

Lifelong Learning Book Series

Reconnection

Countering Social Exclusion through Situated Learning

Karen Evans and Beatrix Niemeyer (Eds.)

Kluwer Academic Publishers

RECONNECTION

Lifelong Learning Book Series

VOLUME 2

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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.

The volumes in this international Series are multi-disciplinary in orientation, polymathic in origin, range and reach, and variegated in range and complexity. They are written by researchers, professionals and practitioners working widely across the international arena in lifelong learning and are orientated towards policy improvement and educational betterment throughout the life cycle.

Reconnection

Countering Social Exclusion through Situated Learning

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INTRODUCTION

This book is based on the work of a European partnership, whose members came together from Belgium England Finland Germany Portugal and Greece with the support of funding from the EU Socrates Programme.

Our goal was to work collaboratively to generate new ways of thinking about the situation of people aged between 14 and 25 who are at risk of (or experiencing) social exclusion, set in the context of a unique international analysis of policies, contexts and perspectives on the problems of social exclusion in Europe and the challenges of promoting lifelong learning among those who have rejected it early in life. We set out to examine programmes which help people to RE-ENTER pathways of education and training, but ended with approaches which are better characterised by their ability to RECONNECT people, not only to opportunities in the social structures but also to each other and to their communities We have developed new models and guidelines based on analysis of the best of European practice using the distinctive approaches of 'situated learning'. By an iterative and collaborative method of working, we have arrived at the concept and approaches of Learning Communities Centred on Practice (LCPs), which lie at the heart of this volume.

The outcomes of the partners' three years of work include:

- analyses of the situation of young people growing up in the changing and contrasting socio-economic environments of England, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Portugal and Greece and the policies which are attempting to address problems of exclusion
- a set of criteria according to which young people are considered, in each of the countries, to be inadequately prepared for further education and training (VET), lifelong learning and the labour market
- a critical review of a collection of examples representing good practice in application and development of the concepts of 'situated learning in improving the situation of young adults and their prospects as lifelong learners
- a new and enriched set of concepts and ideas concerning *Learning Communities Centred on Practice* which can be used by developers of learning programmes
- recommendations for policy and decision-makers in order to support them in improving the effectiveness of the measures being used and being developed for the future.

The book is built around these outcomes, which we have discussed with international audiences in and through the European Conference on Educational Research as well as through specifically organised national and international seminars.

In the course of this research, we learnt much about the possibilities and limits of the ideas and practices of situated learning, action centred learning and communities of practice in the context of the disadvantaged learner. We believe our new concept of Learning Communities Centred on Practice enables us to capture the important features of both the individual *and the* societal part of integration processes. It aims to integrate social and vocational learning through an holistic view on the learners personality and allows the necessary social space, where participation can be lived and experienced as competence.

We have many good memories of our experience of working together as an international partnership.. We met on at least five occasions in international workshops, combining these with visits to innovative forms of provision. We offer our grateful thanks to the many trainers organisers and young people in the 6 countries who welcomed us and acted as key informants for our work. Without the freely allowed access to their field of experience many of our ideas could not have been developed, without their critical discussions these ideas would not have been tested for their practical relevance.

Different European VET systems shape different approaches to reconnection, while individual experience of integration problems seems to be commonly shared. In our debates we very often have been stressing the differences between our systems, approaches, culture and history, while on the individual level similarities seemed to dominate.

Our hope for the book is that it will stimulate new ideas, in ways which interlink theory and practice. We wanted to contribute to the mutual development of expertise of all professionals concerned, by enhancing the sharing of competences. This volume aims to contribute to the establishment of a set of methodologies and the development of related theories. It should enrich the ways of thinking about reconnection of researchers and practitioners, of politicians, planners and all professionals holding the responsibility for integration strategies. These are the people we hope will read it, use it, critique it and find it helpful in advancing their own ideas.

Karen Evans and Beatrix Niemeyer
March 2004

EDITORIAL BY SERIES EDITORS

This volume is the second volume in the new Kluwer series entitled *Lifelong Learning Book Series*. This new series flows on from the symposium ***International Handbook of Lifelong Learning***, which we jointly edited with Yukiko Sawano and Michael Hatton, and which was published by Kluwer Academic Publishers in 2001. With the *Lifelong Learning Book Series* we aim to keep scholars and professionals informed about and abreast of current developments and to advance research and scholarship in the field. Our further aims are 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.

The first volume in the series, Richard Bagnall's book *Cautionary Tales in the Ethics of Lifelong Learning Policy and Management*, provides a critique of contemporary trends in lifelong learning policy and management. It focuses attention on 21 trends, each represented by a fable that is drawn from the experience of a stake-holder.

This second volume in the series, an edited collection by Karen Evans and Beatrix Niemeyer, arises from the work of a European partnership and includes the work of authors from Belgium, England, Finland, Germany, Portugal and Greece. The aim of the text is to identify new ways of thinking about the situation of people aged between fourteen and twenty-five, who are at risk of or are currently experiencing social exclusion as a result of limited access to lifelong learning opportunities.

The authors analyze those factors that prevent young people in Europe from entering systems of post-compulsory education and training, and that militate against their continuing in lifelong learning. The authors identify a number of programs, activities and experiences that assist people to embark upon or re-enter a range of pathways in lifelong learning. These in turn will enhance their ability to make new or further connections, not only to other opportunities in society but also with each other and with their communities. Arising out of their co-operative endeavours the authors arrive at the concept of learning communities centered on practice. This is a new notion designed to integrate social and vocational learning by means of applying a holistic view of learners and their social space, in which participation in learning can be lived and experienced, and requisite and appropriate capacities and competences be developed.

We should like to highlight what we regard as the principal achievements of this book. It provides for its readers:

- analyses of the situation of young people growing up in the changing and contrasting socio-economic environments of western European countries;
- an illumination and exposure of some strengths and weaknesses of policies intended to address problems of exclusion;
- a new and enriched set of concepts and ideas concerning *Learning Communities Centred on Practice* (LCPs) developed with the intention of

capturing the important features of both the individual and the societal parts of the 're-inclusion' process;

- a critical analysis of the feasibility of social inclusion processes in which the unfavorable overall socio-economic conditions (including the weaknesses of existing VET structures and reduced employment opportunities) are considered;
- a discussion of the effect of the increasing move towards globalisation, flexibility, individualisation and the dilution of the concept of work itself;
- recommendations concerning 'framework conditions' as well as 'good practices'. These aim to support opinion formers and policy-makers in improving the effectiveness of the measures being used and being developed for the future.

We are very pleased to present the publication of this second volume in the *Kluwer Lifelong Learning Book Series*. We are sure that this volume will provide the wide range of constituencies working in the domain of lifelong learning with a rich range of new materials for their consideration and further investigation. We believe that it will encourage their continuing critical thinking, research and development, academic and scholarly production and individual, institutional and professional progress.

18 May 2004

David Aspin and Judith Chapman
Editors of the series

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RE-ENTER AND RECONNECT - BUT WHOSE PROBLEM IS IT?

1. INTRODUCTION

What prevents young people in Europe from entering systems of vocational education and training? What prevents them from going on in VET? What makes them drop out? These were starting questions for our European partnership. In some respects they are not new questions - entry to and drop out from post-school systems of education and training have been policy and practice preoccupations since the 1980s. The questions have a new intensity in the first decade of the 2000s. They are linked with identification of 'social exclusion' as a real and present danger, and recognition of the importance of skills as 'protection' against it:

'people without skills are five times more likely to become unemployed than those with higher educational level qualifications; in the end employment goes to the employable'

(Commission on Social Justice, 1993, p. 175)

OECD documents emphasise the risks (and threats) of being among the 'knowledge poor':

'For those who have successful experience of education, and who see themselves as capable learners, continuing learning is an enriching experience, which increases their sense of control over their own lives and their society. For those who are excluded from this process or choose not to participate, the generalisation of lifelong learning may only have the effect of increasing their isolation from the world of the knowledge rich.'

(OECD 1997, p.101)

In all European countries there is a growing number of young persons at the school leaving age and older, who are at risk of losing contact with the educational system, which is supposed gradually to lead them from school to a long term paid occupation through planned measures of vocational education and training. They consequently face reduced chances in the labour market and are at higher risk of dropping out of the social 'mainstream' in their respective societies. Individual risks and personal disadvantages are manifested in difficulties in finding a job or apprenticeship placement on the 'normal' way, but it is impossible to draw up a list of fixed and lasting individual criteria. Personal characteristics, gender, intellectual abilities, interests, school career together with social and environmental factors, financial, social and cultural resources and the economic structure of the area in which a person lives in are all factors influencing the process of transition from school to the adult world of gainful employment.

The questions about 'barriers to participation in VET' therefore need to be set in the context of a much wider analysis of the position of young adults in changing social landscapes.

2. YOUNG ADULTS –THE CHANGING SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

In all European countries, young adults are experiencing uncertain status and are dependent upon state and parental support for longer periods than would have been the case a generation ago. Faced with changing opportunity structures, people have to find their own ways of reconciling personal aspirations with available opportunities and their own values in the domains of education, consumption, politics, work and family life. Achievement and recognition of adult status comes at different times to different spheres of life.

Social changes in the inter-related domains of work, education, family and community all affect transition behaviours, which themselves reflect personal identities and aspirations as well as the opportunity structures with which young adults are faced. The social dynamics against which policies and programmes are assessed have to include growing individualisation of the life course. (Evans et al, 2000, Dwyer and Wyn, 2002)

In the work arena, transitions to worker status are defined by institutionalised rules concerning recognised qualifications and credentials. Successful negotiation of these is heavily influenced by cultural and social 'capital', the resources which come from family background and social networks and are important in access to information, advice, social, financial and career support. Young adults bring different transition behaviours to life situations, and success in negotiating these structures and networks can bring stability or instability to the life course. For those who are unsuccessful in gaining entry to jobs, long term unemployment cuts young adults off from the opportunities of the market, from access to work-based qualification systems and from the exercise of citizenship in any significant sense (Evans and Heinz, 1994). Even successful entry to the labour market can bring another set of limitations and instabilities. Early work entry can create premature foreclosure of options and stereotyped work identities. In England in the 1950s workplaces were described in the Crowther Report (Ministry of Education, 1959) as deadening to the minds of young school leavers. Lifelong learning policies of the late 1990s now talk of learning organisations. These are claimed to provide the model for the future, providing new opportunities for democratic access to knowledge. But only a small minority of enterprises match up to the model, while for those in the increasing ranks of casualised labour, training in narrowly-based competences is unlikely to be of any use over time. Members of casualised pools of labour kept in on-going insecurity and instability are also unlikely to be able to engage in full participation in society.

How did the changing employment situations of the late 20th century affect young people's attitudes to work? For some time, there was a version of the 'moral panic' over the effects of unemployment of young people's motivations to work. Although Britain was at that time the 'unemployment centre' of Europe, these fears extended widely across Europe as youth unemployment increased everywhere with

fears that a generation would be raised lacking the 'work-ethic'. In fact, the decline of employment opportunities for young people 'tightened the bonds' between education and employment in a host of ways. The expansion of post-compulsory education has produced new sets of structures and experiences between the end of the compulsory phase of schooling and first entry to the labour market, at ages up to the mid-twenties.

Families can impede or support the transitions of early adulthood. For many young adults the experience of physical separation from the family for extended periods may result in improved understanding and appreciation and is part of the process of negotiating independence, as Evans et al (2001) have shown. For others, escape from the parental home is seen as the only way to achieve a sense of self and to exercise choices, however restricted these may in reality be. For some young adults thrown back into involuntary dependence on family through welfare policies, prospects for achievement of independence and citizenship may be impaired. It can be argued further that it should be a basic social right not to 'have to rely' on their family because alternatives do not exist (Finch, 1996).

In the context of social changes and individualised transitions, the parental role becomes even more one of support rather than guidance. Few parents have experience of the options facing their children because of the pace of change in all aspects of work and education. Policies in many parts of Europe have progressively increased financial dependence of young people on their parents as access to unemployment benefit have been removed and training rates have assumed parental support. The inter-connections between the three main transitions (or 'careers') of the youth phase become significant here, as Coles (1996) has argued:

- education, training and labour market careers (from schooling into post-school education and training and jobs
- domestic careers (from families of origin to families of destination)
- housing careers (from living dependent on families to living independently of them).

Increasingly these transitions are non-linear. They involve a range of temporary and transitional statuses, and experiences in one domain can fundamentally change or disrupt passages in the others. Many factors can combine to marginalise and exclude young people. While those without skills are most at risk, their 'social capital' is also a very significant factor. Those without skills but high social capital are helped and supported through transitions in ways which are not available to those lacking such capital. Previous research (Evans and Heinz 1994; Evans et al 2000) has also shown that the 'active behaviours' promoted for young people can be important in finding new possibilities for young people who are most vulnerable, while those in the most advantaged trajectories are often carried into jobs in the primary segments of the labour market almost without regard to their specific behaviours.