

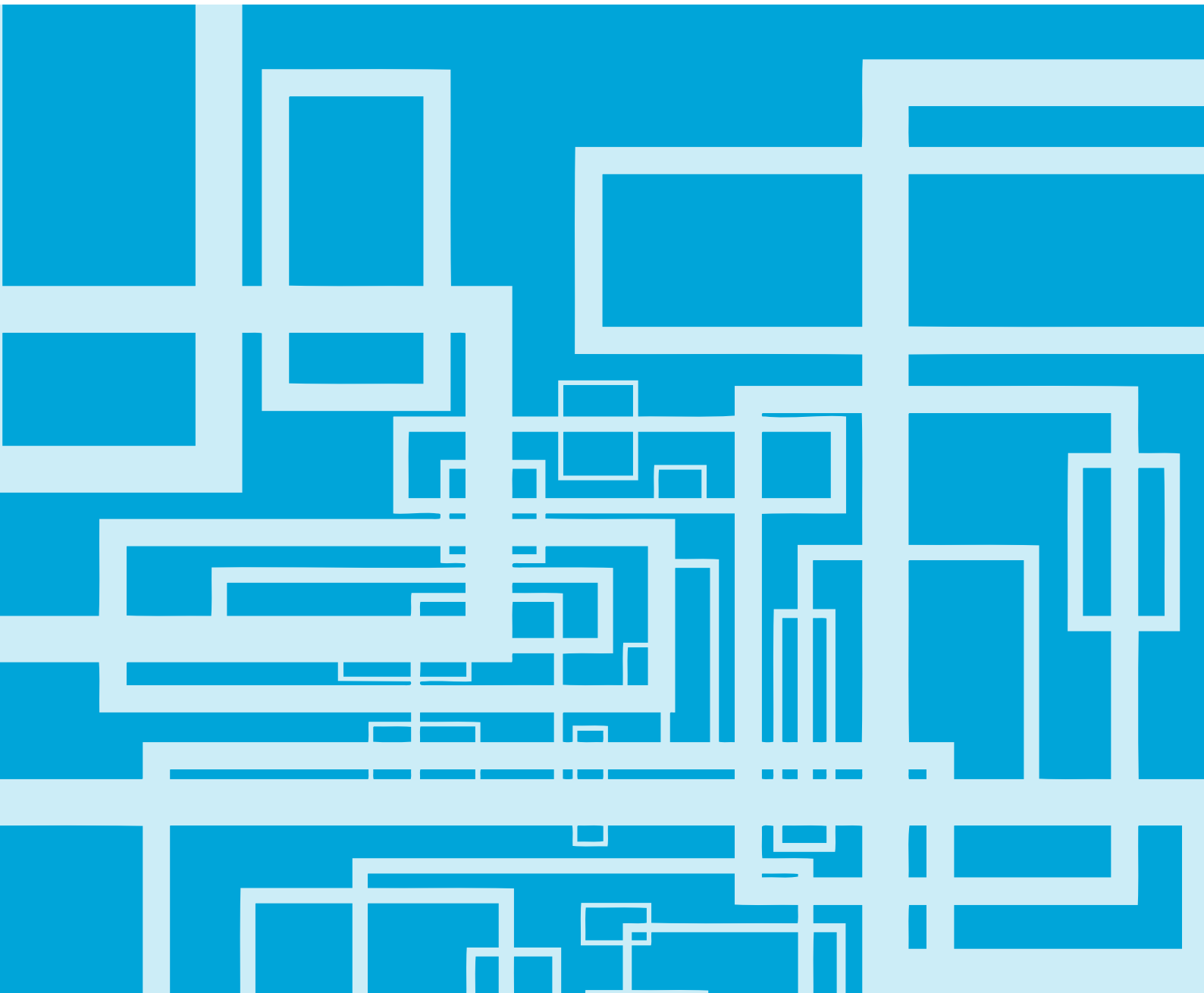
Teaching and Learning Research Programme

Strategies for improving learning
through the life-course

July 2008 The Learning Lives Project

TLRP

www.tlrp.org



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Foreword

3	This pamphlet provides a summary of findings from one of TLRP's largest project investments and an informed discussion of their implications. The Learning Lives project was led by Gert Biesta, John Field, Ivor Goodson, Phil Hodgkinson and Flora Macleod and combined study of the learning biographies of about 120 adults aged between 25 and 85 with analysis of data from the British Household Panel Survey. The project related retrospective life history evidence with 'real time' life-course research. In these ways, the project reconstructed the learning biographies of a wide range of adults in different contexts and stages of their lives.
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The project has been able to get to grips with some of the most enduring issues which affect learning through the life-course and to use this understanding to provide a constructive analysis of strategies for improving learning. It reviews the role of formal education and training, personal support, learning cultures and reflective narrative learning.

One of the notable features of this work is that it recognises complexity and variation. It makes no claim to have identified 'what works', but the project's systematic collection of evidence and theoretically informed analysis commands a more holistic form of attention.

Insights from educational research of this sort has profound implications for policy, practice and daily decision making by individuals. The dilemmas which make life so interesting and diverse call for informed judgement as a basis for action. For this the understanding of 'learning lives' which this project has generated has much to offer.

For further information, see the project website at:
<http://www.learninglives.org/>

Andrew Pollard, Director, TLRP
July 2008

Introduction

The idea of lifelong learning has played a prominent role in educational policy since the 1970s. Whereas lifelong learning was initially focused on personal development and growth, it has increasingly become part of a 'new educational order' in which the policy emphasis has shifted towards its economic function.

Most existing research on lifelong learning is characterised by an institutional focus in that it studies learning within institutional settings or in function of educational policies and practices. In contrast, the Learning Lives project has taken a biographical approach by focusing on individual adults and their learning biographies and trajectories and the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in their lives. Over a three year period we conducted 528 interviews with 117 people (59 male; 58 female) aged between 25 and 84. In addition we analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey, an annual panel survey of each adult member of a nationally representative sample of 5,500 British households (ca. 10,000 individuals per wave).

The main ambition of the Learning Lives project has been to investigate what learning 'means' and 'does' in

the lives of adults. We used a broad conception of learning which includes learning in the context of formal education and work-settings and learning in and from everyday life. Whereas biographical and life-history methods have been utilised in researching adult and lifelong learning, the Learning Lives project has been exceptional because of its scale, length and its longitudinal 'real time' design, and because it has combined analysis of interview data with analysis of quantitative longitudinal data.

In this pamphlet we present main findings from the research and relate them to research-based strategies for improving learning through the life-course.

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The value of learning in people's lives

The Learning Lives research was centrally concerned with establishing and exploring the place and value that learning has in people's lives. It has done so in ways much more fully explained elsewhere (see www.learninglives.org). This paper summarises the most important findings and relates them to strategies for improving learning. In particular, we consider the enhancement of learners' dispositions, learning practices, attainments, and opportunities for people to use their skills and knowledge to assert control over their lives.

The research covers both formal and informal learning. What is often termed informal learning is a ubiquitous part of living. That informal learning arises mainly out of the experiences of living. It can be significant or insignificant, intended or unintended, and transformative or trivial. Much is often tacit and unrecognised as learning, even by those concerned.

In addition, many people participate in formal learning, not just in childhood and youth but across the lifespan. That participation in formal learning varies along a continuum between low and high involvement, depending upon the extent to which the process of learning itself becomes important in the life and self-identity of the person. The question of involvement is an important one, going beyond what is often implied by terms such as participation or engagement. People can engage in learning, yet feel that it is peripheral to what really matters in their lives, or marginal to their sense of who they really see themselves as being. Alternatively, they can value learning as an integral part of their lives, and see it as central to who they are.

Our research confirms other studies in showing that most adult participation in formal learning is related to work. We have further found that much work-related training elicits low levels of involvement. Participation

in more general adult education frequently results in high levels of involvement and is often, but not always, triggered by significant life changing events. Our research also shows that people learn from reflecting upon and thinking about their lives, often but not exclusively triggered by life changing events.

It is not possible to make evaluative judgements about strategies for improving lifelong learning, without first making normative judgements about what learning is of value. In particular, our research shows that not all learning is beneficial, and that what counts as valuable learning can differ according to point of view. For example, there are often differences between the value placed upon learning in government policy, and what many people see as valuable in their lives.

In general terms, our research shows that people can experience learning as valuable in the following circumstances:

- Learning can help people with the processes of routine living
- Learning can help people adjust to changed circumstances
- Learning can provide valuable knowledge or skills, for particular purposes which can include employment and career change, as well as other activities – which may or may not influence their experiences in the labour market
- Learning can contribute to changing self-identity
- Learning can contribute to the achievement of agency.

However, learning for any person or group is always enabled and constrained by their horizons for learning. By that we mean the interrelationships between the person themselves and their situation. This means that there are always limits on what can be learned, so that strategies for improving learning need to vary to meet differing people's needs and different circumstances.

Strategies for improving learning

It is important to be pragmatic about what counts as a 'learning strategy'. A working definition is that a strategy for learning involves a planned, coherent approach to providing and/or achieving learning. Such strategies can originate from different types of 'actor', such as individual learners; those who teach and advise adult learners; governments, through their policies and funding approaches; and local and regional organisations, in the voluntary, private (including employers and Trades Unions) and public sectors.

The work done within the Learning Lives project suggests four broad approaches to improving learning. They are:

1. Provision of planned courses, workshops etc ('formal' education and training)
2. Personal support for the learner, which may be professional (career guidance, workplace mentoring, tutoring, provision of learning materials, etc) or informal (friends, colleagues, family, local community)
3. Enhancing learning cultures. That is, improving opportunities for learning in particular locations (workplace, local community, etc).
4. Providing opportunities for self-reflection, including talking, writing, thinking about our own life histories and life circumstances.

These often can and should overlap. Each of these approaches works best when it addresses both aspects of a person's horizons for learning: the internal and the external. It is possible to develop strategies for the improvement using any one of these approaches taken independently, and we consider that next. However, there is often more to be gained by looking at them in combination.

(1) Formal Education and Training

We have considerable evidence of the value of formal education and training. Where it is of value, formal education has two overlapping types of outcome. The first is the learning of whatever the course was designed to teach. The second is a contribution to personal growth and/or change. Where learners have a low level of involvement, the emphasis is on the former. Where there is a high level of involvement, the former becomes a part of the latter. Then, the process of learning is often at least as important as what is being learned. We have several cases which show that participation in adult education can lead to high levels of involvement. Such high involvers often take several different courses, over several years. Such periods of participation are often linked to significant life changing events. However, in

some cases, participation in adult education continues periodically throughout the person's life.

On the other hand, many in our sample routinely attend short courses or training events that seem to have no discernable impact upon their identities. Often, these are courses provided by employers, which people can see are relevant to their work, but seem not to touch them, beyond this instrumental purpose. Such course can also be undertaken voluntarily, usually for a particular purpose – like improving skills with a computer. The quantitative data shows that most participation in formal learning is related to employment, and much is therefore likely to be of this low involvement type.

It is not the nature of provision that determines the level of learner involvement, but the interrelationship between that provision, the learner and the broader positions within which the learning takers place. However, high levels of involvement require lengthy periods of participation in one or more courses, so is less likely in circumstances where this is not possible. Where the outcomes of formal learning are only concerned with the acquisition of course content, this is not a problem. But when the hope and/or intention are to make a difference to or to change the learner, short courses alone are unlikely to be successful. For significant personal change, there is a need for longer-term formal provision that can encourage higher levels of involvement, and/or the short courses need to be integrated into related informal learning in the learner's life (see below). This finding points up a contradiction in current English policies towards lifelong learning, which set out ambitious goals of personal change for such provision, mainly associated with gaining employment, but also with increasing social inclusion, whilst focussing primarily on short course provision (for example through Learn Direct), and on the acquisition of specified content outcomes, measured by qualification achievement.

The government has set itself ambitious targets for greater employment and social inclusion, while promoting flexibility and upskilling for all. These objectives must entail significant changes in self-identity for many of those people whose life chances the government is hoping to improve. Our research suggests that such personal change is least likely to be achieved through short courses.

We have found that the value of any formal learning does not depend primarily on the achievement of a qualification (though our evidence includes plenty of

cases where this has been valuable and even essential for some people). Many, perhaps most adults, take formal learning provision aimed at a level the same as or below their previous best qualifications. So successful formal learning for adults does not depend on climbing a linear hierarchy of qualifications.

A final empirical point is that some groups have specific needs, and these will require targeted provision. Many of these groups are already well-known from previous studies, but some are less familiar. Our analysis of BHPS data, for example, showed that a number of groups who are not in the workforce are missing out. This includes young women who had early transitions into parenthood, and as some of this group showed a preference for learning at home, they may benefit from access to targeted and supported online provision. The BHPS analysis also indicated that older adults (54+) do not seem to be catered for at all in the present skills drive.

We also have evidence of formal education and training that had negative effects on people. A lot of the negative experience relates to early schooling, but not all. Some derives from participation in formal learning in adult life, which for one reason or another is experienced not only as unsatisfactory in some way, but more fundamentally, serving to 'switch off' motivation for any further formal participation. Disturbingly, this included instances where adults were highly frustrated by their experience of working towards a vocational qualification.

Our research shows that many adults live successful and fulfilled lives without much participation in formal learning. However, it also shows that many people gain considerably from such engagement. Our research further suggests that current strategies and provision of formal learning in the UK have some serious short-comings. These include:

- An excessive focus on learning related to employment
- A lack of accessible provision for people who are not in employment
- A lack of longer provision that is likely to sustain personal growth through high levels of involvement
- An over-focus on content acquisition as demonstrated by qualification achievement
- Particularly in England, a dangerous restriction of funding to hierarchical qualification improvement.

These short-comings can be overcome, and if the intention is to build a learning society for all their negative impact should be removed.

(2) Personal Support

We have lots of data suggesting the importance of personal support in improving learning. This can happen within formal courses, and also in relation to wide ranges of more informal or everyday learning. The support can be from one individual or from a supportive group. It can be professional – career guidance, workplace mentoring, or a tutor on a formal course. It can also be provided through informal contacts, with relatives, friends, work colleagues, local community groups, classmates, etc.

Strategies for improving professional personal support in learning can be thought of in three ways. Firstly, all formal learning provision contains an element of personal support, from a tutor or teacher. In addition, some courses also involve further support, for example from a mentor. In either case, this personal support role can be very important. Secondly, many workplaces provide professional support for learners (perhaps especially new staff). This can be through an official mentor or more informally, though the day to day guidance from more experienced colleagues. Thirdly, there are professional agencies, both government funded and within the voluntary sector, who provide personal support in relation to particular types of situation. Examples include marriage guidance, debt avoidance, psychotherapy and career guidance. At the heart of all these activities is the learning of the client, usually about themselves in relation to a major personal change or crisis. Our research contains several examples where such support has been very valuable, and suggests that recent attacks on a supposedly growing therapeutic culture are over-stated.

Personal support for learning works best when the person giving that support can focus on the wants and interests of the client. Attempts to push people into doing things they do not want to do, and the rationale for which they do not accept, often result in avoidance, resistance, or strategic compliance. Such learning support also works best when the support and learning are interrelated to other activities and learning in the person's life. A serious strategic concern is the very uneven access to such professional learning support, beyond formal learning provision. This is partly a matter of availability, partly a matter of cost, and partly a matter of personal awareness of what such support services can offer, and what the benefits can be.

Non-professional support takes place through the family, friendships and communities within which people live. It can be usefully seen as part of social capital. Our sample includes people who have successfully built

social networks to help support their learning, and even examples of people who have cut themselves off from what they regarded as inhibiting ties. It follows that such support is best improved through activities directed at improving social networking, and the availability of personal support in a general sense. It also suggests that co-presence can be an important resource for learners, particularly those most at risk of dis-engagement from learning programmes. We argue below that this is one part of a strategy for enhancing learning cultures.

(3) Enhancing Learning Cultures

A major limitation on the learning of some people is the impoverishment of the learning cultures with which they engage. Any social situation has a learning culture, by which we mean the practices through which people learn in that situation. Such situations include the family, the local community, workplaces, education institutions, and leisure or voluntary pursuits.

The enhancement of a person's learning cultures can be approached in two ways. Firstly, the learning culture of any specific situation can be enhanced. Secondly, people can be given access to a greater range of situations where learning takes place.

Within any particular situation, the learning culture can be enhanced in ways that make valuable learning more likely. This can be done through expanding the range of challenges and opportunities within the situation, thus broadening the learning practices that a person can participate in. For example, work can be organised to create new challenges and opportunities, or line managers can adopt an enthusiastic and proactive approach to learning rather than a sceptical and obstructive stance. A sports club might offer chances to become involved in management, as well as playing. Another way to enhance a specific learning culture is to increase the opportunities for shared and collaborative activity, where participants can learn from each other. This is particularly important in the light of developments in technology-enhanced learning, which may need to be used in conjunction with co-presence.

Furthermore, research shows that learning is more likely to be effective if the many forces acting upon a learning culture are acting synergistically with the learning concerned. For example, members of a sports club are more likely to learn cooperation and team work if (i) the game being played requires such cooperation to bring success; (ii) the influential members of the club are themselves exemplars of cooperation; (iii) distinction

within the club is earned at least partly through such cooperation, and (iv) the learners want to become better team players. This is one example, and similar considerations apply in other organisational settings, such as workplaces.

The learning cultures of different situations differ considerably, even when two situations have the same purpose. It follows that detailed attempts to improve the learning culture of any situation must be situation specific. Furthermore, in most situations, learning is not the prime function. Workplaces, to take an obvious example, exist primarily to produce a particular product or service. It follows that any enhancement of the learning culture will normally be secondary to the achievement of that prime function. Enhancing the learning culture in any situation has to be pragmatic. Nevertheless, this particular approach to improving learning is currently neglected, and much more could be done.

Many successful adults already live in a range of situations which combine to provide rich learning cultural variations. However, an important way of understanding the problems faced by the least advantaged sectors of society is that they lack access to this rich variety, in ways that severely limit their learning. We can give two examples from the Learning Lives data. When people are not employed, one major situation where learning is possible is removed. The unemployed and the retired not only have reduced access to formal learning, they lack participation in the learning culture of work. Secondly, some people live in deprived areas. Most policy and research focuses on issues of poverty, unemployment and health in defining and analysing such communities. However, they are also areas with relatively few accessible situations which provide rich learning cultures. Indeed, such areas are often stigmatised by outsiders in ways that further inhibit attempts to broaden social networks and promote reliance on limited internal resources.

One way of improving learning in such disadvantaged and stigmatised communities is to expand and sustain opportunities for both informal and formal learning within them. For example, a stable local learning centre and/or sports provision can valuably enhance the culture of a rundown inner city area, or isolated rural community. Formal learning centres in such deprived areas should be seen as an on-going learning resource, not just a means to access courses for instrumental reasons, and certainly not as a temporary measure tied to a particular funding programme or regeneration initiative.

(4) Personal reflection and narrative learning

The project has generated extensive evidence of biographical learning, i.e., of ways in which adults learn from their lives. The life-history methodology has helped us to explore the significance of narrative and narration in such learning processes, something we have captured in the idea of 'narrative learning'.

The idea of 'narrative learning' has been clarified through the course of this study. Stories and storying are important vehicles for learning from one's life, and our evidence shows how differences in the 'narrative quality' of life stories (i.e., narrative intensity; descriptive-evaluative quality; plot and emplotment; flexibility of storying) are correlated with different learning processes (the 'learning potential' of life-stories) and differing learning outcomes (the 'action potential').

There are important differences in the efficacy of life storying and there appear to be important relationships between styles of narration, forms of narrative learning and agency. Life stories play a crucial role in the articulation of a sense of self which means that narrative learning is also a form of 'identity work.'

We have taken agency to be about the (situated) ability to give direction to one's life. We have found that learning itself may or may not be agentically driven: it can be self-initiated or forced by others or be incidental. Learning may result in increase or decrease of agency. Increased agency seems to be more obvious and common, but much depends on the extent to which people acknowledge that they have learned something. This is more obvious in relation to formal education, often because qualifications open up new possibilities for action. Yet, experiences of successful learning also impact positively on people's self-confidence, which in turn can lead to increased agency in many aspects of their lives. The research indicates that the extent to which learning 'translates' into agency, depends on a range of factors and also on the particular 'ecological' conditions of people's field of action. Decreased agency through learning occurs when people learn that things are too difficult or that they cannot cope, which, in turn, impacts upon their sense of self.

The narration of one's life story is not only an important vehicle for expressing one's sense of self, but also for articulating and actively constructing such a sense of self. Relationships between identity and learning often become clear at times of crisis and change. People's major, life-changing turning points often

involve a need to learn. Learning can then contribute to changes in some dispositions, and thus a person's identity. It is, however, possible that existing dispositions are so strong that learning and subsequent change in identity do not happen. Our data suggest a widespread 'need' for the construction of a (coherent) life-story that helps them to make sense and come to terms with their life, although we also have clear evidence of the situated nature of life-stories (that they are told and constructed for particular purposes and in particular social settings), and that people often maintain a distinction between a private and a public version of their life-story.

The 'capability' of learning from one's life is not fixed but can change over time. We have found that narrative learning operates at the intersection of 'internal conversations' and social practices of story telling, which means that for many the (social) opportunities for narrating one's life story are an important vehicle for narrative learning. Our work is therefore consistent with other studies that emphasise the importance of a 'social practice pedagogy', ensuring that learners can contribute their own experiences, grasping the distinctiveness of each learner's life narrative, and establishing common ground where different people's narratives can be heard and valued.

Combining the approaches

Often, a successful strategy for improving learning will combine some or all of these four approaches. We show how this might work by taking three examples.

Learning at Work

Other research, in addition to ours, shows that the most important factor influencing learning at work is the nature of work itself. That is, employers or Trades Unions who wish to improve learning at work should first focus upon what we have termed the learning culture of the workplace. Enhancing this culture might, for example, include providing greater challenges and new work opportunities, increasing cooperative and collaborative working, and modifying working practices which inhibit desired learning. In addition, personal support may be provided through official or unofficial mentoring, and formal courses can also be provided. However, a central problem with learning at work is the tendency to focus only on what the employer values. Where that happens, even the best learning strategies can be counter-productive, from the perspective of the individual worker. For example, mentoring schemes focussed too tightly on employer objectives often generate resistance and strategic compliance. In such an environment, helping learners make sense of their own lives may feel more like increased surveillance than empowerment. Equally, well-managed and focused mentoring schemes can help learners broaden their social capital and provide support for informal as well as formal learning.

Learning at college

Currently, most efforts aimed at improving learning at

college focus on teaching, and on how teachers can better relate to their students, and help them master the specified curriculum content. Sometimes this is seen as including giving personal support. However, other research suggests that much could be done to enhance the learning cultures in colleges and college classes. Teachers can do some of this. They lack control over the learning cultures in their classrooms, but can mediate those cultures, working on aspects of the cultural practices to make more likely the learning that they wish to promote. Others in the educational system can also do more to enhance college learning cultures – or at least to avoid doing them further damage. College managers, government policy makers and several influential quangos could all do more, if they took the learning cultures issue more seriously. Particularly in adult education, there are examples of teachers explicitly working with students to develop personal narratives, to further enhance their growth and development.

Community learning

Strategies to improve learning in deprived, stigmatised communities would also benefit from a mixed approach. As we have already argued, the learning culture can be enhanced, and formal learning provided. Additional personal support and opportunities for some to reflect upon their lives can also be provided. As Veronica McGivney and others have argued, outreach activities are critical aspects of this process; yet learning that is limited to the safe and known settings of a specific workplace or neighbourhood is unlikely to expose learners to the range of skills and knowledge they require in contemporary society.

Limitations to any strategy

While the Learning Lives research shows that all of these ways of improving learning can work and be beneficial for some people, it also reminds us of vast variations in individual identities and circumstances. No single approach is likely to work for all people all of the time. And, whatever mix of approaches is adopted, there remain central and contested questions about the significance, value and desirability of learning. It is also important to remember that most informal learning is unintentional. This means that when attempts are

made to promote particular learning processes and outcomes, there are likely to be additional unforeseen and unintended process and outcomes, which may sometimes be more powerful than those intended. It is for these reasons that the Learning Lives project endorses approaches from other TLRP research on lifelong learning, in arguing that successful strategies to improve learning are likely to focus on increasing the likelihood of desirable learning in any particular situation, rather than prescribing what should be learned and how.

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