

RECOVERING INFORMAL LEARNING

Lifelong Learning Book Series

VOLUME 7

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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.

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Recovering Informal Learning

Wisdom, Judgement and Community

by

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and

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 Springer

A C.I.P. Catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4020-9295-4 (PB)
ISBN 978-1-4020-5345-0 (HB)
ISBN 978-1-4020-5346-7 (e-book)

Published by Springer,
P.O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

www.springer.com

Printed on acid-free paper

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As societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need of formal or intentional teaching and learning increases. As formal teaching and training grow in extent, there is the danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school. This danger was never greater than at the present time, on account of the rapid growth in the last few centuries of knowledge and technical modes of skill.

(Dewey 1966: 9)

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PREFACE

We wish to thank the following for help with the production of this book:

The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for financial help with travel which enabled us to meet to complete the book.

The Universities of Strathclyde and of Technology, Sydney

The OVAL Research Group at UTS for hosting John Halliday during late 2005.

Special thanks are due to the many interviewees who gave their time freely and generously to enable our compilation of exemplars and case studies. Most wished to remain anonymous. Our intention has been to alter the details of their accounts sufficiently so that others cannot recognise them. In all cases they seem to us to be good informal learners. They may well have become involved because they shared with us the suspicion that informal learning is far more significant than is often acknowledged.

The various exemplars and case studies discussed in this book resulted from the research work undertaken with others. Here we take the opportunity to list the projects and project teams, and to acknowledge the work of our research colleagues.

In Scotland:

Dorothy Russell for compiling some of the case exemplars.

In Australia:

Charles' story

'*Changing Nature of Work*', Board of Vocational Education and Training project – researchers: Paul Hager and Bernice Melville.

Anne's story, Alison's story, Jack's story and Maria's story

'*Judgement at Work*' project – researchers: Paul Hager, David Beckett, Carole Hooper and Bernice Melville.

Martin's story and Financial literacy case study

'*Context, Judgement and Informal Learning at Work*', Australian Research Council Discovery Grant No. DP0453091 – researchers: Paul Hager, Jim Athanasou, John Halliday and Mary Johnsson. (The Financial literacy exemplar (Chapter ten, section 2.3.2) is an edited version with permission of a more extensive case study written by Mary Johnsson.)

Permission to include extracts from the following previously published material is also gratefully acknowledged:

HALLIDAY, J.S. (2001) 'Lifelong Learning, changing economies and the world of work', in D. Aspin, J. Chapman, M. Hatton & Y. Sawano (eds.) *The International Handbook on Lifelong Learning*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 93–108.

HALLIDAY, J.S. (1996) 'Empiricism in Vocational Education and Training', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 28:1, 40–57.

HALLIDAY, J.S. (1999) 'Political Liberalism and Citizenship Education: towards curriculum reform', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 47:1, 43–56.

HALLIDAY, J.S. (2001) 'Reason, education and liberalism: family resemblance within an overlapping consensus', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 20, 225–234.

HALLIDAY, J.S. & HAGER, P. (2002) 'Context, Judgement and Learning at Work', *Educational Theory*, 52:4, 429–445.

HALLIDAY, J.S. (2004) 'Distributive Justice and Vocational Education', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 22:4, 151–165.

HAGER, P. (2001) 'Lifelong Learning and the Contribution of Informal Learning', in D. Aspin, J. Chapman, M. Hatton & Y. Sawano (eds.) *The International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 79–92.

HAGER, P. (2005) 'Philosophical Accounts of Learning', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 37: 5, 649–66.

HAGER, P. (2005) 'Current Theories of Workplace Learning: A Critical Assessment', in Bascia N., Cumming A., Datnow A., Leithwood K. & Livingstone D. (eds.) *International Handbook of Educational Policy*. Part Two. Dordrecht: Springer, 829–846.

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 these matters seemed to agree with us that each of the themes that were taken up in 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 generate.

This volume is an outcome of one of the important issues that were raised in the *International Handbook*. It is the work of Paul Hager and John Halliday. They argue that for too long theories and practices of learning have been dominated by the requirements of formal learning. They seek in this book to persuade readers, through philosophical argument and empirically grounded examples, that the balance should be shifted back towards the informal. Their arguments and examples are taken from informal learning in very diverse circumstances, such as in leisure activities, as a preparation for and as a part of work, and as a means of surviving undesirable circumstances like “dead end” jobs and incarceration. Informal learning can be fruitfully thought of as developing the capacity to make context sensitive judgments during ongoing practical involvements of a variety of kinds. Such involvements are necessarily indeterminate and opportunistic. Hence there is a major challenge to policy makers in shifting the balance towards informal learning without destroying the very things that are desirable about informal learning and indeed learning in general. The book has implications therefore for formal learning too and the ways in which teaching might proceed within formally constituted educational institutions such as schools and colleges.

There are some key points to be found in the case this book presents:

1. Many current theories of learning, particularly those that concern workplace learning, rely upon the metaphor of participation in communities of practice. These so-called theories of situated cognition are, however, not without some problems, to which people such as Biesta have drawn attention: “The magic spell cast by Jean Lave and Etienne Enger's situated learning has led many to believe that education is a process of participation in ‘communities of practice’.... If there has ever been a time in which we need a critical re-examination of the idea of ‘practice’ in order to counter

its conservative and conserving connotations, it may well be now". The book aims to provide just such a critical re-examination. It challenges many common taken-for-granted assumptions about learning in a way that connects with much of the Deweyan literature and work from the philosophy of Alisdair MacIntyre.

2. The authors argue that 'community' is nothing like so stable as is commonly supposed. Nor is the associated concept of 'consensus'. They therefore draw upon work from both the communitarian and liberal traditions to move towards a new position that highlights the roles that contingency and opportunity play in learning. Such roles point towards the importance of informal learning. Yet the authors also trace the way that educational policies in general, and lifelong learning policies in particular, have led to an increasing emphasis on formal learning. The authors argue that a main problem with this emphasis – quite apart from the fact that it is likely to be of little use to many people – is that it leads, to borrow Wain's phrase, to a "panopticon" society. In such a society people are compelled or coerced to attend institutions of formal education, not so much out of an interest on what is on offer there, but as unwilling participants in forms of their own social control and surveillance.
3. The authors clearly wish to avoid the slide into such a "panopticon" society and urge, through argument and exemplars, that learning is best conceived of as developing an ability to make contextually sensitive judgments. This emphasis on judgment and the variability of contexts resonates with their political analyses of variability and contingency, to provide a promising new theory of learning with, as their exemplars show, widespread applicability. There is thus no conservative or conserving theory: it calls for radical changes in the way learning is conceived and in the way policies for learning are framed.
4. The book is thus in many ways a challenge to policy-makers, theorists and practitioners to think anew and to question existing conceptions of learning. For the authors the concept of learning has become so distorted by an increased emphasis on the formal, that it almost prevents the kind of imaginative leaps in policy-making that could envisage learning and doing as co-existing. No longer would learning be seen as a preliminary to getting a job or doing a job better. Rather it should be seen as part of life, supplemented but not removed by, formal learning opportunities.
5. The work includes many interesting empirically-grounded exemplars of informal learning, including learning through leisure (hobbies, crafts and so on); learning while preparing for work; learning for continuing vocational development; and learning for surviving (e.g. unemployment, dead-end jobs etc..)
6. There is one excellent extensive chapter which explains carefully why human beings cannot think about learning in metaphor-free ways. There are several distinctive metaphors employed in relation to learning, each one involving its own epistemological and ontological assumptions, as well as a series of subsidiary metaphors. Each of these distinctive metaphors and

their attendant assumptions and subsidiary metaphors is outlined in detail. It seems that one metaphor cluster, the propositional learning one, has been elevated to the position of 'single, preferred account of learning'. Crucial problems for common understandings of learning have been created by the ascendancy of this single preferred account of learning. For policies concerned with lifelong learning such a single account is not only of little use, but is positively damaging: it militates against the whole notion of the availability and utility of different learning styles, modes and signatures that individual learners may bring to their activities. So the book invites us to undertake a reappraisal of what lifelong learning might mean.

This awareness is supported, in the first chapter of the book, by a quotation from Chris Duke: "This transposition of language denies legitimacy to the kinds of learning that are not recognised in educational theory and policy-making. The scope of learning, lifelong and life-wide, mysterious, little understood and invisible, is reduced to that which the 'empire of education' can reach". It is to the authors' credit that they carry the implications of this assertion into an elaboration of an account of learning that might go some way towards making lifelong learning a little less mysterious, much better understood and far more visible, and in this way be of benefit to all learners generally.

We are pleased that this important and radical work helps carry forward the agenda of the Springer Series on Lifelong Learning. We thank the anonymous international reviewers and assessors who have considered and reviewed this proposal 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 and controversial as we who have overseen this project and its development have found it: we commend it with confidence to all those working in this 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 hope that it will encourage their continuing critical thinking, research and development, academic and scholarly production, and individual, institutional and professional progress.

June 2006

David Aspin and Judith Chapman

INTRODUCTION

This book presents a theory of informal learning, which is illustrated throughout with exemplars of cases involving individuals and organisations. Our central thesis is that currently the balance within both policies and practices of lifelong learning has shifted too far towards formal learning. That imbalance should be corrected. We indicate some practical and policy oriented implications of what such corrections would involve and we attempt to illustrate some societal benefits that would result from making them. In summary we argue that too much is spent on the provision of formal learning opportunities and not enough on the provision of opportunities for informal learning. It is not as though informal learning is unpopular or unsuccessful. Indeed we provide evidence to support the view both that it is very popular and that it can be very successful. It is limited not by human interest. Rather it is limited at the practical level by a lack of opportunities. More importantly perhaps at the theoretical level it is limited by a lack of awareness of the richness and variety of practice at all levels. We include in our argument not only considerations of income, status and class but also considerations of the richness of apparently mundane practices which so easily can be missed by those obsessed with the former type of consideration.

1. WHAT IS INFORMAL LEARNING?

Distinctions are problematic. Boundaries may be blurred. Some categories can be made to fit either side of a distinction and the very act of making a distinction opens up some possibilities and closes down others (Edwards *et al.* 2004). Moreover to name something is to position it somewhere in a nexus of power relations that are sustained by the rhetorical force of the naming term. Naming something also positions the nominators somewhere on a spectrum of values. In a research-based book such as this, it is tempting then to try to avoid such positioning. It is tempting to problematise, to draw attention to complexity, sometimes to change the nouns that comprise a distinction into adjectives that describe qualities that may be located along a spectrum. In that way, it is possible to sit on the fence and allow an undefined notion of context to do the evaluative work. This latter appears to be the approach adopted by Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm (2003) in their report to the English Learning and Skills Council on formal and informal learning. They find

It is not possible to separate out informal/non formal learning from formal learning in ways that have broad applicability or agreement Attributes of in/formality are interrelated differently in different situations. (*Extracted from the Executive Summary*)

We disagree with these findings. It seems to us that the distinction between formal and informal learning is both useful and, in most contexts, easily made. We met nobody in the course of compiling our case exemplars, who had any difficulty understanding this distinction. For us, formal learning is that which takes place as

intended within formally constituted educational institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, training centres and so on. Typically it follows a prescribed framework whether or not actual attendance at the institution is necessary. Sometimes there are quite specific outcomes. On other occasions there is more of a kind of broad direction or aim. In all cases however those partaking of courses of formal learning have an idea of what they are likely to learn and they accept that that learning will to some extent be under the control of the institution. Informal learning covers all other situations in which people learn including those occasions when in the course of living they learn without sometimes intending to learn. It also includes those situations within formal educational institutions when some things are learnt which are not directly intended by those employed by the institution.

It is true of course that there are borderline cases but as Wittgenstein (1953) points out, that does not make a distinction useless. Rather he refers to a rule governing the ways such things as distinction are made as standing “there like a sign-post” (1953: PI 85) and he asks

Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it show which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the foot path or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one? (1953: PI 85)

The rule directs a way to go but it cannot compel anyone to go that way. For most purposes the rule serves its purpose. Where a mistake is made, again according to Wittgenstein, is to imagine that a distinction can only be useful if rules can be formulated to govern their application in all cases. Such imagining leads to the mistaken views that it must be possible to define a term before it can be used on all contexts and that all uses of that term must share something fundamental in common. Once this view is accepted then it is easy to see the attractions of an opposing, but equally mistaken view that informality and formality are attributes applicable to all learning contexts. In the first chapter we show how some commentators on the literature surrounding learning have made such mistakes.

We might imagine a person seeking work forced to attend a course of formal learning in order to secure their social security benefit where the course content is of little interest and where most of what is learnt will be learnt informally. Our definitions above will be useful in such a situation. Again our definitions are useful in the situation where someone learns informally while at the same time being enrolled on a chosen course of study. Moreover our definitions allow us to make sense in policy and practical terms of the idea that there is necessarily a balance to be struck between formal and informal learning and that one is not inherently superior to another.

In this we follow John Dewey who argued that all learning is worthwhile. As he puts it ‘the very process of living together educates’ (1966: 6). While education enables the young to come to take part in the social practices of the community into which they are born such enabling is ‘not automatic’. Therefore for Dewey while formal learning at school and elsewhere is important, he (1966: 4-7) cautions that:

Schools are indeed, one important method of the transmission which forms the dispositions of the young but it is only one means and, compared with other agencies, a relatively superficial means. [yet] As civilisation advances, an ability to share effectively in adult activities depends upon a prior training given with this end in view. The task of teaching certain things is delegated to a special group of persons.

In other words while it would be and was possible to learn without attendance at schools and other institutions, current society is sufficiently complicated that without formal learning far too many people would miss out on what might be regarded as key societal practices for harmonious and productive living. Dewey is aware that there is always a danger with such teaching that it becomes remote from the day to day practicalities of everyday life – it becomes ‘relatively technical and artificial’.

Hence one of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional modes of education (*Dewey 1966: 9*).

The problem of determining what forms of learning are worthwhile is shifted by Dewey to one of maintaining an appropriate balance between the formal and the informal. There is a need for formal learning because without it, the initiation of the young into the practices of a society would be too much a matter of happenstance. There are some things that are so fundamental to the educational well being of everyone that formal educational institutions exist to promote them. Crucially though for policy and practice, it is important to maintain a balance with informal learning.

2. THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Our central argument then is that currently the balance is shifted too far towards the formal. Quite simply we seek to persuade readers through philosophical argument and empirically grounded examples, that the balance should be shifted more towards the informal. The assumption implicit in many policies, theories and practices concerned with lifelong learning, that such learning must be predominantly formal, is wrong in our view and potentially dangerous for harmonious societal development.

On our view the richness of the educative possibilities of informal learning within a liberal society depends upon the particular circumstances into which children are born. That means that for us as for Dewey the content of the formal curriculum must necessarily vary depending upon the particular backgrounds of children. For example children who are brought up in certain kinds of community such as farming or fishing communities will necessarily be initiated informally into certain practices and not others.

Curriculum is not entirely a philosophical concern though. Rather it involves political concerns, which are informed by empirical investigation of the informal learning undertaken by each child. Worthwhile learning is education, which may be conceived as cultural transmission between generations. For Dewey and for us the type of transmission that should be favoured is that which encourages the

greatest 'variety of mutually shared interests' (1966: 322) and that is a democratic society.

We have not got very far however and what in our view is currently lacking is an adequate theory of informal learning. Writing at the end of the United Kingdom's multi-million pound programme of research into The Learning Society, the Director notes 'that informal learning was much more significant than many of [the researchers] had previously recognised.' (Coffield 2000: 1). We go further in arguing that a continuing over-emphasis on formal learning is actually harmful for any reasonable conception of a learning society guided by principles of lifelong learning. For some time we have recognised that it is mistaken to hold a rationalist conception of learning through which theory is supposed to guide practice. By implication it is also mistaken to hold on to the idea that the best way to improve practice in the workplace or elsewhere is through formal theoretical learning, which then is somehow practically applied.

We also recognise however that it is mistaken to put too much faith in the idea of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) as bases for informal learning of a non-rationalistic sort. It is mistaken to hold on to the idea that informal learning is best conceived as a series of apprenticeships within communities of practice. Such an idea is often based on an unexamined notion of practice which at worst suggests that all practices are equally worthwhile. The idea also fails to account for the widely held educational principle that it is good to be a generalist with a broad grasp of what are held to be main features of societal practices while at the same time being a specialist in just a few.

Rather we have come to see that what is required is a different conception of rationalism which is much less determinate than commonly supposed. In this book we develop a theory of learning which puts the notion of judgement in context to the fore. We theorise learning as the growing capacity to make appropriate context sensitive judgements. This notion offers a less deterministic account of learning because contexts are nested and layered in a way that problematises the identification of relevant context. Such nesting and layering also problematises the notion of a community of practice and suggests that learning is often sufficiently opportunistic for it to be difficult to sustain the idea of community. We therefore re-examine the notions of community and consensus to set out a less cosy but more realistic account of community than is often suggested in the literature. This re-examination involves a revised relationship between opportunity and wisdom. It might be imagined that our view of learning is most relevant to those concerned with informal learning in the workplace and elsewhere. We point out that this view also has strong implications for those concerned with formal education in general and the school curriculum in particular.

The developing account of learning is illustrated throughout the book by a number of excerpts from empirically based exemplars dealing with such topics as hobbies, crafts, professions, learning to survive, and keeping vocationally relevant in a rapidly changing field. These exemplars are developed in an attempt to illustrate the overall range of the theory presented. However, we hope that they also serve to show some of the richness of learning from practice, a richness that is not fully captured in theoretical discussions of learning. The book concludes by setting

out the implications of this account for policy makers concerned not only with lifelong learning but school education too. Part of our advice to them is that the term 'learning' now comes so loaded with undesirable connotations that it may be time to try to find some new term to describe a developing ability to make contextually sensitive judgments. Such a new term would aim to capture the sense of lifelong development and achievement. That is to avoid the connotation of 'learner' as powerless and, as yet, incapable. A new term would aim to get away from the view of learning as preparing towards one of learning as becoming. It is hoped that policy makers, theorists, practitioners and those simply wanting to live more fulfilling lives may find some things of interest in the book.

3. OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

We begin with a wide-ranging review of the literature concerned with informal, workplace and lifelong learning. We argue that these three distinctive concepts of learning converge much more than has hitherto been supposed. We claim that recognition of this convergence provides new insights into the nature of learning itself. Throughout the book we attempt to tease out such insights. We argue that hitherto there has been an undue emphasis on the cognitive aspects of human life as if through cognitive endeavour alone all practical problems are best solved. Such an emphasis is related to an over reliance on a type of rationalism which puts means-ends rationality to the fore. The emphasis leads both to a concentration on knowledge as a fundamental explanatory category and on a type of instrumentalism, which suggests that knowledge is the best guide to appropriate action. Since it is hard to see how knowledge of a theoretical kind could possibly be 'acquired' other than through attendance at institutions specifically set up to 'transmit' it to learners, then it is not difficult to see how an undue emphasis on formal learning arises.

We also argue that policies concerned with lifelong learning often conflate learning with education with societal development in general. Again there is an implicit instrumentalism in much policy discourse, which suggests that societal development depends fundamentally on sound economic performance, which in turn depends upon appropriate formal learning. Our account is more complex than this. It is not entirely clear just what vision of societal development is favoured by the various versions of lifelong learning that can be found in the literature. To be sure there is an uneasy tension between humanistic and neo-liberal versions, yet it is hard to see anyone now supposing that a humanistic vision of society can be achieved without at least some concern for the implications of global capitalism.

It is widely regarded that lifelong learning conceived as formal learning is an obviously good thing. The question can be asked however 'Who wants to learn forever?' at least in this way. Moreover the strand of lifelong learning that has emerged in the workplace as continuing professional development raises a similar question. The review therefore includes current literature on workplace learning. This shows that there is a tendency in the literature to base practical recommendations on a single theory of learning. For example, much of this literature is based on concepts surrounding situated cognition (Lave & Wenger 1991, Lave 1996,

Wenger 1998). There are at least two problems with this particular literature. The first is that much of it is based on the idea that a single account of learning is what is required. The second is that it misses out on a normative account of practice. Interesting though it might be to theorise about how people learn, for us that is less interesting than theorising about what they should learn. Empirical investigation might enable the former type of theorising, but it is unlikely to enable the latter.

Chapter two is a genealogical account of development of policies towards lifelong learning which attempts to show how a deep-seated empiricist epistemology lay largely unexamined within the democracies of Britain and Australia so that instrumentalism in this area grew into a fairly restrictive sense of vocationalism. It is argued that this deep seated empiricism made it hardly surprising that researchers in the area tended to concentrate on formal learning. The idea that the outcomes of learning could be something measurable and describable gave rise to the idea that learning is a product describable and measurable in behavioural terms. The so-called competence revolution (Hyland 1997) developed that idea so that it became common place to describe the desirable learning outcomes of formal learning in behavioural terms and to group these into occupational families.

It could be argued that this was all part of a wider move to end the public sector's monopoly of formal learning. In an increasingly tight jobs market, vocational qualifications became the keys to securing well paid employment. The certificates of competence became promissory notes of a job. In a very real sense a certificate became a product for which people would pay. The performance criteria that had to be satisfied in order that a certificate to be awarded could also be regarded as products of formal learning. It was then easy for governments to legitimate the idea of a market in formal learning through which products would be sold through different providers both public and private to deliver these products in the most efficient ways. Policies for lifelong learning simply continued the same trend. Once formal learning at school might have been regarded as sufficient to act as a passport for lifelong employment. But now, in a globalised economy in which change is stressed above all else, formal learning is seen to be needed throughout life to keep up to date with rapidly changing employment fields and consumer demands. Hardly surprising therefore that researchers tried to work out what forms of formal learning could best match this policy agenda.

Once it became accepted that learning is a kind of product, then it was not unreasonable to want to be able to specify that product. Once the product was specified then formal learning and formal institutions for learning became all the more prevalent. After all within such institutions and as a preliminary to joining such institutions, learners are supposed to know just what it is they are to learn. Indeed in recent decades under the influence of behavioural learning theory, it has become commonplace to specify the products of learning in behavioural terms as if a quite specific learning outcome could be guaranteed without risk to the learner (see Blake *et al.* 1998). Not only that but those of a neo-liberal persuasion then saw these specifications of products of learning as the means of introducing much needed market reforms to what previously had been public sector provision of learning opportunities. It became increasingly attractive to governments concerned to reduce the size of public sector expenditure to privatise the opportunities for

learning. The dominant metaphors and assumptions that supported the product view seemed to enable them to do this.

As has been said, however, there was something wrong with the metaphysics and epistemology that underpinned these developments. It should hardly surprise us that the logical contradictions of these developments are becoming increasingly apparent. For example it is becoming increasingly difficult to find evidence to support the view that many of the jobs currently on offer do require increased formal learning. Moreover the phenomenon known as credentialism, to which attention was drawn by Collins (1979), has grown apace. A problem arises however because there is a limit to the exchange value of different qualifications. As it becomes increasingly expensive to acquire credentials with high exchange value, some learners simply 'drop out' of the formal learning society.

In chapter three we attempt to show an impending sense of crisis in formal education and in all forms of 'front loaded' formal educational provision which take the form of promissory notes for successful future practice. While it might be imagined that informal learning is essentially a private concern and formal learning a public concern, we attempt to show how such imagining arises and how it gets us off on entirely the wrong foot in considering lifelong learning in postmodernity. In chapter four we go on to argue that learning is necessarily opportunistic at both the individual and communal level. We outline a crisis within liberal democratic societies that arises because of misplaced attraction to a non-perfectionist liberalism such as that of Rawls (1971, 1993). According to this argument both the neo-liberals got it wrong by focusing on the private and the communitarians got it wrong by supposing that community was more stable than it actually can be at the present time. We argue against the idea that there exists a kind of overlapping consensus that can be used to guide educational policy. The development of personal autonomy as a guide to learning may no longer be of much use. What we need is a kind of liberalism that can hold good against postmodernism. Our guide here is Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) and his idea of a network society. Our keywords are contingency and opportunity, as outlined in chapter 4. We suggest that it is precisely because so many people currently slip through the net of formal learning, and are likely to slip through any further nets in the form of formal schemes of lifelong learning, that provides us with the most hope that the significance of informal learning can be recognised.

While we seek to redress a balance in favour of informal learning, we are aware of the risks involved in such an attempt. Just as it is argued that formal learning has become a central part of a panopticon society (Wain 2004), it can also be argued that any systems designed to encourage informal learning could easily function as part of such a society too. Moreover systems which promote informal learning may serve as a rather cheap type of panopticon at that. In short an adequate theory of informal learning may be precisely what is not needed at the present time. We are sensitive to this possibility and our theory brings risk and uncertainty in learning to the fore. Risk and uncertainty are resistant to systematisation. Attempts to make lifelong learning risk free and its outcomes determined in advance are what have led to a present state of crisis. A different way of thinking about the State's interest in encouraging learning is required. We argue that a

renewed focus on informal learning opens up the possibility of recognising practices that have gone largely unnoticed as educative practices and that such recognition is overdue.

In chapter five we begin to rethink learning. We argue that a single account of learning is always unlikely to be sufficient and describe how metaphor seems essential to enable us to talk and think about learning. Yet metaphor not only enables but restricts our thinking. For learning is an ‘essentially contested’ term (Gallie 1956) and the metaphors that we use to describe learning reflect the different meanings that are ascribed to the term. Metaphor both reveals and conceals however. With close scrutiny it becomes apparent that some of the ontological assumptions that are hidden through the use of metaphor are seriously deficient. Unsurprisingly the view that learning is essentially the acquisition of a product comes in for most criticism.

The chapter concludes with some desiderata for a better understanding of learning as a dialectical interplay of product and process and a greater awareness of the ways that metaphors shapes our understanding of and practices in learning. In summary we think that learning is concerned primarily with the development of the capacity to judge well whether that judging is concerned with the appropriateness of actions or speech. On this view learning is holistic. It involves not only individual bodies but the organisations and communities of which they are a part. It makes sense to talk of organisations as well as individuals learning. The outcomes of learning cannot always or even often be written down. Since the learner is part of the world then learning alters both learner and the world of which she is a part. There is a view of learning as the ability to rehearse certain behavioural repertoire in a formal context, which may or may not share a resemblance with the practical context in which the learning has real point. In contrast to this view we advance an alternative that all learning is primarily contextual and that an understanding of context is crucial to any theory of learning. We also consider the idea that learning itself is metaphorical and that the metaphor of learning now carries considerable unhelpful baggage in the form of associations with such qualities as helplessness, powerlessness and incompetence.

In chapter six we begin to outline our preferred informal learning theory as the developing ability to make judgments with ever increasing contextual sensitivity. Plainly there are two key terms in need of expansion and explanation here – context and judgment. We start with the term ‘context’. We argue that the learning of propositions within formal learning has distorted commonly held views of learning to such an extent that it is hard now to conceive of propositions as things to be learnt practically as and when required. In contrast to the widely accepted view that definitions of terms are essential prerequisites for successful uses of those terms in a variety of contexts, we argue that definitions are but one type of use appropriate in some contexts but not in others. Indeed in most practical contexts definitions are of no use at all.

We also argue that learning is holistic in that learner, learning and context cannot be sharply distinguished once and for all. For us learning is a transactional relationship in which both learners and their environment change together. That is so because learners are part of the environment. Likewise, rather