WELCOME TO THE SMORGASBORD, PLEASE, HELP YOURSELF!
DECONSTRUCTING THE INDIVIDUAL IN CONTEMPORARY LIFELONG LEARNING DISCOURSES

SEMINAR PAPER PRESENTED AT ‘INTEGRATING WORK AND LEARNING – CONTEMPORARY ISSUES’ SEMINAR SERIES 2004, 28TH SEPTEMBER

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, UMEA UNIVERSITY, UMEA, SWEDEN

OVAL RESEARCH WORKING PAPER 04-06

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ISBN 1 920698 99 X

THE AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR ORGANISATIONAL, VOCATIONAL AND ADULT LEARNING
A key national centre supported by the Australian National Training Authority
In contemporary Western discourses on lifelong learning the ideal individual is being described as the active, self-directed, free agent lifelong learner. This paper explores the language of lifelong learning focusing on its implications of the individual by critically examining its inherent construction of the capable man, who is supposed to be successful within and useful for the so-called Learning society. When socially constructing the ideal individual for the ideal society the opposite, ‘the undesirable other’, is simultaneously implicitly being constructed, here referred to as the disabled man.

**INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary discourses on lifelong learning the individual is strongly emphasised, e.g. in terms of the lifelong learner, the self-directed learner or the free agent learner. Rhetorically¹ the ideal individual is being characterised as active, capable, responsible, highly self-motivated, flexible, career-driven, engaged, disciplined, successful, informed, experienced, passionate, performance-driven, high achieving, cooperative, compatible, confident, autonomous etc. Virtues like these are strongly emphasised as necessary to succeed, or even to survive, in the so-called Learning society². In discursive expressions like these, with their celebration of the active, independent and self-fulfilling individual, embedded in the language of lifelong learning, the idea of the capable man³ is being constructed. In the construction of the desirable virtues of the successful ideal individual, who is to be useful within the constructed ideal society (the ‘learning society’), undesirable characteristics are automatically being framed out and are thereby being constructed as the opposite of the ideal. Instead of being regarded as successful and highly valued, i.e. able, in the society the individual who is not able or willing to adopt the discursive ideals is rhetorically being described as an anomaly that does not fit into the society and thereby becomes “the undesirable other”. Being an anomaly means being constructed as imperfect, incomplete and inadequate in relation to the ideal society and its socially constructed demands. Instead of being the able, or cap-able⁴, the individual is being constructed as dis-able, or disabled, and thus becoming the disabled man⁵.

The language used when talking and writing about lifelong learning is in no way neutral, but loaded with ideological and political values shared or struggled about within a certain community of use, discourse. By analysing the discourses of lifelong learning and its underlying assumptions about what is regarded as good and desired or bad and undesired the ideological and political values can be illuminated. An underlying assumption in this paper is that there are no ‘true’ good or bad behaviours as such. Instead the notions of e.g. ability and disability are socially created and negotiated, consciously and/or unconsciously, with or without struggle between different ideological and political standpoints, within different discourses, in different contexts in different times until the values become taken for granted as the ‘truth’.

This paper aims at analysing the language within Western lifelong learning discourses focusing on the individual.

**The capable man**

The notion of ability relates to the ideas and ideals held within a certain context or culture at a certain point in time. Who is regarded as able and who is not is therefore always on the move and up to question. In present Western discourses the formation of so-called learning societies (see e.g. Field, 2000; Edwards & Boreham, 2003) is a highly valued societal goal and emphasised as the key to prosperity and growth. The contemporary ideal society is mainly constructed on the basis of an economic rationality where competition in the market is taken for granted as the desired ‘good’ (Field, 2000, Rubenson, 1996). For that reason education and learning on a lifelong basis for continuously ‘updating’ of knowledge and skills are regarded as vital to market performance compatible in the market. The notion of competition goes for nations, companies as well as for individuals. The responsibility for education and learning has however shifted from the state to the labour market, civil society and the individual (Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). Even more so, according to contemporary rhetoric the responsibility has also shifted from the labour market and civil society to the individual (Berglund, 2004). The ideal individuals are seen as ‘free agent learners’⁶ (Opengart & Short, 2002), or
customers, who are eager to invest in their own human and social capital by choosing, buying and consuming different kinds of learning and educational opportunities offered as a smorgasbord laid by the providers on the market, the state, municipality authorities, labour market, civil society etc. Investing in lifelong learning will make the individual employable in the labour market as well as becoming a valuable citizen according to the same rhetoric (Aspin & Chapman, 2001, Opengart & Short, 2002).

The idea of a learning society has moved from being an ideological ideal to become the norm, as in normal as well as normative. According to Edwards & Boreham (2003) there is a struggle over meaning and the politics of discourse. They identify three different aspects of the learning society policy discourse: economic, political and cultural. As different policy-makers have their own context- and cultural-dependent understandings of what a learning society, lifelong learning etc. means, they have to negotiate a common meaning of the concepts. The result is that it is difficult, or even impossible, to really share exactly the same meaning. The language used when speaking about these things therefore becomes vague and general. On the other hand the vague and general language makes it easy for people in general to recognize and adopt the ideas. Following that logic the discourses of a learning society and lifelong learning speaking of a learning market, and educated society, informed citizenry, a learning life-style etc. in a seamless natural and conflict-free way. When the language is used to talk about willing, responsible, committed and informed citizens, or individuals, it has the tone of naturalness. To have a learning life-style and being a lifelong learner is considered to be the natural and normal behaviour. The language on the individual with these positively loaded characteristics equals normality to ability or capability.

The language of lifelong learning has a special emphasis on activity as a desired quality of the capable man. The individual’s activity is often expressed as being an active agent. This ‘agency’ takes different forms. Firstly, the individuals’ supposed creation of their own identity and self-image. Well-known metaphors such as being ‘the architect of one’s own fortune’, ‘the self-made man’, ‘God helps those who help themselves’ are examples of a construction of the individuals as ‘active agents of their own fate’. The so-called lifelong learners are often described in terms of self-directed learners, who are internally motivated and engaged in their own learning and make their own informed life choices.

Secondly, ‘being an active agent’ is strongly stressed in the rhetoric in relation to the labour market. The individuals in relation to the labour market are often described in terms of being self-responsible, rationally planning, free-agent learners, or customers, who help themselves at the ‘lifelong learning smorgasbord’. The individuals create their own personal profiles and career-paths to ensure a self-sustainable employment. Individuals’ security is said to depend on their specific knowledge and skills, their own personal human capital, and the value it has in the market. The ideal individual in the labour market is thus constructed as the employable agent with flexible utility in the labour market. The metaphor ‘a chain is only as strong as its weakest link’ is often used in the labour market rhetoric to stress the importance of skilled and useful employees.

Thirdly, one of the much discussed matters in relation to lifelong learning in contemporary rhetoric is how to finance education and learning and where the responsibility should lie. Models of shared responsibility have been discussed, such as Individual Learning Accounts and Learning Tax Credits etc. More and more individual responsibility is stressed arguing that it is up to the individuals to make themselves employable and that the competences are ‘owned’ by the individuals themselves to ‘sell’ in the market. In that sense the individual is both seen as a customer and a supplier in the market. The ideal individuals should therefore, accordingly, run their lives like a company. The self-financed, often referred to as self-funded, learner is being constructed as the ideal capable man.

Fourthly, active agency is discussed in terms of active citizenry. In the rhetoric the individuals are supposed to be useful to the society and community. Lifelong learning is in this sense e.g. about accumulating ‘social capital’. Lifelong learning and citizenship are also talked about in terms of having enough knowledge to be able to make informed decisions to make democracy work. According to Martin (2003) there is a reconstruction of citizenship going on, where citizenship is less about welfare and more about ‘workfare’. Martin argues that “there is a radical restructuring of the welfare state and the hitching up of social and educational policy to the imperatives of economic policy”
Neo-liberal values are thus applied even when it comes to the social domain. To follow the rational-economic arguments the individuals will ‘gain’ socially and politically by being informed and active citizens. The construction of the active citizen can then be argued to be another construction of the individual as the capable man, this time on the civil playground.

To summarize, the capable man, as described in contemporary western lifelong learning discourse, is being constructed as:

- **The active agent of its own fate** (the free-standing individual independent of everything else)
- **The employable agent** (the individual in relation to the labour market)
- **The self-financed learner** (the individual as a self-governed company)
- **The active citizen** (the individual in relation to civil society)

The contemporary meta discourse on lifelong learning is a mixture of different traditions now sharing the concept of lifelong learning. Originally, the two main actors on the lifelong learning scene, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), represented two inherently different ideological views on learning and education. While UNESCO initially based its ideas on holistic and humanistic ideals, focusing on lifelong education as a basic human right for liberation and enlightenment, the OECD had an economic and utilitarian rationale focusing on recurrent education as a means to increase the human capital for labour market growth (Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). Edwards and Boreham (2003) compare Sutton’s (1994) notion of lifelong learning (and lifelong education) as the perfectibility of man with that of recurrent education as a more restricted focus on the perfectibility of human potential in the workplace (Edwards & Boreham, 2003, p.416). In the rhetoric of the documents studied for this paper the notion of lifelong learning could indeed be described as an ideological and political idea of accomplishing the perfectibility of man whether it concerns being the active agents of one’s own fate, the employable man on the labour market, the self-financed learner or the active citizen. The notion of perfection of human potential, ‘doing the right things’ for the labour market, civil society etc, seems to be an integrated part of the wider notion of perfection of man which also, to a large extent, focuses on ‘having the right identity and engagement’.

**The disabled man**

As this paper has argued so far, the rhetoric on lifelong learning is concerned with the construction of the ideal lifelong learner, here called the capable man. The construction of the capable man is built on an ideological and political idea of lifelong learning as a means to achieving the perfectibility of man. So far the paper has presented and discussed the characteristics of the capable (normal and perfect) man, but every coin has two sides. Where perfectibility, as in ability, is a matter of concern the opposite, the imperfect and incomplete, is also implicitly taken for granted. “Language and power constitute subjects as able or disabled”, according to Baker (1999). When highlighting the able as the perfect and desired, the opposite, the disabled, is simultaneously constructed as the imperfect and undesirable. As the capable man has become the norm and considered normal, the disabled man becomes the ‘undesirable other’. The undesirable other will therefore be considered to be incomplete and inadequate, and thus disabled in relation to the constructed ideal society. The disabled man will also, through the evaluative qualities inherent in language be regarded as ‘the different’, ‘other' member of society and be given less social value than those in the position to judge and evaluate them (Cocks & Allan, 1996, p. 282). In the evaluative language a ‘less-than-able body’ equates to a ‘less-than-moral self’ (ibid.), which also goes for other so-called impairments than those body-related. As the ideal individual, the capable man, is regarded to have a moral responsibility to be a lifelong learner within the learning society the ‘others’ are (implicitly) being stamped as immoral. Being constructed as the disabled man will thus also mean being constructed as immoral in relation to the construction of the ideal individual in and for the ideal society.

The labels disable and disability are mostly used when talking about physical or mental so-called handicaps or dysfunctions in terms of impairment. “Impairment is mapped onto the body-mind, the biological becomes a disability only if a culture or society makes it so” (Baker, 1999, p. 94). If
disability is a construction made discursively within a culture or society, it should mean that not only body-related or mental aspects could be considered a dysfunction. Every aspect constructed as imperfect, dysfunctional or not desired could then be argued to be a disabling factor in relation to the specific culture or society.

Constructions of the disabled man

In contemporary rhetoric the opposite of the lifelong learner, here called the disabled man, is mostly indirectly mentioned. The kind of comments that can be found often mentions so-called barriers towards learning, mostly identified as mental barriers on the individual level. Policymakers and others seem deeply concerned that some people are non-participants in ‘lifelong learning activities’. In the discourses studied the main reason for the barriers and non-participation are often thought of as being a lack of high value for learning and education.

Below is a list of some of the discursive characteristics of ‘the lifelong learner’ (the left column). In the right column is a somewhat provocative attempt to read between the lines to illuminate the constructed opposite (binaries) of those characteristics. The words without asterisks are commonly used words in the studied documents (see footnote 1), whereas the words without an asterisk are the implicitly constructed binaries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The capable man</th>
<th>The disabled man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>*Incapable, unable, disabled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>*Irresponsible, immoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self mastered</td>
<td>*Must be forced or convinced, in need of help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly self-motivated</td>
<td>Sees motivational barriers towards learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career-driven</td>
<td>*Not interested in work-related issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>Non-participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>*Lazy, unbothered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplined</td>
<td>*Undisciplined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed</td>
<td>*Ignorant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passionate</td>
<td>*Cold/indifferent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-driven</td>
<td>*Does the job without reflecting, or not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High achieving</td>
<td>*Low achieving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatible</td>
<td>*Incompatible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous/independent</td>
<td>*Dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>*Afraid, scared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>*Rigid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>*Flop, looser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>*Inexperienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>*Antisocial, obtrusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values education and training</td>
<td>Does not value education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed/employable</td>
<td>Unemployed/unemployable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*implicit constructions of the ‘disabled man’

Who is then regarded as the disabled man and undesirable other in the ‘learning society’? The rhetoric speaks of certain ‘target groups’ labelled as ‘at risk’ of being marginalised in the so-called learning society. These groups consist, according to the rhetoric, of the unemployed, people who do not want to participate in education, training or other learning activities, people with low formal education, people from lower social classes etc. Being ‘at risk’ is also described as a function of gender, ethnicity or disability. The rhetoric thus includes all, leaving no one out. At the same time as the ‘at risk’ groups are singled out in the rhetoric there is seldom a discussion about structural reasons for not being, or ‘wanting’ to be, a ‘lifelong learner’. After identifying the deviant groups, often in rather a casual way
of simply listing the groups to acknowledge their existence, the rhetoric continues to speak about the individuals and their responsibilities and personal barriers.

**CONCLUSION AND SOME UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

In the rhetoric lifelong learning has a seductive aura of positive and future-oriented power. As has been shown in this paper the individual lifelong learner, constructed as the capable man, is being equally positively envisioned. Despite all the positive aspects lifelong learning draws upon, there is a growing dismay and critique among academics as well as practitioners (Crowther, 2004). The critique concern many different aspects of lifelong learning such as the concept itself and its meaning, its inherent ideological and political aspects, implementation aspects etc. This paper has focused on the discursive construction of lifelong learning by looking at one of the central aspects in the contemporary rhetoric, the individual. The individual virtues rhetorically linked to the ideal individual, called the lifelong learner or the free agent learner, have in this paper been described as a discursive construction of the capable man as being the active agent of one’s own fate, the employable agent, the self-financed learner and the active citizen. The critique on lifelong learning and its positive implications in this paper lies in the non-visible language, i.e. all the things that are not said, but are inherent in the language used. Where there is a construct of the lifelong learner as the ideal individual, worker and citizen, there is also an implicit notion of the imperfect, non-fitting, undesired opposite, here spoken of as the disabled man. The critique that comes out of this deconstruction of the individual virtues and their implicit constructed opposites concerns the views held in the contemporary rhetoric on lifelong learning on human beings, their learning and their relations to the social context.

In the rhetoric the individual is described as possessing an almost unlimited potential of life-possibilities lying waiting for the motivated, engaged, goal-oriented and ambitious individual regardless of any structural or social constraints. In this light Falk’s (1999, p. 1) comment on lifelong learning and what he refers to as the Market defined ethic: “Adapt or You’re Toast”, or Martin’s (2003, p. 569) critique of the British so-called Third Way as “social Darwinism”, is understandable and worth considering. Is there a hidden social Darwinist agenda (survival of the fittest) at play in lifelong learning? If so, what happens to those who cannot or do not ‘want’ to be active self-directed free agent lifelong learners because of social, psychological, physical or other reasons? What really happens to choice? Are people ‘free’ to make their own choices or are they only free to make the choices regarded as valuable in the market, and thus highly valued when constructing ‘the capable man’? Is it considered as out of fashion or politically incorrect to discuss and study structural and social dimensions of lifelong learning? This paper has no answers to these questions, but as they inevitably appear when scratching the surface of lifelong learning, questions like these should be utterly important to have in mind and discuss when dealing with lifelong learning.
ENDNOTES

1 The paper is built on a discourse analysis on different kinds of written documentation from the USA, Australia and Sweden (see the reference list below) and is part of a larger analysis for my doctoral thesis. The documents are mostly policy documents representing governmental, educational and labour market discourses and also some critical articles and web-based debates. The references to the “contemporary rhetoric” made in this paper refer to earlier studies based on these documents (Berglund, 2002, Berglund, 2004) but can be generalised to the Western meta discourse on lifelong learning in general.

2 Other expressions often used in the rhetoric are the Knowledge society, the Information society, the Learning economy etc.

3 The expressions the capable man and the disabled man used in this paper are to be considered as a paraphrase on the economist Adam Smith’s notion of the economic man, homo ‘oeconomicus. According to this theory the economic man makes rational choices to serve and maximize his/her own self-interest and utility. The model of the economic man is often used in economic theory as a model of human behaviour. The word man is used in this paper to mean human, a person, regardless of sex or age. That does not mean that the language of lifelong learning is gender neutral, far from it, but that is a topic in need of further analysis and will therefore not be dealt with in this paper.

4 Able; Middle English, from Old French, from Latin habilis, from hab_re, to handle. See ghabh- in Indo-European Roots. The construction able to takes an infinitive to show the subject's ability to accomplish an action. Synonyms: Competent; qualified; fitted; efficient; effective; capable; skilful; clever; vigorous; powerful. Capable; Latin cap_bilis, from capere, to take. See kap- in Indo-European Roots. Possessing ability, qualification, or susceptibility; having capacity; of sufficient size or strength. Synonyms: Able; competent; qualified; fitted; efficient; effective; skilful (see http://www.dictionary.com). Although the words able and capable have different origins they lie within the same area of understanding and usage today and are often referred to each other as synonyms.

5 The opposite of able is often referred to as unable, and incapable in relation to capable. Being constructed as unable and incapable in the constructed ideal society at the same time means being constructed as disabled in relation to the discursive expectations (see further discussion in this paper).

6 Free agent learners are defined as: independent, highly motivated adults, who take responsibility for their learning and development, utilize their spare time to learn, use new approaches to learning, and self-teach using a variety of resources. These employees are more selective and independent in the training they receive (Opengart & Short, 2002, p. 222).

7 Disability is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in their International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap (ICIDH) model as “any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being” (WHO 1980).
REFERENCES


Documents used for analysis:

Australia:


Sweden:


**USA:**


