
AUTHENTICITY AND SELF-CULTIVATION AS LEARNING TO BE: THE HERMENEUTICS OF LIFELONG EDUCATION

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Charged with examining the state of education across the globe in 1972, Edgar Faure, then chairman of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), published an educational treatise titled “Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow.” Four common principles guided the authors of this document. These included: (1) all nations, despite political, economic, and cultural differences nevertheless aspire toward a common destiny; (2) belief in democracy, broadly conceived as each human being’s right to realize his or her own potential and to share in the building of it; (3) an aim toward development is the complete fulfillment of humankind individually and as a community; (4) and lifelong education produces a complete human being.

Barring some tensions I encountered within the UNESCO document, there are important hermeneutic ideas about lifelong education that warrant attention. An exploration into the concepts of authenticity and *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, fruitfully highlights such ideas. In this paper, I will focus on Charles Taylor’s concept of authenticity and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of *Bildung* because both philosophers demonstrate a commitment to hermeneutics, or grappling with the dialogical nature of the individual’s existence in relation to others and the greater world. Furthermore, both articulate well, albeit in different ways, the idea of coming into one’s sense of self as a lifelong process, with Taylor focused on the ethical ideal of leading one’s individual, though deeply communal, life, and Gadamer focused on the educational ideal of cultivating oneself as a learner and thinker through communion with others.

In this paper, I will connect both philosophers to lifelong education, specifically to UNESCO’s second and third educational principles of democracy, broadly conceived as the realization of one’s own potential and human development, understood as the complete fulfillment of humankind as an individual and as a community member. To bring forth the hermeneutic underpinnings, I will link the second principle of democracy as potential with Taylor’s discussion of authenticity and the third principle of human development with Gadamer’s discussion of *Bildung*. My goal in this work is to not only tease out some of the tensions I encountered within the UNESCO document, but more importantly to explore the hermeneutic ideas embedded within UNESCO’s conception of lifelong education.

BACKGROUND TO LIFELONG EDUCATION

During the late 1960s, lifelong education was an important topic of discussion among adult education theorists. Instead of a system of education, lifelong education was considered a philosophical principle. Leading UNESCO education theorist at the time, R.H. Dave, broadly defined lifelong education as “a comprehensive concept which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning extended throughout the life-span of an individual to attain the fullest possible development in personal, social and professional life.”¹ Beyond the confines of place and the particular stages of development, lifelong education discussions marked a radical departure from formal schooling discussions. Tuijnman and Boström argue that lifelong education has roots in humanism, based on Enlightenment principles, and compensatory education, wherein an individual can compensate later on in life for the education that was missed or denied earlier.² Lifelong education represents a second chance of sorts, allowing all seekers an opportunity to develop themselves, alongside others who seek similar opportunities to grow.

This global focus on the empowerment and liberation of individuals and communities shifted toward commodities and market demands during the late 1970s and has not seen a return to individuals or the flourishing of communities since that time.³ Discussions are now centered on lifelong learning, supplying labor markets with a skilled work force, and sustaining economic growth. Jim Crowther has described the difference between lifelong learning and lifelong education in more candid terms.⁴ Lifelong learning, he posits, is pernicious. The pernicious aspect of lifelong learning is that while attached to building up a continually evolving body of knowledge throughout one’s life, learners are thrust into their education as a result of an economic imperative at the level of policy and practice. This critique consists in lifelong learning’s reliance on human capital development. Crowther’s suggestion is to dispense altogether with lifelong learning policies and practices and to promote lifelong education, which enhances the individual and collective autonomy of communities rather than the objectives of a global economy and workforce. While conceptually related, lifelong learning and lifelong education are philosophically distinct educational ideas.

¹ R.H. Dave, “On Learning Strategies for Lifelong Education,” in *Reflections on Lifelong Education and the School*, ed. R.H. Dave (Hamburg, West Germany: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Institute for Education, 1975), 43.

² Albert Tuijnman and Ann-Kristin Boström, “Changing Notions of Lifelong Education and Lifelong Learning,” *International Review of Education* 48, nos. 1–2 (2002): 93–110.

³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴ See, e.g., Jim Crowther, “‘In and Against’ Lifelong Learning: Flexibility and the Corrosion of Character,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 23, no. 2 (2004): 125–136.

THE UNESCO DOCUMENT

Roots of lifelong learning are prevalent in 1972, but so too is a concern for lifelong education. Regarding these educational issues, the authors write:

For far too long education had the task of preparing for stereotyped functions, stable situations, for one moment in existence, for a particular trade or a given job. It inculcated conventional knowledge, in time-honoured categories.⁵

One need only to consider most programs of vocational education and how these cut short not only the length of one's education but also the breadth and depth of knowledge learners can pursue. The authors continue:

This concept is still far too prevalent and yet, the idea of acquiring, at an early age, a set of intellectual or technical equipment valid for a lifetime is out of date. This fundamental axiom of traditional education is crumbling. Is not this the time to call for something quite different in education systems?⁶

We cannot acquire all the knowledge necessary from grades K-12 alone. Rather, education needs to be ongoing. The authors define lifelong education as a continual educational process in which human beings participate in learning throughout their lives, through the influence of the surrounding environment and experiences that mold their behavior, their conceptions of life, and knowledge content.⁷

While this definition appears broad enough to include different types of learning and for different purposes, as one continues to read, it becomes increasingly apparent that lifelong *training* rather than lifelong *education* is the ultimate agenda behind the UNESCO authors. And yet, instances of lifelong education make an appearance in the document, but only to satisfy the purposes and aims of developing *societies as a whole*, rather than to develop *individuals*. The authors write:

Most men are not sufficiently equipped to face the conditions and vicissitudes of life as lived in the second half of the twentieth century. Hundreds of millions of adults need education, not only for the pleasure of perfecting their capacities or contributing to their own development, as before, but because the demands for over-all social, economic

⁵ Edgar Faure, Felipe Herrera, Abdul-Razzak Kaddoura, Henri Lopes, Arthur V. Petrovsky, Majid Rahnema, and Frederick Champion Ward, *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (Paris: UNESCO, 1972), 69.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 142.

and cultural development of twentieth-century societies require the maximum potential of an educated citizenry.⁸

To achieve *the maximum potential of an educated citizenry*, individuals would need to embrace a desire to learn, develop skill sets, and increase competencies. The authors point not only to the pleasure of achieving personal growth and enrichment as a result of education, but they also point to *the necessity because society* demands it, and because there is a prevailing global economic imperative.

The UNESCO writers straddle a neo-liberal conception of lifelong education. Their insistence upon satisfying the demands of the global economy betrays their otherwise strong insistence upon education as a lifelong process. In their very writing, the authors shed light upon the phenomenon of lifelong learning and shift away from the emphasis on lifelong education. Whereas lifelong education consists in an Enlightenment ideal rooted in self-knowledge, understanding, and realization, lifelong learning bears little resemblance to such meaningfulness and instead depersonalizes educational experiences and aims for greater global efficiency and economic growth.⁹

And yet, the UNESCO education writers' version of lifelong education is less pernicious and wholly capitalist-driven than Crowther describes in his full-blown version of lifelong learning today. The UNESCO writers describe a vision of lifelong education that is both dialogical and personalized. They write:

The concept of lifelong education covers the entire educational process, from the point of view of the individual and of society. It first concerns the education of children and, while helping the child to live his own life as he deserves to do, its essential mission is to prepare the future adult for various forms of autonomy and self-learning. This later learning requires many wide-ranging educational structures and cultural activities to be developed for adults.¹⁰

In this passage, it appears that the authors wish to make way for selfhood. There is no doubt that an education for autonomy and self-learning is consistent with lifelong education. Acquiring self-knowledge, understanding, and reasoning through the exercise of critical thought and responsible action are important aims of lifelong education.

However, that very same education is not required to meet the demands of our global, market-driven society. Instead, one need only an ability

⁸ Ibid., 142–143.

⁹ For an elaboration of this argument, see Gert Biesta, “What’s the Point of Lifelong Learning if Lifelong Learning Has No Point? On the Democratic Deficit of Policies for Lifelong Learning,” *European Educational Research Journal* 5, no. 3 (2006): 172.

¹⁰ Faure et al., *Learning to Be*, 143.

to adapt to changing market conditions, openness toward new technologies, and willingness to learn from new cultural contexts brought about by an expanding global workforce. So the question arises: If the aims of “Learning to Be” are for the human being to explore himself/herself as s/he comes into self-knowledge, as well as an understanding of others and of the world through education, why then must human beings also cater to the needs of the learning society by learning skills and other competencies? Wouldn’t such catering run the risk of betraying one’s primary goals of self-knowledge, community empowerment, and liberation through education?

These inconsistencies will no doubt bring an individual down one of two paths. One path is to the learning society and the challenges of meeting the capitalist economy demands that come with it. Here, the risk of self-betrayal for the preservation of global goals is great. The other path is toward the pursuit of lifelong education that the UNESCO authors discuss, in which the learner pursues knowledge and understanding of the self, others, and the ever-changing world in a broad sense. My exploration of the concepts of authenticity and *Bildung* intend to clarify and fine-tune the UNESCO definition of lifelong education and its hermeneutic underpinnings.

AUTHENTICITY AS POTENTIAL

By authenticity we tend to think of genuineness and accurate origins, as in the sense of the connoisseur who is relied upon as an expert in finding the truth of an artwork. However, I wish to go beyond references to authenticity in the fine arts, and to explore the ideal of authenticity in Taylor’s sense. Members of the UNESCO educational commission clearly wish to empower the individual participant from a lifelong, dialogical, and critical standpoint. They write:

Learning to live, learning to learn, so as to be able to absorb new knowledge all through life; learning to think freely and critically; learning to love the world and make it more human, learning to develop in and through creative work. Seemingly abstract words. But education is such a huge undertaking, it has so radical an influence on man’s destiny, that it will be damaging if it is only considered in terms of structures, logistical means and processes.¹¹

Taylor writes of the moral force behind the ideal of authenticity.¹² A person is grounded in a society and its laws, culture and familial traditions, steeped in communities that when combined comprise the person’s horizons of significance against which s/he must contend and work out his/her identity.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹² Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 17.

Taylor writes,

I can identify my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.¹³

The picture Taylor sketches of authenticity is unlike our notion of the term that we've come to know. Indeed originality and expression of individuality are primary concerns, but authenticity is not a self-absorbed, narcissistic pursuit, for if it were it would lose its moral force. Instead, authenticity is grounded in an ethical-existential commitment to work out one's identity in relation to greater surrounding forces that comprise the individual's horizons of significance.

Taylor's concept of authenticity relates to lifelong education as individuals acknowledge the greater global forces at work with which they must contend, but also recognizes the potential for the development of selfhood. "Learning to Be" means learning for the sake of acquiring knowledge and gaining personal fulfillment while adjusting to the needs and demands of capitalism. It's a dialogue between oneself, one's community, and one's society that provides an opportunity for an individual to focus on her own personal becoming, or originality.

Indeed, Taylor's notion of authenticity as a form of self-fulfillment is an ethical achievement that is worked out over the long term. Like the UNESCO commission's concept of lifelong education, authenticity is a process of becoming. The UNESCO commission writes that lifelong education is considered "a process in the human being, who thereby learns to express himself and to question the world, through his various experiences, and increasingly—all the time—to fulfill himself."¹⁴ What Taylor's notion of authenticity lacks is an ethical-existential companion for education that has broader implications for UNESCO's concept of human development. This is where Gadamer's concept of *Bildung* can be useful.

BILDUNG AS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

According to the UNESCO publication "Learning to Be," human development is described as an ongoing, dialectical process rooted in the

¹³ Ibid., 40–41.

¹⁴ Faure et. al., *Learning to Be*, 142.

interrelatedness of self-knowledge and social relationships. The aim of human development is the complete fulfillment of humankind, not unlike *Bildung*. As a phenomenon in educational thinking since the time of ancient Greece that acquired newfound importance during the German Enlightenment, *Bildung* is best described as upbringing.¹⁵

According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, a person with *Bildung* has undergone an individual process of self-formation that harmoniously entwines with the world, whereby the individual develops different aspects of his identity that makes some greater contribution to humanity.¹⁶ Twenty-first century educational philosophers have examined the enduring significance of *Bildung*.¹⁷ *Bildung*, facilitated through liberal education, prepares us for democratic living.¹⁸ The concept is also relevant for critical education theory, which holds emancipatory potential for the modern Western subject who exercises autonomy, self-determination, and self-reflexivity.¹⁹ Underlying each treatment of the role of *Bildung* in education is the emphasis on self-development and an individual's relationship to the world. In this regard, *Bildung* relates directly to the UNESCO conception of human development.

In *Truth and Method* and "Education as Self-Education," Gadamer calls *Bildung* self-cultivation and self-formation,²⁰ the underlying theme of which is the individual must accept responsibility for growth. Specifically in his educational work, Gadamer calls upon the individual to take responsibility to overcome any knowledge gaps. But they must do so through their own initiative. He raises the bar even higher by insisting that youth address any shortcomings by strengthening their own resources.²¹ He demands that they not relinquish responsibility to teachers, schools, society, or to anyone else to make such improvements. They must take ownership of their education and cultivate themselves.

The goal of lifelong education is to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through one's life. If lifelong education is meant to produce a more complete human being, it makes sense that this human being work at cultivating himself. Gadamer's point is well taken; nobody can do such work on another's behalf. The individual must do the hard work on his or her

¹⁵ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹⁶ Humboldt's notion of *Bildung* is explained in Sven Erik Nordenbo, "Bildung and the Thinking of Bildung," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 3 (2002), 341.

¹⁷ See Lars Løvlie and Paul Standish, eds., "Bildung and the Idea of a Liberal Education," special issue, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 3 (2002).

¹⁸ Lars Løvlie and Paul Standish, "Introduction: Bildung and the Idea of a Liberal Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 3 (2002), 323.

¹⁹ See Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken, "Do We (Still) Need the Concept of Bildung?" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2003): 139–154.

²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 8–9.

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Education is Self-Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 4 (2001): 535.

own. But this is good work, and in no way is she isolated as she does this work during her journey, for her peers, who similarly take up this cause, are completing parallel journeys, as they too cultivate authenticity and contend with their horizons of significance. She has owned up to her responsibility to shape her life, to give it meaning, and to engage with others along the way.

CONCLUSION

Philosophers of education should have interest in lifelong education for its philosophical importance. Not only does lifelong education benefit from sharper distinctions made between education vs. learning, or fuller descriptions of formal vs. informal kinds of educational experiences, but drawing connections between existing ideas of education and selfhood could prove fruitful as well. If one turns to the work of Michael Oakeshott, one finds a connection between his notion of freedom and lifelong education's focus on the empowerment and liberation of individuals through their education.²²

The UNESCO education commission tasked with writing "Learning to Be" clearly wants individuals to learn "to think freely and critically" and even to learn to live and learn. However, the authors make clear their indebtedness to the learning society. Given our current challenging context, I suggest we take the UNESCO's call upon individuals to think dialogically and critically and act ethically to work out our identities within the context of our increasingly market-driven society. We'll need to think freely and critically, learn to live, and learn to "absorb new knowledge all through life"—though *not* for purposes of preparing ourselves for the global market, but rather for purposes of *preparing ourselves to become ourselves*.

²² Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 2–3.
