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Lifelong Learning Through a Higher Education Lens

Roger Mitch Nasser
Lindenwood University

Holly Karraker
Lindenwood University

LIFELONG LEARNING THROUGH A HIGHER EDUCATION LENS

Article by Roger Mitch Nasser, PhD and Holly Karraker, PhD

Abstract

Higher education administrators and faculty often cite lifelong learning as a central focus. In fact, many institutions include lifelong learning in their student outcomes or mission statements. However, few may actually define what lifelong learning means as a construct. Research has suggested lifelong learning is a skill developed over time (Knapper & Cropley, 2000) which leads to self-directed development in the years following graduation (Candy, 1995). While researchers may agree lifelong learning is a skill, there appears to be a lack of literature explaining how higher education faculty may develop this skill in students. The following discussion will attempt to suggest methods of teaching this skill at colleges and universities through examination of theoretical foundations and current practices.

Introduction

Higher education faculty often cite lifelong learning as a central focus of their work. In fact, many institutions include the construct of lifelong learning in their student outcomes or mission statements. Day (1999) has suggested, “One of the main tasks of all teachers is to inculcate in their students a disposition towards lifelong learning” (p. 2). According to Jõgi, Karu, and Krabi (2015), “learning experiences and teaching practices at university influence further choices and support continuing lifelong learning of university students” (p. 61). It is important for institutions to consider “whether students are developing a belief in, and commitment to, lifelong learning” (Bath & Smith, 2009, p. 174) as a result of the teaching practices employed and the learning experiences provided by their faculty.

It is clear that one important goal of college education is to foster lifelong learning in students. What is less clear is how the faculty at these institutions foster the development of their students into lifelong learners. Research has suggested lifelong learning is a skill developed over time (Knapper & Cropley, 2000), which leads to self-directed development in the years following graduation (Candy, 1995). Bath and Smith (2009) suggested lifelong learning involves more than skills; it involves possessing beliefs related to learning as well. They described these “epistemological beliefs” as the

"'keystone' of being a lifelong learner" (p. 175). Research has demonstrated the importance of having not only the ability and skills to engage in lifelong learning, but also the intrinsic motivation that causes one to engage in learning throughout one's life. (Bath & Smith, 2009)

While researchers may agree lifelong learning is a skill, there appears to be a lack of literature explaining how higher education staff and faculty may develop this skill in students. Various textbooks have addressed teaching in the context of lifelong learning (Day, 1999; Scales, Briddon, & Senior, 2013). In chapter 6 of *Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector*, Scales, Briddon, and Senior (2013) examined a variety of teaching and learning methods that may be employed within a professor's repertoire. While this is not an exhaustive list of strategies from which a professor may choose, it represents a variety of techniques that may be commonly used in higher education courses.

Research has suggested, however, that teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions of the value of different teaching and learning techniques may not be in agreement. Jõgi et al. (2015) identified a discrepancy between how professors and students perceive the teaching and learning process. They found that professors "experienced teaching as a cooperative process which is defined together with learners" and "an opportunity for critical interaction and thinking"; however, the students in their study perceived teaching as "imparting and receiving knowledge, which results in passive learning/acquisition" and "that their experiences, needs and proposals were not taken into account" (Jõgi, Karu, & Krabi, 2015, p. 73). Further research is needed regarding students' perceptions of teaching methodologies' impact on their future learning.

The following article examines the concept of lifelong learning through a higher education lens. First, the authors will discuss student learning models with connections to lifelong learning. An examination of administrative responsibilities regarding lifelong learning will follow. Next, the authors will explain faculty roles and the student perspective. Finally, the authors will propose future research opportunities and conclusions.

How Scholars Conceptualize Lifelong Learning

Scholars have debated the idea of lifelong learning as a concept for over thirty years. David Kolb (1984) was one of the first theorists to link the concept of lifelong learning with higher education. Kolb suggested student learning should be an active experience rather than a purely directed experience. He described his perspective of experiential learning as,

Experiential learning theory offers a fundamentally different view of the learning process from that of the behavior theories of learning based on an empirical epistemology or the more implicit theories of learning that underlie traditional educational methods, methods that for the most part are based on a rational idealist epistemology. From this different perspective emerge some very different prescriptions for the conduct of education, the

proper relationship among learning, work, and other life activities, and the creation of knowledge itself. (p. 20)

Kolb (1984) discussed six key components to the experiential learning process: learning as a process, a continuous process centered on experiences, resolution of opposing viewpoints, a holistic process, a relationship with the person and the outside world, and the process of creating knowledge.

Kolb (1984) indicated learning is a process and not the result of outcomes. While outcomes may guide practice, his first suggestion indicated these must be blended into the overall student experience. Later scholars appear to agree with the concept of outcomes as not absolute (Bagnall, 1994; Tam, 2014). Second, Kolb stated learning should be connected to the student's experiences. This discussion appears to include both in class and extracurricular activities. Students learn concepts, encounter personal experiences, and reflect on the two in conjunction. This view appears in line with other research regarding the importance of reflection (Cantor, 2006; Cowan, 2014; Findlay, Dempsey, & Warren-Forward, 2010; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). Third, his research (Kolb, 1984) indicated an importance in balancing viewpoints. Students must be challenged to develop an understanding of multiple perspectives prior to decision making. This balanced approach appears connected to expectations of decision making within specific career fields (Crea, 2010; Poliner Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016**).** Next, Kolb mentioned a holistic approach to education, suggesting learning occurs within different structures and circumstances. This discussion appears to be validated by other authors suggesting varied locations (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014; Merchant, Goetz, Cifuentes, Keeney-Kennicutt, & Davis, 2014) and time frames (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013) create well rounded educational experiences. Fifth, he (Kolb, 1984) suggested students have relationships with the outside world to impact learning. These outside experiences could include study abroad (Walters, Charles, & Bingham, 2017) or service learning (Richard, Keen, Hatcher, & Pease, 2016). Finally, his research indicated experiential learning contributes to the formation of knowledge. Perhaps developing the ability to form knowledge from experiences is central to lifelong learning. Many scholars have suggested lifelong learning is the development of skills, which may be utilized throughout life (Boyer, Edmondson, Artis, & Fleming, 2014; Ellinger, 2004). Kolb's view of education as a means for creating learning suggested faculty and staff create beginnings of constructs with the student completing the process. While Kolb's thinking may have been slightly extreme at the time, later scholars have proposed similar interactive learning models.

Sharples (2000) recommended an active teaching module through the lens of technology. He suggested current and future technologies should link students with instructors and initiate self-reflection. His research challenged traditional education to review practices and prepare future learners. He explained this perspective:

Since 1970, an approach to education has been articulated that neither embraces nor challenges institutional education, but is complementary to it. The approach, of lifelong learning, has gained currency through attempts to harness it as a means of providing

people with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in a rapidly-changing world. (Sharples, 2000, p. 177)

Sharples (2000) suggested several tools to address lifelong learning. While these tools carry a context of technology, they are relevant to the lifelong learning discussion overall. The recommended characteristics of these learning tools include (p. 178-179):

1. Highly portable - the student must be able to access learning in self-selected environments;

2. Individual - system should be adaptable for each student;

3. Unobtrusive - technology should not be a barrier for a student's education;

4. Available anywhere - students should have easy access to peers and instructors;

5. Adaptable - methods provide students flexibility;

6. Persistent - processes must encourage students to continue the learning process beyond the course or experience;

7. Useful - methods must encourage and connect to the learning process;

8. Intuitive - techniques must apply to all experience levels.

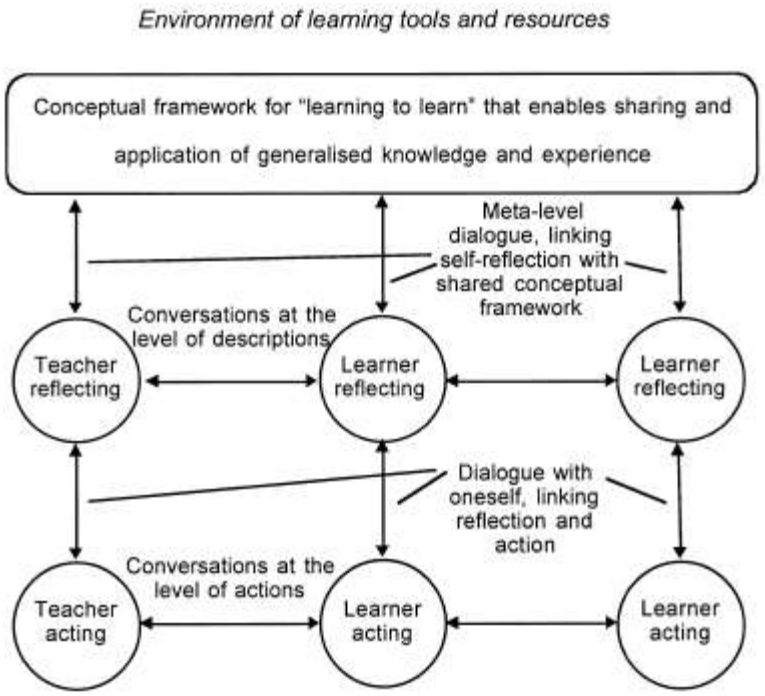

Fig. 1. A conversational framework for personal learning.

The researcher concluded his discussion with a visual of an interactive learning model. The model includes teacher-student interaction, peer interaction, and self-reflection of students and teacher. Sharples argues this model is true to the process of lifelong learning. The model is represented in Figure 1.

Research has suggested lifelong learning encompasses experiences, interactivity, reflection, and communication (Kolb, 1984; Sharples, 2000). While these authors have indicated meaning and overall techniques, a question remains regarding connecting specific methods to development of lifelong learning skills.

Academic Programs and Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning, since its inception as a construct, has evolved into a fundamental component of educational policy (Jakobi, 2012). Some conceptualize lifelong learning as formal graduate studies, continuing education, adult education, informal learning opportunities, etc. (de Viron & Davies, 2015). By their very existence, educational programs at universities provide a wealth of learning opportunities. Education programs offer a specialized focus of study with a primary goal of developing specific competencies within the field. These competencies are dictated by a variety of accrediting agencies, professional organizations, and state educational entities (Kasworm & Hemmingsen, 2007). However, in addition to the development of these

specific competencies, many universities adopt a more holistic view of the desired outcomes for their students; universities aspire to positively impact upon the development of the person as a whole, including the development of abilities and characteristics associated with lifelong learning (Su, 2011). Thus, the fostering of lifelong learning among graduates is often included as one of the goals identified in university mission statements.

Higher education faculty are guided by a curriculum that is two-fold. Institutions are obligated to ensure the curriculum offered satisfies the objectives for the course which are intentionally aligned with the standards set forth by the various accrediting bodies, thereby ensuring their students gain the knowledge and develop the competencies which are the focus of the course or program of study. Curriculum may be viewed as both a product and a process. The product of the curriculum refers to the intended and observable outcomes, the knowledge gained and the ability to apply that knowledge in terms of observable skills. The process of the curriculum, however, is not as readily observed. The process refers to the development of the underlying cognitive skills that occurs during an individual course and/or throughout a program of study (Duckworth & Tummons, 2010). The development of functional skills, the practical skills needed to effectively perform in the workplace, the specific competencies which are the desired learning outcomes, are developed through the curriculum as a product. The content of the courses and the program as a whole is primarily accountable for the development of functional skills. However, to truly foster lifelong learning, the process of curriculum must also be considered. The process of curriculum delivery must be intentionally designed to ensure an additional emphasis on the development of students' learning skills, or ability to learn, as well as their attitudes toward and beliefs about learning, including the desire to learn in general (Duckworth & Tummons, 2010). According to Bath and Smith (2009), "specifically targeting epistemological belief development is a reasonable goal for curricula in higher education" (p. 185). Higher education administration facilitates the implementation of the process curriculum through the establishment of a clearly articulated mission statement, the selection of faculty members to deliver the curriculum, and ongoing support for the professional development of faculty.

Studies have suggested faculty professional development may be linked to skill improvement, and thus improved instruction. Riley and Russell (2013) studied the impact of professional development on faculty department chairs. Many of these professionals indicated little or no training prior to taking the role. Participants indicated improvement following professional development activities, which led to better communication methods with the faculty they supervise. These department chairs also indicated new ability in holding faculty accountable for student learning. Hemmings, Hill, and Sharp (2013) furthered the discussion on shared accountability of faculty members. Faculty members working in environments which promoted community and development were more likely to reflect on pedagogy and student learning. Finally, researchers examined professional development of faculty members by linking them with K-12 counterparts. Knowlton, Fogleman, Reichsman, and de Oliveira (2015) found faculty members were impacted by methods discussions with K-12

instructors. Participants indicated they made adjustments to teaching not only immediately following the experience, but also years later after further reflection on the discussions. These studies appear to link with earlier discussion regarding the importance of reflection in lifelong learning (Cantor, 2006; Cowan, 2014; Cowan & Westwood, 2006).

Faculty Responsibility for Lifelong Learning

While the university provides the opportunity to engage in lifelong learning through degree programs and other formats, much of the responsibility for fostering lifelong learning falls upon the individual professors teaching the courses. Faculty must consider the most effective techniques and strategies to accomplish these goals (Jõgi et al., 2015; Kasworm & Hemmingsen, 2007). Professors have a variety of techniques within their repertoire. Scales et al. (2013) identified a variety of teaching methods ranging from teacher based strategies, such as lecturing, to very student centered approaches, such as case studies and projects. The implementation of the techniques impacts the learning environment and, in turn, has an effect upon student motivation and achievement (Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2013).

According to Jõgi et al. (2015), professors perceive university teaching as being "connected to a context based on the requirements and standards of formal learning – taking account of the characteristics of the respective subject specialty, setting boundaries, achieving learning outcomes, taking responsibility for the quality of knowledge and skills, and giving feedback" (Jõgi et al., 2015, p. 69). Jõgi et al. (2015) further describe teaching at the university level from the professors' perspective "as a formal learning process planned together with learners" (p. 69). This is consistent with constructivist teaching (Baeten et al., 2013) and the view that adult learners prefer to be actively involved in the planning of their own learning (Maehl, 2000). Professors become facilitators of student learning (Maehl, 2000) and enhance students' intrinsic, autonomous motivation for learning (Baeten et al., 2013). In addition, University teaching provides professors "an opportunity to support the development of a personality – to ensure the development of an independent critical thinker and a responsible, creative lifelong learner" (Jõgi et al., 2015, p. 69). Research has suggested the personality traits to be targeted include "personal efficacy", "openness to experience", "change readiness", and "epistemological beliefs" (Bath & Smith, 2009, p. 175-178). The role of the professor has expanded from primarily imparting knowledge to include the development of underlying skills required for students to continue to expand their knowledge throughout life.

Research has suggested faculty members may adjust curriculum or instruction methods in order to build lifelong learning skills in students (Biondi, 2013; Cantor, 2006; Findlay et al., 2010). Biondi (2013) suggested instructors use cogenerative conversations (cogen) to create classroom community through shared responsibility. These dialogues allow the students to create rules for classroom participation and remove the instructor from sole responsibility. While the faculty member should remain the primary instructor, the instructor also serves as participant equal to that of the students. Biondi (2013)

suggested this technique was met with positive results, “Through the experience of cogen, students not only reported learning more than they had in traditional courses, but they also reported feeling more connected to the class and their learning.” (p. 2-3).

Researchers have indicated reflective journaling is a useful tool for enhancing lifelong learning skills in students (Cantor, 2006; Cowan, 2014). This suggestion was taken further when Cowan and Westwood (2006) conducted a study examining the impact of reflective journaling on faculty members. Participants indicated the reflective journaling served as an important source of self-reflection, which resulted in a review of curriculum and instruction methods. The researchers noted the importance of facilitation of the reflective task as well as more success with seasoned faculty members (Cowan & Westwood, 2006).

Students and Lifelong Learning

Higher education provides specialized knowledge leading to opportunities for individuals to gain new qualifications and/or update existing qualifications (Jakobi, 2012). The classes and programs offered at universities are filled with students who come to the university for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Kasworm and Hemmingsen (2007) identified students as being motivated to complete their programs “to develop their competencies for their job function as professional practitioners or in leveraging new career opportunities through use of the degree to change their position within the same field” (p. 457-458). The learning experiences students have during their course of study “influence students’ future choices and support continuous lifelong learning” (Jõgi et al., 2015, p. 65).

University students represent a heterogeneous group of learners with diverse sets of skills, beliefs, and experiences. Clemans (2015) highlights the importance of students connecting their learning to prior experiences, to different forms of knowledge, and to their personal feelings and perspectives. The ability to do so “positions learners who come into higher education as ‘knowers’. It sensitizes them to the existence of multiple knowledge forms, some of which they are more comfortable and familiar with than others, and some of which they are just beginning to engage with” (p. 152). The view of the student as “learner-in-the-world” (Su, 2011, p. 404) and “learner as a scholar” (Clemans, 2015, p. 156) impacts the development of the student as a lifelong learner by influencing students’ beliefs about learning and the students’ identities as learners (Clemans, 2015; Su, 2011). Learners must “commit themselves, be authentic to the situations in which they find themselves, and acknowledge responsibility for their choices as constituted by affect, thought, and action” (Su, 2011, p. 408).

Bath and Smith (2009) studied the impact of students’ belief systems, specifically their epistemological beliefs as related to their predispositions as lifelong learners. They found students who display a propensity for lifelong learning evidence certain characteristics, including confidence in their own ability to learn and an intrinsic sense of intellectual curiosity, as well as a sophisticated epistemological belief system. Bath and Smith (2009) suggested that “epistemological beliefs and an openness to intellectual

experience personality were the two most important predictors of the characteristics of lifelong learning" (p. 185).

Conclusions and Implications

This article examined the concept of lifelong learning as it pertains to higher education faculty and students. Kolb (1984) indicated learning is a process and not the result of outcomes. Student learning models encompassing experiences, interactivity, reflection, and communication were identified to be connected to the development of lifelong learning skills (Kolb, 1984; Sharples, 2000). The facilitation of the implementation of both the product and the process curriculum through the establishment of a clearly articulated mission statement, the selection of faculty members to deliver the curriculum, and ongoing support for the professional development of faculty were identified among the responsibilities of higher education faculty when fostering of lifelong learners is one of the desired outcomes.

The role of higher education faculty was found to have expanded from primarily imparting knowledge to include the development of underlying skills required for students to continue to expand their knowledge throughout life. As facilitators of student learning (Maehl, 2000), professors strive to enhance students' intrinsic, autonomous motivation for continued learning (Baeten et al., 2013). Professors have a variety of techniques within their repertoire, the implementation of which impacts the learning environment as well as student motivation and achievement (Baeten et al., 2013).

University students were identified as bringing a diverse sets of skills, beliefs, and experiences to the learning environment. Positioning students as "knowers" was found to influence students' beliefs about learning and the students' identities as learners (Clemans, 2015). Students who evidence certain characteristics, including confidence in their own ability to learn and an intrinsic sense of intellectual curiosity, as well as a sophisticated epistemological belief system were found to display a propensity for lifelong learning (Bath & Smith, 2009).

The review of literature presented has a variety of implications for practice as well as for future research. The need for a clearly articulated position regarding an institution of higher education's commitment to lifelong learning on the part of university faculty was identified. Jakobi (2012) cautioned regarding "a discrepancy between official statements and corresponding activities" (p. 35). It is important for the institution's practices to align with the expressed position regarding lifelong learning. Such practices should include the development and implementation of the product and process curriculum designed to cultivate program specific competencies as well as skills and dispositions characterizing lifelong learners. In addition, the ongoing professional development of faculty to refine practice and strategies for developing students' propensity for lifelong learning demonstrates commitment to this objective.

Many authors have identified teaching methodologies professors may possess in their repertoire that may be instrumental in the development of students' skills and

dispositions relative to lifelong learning. Researchers have found, however, that there sometimes exists a disconnect between the teaching methods implemented with the intention of developing lifelong learning skills and the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the methodology to produce the desired outcome (Baeten et al., 2013; Jõgi et al., 2015). Further research is needed regarding the strategies professors may employ to build skills and to influence dispositions/belief systems within their students. Such research may be designed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific teaching and learning strategies for lifelong learning. In addition, further research examining the impact of various teaching methodologies on the development of students' abilities and belief systems from the student perspective is suggested.

Research has identified characteristics of students likely to engage in lifelong learning, though further research regarding the development of characteristic skills and belief systems at different stages of development is needed. Studies conducted by Bath and Smith (2009) and Baeten, Dochy, and Struyven (2013) focused on adult learners at the undergraduate level. Bath and Smith (2009) posit that the relationship identified between epistemological beliefs and lifelong learning may change over time. Further research regarding belief systems and propensity for lifelong learning at different stages of matriculation is needed. Such research may investigate students' conceptualizations of lifelong learning as well as their understanding of the skills supporting such learning. In addition, further research examining the propensity for lifelong learning, including the characteristic skills and beliefs, from the perspective of graduate students is suggested.

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