

LIFELONG LEARNING, WORK, RETIREMENT AND INALIENABLE INTERCONNECTIVITY: REFLECTING ON PERSONAL SUCCESSES AND FRAMING COLLECTIVE FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the connection between lifelong learning and work by analysing the authors' respective experiences of formal and informal work and retirement. Inalienable interconnectivity is a fruitful way of understanding lifelong learning, work and retirement that simultaneously reflects on personal successes and frames and builds on collective futures.

KEYWORDS

academic work – alienation – collectivity –
retirement – work

INTRODUCTION

Attaining a productive and sustainable work–life balance remains one of the central challenges of contemporary late capitalist economies. Despite evidence of intergenerational unemployment (Corak, Gustafsson & Österberg, 2000; Kelly & Lewis, 2002) on the one hand and the development of portfolio careers (Fenwick, 2003; Gold & Fraser, 2002; Platman, 2004) on the other, formal, full-time work remains a powerful force in defining individual identity and communal acceptability.

This situation generates a challenge for concepts of and policies for lifelong learning. In particular, what are the relationship and the dividing line between lifelong and lifewide learning; what is the association between lifelong learning and various enactments of work (full-time, part-time and casual; formal, non-formal and informal); and can lifelong learning be resuscitated from the excessively economic focus of its claimed contribution to enhancing work-based productivity? In short, what space is there for lifelong learning before, alongside and after formal, full-time work (see also Billett, 2001; Engeström, 2004)?

This paper explores this complex and potentially contradictory connection between lifelong learning and work by analysing the authors' separate and shared experiences of formal and informal work and retirement. One author has combined the responsibilities of raising a family with various combinations of full- and part-time work and is now a full-time retiree, yet is working productively in several respects, ranging from volunteer service for local groups to co-authoring a research book (Danaher, Coombes & Kiddle, 2007). Another author has moved from casual to permanent full-time to permanent half-

time work as an academic, the most recent phase of his working life coinciding with a renewed interest in creative writing and travel. The other author is finding increased difficulty in achieving a work–life balance, and is seeking ways through lifelong learning to redress the balance.

The analysis is informed by the concept of inalienable interconnectivity (Danaher, 2006), whereby resistance of alienation of education can be pursued by self-emergent groups. The authors argue that inalienable interconnectivity is a fruitful way of understanding lifelong learning, work and retirement that simultaneously reflects on personal successes and frames and builds on collective futures.

The paper's research design was framed by the principles of autoethnography, entailing a focus on the "researcher as subject" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, n.p.; see also Holt, 2003). This method requires a politicised interrogation of the interplay between the private and the public and between the personal and the communal dimensions of social life. The underlying research question was "How do the author–researchers understand their formal, non-formal and informal lifelong learning experiences in relation to inalienable interconnectivity?"

The paper is divided into five sections:

- A conceptual framework focused on inalienable interconnectivity;
- Each author's respective experiences of the complex intersection among lifelong learning, work and retirement;
- A conclusion that links that framework and those experiences with implications for framing personal successes and collective futures in lifelong learning.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of inalienable interconnectivity (Danaher, 2006) was articulated as a counternarrative to the dominant discourses of the commoditisation of knowledge and the

alienation of education to market forces, largely on the basis that they serve to disconnect learners from their learning environments. On that basis, "...a market-driven global educational agenda provides a model of interconnectivity that is limited and that diminishes the possibilities of lifelong learning" (p. 56). A very different approach is centred on:

...a conception of lifelong learning as an inalienable value, part of the education of every citizen, and which is based on the principle of interconnectivity. This model would promote the interconnectedness between the local and the global, the physical and the spiritual, the learner and the learning experience. It would provide pathways, create partnerships, and fashion pedagogies that are aimed at addressing this paradox: how to ensure the inalienable value of education in an interconnected world. (p. 56)

This resistant model of lifelong learning draws on a number of intellectual forces (such as complexity and chaos theory) and has several manifestations, including, "...in the Australian context, ... the down-shifting, sea-changing, and tree-changing movements, in which people opt to give up high pressure jobs or reduce their working hours and relocate from cities to rural areas" (Danaher, 2006, p. 58). Self-emergent groups are posited as one among several possible ways forward, such groups ranging from reading groups and book clubs to more diffuse collections of diverse individuals, all "...motivated by the principles of open and respectful dialogue with a view to exploring how ideas and concepts might be applied and resonate across different contexts" (p. 59). Seen from this perspective, "Inalienable interconnectivity aims to establish pedagogical pathways and partnerships between lifelong learners in a range of different areas, based upon their shared commitment to resisting the claims of the market and reclaiming education as something valuable in itself" (p. 60).

While it is important to acknowledge that inalienable values have a mythic dimension and are as subject as any other values to the play of competing interests of different groups (Danaher, 2006, pp. 56-57), we deploy the notion of inalienable interconnectivity in this paper as a conceptual lens for interrogating our respective lived experiences of life, learning, work and retirement. We have selected this lens for three reasons:

- Inalienable interconnectivity engages with the key players (including forms of capital, knowledge construction, globalisation and technologies) that

influence lifelong learning, work and retirement in the contemporary world.

- Inalienable interconnectivity helps to articulate a clear alternative to the dominant discourses associated with late capitalism, marketisation and alienation.
- Inalienable interconnectivity says something new and different about lifelong learning and about framing futures for lifelong learning that are simultaneously personal and collective.

Work-life balance in retirement

The transition from a satisfying career to full-time retirement can be an alienating experience. As we have mentioned, individual identity and communal acceptability are defined by certain aspects of our life-worlds, including friends and family, community activities and career. In my own case, after more than 30 years in full-time and part-time employment, I was well aware of the necessity for careful preparation for this new stage in my life, and I learned to regard it as a beginning rather than an ending.

Lifelong learning, naturally, maintains strong connections with work. We learn to prepare ourselves for a trade, job or career, and we continue to learn as an important part of our professional development. We tend to define work as paid employment, but how does the retiree fit into this concept? It is important to bear in mind that retirement too can be regarded as a career, even though an unpaid one. While the absence of salary can be problematic, freedom from the economic imperative can also be liberating. Many people in their sixties and seventies are still relatively active, both physically and mentally. When this is the case, and following the argument that learning continues to be important throughout life, the retiree can choose from a range of learning options, defined mainly by personal interest. Thus retirement becomes a time of opportunity rather than a process of getting through each day in a purposeless and unsatisfying way.

It has been noted (Danaher, 2006) that a danger inherent in the trend towards commoditising knowledge is that learning can be regarded as an exchange value rather than a core value. There is no danger of this for the retiree. Learning becomes truly self-directed, and there are many options available. For example, in my own case, I have chosen to pursue two of my favourite activities, reading and writing. I have joined a book club where the selected books usually provoke lively discussion and sometimes dissent whereby we all continue to learn. I also attend University of the Third Age writing workshops

where I am learning the techniques of creative and memoir writing, so different from academic assignments and articles, but requiring a similar degree of rigour and discipline. I also devote some of my time to volunteer activities, an excellent method of familiarising myself with the new community where I am now living.

In retirement, it is important to maintain some sort of structure, though this tends to be less rigid than that of our working life. Inalienable interconnectivity for the retiree combines learning for its own sake with self-emergent groups. The choice to involve oneself with any form of structured learning activities, formal or informal, inevitably results in interaction with other people and new associations are formed. Lifelong learning for the retiree does not, perhaps, contribute directly to work-based productivity. Nonetheless, in the later years of life, we can still lead fulfilling lives, and our productivity and usefulness become community-based as we continue to learn and pass on our renewed wisdom.

Creating spaces: Work-life balance in semi-retirement

In this section of the paper, my focus explores the experience of moving to part-time work, and conveys a similar love of reading and writing as that evinced by the author of the previous section. This change occurred in the middle of 2007, and emerged in relation to a consideration of financial implications and a desire for the further lifestyle opportunities that such an adjustment would afford. Perhaps the adage that encapsulates the impulse for this change was that it is unlikely that anybody would reflect on her or his life and genuinely wished that she or he had spent more time in the office.

A significant element relating to the inalienable interconnectivity of this change is the concept of economies of pleasure (Schirato & Yell, 2000, p. 189), referring to the relationship between the time and energy that consumers spend in reading texts against the pleasure that they gain from this. That is, reading a great work of literature involves investing much more time and, arguably, concentrated attention than does watching a film version of the book. As our time and labour have been alienated to market forces and workplaces, less is available for the more leisurely paced, deep absorption of reading. One manifestation of this displacement is the curiosity noted by Rosemary Neill (2008), among others: a considerable number of students enrolled in creative writing programs have relatively little experience of reading literature. It seems that their cultural tastes and sensibilities have

emerged within an economy of pleasure generated by the forces of speed and instant gratification.

Semi-retirement and partial removal from this alienated world of speed and work offer opportunities for interconnecting with the economies of pleasure of literature and thereby developing different perspectives on life. As such, the concept of economies of pleasure might be extended to ecologies of pleasure. While the institutional ecologies of work offer certain pleasures in relation to interaction with colleagues, achievement of outcomes and possibility of promotion, retirement into the other ecologies of imaginative textual engagements, local communities and natural ecosystems offers another array of pleasures and conditions of possibility. Within such a space of removal, the sustaining values of self-emergent groups such as book clubs and creative writing retreats (to locations such as the rainforest and islands near my local community) constitute a significant part of the ecology of pleasure. Indeed, in my own absorption within creative reading and writing, I have found that the characters and experiences encountered through this investment constitute, *albeit* literarily rather than literally, self-emergent groups in themselves, in the way in which they evolve within my imagination and form connections with other parts of life. As a writer who prefers to eschew careful and detailed planning in favour of composing scenes and vignettes which gradually converge to form patterns of connection and narrative coherence, I find that the relationship between self-emergence and inalienable interconnectivity is one that significantly informs my creative practice.

Thus, in my experience, the move to part-time work and semi-retirement has enhanced my sense of the possibilities of inalienable interconnectivity and self-emergent groups, both literal and literary, in contributing to lifelong learning futures.

Work-life balance: what's that when it's at home?

As the third author of this paper, my experiences are centred on lifelong learning and full-time paid work, with retirement something to aspire to and long for in the medium future. Work for me is centred on being an academic, clustered around teaching online postgraduate courses, supervising doctoral candidates, discharging administrative and service responsibilities, and conducting and publishing research. I confess to an enduring ambivalence about my work. On the one hand, I am immensely privileged to be an academic and to be paid to read and write

academic texts and to think and talk about intellectual concepts and research methods. On the other hand, I am increasingly concerned about the individual and group sustainability of a work environment characterised by intensification, managerialism and hierarchisation (Danaher, Alcock, Danaher & Harreveld, 2004; Danaher, Danaher & Danaher, 2006).

Given that environment, it is hardly surprising that the notion of a work-life balance is something of a chimera. As I have done for most of my life, and in common with many of my colleagues, I routinely work seven days a week. Mostly I enjoy doing so, finding that absorption in academic pursuits generates the feelings of energised focus, involvement and fulfilment associated with the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998, 2003). Yet I recognise the downsides of that absorption, including physical inactivity, awkwardness in social situations and guilt when I engage in leisure activities such as reading and viewing detective fiction.

Inalienable interconnectivity gives a mixed report card in relation to my experiences outlined here. At one level, there is certainly evidence of enjoying and promoting education in its widest sense and for its own sake. At another level, and from an outsider's perspective, the span of interests might be seen as narrow and the impact as limited and localised.

Two examples of the self-emergent groups identified above as helping to promote the alternative understandings of inalienable interconnectivity must suffice. The first is a diverse and lively group of colleagues in Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Scotland and Venezuela, clustered around shared interests in the education of Traveller and nomadic communities and encompassing a range of conceptual and methodological approaches to practising and researching education. The second is a group of postgraduate students and early career researchers whom I find the greatest source of sustenance and support at my current institution (Danaher, under review).

In this section of the paper I have engaged with selected aspects of lifelong (and less so of lifewide) learning; I have affirmed work's central role in defining (but hopefully not limiting) my identity; and I have referred in passing to retirement (without having a clear idea of what it might mean for that identity). In doing so I have reflected on some of my personal successes (and

failures) and I have subscribed to a framing of collective futures in which individual and communal achievement can be conjoined. This is my understanding – inevitably partial, restrictive and restricting – of what inalienable interconnectivity currently is and might become.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR FRAMING PERSONAL SUCCESSES AND COLLECTIVE FUTURES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

This paper has explored three among several possible iterations of the complex relationship among lifelong learning, work and retirement. The conceptual lens deployed to frame that exploration was inalienable interconnectivity (Danaher, 2006), whose key features include a commitment to lifelong learning as an inalienable value and an openness to self-emergent groups as a means of enacting that value. In each manifestation of the continuum from full-time work to full-time retirement, that lens was used fruitfully to elicit the respective author's reflections on personal successes (and inevitably failures) and to suggest some possibilities for sustainable and sustaining futures in lifelong learning.

The character of that continuum constitutes the first implication of the preceding discussion for framing personal successes and collective futures in lifelong learning. If we consider what shifts from one edge of the continuum to the other, we might speculate that moving from full-time work to full-time retirement parallels a change from full-time alienation to full-time learning and/or interconnectivity. Yet not necessarily so: full-time, paid work is not always or inevitably alienating and full-time retirement can be associated with ill-health and other impediments to learning and interconnectivity. From a different perspective, what is constant at all points along the continuum is the sustaining power and the contagious enthusiasm of and for lifelong learning and self-emergent groups – groups that we can choose to join and to leave at will and all of whose members benefit in significant ways from such membership.

The second implication is that our vision of successes and futures in lifelong learning is simultaneously and indivisibly individual and collective. The shared and separate lifelong learning journeys elaborated in this paper derive from and depend on individual activity and agency – on each person's commitment to continuing to interact and learn and each person's resilience in the face of inevitable obstacles and diversions. At the same time, that

individual activity and agency are strengthened and nourished by the active interest of significant others: family members, work colleagues, friends and community members. The self-emergent groups that are constituted by those significant others are composed of both kindred spirits and others who have different world-views but from whom we can learn and to whom we can return the favour.

The third implication is the potentially resistant quality of lifelong learning and self-emergent groups alike. A key element of inalienable interconnectivity is that it runs counter to contemporary dominant discourses about the commoditisation of knowledge and the prevalence of economically centred assumptions about educational provision. As such, inalienable interconnectivity seeks to resuscitate discussions and experiences of lifelong learning that privilege micromanagement and productivity in favour of a more broadly based, diverse and encompassing approach to our engagements with our communities and our world. From this perspective, lifelong learning futures that highlight the emotional dimension of learning and living and that create spaces for fun, frivolity and sheer *joie de vivre* are well worth exploring – seriously.

The preceding discussion suggests that inalienable interconnectivity has yielded fruitful reflections on the three lifelong learning journeys elaborated here as well as broader possible implications for understanding the multiple intersections among lifelong learning, work and retirement. Those reflections and implications form one among many possible navigational devices for reflecting on personal successes and framing collective futures at different points along the work–retirement continuum that hopefully maximises fulfilment and meaning while minimising alienation.

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