, 2000, p. 4). A learner may plan to learn one thing but the learning takes a life of its own and can take the learner in a completely different direction. Learning can be incidental and constructed in informal settings. For example, I have gained new insights on parenting by speaking with other parents, or learned how to grow tomatoes from my neighbour and immigration challenges from my friend. Learning is ubiquitous and therefore lifelong.

Formulating a clearer idea of the multi-dimensions of learning will help me as a teacher so that I can recognize learning opportunities in non-traditional forms. This will gain me awareness of teachable moments and how to use them wisely to engage the student.

The social capital perspective of lifelong learning is more in line with how I view the student role in the teaching learning process. The student is driving the learning in a self-directed fashion. The student determines what they need to learn; which may be for the purpose of supporting them in their jobs, their social roles or simply just for the love or sake of learning.
In the human capital theory, there is a power shift away from the learner. The market is driving the government and institutions to determine: what is considered good learning and how, when and where it should occur. Knowledge and skills that are acquired that don’t match the market demands are undervalued and not recognized (Regmi, 2012). This “marginalizes other learning activities which maybe worth doing on non-instrumental grounds” and can curb the potential for rich learning (Su, 2014, p. 520). Employers are offering financial incentives and creating pressures on employees to seek out new learning. Coffield sees this as a new form of social control; learning is becoming a duty and moral obligation in order to be a contributing member of society (as cited in Kerka, 2000). People are not seeking out learning opportunities because they want to but rather because they feel they have to. Learning is no longer a voluntary process.

If learning becomes involuntary then the love of learning is extinguished and so is the notion of lifelong learning. As Knowles noted that adults resent and resist when others impose their wills on them (Knowles as cited in Bierema & Merriam, 2014). If a learner is told what to learn and how to do so, it can decrease their drive to learn. It takes the fun and excitement out of learning. Students “who enjoy learning often become lifelong learners and are able to self–regulate their own path and educational endeavours in manners that keep them both highly engaged and highly productive” (Sibthorp, Schumann, Gookin, Baynes, Paisley & Rathunde, 2011, p. 388). This self-regulation is an important attribute for a learner because if they can self-regulate their learning, their motivation to learn will continually nourish their internal need to learn. This demonstrates that as teachers we need to ignite that love of learning in our students in a way that can equally benefit the needs of the society.

**Interpretive**
What I realized through exploration of this quote is that I believe all learning is beneficial to a person regardless of what that learning is, how or for what ends it accomplishes. Students should have the liberty to follow their hearts and go where the learning takes them. Learning objectives are important in a course because they serve as a guide for learning but the learning that happens along the journey is equally important. This made me realize that as the teacher I must relish every part of the learning journey. If the students are engaged in the learning then it is okay if I stray at times from the learning objectives.

I also realized that learning can accomplish the outcomes of both paradigms. For example in the nursing program we have certain content that must be covered to meet the requirements of the program and prepare the student for the competency exam at the end of the four year program. These learning outcomes would be the institutional and government learning goals. With the new RN competency exam having changed to the NCLEX I am seeing a shift in how we are teaching our classrooms. We are moving to a more pedagogical method of teaching with more lectures, less group work which is creating less time for critical reflection and peer learning. I believe as teachers that we can still teach in an andragogical manner and still adequately prepare our students for the NCLEX exam. Learning can still be self-directed by the learner and facilitated by the teacher to create a meaningful learning experience for the student.

**Decisional**

The way in which the outcomes of the human capital and social capital theories can intersect is by using a creative and engaging way to achieve the learning outcomes. The student should be given some creative power in the learning experience. Creating learning objectives with the student can create a space for deeper learning that means more to the student. While some of the learning objectives need to meet the criteria to move the student toward a certain competent level, the other objectives could be more personal to the students. For assignments,
the teacher can create a loose framework that adheres to learning objectives but allows room for some creative freedom by the students. This provides the student with some space to take learning in a number of directions and make it a more personal experience.

Globalization and technological advances are contributing to an information-based society. Knowledge is changing so quickly and to keep abreast of these changes we must adapt accordingly. We need to teach students how to learn and how to critically think so that they can adapt to the changes around them. They will learn how to mobilize resources to help them solve problems. Facilitation of learning with the use of technology in assignments and in classroom learning activities demonstrates to the student the importance of technology for the purpose of learning. These foundational skills of learning can then be applied to any situation and the student is more effectively equipped to deal with the constantly evolving nature of the world. They become lifelong learners because they know how to access information and use their critical thinking skills to problem solve the challenges that life presents.

We must also model lifelong learning in order to encourage it in our students (Helterbran, 2005). As a teacher I can do this by sharing some examples of my lifelong learning endeavours upon my introduction to the class and also thread examples of these throughout the course. As an added benefit of this strategy students become more engaged in their class when they start to see their teacher as a person not just a teacher. I will share with my students that I am in the Provincial Instructor Diploma Program working towards my professional goals, and pursuing my interest in Hypnotherapy by taking a course on it. I will also share with them how I had my first vegetable garden this year and from other gardeners, books and the internet I learned how to grow my favourite vegetables.

Self-evaluations and critical reflections model lifelong learning by demonstrating that learning continues to evolve long after the initial learning occurred. Self-evaluation can be used
to help the student and teacher explore the expansive learning that has occurred with both the institutionals’ and student-created learning objectives and all the other subsequent learning that took place. The student then creates future goals to further evolve their learning. Critical reflections are used in a similar manner helping the student reflect on their learning experience and creating new learning through the reflective process. When the students are comfortable with the process of critical reflection it becomes engrained in them and they will continue to do this in all aspects of their lives. The students will then be inspired to continuously improve themselves through lifelong learning.

Conclusion

As more post-secondary institutions are moving towards the human capital model teachers have to be conscious of this shift but still be true to their values of teaching and learning. We can work within this system by being mindful of its existence and continuing to prioritize a student centered approach. Teaching students how to problem solve through learning will prepare them for all of life’s challenges. Modeling lifelong learning to students and creating an engaging and meaningful learning experience will plant the love of learning seeds in our students’ minds (Helterbran, 2005). As teachers we can only hope that the students’ then will be inspired to water these seeds to grow into lifelong learners.
References


