

A Practical Theory of Lifelong Learning Assistance for Promoting Community

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education – Hawaii 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

“Community planning of lifelong learning” has been a common theme within the lifelong learning policy of Japan since the late 1980s. While community promotion has never been the main aim of activating each citizen’s learning activity, it has been reported that promoting lifelong learning activities throughout a particular region has led to the effective empowerment of community. This paper explores and proposes new practical educational theories, taking these facts into account. It suggests that we need to expand the concept of education and simultaneously reverse our way of thinking by reconsidering relationships between education and learning. Here, some recommendations are made. First, education must be redefined not only as a concept focused exclusively on the nurture of each individual, but also as a relational concept with the capacity to foster human relationships. Second, the concept of educational space must be reconfigured, not so much based on educators and teachers, but on learners. We need to adopt a learner-based theory that learners live in the world which consists of five layers, as follows: absence of learning, learning as a result of experience, learning activities, receiving education, and being taught. Third, it is necessary and effective to create a theoretical framework that can function both as an analytical guideline and a pragmatic indicator. Individual learners’ actions are simplified and categorized according to three basic types of activities—input, output, and intercommunion.

Keywords: human relationships, learner-based theory, individual learners’ actions

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

Lifelong learning breaks free from the traditional concept of education typified by school education. It necessitates widening the category in which the concept of learning and education is covered. First, in reconfirming the term “lifelong” in terms of time-theory, learning and education is not only connected to the early stages of life, but also to the whole life. Based on the idea that education can be carried on from birth till death, all human beings including a small child, a young adult, the middle-aged, and elderly people must be taken into consideration as potential educational objects. Second, in amplifying the meaning of the term “lifelong” from a space-theoretical viewpoint, it is certain that spaces of education and learning are not only schools, but also various places such as homes, workplaces, communities, and online spaces as well. If society tries to attain a cradle-to-grave educational system, it must be noted that education and learning take place everywhere in the world.

However, lifelong learning goes beyond the scope of receiving education, and it requires a significant imaginative leap to debunk traditional stereotyped views of education. I have come to understand this through multiple means, not only from some abstract theories of lifelong learning, but also from witnessing how the effects of lifelong learning assistance accumulate and collectively lead to community empowerment. In this paper, I explore and propose new practical theories of education, founded on a redefinition of the concept of education.

Lifelong Learning and Community Planning in Japanese National Education Policy

When social changes are rapid, accelerating, and very difficult to forecast, education cannot but vary with the changing times. Accordingly, the concept of education must be accompanied by radical changes in the traditional concepts of education and schooling.

Lifelong learning is a concept known to target not only adults, including the elderly, but people of all generations from birth to death. The idea of lifelong learning helps in overcoming the fixed idea that education exists only within schools and in rediscovering that schools are not the only educational and learning spaces; various other places such as the home, workplace, community, mass media, and online media also serve this purpose.

In 1971, the Central Council for Education in Japan theoretically pointed out the limitations of “school-centered education” and stated that educational agents and stakeholders must take into consideration various elements that consciously or unconsciously influence human character formation when redefining education.

In 1981, “lifelong education” was defined in close association with the provisional definition of “lifelong learning” as a concept emphasizing its spontaneous nature in a report of the Central Council for Education in Japan on “Lifelong Education.” In the mid-1980s, the Ad Hoc Council on Education under the direct control of the Prime Minister attempted to promote a “shift to a lifelong learning system.” Since then, national educational authorities have exclusively used the phrase “lifelong learning,” rather than “lifelong education.” It is not the term “education” but the term “learning” that was adopted quite deliberately in Japanese lifelong learning policy at that time.

In the late 1980s, the idea of “community planning of lifelong learning” was proposed in the context of the comprehensive educational policy. This proposal led to quantitatively enriching the construction of educational facilities in Japan as centers of lifelong learning, with libraries, museums, cultural halls, and so on, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. As building construction was given high consideration in community planning in those days, the hardware side of lifelong learning promotion took priority over quantitative and qualitative improvement of the software side, which included educational contents and methods.

In the mid-1990s, the Council on Lifelong Learning compared “community planning for lifelong learning” with “community planning through lifelong learning,” considered two typical choices of “community planning of lifelong learning.” The former was the idea that it is necessary for each municipal organization to create a regional environment for inhabitants of the district to perform various learning activities anytime and anywhere, while the latter was the idea that it is important for local residents to apply the learning outcomes acquired through their learning activities for the promotion of the community.

Creating a circulatory relationship between “community planning for lifelong learning” and “community planning through lifelong learning” is vitally essential for the promotion of community to succeed. In short, we must create effective reciprocity between learning activities and the application of learning outcomes.

Critical Reconsideration of the Basic Concepts of Education

I believe that careful conceptualization of lifelong learning offers an advantage in theorizing and investigating education. Lifelong learning means going beyond the scope of prolonging the span of school education, and it requires a great leap of imagination to debunk some traditional stereotypes of education.

First of all, we must destroy an ambiguous borderline between education and learning, although, so far, “lifelong education” and “lifelong learning” have been very often viewed as being synonymous. The distinction between education and learning is the most fundamental when we discuss the importance of lifelong learning assistance. The subjects of education are educators including teachers, while the subjects of learning are learners including students.

Second, learning is different from being taught, although many passive learners regard these two concepts as the same. To be sure, being taught something leads mostly to learning it, and not being taught something generally results in not learning it, but being taught does not necessarily lead to learning, and not being taught something does not prevent it from being learned. Taking account of the theoretical feasibility of the last two cases, we discover that being taught is only one means of learning. In reality, human beings can learn something anytime; when they are working, playing, and housekeeping, not to mention studying at school.

Third, we must not conflate education and teaching. Indeed, teaching is one effective method of education, but it is not only a means of assisting learners. On the contrary, not teaching is sometimes more effective than teaching, partly because the former situation compels learners to abandon their passivity, making them independent of

educators and promoting self-direction. This is why we must not confine education to the relationship between teaching and being taught. The flip side is that human beings learn various things by communicating with other people, communities, media, nature, and so on.

Taken together from my theoretical point, the difference between education and learning must be clarified through a shift from relational issues in the cognition or action, to relational ones between “subject” and “object.” As compared to the distinction between “teacher” and “student” in the context of school education, we must adopt the fundamental distinction between “educator” and “learner” in the context of promoting lifelong learning. Stressing the most fundamental point in advance, lifelong learning is an idea based less on educators than on learners.

The Scheme of Learner-Based Educational Theory

In provisional conclusion, we need learner-based educational theory to create, practice, and analyze lifelong learning assistance for promotion of community. Let me develop the structural discussion of learners’ opportunity to learn something. Figure 1 exhibits the whole framework, comprising five layers, namely, absence of learning, learning as a result of experience, learning activities, receiving education, and being taught.

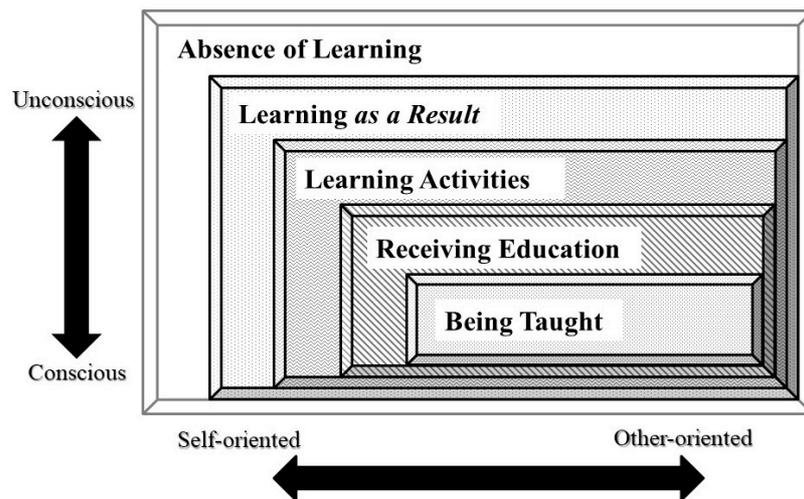


Figure 1: Learner-based educational scheme

As a preliminary argument, we must strictly distinguish between “learning” and “learning activity.” The former concerns learners’ cognition, but the latter concerns learners’ action. The former can exist when a person could have learned something as a result of some experience regardless of whether the learning process was purposeful, but the latter can exist when a person executes concrete action such as reading books and taking classes, irrespective of whether the learning effect leads to success. In sum, learning activity is defined as intentional, in order to actualize the situation for a person to have learned something as a result.

In reality, a human being does not always become a learner even though he or she might be a learner by nature. It is not until a person can become a learner that he or she comes to learn something. On ground zero, we assume the possible existence of opportunities for someone to learn nothing.

At the first level, a living person becomes a learner as soon as he or she has some lived experience and has thus learned something. There exist opportunities for someone to have learned something *as a result*. A learner can exist without educators.

At the second level, a person can execute learning activities as intentional acts, and then he or she certainly deserves the name “learner.” There exist opportunities for a learner to practice intentional learning activities. A learner can spontaneously choose the content and methods of learning activities.

At the third level, a learner can choose to embrace the opportunity of receiving education, including schooling, as one of the methods of imparting learning activities. A learner can receive education without being directly taught by someone, such as being endowed with the right to enjoy free access to libraries and museums. Also, receiving education differs from being educated although very few people including educators can distinguish them. Being educated is an effect by which a learner may be influenced, but the receiving education is a choice that a learner can select alone, proactively. In both cases, a learner needs educational others, whether consciously or unconsciously.

At the fourth level, a learner can choose the opportunity of being taught by others, including teachers, as one learning method for receiving education. Indeed, being taught is a passive action, but it is, at the same time, an action that enables a learner to choose independently. If a learner is aware of his or her limitations of self-study, theoretically, he or she can select to be taught by someone, including professional persons, although this situation does not always manifest itself in actuality.

Schematically, a learner’s lifeworld theoretically consists of five layers, as follows: absence of learning, learning as a result of experience, learning activities, receiving education, and being taught. Thanks to this abstract theory, we can reverse our way of thinking by reconsidering relationships between education and learning. As an implicit premise, learner-based theory is essential and effective for associating lifelong learning promotion with community planning.

Human Relationships as a Key Concept of Lifelong Learning Assistance

In recent years, the concept of the “No Connection Society” (*Muen-shakai* in Japanese) has been widely discussed in Japan. According to the TV program that first coined the expression in January 2010, in the past one year, approximately 32,000 Japanese people died solitary deaths, their bodies remaining unclaimed. These are individuals who lacked connections to their families, relatives, neighbors, colleagues, or friends at their time of death. As such, they were isolated from society until death. The “No Connection Society,” therefore, is a paradox doomed to extinguish social connections.

Many young people with good online social networks reacted strongly to this television program, worrying about their future lives. Most of them made comments such as, “Solitary death concerns me too.” They were completely aware that online connections are, in many cases, superficial in terms of the depth of human relationships. Some of them understood that even though they were aware of beneficial information about humanity, they failed to connect to human beings.

In sum, a disparity exists between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged with regard to opportunities to communicate with others and to foster communication capabilities. Indeed, some individuals are skilled in both face-to-face and IT communication. However, others avoid face-to-face conversation, regardless of their abilities in using IT-related equipment and systems. Furthermore, an increasing number of Japanese people do not maintain healthy human relationships. In part, this is due to the convenience of modern life that allows people to live comfortably while maintaining minimal contact with others. In addition, recent harsh economic circumstances have prevented many economically disadvantaged people from participating in the highly sophisticated information society. Thus, the reconstruction of social human bonds is imperative.

Apart from this prevailing situation in Japan, innumerable efforts have been made to provide learning opportunities for adults, including the elderly. Research reveals the importance of qualitatively and quantitatively enriching human relationships, in order for community members to become active learners. While community promotion has never been the primary aim of activating active citizen learning, it has been reported that promoting regional lifelong learning activities leads to the effective improvement of the community. Therefore, we should focus on accumulating lifelong learning practices as a means to exploring solutions to the “No Connection Society.”

At the strategic level, we need to establish social goals to realize a human society with abundant mutual trust among all members. Human relationships do, in principle, benefit the social infrastructure, which not only protects society but also creatively activates it.

At the tactical level, we need to develop educational programs for learners to encourage their social interaction, have them experience the joy of communication, and enhance their communication skills. After reconsidering the time allocated for individual activities and devising various learning-space designs, educators should make the most of the diversity and dynamism resulting from flexible horizontal relationships among learners instead of clinging to static vertical relationships between lecturers and students.

At each practice level, we need to adopt many techniques to achieve joyful and active learners because the motivation to learn depends greatly on the strength of human relationships among learners. For example, a conscious or unconscious sense of reassurance based on interrelationships of mutual trust can serve as a locomotive for effective learning. It is important to set a harmonious tone for learners to respect each other. If possible, learners should be able to enjoy communication with other learners.

Educational Methodology for Effectively Combining Learning Outcomes and Rich Human Relationships

The accumulation of rich human relationships created through learning activities that promote active collaboration, including mutual face-to-face encounters, leads to optimal social efficiency. This enables the promotion of effective community design among community members. For this reason, education as part of lifelong learning promotion must be redefined, so that it is seen not only as the process of teaching individuals, but as the fostering of mutual trust, despite educational evaluation being

restricted to the individual.

Indeed, we have adopted many concrete practical techniques to assist lifelong learning. However, these methods still leave space for originality and ingenuity. The development of educational methods to effectively combine learning outcome with rich human relationships is very important. Some basic theoretical ideas that can simply and straightforwardly function as both analytical guidelines and pragmatic indicators are required.

I will now attempt to propose a new methodological framework for the practice of lifelong learning that focuses on a simple arrangement of how to learn. First, I want to show this whole scheme as Figure 2, which constitutes three basic types of correlated activities – input, output, and intercommunion.

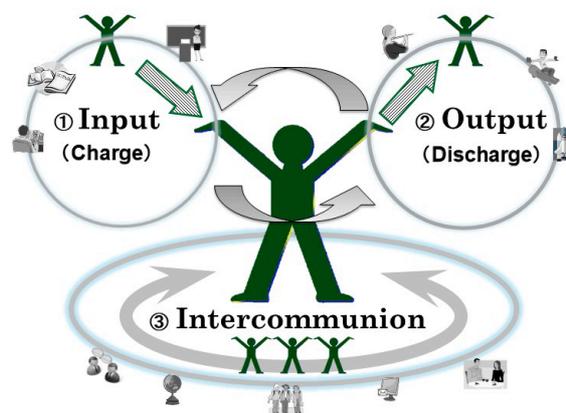


Figure 2: Three basic types of learners' actions

Learning involves nurturing one's inner self by absorbing something from the outer world, such as information, knowledge, wisdom, skills, abilities, and experience, by attending lectures, reading books, watching television, practicing skills, and so on. In contrast, self-expression activities, such as artistic activities, sports, voluntary actions, and work, can be regarded as consciously or unconsciously applying and harnessing learning outcomes. Schematically, learning itself corresponds to input, while applying learning outcomes to one's life corresponds to output. To make an analogy to an electric machine or a battery, input corresponds to charge, while output corresponds to discharge.

The interaction between input and output can generate dynamic synergetic effects. The more learning outcomes an individual inputs or charges through further learning, the greater that individual's appetite for output or discharge. In contrast, the more learning outcomes an individual outputs or discharges, the more learning is necessitated, due to the individual's discovery of a need for learning. In this way, input activities promote output activities, as discharge activities promote charge activities. The more input, the more output. The more discharge, the more charge.

In addition, an individual can make his or her life complete by repeating this process. It often seems that older learners, with abundant life experience, remember past events and rediscover wisdom preserved unconsciously in their lives and, as a result, become self-affirmative.

However, it must not be forgotten that this interactive relationship cannot be realized by the individual alone, and that more than one person is required. An interrelationship based on an input-output interaction always requires an interpersonal human network. Therefore, I recommend that learning programs include the introduction of human interactions, where educators effectively cross-fertilize learners from different backgrounds. Communicative learning activities can help learners to realize the harmony between relaxation and concentration. I call this situation “intercommunion,” because of its ability to create deep associations between individuals or groups.

Considering the broader scope of individual learners’ actions, I maintain that lifelong learning consists of three types of activities – input, output, and intercommunion. The third level is directly relevant to human relationships, but the other two are also closely related to matters of human connectivity. I firmly believe that it would be effective for learners to experience the three types of activities—charge, discharge, and intercommunion—as a combination, like the three corners of a triangle.

Conclusion

Education is to be understood as nurturing a person through instruction. However, we must be bold enough to change the ground rules for the traditional concept of education, taking account of the fact that lifelong learning assistance can lead to community empowerment.

First, education must be redefined as a concept that goes beyond the individual to form a relational concept in human relationships. When we try to create the circulative relationship between “community promotion *for* lifelong learning” and “community promotion *by* lifelong learning,” education also should be understood as fostering the human relationships between individuals and groups rather than teaching individuals. This idea must be made central in our highly networked information society, where the quality of communication has become impoverished, regardless of its quantitative richness.

Second, the concept of educational space must be reconfigured; it should prioritize learners instead of educators and teachers. We need to reverse our way of thinking by reconsidering relationships between education and learning, and adopt a learner-based theory that learners live in the world which consists of five layers, as follows: absence of learning, learning as a result of experience, learning activities, receiving education, and being taught.

Third, the concept of learning actions must be broadened to reflect the fact that actual learners learn in a variety of ways, anytime and anywhere. As we implement lifelong learning assistance, it becomes necessary and effective to create a theoretical framework that can function as both an analytical guideline and a pragmatic indicator. Broadly simplifying individual learners’ actions, I maintain that they consist mainly of three basic types of activities – input, output, and intercommunion.

These theoretical proposals are a product of my observation of various efforts in Japan to provide many learning opportunities for adults including the elderly. I

propose that we should reconsider educational potential by taking into account the cumulative benefits of lifelong learning assistance.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Editage (www.editage.jp) and Enago (www.enago.jp) for the English language review.

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