Book Review

Ellu Saar, Odd Bjørn Ure and John Holdford, eds.
Lifelong Learning in Europe: National Patterns and Challenges
Northampton, MA, USA / Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013

Reviewed by: Howard A. Doughty

An opening word about the publisher: Edward Elgar Publishing is not for the penurious. This company produces first-rate books. They mine the talents of some of the world's most erudite and brilliantly analytical scholars. The books are skillfully written, carefully edited, attractively designed and expertly printed. So, if the old axiom remains accurate and "you get what you pay for" (and "pay for what you get"), then Edward Elgar's inventory assures excellence.

"EE" has been around for almost thirty years. It already has over 3000 high-quality academic and professional books on its list. It currently publishes about six new books every week. They include research monographs, reference books and upper-level university textbooks. Anyone with the resources to purchase them and the time to read them would soon become an astonishing repository of useful knowledge, ideas and opinion on the basis of its inventory alone.

> Knowledge is power … once people learn to read, it becomes immensely difficult to control how they might choose to use their new skill.

EE's preferred disciplines include about seventy fields ranging from economics, finance, business and management to law and public policy. Its books are highly focused and expertly composed. They are ideologically diverse and range from a technically sophisticated *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications in Empirical Macroeconomics* to a refreshingly sympathetic *Companion to Marxist Economics*. For those with more esoteric interests, EE offers comprehensive assessments of *Asian Monetary Integration*; *Intellectual Property*; *Pharmaceuticals and Public Health*; *Social Capital and Rural Development in the Knowledge Society* and more than 2995 others. EE is a self-consciously elitist, family-owned business. For that reason, although some of its paperbound volumes can be as cheap as $35.00, it is not uncommon to see its hardcover editions top $200. The book under review can be had for $134.32 (plus shipping and handling). If you like, you could probably cut a deal and purchase the entire catalogue for well under half a million dollars should you be so wealthy and so inclined. You are forewarned. Take a breath ...

... and now that the shock and awe have been absorbed and at least a few readers might be consulting their departmental acquisitions budgets, let me say that this book in particular is worth the price for anyone who is genuinely interested in lifelong learning as a matter of philosophy, policy, programming and, yes, politics.

I

Lifelong learning is a broad term that can cover anything in the fields of formal and informal adult education programs. Commonly understood, it refers to the learning we experience after our early schooling is complete and we have ventured into what passes for the real world. It may include regulated and required professional upgrading in law and medicine, industrial retraining for redundant factory workers or leisure-time recreational adventures in cookery, yoga or folk dancing. Lifelong learning can be accredited by professional and occupational licensing authorities or it might occur almost by happenstance in local public libraries and church basements. It has been around for a very long time within occupational settings—at least since the medieval artisanal guilds and certainly as long ago as the nineteenth-century Mechanics' Institutes in which self-motivated and self-directed working people sought self-improvement. At that time, working-class people banded together to organize their own educational projects and sometimes petitioned local authorities to make education available to them as well as to their wealthier, more fortunate compatriots. Unlike today, when colleges and universities are falling all over themselves seeking new markets for their products, few institutions of higher learning were responsive at the time. A pervasive and generally unyielding class prejudice made it clear that classical education was the preserve of the privileged.

Adult education has always been a battleground (Welton, 2007). Conservative forces were not happy to see a craving for knowledge among the lower orders. After all, once people learn to read, it becomes immensely difficult to control how they might choose to use their new skill. As a result, otherwise servile paupers, peasants, proletarians and "loose and disorderly" people of every kind could easily find themselves in thrall to heathens, heretics and subversives of all sorts. This is why the Roman Catholic Church sought to limit the effects of the new-fangled printing press by creating the *Index Liborum Prohibitorum* to make sure that the faithful were dissuaded from reading volumes that might shake their faith and corrupt their morals. The *Index* began in 1529 and lasted until 1966, when it was abolished at least partly because, according to Cardinal Ottaviani, there were simply too many demonic texts for the censors to manage.

For over four centuries, not only did the Vatican ban books and harshly punish those who read and distributed forbidden works, but it was also long a capital offence for anyone (Catholic or Protestant) to translate *The Bible* into any of the various European vernacular tongues. In fact, William Tyndale, the man whose clandestine translation formed the basis for the stately King James edition (1611), was executed in a gruesome fashion in 1535 for creating what would become a literary and theological triumph just three-quarters of a century later.

If the religious elite was terrified that the official version of the Word of God might be put at risk by inquiring minds with alternative interpretations, the holy authorities were also frightened by secular texts. This is also why the Church's list of proscribed texts was meant to ensure that punishments were meted out to anyone who

read the likes of René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, John Milton, John Locke, David Hume, Jonathan Swift, Immanuel Kant, John Calvin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, of course, Martin Luther, as well as later luminaries like George Sand, Émile Zola, Graham Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (though, notably, neither Karl Marx nor Charles Darwin were actually prohibited).

Of course, we should not forget for an instant that religious interests were far from alone in seeking for censor literature, music, the plastic and the performing arts. From Plato's *Republic* through to Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia and on to any number of institutions in contemporary liberal democracies, the impulse to repress has rarely been absent, no matter how totalitarian or how allegedly free and democratic a society might be. Censorship in the classroom may not be as open and obvious as it once was, but it would be foolish to pretend that it doesn't exist … even here, even now.

II

The slogan that "knowledge is power," (often attributed to Francis Bacon, 1561-1626, but more likely coined by his youthful secretary Thomas Hobbes, 1588-1679) expresses a principle well understood by the guardians of civic morals. Conservatives in authority have considered it unwise to let knowledge slip into the wrong hands, especially those of the poor who might use it for socially disruptive purposes. Liberals, on the other hand, understood it even better and generally preferred that it be set free but carefully monitored for, in the give and take of debate, writers from John Milton (1608-1674) onward ultimately relied on the wisdom of the "marketplace of ideas" for truth as much as they relied on the unfettered marketplace for prosperity and economic justice.

> The fetish of technological change is making it almost mandatory that institutional education begin as soon as a child is out of diapers, but it also makes certain that it continues into the geriatric facilities where we warehouse the elderly.

It was the liberal preference that ultimately won out, not because of the moral superiority of their enlightened opinions, but because the material conditions established by the industrial revolution made it necessary for workers to have brains as well as brawn in order to read work orders in factories and to make calculations so that they could set the dials properly in a machine age. The mode of production established with the use of science and technology required at least a minimally educated working class. So, public schools were established to enhance the skills of the emerging industrial proletariat. The liberal elites, however, were not foolish. They took care to control what reading materials got into the hands of ordinary people and they made every effort to ensure that adult education combined knowledge useful in various occupations with moral teachings that reinforced extant social norms.

Coming up to our own time, the historical trend from elite to mass and now on to universal education cannot realistically be resisted. We live in a world of ubiquitous, pervasive and often intrusive information (the quality of which will not be discussed

here). As we make our way through the early decades of the twenty-first century and try to negotiate this enveloping information society, it is plainly insufficient to provide education for children and young adults as a platform from which to launch them into their authentic adult lives and then to assume nothing will, can or needs to be done to provide learning opportunities as they take their measured steps toward maturity and toward the grave. Indeed, the fetishism of technological change is making it almost mandatory that institutional education begin as soon as a child is out of diapers, but it also makes certain that it continues into the geriatric facilities where we warehouse the elderly—still learning after all their years—until death separates them from what are marketed as cognitive enhancement devices capable of, at least, postponing dementia.

> Common architectures are difficult to build in federal states, especially when overarching power does not reside in a central government. …In Europe, the inevitable tensions of any federal arrangement are considerably more complicated by size, economic development, culture, ideology, language and history.

Amidst all of this, discussions of such matters as vocationalism vs. liberal arts, online technology vs. classroom teachers, declining professorial tenure vs. increased dependence on contingent faculty and the related matters of academic freedom, corporate domination of research agendas, proliferation of administrative personnel, not to mention the multiple issues concerning students such as academic preparedness, false senses of entitlement, grade inflation, escalating costs and consequent indebtedness at graduation etc., take up a great deal of time and energy as educators debate and deliberate on the nature, purpose and future of colleges, universities, mass open online courses, educational broadcasting and other private and state-sponsored facilities and activities.

In *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, a large number of these and related issues are discussed; however, the discourses are considerably more civil than those of their counterparts in much of North America. Even when the issues at hand are necessarily controversial, they do not strike the reader as unnecessarily adversarial. For people who are overly familiar with dueling orthodoxies, this is a welcome change. Whether it is a consequence of the Edward Elgar's penchant for professionalism or a reflection of the broader need for pan-European communication and cooperation in pursuit of common objectives that have still to be worked out among diverse governments, institutions and cultures in the European Union is not a topic upon which I feel competent to comment.

What does require comment, however, is the process whereby European authorities and educators have gone about constructing their conversations. Since leading nations (France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom) met to establish a "common architecture" with which to build or to rebuild their postsecondary institutions in an era of "massification" (Haskel, 2013; Ravinet, 2008), a continuing conversation has been maintained. Common architectures are difficult to build in federal states, especially when overarching power does not reside in a central government. In Australia, Canada and the United States the federal-provincial/state relations are complicated enough; but, on most issues, even though provincial/state governments may have jurisdiction and even local

authorities may have influence, the federal government has insinuated itself into educational policy and practice if only because of its capacity to distribute or withhold the financial resources needed for educational investment. In Europe, the inevitable tensions of any federal arrangement are considerably more complicated by size, economic development, culture, ideology, language and history. Accordingly (and especially when tensions arising from the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 and ongoing international uncertainty in the Middle East and elsewhere), doing the business of government has become increasingly challenging and those who are able to "muddle through" (Lindblom, 1959) may confidently claim a great victory.

III

The ongoing process of building a pan-European approach to lifelong learning is naturally of immediate interest to educators. *Lifelong Learning in Europe* provides useful essays on broad "conceptual considerations" and instructive material on existing typologies utilized by specific countries. It describes and explains efforts to build an applicable framework that will allow for comparative analysis of different forms and methods as a preliminary step toward managing diverse organizational fields. It raises important issues questions related to the possibility of coordinating common projects while respecting cultural diversity and diverse economic needs. However, the largest part of the book, twelve of the fifteen chapters, is devoted to national case studies. These reveal how particular countries have grappled with the difficult questions of how best to marshal the material and human resources needed to achieve the socially sanctioned goal of disseminating the cognitive, affective and behavioural attitudes and skills needed for the production and reproduction of the symbolic and material cultures of particular nations as well as the important personal goals of intellectual and social development of people as individuals and citizens, not just cogs in an economic wheel who are occasionally in need of fine tuning. All of this, of course, is done with an abiding concern about coordinating adult educational systems so that a common agenda can be devised, credentials can be commonly recognized and credits transferred among institutions and across national borders.

By learning how educators deal with their challenges, practitioners in other fields can make their own connections, perhaps gaining perspective by incongruity.

The specific "country studies" address topics of controversy such as lifelong learning's success in promoting "social inclusion" in Scotland; whether the United Kingdom's "Learning Age" initiatives have brought a "Renaissance without enlightenment"; community-based adult education and the problem of marginalized groups in Ireland; Estonia's experience in "developing human capital in post-socialist capitalism"; adult education in Russia's transforming labour market; explaining Hungary's low participation rates; problems of equal access to lifelong learning in Slovenia; and so on.

Although these topics may seen to be (and, in fact, are) of tremendous importance to people designing, implementing, advocating or trying to assess institutional policies and processes directly related to the stated theme of lifelong learning, this book should appeal to a wider readership as well. Whether we are involved in economic development, social assistance, social inclusion of ethnic minorities and migrants or any other field of program development and social investment, common problems and priorities exist. How do we establish common or at least compatible objectives? How do we develop strategies to help citizens cope with the necessity of taking risks in their own life choices? How do we balance the need to assist individuals with the necessity of responsible allocation of funds for socially necessary projects? How do we innovate, stabilize, maintain and grow successful social initiatives?

The experiences of educators reported in this anthology provide clear lessons for people involved in parallel fields from social assistance to health care and from public safety to cultural development. Moreover, by learning how educators deal with their challenges, practitioners in other fields can make their own connections, perhaps gaining perspective on their own concerns without being hobbled by their own personal and professional investments in particular problems and solutions. In Kenneth Burke's timely phrase, by seeing equivalent patterns in unfamiliar settings, we may gain "perspective by incongruity" and find ourselves coming up with pertinent ideas precisely because we see them raised and applied in exotic settings.

IV

An example of the kind of approach that has been part of the project of identifying problems and developing solutions in lifelong learning is the effort to achieve cooperation within diversity using methods such as the "open method of coordination" (OMC). Promoting lifelong learning for citizens within countries, never mind across cultural and language communities in countries with different histories, economies and political institutions and relations to democracy requires what is called social or organizational learning. When I was first exposed to the approach to problem identification and problem solving that is present in OMC, I was more than a little sceptical. While I understood very well the perils of policy formation and implementation in a hierarchical, top-down model for promoting innovation, I also worried that a self-consciously modest and necessarily slow-paced, consensus-oriented approach would prove ineffective. Especially considering the complexity of the circumstances and the urgency of the problems, OMC had all the hallmarks of futility and possibly of deception.

> Authoritarian intervention inevitably produces the opposite result from what was intended and fails or, worse, superficially succeeds but builds a culture of sullen resentment that ensures a greater failure over the long term.

Simply put, OMC is a cyclical reporting process which is directed toward policy learning, not policy-making, policy implementation and policy enforcement. It is a wholly voluntary process. It is seemingly aimed at nothing more impressive than the

sponsorship of an unending series of meetings at which a collection of bureaucrats and external experts chat amiably and seemingly endlessly about some important and probably sensitive issue. It is backed by no EU legislation. It contemplates no authoritative action, no executive accountability, no responsible assessment and no juridical entity with the right and the duty to mete out punishment or order corrective action if the policy fails. With no power, little structure and only the vaguest of mandates, it initially seemed to me that OMC was set up to fail. It appeared to be no more than an administrative ploy to allow governments to claim that a problem was being addressed when, in fact, nothing was being done except the providing the pretence of looking as if something was being done ... but with no possible results.

It took a very productive morning in the company of Bart Venhercke, Director of the European Social Observatory in Brussels to convince me otherwise. What I learned in person from him and what I learned from this book are essentially the same lessons. When confronted with apparently insoluble problems in seemingly unfathomable situations, the temptation is to yield to the impulse to smash through the ambiguities and contradictions and impose what seems to be a rational solution on all parties, regardless of their reluctance, timidity, confusion and perceptible intractability. Authoritarian intervention, however, inevitably produces the opposite result from what was intended and fails or, worse, superficially succeeds but builds a culture of sullen resentment that ensures a greater failure over the long term. Patience, on the other hand, may be the only option when authentic cooperation and not mere compliance is the goal.

Surely there can be no social domain in which authentic cooperation must trump mere compliance in order to produce tonic and not toxic results. Lifelong learning is not just a fashionable slogan. It is a necessary prerequisite for societies experiencing change and requiring innovation to permit adaptation in the effort to grasp opportunities while simultaneously avoiding the dangers raised in current conditions of technological, ecological, political, economic, demographic and overall cultural change. The problems we face and will increasingly face are too large and complicated to admit of easy solutions. In circumstances of urgency, sometimes the only effective strategy is a sort of methodological serenity. If this seems too much like an inchoate exercise in Taoism, so be it: as the sage said, "the way that can be known is not necessarily the true way"; to which I can only add, as the "take-away" from this impressive collection, "the way that can be known quickly and decisively is necessarily the false way."

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches cultural anthropology and modern political thought at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.

Reference:

Lindblom, C. 1959. The science of "muddling through. *Public Administration Review 19*(2): 79-88.