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# Lifelong learning, academic development and the purposes of higher education

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with the competence of the university graduate; it poses two main questions: 1. How can a higher education institution ensure that its students exit the system with the ability to generate socially useful knowledge throughout the rest of their lives? 2. To what extent do students who are currently exiting universities have this ability? It goes on to argue (in agreement with the architects of the NQF) for certain generic competences that are seen as vital for survival in the world of work today, regardless of the degree studied. Focusing on the notion of 'critical thinking', as one of these descriptions of competence, the article suggests how this notion can usefully be elaborated if education is to serve an emancipatory purpose in the current context.

## Introduction

This paper seeks to demonstrate the conceptual, historical and practical convergences of the notions of lifelong learning and academic development, as these concepts have influenced and continue to influence thinking in higher education institutions. It does this by situating these notions, and the activities they represent, within the current socio-economic context.

The paper goes on to make suggestions for the practice of academic development, with one particular question in mind: how can a higher education institution ensure that its students exit the system with the ability to generate socially useful knowledge throughout the rest of their lives? In answering this question one has to pay attention to the further question of what it is that makes knowledge socially useful today, hence my reference to the purposes of higher education.

I will be particularly concerned to provide a definition of the lifelong learner. When I use this term I will be assuming that the ability for *any* individual to learn widely and through the whole of his or her lifespan is a desideratum of education in general. I do not use the term 'lifelong learner' to refer to some particular learners within the system, such as part-time learners, mature

learners, or those workers seeking occupational upgrades. Rather the lifelong learner will be defined as one who is able to engage critically with his or her world, in addition to commanding those sorts of competence that are required for survival in it, especially the ability to adapt to new roles and situations. At a time when buzzwords such as 'generic skills' and 'interdisciplinarity' are somewhat ritually mentioned in policy documents, it may be useful to enquire into the social dynamics that lie behind them and to re-examine what they might mean in relation to real-world problems.

## Learning to be

It is difficult to determine the origins of the term 'lifelong learning' with any great precision, but certainly one of the earliest and most influential sources for it is a UNESCO commissioned work entitled *Learning to Be* (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema and Ward, 1972). The term used there was actually 'lifelong education' rather than 'lifelong learning'. However these concepts are quite similar, as some further quotations from Faure *et al.* below will show, and they are also interrelated with various others such as 'recurrent education', 'permanent education' etc. (Tight, 1998). It is true though that certain writers, such as Torres (2004), place considerable emphasis on the distinctions between these concepts, so that the notion of lifelong education tends to be limited to opportunities for receiving instruction in institutional settings, whereas lifelong learning encompasses all the factors that facilitate learning, such as one's living conditions, social *milieu* and so forth.

Faure, a former French minister of education, and his collaborators in this work, pointed out at length the many failures of the global education system, especially the low participation rates in schooling and some of its more disappointing results, such as a failure to keep pace with the ever changing demands of the workplace and technological development. The main themes of *Learning to Be* were: massifying education; making it more relevant, using new methods and media; meeting popular aspirations for liberation and democracy; achieving self-fulfilment; mobility between branches of education (flexibility of entrance and exit). It was asserted that "lifelong education is not an educational system but the principle on which an over-all organization of a system is founded, and which should accordingly underlie the development of each of its component parts," and the authors proposed "*lifelong education as*

*the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries” (p.182).<sup>1</sup>*

The authors proposed, amongst other things, a notion of “recurrent education” which, they said, “may resolve the contradiction between institutionalized and non-institutionalized education by integrating them into a coherent system in which they complement and supplement each other harmoniously” (pp.189–190). The roots of what we have come to know as recognition of prior learning (RPL) can clearly be seen here, since one of the ‘contradictions’ between formal and non-formal education lies in the fact that the latter is often not recognised by the former. The authors were thus trying to bring all learning into one framework. Any learning programme would somehow have to give recognition to whatever learning had come before, whether this was in a formal institutional setting or not, and anyone having completed a formal programme should be able to continue building on that learning, whether in a formal setting or not.

It is evident that this thinking was informed by changes in the workplace and the need for education to keep pace with these, hence the greater emphasis on problem solving rather than disciplines, as is evident in the following recommendation: “*Artificial or outmoded barriers between different educational disciplines, courses and levels, and between formal and non-formal education should be abolished; recurrent education should be gradually introduced and made available in the first place to certain categories of the population*” (p.189). There is a certain radicalism in proposals like this and no doubt ‘progressivist’ currents in education have been strongly influenced by such thinking ever since. In order to understand the significance of this development, and before dealing with any practical problems that it raises, let us step back and briefly consider the social and historical context.

## From lifelong employment to ‘cognitive capitalism’

The term ‘Fordism’ was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> It referred to the dominant paradigm of work at the time, which was based on

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<sup>1</sup> All italics found in quotations from Faure *et al.* are the authors’ own.

<sup>2</sup> In Gramsci (1971).

Taylorist ‘scientific management’ principles, the assembly line method of mass production, high wages (sufficiently high for workers to buy the products of their own labours and to support a family), an unskilled or at most semi-skilled worker, and a paternalistic control over the lives of workers, even their private lives. The condition of the mass worker under Fordist regimes was such that work tended to be highly repetitive and the cognitive demands that it made on the worker very low. Fordism is usually associated with Keynesian economic policies (Itoh, 1992; Allen, 1996; Gambino, 1996; Lebowitz, 2004), and its period of greatest success is generally thought to lie in the two decades immediately following the Second World War. The convergence of Ford and Keynes is summed up in the Fordist maxim, “the worker in an auto plant should be able to buy an auto” (cited in Caffentzis, 1998, p.6). The same author goes on to explain:

One of the most important functions of the Keynesian state was the management of a parallel growth of wages and productivity, via its control of the money supply and the interest rate. If wages increases out-ran productivity increases, then an increase in the money supply with its inflationary impact followed by an interest rate increase and its recessionary consequences, would reduce the value of the wages in line with productivity.

(Caffentzis, 1998, pp.7-8)

It is generally agreed that the Fordist paradigm of work and the ‘Keynesian compact’ (Krugman, 2000) began to suffer a crisis in the late 1960s, although opinions differ on the reasons for this. Amongst the more strongly supported reasons are the fact that trade unions had become strong, that wages had risen while working hours had shortened and that a drop in the rate of profit had occurred. By the early 1970s, and with the onset of oil price shocks, far-reaching solutions were required in order to restore profitability and these would eventually lead to a large scale reorganisation of labour.

The response was generally to change the nature of production itself. One aspect of this was the rise of Japanese models, so called ‘Toyotism’ or ‘lean production’ (Itoh, 1992; Gambino, 1996), which emphasised innovations such as ‘quality circles’, ‘just in time production’, ‘total quality control’, and so forth, which, at least according to certain writers, had a purpose of breaking the power of workers on the assembly line by making their work more open to surveillance and control (Caffentzis, 1998). Such innovations in work and management techniques should not be seen in isolation from the technological innovations that accompanied them. The effect of introducing new computer technology, for example, has generally been twofold, to expel surplus labour and to make the remaining workers more flexible and mobile. These various innovations, taken together, imply a different type of worker.

As Harry Cleaver (1992, no pagination) has put it, “such ‘post-Fordist’ approaches to the organization of work have included attempts to relink private industry and public education as a means to relaunch the growth of productivity” and this is done “by harnessing the new abilities of working class subjectivity”. Thus there is a large scale *reskilling* of workers in the post-Fordist era, as “capital grants its labor power a certain fusion of conception and execution” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p.490). In contrast to the Fordist mass worker, for whom conception was always the activity of another, the post-Fordist worker is made into a subject of communication, who, as a member of a team must communicate, think and solve problems as a part of his or her condition of being a worker. So, this worker now obeys a new type of command and becomes a new type of subject in the process, in the service and pursuit of one great good, *productivity*. This has far-reaching implications for the interface between work and education, insofar as the problem for work now becomes one of developing mass intellectuality:

Mass intellect appears not just in production but throughout a whole network of educational and cultural relations. It is present in industrial and service workers, labouring at the dataface: in students keeping pace with technological innovation through ‘life-long learning’; and in the various technocultural literacies on which new markets for electronic and entertainment goods depend.

(Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p.488)

Here we begin to see the grounding of some of the preoccupations of Faure and his colleagues, particularly the true nature of the link between formal and non-formal education. The worker must above all be ‘technologically literate’, an essential component of the mass intellectuality that is referred to above, and this familiarity with technology is not gained entirely in formal education. It is gained largely informally, ‘as cultural capital’, by those who have the opportunity to gain it, through work, through study and through play. The age old dichotomy between work and play is thus partially effaced. If the worker likes surfing the Internet as part of her leisure time, or taking apart electronic gadgets, or playing highly intricate computer games, the better the post-Fordist worker will she be. Technological skills, due to their cognitive component, are transferable skills and this is an important part of making a worker flexible or transferable from one domain of work to another. Note that it was precisely the *lack* of skill on the part of the Fordist worker that made him transferable from one branch of industry to another, due to the very nature of Fordist production techniques, and a worker would typically require only a day’s training on a new job site. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the transferable skills that go with them have provided the

possibility of a new ‘universal worker’, who, being technologically literate, is also virtually job-ready, but in a different way.

Thus when Faure *et al.* highlighted the following problems, already in 1972, and posited lifelong education as their solution, they were clearly at the cutting edge of a problematic that bears down on education all the more heavily now:

Five major population groups present education with especially serious problems from the point of view of the economy and employment. The first two groups comprise young people who have never been to school and who are virtually devoid of any preparation for work, and those who have left school prematurely and who are accordingly hardly better equipped. The situation of the other three groups causes concern on another level. These are young people who have successfully completed regular studies at a more or less high level but find their training ill-adapted to the economy’s needs, adults employed in jobs for which they have not been trained, and professional people whose training no longer meets the requirements of technical progress. The number of individuals in each of the five categories has increased in recent years. This development shows that education is often out of phase with economic trends and the needs of large sectors of society, so that in many cases it is in fact producing more and more ill-adapted people, despite increasing costs. (p.29)

## Lifelong unemployment and its discontents

So far we have considered these developments in a one sided way, as a set of problems to which lifelong education simply provides ‘the answers’. In order not to distort these realities we must also consider their darker side as this has manifested itself since the time when Faure *et al.* were putting forward their proposals. We cannot be content with simplistically positing a happy match between problems of work and educational solutions.

I mentioned earlier that one of the effects of increasing productivity through technological innovation, especially the introduction of ICTs, was to expel workers from work. In many countries today, South Africa not excepted, unemployment is reaching gargantuan proportions, so that it becomes worth considering whether this is not just an effect of innovation, but perhaps also one of its goals. After all, if labour costs are *the* major deduction from profit, and if consequently there are gains to be made by increasing productivity of each worker rather than boosting production through increasing the number of workers, or through politically difficult strategies such as increasing the length of the working week, then we might see in technological innovation a veritable utopia from the point of view of profit: a workplace with hardly any

workers in it.<sup>3</sup> The so-called dark factory, “an entirely automated plant floor in which there is no labor”,<sup>4</sup> and therefore needing no lights, is not unknown to industry.

Since the question of the relationship between productivity and unemployment is a contentious one, the position adopted here requires a little space and some argument supported by empirical studies. There are two main problems here. The first is that productivity in much current discourse is seen as an unalloyed good; it is ‘obviously’ good for an economy, and therefore good for everyone, etc. It is perhaps mainly in the Marxian literature that such an ideological function of this concept has been consistently identified. Cleaver (2000), for example, writes of productivity as a virtual weapon of class struggle aimed against the working class. As is well known, Marx, in his various economic writings, dispensed with the term productivity, in favour of ‘the organic composition of capital’, where the relationship of constant capital (mainly machinery) to variable capital (mainly wages) is altered so that the proportion of the former is increased relative to the latter.

Lest the above paragraph be interpreted as merely ‘Luddite’,<sup>5</sup> I need to mention the second, more substantial, problem connected with productivity. Research into the relationship between productivity and employment tends to be shaped in the same way that much economic research is shaped, that is, as enquiry into developments within *national* economies. My hypothesis here, which is supported by empirical material and which I will elaborate on as much as space will allow me, is that growth of labour productivity, within the actually existing (capitalist) world, is unavoidably linked with greater unemployment and underemployment, and also with ever-greater income disparity. But it is linked in this way on a global scale and not necessarily on a

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<sup>3</sup> It is not intended to suggest that this is a realistic perception. Productivity gains would usually lead to a drop in prices over time, which would rather have the effect of lowering the aggregate rate of profit, not to mention the fact that the increasing numbers of unemployed would not be able to buy the goods produced. But nevertheless the pursuit of productivity remains compelling, due to competition among individual capitals. Andrew Kliman has written extensively on the question of the relationship between productivity and falling rate of profit. See his website: <http://akliman.squarespace.com/writings/> accessed on 16 March 2007.

<sup>4</sup> As defined on IQS Directory, a website for assembly machinery: accessed at <http://www.iqsdirectory.com/assembly-machinery/> on 19 March 2007.

<sup>5</sup> I use this term here in its common, vulgarised sense, where it refers to someone who simply dislikes technological innovation, rather than in the more historically accurate one that is available, for example, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luddite> as accessed on 19 March 2007.

national scale. Insofar as this problem is seen as ineluctable within capitalism as we know it, my argument is critical of contemporary global capitalism, not of technology *per se*.

Studies of the relationship between productivity gains and unemployment in countries such as the United States and Europe do not show very clear patterns. At some points in the history of such countries productivity growth is correlated positively with unemployment, at other times negatively, and sometimes not at all. Therefore the relationship is one around which there is room for debate.<sup>6</sup> But research in South Africa post-1994 tells a different story. By most accounts there has been both growth in labour productivity and in unemployment. And South Africa resembles the global situation in its entirety more than a country like the United States does, the latter being exceptional in many respects. In South Africa there is massive income disparity, one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, and yet it has a very advanced industrial, technological and educational metropolitan culture despite this. It is in these disparities, diversities and inequalities that South Africa reflects the global situation as a whole.

It seems I have an initial hypothesis here which is difficult to prove: that productivity growth, on the one hand, and the growth of both unemployment and underemployment on the other, are linked on a global scale. The difficulty lies in correlating an aggregate global measure of labour productivity with aggregate global measures of unemployment and underemployment. I am not in a position to offer such correlations, but I propose to take South Africa here as a proxy for the global economic system. If we see, as we do, that these measures are positively correlated on a national scale in South Africa then this requires explanation.

According to writers such as Kingdon and Knight (2004) unemployment in the narrower sense (those who are looking for work) may have more than doubled in the decade after 2003, from 13 per cent to 35 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Rodrik (2006) attributes the rise in unemployment to low levels of demand for low-skill labour and the growth in all economic sectors of “skill-biased” technology. Banerjee, Galiani, Levinsohn and Woolard (2006, p.3) make the same point when they say: “The unemployed are becoming, on average, less-skilled and

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<sup>6</sup> See Wakeford (2003).

<sup>7</sup> See also Kingdon and Knight (2005), Rodrik (2006), Banerjee *et al.* (2006) for similar figures.



the gap is widening between their skill level and the skill level of the employed.” However, Rodrik also shows that the sector employing most low-skill labour, namely tradables (including manufacturing), has declined as an economic sector in the period since 1994, this sector showing the highest levels of substitution of capital for labour, partly due to competition from abroad (see also Fryer and Vencatachellum, 2003). Rodrik explicitly attributes the pattern of a rise in output together with a drop in employment to an increase in total-factor productivity.<sup>8</sup>

My further hypothesis then is that competition among national capitals in South Africa, and among South African and foreign capitals, leads both to a quest for productivity gains and, with that, to the shedding of surplus, unprofitable labour as part of a single process. Thus the hypothesis is not so much that productivity causes unemployment (or vice versa), but rather that capitalism in its later phases creates the tendency for both productivity and unemployment to increase within a single process, as part of a shift from an absolute surplus value strategy to a relative surplus value strategy, to put it in Marxian terms (Cleaver, 2000). If wages cannot be kept down, because it is politically too difficult (Rodrik, 2006), machinery must be used to maintain and increase production levels, and, as far as possible, only those workers must be employed who are able to command the skills of problem solving, critical thinking, communication, etc., that are required for effective competition in a globalised, high-tech environment, *without* massive training expenditure on the part of the enterprise. Enter the university, that formerly stuffy old institution that must now be reconfigured for this new purpose. It must rally around national capital and the project of the ‘winning nation’.

I believe that the above explanation is plausible for South Africa, in that it fits the empirical facts and it reasonably answers some questions that, on the face of it, seem fairly difficult. For example, why should a popular regime with a clearly developmental agenda and a strongly national-liberationist orientation be found presiding over a technologically advanced, middle income country, one that moreover shows impressive productivity growth (Wakeford, 2003), and yet be unable to prevent the slide towards greatly increased unemployment and income inequality? But to my way of thinking the question seems to be rather the converse: why a country like the United States, say, does *not* show the same patterns. This is not a question that can be settled here – the present economic digression is already becoming lengthy – but parts of

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<sup>8</sup> For an explanation of total factor productivity and its relationship to labour productivity, see Krugman (2000, pp.27–34).

the answer might be connected with the issues of greater social homogeneity within such countries and their historical competitive advantage in industrialisation. But what must be stressed is that global society is not similarly homogenous, nor, obviously, could it reflect a uniformly competitive advantage in economic development, etc. Thus one should be very careful in taking such countries as realistic normative ideals. The South African experience is well encapsulated in the following from Wakeford (2003, p.4):

. . . given the economy's slow growth performance over the past decade, the rapid rise in productivity (and average real wages) reflects in large part the sharp decline in employment levels. South Africa's productivity performance should not therefore be looked at in isolation of the employment trend, which indicates the job-shedding nature of economic growth in this country over the past 13 years. The decline in employment cannot be fairly blamed on real wages growing in excess of productivity (forcing employers to cut jobs). The reverse is true, i.e. productivity has grown faster than real wages. As a result, labour's share of gross output has been shrinking over the past decade, and has now reached its lowest proportion relative to capital's share in the past 40 years. This trend has been observed in many other developing countries around the world, and reflects an increasing concentration of wealth among owners of capital. This is particularly alarming in the South African case given our high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment.<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps useful at this point to summarise my argument concerning unemployment and precarious employment, as essential characteristics of post-Fordist capitalism, and to show where they differ from certain common views. I explicitly differ with the following three understandings: (a) that productivity growth leads to growth in employment on a world scale because firms are more likely to want to employ these more productive workers; (b) that productivity and unemployment cannot be linked because this would imply that the amount of production stays constant when new machinery is introduced and therefore workers must be laid off; and (c) that productivity is *simply* a weapon of the capitalist class to use against the working class. All three of these views seem to me to ignore in one way or another the realities of capitalist competition.

I have pointed out that there is no empirical evidence to support (a), certainly not in the case of South Africa. That view does not seem to take into account the facts of competition in the sense that one capitalist will try to compete with another by lowering labour costs so as to be able to lower prices. The only way to do that is to raise the organic composition of capital. This strategy will result in layoffs because consumption (even in a situation of 'giveaway prices') has its limits and overproduction obviously cannot be good for profits.

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<sup>9</sup> Motinga and Mohamed (2002) show a very similar pattern of substitution of capital for labour in the case of Namibia.

The apparent naïve implication of (b) that I mention above is sometimes subjected to ridicule. But it is not my point. Capitalist firms are not simply independent operations that are indifferent to one another, so that each one just produces more and more with no reference to its rivals. On the contrary, they actively try to compete, and a firm that boosts its productivity does so in order to put its competitors out of business, which will result in layoffs. My point about the imperative to avoid overproduction applies here too.

My partial disagreement with (c) is based on the fact that capitalists are not like a happy family that is united against the working class. If productivity is a weapon, it is primarily a weapon of one capitalist against another. I would not confuse this with the somewhat separate point about capitalist exploitation of the working class. In fact Marx pointed out in the *Grundrisse* (1973) that raising the organic composition of capital through the introduction of machinery and the application of natural sciences in the direct production process helps to raise the ‘general intellect’ of the worker and of society generally,<sup>10</sup> a point that I am also concerned to support in this article. And it may in one sense be less exploitative, because without this (relative surplus value) strategy the only other options in inter-capitalist competition would be speedup and a lengthening of the working week (absolute surplus value strategy).

But it is linked to unemployment, and chronic divisions within the working class, as is evident from the South African data. It is so because of: competition (both intra-national and international); bankruptcies or closures of the less productive enterprises, leading to layoffs; the limitations of consumption, which are limitations on production (even given a certain degree of elasticity); casualisation and precarious employment; and, ultimately, I would argue, a falling rate of profit, although for reasons of space I do not wish to pursue this last point. I am certainly not arguing that productivity is somehow ‘bad’; I am saying that growth in productivity is inevitable in capitalist competition, and that within this capitalist context (or *contest*) it has some ruinous consequences, as well as profound implications for higher education.

Thus for many a member of the post-Fordist workforce the reality today is likely to be either lifelong unemployment or continuing precariousness (lifelong underemployment). We have here a new normative ideal, but one which is difficult to accept. It is this: that no-one should expect to be

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<sup>10</sup> In the so-called ‘fragment on machines’, p.705 ff.

employed for life as a right, but rather that everyone should accept that the independence and entrepreneurial acumen of the freelance worker are now a *sine qua non* for anyone to be able to work at all. 'Flexibility' does not just mean that one should be able to change from one job to another, as circumstances and inclinations might dictate, but that periods of unemployment, part-time employment and short-term contractual employment, often in tightly recurring cycles, are quite normal and 'as good as it gets' for even the very highly skilled. It is therefore not difficult to agree that most people's experience of work today in metropolitan settings is characterised by "precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility and hierarchy" (Lazzarato, 1994, p.2).

At the same time, in countries such as the United States, there has been a parallel drive to find cheaper labour, by employing more women, immigrants, foreign workers, and even prison labour (Caffentzis, 1998). If one adds to these forms of 'primitive accumulation' also sweatshop labour and other forms of forced labour in both the developed and developing countries, as well as war, plunder and environmental degradation, one has a better idea still of the many-sided nature of the desperate drive for profitability in recent decades.

Let us mention some likely consequences of these developments for a country like South Africa. The flexible, skilled worker described above represents something of an elite amongst the workforce, but an elite that is more and more subjected to the insecurities and anxieties that have been described. As higher education massifies itself, it is increasingly into the ranks of this 'intellectual working class' that university graduates are heading, rather than, as in the past, into the exclusive ranks of senior management, government and the professions.

Then the unskilled worker, who often provides cheap labour for foreign owned industrial enterprises, represents a relocation of the mass worker into the third world, but not a mass worker who can buy himself a new Ford or even support a family on his wage. This is rather a kind of degraded version of the Fordist worker, who is likely to be both poorly paid *and* insecure. Finally, there are the unemployed and unemployable, who represent the growing pool of surplus labour that is not only characteristic of the underdeveloped, marginalised third world, but increasingly so of the overdeveloped first world too, and who represent the category into which almost everyone is afraid of falling nowadays, an anxiety which may itself be 'lifelong' for an individual. Thus the normative ideal of the worker who is virtually guaranteed a 'family

wage' for life corresponds less and less to the lived reality of the global working class.

Such a situation of lifelong anxiety and/or lifelong unemployment cannot but have its discontents and its dissident voices, both within the university and outside of it.

What is the best role for the university to play now? According to banal ideology education is "the best economic policy" and it must play its role in serving the economy by helping to create "a learning society" (Blair, 2005). There are two related ways in which the university is asked to do this. One, as we have seen, is to provide lifelong learning opportunities, which for the intellectual worker has become the price of employability. This imperative for lifelong learning is being combined with another, which relates to intellectual property:

Enabled by changes in intellectual property laws to exercise ownership rights over patents resulting from government funded grants, universities become active players in the merchandising of research results. Amidst this intensifying commercial ethos, the internal operations of academia become steadily more corporatised, with management practices modeled on the private sector.

This rapprochement with academia performs two purposes for capital. First, it enables business to socialise some costs and risks of research, while privatising the benefits of innovations. Second, it subsidises capital's retraining of its post-Fordist labour-force, which is sorted and socialised for the new information economy by increasingly vocational and technically-oriented curricula that stresses skills and proficiencies at the expense of critical analysis and free inquiry.

(Dyer-Witheyford, 2004, p.4)

It is from this quaint perspective of 'critical analysis and free inquiry' that I would now like to view the question of lifelong learning and to begin to provide a definition of the lifelong learner that is worthy of the university intellectual project at this time.

## The lifelong learner

How does one recognize a lifelong learner? How does one become a lifelong learner? Our own National Qualifications Framework, which proclaims itself to be based on the principle of lifelong learning, *a la* Faure, has supplied an answer in the shape of the critical crossfield outcomes. Applying these, one might say that a lifelong learner is one who can:

- Identify and solve problems in which responses display that responsible decisions using critical and creative thinking have been made.
- Work effectively with others as a member of a team, group, organisation, community.
- Organise and manage oneself and one's activities responsibly and effectively
- Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information
- Communicate effectively using visual, mathematical and/or language skills in the modes of oral and/or written presentation
- Use science and technology effectively and critically, showing responsibility towards the environment and health of others
- Demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.<sup>11</sup>

The ingenuity in these outcomes is that they have been carefully developed, internationally, so as to satisfy almost anyone who is interpreting them from almost any perspective, anywhere. They are truly global. As the goals of an education system it is very difficult to disagree with any of them or indeed to improve upon them. And anyone who exhibits these outcomes is surely on the road to becoming a lifelong learner. In fact one is tempted to say that even one of them would be enough to define a lifelong learner. If you can identify problems, solve them, be responsible, make decisions, think critically and think creatively, all of which are mentioned already in the first outcome, you surely can go on to learn throughout the rest of your life with minimal dependence on others.

If there seems something wrong in all this it is surely not because these outcomes have been poorly written or that they are in any way unworthy; it is rather that they seem so impossibly 'generic' as to cover any of the purposes of education – and at any level – that have ever been conceived, yet without any practical underpinnings being specified. Thus they cannot be used to specify the nature of the education system that might best support them, let alone the nature of the specific institution that might support them.

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<sup>11</sup> SAQA Bulletin Vol. 1, No. 1 (1997), accessed at <http://www.saqa.org.za/> on 22 March 2007.

Yet I would like to explain briefly why I see something useful in this from the point of view of an emancipatory lifelong learning. Let us take the ambiguity in the term ‘critical thinking’ as a starting point, an ambiguity that I think is intentional. Let us imagine two institutions and assume that each institution has been left free to define the meaning of this term for itself. Let us call the first institution ‘the technical university’ and the second institution ‘the liberal arts college’. They arrive at the following definitions of critical thinking: the technical university defines it as ‘the capacity for original thought in the application of knowledge to problems in industry and commerce’; the liberal arts college defines it as ‘the capacity to reflect on and to question the value and validity of all received knowledge in the pursuit of the good life’. When one spells out these interpretations like this the partiality of each becomes glaringly apparent. While the two might both be termed ‘critical’, the first is entirely devoid of anything that can really merit the name of critique, while the second is virtually all critique and no practical application. This is perhaps why institutions generally would not make an explicit choice between them, with the exception of very specialised institutions, and why these different meanings are not often spelled out in this very explicit way.

Within universities such differing interpretations tend to be made rather according to the interests of individuals, or perhaps departments, and the term ‘critical thinking’ then acts as a kind of overarching category announcing that everyone is engaged in this same good thing, even though they are engaged in practically very different things. The fact is that the two interpretations given correspond to two poles on a continuum, the first of which concerns itself with the pursuit of self-interest within an existing arrangement of society, assuming that it is good, or that it must be good, and the second of which questions, perhaps in a somewhat detached and quietist manner, whether it is good. Under certain conditions these can even be antithetical to each other, in that acting within a given arrangement of society, whether ‘critically’ or not, may be done in such a way as to make any deeper questioning of it impossible.

Many people may find their working lives to be a drama that is defined precisely by the tension between these opposites; this can apply to teachers, scientists, lawyers, doctors, administrators, artists or housewives alike. The ideal world that exists in one’s values or in one’s imagination is stubbornly opposed by the real world to which one must pragmatically, and sometimes very uncomfortably, adapt. I therefore propose that we see the lifelong learner as one who can and does learn about managing the tension between the two general modes of critical thinking that have been described. There may be many reasons for wanting to adopt such a starting point. I will mention one very good one.

If the analysis regarding work and employment that was provided above is fundamentally true, then it is clear that solving problems within industry and commerce means that one is engaged in precisely the kind of problem solving activity that has as its result, if not as its explicit goal, the creation of greater unemployment and inequality. If this tendency is still doubted, then let us reflect on this complex question: What proportion of humanity today is actively engaged in the system that produces goods for the world market, and what proportion of humanity consumes the goods that are produced for that market?

This is of course an immense question, precisely the sort that one would like each educated human being to grapple with if one is concerned with the future wellbeing of humanity. A short answer may well be that there is a considerable proportion today who are entirely marginal to the system of commodity production and who are therefore incapable of consuming its goods, and therefore whose very base existence is precarious, since the system of commodity production does not allow other production systems to lie alongside it. Mike Davis (2004) has alerted us to the coming megacities of thirty million or more, in which the majority of humanity will live, of whom a very large proportion, perhaps already one billion, will have no place in the formal economy. Whether such cities will be sustainable biologically, ecologically and economically is unknown. Thus while the education system must help people to deal with their immediate needs it is reasonable to propose that it also harness as much of the mass intellect as possible, to the end of creating a more sustainable form of society, rather than increasing productivity for the purpose of ruinous capitalist competition.

So if a lifelong learner is one who is practical and pragmatic, but embracing also a longer view of things, then this means that he or she must be able to grapple with the immediate challenges of cognitive capitalism, as the price of employment, and also be able to become part of a longer term transformative critique. Let me stress the interdisciplinary nature of this project; it means bringing into being new connections and relationships, which perhaps exist already in an implicit form in the technology and the intellectual life of the day:

Some of these connections and relationships include: the establishment of new planetary indices of well-being beyond monetised measurement; investigation of new capacities for democratic social planning provided by information technologies; the development of systems of income allocation and social validation outside of obligatory waged labour; the emergence of new models of peer to peer and open-source communication systems; the critique of dominant paradigms of political economy in the light of ecological and feminist knowledges; the refinement of doctrines of global 'public goods' and of concepts of global



citizenship; and the formation of aesthetics and imaginaries adequate to the scope of species-being.

(Dyer-Witthford, 2004, pp.12–13)

When Muller (2000, 2001, 2003) and others complain about the imperatives for interdisciplinary teaching and research that proceed from outside the academy, there appears to be an abiding assumption that ‘sacred’ disciplines are in danger of being superseded by curricula consisting of an amorphous bricolage of disciplinary bits and pieces, none of which advance the learner beyond a basic level of conceptual understanding. I think that this type of warning has been overstated and offered in such a way as to obscure some real issues that have been highlighted in this article (see also Wood, 2005). I do not wish to argue that being thoroughly steeped in a discipline is not a good way, or even the best way, to develop one’s cognitive abilities, but I do suggest that every human being should be able to make the kinds of connections and work on the sorts of relationships that are mentioned in the Dyer-Witthford quotation above. To take the issue of climate change and environmental degradation as an example: This problem simply *cannot* be understood within the conceptual framework of any one discipline. It cannot be understood without being able to think critically through issues of industrialisation, consumption, the use of fossil fuels, lifestyles, public policies, and so forth. Rather than abolish the disciplines, none of which can encompass this problem area on its own, one would want, in addition to them, a way of learning that enables a broader critical consciousness of self, community and world.<sup>12</sup>

The above propositions suggest that academic disciplines cannot be like straitjackets. One may have good reason to switch learning activities during one’s life to other fields of learning. Therefore the way a discipline is taught and learned should be such that it makes it easier rather than more difficult to learn other modes of thought. It may ultimately imply that each learner needs to be assisted in developing a larger knowledge framework that incorporates, at least potentially, all of the available branches of knowledge. It may also be that this is what Faure *et al.* imply when they say regarding “the principle of self education, of self-learning”, that:

With a few exceptions, this does not arise from the individual’s spontaneous development. Learning to learn is not just another slogan. It denotes a specific pedagogic approach that teachers must themselves master if they want to be able to pass it on to others. (p.209)

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<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Durkheimian proposition, supported uncritically by Muller (2000, p.79), that “polymathy. . . breeds a smug and false sense of self-sufficiency” and that dependence on experts promotes “civic-minded virtue” is not supported here. My argument for interdisciplinarity supports the converse notion, that a society can only be democratic to the extent that *each* citizen can cognise social problems for him or her *self*.

In this statement we see the convergence between the notion of lifelong learning and that of academic development. It is a moot point as to whether this “specific pedagogic approach” has ever been fully mastered anywhere, but that is not a debate that can be concluded here. It is sufficient to say that any institution that is serious about this matter must be prepared to evaluate what has been achieved through academic development strategies, and to bring various branches of knowledge to bear on the problem of achieving more than that in the future. In other words academic development cannot be a discipline, yet it must be intellectually robust.

## Redefining the academic development project

It may be that under certain circumstances at certain points in the past the education system has produced self-directed learners who have been able to continue learning throughout their lives, and that many of these have succeeded in mastering various branches of knowledge. This might have come about through extraordinary convergences of good public education with an exceptional store of private cultural capital. What is doubtful – and here I am in full agreement with Faure *et al.* – is the idea that this is in any way common within the system of mass education, including mass higher education, where many of the learners come from poor backgrounds with little of the cultural capital that really counts for anything within the education-work system.

Given such shortcomings in the higher education system as have been mentioned, let us try to enumerate some of the likely tasks for the academic development project today:

1. Making up for apartheid education and racial inequality. This is the most well known task of all and for some it is almost synonymous with academic development. In South African higher education this began with the notion of ‘academic support’ in the early 1980s, with the idea that black students were ill-adapted to universities and needed extra provision. From there it was a simple ‘flip-flop’ to saying the opposite, that it was the universities that were ill-adapted to their newer students and needed to be changed. Today we should probably not choose between these alternatives, but rather consider the truths that may be contained in both positions. Certainly there is a need for extra provision in the case of particular students, and certainly universities need to be adapted to their broad student bodies, especially in the light of the newer emerging purposes of higher education that I have mentioned.

2. Determining how the curriculum and pedagogy can contribute to a redirection of subjectivities towards grasping the changing nature of work, its requirements and its consequences. The research problems here are enormous; among them must be included: an understanding of the relationship between disciplinary and generic elements in a curriculum and how each may be strengthened without weakening the others; what sorts of knowledge, both disciplinary and generic, really contribute to survival in the job market; how one incorporates social critique into programmes that have traditionally excluded it (e.g. how a biotechnologist or physicist should become aware of economic, ecological and gender issues, etc); the question of what makes knowledge socially useful and therefore definitive of 'graduateness'.
3. Answering the empirical questions: e.g. to what extent our current graduates are turning out to be lifelong learners (this would involve not only constructing measurement instruments, but also first determining what sorts of indicators or criteria could tell us that); exactly what sorts of incoming students need foundational provision, and what this provision should consist of; to what extent traditional methods of university instruction need to be replaced by newer methods and why; the relationship between factual knowledge and conceptual knowledge in the various fields; the relationship between student interests and the requirements of their studies.
4. Developing the relationship between students and the institution. I have suggested elsewhere (Wood, 2005) that the best model for this relationship in the present circumstances may be that of the social contract. In any case there must be a shared understanding of what is *right* in the triangular relationship between university, students and the world of work. Such an understanding must be dynamic and open to renegotiation. A crucial moment in achieving such an understanding, for example, is that of student orientation; this is not always thought of as an academic development opportunity as it should be.

## Conclusions

I have argued that the imperatives for developing genuine lifelong learners are real and that they are profoundly implicated in the whole situation of contemporary education and its relationship to work. The paper has also raised some doubts as to whether universities are able to meet this challenge without

some radical rethinking of the nature of an academic degree and what it is meant to achieve today. And I have argued for an expanded notion of academic development that takes on board such large questions.

The latter cannot be achieved if academic development is conceived, as it very often is, as a purely junior form of academic work, not requiring ‘real’ research, hardly different in fact from the sort of nurturing that the weak and infirm in society require as a matter of ‘special needs’ (with all the gender-based disrespect that goes with such a notion). These attitudes are themselves the product of ideologies and attitudes associated with different periods in the history of universities. With traditionalism comes the idea of ‘normal’ (elite) university education that was common some fifty to a hundred years ago; with the newer corporatisation of the university come macho ideas of ‘big science’ (and big money) that makes any sort of social critique seem like a frivolous luxury; and with academic development have come practitioners who have unfortunately often failed to demonstrate that their own field embodies an intellectual competence comparable to traditional culture critique or big science, and who have consequently ghettoised themselves in a mediocre comfort zone.

One of the problems to be considered here is the sorts of competence that need to be found within an institution’s academic development team. Certainly the ability to enquire deeply into processes of cognition and their socio-cultural conditions must be a part of this overall competence. There must also be an element of academic seniority to create sufficient respect.

I have tried to show that some of the gravest issues of our time are implicated in the notions of lifelong learning and academic development, which is why I have linked them in my title with something that has been traditionally seen as rather lofty and philosophical, namely the purposes of education, rather than, as is more customary, with rather restricted practical matters. A good university today should have people who are researching lifelong learning, academic development and the purposes of education from the perspectives of multiple disciplines, and who are sharing their findings with the university, as well as the wider academic community, through seminars and publications on a regular basis. The academic today has no choice but to mediate the relationship between the student and a rapidly changing world of work, and doing this well requires new knowledges and new practices.

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