

## Book Reviews/Recensions

### *INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF LIFELONG LEARNING*

David Aspin, Judith Chapman, Michael Hatton and Yukiko Sawano (Eds.). (2001). Boston: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2 volumes, 820 pages.

With broad promises to solve the economic and social problems facing the industrialised world, lifelong learning is something of a 'New Jerusalem.' Anyone doubting this just has to take a quick glance at national and intergovernmental policy documents for the last decade that uniformly promote lifelong learning as the foundation for educational and training policy. The scholarly community has been quick to jump on the bandwagon and has in the last couple of years produced book after book with a promise to address fundamental aspects of lifelong learning. With very few exceptions the reader will be disappointed, as what is provided is nothing but old wine in new bottles. The *International Handbook of Lifelong Learning* covers a traditional issue within adult education, but in order to improve its commercial value, it is presented under the guise of lifelong learning. Thus, it was with great suspicion that I approached this text. If for no other reason, the editors of this major collection should be congratulated for being able to assemble no less than 40 chapters that actually make serious attempts to wrestle with aspects of lifelong learning. It is obvious that the editors have had a well developed prospectus and devoted considerable efforts to assure that the individual authors followed the script. They have also done an excellent job in assuring that there are contributions, not only from the former Western Europe and North America, but also from Africa, Asia and the former Eastern European block.

The *Handbook* comes in two volumes which are organized into sections: lifelong learning and its practice. The first volume, lifelong learning, contains sections on conceptual, philosophical and values issues, the policy challenge, and the structures and programs in lifelong learning. The second volume, the practice, contains information on the formal, informal and non-formal initiatives in learning across the lifespan. The conceptual section provides a good discussion not only on the dominant and competing discourses of lifelong learning, but leaves the reader with a set of theoretical frameworks against which programs and activities of lifelong learning might be

developed and analyzed. However, as a reader, one would like to have seen a more in-depth discussion of informal learning than what is provided. Similar to almost all other texts on lifelong learning, informal learning is presented as something that is always positive. The fact that for many people their 'life curricula' has been very restrictive and detrimental to their full participation in society is not being considered.

The analyses from different parts of the world in the section on policy challenges suggests that although countries are faced with the same global forces, these national responses are very much a consequence of a historical and cultural context. Thus, the convergence of policy under globalization might be less pronounced than often suggested in adult education literature. As for the discussion on provision, it focuses both on lifelong and life-wide dimensions. These contributions wrestle with the limitations of the present systems and the changes that need to take place within, particularly, the formal educational system to assure smooth progressions, as well as integration between different levels and sectors. From a sociological perspective, one might find some of the suggestions and analyses a bit too optimistic and void of a serious discussion of the 'rationality' of the present system in the allocation of life chances. The final section presents a rich portrait on how lifelong learning is practised in different parts of the globe. Several of the contributions written from an intergovernmental perspective helps the reader to understand the limitation and often inappropriateness of lifelong learning as portrayed in dominant Western literature. In this connection, one could also have given some attention to what some have called the rationality of non-participation in adult learning. This refers to the fact that for large groups in the western world the lifelong learning rhetoric has little to do with their everyday life.

Taken together, the forty chapters provide the reader with a rich and fruitful introduction to the key debates on lifelong learning. The *International Handbook of Lifelong Learning* might be too expensive for many to buy, but every effort should be made by institutions to make sure that its students and staff can have access to this stimulating and thought provoking text that will remain a key document for many years to come.

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