Adult Learning in the Digital Age. Information Technology and the Learning Society

by Selwyn, N., Gorard, S. and Furlong, J. London: Routledge, 2006.

Reviewed by

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Introduction

Has the sociology of education undergone a transformation in the last three decades? In the 1970s the work of researchers such as Coleman (USA) and Bernstein (UK) defined a field where the social, cultural and economic background of the pupil/student was important in determining access and performance in the formal education system. Today, the names of Coleman and Bernstein are less quoted and others such as Bourdieu are more popular, but for many sociologists of education the connection between access and performance and contextual background factors still dominate their research frameworks and the research questions they ask. This is the case in *Adult Learning in the Digital Age. Information Technology and the Learning Society* by Selwyn, N., Gorard, S. and Furlong, J.

Such a conception of the sociology of education, as nothing more than old wine in new bottles, easily misses how these authors have widened and hence transformed the sociology of education as they consider three things. Firstly, the role of ICT in learning

strategies of individuals. Admittedly, Bell and Toffler, already in the 70s highlighted the societal role of information technologies, but this was before the arrival of the internet and its world-wide dominance. Secondly, a concern with life long learning after the initial period of obligatory schooling. Of course, we find a concern with adult education in the work of Linderman in the USA in the mid-19th century. But, it is the manner in which the widening of educational provision, as a mass phenomenon, now includes not just merely those of school age, but those who are adults. Thirdly, in addition to formal learning, they focus upon informal learning, outside of institutionalised, formal contexts, along with non-formal learning, 'non-credentialised but still institutionally-based and structured'. Such a move to study informal learning is also to be found in those researching youth motivation, or lack of motivation, towards education (Dobson, 2006, 2006a; Dobson et.al.,2006). In other words, they re-direct the sociology of education towards a concern with technology, adult learning and the relationship between formal and informal learning, and most importantly the relationship between these three things.

To conceptualise this relationship they present and explore the concept of the le@rning society. A concept created in the course of the book by combining an idea of the learning society (the political ideal of a society built around a population participating in learning throughout their life) with e-learning (any type of learning that takes place with the involvement of ICTS, predominantly computers in different forms, palm tops) (pxv). The two opening chapters contextualise debate on the le@rning society by looking at arguments in favour of this new form of society and arguments that dispute its emergence.

Those in favour of ICT as an educational resource in an emerging le@rning society talk of the opportunities for learning offered by different forms of ICT. Three main arguments are highlighted: that ICT can lead to a widening of educational participation, it can support a diversity of educational provision and that ICT can lead to better forms and outcomes of adult learning. Those against the optimists raise the digital divide as an important argument. Moreover the sceptics ask for a more nuanced definition of ICT. It

is commonly taken to mean either a narrow definition of technologies or the opposite as a homogeneous, catch-all concept. Selwyn et al. ask for attention to the different resources of ICT and also the differing contents it makes possible. In the book under review they focus mostly upon the computer in its different sites (home, work and in the community) and are wise not to make claims to other ICT resources, such as mobile telephones.

In sum, those questioning the optimism of ICT and the emerging le@rning society add caveats, such as the need to move beyond the simple dichotomy access vs. non-access when talking of the le@rning society. This is something that the authors take on board in their four categories of ICT user (see comments to chapter 4 below) Secondly, the authors note the need to move beyond a simple dichotomy between technological determinism (the optimists) and social determinism (the opposite view, that technology is a neutral instrument and can be moulded by the needs and policies of society). The solution they suggest is to avoid the clear technology/society distinction and remain 'aware of the social contexts where technologies and policies are developed, and focuses on the ones where they are used' (p33)

Research questions and data collection

With these things in mind the authors asked a set of research questions about the present potential of technology for adult learning (and not future potential), about all types of adult learning, about gaining a representative picture of engagement, taking a life-long perspective of people's learning and technology use and lastly, seeking to develop an understanding of the different contexts of learning and ICT use.

The data for this book was based upon a survey 1001 adults from two regions – one in south Wales and the other in south west England, a 100 booster sample of public ICT users to enhance knowledge of use of public ICT facilities and in depth follow-up interviews of a selection of the respondents, together with an ethnographic study over one year of some of those studied. The methodology was therefore mixed, producing

both quantitative and qualitative data. Several of the chapters in the book present this mix of research data, drawing upon it to support their claims and interpretations.

Findings

Chapter 4 is the first chapter presenting findings from the data. It seeks to answer three questions, each fundamental to the thesis of a le@rning society and its achievement: 'what are the patterns of participation in lifelong learning; what are the determinants of participation in adult learning; and lastly, to what extent does use of ICT interrupt or reinforce existing patterns of participation in lifelong learning?' The authors develop 4 categories of participant to frame their answers: non-participants (no episodes of education or training at all since leaving school), transitional learners (with one episode of immediate post-compulsory education), delayed learners and lifelong learners (who report one immediate post-compulsory experience of learning or training and one later episode). They note that one third of the survey population had not engaged in any further learning; informal learning is patterned in a similar way to formal learning, even though more non-participants in formal learning reported sustained interest in informal learning; and women with child-care find it harder to participate in life long learning. To summarise, they found that:

> The key determinants of extended initial education apparent in our survey data are parental occupation and education and respondent's age, place of birth, ethnicity and initial schooling. The key determinants of later participation are, in addition, area of residence, sex, occupation and having children. (p79)

These are important findings because they indicate that supply side solutions, with greater provision of ICT, do not in themselves lead to greater learning and training.

Taking one of the finding in more detail, those living in economically disadvantaged areas were found to be least likely to participate in lifelong learning and less likely to use ICT. The authors suggest that this may partly be to do 'with the relative social capital of those in differing areas'. A plausible explanation, but they do not provide the reader with an understanding of what they mean by social capital. Could it be that in the most economically disadvantaged areas social capital, from the perspective of Bourdieu,

means there are few shared social networks of learners upon which learners can draw in their desire to participate in life long learning, with or without the assistance of ICT? This is only a small point, but as the reader progresses through the following chapters, there is a hope that the authors might take up the thread of social capital and learning networks.

Chapter 5 moves on to present data on what people use ICT for, covering mainly formal learning and informal learning practices. Thus 'within the 52% of the sample who had used a computer, word processing was the most popular activity, followed by "fiddling around on the computer' (p84). 21% admitted to having used the computer during formal post-compulsory educational episodes and 26% of the survey sample reported having used the computer for informal learning such as DIY, art and music. Plenty of data is presented in this chapter, lots of tables describing different forms of ICT learning, but there is a danger that readers will "cherry pick" the data to make their own points. The main point in my opinion is the following: Relatively low levels of use of the ICT for learning purposes – whether formal or informal - reiterates the conclusions of the previous chapter, that access to ICT does not make people any more likely to participate in education. And if ICT has any effect, it is more to motivate informal learning, rather than formal learning.

Chapter 6 carries appeal because its focus on the domestication of ICT in the family provides an opportunity to reflect upon how the reader has placed his/here own ICT resources in the home. The authors note that it is the needs of children that gain priority in how the computer is used and positioned in homes. Parents, think less of their own learning needs and more of the investment that will secure or enhance the cultural capital of their households and hence children. Once again the chapter emphasizes with telling examples from interview an ethnographic material that 'computers at home mostly involved informal, rather than formal learning' (p115). Secondly, the chapter concludes:

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> In all of these cases there was little evidence that computers had created new-found desire for learning – rather that these instances of computer-based informal learning were building upon existing learning behaviours in the home (p118)

Chapter 7 follows the interest in the use of ICT at home by demonstrating – with qualitative data - how ICT skills learnt at work are not always easily transferable to the home sphere and learning activities. Chapter 8, appealing to policy makers, looks at the use of ICT for learning in public and community settings; for example in community centres, libraries, internet cafes and local school institutions. While the authors found users who were engaged in formal educational study and others who were developing a scaffold to support their increasing familiarity with ICT, the vast majority were not users of ICT sited in public places. The reasons for this are multiple, such as perceptions that public facilities were 'low tech', the public ICT facilities are not regarded as 'community' owned and most importantly, ICT is considered irrelevant for the daily activities of many. In other words, it may not be a supply problem, but the low level of demand for ICT in the UK population as a whole.

Chapter 9 is a short chapter that pursues one component of the le@rning society, namely the social processes of learning to use computers. The authors 'found more sustained evidence of learning about computers rather than learning through them' (p161) Picking up on an earlier point in this review, the authors found evidence that learning to use a computer, apart from being an informal rather than formal learning activity, was often undertaken in a solitary, self-directed manner. It was not therefore, dependent on making use of the social network – read social capital – resources possessed by informants.

Closing chapters and final thoughts

Chapter 10 entitled, Making Sense of Adult Learning in a Digital Age, sums up the findings of the empirical research presented in previous chapters. The le@rning society continues to be a divided society with many still not participating in adult, life-long learning. And of those who possess access to a computer – some 92% in the survey – only a little of half had made us of it. The biggest topic emphasised by informants was learning about the computer rather than learning through it and most importantly the

existence of ICT was not creating new adult learners. As a consequence, they propose that the term digital divide should be recognise what they term digital choice because significant numbers are choosing not to engage in the digital world of the computer and the learning potential it offers.

As to signs of the le@rning society's emergence, the authors hold that ICT functions to enhance informal learning rather than formal learning, where self-education was an important motivating factor. And yet, here social networks are mentioned as the key to supporting and propelling this self-education. Users of ICT often sought the assistance of those around them (e.g. spouse). (p184) A kind of dialectic is hinted at by the author, such that users of ICT remained socially dependent and self-directed at one and the same time. On a more positive note, the authors suggest that adult use of ICT for educational purposes requires greater sensitivity to the 'ebb and flow' of individuals' present life circumstances' (p188). This reflects, as they note, the somewhat 'messy realities of contemporary life' and their final conclusion is that 'the picture that has emerged from our data is neither utopian or dystopian as other authors would have it' (p189). In a simple sentence (my words): Those that use ICT for learning, whether formal or informal, are learning and those that don't, are not.

The reason for such a conclusion is the strong empirical foundation of their work. It has made it possible for them to sift through the arguments in favour and against the emerging lea@ring society. It makes it possible for them to devote the final chapter to 'recommendations for future policy, practice and research'. They make many recommendations and here are a few of them: recognise that ICT is not a universal solution to adult non-participation; move towards a model of lifelong learning and ICT-use based on choice rather than deficit; refocus formal educational provision away from learning about ICT and towards learning with ICT; research needs to move away from providers, and routinely involve comparison groups such as non-users and non-learners.

This is a well-written and scholarly work; a fine example of how quantitative and qualitative research methods can be used together and not in opposition. If I had to pass

comment on what I think the book could have had more of, then I would return the reader to my earlier comments on social capital and networks. Admittedly, the authors touch upon this towards the end of the book when they talk of social contacts supporting ICT use. But, a more sustained use of theoretical concepts such as social, cultural and economic capital might have been preferred. Similarly, they mention the 'mix-and-match bricolage approach to learning with computers displayed by our respondents' (p183), to mean among other things the constructivist manner in which respondents mix ICT with other learning resources to suit their own contexts. But the concept of bricolage remains relatively undeveloped in the book as a whole. I have a feeling that the authors are saving a longer reflection on conceptual and theoretical matters for a later essay/work – and I shall read this, when it is published, with interest.

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