

Freedom to learn: a radically revised pedagogy to facilitate lifewide learning in the academic curriculum

John Cowan

Synopsis

Higher education has progressed fairly steadily to a common pedagogical approach which centres on the idea of *alignment*. In this arrangement, intended learning outcomes are identified and declared; learning activities which will enable the desired learning and development to be achieved are conceived and undertaken with the support of appropriate and effective teaching; and assessment which calls for these outcomes is (ideally) carefully designed and implemented. All three elements are aligned in advance. The same principles and practices underpinned by notions of alignment have been applied to date in most of the purposeful schemes for personal development planning. In this Chapter I argue that lifewide learning, wherein learning and development often occur incidentally in multiple and varied real-world situations throughout an individual's life course, calls for a different approach, and a different pedagogy. Higher education should visualise lifewide learning as an *emergent* phenomenon wherein the outcomes of learning emerge later on, and are often *unintended*. Consequently, they cannot be defined in advance of the activities through which they are formed. This Chapter offers some practical ideas on how lifewide learning might be embedded in academic programmes.

Introduction

The aim of this Chapter¹ is to answer the questions *why* and *how* should we develop and adopt a new and independent pedagogy for curricula which feature and honour students' lifewide learning? I begin with the bold assertion that trail-blazing efforts in lifewide learning have been hampered, to date, by established academia, which has treated this innovation, at best, as something to be simply added to current practices. In such cases it has been assumed that we can retain the main features of the established approach and graft on additions (in various forms) to cater for lifewide learning. In this Chapter I distinguish between the treatment of lifewide learning virtually as an extra-curricular activity, and its integration as an independent co-curricular component of higher education, with its own appropriate curriculum, assessment and pedagogy – an approach which Baxter Magolda (2009) describes effectively and persuasively in terms of many recent examples of Learning Partnership Models. For I assert here that lifewide learning should be distinct in its own right, and so merits distinct consideration – especially where matters of pedagogy and curriculum design are concerned. Those who want to see lifewide learning sited firmly in learners' programmes are therefore confronted by the challenge of developing and practising a new lifewide learning pedagogy.

Pedagogy of the status quo

Over perhaps the last twenty-five years, a fairly explicit and directive pedagogy has emerged for programmes of higher education in the United Kingdom. The characteristics of this approach are that:

- 1 Programmes are conceived by teachers.
- 2 Programmes or courses are subdivided into self-contained modules.
- 3 Each module has its own explicit learning outcomes which the course team has decided that learners should achieve.
- 4 Assessment is arranged by the course team to validly and reliably determine achievement of these intended learning outcomes.

- 5 Learning and teaching activities should be purposefully planned to support achievement of the intended learning and development.
- 6 The desirable integration and compatibility of items 3 to 5 is described as alignment or constructive alignment (Biggs 2003), and is featured as a desirable goal or ultimate quality of well-designed curricula.

Consequently, assessment by teachers of the achievement of specified competences by learners (confirming what they can do), according to predetermined criteria and at an appropriate level, is a core feature – except perhaps in those few schemes that embody self or peer assessment.

Personal development planning

The advent of planning for personal development as a central feature of learners' programmes (QAA 2000) has created the impression of enhanced learner empowerment within the traditional structure. Compared with traditional programmes:

- The intended learning outcomes are certainly predetermined; *but they are now chosen and framed by learners who have not yet undertaken the learning journey, and who have an incomplete appreciation of its demands and potential.*
- The assessment is compatible with the intended learning outcomes; *it is conceived according to the same limitations as are the outcomes.*
- Learning activity is planned towards the achievement of the chosen outcomes; *but it is necessarily planned by learners who lack training or experience in the design of learning activity, and are unlikely to conceive innovative learning activities.*
- Most importantly, the overall programme aims, the programme structure and the criteria and levels for judgements are still predetermined by teachers, and so can strongly influence the learners' exercise of autonomy.

PDP-based development in a traditional programme

I choose to test my suggestion that most PDP is to a considerable extent arranged to fit traditional structures. I do this first by considering a complete programme where I am a tutor. The details are as follows:

- In a parallel set of activities, alongside their degree programme, postgraduate MSc(HRM) students have the opportunity to prepare for Associateship of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).
- By the time they have completed their MSc programme, students who so wish should have shown themselves capable of planning, monitoring and evaluating their personal and professional development
- Most students begin this programme with little or no experience of planning for development, or evaluating progress. A short introductory workshop, based on manufactured examples, centres on offering helpful advice to the imaginary authors of mid-standard plans and claims; it then helps them to summarise how to plan and claim on the basis of SMART objectives, in terms of advice to themselves as they prepare drafts.
- The expectation (not requirement) is that students will be giving attention at any one point in time to around six objectives, divided between professional, academic and personal aims – without trespassing directly on the MSc syllabus, but otherwise freely chosen.
- During the introductory workshop, the need to begin to assemble relevant data from the outset, in order to inform judgements and substantiate claims, is stressed and exemplified. Students' forward plans should include consideration of the forms of relevant data which they can readily acquire and assemble to inform monitoring and claims.
- The learning communities in which students are grouped for course purposes should form supportive groups for their CIPD efforts.

- Students' learning communities in turn have the facilitative support of a personal development tutor, whose function is to prompt, but never to direct, the students' activities. This style of tutoring is 'nudging', in the Brunerian sense, prompting progress into Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It takes the form of facilitative comment on claims and plans, assembled for this purpose at six-monthly intervals.
- Final claims are audited by tutors, to confirm that the requirements of the CIPD strand have been met and the procedures followed. But the claimed attainment of competences and standards is not assessed. The course team are confident in the ability and desire of self-managing, self-monitoring and self-assessing postgraduate students to prepare themselves adequately for professional life and ongoing personal and professional development, and to satisfy CIPD that they have done so. Our confidence has not so far proved unfounded.

On the face of it, this activity, which is focused on personal and professional development, appears to share many features with the traditionally designed and delivered MSc programme. It has predetermined and explicit learning outcomes (albeit chosen by individual students). Assessment is objective, systematic and appropriate, according to criteria and an expected level of demand which were decided initially by the course team. Assessment decisions are reported to assessment boards and acted upon in the usual way. The status quo remains secure.

The challenge of lifewide learning

I now submit that lifewide learning is so radically different in its nature that if we are to contemplate featuring it in learners' programmes we should ensure that it is independent of constraints arising from the characteristics and practices of other accompanying components of higher education. In particular, we need to radically rethink our pedagogy, beginning from scratch.

Again I choose to use an example to illustrate the points I make, which I claim are general for lifewide learning. My example this time is a mere component of an undergraduate module entitled *Developing Employment Skills*; but it is one whose features are not constrained to conform with those of its traditional senior partner, so to speak. Enrolment on this module is only open to students who have some kind of part-time employment, not necessarily discipline-related, and whose employers will permit these students to use this experience to contribute to their development towards enhanced employability, including the identification of an issue or problem upon which they might reflect constructively.

One component of this module calls for the identification on eight occasions of a critical incident, involving the students or directly observed by them. This should be an incident from which they may generalise and, by so doing, identify a step forward in their development. If students so wish, they can email their reflective logs to a tutor whose Brunerian comments are intended to facilitate deeper reflection. Another component of the module, often arising from a critical incident, is the identification by the student of a problem in their place of employment, and the generation of a possible solution to that problem.

During this one-semester module, a significant number of students find themselves awarded an increase in their basic pay rate; and some are promoted to a higher level of employment, especially when their project is deemed impressive by their employer. However, it has not been simple to negotiate approval and ongoing validation of this apparently successful module within the traditional environment of a conventional university.

For the important outcomes from the two components I have described are unintended, are often highly personal and only emerge as the students' experience progresses. The programme activities were not framed to facilitate specific developments; and the outcomes are at various levels, in a range of domains, and are often very difficult to substantiate, especially when they are in the affective

domain. Although the module is assessed traditionally, the assessment which matters most to students, and features in their self-portrayal to employers, is their own self-judgement, framed in their own way, to their own criteria. The associated pedagogy to structure the effective supporting of the students in their creative, reflective and analytical thinking is as undeveloped as is the methodology for e-moderation which is currently perturbing many academics (Vlachopoulos and Cowan 2010).

Table 7.1 compares and contrasts features of typical schemes to support student-led lifewide learning and traditional teacher-led learning.

Table 7.1: Comparing and contrasting student-led lifewide learning with traditional teacher-led programmes

| Traditional teacher-led learning programme | Student-led lifewide learning |
|---|---|
| Planning concentrates on desired outcomes; Outcomes are intended | Design concentrates on worthwhile experiences; Outcomes emerge |
| Activity designed to achieve outcomes | Learners have various reason for choice of activity |
| Most of the spaces and places for learning are chosen by the teacher/institution | Spaces and places for learning are chosen by learner |
| Outcomes and criteria are general | Outcomes and criteria are particular |
| Assessment is usually by teachers | Learners identify, represent (often in varied ways) and claim their own development |
| Competence is external judged | Self-knowledge is central |
| Learning level predetermined against generic level descriptors | Learning level emerges: this level is problematic and is judged against an individual's notion of their previous level of learning |
| Teachers are directive: concepts of tutor, manager, scholar, even instructor are relevant | Teachers are supportive and facilitative: concepts of coach, guide, mentor, facilitator are relevant |
| Outcomes, assessment and learning and teaching activities are aligned from the outset | Learning experience leads to development and, after reflective self-evaluation, to a Record of Development and a judgement on development |

Complex learning and achievements

Peter Knight wrote many wise words about pedagogy. Pertinent to the present topic are remarks he made at the First International Conference on Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Assessment in Kowloon in Hong Kong (Knight 2005). There he concentrated on what he called complex learning, which for him was development located towards the higher end of the taxonomies of the cognitive and interpersonal domains. These areas were of interest to him at a conference on assessment, because learners' higher level achievements feature complex and changing constructs which do not have the qualities necessary for them to be measurable. He referred to the lists of preferred graduate qualities emerging from the researches of Harvey *et al.* (1997), Knight (2005) and Brennan *et al.* (2001), to which reference can usefully be made for amplification. Their comprehensive catalogue of desirable attributes of employable graduates is similar to many of the achievements that students are claiming from their lifewide learning.

Having stressed that complex achievements resist measurement, Knight (2005) went on to argue that, their indeterminate nature impels us to use assessment approaches that are radically different from those in routine use. Like many nowadays he favoured deliberation on the weight of evidence (*ibid*:2), a methodology which empathises strongly with what is emerging for many as the favoured approach to assessment of lifewide learning. The consequence of this, of course, is for universities to replace warrants with students' claims about their complex achievements (*ibid*:6).

He also remarked (ibid:4), that we cannot even find reliable and robust ways of fostering complex achievement. Then, in what he described as a digression, but one which is important in the present context, he made five points about fostering the type of complex achievements which lifewide learning values. These were:

- We need to think systemically or holistically about the student learning experience.
- We must eschew approaches which merely “encourage simple learning of complicated material, and offer little to the developments that employers, amongst others, value”.
- Curricula which promote self-theories, beliefs about ourselves, about others and about the extent to which we can generally make a difference are more favourable to the formation of the desired complex achievements.
- That development of complex achievements is helped by metacognitive awareness.
- Tasks to promote complex achievements are those which encourage what he called “real transfer”.

Rather than ‘dumbing the curriculum down’, it was Knight’s view that it behoves us to actively foster complex learning – which is precisely what lifewide learning sets out to do. Readers of this volume will note much common ground between the aspects of the education process which Knight advocated and the priorities stressed by Baxter Magolda (2009:251) which were:

- discouraging simplistic solutions
- drawing learners’ attention to the complexity of their decisions
- encouraging learners to develop their personal authority by listening to their own voices
- encouraging learners to share authority and expertise
- encouraging learners to work interdependently with others to solve mutual problems.

Table 7.2 Ten propositions for an imaginative lifewide curriculum. Source: Jackson, Chapter 6 this volume.

| |
|---|
| <p>Proposition 1: gives learners the freedom and empowers them to make choices so that they can find deeply satisfying and personally challenging situations that inspire, engage and enable them to develop themselves</p> <p><i>Proposition 2: enables learners to appreciate the significance of being able to deal with situations and see situations as the focus for their personal and social development</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 3: prepares learners for and gives them experiences of adventuring in uncertain and unfamiliar situations where the contexts and challenges are not known, accepting the risks involved</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 4: supports learners when they participate in situations that require them to be resilient and enable them to appreciate their own transformation</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 5: enables learners to experience, feel and appreciate themselves as knower, maker, player, narrator, enquirer, creator and integrator of all that they know and can do, and enables them to think and act in complex situations</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 6: encourage learners to be creative, enterprising and resourceful in order to accomplish the things that they and others value</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 7: enables learners to develop and practise the repertoire of communication and literacy skills that they need to be effective in a modern, culturally diverse and pluralistic world</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 8: enables learners to develop relationships that facilitate collaboration, learning and personal development</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 9: encourages learners to behave ethically and with social responsibility</i></p> <p><i>Proposition 10: encourages and enables learners to be wilful, self-directed, self-regulating, self-aware and reflexive so that they develop a keen sense of themselves as designers/authors and developers of their own lives, appreciating their learning and developmental needs as they emerge</i></p> |
|---|

Propositions for a lifewide learning pedagogy

In Chapters 6 Jackson sets out ten propositions to provide guidance to learners (both teachers and students) on the types of situations and experiences that are being encouraged through a lifewide

curriculum. These constitute a very real challenge for any programme designers who traditionally do not support these forms of learner engagement. They are worth considering here (Table 7.2) because teacher/tutor designers would need to give careful consideration to these propositions in designing their programme.

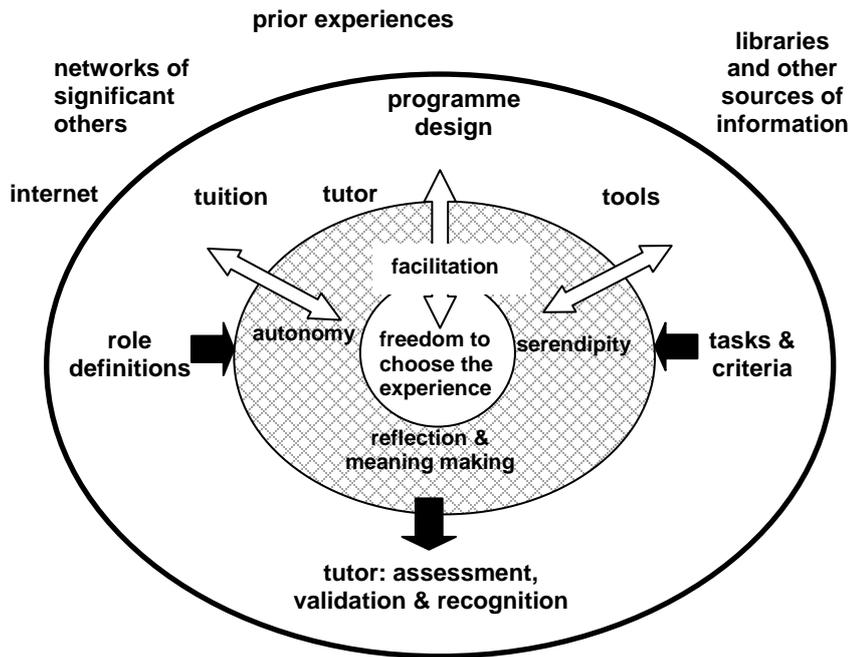
At first sight it might seem that this learner-centred arrangement encompasses no role for teachers. But closer inspection reveals that the propositions almost all imply teaching persons as the subjects for the various active verbs within their wordings, whose objects grammatically are the learners. If lifewide learning is to become part of the core educational offer of universities, it will surely be teachers or tutors or teacher-planned frameworks that *enable, encourage, support, prepare and give permission or empower* and ultimately *recognise and validate* the learning. It will be their notions of standards in this learning environment that will ultimately be recognised through an award. What is emphasised in Table 6.2 is the overarching importance of the first proposition which must be at the heart of any pedagogic model. The remaining propositions provide guidance on the focus for learning and development, facilitation and collaboration in tutor–student interaction.

Towards a pedagogy for lifewide learning

I now outline some tentative steps towards a pedagogy that might enable lifewide concepts and practices of learning and education to co-exist with other components of programmes in higher education – and vice-versa. In so doing, I have been immensely attracted to Maret Staron's ideas (see Chapter 8) of an ecologically sound learning and pedagogy, with its ever-shifting relationships, and interdependence.

1. It is paramount that lifewide learners have freedom to choose – their aims, their activities through which they will learn and develop, and the criteria by which they will judge their learning and development in due course. Hence their learning during the lifewide experience should be autonomous. The experience should be one within which they are free to plan, manage, monitor, change and evaluate their learning and development. In that sense their activity might be described as 'ring-fenced' from the interference of tutors (Figure 7.1).
2. Outwith the ring-fence are located the various involvements of what may be described as teaching people or people who support the learner and their learning. It is here that the design for a lifewide learning programme is conceived. It is here that the programme team, in many cases in negotiation with learners, will ensure that:
 - roles are defined for learner, tutors, administrators – and assessors, if necessary
 - the mode and expectations of assessment (the persuasive hidden curriculum) are decided and communicated to learners
 - whatever statement about the criteria that will be applied is formulated
 - potentially useful inputs, whose use is never mandatory nor even presumed, are created and made accessible
 - tutors and teachers are available and may be commissioned to provide specialist instruction, information or even advice, as in some problem-oriented project-based learning (Moesby 2006)
 - tools of enquiry, and methods used to support enquiries, are available in digest form, for reference
 - tools for recording and meaning making are provided, again recognising that there must be freedom of choice in the way learners record and represent their learning. There is no room for a 'one size fits all' approach here.

Figure 7.1 Integrating lifewide learning into the academic curriculum by giving learners the freedom to choose their activities and experiences through the idea of ‘ring-fencing’



- 3 Within the ring-fence, the learners should be free to negotiate, decide, plan, prioritise, act, judge and interact as they so wish, as they direct, monitor and record their own representations of self-taught learning. Any tutor's activity within the ring-fence can only be facilitative – to encourage, support, enable, prompt and challenge in a constructive way. The events which occur within the ring-fence, once the lifewide experience has commenced, will often entail serendipitous inputs, unexpected experiences, unplanned affordances and fresh challenges and opportunities – all of which the learners will or should respond to autonomously. During their experiences, the learners will draw on familiar worldwide sources such as the internet, libraries, their own networks of people including peers and of course on their own prior experiences. On conclusion of their focused activity, the learners should reflect within the ring-fenced activity both on their learning and on their development. They should also reflect meta-cognitively on the processes they have followed, and how these, like their development, may benefit from enhancement in their next lifewide learning experiences.

- 4 Outwith the ring-fence is the tutor whose other function, besides design, facilitation (and perhaps collaboration as knowledge is developed and shared), is the evaluation and validation of the learners' own judgements on their learning and personal development.

Roles of teacher/tutor/educator

These ideas for a pedagogy to support lifewide learning have important implications for the role of the teacher, tutor or significant other who supports learners and their learning. I take guidance here, as my title implies, from the writings and teaching of Carl Rogers (1969, 1983). He spelt out two principles describing the style of a facilitative teacher in contact with learners within such a setting as lifewide learning. The first was that the support of learners in a learner-directed context should feature congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy, which at times he called genuineness, acceptance and understanding. The second was that the facilitator of such learning should become a fellow learner. Both principles describe with helpful precision an effectively facilitative tutor/student relationship.

Rogers also wrote of the role of teachers in setting up such learner-directed situations. He spoke of *modes of building freedom*. He gave many examples of how to create the conditions for responsible self-directed learning. He discussed how teachers with that intention concentrate on making resources clearly available by thinking through and simplifying the practical steps the student must go through. These are areas of responsibility which should be undertaken and completed, albeit in negotiation with the students, *before* the learning activity begins and hence outwith it.

The three principles of educational practice underlying the Learning Partnerships approach developed by Baxter Magolda (2004) to facilitate learner's journeys towards self-authorship and described by her in Chapter 5 are entirely consistent with Rogers' clear annunciation of the principles of a facilitative pedagogy. However, Rogers, and those who have tried to follow his example, moved rather sooner towards self-authorship and refrained from acting in a guiding role, like the fellow traveller on the rear seat of the tandem in Baxter Magolda's metaphor:

The first principle, *validating learners' capacity to know* ... invited participants into the knowledge construction process, conveyed that their ideas were welcome, and offered respect that boosted their confidence in themselves. ... The second principle, *situating learning in learner's experience*, was evident in educational and employment settings that used participants' existing knowledge and experience as the basis for continued learning and decision making. ... The third principle, *mutually constructing meaning*, involved educators and employers connecting their knowledge to that of the participants to arrive at more complex understandings and decisions. This welcomed participants as equal partners in knowledge construction, helped them clarify their own perspectives (emphasising autonomy), and helped them learn how to negotiate with others (emphasising connection). The blend of connection and autonomy inherent in constructing meaning supported learners in moving towards the mutuality characteristic of self-authorship.

Baxter Magolda (2004:42–3)

Possible lifewide learning format

1. Teachers design a programme framework which will encourage and permit learners to engage in their choice of lifewide learning
2. The framework provides for learners to freely choose their aims, the activity in which they will engage and in due course the criteria against which they will judge their efforts and development.
3. As a preparatory activity, learners may inform themselves about several lifewide learning experiences and their assessment, discuss their judgements and the objective making of such judgements with peers, and reflect on what they wish to carry forward from this induction into their own lifewide learning.
4. Learners now firm up on their intentions, presumably moving on from at least a vague intention which led them to express interest.
5. The programme team offers input on the collection and citing of appropriate data to inform judgements in due course by learners of their learning and development during, or as a consequence of, the lifewide learning experience. The team may offer a range of options for the recording and representation of learning and achievements leaving the learner to make the final decision as to which format to employ.
6. The programme framework encourages formative and summative reflections by learners on the process and its outcomes. This can be facilitated by tutors, if the learners so wish.

7. The programme framework makes provision for, but does not require, constructive peer interactions between learners.
8. Learners, preferably beginning this task before the conclusion of their project, collate and analyse the data they have ingathered, drawing out meanings, achievements and results against criteria of their choosing which they provide reasons for.
9. Having formulated their judgments, learners review their experiences and their evaluation of them, formulating a view about the standards of their development and of the processes they followed. They are encouraged to imagine different pathways they might have taken and to reflect on these with the wisdom of hindsight.
10. Learners' claims and reviews are then audited by peers, who seek to check these against programme procedures and the need for objectivity and comprehensiveness. Teachers/peers provide feedback to learners. In doing so they are acknowledging the validity of the personal knowledge and judgements embodied in the claims for complex achievements.
11. Learners are expected, but not required, to carry their reflective self-evaluation forward into an iterative forward plan for further development.

Concluding remarks

Teacher-designed programmes should support the ideals of autonomous lifewide education through careful consideration of propositions that encourage learners' lifewide learning and the pedagogy that supports and facilitates it.

Lifewide learning should feature learning and development for the learners, taking them beyond their level of attainment when the experience commenced. It should not centre upon the display and application of learning and competences which have already been acquired.

The effective use of teachers to promote and support lifewide learning will be in the various activities outwith the ring-fence in Figure 7.1 and (for some) in facilitation and possibly cooperation within the ring-fence. There are two dangers in the facilitator role of which all concerned should be aware:

- It would be readily possible for a gauche facilitator to limit the students' freedom, rather than to empower them as autonomous learners.
- A facilitative tutor who has been involved in an activity outwith the ring-fence when the programme was being formulated may be tempted to wander across the ring-fence to make adjustments while learning is in progress. This would seriously confuse students about their autonomy within the ring-fenced area.

(Vlachopoulos and Cowan, 2010; case study 3).

In some schemes for lifewide learning, there is a risk that catering for and encouraging individual choices may lead to disregard of the socio-constructivist potential of formative peer interaction. However, learners should be encouraged and given recognition for their efforts to create their own networks and relationships for learning and personal development.

This search for a new pedagogy, suitable for lifewide learning, has brought out several immediate findings. The first is the fact that the traditional pedagogy of the status quo is inappropriate. The second is the direct relevance of Rogers' thinking about how to ensure freedom to learn for students, in this case in lifewide learning. The third is the need to carefully consider the roles and activities of

tutors once lifewide learning has commenced, lest departures confound the autonomy which the lifewide learners need to enjoy and use.

The lifewide learning process is fundamentally different from most teacher-directed situations in that it begins with the learners choosing an area of activity which may be attractive to the individual for a variety of reasons. Such activities are not purposefully selected and planned in advance to enable the learner to achieve *specific* learning; rather, specific learning emerges only later as a serendipitous by-product of doing.

Insofar as lifewide learning entails planned development, the planning is of arrangements through which the potential of the chosen activity for the learner may best be discovered and realised. Consequently, the assessment of the outcomes must be analytical and reflective; learning and achievement (often complex) should be judged against particular criteria that make sense to the individual in that context – rather than against more general criteria. Lifewide learners thus have to evolve their own frameworks for identifying, analysing and judging their own development in the particular contexts in which it has occurred – rather than being constrained to criteria devised by others. Hence learning outcomes from lifewide learning are *identified through* the assessment or review process – rather than being *confirmed by* it.

The making of objective judgements, about experiences, inputs and competences, is arguably the most demanding of the cognitive abilities, and one for which even graduate lifewide learners can profitably be prepared. Concerns about the assessment of lifewide learning can readily proliferate. Possible areas of development include the demand associated with making personal assessments; the difficulty of informing judgements regarding some of the more sophisticated of the abilities developed in lifewide learning; and the fact that the level of learning and development cannot be known at the outset, and may well be lower than the learner – and society – would have wished. Perhaps the most adequate response to these concerns is to point out that, in subsequent life, in employment, social life and even in interviews, these learners will be judged and rated for what they are, what values they epitomise and what they demonstrate in practice that they can then do – and not by whatever certification they have acquired.

Endnotes

1 This Chapter began life as a background paper to support my presentation at the Student Lifewide Development Conference at Aston University in February 2011. It was published in 2011 as Chapter 7 in N. J. Jackson (ed) *Learning for a Complex World: A lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development*. Authorhouse