

Opening presentation: TRANSFINE Day

Wednesday 14 May 2003



Why should we recognise non-formal and informal learning? Why now?

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First, I must apologise on behalf of Michel Feutrie who was intending to make this opening presentation but has been delayed by the air traffic control strike in France and will not be here until this afternoon. The strike just gave me a long wait in Barcelona airport so I was able to prepare something to say to you - it will not be the same but hopefully will get us off to a good start.

So let me begin by stating clearly what we are talking about. We are concerned with the formal recognition of learning from experience – from work, from civil society, from voluntary activity, from personal engagement in family and community life. There used to be an expression in English, often used by ‘self-made’ men (usually men) that they had been to the ‘university of life’ – in other words that they had gained all their knowledge and skills through experience. We don’t hear the expression much any more, but the idea remains and has become more important.

For many years (for me and a few others that I know – at least 20 years), some of us have been arguing for and working for policy and practice to formally recognise that kind of learning – to develop tools, procedures and systems that will enable us to award qualifications or parts of qualifications on the basis of this kind of learning. My sense is that the moment has come – that finally events, people, and circumstances are coming together to make it possible on a wide front.

Of course, it has been happening in many places for some time. In the UK and France since at least the early 1980s, but since those early days there has not been a great deal of progress, certainly in the UK. Development is fragmented and not dynamic – it has got stuck as a relatively marginal activity, dependent largely on the enthusiasm of a band of very committed practitioners. Even in vocational training (NVQs) the debate has become bogged down in technical detail and in demands for ever more evidence and proof of learning. In other countries – France and Norway for example, arrangements have recently begun to take off again and great strides have been and are being made. In Italy development has begun in the vocational sector in interesting ways and in Estonia things are ‘bubbling up’ all over the place – in universities, in enterprises, and in vocational schools. But you will hear much more about what is going on in these countries over the next few days so I will not go into more detail here.

But why? Why now? What has happened and is happening to bring this about?

I do not have a lot of time but I want at least to identify some of the key influences as I see them. Clearly in the European context, the European Commission has long advocated the valuing of different kinds of learning and the lifelong learning policy developments of the last 8 years or so have given greater attention to issues such as employability, citizenship, personal and professional development - all of which are important background arguments. The Commission has also, and for much longer, been concerned with the transparency of qualifications to make visible and easily readable across Member States the vocational skills, competences and qualifications in various occupational sectors and professions. Social inclusion, mobility and lifelong learning are important elements of this discourse too. The fact that the Commission is now making the recognition and valuing of non-formal and informal learning a part of its agenda for making lifelong learning a reality is clearly significant.

For me the most persuasive argument has always been the social justice argument and there are two dimensions to this. First, qualifications are a social construct – they are created by society and function as a social mechanism for selection and inclusion, and by extension – exclusion. They confer on holders rights, status and opportunities that open doors in a variety of important ways. This raises fundamental questions. Why should people who have acquired knowledge skills and competences in one way – taught by teachers in a classroom - be granted these privileges while those who have learned them in different ways – from their experience in other domains – be excluded from the benefits that attach to qualifications? How can we justify that in a democratic and fair society?

The argument is sometimes put that we should not seek to obtain or to award qualifications – diplomas and certificates – for all kinds of learning. Learning is its own reward and valuable in its own right whether or not it brings with it a qualification and there is a danger of debasing learning by seeking always to assess it and publicly label it in some way. I accept that there is a danger here but in my experience those who push this argument most strongly often have more qualifications to their name than the average person. I remember at a conference of adult educators a few years ago the view that we should not seek to award qualifications for all kinds of learning was put forward and one participant said: 'Its OK for you to say that that because you have lots of qualifications but for me it's the first time in my life that someone recognised that I know things, that I understand things, that I can do things and that I am capable of doing more. Now I can hold my head up and talk to my daughter on equal terms'. Of course the award of a qualification must always be voluntary but we should not underestimate the impact that the gaining of public recognition can have on individuals, especially those at the margins of social inclusion or exclusion.

The second dimension to the social justice argument is more pragmatic. It is the sheer absurdity of obliging someone to sit in front of a teacher for X years – 2? 3? 4? More? – in order to learn ‘properly’ what they already know and understand; to take exams and jump through hoops like circus animals to prove it; and often to pay real money to do so. This is not only absurd it is socially unacceptable in a fair society.

But the social justice arguments have always been there and yet they have not brought about major change. So what else has happened? I think there are two other types of development that are pushing the arguments forward: the geo-political and the economic. I will take the geo-political first.

We have mobility and political change in Europe of a fundamental kind. Political regimes in place for decades have fallen. The quality of the formal education and training systems and the qualifications acquired under those regimes have been challenged as low quality or politically biased. We have increasing mobility of population – not in itself new – war in Europe has always created massive movement of peoples – but now it is taking place in peacetime. We have an expanding European Community which brings the need for on the one hand more standardisation and on the other more diversity and flexibility. How can we develop arrangements to transfer the skills and knowledge acquired in one cultural context to another while valuing both contexts and culture? How can we support mobility and enable people to mobilise their skills in a very different context to the benefit of everyone? Mechanisms for the formal recognition of different kinds of learning can help here.

However, the economic arguments always tend to be more persuasive in political and government circles and the economic arguments are now becoming quite clear. Again, let me identify them briefly.

First, the world of work – manufacturing and service industries are changing fast and such change is not a passing phase – it is a permanent feature of the economic landscape. Although this has always been the case to some extent, the rapid and relentless pace and scale of change is a relatively new element. In this context, the workplace is becoming a place where knowledge is not merely applied but where it is actually also produced; a place where skills are not only applied but ‘taught’ through the practice of routines that are becoming ever more complex. The knowledge economy, the knowledge society, learning organisations, learning cities – all are phrases that encompass these ideas.

Second, there is considerable consensus that education and training are important to successful enterprises and to individuals alike. But education and training are expensive – not just the direct cost of training fees but the indirect cost of the time – for the company the loss of the individual’s productive work and for the individual away from family and social life. These costs may be indirect but they are nevertheless real costs, whoever pays. Any way in which we can reduce the costs of training are likely to benefit both the employer and the employee.

Third, effective and efficient management of the labour force, at company, regional or national level, requires that we know what people know, understand and can do - what work related skills and competences they possess so that they can be mobilised in more effective ways, so that people can be matched to roles and functions that will enable both the company and the employees to benefit.

Clearly in relation to all three of the areas, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning can play a part in dealing with the problems and challenges that are posed.

Time does not permit me to develop these arguments fully and I hope that I have not oversimplified too much. I am aware that these are enormously complicated and contested debates and I do not underestimate the difficulties and obstacles that remain. However, I am optimistic and I do believe that at this present time there is a coming together of these various strands – strong social justice arguments, with geo-political and economic pressures – in a way which suggests that the idea of formally recognising non-formal and informal learning may be an idea whose time has come. We must not let this moment pass without grasping it and exploiting it to the benefit of individuals, companies and institutions alike. We in the world of education and training cannot ignore the wider social trends – we too must change – we have a responsibility to move the policy and practice forward and I hope that the next few days will enable us to do that.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury I rest my case. Thank you for your attention.