

Realising the age of lifelong learning:

higher education calls for the on-going capture and valuing of non-formal and informal learning

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Abstract

Higher education must take a united approach to activating the lifelong learning mindset of all individuals in society. By calling for individuals to identify and name learning gained experientially in the workplace, or in community settings, higher education providers will normalise the on-going capture of knowledge, skills and competencies. This mindset is valuable in a time of economic uncertainty. Valuing learning ties to the preparation of material for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) should the individual's knowledge be comparable with a particular programme or module. With this approach it is possible to capture significant learning events as they occur and claim the learning in a reflective, meaningful way.

Cork city's Lifelong Learning Festival provided the forum for Cork Institute of Technology and the Cork Adult Guidance Service to explore the capturing of non-formal and informal learning through the creation of individual eportfolios. Workshops were provided to community-based groups with the purpose of activating the individual's lifelong learning mindset.

Discussions held after the workshops capture insights and opinions regarding making experiential learning visible. The workshop organisers conclude that in order to realise the full potential of RPL it is worth promoting the step before entering the learning system, namely the capturing and valuing of all learning as it arises and maintaining this on an eportfolio.

Keywords: valuing learning; eportfolio; informal learning; non-formal learning.

1. Introduction

Higher education must promote a message of valuing learning to employers and to local community-based groups. In promoting this message we are asking society to be aware of learning gained in life and to document these competencies on an on-going basis.

1.1 Context within which this research resides

Significant changes in how we live and work have resulted in our returning to learning many times over a lifetime through further education or continuing professional development. There has been a shift in mindset as to where learning happens, from that of the traditional classroom-based model to one where learning occurs in many modes, including formal, non-formal and informal learning. Indeed, learning is now considered to be a lifelong and life-wide activity that occurs in many settings and for many purposes (European Commission, 2010).

Lifelong learning has become significant in the past forty years. The original UNESCO Report in 1972 was followed with another in 1996 entitled "*Learning: The Treasure Within*," where the vision of a knowledge-driven society underpinned with learning opportunities throughout life was outlined.

The intention was to support our ability to adapt to change in the workplace and to encourage active participation in society (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema, & Champion-Ward, 1972; Delors 1996). These reports were followed with others in 2001 and 2009 and have been further supported with the formation of the *UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning* (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001; UNESCO 2009a). Currently UNESCO maintains a programme area called *Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* linking Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) with lifelong learning. The recent report entitled '*UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*' was published as a result of the 2009 Belem Framework for Action arising from the 6th International Conference on Adult Education in Brazil (UNESCO, 2009b).

However, despite significant policy developments, 2010 saw the *European University Association* report that lifelong learning is still seen as a being outside normal education provision. The Association called for higher education providers and national authorities to implement policies to promote the lifelong learning agenda and to allow "*accessible, flexible and transparent student-centered learning.*" An increasing number of providers are rising to the "*challenge of attracting and teaching a more diversified student body*" and are implementing policies to support this (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). To use Jarvis' definition, lifelong learning is a process that happens over time, involving the whole person, their mind, body and behavior, where they transform information and combine this with their prior experiential learning to bring about a "*more experienced person*" (Jarvis, 2006).

As a priority policy area for Europe, lifelong learning is defined as:

...all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an on-going basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic social and/or employment related perspective. (European Commission, 2000).

Subsequent European policy developments promoting lifelong learning include the *ET2020 Strategic Framework for European Co-operating in Education and Training* (European Commission, 2011a). Within this framework, it is significant that the European Commission has combined its education and training initiatives under a single entity, *The Lifelong Learning Programme*, with four sub-programmes: Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig (European Commission, 2012). The programme supports the modernisation of European education and training programmes, providing tools and information to both the citizens of Europe and to those providing the education and training (European Commission, 2011b).

Interestingly, in 2008 the European Commission set out the *European Framework of Key Competencies* which supports policy makers by articulating eight key competencies needed by people, namely:

- *Communication in the mother tongue,*
- *Communication in foreign languages,*
- *Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology,*
- *Digital competence*
- *Learning to learn*
- *Social and civic competences*
- *Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship*
- *Cultural awareness and expression* (European Commission, 2008)

In 2010, CEDEFOP, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, published a *European Lifelong Learning Indicator (ELLI)* documenting indicators for lifelong and life-wide learning based on the UNESCO framework where learning is categorised as: learning to know (formal learning), learning to do (vocational learning), learning to be (personal development), and learning to live together (for social cohesion). The report presents a tangible tool to measure a country's progress implementing lifelong learning as well as highlighting the outcomes and benefits of learning (Hoskins, Cartwright, & Schoof, 2010).

In 2007, Patrick Werquin suggested mechanisms to promote lifelong learning, including RPL and the use of learning outcomes. He suggested linking education and work as an appropriate policy response to support lifelong learning (Werquin, 2007).

A key theme in the lifelong learning movement is that learning is *valuable* regardless of how or where it is gained. All learning is valuable: past (prior), present, and all future learning opportunities. UNESCO first introduced the terms '*learning society*' and '*valuing learning*' in 1972 saying that learning must involve all of a person's life and all of society (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema, Champion-Ward, *et al.*, 1972).

The Memorandum on Lifelong Learning included valuing learning as one of its key components with the aim of promoting quality systems for Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) (European Commission, 2000). Valuing learning can encourage the individual to access learning opportunities throughout life, depending on their needs. Valuing of prior learning (formal, non-formal and informal learning) is a key principle underpinning lifelong learning strategies. CEDEFOP defines the valuation of prior learning as:

The process of promoting participation in, and outcomes of (formal or non-formal) learning, in order to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning. (CEDEFOP, 2011).

To cite Duvekot, valuing learning is '*activating*' or empowering the learner (Duvekot, 2010).

1.2 Introducing the Research

Cork Institute of Technology and Cork Adult Guidance Service delivered a joint event for Cork City's Lifelong Learning Festival 2013. The occasion allowed the sharing of stories amongst adult returners to higher education including the benefits of actively maintaining a digital archive of significant learning events as they unfold (O'Leary, 2013). On return to formal education personal competencies can take on a new significance when they complement a particular field of learning (CEDEFOP, 2009; NQAI, 2005; Werquin 2010).

2. Method

An action research methodology allowed an exploration of the step before RPL, where the individual is prompted by the higher education provider to actively maintain an archive of knowledge, skills and competences as a pro-active habit. Action research allowed for a process of acting and observing, reflecting and amending in an on-going fashion until a satisfactory outcome was achieved (Cook, 1998).

The research question

Should higher education promote a message of Valuing Learning in order to create an environment where non-formal and informal learning is captured by the individual ?

This question focuses on the step before RPL where the learner maintains an active repository of their knowledge, skills and competences as they go through life in a reflective, meaningful way. RPL refers to a process where learning is given a value (NQAI, 2005). This can be in the form of credits for modules on programmes, for advanced entry, or for non-standard admissions on to a programme. The individual who already maintains a picture of how they work and adapt to key situations, has a distinct advantage in preparing an RPL case should their learning be relevant to any programme of study on return to education.

Taking an action research approach allowed for a sequence that incorporated four cycles to plan, act, observe and reflect. The first cycle delivered a joint Lifelong Learning event for Cork Adult Guidance Service and Cork Institute of Technology. This was followed with a second action research cycle to deliver workshops in community settings to demonstrate the uncovering of tacit knowledge and promote a valuing learning message. *Google sites* was used to host the eportfolios. This is a free system and was used as individuals are familiar with Google. The third and final research cycle

allowed for analysis of data captured in discussions held after the eportfolio workshops. The resulting discussion and conclusions are based on that data.

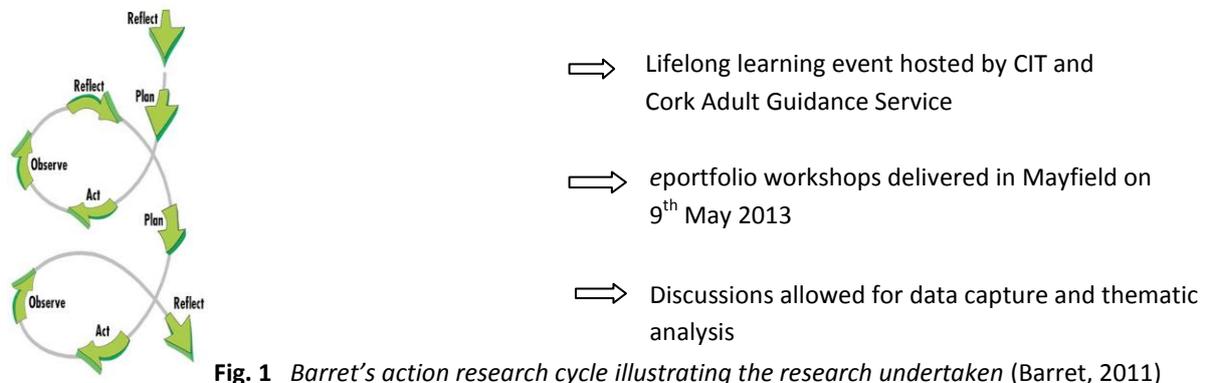


Fig. 1 Barret's action research cycle illustrating the research undertaken (Barret, 2011)

The workshops were delivered on 9th May 2013, in Ardbhaile Community Centre, Mayfield, Cork. The group was introduced to eportfolios and given a general overview of their use. Each individual then created and structured an eportfolio for their particular needs. The group discussed what might be included on their space and took the opportunity to share ideas and experiences as to how they might illustrate their learning. The range and diversity of non-formal and informal learning was apparent to all when thoughts were shared. The workshop generated a discussion on the documentation of non-formal and informal learning and the benefits of “*documenting as you go*” through life.

3. Results

Eportfolios were prepared by each participant. In building the eportfolio, candidates reviewed previous experiences, sifted through key learning events and considered what to include. The portfolio environment involved selecting and organising items or products from messy real-life situations and presenting how they are relevant or meaningful to a particular situation. This very act promotes reflection. Tasks that demand putting order on thoughts, and those that require judgement actually promote reflective thought (Moon 1999; Zubizarreta, 2009). Each individual had her/his own ideas as to what should be included and how it should be presented on the eportfolio. In general, the eportfolios were structured to reflect particular strengths and abilities and general areas of interest which they could easily document. Fig. 2 presents an example of the structure of an eportfolio.



Fig. 2 Example of e portfolio structure

The second aspect to the workshop was the discussion which was generated as a result of creating the eportfolio. The researcher took the opportunity to impart the importance of maintaining the e portfolio over time, to see it as a safe space, or friendly ally, where significant learning can be described and claimed. Reviewing the contents within the eportfolio should raise an awareness of valuable life lessons and possible opportunities arising from these.

Participants reported that creating the eportfolio was a worthwhile skill to have mastered, and one that would be useful in the future. They noted that eportfolios were challenging to prepare, but that there were benefits to having created a personal space “*by me, about me.*” The discussion indicated an openness to using the *Google sites* system. Discussions concluded by saying eportfolios were a significant tool to activate the learner in managing their competencies.

4. Discussion

4.1 We must value what we know already

We compete on the basis of knowledge, both as individuals and in the workplace. Increasingly, we will have many roles and responsibilities over a lifetime. There must be a cultural shift to allow the ethos of lifelong learning to emerge, in that possibly from a young age, the learner should have the ultimate say as to their learning journey. This shift in power from the education system to the individual will realize the true learning society (Duvekot *et al*, 2007; Duvekot 2009). Nurturing the ability to articulate this knowledge is central to functioning effectively in 2015. Developing a habit of documenting what we know is essential. Knowledge is ever changing and mobile. Regularly tracking how we work and adapt to key situations in our lives must become a regular habit (Fenwick, 2004). It is to culture a mindset akin to that of the reflective practitioner (Lyons, 2010).

There is an opportunity now for higher education to promote a valuing learning message to society, to document non-formal and informal learning (Duvekot, 2010). Imparting this message would

encourage learners to archive their learning over time. The onus is on the individual to gather a learning portfolio or reflective journal over a lifetime in a formative way and to build a catalogue of knowledge, skills and competencies. The frameworks are in place now and RPL is a reality. However higher education providers must consider how to encourage the individual to take ownership of their own individual learning path (Hunt, 2011).

All aspects of society have a role to play in promoting the valuing learning mindset (see Fig. 3). From a young age, children can be introduced to the concept of capturing a picture of what they know about. This will promote confidence and a sense of well-being as well as preparing them for a life of reflective practice. The workplace can support staff to build and maintain a portfolio of their workplace competencies and professional training attained overtime. This can be built into a personal learning plan, which will underpin their working life; encourage work-based learning and support reflective practice (Duvekot, 2010).

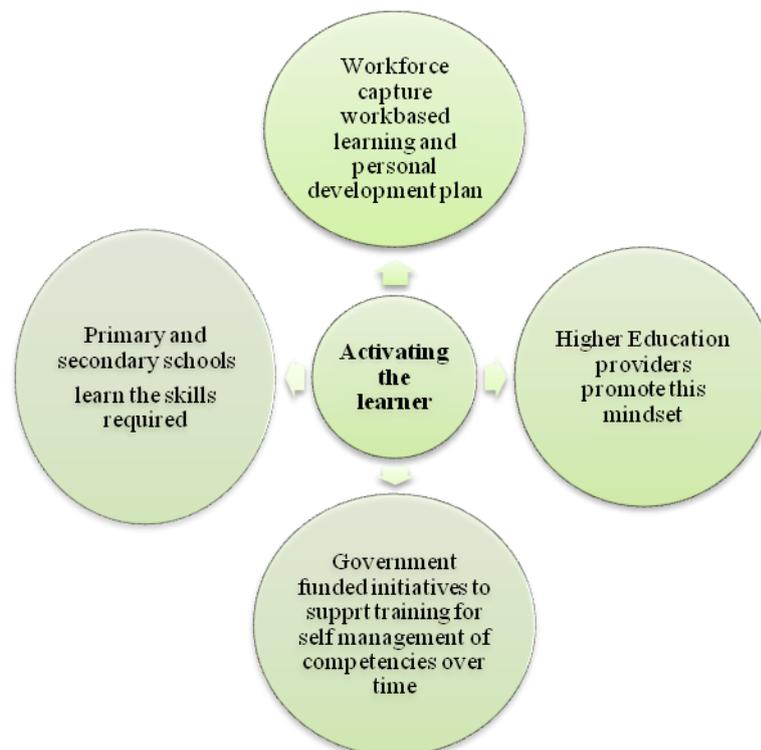


Fig. 3 *The systems involved in activating the learner* (adapted from Duvekot, 2010)

The importance of documenting learning throughout life is of increasing significance in a society where all learning is valued (including prior learning). Traditionally, an individual kept a folder with significant learning events stored for future reference. However key learning events are often incidental or perceived to be of no significance at the time and are difficult to document when required to at a later date in life, perhaps due to changing employment, or address. Documenting

learning requires the learner to develop a certain mindset to enable the optimum return in terms of capturing all learning opportunities: paid and unpaid activities, formal, non-formal and informal learning. Developing this ability requires support and appropriate training.

E portfolios are an emerging tool and will be of increasing significance to support an individual to document their learning in a digital manner throughout a lifetime. Indeed the development and practice of a lifelong learning mindset does not have to entail the use of electronic aids, but more the careful documentation of significant learning events. However, the use of information technology will certainly play an increasingly significant role.

4.2 Promote Digital Archiving

When higher education promotes digital archiving, there are benefits for the learner, for the higher education provider and for the employer. Promoting a valuing learning message will encourage a positive experience when an individual approaches formal education with the express hope of validating non-formal and informal learning. Preparing a prior learning case can be an intimidating experience for a student who, in effect, is taking on the might of the learning system by taking this step (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). If the provider includes a valuing learning space on its website, or a prospectus that promotes digital archiving it shows the learner that they are 'RPL friendly' and ready to support the documentation of their case. This space then in turn supports RPL practice within an Institute or University. Prior learning cases well laid out and well supported with appropriate documentation are an easier task for an assessor to make a judgement on, as opposed to one which is poorly put together and lacking evidence to support the claim (Leiste & Jensen, 2011).

Higher education must expect the learner to provide a digital record of what they know and this expectation in turn will encourage the learner to maintain this activity over time. The Institute or University is acknowledging that learning occurs everywhere by taking this step, and is in tune with the broader picture of where learning is gained today (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2012). This will in turn inform employers demonstrating that higher education is aware of the relevance of workplace competencies and skills. There is a need for society to create a culture where education actively engages with employers (Cork Institute of Technology, 2012). Higher education must be responsive to the ever-changing need for re-skilling and up-skilling of workers and be in a position to meet these demands in a flexible, meaningful way.

4.3 Why 'activating the lifelong mindset of the learner' is essential

Innovative ideas and cutting-edge knowledge is always moving forwards. Our input in solving a problem or adapting to a situation tends to be very specific to a particular set of circumstances.

However, key learning can be extracted from any event with reflective ability (Schon, 1983). This experiential learning can be adapted and used again in another situation. Our role in life is constantly changing and information or knowledge which is seen as significant is always moving ahead. With this comes a certain vulnerability. It makes sense then to foster this habit as a proactive one to be self aware as we continue to identify the knowledge, skills and competences which we possess and to put aside time to capture them as we go on an on-going basis. It is good career husbandry to maintain this habit over time (Barrett & Garrett 2009).

The question is: how do we prompt this to happen in a real way? Society needs to be supported to arrive at this activated learning state. Ideally this should happen early in life. It could even be a compulsory activity in school. The project, *'Managing European Diversity in Lifelong Learning'* (Duvekot, *et al.*, 2007) considered this very question. According to Duvekot, the individual must be in charge of their own learning path through life. He suggested using 'how to' guides and training modules to support individuals and organisations in self- management of competencies (Duvekot, 2009).

According to Judith O Brown, Barry University Florida USA, seven generic competencies can be used as a scaffold to support the learner in building the eportfolio. These generic competencies capture abilities in all areas of life: administration; communication; critical thinking; creativity; interpersonal relations; investigation and research; supervision and leadership (J. O. Brown, personal communication, April 24, 2012). Similarly the *European Framework of Key Competencies* could be used to scaffold an eportfolio (European Commission, 2008) or even the "*capabilities for living and lifelong learning*" which are emphasised in New Zealand (Ipurangi, 2012).

To go through life in this '*learner activated*' mode, is to be prepared for the very real eventuality of change and new work situations where a portfolio would be useful. On return to education one would be already halfway there in terms of documenting a prior learning case for RPL should that be an option (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2013).

The EU Lifelong Learning programme could be harnessed to provide funds specifically for research and delivery of training in the area of activating the learner and digital archiving. Funds could support the creation of a reflective space where one can tease out learning resulting from roles and responsibilities held in paid and unpaid positions. Employers and community based education could provide training initiatives on digital archiving of competencies over time and should provide training to support the individual with the task.

5. Conclusion

Higher education must promote a *valuing learning* message. Education providers must play their part in supporting the creation of an environment where society recognises that learning occurs everywhere. Having an RPL policy and practice in place goes a long way towards realising this. But there are other steps which can be taken to create an environment where non-formal and informal learning is valued and where the ordinary individual is 'activated' in terms of capturing what he/she knows about over time.

Higher education must engage with community and workplace to promote a valuing learning mindset. Providing workshops and training to enable individuals will support this space. College websites and prospecti must call for on-going documentation of non-formal and informal learning. Providers must promote the valuing and capturing of non-formal and informal learning for RPL purposes during open nights, learning clinics within industry and community groups.

Whether a digital archive or a simple file, what is important is that the repository is maintained and significant events are captured as they unfold. Reflection on this archive will allow for the learning to be claimed. In essence, the individual is protecting themselves from the rigours of modern living where no job is for life and where it is quite likely that they will return to education a number of times for a number of purposes.

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