Evaluating the Relevance of Learner Identity for Educators and Adult Learners Post-COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed an unprecedented impact on our world. In a short period of time, it has exposed deep and entrenched inequalities between and within societies and has prompted a radical rethink of the purpose and function of education. It is clearly no longer sufficient to impart learners with mere curricular knowledge. It is imperative that learners learn 'how to learn' and understand the process of becoming and being a learner. 'Learner Identity' is an emergent construct linked to learning 'how to learn'. This paper interrogates the relevance of learner identity for educators and for adult learners in a post-COVID-19 world.

Keywords: Learner Identity, Learning 'How to Learn', 21st Century Learning, Core Competencies, Adult Learners

Introduction

An overwhelming majority of the world's enrolled learners experienced the temporary closing of educational facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Viner et al., 2020). Approximately 200 countries closed schools with over 90% of learners, ranging from early years through to higher education, facing some sort of disruption to their education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably caught education systems and learners off guard and in a short space of time exposed gaps, inequalities and limitations in developing preparedness among learners for times of pandemics and emergencies. Teacher-led learning became obsolete overnight and key questions were asked about the 'what', 'how' and 'where' of learning (Zhao, 2020). The questions arising have resonated within adult and community education contexts for some time. Must all learners follow a predetermined curriculum about which they have no voice? Can't learners

be provided with opportunities to pursue their own interests and needs? Can't learners be allowed to design their own learning? With educational systems worldwide transitioning from face-to-face teaching to online instruction, the issue of 'how' learners learn best emerged as a controversial talking point. Limitations of traditional ways of teaching, where learners are the recipients of what teachers teach exposed vulnerable, ill-equipped learners in an online world where teachers were not available to teach. Key attributes in learning were missing for students including learner agency, learner autonomy, self-regulation, responsibility and ownership of learning. The issue of 'where' learning takes place also entered the debate. In pandemic-times, learning can no longer be defined by what happens in a classroom or a homework space. Learning can take place anywhere and the need to acknowledge the multifaceted opportunities that may contribute to a learner's journey in becoming lifelong learners were debated (Zhao, 2020).

Adult and community education initiatives have long acknowledged the limitations of traditional educational systems. Embodied within the principles of adult and community education is the need to place learners at the centre of learning experiences, starting with the lived experience of the participant and locating learning in daily family and social lives. Teaching methodologies in adult and community learning programmes advocate for (DES, 2012) approaches that foster self-directed learning, critical thinking and 'learning to learn' skills. Teaching approaches are directed towards facilitating individuals to manage their own learning. Thus, many of the issues raised during the pandemic have already been debated within the context of adult and community education and indeed have also been debated throughout the first two decades of this century within the context of 21st century learning. The term '21st century learning' is widely used as an umbrella term for the proposed re-conceptualisation of the goals and purposes of education and learning in the third millennium. Education systems, now more than ever, are expected to cultivate values that will lead towards more inclusive and just societies, competent and active citizenship, and equality and equity in learning outcomes (OECD, 2018). With a view to the future, education, it is argued, must also equip learners with the capacity to transform themselves into self-directed learners, as well as 'with agency and a sense of purpose and the competencies they need to shape their own lives and contribute to the lives of others' (OECD, 2018, p. 2). The emergent goals for 21st century learning resonate closely with the goals and general principles underpinning adult and community education. Internationally, there is a noticeable shift away from content and knowledge

models in education towards competency-based models which place learner autonomy at the centre. Amongst the competencies identified, learning 'how to learn' is proposed. Claxton (2018) observes that it is extraordinary that it has taken education so long to develop a framework and language/vocabulary for effective learning. Learning 'how to learn' is particularly relevant for adult learners where confidence and efficacy in learning may be doubtful. Once learning is understood as a collection of skills, habits and attitudes that can be influenced by experience, then the idea that learning itself is learnable and capable of being boosted, offers endless possibilities.

Learning 'how to learn' extends far beyond content knowledge and academic skills and includes factors such as attention, memory, metacognition, persistence, grit, goal-setting, help-seeking, cooperation, conscientiousness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-control, self-discipline, motivation, mindsets, effort, work, habits, organisation, learning strategies and study skills. 'Learner Identity' is an emergent construct linked to learning 'how to learn'. It is defined as the process of becoming and being a learner. It is a 'conceptual artefact' that contains, connects and enables reflection over the emotional and cognitive processes of the experience of becoming and being a learner. In essence, it is about enabling students to review themselves as learners and to foster their understanding of how their actions, emotions, thoughts and motives about themselves in learning are interconnected (Coll and Falsafi, 2010).

This paper begins by documenting the transition from traditional models of learning with a curricular focus to 21st century models of learning defined by core competencies where goals relate to lifelong learning. Proposed models of learning for the 21st century are critiqued and their relevance to adult education considered. Learning 'how to learn', a key competency for 21st century learning and related to learner identity is considered. The paper will critique learner identity, a fluid, organic construct which aspires to embrace the process of becoming a learner rather than measuring what learners become. This empowering and potentially transformative construct emphasises the need for nurturing 'the becoming and being of learners'. Such a construct challenges prevailing understandings about how individuals learn and how educational systems evaluate, measure and track progress. The impact of this new perspective on learning will be considered with particular reference to adult learners and marginalised learners who, too often, struggle with the 'what' of learning at the expense of inadequate acknowledgment of the 'who' or 'how' of learning. The paper concludes by proposing that learner identity is a timely and relevant construct for adult education.

Purpose and Function of Learning

This section of the paper considers the evolving understandings that prevail about how individuals learn. As suggested by Deakin Crick, Broadfoot and Claxton (2004), learning is a process which is undertaken by individuals and groups. In any discipline, Deakin Crick et al. (2004) contend that the process of learning results in the acquisition of knowledge or skill. As the authors suggest, this can 'take the form of the ability to do something which could not be done before, or a new understanding about the world' (p. 248). Traditionally within the field of education, learning has been regarded as a process of acquisition as opposed to a responsive process (Biesta, 2004). This view is supported by Thomas and Brown (2009) who highlight the fact that learning in the 20th century was centred on the transmission of knowledge. Similarly, Gholami (2016) writes that, in the past, curricula have emphasised the impartation of knowledge. More recently, learning has begun to be viewed as a participatory process (Thomas and Brown, 2009) whereby the learner assumes responsibility for constructing his or her own knowledge and understanding (Glaser, 1991). Over the past decades, many researchers in the field of education (Boud, 2000; Wirth and Pekins, 2008; Thomas and Brown, 2009) have argued that new types of teaching and learning are needed within education systems of the 21st century. Gholami (2016), for example, contends that instead of concentrating solely on imparting knowledge, curricula should focus on the teaching of 'how to learn'. In a similar vein, Thomas and Brown (2009) outline the need to embrace a theory of 'learning to become' (p. 321) in contrast to theories that conceptualise learning as a process of becoming *something*. Adult learners bring previous experiences and biographies of learning to new learning contexts. A theory that acknowledges the centrality of process in learning welcomes the valuable contributions of life experiences in learning, exploration and continuity in learning. Indeed, as is suggested by Carr and Claxton (2002), the core aim of education for the 21st century:

> Is not so much the transmission of particular bodies of knowledge, skill and understanding as facilitating the development of the capacity and the confidence to engage in lifelong learning (p. 9).

The European Commission (2001) proposes that lifelong learning encompasses 'all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competence within a personal, civic, social, and/or employment-related perspective' (p. 9).

Critical discourse about the purpose and function of learning has contributed new understandings that identify learning to 'become' and process in learning as critical in achieving the ultimate goal of lifelong learning. It is acknowledged that traditional models of learning with a drill, practice and test focus fail many of our adult learners and in general ill prepare learners for the future. It is argued that the illiteracy skills of the future will not be the learner who cannot read, but the learner who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn (Toffler, 1970). In this, an unprecedented time of educational challenge, there is a golden opportunity to shift the focus from learning tasks and activities to the world of the learner and, hopefully, in doing so empower learners with the skills for learning for life. This vision for learners is echoed within international frameworks for 21st century learning.

21st Century Learning

In broad terms, the term '21st century learning' embodies the skills, knowledge and competencies required for academic and life success in the workplace and in general society (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009; Chalkiadaki, 2018). The knowledge society while still valuing traditional foundation skills in literacy, mathematics and manual labour, places new emphasis and increased value on higher-order cognitive abilities. Such abilities, it is argued, enable citizens to cope with change and respond to complex and non-routine problems (Levy and Murnane, 2007; Voogt 2008). The globalisation of society has also led to an increasingly multicultural and heterogeneous society in which citizens must learn to co-exist (Zajda, 2010). To overcome new complexities and avoid potential conflict, it is argued that learners must be equipped with appropriate competencies. Chalkiadaki (2018) argues that in spite of significant technological and cultural changes, education has not evolved to meet these challenges. There is, therefore, a renewed urgency within frameworks such as the 'OECD Learning Compass for 2030' (2019a) to ensure that countries are now investing in educational systems which prepare individuals for the society of the 21st century. There is a growing volume of research supporting the value of non-cognitive skills such as intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation and meta-cognitive strategies which have been correlated with academic achievement and successful outcomes after schooling (Rauber, 2008; Rosen et al., 2010; Lai and Viering, 2012). Adult and community education initiatives frequently advocate for the development of non-cognitive skills. It is arguable, however, that to operationalise outputs in this domain, there is a need to explicitly define relevant non-cognitive skills, why they matter, and how they should be nurtured in adult learning contexts. The benefits of learner-centred

forms of learning, the importance of learner voice, as well as learner agency and responsibility are also increasingly apparent in educational policy (Voogt and Roblin, 2010).

Echoing the aforementioned calls for higher-order critical thinking skills within the workforce, McGuinness (2018) and Perkins (2014) cite concerns that current educational practices at all levels lead only to superficial comprehension of topics and that learners are lacking in their abilities to cope with the unpredictable and non-straightforward problems presented to them in the workplace. Taken together, it is clear that the demands of society have and continue to evolve and, thus, there must be real changes to educational systems at all levels of learning to reflect new forms of learning and knowledge (Geisinger, 2016; Mishra and Mehta, 2017). The pause created by COVID-19 offers governments and education leaders a rare and possibly very short opportunity to review key goals in education and, perhaps with renewed vigour, to look forward, embrace change and realise the promise of 21st century learning for all learners.

Competency Based Models

To facilitate the realisation of 21st century goals in learning, a determined shift towards a competency based model in education has been observed. A core or key competency is a broad concept and encompasses skills, dispositions, attitudes and values, as well as knowledge about the context in which the competency is learned and demonstrated. A core competency is a learner's capacity to act in response to the demands of a more complex situation or task. To do so successfully, the learner needs to be appropriately informed about the task, have prior knowledge and to deploy cognitive and social skills, dispositions and values to meet the demands of the task. The concept of competency, therefore, implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It also involves the utilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. Such a model places learner autonomy at its centre and is motivated by three interrelated imperatives: education for democratic citizenship, education for life, and education for lifelong learning. Over the past two decades educators and international education communities have grappled to identify 21st century competencies. There is, however, no agreed international classification of key competencies. The 'OECD Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) Project' (2005) tentatively proposed three key categories of competencies: (1) Using tools interactively which involves using language, symbols, text, knowledge, information and technology interactively,

(2) Interacting in heterogeneous groups which involves relating well to others, working in teams and managing and resolving conflict and (3) Acting autonomously which involves the capacity to develop life plans, defend and assert rights, interests, limits and needs. Building on the original competencies, the OECD (2019a) proposed three further competencies to address the need for young people to be innovative, responsible and aware. These newly identified competencies are referred to as 'Transformative Competencies' and include: (1) Creating new value which involves displaying adaptability, creativity, curiosity and open-mindedness with a view to achieving a stronger, more sustainable future, (2) Reconciling tensions and dilemmas which involves learning to be system thinkers and (3) Taking responsibility which involves self-regulation, self-control, self-efficacy, responsibility and problem-solving.

McGuinness (2018), in a simplified and more accessible manner, recently proposed three key competencies necessary for 21st century education. Explaining that key competencies consist of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, McGuinness (2018) proposes that curricula should promote: cognitive competency, interpersonal competency, and intrapersonal competency. These are deemed to be key competencies because of their applicability across many knowledge domains. Cognitive competency refers to the development of cognitive skills including problem-solving, critical thinking, reasoning and decision-making. It also includes dispositions such as open-mindedness, persistence and curiosity. In terms of values, cognitive competency resonates with the desire to be stimulated, seek challenges and act with integrity. Interpersonal competency pertains to the development of socio-emotional, teamwork, listening and communication skills. With regard to dispositions, interpersonal competency involves being empathetic, assertive, responsible and respectful. Values might include the desire to be just, ethical, agreeable and trustworthy. The third key competency proposed by McGuinness (2018) for 21st century education is intrapersonal competency. This incorporates the development of personal skills, dispositions and values. These include self-awareness about learning, metacognition, self-recognition of learning strengths and weaknesses, self-regulation, persistence, autonomy, agency, self-efficacy and personal identity construction.

Competency frameworks represent a significant paradigm shift in education and a move away from implementing a knowledge-based curriculum to nurturing a skills-based curriculum that will support lifelong learning. Such a shift calls for learners to assume more responsibility for their learning and

enables them to become active agents of change (OECD, 2019a). Building on this vision, the 'Future of Education and Skills Project' was launched by the OECD in 2016 to support countries to find answers to educational imperatives:

1. What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are needed today to shape and thrive in their world in 2030? and

2. How can instructional systems develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively? (OECD, 2018, p. 2).

The 'OECD Learning Compass 2030' emerged from the initial phase of the project and offers an evolving learning framework. It aimed to articulate goals for a shared future in a manner that could be utilised at different levels, including by individual learners, educational leaders and institutional decision makers to guide efforts in education (OECD, 2019a). Learner agency lies at the heart of the Learning Compass framework and is defined as:

> The human capability to anticipate the unknown (based on prior experiences and current competencies, skills, knowledge, values, attitudes and beliefs), to set goals, to plan their pursuit and attainment, and to accept responsibility for one's action (Taguma et al., 2018, p.23).

Learner agency is not viewed as a fixed personal construct and may evolve depending on individual maturation, social relationships and contextual factors (Taguma et al., 2018). For agency and co-agency to be achieved, it is proposed that the learner requires the acquisition of core foundations in literacy and competencies such as 'learning to be a learner'. Finally, it is hypothesised that learner agency will be achieved through a continuous cycle of 'Anticipation-Action-Reflection', i.e.:

> An iterative learning process whereby learners continuously improve their thinking and act intentionally and responsibly, moving over time towards long-term goals that contribute to collective well-being. Through planning, experience and reflection, learners deepen their understanding and widen their perspective (OECD, 2019b, p.2).

The OECD stresses that the Learning Compass is not a prescriptive framework and simply points to a shared, desirable future with a focus on individual and collective well-being. Progressive educational systems worldwide are embracing competency models. 'Learning to learn' has been introduced as a key

competency by a number of countries including Ireland in recently redeveloped curricula with a view to empowering learners, along with nurturing students' sense of agency and identity (OECD, 2019a). The pandemic has highlighted the need for education to equip learners to meet the challenges of a dynamic, unpredictable and changing environment. Within this context, implementing a framework for 'learning to learn' (L2L) across the continuum of education is paramount.

Learning to Learn as a Key Competency

L2L is identified in one of eight 'Key Competences for Lifelong Learning' by the European Commission (2018). Radovan (2019) traces the origin of L2L to the 1980s when the processes through which individuals' control, direct, and manage their learning became of interest to researchers. The focus at this time shifted from a teacher-oriented behavioural understanding of learning to a cognitive approach and centred on 'how information is processed and stored in memory' (p. 31). The European Commission (2018) describes L2L using cognitive and metacognitive terms and highlights the processing, assimilation and application of knowledge and skills as well as the organisation and management of information and time. The definition acknowledges to a lesser extent the affective and social dimensions of L2L with token attention paid to the role of motivation, confidence or persistence in overcoming obstacles, either individually or collaboratively. Contemporary authors argue the need to avoid a 'narrow identification' of L2L and call for a broader understanding acknowledging the 'who' of the learner alongside the 'how' of learning.

Narrow versus Broad Vision of L2L

Lee (2014) identifies L2L as a crucial '21st century cognitive competence' (p. 466). Radovan (2019) emphasises the inextricable link between L2L and 'the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning' (p.30). Cognitive learning strategies are defined as intentional mental processes implemented by an individual in pursuit of a specific learning goal involving self-regulation and control (Radovan, 2019). Typically, cognitive strategies can be categorised across three different levels of cognitive engagement involving rehearsal, elaboration and organisational strategies. Metacognitive strategies, by contrast, involve guiding or managing the learning process (Radovan, 2019) through setting goals, managing learning strategies and learning behaviours and self-monitoring strategies. These occur after the learning process and involve the evaluation of performance and identification of problems.

Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd (2013) argue for a broadening of understanding of L2L. Such a shift, it is argued, is necessary to transcend the current individualistic and task-oriented approach to L2L which sets arbitrary horizons to a learner's efforts through its predetermined educational ends (Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd, 2013). While it is evidently necessary to consider the cognitive and metacognitive 'how' of learning, its relevance is contingent upon the concurrent recognition of the unique person brought to the learning process, as well as the operating context. In this sense, L2L is not limited to the development of a toolkit of skills and strategies in pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency in learning. Rather, it must concurrently cultivate learning dispositions and attitudes. It is important too that there is an acknowledgment of prior experiences and the sociocultural context and that L2L recognises the collaborative, dialogical and experiential nature of learning. Viewed from this perspective, L2L fulfils the definition of a competency. Smith (1993) in his book *Learning How To Learn: Applied Learning Theory for Adults* offered practical guidelines for supporting learning 'how to learn' into application in adult education settings. Recommendations included self-education, group learning projects, learning through reflection and learning through intuition and dreams. L2L is more than just the acquisition of strategies and skills. It also involves the utilisation of attitudes, values, dispositions with due recognition of sociocultural context. L2L and learner identity are inextricably linked. Nurturing learner identity is among the core aspirations for 21st century education (OECD, 2019a) and is an emergent construct with key relevance to adult learners.

Learner Identity

Key perspectives on learner identity have been proposed by researchers and authors in the field of education over the last number of years. Early attempts by the Centre for Learner Identity Studies (CLIS, 2014) to conceptualise learner identity featured a broad model of the construct centred upon six bases: gender, generation, social class, place, ethnicity and spirituality/religion. This model suggested that these six bases and the socio-cultural aspects of an individual's experiences influence one's subjective experience of being a learner (CLIS, 2014). Other researchers, however, contested this preliminary model of learner identity. For example, Falsafi (2010) argued that the CLIS definition described several social identities rather than providing a definition of learner identity that was based solely on the activity of learning.

A differing perspective has been adopted by Kolb and Kolb (2009) who define one's overall identity as a learner rather than part of one's identity being that of

a learner. These authors state that 'people with a learner identity see themselves as learners, seek and engage life experiences with a learning attitude and believe in their ability to learn' (p.5). Kolb and Kolb (2009) argue that an individual's learning identity develops over time and is nurtured through positive relationships. Crick and Wilson (2005) share a similar understanding, stating that one's awareness of self and one's self-worth as an individual are necessary prerequisites for becoming a learner. Furthermore, they argue that one's sense of self as a learner is developed through relationships and recognised as the individual narrates their own story 'as a participant in the conversation of the learning community' (p.359). This understanding of learner identity is particularly relevant for adult learners. A multitude of barriers can limit learner access to, participation in and benefit from relevant programmes arising from differences in socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. Nurturing learner identity through supportive relationships, communities of learners and space for exploration of learner narrative offers opportunities to enhance awareness of self as learner.

A sociocultural viewpoint on learning is also presented by Dewey (1910). He argues that the nature of the social environment and the quality of the learning relationships in which individuals participate influences their development as learners. Likewise, Crick and Wilson (2005) emphasise the importance of the quality of relationships in learning contexts. Stemming from the work of Rogers (1961; 1964), they regard authenticity, congruence and unconditional positive regard as pivotal qualities within learning relationships. Adult education programmes understand the importance of quality learning relationships and place emphasis not just on the individual adult learner but also on the potential benefits of positive group learning experiences which can support community cohesion, participation and collective action.

An alternative viewpoint is suggested by Coll and Falsafi (2010). They propose that learner identity:

> Is the conceptual artefact that contains, connects and enables reflection over the emotional and cognitive processes of the experience of becoming and being a learner, in the past as well as in the present and the future (p.219).

These researchers explain that students construct self-understandings based on their experiences within formal and informal educational settings. Coll and Falsafi (2010) point out that learner identity incorporates generalised meanings

about how an individual is recognised as a learner by oneself and by other people. Moreover, these authors suggest that the meanings learners formulate about their experiences are influenced by certain aspects of the learning environment. Influential factors may include the pupil's self-confidence in their own ability, opinion of the class teacher, prior knowledge in a particular area, attitudes, interests and motivation. As a result, the learning experience can be understood to assume an important role in mediating the meaning a student formulates about the learned subject, overall educational experience and oneself as a learner in different learning environments. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible that many adult learners are at risk of presenting with fragile learner identities. Early school experiences may not have been positive and many adult learners have not acquired 'learning wisdom' associated with a positive learner identity or knowing why, what, when and how to learn: in other words, being ready, willing and able to engage in the learning process. Adult learners may not have had educational opportunities to tackle and persist with challenge. They may not have had the opportunity to develop a sense of agency. Fostering a sense of agency in learners allows the learner to feel empowered and to take a leadership role in relation to their learning and development. Research has found that positive learner identities are more likely to be sustained if teachers help to position learners as the authors of their own learning trajectories.

While differing perspectives on learner identity exist, shared understandings are evident. All models of learner identity incorporate the learner's sense of him/herself as an active agent of learning and development over time. The learner's awareness of personal feelings, attitudes and processes in learning and the learner's ability to manage them are evident across all theoretical models. Importantly, viewpoints concentrate on the ongoing process of learning, of becoming and being a learner as opposed to immediate goals and achievements. All models promote learner narrative, the 'story' of the learner, and stress the importance of learner voice. As early as the 19th century, George Herbert Mead spoke of the 'self' as an important basis for understanding young people's 'definitions of the situation' in which they find themselves, and acknowledged that young people themselves actively shape the educational processes in which they are engaged. There is a common understanding among theorists about the significance of learner autonomy coupled with agency in learning and with an implicit emphasis on intrinsic motivation. The process of becoming and being a learner and the nurturing of learner identity is inherently reciprocal and the quality of learning relationships is acknowledged.

Learner identity is, therefore, a hypothetical construct like self-esteem or intelligence. It is an emergent construct, and a brief Google search will reveal a limited number of definitions emerging in very recent times. How learner identity is conceptualised, defined and what significance will be assigned to it in education will no doubt be the source of future theoretical and philosophical debates. Differing definitions will typically reflect varied theoretical perspectives. An agreed definition will need to highlight the multi-componential, inter and intrapersonal nature of learner identity as well as the role of socio-culturally-mediated processes.

From an educational perspective, it is important to be able to define learner identity and, yet, therein lies a philosophical conundrum. While on the one hand, definitions reduce fuzziness and make constructs more tangible, there is an inherent difficulty in defining learner identity. Learner identity focuses on the process of 'becoming' rather than 'becoming something' and is defined by the learner and by learner narrative. It is arguable that the essence of 'learner identity' can be defined only by the individual. Scales, tests or measures no matter how sensitively developed reflect an alternative view of an individual's learner identity and deny the individual the freedom to define it for him/herself. It is problematic and potentially invalid to design such a measure that prompts a learner to accept passive measures by others for defining their learner identity.

The authors favour a conceptualisation of learner identity as an organic construct, in constant evolution reflecting the process of 'becoming and being a learner' and composed broadly of two main dimensions that should not be separated, but rather viewed in totality. Firstly, there is the 'who' of the learner. This is the learner narrative and includes non-visible behaviours: the learner's thoughts, perceptions, values, feelings and beliefs. The 'who' of the learner includes the biography of the learner, the story of the learner, the learning journey and must always be referenced within the social-cultural context in which the learner resides. Secondly, there is the 'how' of learning. This relates to the language, skills and strategies for learning selected, customised and personalised by the learner. This understanding of learner identity mirrors previously articulated views by a myriad of theorists and also reflects the broad thrust of 21st century learning competencies. The construct of learner identity offers a fresh, new and empowering perspective to understanding learning and learners, as well as challenging prevailing understandings about how we evaluate, measure and track progress in education.

Learner Identity and its Relevance for Adult and Community Education

COVID-19 has challenged the functions and purposes of education with an immediacy and urgency unparalleled in history, obliging policymakers and educators to reconsider what values and practices underpin existing models. COVID-19 may be a short-term crisis but in the context of other potential crises looming large such as climate change, large-scale movements of populations, worldwide demographic changes, hundreds of millions of people who lack basic skills, it is critical that the educational response to this crisis is not short-term. Now, more than ever, we need to embrace a new understanding of education. The linear approach of our current educational system does not align with the dynamic and nonlinear nature of the world we live in nor with the learning needs of many of our adult learners. The capacity to respond to future challenges points to a need to nurture learner identity, to support a learning orientation for life, and enable learners to experience learning as a continuous rather than static process. With this shift to viewing learning as a dynamic and continuous process, we must also look to utilising more learner-centred instructional approaches to prepare for lifelong learning. The construct of learner identity is timely, relevant and empowering for adult learners and seeks to emphasise the nurturing of efficient, effective, self-aware, lifelong learners. To establish a learner identity, individuals must be given the opportunity to increase their autonomy, responsibility and motivation as learners, acquire the language of learning, explore dispositions/learning ways and implement effective customised learning strategies. This is a welcome perspective for learners and particularly for vulnerable learners. It places a renewed focus on the importance of learner voice, learner narratives, authenticity in assessment practices and the provision of specific vocabulary and skills for learning how to learn and the opportunity to customise and personalise learning strategies. Learner identity as an emergent construct offers an empowering perspective on learners and the learning process. It challenges current models of adult and community education to embrace autonomy-led pedagogies, teaching methodologies that emphasise authentic and sustainable assessment and learning experiences that promote opportunities to elicit learner voice and learner narrative. Learning to be a learner, a key goal for adult education, should support personalised and customised learning agendas.

Models of Learning and Teaching

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the multiple models of learning that have emerged over recent years that focus on adult learning. Andragogic approaches (Knowles, 1970), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978),

experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), self-directed learning (Garrison, 2017), project-based learning (Dewey, 1897), and action learning (Revans, 1982) all take into account the interrelationship of many factors in the learning situation, and place the adult learner's contexts, purposes and practices at the centre (Freire, 1993).

Nurturing learner identity requires a shift in teaching models, from the teacher transferring knowledge to the learner (Freire, 1993), to an emphasis on learner autonomy, learner responsibility and learner ownership. In adult and community educational contexts that nurture learner identity, learning will be directed towards the specific individual instead of a one-size-fits all instructional model. Learners will be invited to drive learning and demonstrate the capacity that to learn is, itself, learnable. As a consequence of autonomy-led pedagogies, learners will be nurtured to be confident capable learners, ready, willing and able to choose, design, research, pursue, troubleshoot and evaluate learning for themselves, alone and with others, in education and in life.

As previously discussed, a key priority moving forward in education is the need to 'form learners who know how to learn throughout their lives' (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014, p. 275). Using appropriate learning strategies can render academic behaviours more productive and effective in improving students' performance. Disciplinary literacy approaches have been advocated as a potential instructional method for 21st century curricula (Burke and Welsch, 2018). This approach promotes the essential skills, dispositions and forms of knowledge associated with reading, writing, speaking and listening in specific academic disciplines (Moje, 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2012). In a new era where learners are to be equipped with the language, skills and strategies for learning 'how to learn', it is arguable that a transdisciplinary literacy curriculum should be developed within education. To enable learner ownership, learner independence and learner responsibility in learning, learners must be introduced to the vocabulary and language associated with learning 'how to learn'. There is arguably a need for adult education to create a framework for learning 'how to learn' with a specified transdisciplinary literacy to enable learning for life.

Authentic and Sustainable Assessment

Models of assessment reflect our understanding of how learners learn. Future directions for assessment policy must be built on practices of sustainable assessment that nurture learner identity and that must in turn be evident in the assessment methods embedded within adult education if learners are to

become lifelong assessors and active participants in a learning society. When defining sustainable assessment Boud (2000) refers to assessment practices that 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (p.151). As noted by Boud and Falchikov (2006), sustainable assessment is not a new type of assessment; rather, it involves the further development of formative and summative assessment to promote longer-term goals. Boud (2000) coins the term 'double duty of assessment', acknowledging the fact that assessment should consider the current task and the implications for preparing learners for lifelong learning in an unpredictable future, and that it should focus on engaging learners in the learning process and ensuring that they acquire knowledge. Moreover, it is suggested that individuals must have the ability to be assessors of learning if they are to become lifelong learners (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). In other words, the assessment practices utilised by educators and learners themselves should be considered in terms of whether or not they prepare learners to assess their own learning in the future. New assessment methods and a greater balance in assessment methodologies will hopefully emerge post-COVID-19. Such assessment methods in adult learning contexts may well include the use of rubrics, scaling techniques, personal construct psychology methodologies and peer and self-assessment methodologies.

Learner Voice

As far back as 1975, Stenhouse put forward the idea that learners would perform better in education if they were treated 'with respect as learners […] and [their] ideas listened to and taken seriously' (p.32). Too often, learner voice is positioned in educational systems as 'an evaluation criterion for teachers' underscoring the 'pedagogical importance of engagement and consultation' (Fleming, 2015, p.236). Such facilitation of learner voice, serving issues of performativity, accountability and power within organisations misses the point of eliciting learner voice. Rudduck and Flutter (2004) make a noteworthy comment on the significance of learner voice in enhancing teaching and learning practices:

> Hearing what learners have to say about teaching, learning and educational environments enables teachers to look at things from the learner perspective […] [and] being able to see the familiar differently and to contemplate alternative approaches, roles and practices is the first step towards fundamental change in classrooms and schools (p.141).

Lundy (2007) identifies four conditions necessary for the meaningful use of learner voice. She proposes that learners should have a space in which they can share their views, a voice to express their opinions, and an audience to listen to their ideas. Furthermore, she states that their views should instigate a response and action. Where learner voice is incorporated meaningfully into education, it has the power to support learner agency and contribute to individuals' self-identity as learners. In the diverse adult and community learning contexts of today, giving formal space to the tracking of learner voice across the learning experience should be part of assessment records. Such practice acknowledges the 'who' of the learner and offers a glimpse into the inner world of the learner – the motivations, interests, strengths, challenges, ambitions of the learner. These are critical dimensions and aspects of the learner which facilitate meaningful connections and relationships in learning enhancing the possibilities of engagement and participation in education.

Personalised Learning

Personalised learning embraces an agenda for individual empowerment in education. It is about focusing teaching and learning on the aptitudes, interests and strengths of the adult learner. Knowing the 'who' of the learner, the strengths and weaknesses of individual learners is key. Using assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and developing new methods of assessment must be considered. Personalised learning should enable the adult learner to develop the confidence and competence to learn 'how to learn' and to accept responsibility to move forward in their own learning. Personalised learning offers choice with clear pathways through the courses undertaken. The ethos, in this personalised learning model, is focused on adult learner needs with adult learners listened to and their voice used to drive forward. Miliband (2006) rightly asserts that 'choice' and 'voice' are central to the personalisation agenda in education.

Conclusion

This paper explored the construct of learner identity and its relevance for educators and adult learners within a broader context of 21st century learning and a post-COVID-19 world. While yet lacking a universal consensus on definition, shared understandings on learner identity offer a useful and purposeful lens through which to reconceptualise adult teaching and learning. In this paper, it is argued that the purpose of education is not simply the transaction of knowledge but the construction of identities that will serve learners positively throughout their learning journey. Achieving change within

adult and community education requires a reconsideration of teacher roles that re-define best practice to implement autonomy-led pedagogies; to extend use of authentic assessment strategies; to embrace learner voice, personal narratives, biographies and stories of learning; to invite customisation of learning approaches strategies, and to introduce a 'transdisciplinary literacy' for 'learning how to learn'. The potential benefits to adult learners may only be imagined. Learner identity is an empowering and potentially transformative construct inviting alternative goals for educational systems and learners – goals that place learner voice, learner agency and learner autonomy at its core. The advent of COVID-19 has highlighted the need for embracing these alternatives.

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