

# **Learning Changes through Life**

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## **Learning and life age**

The concept of Lifelong Learning basically contains the simple message that learning can and should be a life-long occupation. This poses the fundamental question as to whether the processes of learning are the same irrespective of age. In trying to answer this question, the point of departure must be found in some form of understanding and theory of what learning actually means, and it will soon emerge that the kind of answer that can be reached depends on the type of learning theory addressed.

For more traditional kinds of learning theory dealing with internal mental learning processes, the answer will be yes, the learning processes are in principle the same. This is because these theories are based on the assumption that learning occurs by means of certain innate mental mechanisms that have been generated throughout the history of our species' struggle for survival. In general, these mechanisms are at disposal for any normal human being, although the ability to fully practise them only gradually ripens during the years of childhood.

But in recent decades, some learning theories have included social aspects in a new way and, most radically in social constructionism, such processes as learning are primarily or exclusively regarded as social processes (e.g. Gergen 1994). In this case age certainly influences the learning processes, as the ways in which the individual is involved in social processes are strongly influenced by age.

However, in my recent book, "The Three Dimensions of Learning" (Illeris 2002), I have endeavoured to develop a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of learning by examining a large number of relevant existing and acknowledged theories and approaches – American, British, Continental, Nordic and Russian. I have not only analysed approaches that present themselves as learning theories but have also considered other psychological, social psychological and sociological theories that can in any way contribute to a comprehensive grasp of the field. The basic idea has been that any well-established theory must contain something of importance, and that the process of learning and its conditions constitute such a broad and complex field that only one type of theory or approach will not be sufficient. Thus I have tried to select the really significant elements of each contribution and merge all these elements into an overall pattern.

This has led to the basic recognition that all learning includes both internal mental and external social processes, i.e. that in order for learning to occur the learner must be actively involved both in interaction, direct or indirect, with the social and material environment and in an internal acquisition process in which the impulses that derive from this interaction are integrated in the mental schemes formed by prior learning. This implies that both the cognitive and the social approaches to learning are recognised, but neither of them can claim to fully cover the field.

Further, the acquisition process has in itself a double character as it always involves a cognitive as well as an emotional (or psychodynamic) side. This fact has been more or less explicitly recognised by many researchers of cognitive learning. For example Jean Piaget stated that “all schemes, whatever they are, are at the same time affective and cognitive” (Piaget 1946, p. 222), and similarly Lev Vygotsky made it clear that “any thought contains an affective relation to the parts of reality to which the thought refers” (Vygotsky 1971, p. 24, author’s translation from Danish). In spite of this, in all learning theory the cognitive side has been in focus as the underlying interest has been how to make learners learn what they should learn. But this is no longer so evident, as the modern concept of competencies is about to change our understanding of knowledge and qualifications. The difference lies exactly in the fact that today the important thing is not just what we know or can do, but how we can utilise our knowledge and skills to cope with present and future situations and problems, i.e. how we *perform*, which to a great extent includes emotional, motivational and psychodynamic aspects.

Another important contribution to the understanding of the fundamentally dual character of mental processes has recently come from the field of neurology, with Antonio Damasio’s studies of the close cerebral connections between reason and emotion. Damasio’s work shows that all cognitive processes are influenced by emotions – and if this connection is damaged, although the intelligence may be intact, cognitive functioning is reduced in very inconvenient ways (Damasio 1994).

I shall not delve further into this very challenging topic here. The conclusion that constitutes the basic idea of my book, and is important for the understanding of the interplay between learning and life age, is that all human learning necessarily involves a cognitive, an emotional and a social dimension. Accordingly, the study of learning spans the combination of a cognitive, a psychodynamic and a social psychological approach which may be worked together in an overall constructivist frame. This implies that individual learning is brought about when impulses from the interaction with the social, material and, in the last end, also societal environments are integrated through a combined cognitive and emotional acquisition process with existing mental schemes which have been developed by prior learning.

This understanding, however, makes it obvious that an adequate and contemporary learning theory cannot be exclusively based on psychological sources. There must also be sources for insight into the mainly sociological conditions that characterize the actual environment with which the learners in question interact. In the present case these are the conditions variously described as late modernity, e.g. in the writings of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash (Giddens 1990, 1991, Beck 1992, Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994), or as the process of cultural liberation as suggested by the German psychologist and youth researcher Thomas Ziehe (Ziehe & Stubenrauch 1982). It is only with a notion of what culturally and societally maps out the social environment of the learners in question that an understanding of their learning processes can be fully reached.

When the focus is brought to bear on the connection between learning and life age, these societal conditions are of crucial importance. This is because the differences are mainly rooted in the various positions in the relations to the social environment that are typical of each of the ages. The so-called life age or life span theories provide a connecting link here, for example the well-known theories of Erik H. Erikson (1968) and Daniel J. Levinson (1979), or the lesser known, more general work in Danish by Johan Fjord Jensen (1993). From these sources it becomes clear that four main life ages are always included, of which the three first are generally known as childhood, youth and adulthood. The fourth has developed since the middle of the 1950s, has become separated out as a distinct life age, and may be termed mature adulthood.

In one of the last chapters of my book, I take up the issue of learning and life age by trying to show the essential characteristics of learning in each of these four main life ages. The rest of this article is a further elaboration of parts of this chapter as seen in the perspective of lifelong education, the line of thinking being that when important elements of learning change, educational design and practice should change correspondingly.

Of course, these descriptions cannot be derived from theory alone. On the contrary, they are solidly grounded in empirical studies – except in the case of childhood, where I rely on the works of others. My personal professional background has been tied to research and developmental work in youth and adult education for more than thirty years, with special attention to those with brief schooling, the unemployed and other learners who are in a personally and societally weak or vulnerable position. Methodically many types of individual interviews, group interviews, classroom observations and structured discussions have been applied. Much of the research has been carried out in cooperation with my colleague, Professor Birgitte Simonsen, who is now the leader of the Danish Centre for Youth Research. Also many others have been involved, in recent years especially our colleagues Annegrethe Ahrenkiel, Noemi Katznelson and Lars Ulriksen. Most of our results have only been published in Danish, recently Ahrenkiel et al 1998, 1999, Illeris 2000, and Illeris et al 2001, in particular. Some references in English can also be mentioned: Katznelson 2000, Simonsen 2000, Ahrenkiel & Illeris 2000, Illeris 2003a, 2003b.

It is essential, however, to understand that such empirical studies in the present connection can only function as general background. In order to detect the significant characteristics of learning in the various life ages, one must step back from the empirical data and find some more distant positions from which to observe them and to generate more general and overall understandings. In this case such positions are those of the learning theory and the understanding of late modernity as outlined above.

This approach also means that of necessity the descriptions will be on a general level, paying attention to what is important, distinctive and typical. Thus they will not be valid in specific cases, but should be understood as model pictures of a sort that will make it possible to see the main structures and to get an idea of what is special. More detailed references are given in relation to each of the life ages.

### **Children want to capture their world**

As mentioned above, I have never been personally involved in empirical studies of learning in childhood. However, as a psychologist training included a great deal of child and developmental psychology, and my special interest in learning has led me to many sources dealing with children's learning. Piaget (e.g. Piaget 1952, Flavell 1963) and Vygotsky (e.g. Vygotsky 1978, 1986) have obviously been central, but to me the works of Freud (e.g. Freud 1974, Badcock 1988) and Erikson (e.g. Erikson 1950) have also been important sources, especially in connection with the emotional dimension of child learning. One very important inspiration for me has been Hans G. Furth's book "Learning As Desire" in which he connects the theories of Piaget and Freud precisely in the perspective of the fundamentals of learning in childhood.

The life age of *Childhood* lasts from birth to the onset of puberty, which occurs these days around the age of 11 to 13 (previously it was at a later stage). The overall characteristic of children's learning is that in line with their development they are absorbed in capturing the world by which they see themselves surrounded and of which they are a part. In child psychology there are comprehensive descriptions of the many different facets and stages in this capturing process, including, for example, Freud's division into psycho-sexual stages, Erikson's development ages and Piaget's theory of cognitive stages. Here I will only point out certain overriding factors that determine some of the general conditions for the process.

In learning terms, it is naturally important that the cognitive learning capacity develops gradually throughout childhood – this is what Piaget's stages theory is about. When Bruner asserted that any subject can be taught in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development (Bruner 1960), this does not mean that children of any age can learn anything – but the reverse: that teaching must be appropriate to the children's age and presuppositions.

In addition it is an important factor that children basically expect to be guided by their parents and other adults as to what and how they should learn. As babies their connection with the surrounding world is through the mother and other adults, and the first "capture" involves establishing the separation between themselves and the surrounding world. The child is from the start subject to the control of adults and can only gradually free itself from it.

In childcare institutions and in the early years at school, children are still obliged to unfold and develop within a framework set by adults. They must of necessity accept this as a basic condition, even though naturally they can resist when they feel that they are being restricted or they are unable to understand what is going on – and this resistance is also a highly significant factor in development and learning. However, children are typically ready to accept explanations that tell them that learning something may be good or important for them later even if they cannot grasp it right now.

Nevertheless, the development of our late-modern society has brought with it certain trends for change that apply to some of these basic factors affecting learning in childhood. In general, late-modern society gives children plenty of opportunities for activities, relations and impulses which previously lay beyond their reach, while at the same time, the disintegration of traditions and norms weakens or removes a number of the fixed points and structures from which children could previously take their bearings. Like young people and adults, children today perceive a number of potential choices from an early age – of which some are real and many others are only apparent – while previously there was a much higher degree of certainty, for good or ill.

The mass media play a special role here. More than parents or other adults, they give children the opportunity to experience – or often almost force on to them – a mass of impulses, including things like catastrophes, violence and sex; experiences to which they have not previously had access, and which can have strong emotional influences on them, as well as introducing these things in advance of the formation of personal experience, making it more complicated for them to later acquire their own experiences in these spheres.

Another important factor is that developments in some spheres of society can happen so fast that adults have difficulty keeping up, while children can leap, so to speak, straight into the development at its present stage, which in some areas makes them able to overtake adults. This typically occurs in the field of information technology, where teachers and parents often find that some of the children know more than they do themselves.

Many other features are, of course, of great importance for learning in childhood, for example gender socialisation, the local social and material environment, health conditions, societal regulations etc. I shall not go into all such conditions here but rather stress that, from a learning perspective, childhood as a life age may in general be regarded as a huge acquisition process of integrating and relating to the whole of the complex material, social and societal world. This requires a broad spectrum of protracted constructive processes which the child is disposed to carry out, trusting in adults and being supported by them.

To put it briefly, the fundamental characteristics of childhood learning are that it is uncensored and confident: the child aims at learning what there is to learn and has to rely on the support of the adults. Late-modern society has, indeed, led to growing complexity and even confusion, but still the open and confident approach must be recognized as the starting point.

### **Young people want to construct their own identities**

The extensive empirical studies carried out by Birgitte Simonsen (Simonsen 1993, 1994, 2000) and Noemi Katznelson (Katznelson et al 2000) predominantly form the specific background for the description of learning in youth. But I was myself involved in such studies in the 1970s and 80s, and recently Simonsen, Katznelson and I together with Lars Ulriksen worked through this area in detail in a book that mainly refers to specific Danish conditions such as in youth education (Illeris et al 2002), but also includes more basic, general considerations that I have

elaborated further in a paper written in English (Illeris 2003b). The most important theoretical sources for this work were Erikson (1968), Ziehe (Ziehe & Stubenrauch 1982) and Giddens (1990, 1991).

*Youth* lasts from puberty until the preconditions for a more or less stable adulthood are established, typically through relatively permanent relationships with partners and work, or perhaps a consciousness of not wanting to enter into such relationships. It is a characteristic of present-day society that the period of youth is longer than it has ever previously been, and has a very fluid transition to adulthood; it is quite within the bounds of normality for it to finish anywhere between the ages of about 20 and 35. The end of it will often be incomplete, with a degree of connection to the youth phase being carried over into adulthood.

Youth has not always been perceived as existing as a life age in its own right, but as long as it has existed it has been linked with a particular need for socially necessary learning and personal development. With Erik Erikson's "Identity, Youth and Crises", the conception of youth took the direction typical of the current interpretation, which is that youth is primarily a period of more or less crisis-determined development of a personal identity or self comprehension (Erikson 1968). However, with the development of late-modernity, recent decades have seen a further expansion of the youth period, and in addition, youth has become very much idealised – and commercialised – as the age of freedom, no responsibilities and happiness, while at the same time, the personal and societal problems linked with youth seem to be steadily increasing.

In terms of learning, youth centres on the development of a personal identity – although some post-modernists claim that this is not possible in our existing society (Gergen 1991, Shotter 1993, Usher 2000). Anyway, the demands on the formation of identity have undergone an explosive growth in line with late modernity – it is definitely not by chance that in Danish we often talk of "identity work", which young people have to do, as well as getting through their education, form relationships with a partner, find their place in society etc.

Previously there was family affiliation, a gender role, class attachment and usually also an attachment to a particular profession, as well as a mass of given values and norms that the young person was expected to take on, perhaps through a somewhat rebellious process; now all this is disintegrating or becoming redundant, and one must find one's own way through one's own choices. It is not only about education, career, partner and home; also lifestyle and personal identity must be chosen. Development in these areas has been overwhelming, and young people and society currently have to struggle with new, untried processes, the conditions of which change almost from day to day - new educational opportunities, new consumer opportunities, new communication systems and new lifestyle offers make themselves felt in an almost chaotic confusion. Everything seems possible, and yet young people perceive countless limitations, for many opportunities are completely inaccessible for the vast majority – only very few can become actors or sporting heroes, even though many secretly wish for it and do what they can in the hope of achieving it.

According to Piaget, human beings are cognitively fully developed from puberty, i.e.

we have reached the formal operational stage and are equipped to think logically and deductively. In terms of learning, the first part of the youth period is still subject to compulsory education, and later it is virtually a requirement to go through some youth education, and as a rule, also some further education of a more vocational nature. However, although this would appear to be education with a specific subject content, all learning in the youth period from the age of about 12 or 13 onwards is very much oriented towards the formation of identity and can only be understood in this light.

This contradictory relationship leads to a number of problems, for the school and education system are developed primarily to deal with subject learning, while matters of identity in its broadest sense are what young people are concerned about. Therefore young people often react more or less reluctantly to the academic subject requirements, which they feel are forced upon them and which they find outdated, while the representatives of the system attempt to keep the pupils' concentration on the academic work, which they themselves are trained in, are committed to, and are under an obligation to uphold.

In Denmark the upper secondary school can be seen as a typical battlefield for this conflict. An increasing number of young people go on to attend upper secondary school, for academic education is more and more becoming a sine qua non if you want to get on in life. However, upper secondary school subjects and their content, and the teachers' qualifications and ways of thinking, are very often firmly rooted in a time and tradition in which the young generation played no part. Pupils go on to upper secondary school because it is their only option, and because here they can meet other young people with the same needs and problems, while the subjects, teaching and marks are for many a kind of necessary evil, which do not seem to be of any use. The teachers try to maintain in themselves and in others an understanding that, despite all, what is happening is both meaningful and important, and there are fervent hopes that pupils will "take responsibility for their own learning". However, who wants to take responsibility for something they feel very little interest in and which has been decided by others?

One of the most striking effects of these factors is the dramatic drop in applications to technical and scientific courses. Even though these courses bring employment opportunities with high status in society, high priority and good salaries, most young people go in other directions, typically towards humanistic, social, pedagogical and societal subjects, for these provide far better opportunities for establishing an interaction between the academic content and the formation of identity.

The identity process is for most young people today far more important and far more urgent than career orientation, and in one way it is also a precondition for the choice of career, or part of it. So from the perspective of young people, there is good reason for the many searching activities, shifts and years out that the system views as expensive delays in the education process.

The most important things for young people to learn today are to be able to orient themselves, to be able to make choices that can be answered for, to keep up with everything, not



to waste their lives on the wrong thing, to be able to decline in the many situations where a choice has to be made. Society and employers also demand maturity, independence, responsibility etc. – and as far as academic qualifications are concerned, there is always something to be got out of it if you do what you are interested in. Yet no-one can say which academic qualifications will be relevant in five or ten years' time, so everyone must be prepared to go on to further education throughout most of life. The best security for the future is not to learn a subject on what are perceived as traditional premises, but to be ready to change and take hold of what is relevant in many different situations. Uncertainty cannot be countered by stability, but only by being open, flexible and constantly oriented to learning (cf. Simonsen 2000).

### **Adults pursue their life goals**

Adult learning has formed the core of my academic work over the last decade. It has been studied intensively by me and many of my colleagues in the various branches of the Danish adult education system and, as mentioned earlier, with special emphasis on those with brief schooling and other more or less marginalized groups. Our findings have been published extensively in Danish, and contributions in English include Andersen et al 1994, 1996, Ahrenkiel & Illeris 2000, Illeris 1998, 2000, 2003a and 2003b. We also received comprehensive inspiration from other sources, some of the most important of which are Alheit 1994, Brookfield 1987, Jarvis 1992, Leithäuser 1976, Mezirow 1991, Negt 1971, Rogers 1969, Schön 1983 and Wenger 1998.

*Adulthood* lasts from the end of the youth period until the *life turn* – a concept which has been fully discussed in Danish by Fjord Jensen (1993) implying that the end of life has been perceived on the distant horizon, and the person is beginning to accept this and relate to it. The actual moment of the life turn and thus the transition from the first part of adulthood to mature adulthood is extremely fluid within the period stretching between the ages of about 45 to 65. There are also considerable differences between the genders in the nature of this transition.

In terms of learning, the main orientation in adulthood is broadly towards the management of the life course and its challenges, typically centring on family and work, and more broadly, on interests, lifestyle and attitudes.

The beginning of the adult period may typically be marked by external events such as starting a family or finishing education. There are no decisively new cognitive opportunities; what happens in terms of learning and consciousness is that the person takes on the management of, and responsibility for, his or her own life, with this normally occurring gradually as a long process throughout the years of youth and into adulthood.

In general this life phase has traditionally been marked by a kind of ambition that implies a striving to realise more or less clear life aims relating to family, career, interests or something else – but in late modernity this representation is also on its way to being overlaid by the continual societal changes, the unpredictability of the future, the conditioning of the market

mechanism and the unending succession of apparent choices.

Many factors that were in earlier times, for good or ill, already marked out for the individual, have now become things to be decided on again and again. It is no longer possible to make your choice of life course once and for all when young, and then expect to spend the rest of your life accomplishing it. Whereas once a large number of factors were given, based on gender, for example, or class affiliations, all now appears to be redundant. The fact that this is only how it appears can be seen from statistics showing that the large majority of people, now just as previously, live their lives in the way that their gender and social background has prepared them for. However, this does not influence the perception that now this is something people choose themselves, something for which they are responsible, and thus have only themselves to blame if it turns out to be unsatisfactory.

Just a generation ago, there were still relatively firm learning and consciousness patterns that were taken as given, based on gender, class and environment (especially the degree of urbanisation) during upbringing. There was, as a typical basis for the general conception, the authoritative patriarchal middle class man, a pillar of society and an idealised norm – this could and still can be indirectly seen in a great deal of law, history, sociology and psychology. There was also his wife with her solicitous, modest and ambivalent function of housewife. There was a working class with a close-knit worker culture and consciousness, based on the experience of being the oppressed who carried out the toil of society, there were the women with their double burden of family and work and its attendant ambivalence, and there were also the industrious and often narrow-minded independent lower middle classes and country dwellers. There was a merging of societal position, learning, education and forms of consciousness, which were limited and often repressive, but which also created a pattern the individual could follow (Simonsen & Illeris 1989).

Today learning in adulthood has taken on a completely new perspective. With the earlier, firmer structures, the individual could use his or her years of youth to develop an identity, or at least a sort of draft identity, which would be of help in governing future learning. In career terms, school and education would have provided for the acquisition of a groundwork that was regarded as feasible for the rest of that person's life, so that whatever was needed later could generally be gained through practice learning at work and maybe a few additional courses. In life also, it was necessary to keep up with any developments, but this did not go too fast for people to manage to get the requisite learning as they went along. Thus, for the vast majority of people, learning in adulthood was fairly manageable and predominantly assimilative in nature, with its most characteristic aspect probably being the development of a system of defence mechanisms that could screen out any new impulses that were too insistent, thus ensuring stability and self-respect.

Becoming an adult formally in our society means coming of age and so taking responsibility for one's own life and actions. This happens legally (in Denmark) on the eighteenth birthday, but from a psychological perspective it is actually a process, as has been mentioned earlier in the text, and it is characteristic that this process has become longer and

longer, to such an extent that today it is most often accomplished well into a person's twenties or perhaps never. Late-modern society's promotion of youth makes it difficult to let it go.

In the field of education the prolongation of this process goes hand in hand with the continual extension of the average time spent in education, and the steady increase of the scope of adult education. It is not so very long ago that the majority of Denmark's population received only seven years' schooling, but today there are nine years of compulsory education and a clear state target that everyone should have at least twelve years' education; and a majority go on to a further course of education of a longer or shorter length before the end of the preliminary period of education. In addition to this, an increasing number of people take part in adult education courses, and young people's expectations are for recurrent or lifelong education.

However, it is basically characteristic that adults learn what they want, and have very little inclination to acquire something they do not want, i.e. something they do not perceive as meaningful for their own life goals, of which they are aware in varying degrees of clarity. A rule of thumb for understanding adults' learning would state that

- adults learn what they *want* to learn and what is meaningful for them to learn
- adults draw on the resources they already have in their learning
- adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to).

(Illeris 2002, p. 219).

As a consequence of this, rather than having various more or less unconnected motives as the foundation for their educational and learning activities, adults have more coherent *strategies* relating to goals that are normally fairly clear and known to the individual (Ahrenkiel & Illeris 2000). This approach to education is, however, far from always in accordance with the way adult education is organised, and neither does it accord with much of the participants' own expectations. For in the ordinary popular conception and throughout the many years of schooling, everyone more or less takes on board the traditional view that education and learning are the responsibility of schools and teachers. Teachers have to teach pupils what has to be learnt.

In relation to youth learning, I discussed how the conflict between the respective interests of the system and the participants dominates youth education today, creating major problems. In adult education these problems are basically different because adult education is nearly always voluntary in principle. Of course it is very often the case that someone needs to take a particular course to achieve a particular goal, but that person was also the one to choose the goal – in contrast to youth education, where there is no realistic alternative if there is to be any hope of a life on a level with what is normal in the eyes of society. However, there are also cases where employers, or in Denmark very often the unemployment authorities, compel adults into education courses against their will, although it is a common experience that they will learn very little from this; it is a reluctant process which is more like storage than learning (Ahrenkiel

& Illeris 2000, Illeris 2003a).

However, the academic content is the least problematic aspect of adult education today. With the pace of change and need for reorganisation in the late-modern period, the phrase lifelong learning primarily implies a need to be constantly prepared for reorganisation. This can be hard enough for young people, but for those who first got caught up in this development as adults, the challenge of reorganisation is even harder. The stability, self-assurance and professional pride that were crucial qualifications for many a few years ago, now seem like burdensome encumbrances. Where before there was stability, there must now be flexibility, and if there is to be any hope of survival in the job market, the defence mechanisms of stability must very quickly be replaced by service-mindedness and readiness for change – regardless of whether the defence was developed in the form of middle-class values or working class consciousness.

Societal demands that adults must learn on a far greater scale and in a totally different way than previously are inescapable on every level. It is primarily a demand for a mental reorganisation and personal development, but there may also be technical or academic demands, e.g. typically in connection with information technology developments. In other words, these are demands for profound change or transformative processes (Mezirow 1991) – and that is not something most adults are expecting or accustomed to.

It is clear enough, however, that the normal situation in adult education is that the adults themselves have chosen or more or less had to accept the course in question – the choice can be predominantly libidinal or influenced more by necessity; it is usually both in some kind of combination. On this basis it could be expected that the adults would themselves take responsibility for the learning the course is providing. However, ordinary conceptions and experiences of education often get in the way of this. Even though the institutions, the teachers and the participants might say and believe otherwise, everyone in the education situation obstinately expects that the responsibility will lie with the teacher. It is, after all, the teacher who knows what has got to be learnt.

The situation is paradoxical, for while the adult participants behave like pupils, they have a very hard time accepting the lack of authority the traditional pupil role entails. They get bored and become resistant in a more or less conscious way – but nevertheless they will not themselves take on the responsibility, for that is actually far more demanding. The conflict can only be resolved by effectively making a conscious break with the prevailing roles as pupils and teachers at school. And as a rule it is the teacher who has to take the initiative and insist on it. It is normally only when the participants realise that they truly can take responsibility and use the teacher as a support for their own learning that the picture alters, and after that the way is clear for the learning to become goal-directed, effective, transcendent and libidinal, as is characteristic of a learning process actually chosen by the individual (Illeris 1998).

However, there is much to suggest that the conditions described here stand in the way of complete changes. The “new youth” of late modernity, who have in recent years turned youth education upside down, are well on their way to making their entry into adult education as the

“new adults”. Birgitte Simonsen has the following to say about this development:

*“In a few years’ time, these young people will really come into adult education, and then we will need all the flexibility we can get. In the field of adult education we in Denmark have an extremely well-founded tradition for heterogeneity, which makes us hopeful. If, on the other hand, current trends towards homogeneity in large inflexible systems get the upper hand, major problems should be anticipated.” (Simonsen 1998, p. 213).*

### **Mature adults seek richness and harmony**

Whereas mature adulthood may fairly easily be separated from earlier adulthood analytically, this is more difficult in empirical studies as the age of transition is very individual and people in the stages of mature adulthood and earlier adulthood are mixed together to a high degree in adult education and other learning situations. Thus we have observed important differences in many of our empirical projects and reflected on these issues in several of the publications mentioned earlier. This has especially been the case in Ahrenkiel et al 1998, Ahrenkiel & Illeris 2000, Illeris 2000 and 2003a. The most important external sources were existing literature on the topic in Danish and Jarvis 2001 in English.

*Mature adulthood* lasts until death, or in terms of learning, perhaps only until mental weakness begins to take hold to a considerable extent. In learning terms, mature adulthood – if energy and other circumstances permit it – is typically oriented towards bringing about understanding, fulfilment and harmony (cf. Jarvis 2001, p.76ff).

“The age of maturity”, “the third age” or “second adulthood” are all terms for the phase of life that for most people in modern society lies between the so-called life turn and actual old age, and can well last a period of twenty years or more.

The life turn is a psychological phenomenon concerning the perception and acknowledgement that the remaining time in your life is not unlimited. It is, however, most often external events that bring about and mark the life turn – typical examples are the children leaving home, losing a job, taking early retirement or being given reduced hours; it can also be a divorce or the death of a near one, and for women the menopause may play a part in the situation (cf. Fjord Jensen 1993).

In contrast to the first age of adulthood, the mature age is characteristically not dominated by the same form of purposefulness – the goals being reached for do not have the same existential nature as having a family, raising children, or work and career. As far as they are able – and the mature age is for many today a period with a certain personal and financial ability - people spend their time on things they perceive as quality activities, such as cultural or social activities, helping others, their partner, if they have one, their children, grandchildren, or disadvantaged groups they are involved with.

In this context there may often be important learning activities, both formal education

and less formal processes of development and change, characterised by being something absolutely personally chosen, because it is something one wants to do, something one considers important for oneself or for other people. It can also be that one needs to prove to oneself and to others that there are things one is well capable of, that one simply has not had the opportunity to do previously.

Learning in mature adulthood is thus usually characterised by a personal libidinal motivation, without that aura of necessity or external incentive which often forms the basis for learning in earlier adulthood. This could apply to things one would like to study, things one would like to understand, or experience, or learn and use in specific contexts.

However, it must be remembered that this only applies to relatively privileged mature adults. Many people have more than enough to do just getting by practically and financially, and have neither the opportunity nor the reserves to look towards the self-actualisation or learning in which those in more favourable positions increasingly get involved. The new wave of learning and education for mature adults is for the time being a middle-class phenomenon mainly.

Cognitively there may be a trend towards learning beginning to go more slowly if it concerns new areas the person is not very committed to, but this does not normally apply when it concerns things he or she is interested in, and for which he or she has good presuppositions and experiences. The usual popular notion that elderly people are worse at learning things can thus be seen to relate only to the fact that they can be *slower* in learning something *new* - which people are often not particularly interested in acquiring. People are satisfied with their own interests and experiences, and if the new matter is not connected to that, it can make it more difficult to mobilise psychological energy.

Naturally, dementia and other illnesses are another matter – but that subject is beyond the perspective of this article.

### **Lifelong learning**

In the above I have looked at some typical current background attitudes to learning in various life ages. It is important to stress that these are current attitudes, for life ages are only rooted in biology to a certain extent. The details of the various life ages are to a great extent determined by history and society, and can alter rapidly. It has become clear, for example, how late modernity has influenced learning today, particularly in childhood and youth, but also increasingly in adulthood.

A Finnish life process survey can further throw these attitudes into relief (Antikainen et al. 1996, Antikainen 1998). Certain clear differences were found between the attitudes of three generations to education and learning: the oldest generation's life histories take the form of survival accounts, in which education figures as a limited benefit which provided the opportunity for a learning that could positively contribute to their struggles in life. In the middle generation, the life histories of the men in particular take the form of career accounts, and

education and learning play a part as a means to career development. In the young generation the life histories are characterised by reflexivity and individuality, and education is perceived as a consumer item to be made use of when there is a need for it or an interest in it. It is clear that the very different perspectives on education imply correspondingly large differences in the nature of the learning that takes place.

Thus very different frames of reference for society and consciousness determine the learning conditions in the various life ages, and these frames of reference change rapidly in step with developments in society and consciousness. Nevertheless there are also a number of important common links running through the life ages which are more general and which to a certain extent run across changing circumstances. From the descriptions previously given, three closely linked long lines of this kind can be pointed out:

Firstly, a gradual *liberation* occurs throughout the life ages for the individual in relation to the societal determination of learning. Whereas learning in childhood is framed in an interaction between biological maturing and external societally determined influences, in youth it is characterised to a great extent by young people's fight to have a say in things and, partly through this, construct their identity. In first adulthood people move towards learning what they themselves think is important, but to a great extent this is determined by their societal conditions. It is only in mature adulthood that societal determinations move into the background for those people who have the opportunities and the resources to liberate themselves.

In close interaction with this gradual liberation of learning from its societal bondage there also typically occurs an *individuation*, i.e. learning increasingly directs itself towards the development of an individual person and is determined by personal needs and interests. Again it is a development which first takes off properly in the period of youth, but which only has a full impact in mature adulthood.

Finally, a gradual development of a *responsibility* for learning also occurs, which is closely connected with the two other developments and thus follows the same pattern.

In our society, it seems very clear that it should be both a condition and a goal for society to strive to organise itself along the lines of these developments and to support them. However, learning is not merely an individual process and education can also have other perspectives than supporting personal development and the provision of qualifications for individuals, which our late-modern market society places firmly at the centre. Human beings are and always will be social beings also, the individual cannot develop and fulfil his or her potential without others, and so there will also always be a counter-movement towards the notion of the common before the individual good. In mature adulthood, when there are many truly free learning initiatives, these are often both social in nature and have a social perspective.

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