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# Introduction - Learning and the learner: exploring learning for new times

P. Kell

*University of Wollongong, pkell@uow.edu.au*

W. Vialle

*University of Wollongong, wvialle@uow.edu.au*

D. Konza

*Edith Cowan University*

G. Vogl

*University of Wollongong, gillian@uow.edu.au*

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## Introduction

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### **Learning and the learner: Exploring learning for new times**

Peter Kell, Wilma Vialle, Deslea Konza & Gillian Vogl

*Learning and the learner: Exploring learning for new times* is a collaboration emerging from the Faculty of Education in the University of Wollongong. It is the outcome of an international workshop held in September 2004 involving researchers from Australia and overseas. The workshop was funded and staged by the Faculty of Education as part of the activities of the research group termed Learning and the Learner.

This book has emerged from this workshop and the subsequent exchanges and interactions that arose from the workshop and this book is an exploration of the questions about the nature and character of learning in contemporary times. The contributions in this book are critically engaging contemporary questions about learning and the learner. These questions have shaped and will continue to shape learning in schools, universities, colleges, work places and in communities, villages and towns across the globe in diverse settings and involving peoples from diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages, experiences, ambitions and needs.

The questions explore the broad dimensions of learning, asking:

- What is the nature and character of learning in the context of the opportunities and threats of globalisation, new technologies of learning and the trans national nature of education markets?
- How do learners and the institutions where they live and work in respond to the global dimensions of everyday life in contemporary times as well as engage with the sometimes contradictory demands of the local and global simultaneously?
- What are the new learning environments in these “new times” and how are they different from what has emerged as commonplace understanding of what and where learning is undertaken in the past?
- How do we engage and negotiate with learners in the processes and practices of learning in ways that enhance autonomy, participation and the capacity of learners to contribute to the local and global communities in productive and meaningful ways?

- How do we develop theoretical positions that are reflexive, rigorous and relevant to the needs of diverse learners in diverse settings? How are new theoretical positions able to incorporate the new global dimensions of learning as well as the needs to incorporate a more holistic view of the individual's social, political, economic, spiritual and collective needs?
- How can the experiences of learning be improved to incorporate broader dimensions of learning that go towards a global citizenship to enable learners to both respond to and to contribute to the quest for a world that features concerns with human rights, democratic participation, ecological sustainability and peace?

The contributions seek to explore alternative views of learning that seek to challenge learning as a functional, atomised and an individualistic process. The contributions also challenge the views that learning is simply a technical activity limited to functionalist check-lists that collapse learning into reductionist methods of “how to get learners to learn” and “how to measure learning”. The authors look for alternatives to learning as simply the acquisition of what are disconnected facts, skills and behaviours.

The growth of learning markets that frame learning as an “exchange relationship” is also explored for its influence in distorting opportunities, creating inequalities and narrowing the dimensions of learning around “what the market wants”. The valorisation of knowledge and learning that accompanies the marketisation of learning is explored for the way in which some forms of knowledge and practices are assigned greater value than others and how this influences and distorts life opportunities and outcomes of the process of learning. *Learning and the learner: Exploring learning for new times* challenges the narrow views about learning that has often dominated the discourse of governments, the media and many educators. The contributors individually argue that traditional notions of learning are inadequate for the complexity and multidimensional qualities of contemporary life and the challenges of globalisation.

The authors in this volume view learning as strongly influenced by the social, cultural, political and economic contexts in which they live and work. This positions learning as an interactive process and as a form of social practice that involves collaboration, partnership and the creation of environments that account for the broader dimensions of people's lives.

In this way learning is not seen as the acquisition of disconnected and often irrelevant facts or the attainment and demonstration of irrelevant and often damaging skills, attitudes and behaviours. Rather

*Learning and the learner: Exploring learning for new times* seeks to explore opportunities for interconnected and imbedded knowledge that features a transformative practice to improve opportunities for learners and their local communities and global linkages. It is also strongly linked to a recognition that the learner is at the centre of any learning process and that learners of all ages have the capacity to have control and autonomy in their own learning experiences.

The book also seeks to explore the complex relationships between the social practices of learning, the social forces that shape the learning environment and the inter-relationship between learners and those responsible for the processes of learning.

The first chapter by Chris Fox in *Learning in new times: Globalisation, learning and the post-colonial condition* explores aspects of the questions concerning the changing setting of learning and globalisation. Fox describes the emergence of a global consciousness and what she terms as “globe talk” and suggests that globalisation has positioned knowledge and power in a new alignment. This alignment creates a new post-colonial arrangement of power and influence that favours and differentiates in the interests of powerful global corporate interests. The new learning associated with the globalisation is seen by Fox as not having occurred in a vacuum but as being conceived in an environment that favours arrangements that exploit and marginalise many learners. Fox extols Stewart Clegg’s call for academics and teachers to understand the interrelatedness of “power, knowledge and learning in this new era” and to also look beyond the “claims of those in power”. Fox suggests there is as a challenge in reclaiming values to ensuring that there is a balance between the opportunities and threats from globalisation.

Taking up some of these questions about the impact of contemporary society on access and opportunities in education, Peter Kell explores some of the challenges that the new social and class relations present for educators. In *Equality of opportunities in new times; The politics of learning and the learner in the new world disorder*, Kell explores the ways in which the state has repositioned itself within the context of the market and how this impacts on curriculum, teaching and learning. Kell argues that the politics of whiteness and backlash politics have been utilised by the right to create artificial divisions and de-legitimise and erode the progressive claims made for democratic and inclusive approaches to education. He argues that the new challenge is to overcome the politics of “fetish” and “consumerism” which has depoliticised education and develop a global optimism that (re)politicises learning and teaching.

The themes and questions around meeting the needs of those with disabilities and how inclusion can be promoted is undertaken by Deslea Konza in the chapter *Inclusions of students with disability: responding to the challenge*. Konza explores the issue of inclusion describing the changing socio

political climate that places pressure on schools to adopt inclusive practices that no longer see “dumping ground practices” for those with disabilities. The barriers to inclusive practices including teacher resistance, inappropriate and inadequate training and curriculum and pressures are described as impediments to inclusion. In response to these challenges, Konza argues for a collaborative approach by teachers and a need to expand the teacher skill base to meet the needs of students. Innovative ways of doing this are proposed by Konza and these include teacher mentoring and peer mentoring which are conducted in an environment where teachers can physically and emotionally “come together”.

The questions regarding mainstreaming those with disabilities is explored in a very different setting of sports by Peter Kell, Marilyn Kell and Nathan Price in *Two games one movement; The Paralympics and the Olympic movement*. The authors explore the way in which the creation of a special event has marginalised those with disabilities. Kell, Kell and Price explore the glamour, glitz and commercialism of the Olympics and how this corporate view of sport overshadows the Paralympics and acts to reinforce marginalisation. The authors cite examples of how this marginalisation might be avoided and the article signals some important principles associated with inclusion and learning in the arena of sport.

The subject of the shifting identity of teachers and change in the workplace of teachers is also taken up by Gillian Vogl in *Teachers as learners: Change, identity and relationships in public education*. Vogl’s contribution explores the nature of change in the workplace and the impact of these changes on the work and identity of teachers. The chapter considers the importance of the media in creating a climate of crisis and identifies how neo-liberalism and the discourse of privatisation have influenced public perceptions about teaching and teachers. The chapter reports on interviews of teachers who describe the changing social relations of the workplace in response to neo liberalism. The statements of teachers depict an erosion of morale and status in the face of depleted resources, criticisms of public education and the way top down management has disempowered teachers. Teachers describe the importance of collegial solidarity and collaboration against the threats of fragmentation that are manifested from competition. An enduring theme of this chapter is a continued commitment by teachers to the notion of public education and a democratic system of education that values the participation of teachers in decision-making.

The challenge of change is also explored by Nicola Yelland, Stavroula Tsembas and Lowell Hart in the chapter *E Learning: Issues of pedagogy and practice for the information age*. This chapter explores the emerging flexibility of online learning and the changes that this brings to education providers and teachers. The authors argue that a new learning environment will demand a new set of pedagogies that promote self directed approaches to learning and respond to a diverse range of learners. The chapter uses a case study in professional learning of the implementation of online learning at RMIT University in Australia as an example of the way in which a new pedagogy can be developed using a new

framework. The Evidence-Critique-Impact framework is proposed by the authors as promoting learner directed learning that can be applied in social and workplace contexts. It is a more active and engaging process that responds to the diversity of learner needs, particularly in professional learning. The authors urge a rethinking to provide a “fluent access” of technology and the structures and the people to support online learning.

Professional learning is the setting for a contribution entitled *De-reifying learners: Grappling with student ethics in postgraduate studies* by Marilyn Child and Regine Wagner. This chapter explores ethical dilemmas in postgraduate education are explored through a set of critical incidents. These dilemmas present special challenges for teachers attempting to secure the confidence of postgraduate students, many of whom are non-traditional learners, and may bring behaviours and attitudes that contrast with those evident in the academy. The chapter explores the construction of the notion of rules and the problematic ways in which the relationship around them are constructed and preserved around class, power and influence. Questioning of assumptions about tolerance and the asymmetrical power relationship between the teacher and the learner is considered in this thought provoking contribution.

Responding to the needs of learners returning to study later in life is one of the key themes associated with developing a life long learning society. The contribution *Women returning to work: Stories of transformation* by Pauline Lysaght describes the experience of several women undertaking study and employs Howard Gardiner’s notion of multiple intelligences. Lysaght uses a framework of multiple intelligences to explore how the selected group of women see their learning experiences. Lysaght has also used the framework to develop profiles to enable the participants to describe their own learning styles. The multiple intelligences framework was found to be a vehicle for people to redefine their abilities and potential and it also enables people to re-story their lives and according to Lysaght develop potential for re-authoring their future towards life changing opportunities.

Instrumental notions of education have often crowded out a wider purpose for learning and neglected aspects such as moral education and spiritual education. How children make decisions about meaning and value is explored by the team of Wilma Vialle, Russell Walton and Stuart Woodcock in the chapter *Children’s spirituality: An essential element in thinking and learning in new times*. This team identifies the need to develop children’s world-views in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. They contend that “spirituality is a secular concern and spiritual learning is an important matter for schools” and explore issues of meaning and value with a selection of children. The chapter identifies how children see the “nature of nature” and a “circle of life” and their relationship to living things. Vialle, Walton and Woodcock in this chapter argue that in today’s world good and bad are not neatly divided and schools will have a greater role in the learning processes around these values.

Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet Psychologist who died in the 1930s, has been popularised in recent decades by many learning and development theorists who have utilised a socio-cultural approach to learning. In the next chapter *Scaffolding and learning: Its role in nurturing new learners*, Irina Verenikina describes the use of aspects of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, most notably exploring the notion of the zone of proximal and scaffolding in learning and development. The chapter describes how scaffolding can be utilised by adult learners in an undergraduate education program. Scaffolding, not to be confused with programmed learning, provides students with a more active and involving way of learning and according to one participant enables children to be "guided supported and even led at times although they (the students) are putting in effort too". Freedom to explore and experiment and interact with the external environment is a key feature of Vygotsky's work and offers a different and active perspective on learning through shared experience.

These themes of exploration and the development of deep connections in learning mathematics are discussed in contribution by Mohan Chinnappan entitled *Productive pedagogies and deep mathematical learning in globalised world*. Chinnappan explores how students can achieve a more connected understanding of mathematical concepts through a framework that utilises a situated and collaborative approach to learning. This approach challenges memory-based approaches that rely on individuals to remember disconnected concepts and theories. The contribution includes an example of how to contextualise mathematical concepts and concludes that much is reliant on the connections that teachers make on behalf of learners and this will be an on going challenge for the future.

The chapter by Honglin Chen explores how Genre can inform student language and student writing and discusses the application of the work of Bakhtin in *Learning in new times: Writing through the "Eyes of Genre"*. Exploring genre, Honglin uses Bakhtin's view of language as social and situated and determined by both the "social situation and the broader social milieu". In this way language and the teaching of writing has the potential to break away from language "shells" and "age old crystallisations" and account for a more flexible situated view of language. The discussion also utilises Vygotsky, already discussed by Irina Verenikina, in the earlier chapter, to explore how higher order thinking can originate from social interaction" as well as the development of an inner genre. Chen argues that "learning to appropriate academic genres in a second language is not simply a matter of learning the formal rules but a matter, of changing, acquiring new ways of knowing and being."

The preparation of teacher and "the teaching of teachers" remains an issue of considerable debate. A consistent theme emerging from a series of reviews and inquiries into teacher education has identified the need for student teachers to gain more authentic experience in the school setting. Angela Hill in *Learning in the workplace: New forms of learning for pre service teachers* explores the question of how to develop situated learning in the workplace that integrates the needs of the academy and develop

authentic learning. This contribution critiques many of the models of workplace learning and calls for more active and engaging approaches that move beyond outdated practicum models and placement models. Angela Hill argues that teacher educators need to be aware of the needs of the student and to assist them in building an understanding of theory through participation in a learning community.

This question about what constitutes a learning community and how it might be organised and nurtured is key to designing education futures for learners. In *The Ontology of learning environments* by Gordon Brown, he sees the development of future environments as not merely the context for learning but “the set of conditions that enable and constrain learning”. Brown argues from the perspective of critical realism and explores traditional views of the learning environment and identifies the need for an ecological model. An ecological model accounts and incorporates the development of open systems that are stratified and emergent and are also moral. The proposals by Gordon Brown suggest an alternative way of viewing a learning that challenges learning environments that are closed, restricted and dominated by competition that marginalised moral and communal connections.

The objective of the workshop and this book was to explore issue for learners and learning from a diverse range of perspectives and to explore new themes and directions in teaching and learning. The contributions have sought to explore new directions in learning and to develop diverse, eclectic engagements and dialogues with a diverse range of settings and theories to enable readers as learners to make decisions and selections that may inform their own practice and theory building. In making the workshop and this book a reality, thanks go to Professor Barry Harper, the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong and Professor Jan Wright Associate Dean (Research) in Faculty of Education and the University of Wollongong for their support for the Learning and the Learner research group. Special thanks go to Michael Organ and the team at the University of Wollongong online research services group for enabling the production of this book in a way that it will reach new audiences through cyberspace. Finally thanks you to all the participants and contributors to this volume for their energy, enthusiasm and patience.