Learning for a Complex World

A lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development

Edited by
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Chapter 8

Connecting and integrating life based and lifewide learning

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> Life based learning seems initially a utopian/fantasy notion, but we live in a complex world. The notion is an honest attempt to capture the full breadth of our humanity, and apply it to our working life[1]

Synopsis

This chapter provides an overview of a research and development project in Australia that focused on capability development for the knowledge era. A new model, called life based learning, was developed through research and discussion. The basis of life based learning is that learning *for* work is not restricted to learning *at* work and that all our learning and development is interrelated. There are many similarities between the concepts of life based and lifewide learning and it makes sense to connect them. However, in life based learning there is an explicit emphasis on a strength based orientation to capability development and it would be beneficial to further explore this in the context of lifewide education and personal and professional development planning.

Introduction

The concept of life based learning is an outcome of a research project – 'Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era' – that examined professional development in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia[2]. The research was motivated by a desire to discover what might lie beyond traditional approaches to professional development. The project team[3] was supported throughout the research phases by an international Working Group, a National Reference Group and wider audiences for feedback and dialogue on research in progress - through forums, journals, website

publications, presentations and workshops. The methodology informing the research drew on phenomenology, hermeneutics and dialogue.

A key question underlying the project was: what needed to change in professional development in the workplace to accommodate emerging technologies, business imperatives and globalisation? Other research pointed to the need to broaden approaches to training and compliance; integrate formal and informal learning; re-examine pedagogy and build capacity; and foster sustainability and resilience. The needs of customers, including students, were rapidly changing, as were the demographics of the workforce. New thinking was required around learning models that supported innovative practice in the field.

The research team's vision was that of rich, diverse, sustainable learning environments, that incorporated continuous inquiry and adaptability in complex and constantly changing settings. The team's value was around choice – that there was no one way to learn; learners knew best how to meet their learning needs; and designing how learning and development fits into and influences their lives - was potentially the best way to go.

The purpose of the research was to develop a business framework that supported this value and vision, and guided workforce planning and development in VET. The assumption was that teachers' learning would directly impact on students' learning. As indicated by Moodie (2004:6), teachers and trainers best develop student learning by reflecting and learning from their own practice as teachers.

What follows is a summary of the research[4], its core concepts, key findings and application of the research in the field. Connections between 'lifewide' and 'life based' learning are drawn out and there is reflection on the research, five years on. Implications for personal and professional development planning within a lifewide concept of learning are considered and suggestions for a strength based approach are provided.

Key concepts

The research commenced with the identification of four key concepts that underpinned a new approach to professional development: broadening the term to capability development and providing a new model called life based learning. The key concepts came from an extensive examination of literature and knowledge gathering in the field. The concepts were:
- knowledge era – the environment

- learning ecologies – the metaphor
- strength based philosophy – the mindset
- business wisdom – the actions.

Knowledge era – the environment

As we move out of the information era into what some are calling the knowledge era of the 21st Century, people are experiencing increasing complexity, diversity, uncertainty, contraction and change. This is reflected in the increasing tension between mechanistic processes vs organic and fluid ways of working and learning; the desire for predictable outcomes vs emergent outcomes; the collection of information vs the generation of knowledge; the desire to have one way of doing things vs multiple solutions. Both the concept of life based learning and lifewide learning acknowledge these contradictory, complex, diverse and changing environments and contexts.

In such environments, how we create knowledge becomes a key issue and *knowledge work* has emerged as a key generic capability. This form of work is non-linear and non-routine, more intuitive, opportunistic and networked and less driven by a pre-planned path or mindset. Knowledge workers reflect this generic capability when they tackle problems in new ways that make sense in new contexts; maintain a balance between productivity and creativity; and collaborate in both face-to-face and virtual environments (Staron, Jasinski and Weatherley 2006:24). The challenge is both individual and organisational: the creation of a happy, productive and effective workforce in environments that are diverse, contradictory and rapidly changing.

Learning ecologies – the metaphor

A new metaphor was needed. Metaphors such as 'bureaucracy' and 'networks' that suited previous eras were no longer adequate for the knowledge era. The research team chose the metaphor of 'ecology' because it embraced the idea of adaptability and 'opposites in co-existence'. They extended the metaphor to that of 'learning ecologies' (Siemens 2003) as a 'best fit' for the changing needs of working and learning. in the knowledge era.

A learning ecology metaphor is: dynamic – with ever-shifting relationships and interdependence informing learning and doing; adaptive – which is a key survival capability within an ecology; and diverse – a core requirement in knowledge work (Staron *et al.* 2006:26). It enables a move away from seeking the 'one way to get it right' to a more open *orientation* to learning – including *multiple* ways of working, learning and living. A learning ecology metaphor also

invites us to work with apparently contradictory concepts that often challenge us, such as using an anticipative approach rather than a predetermined approach; using approximations rather than exactness; seeing fuzziness as a strength; and watching self-organisation happen even though there may be no explanation for where the self-organising pattern comes from (Staron *et al.* 2006:26). The researchers named this more open and adaptive orientation to learning: life based learning.

Strength based philosophy – the mindset
The changing paradigm for organisational change and learning is based on a *strength- or asset-based emphasis* that views organisations as mysteries to be embraced rather than problems to be solved (Cooperrider 2004:99). The focus is on collaboratively identifying what is right and enhancing it. Core strengths and solutions that already exist are identified and the aim is to *amplify* what is working. The spotlight is on the forces that help the organisation to thrive.

However, many organisations still have a culture of deficit based approaches to learning and development. Cooperrider (2004) describes the *deficit based emphasis* as one where organisations focus on what is wrong and 'fixing it' through intervention strategies. Problems are identified, solutions are brainstormed and efforts are made to 'fill the gap' This is an outmoded legacy from the industrial era.

The shift to strength based approaches is more than just wanting to 'think strengths'. It requires a shift in learning systems, processes, practice and mindset. Essentially a paradigm shift. The research identified two underpinning theories that support the shift to strength based approaches – positive psychology (Seligman 2000) and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Business wisdom – the actions
Organisational wisdom builds on organisational learning and knowledge management (Hayes 2005). Wisdom emerges from the way that knowledge, values, and experience are linked and leveraged to promote learning and growth within an organisation. Baltes (2004) offers as a work in progress, seven properties that are usually part of any definition of wisdom: questioning the conduct and meaning of life; knowing the limits of knowledge and the uncertainties of the world; a 'superior' level of knowledge, judgement and advice; knowledge with extraordinary scope, depth and balance; synergy of mind and character; knowledge used for the good or well-being of oneself and

others; and that wisdom is easy to recognise though it may be difficult to achieve and specify.

The concept of wisdom is central to the research project. Wisdom is strength based as it contributes to human well-being and the common good. Wisdom contributes to synthesis, aligning components together into an integrated whole; and wisdom is achievement-oriented as it has a practical orientation and guides thinking and action. (Staron *et al.* 2006:30). A focus on wisdom can help us understand how we work, learn and lead in complex and chaotic environments. It reminds us of the fundamental importance of human development and encourages us to be the best that we can be for the benefit of both ourselves and others.

Key findings

The key concepts and the related practices that the researchers investigated led them to the following three key findings:

- *Capability development* is the new emphasis for working and learning in VET.
- *A strength based orientation* to capability development is most effective for change.
- *Life based learning* is the contemporary framework for capability development.

Emphasising capability development

The research recommended that the term 'capability development' be the preferred term to 'professional development'[5]. The term capability development aligns well with the discourse around the four key concepts and reclaims the importance of people, as well as reinforcing the importance of business imperatives. It focuses on people's *confidence* in applying existing skills in new circumstances (Stephenson and Weil 1992) and integrates a broader range of strength based strategies than does professional development.
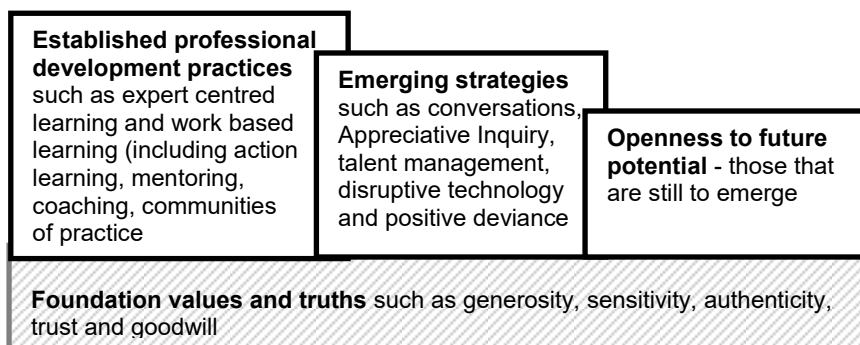
The term capability development suits the 'organic', open-system nature of the knowledge era and recognises that both individual and social processes coexist and underpin learning (Staron *et al.* 2006:39). Capability development encourages learners to be self-directed, designing their own situations for learning and sharing their knowledge with others. To support capability development, organisations need to create environments that promote and enable the dissemination of learning for the benefit of all. Both life based and

lifewide learning acknowledge the importance of 'capability development' (Chapter 4 this volume).

The research defined capability development as 'supporting people being confident, capable, connected, curious and committed learners who interact with their environment so that they are in dynamic balance between life and work, and who take effective and appropriate action at work' (Staron *et al.* 2006:40). On reflection, Jackson's reference (Chapter 4 this volume) to capability being the ability to comprehend, evaluate and act in situations of different levels of complexity – as well as Eraut's construct 'everything a person (or group or organisation) can think or do' (Eraut 2009:6), provides a deeper perspective on capability development and it would be beneficial to incorporate such perspectives into a reworking of the researcher's definition.

Figure 8.1 Building new foundations for capabilitydevelopment.
Source: Staron *et al*. (2006: 41) (© TAFE NSW)

Established professional development practices such as expert centred learning and work based learning (including action learning, mentoring, coaching, communities of practice

Emerging strategies such as conversations, Appreciative Inquiry, talent management, disruptive technology and positive deviance

Openness to future potential - those that are still to emerge

Foundation values and truths such as generosity, sensitivity, authenticity, trust and goodwill

A strength based orientationto capability development
A strength based orientation to capability development does not displace what has gone before. From an ecological perspective, the 'survival of the fittest' can be applied to any strategy that is *being considered for capability development. Some* people will prefer known, established approaches while others will require varied and creative opportunities. This mix is best achieved through: incorporating foundation age-old values with known, established practices; providing opportunities for engagement with emerging new strategies; and an openness to future options (Figure 8.1).

Participants in the research forums believed that *values and age-old truths* were fundamental to the success of any strategy. They talked about, for example,

being valued, trusted, appreciated and recognised. It became apparent to the researchers that values and truths were an important underpinning to the successful application of strength based capability development strategies.

In a strength based approach, learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and select from as wide a range of strategies as possible and personalise them to meet their needs. Both life based and lifewide learning encourage this. However the lifewide learning concept could benefit from incorporating a more explicit emphasis on a strength based orientation to learning.

Life based learning
Life based learning is the suggested contemporary model for capability development in the knowledge era. Life based learning proposes that learning *for* work is not restricted to learning *at* work. The premise is that all learning is interrelated and therefore it is not easy to separate learning at work from other types of learning adults do (Figure 8.2). Being a multi-dimensional experience, adults engage in a lot of learning other than formal learning. Much of this 'extra curricular' learning influences our thinking and practice at work. This is the same premise that underlies 'lifewide' learning[6].

Figure 8.2 Moving from segmented to integrated learning. Based on Staron *et al*. (2006:44) (© TAFE NSW)

Expert Centred	Work Based	Life based	Emergent Strengths Holistic Adaptive Diverse Integrated Mutual Relationships
Training	Professional Development	Capability Development	
Hierarchy metaphor	Network metaphor	Learning ecology metaphor	
Learner as passive receiver	Learner as worker	Learner as whole person	
Strategies	**Strategies**	**Orientation**	

The aim of life based learning is to allow for more of the 'whole' person to be present at work. It acknowledges that what we learn and experience outside of work can be as important to our work as what we learn and experience at work. Illeris (2003) refers to 'life projects' that link everyday interests with professional learning. Life projects can be, but are not restricted to, family projects, work projects, service projects, leisure-time projects – all of which are integral to the identity of the individual.

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Many people have skills, knowledge and attributes that are not acknowledged at work but that could significantly contribute to business results and working relationships. Life based learning recognises the importance of this. It acknowledges *multiple sources of learning* that open up opportunities for developing and using capability (Figure 8.3). The challenge is how to recognise, capture, support and utilise this more open-ended approach for the benefit of both the individual and the organisation.

Both lifewide and life based learning differentiate themselves from *lifelong* learning. Lifelong learning is seen as a continuum of learning throughout life and promotes 'learning for ever', whereas life based learning focuses on the source of learning for the purpose of workforce capability development. Lifelong learning is learning through the whole of a person's journey through life and life based learning is 'learning from the whole of a person's life at any point in time[4].

Figure 8.3 Life based learning – building on and integrating potential. Source: Staron *et al*. (2006) (© TAFE NSW)
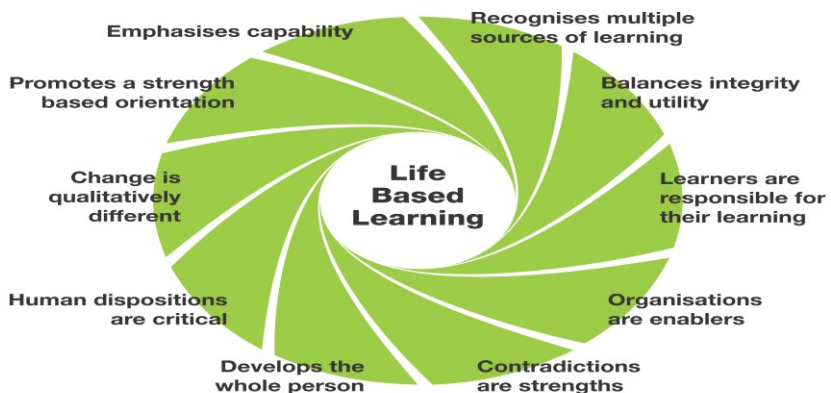

Rather than a list of prescribed strategies, life based learning proposes that it is the *characteristics of life based learning* that best support individuals and groups in the judgements and decisions they need to make about their learning. Characteristics of life based learning (Staron *et al.* 2006:46–7) are that it:

- *Emphasises capability development.* The purpose is to fulfil people's potential.
- *Promotes a strength based orientation to learning.* It is the orientation that makes the difference, not the strategy.
- *Recognises multiple sources of learning.* Supports engagement in varied learning events and acknowledges the associated capability development.

- *Balances integrity and utility.* Mindset matters. Life based learning seeks a balance between integrity of being authentic and utility of the required business results.
- *Shifts responsibility for learning and personal development to the individual.* Learning is a personal and unique event. Individuals need to take responsibility for designing their own learning and choosing options that best meet their personal and professional goals.
- *Shifts the role of organisations to that of enabler.* Organisations need to be places of rich learning, reflection and choice that optimises learning opportunities.
- *Acknowledges that contradictions are strengths.* Contradictions can lead to new understandings, practices and relationships with space for different interpretations of the world.
- *Invests in developing the whole person.* The refocus is on the human factor and 'being' through having a robust sense of self and a sense of relationship with others that enriches knowledge and skills development.
- *Acknowledges human dispositions as critical.* Basic human foundation truths are vital and *what* you know is as important as *how* you know about the world.
- *Appreciates that change is qualitatively different.* Change is both externally and internally oriented. Knowing self is as important as new knowledge and new practicesWhile these characteristics appear in list form, their true strength is in their relationship as an interconnected and integrated whole rather than as separate entities (Figure 8.4).

Figure 8.4 A holistic and interconnected perspective of the key characteristics of life based learning. Source: Staron *et al.* (2006: 47) (© TAFE NSW)

Life based learning model

Life based learning moves us *beyond the familiar models* that have been the predominant models for learning and development in vocational education and training (VET):

- the expert-centred model – focusing on the 'teacher' as the holder of knowledge, skills and experience from which the learner learns.
- the work-based learning model – focusing on learners learning from the 'teacher' as well as from facilitated learning experiences through work projects and action learning processes at work.
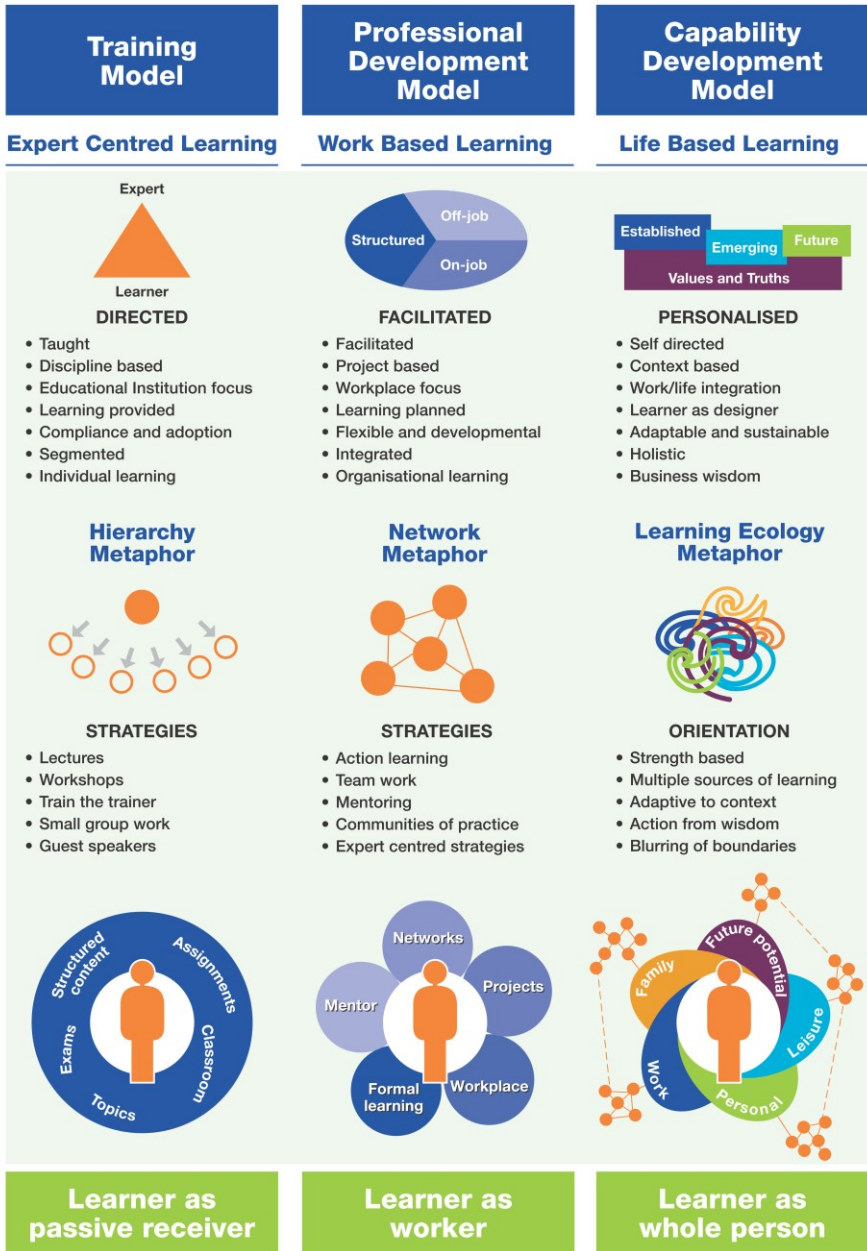
Life based learning does not discard the expert centred and work-based learning models. It embeds the models within an *expanded* model of life based learning – it 'grows' the image of learning for work. Being *a model for growth and the realisation of personal potential* (Figure 8.5), life based learning is adaptive, self-facilitated and based on reflexive practice, making use of any strategy appropriate to the task. Strategies can be sourced from any model that works for the individual – whether expert centred, work based or through life experiences. The preference may be for one learning approach over the other or all three may co-exist. Like any model, life based learning will morph and shift over time as people engage with it and reshape it to fit their context.

The four distinguishing features that a life based learning model needs to retain are:

- an emphasis on *strength based orientation* rather than strategy
- explicit recognition of underpinning *foundation truths and values*, which for the participants in the research forums included trust, mindfulness, generosity, consideration and tolerance
- *integration* of the best of traditional formal and informal approaches to learning with learning through life experiences
- acknowledging the *learner as a 'whole' person* who accesses many sources of learning (Staron *et al.* 2006:49) and who learns in a holistic way (Beard and Jackson Chapter 3 this volume).

In the national research forums, participants were enthusiastic about the life based learning model because it articulated what was familiar and known to them, and proposed a way forward that was tangible and realisable. For them, the benefits of life based learning were that it: expanded perspectives on learning, legitimised life experiences as a key source of learning and acknowledged the whole person. The main types of life based learning experiences that participants identified were: significant life events, developing

Figure 8.5 The life based learning model.
Source Staron *et al.* (2006:50) (© TAFE NSW)

Life Based Learning: a model for integration, growth and potentiality. © TAFE NSW ICVET

a talent and recreational interests. Participants were able to articulate how their life based experiences transferred to the workplace and how it impacted on themselves, their students and their teams.

The research concluded that there is no one way or best approach to successfully implement life based learning – it depends on context. Organisations need to determine which enablers will be most useful and how to effectively support staff in their learning, growth, adaptability and resilience during complex, uncertain and changing times.

Applying life based learning to capability development

Decisions about applying life based learning need to be made in context. As context (or reality) varies person to person, group to group, organisation to organisation there is no one way forward. However, to assist people and organisations in getting started, the research suggests that a starting pointing point could be to re-examine their principles, enablers, strategies and evaluative approaches. Perhaps these ideas also offer pointers to institutions wishing to adopt a lifewide approach to student development?

Guiding principles

Guiding principles provide the 'scaffolding' on which capability development can be built. Groups and individuals must decide for themselves the principles that best serve capability development in their context. The following principles are provided for discussion, not as a prescriptive list: embed a strength based orientation; understand your learning ecology; appreciate and recognise wisdom; acknowledge the whole person; learners are responsible for their own learning; there are many sources of learning; support connections and networks.

Organisational enablers

The enablers aim to support the development of rich learning environments. The following list is provided for discussion and is not a prescriptive list:
- space for exchanging and sharing ideas (informal learning)
- a culture that supports job reshaping for personal growth
- systems that support learners as designers of their own development
- balance between control and creativity
- capitalise on the benefits of an intergenerational workforce
- focus on futures in education rather than futures of education (Slaughter 2005).

Strength based capability strategies
Established capability development strategies (i.e., those strategies that practitioners in the research forums were familiar with) may have a strength based orientation or, if not, can be easily adapted. Practitioners identified established strength based strategies as: action learning, communities of practice, coaching and mentoring. What matters is how these strategies are applied. Unfortunately many practitioners said that strategies such as mentoring have been applied with a negative focus on weaknesses rather than on building strengths.

Many 'new' and *emerging strategies* align well with the concept of learning ecologies and their methodologies have been developed around a strength based focus. Practitioners in VET were not very familiar with these emerging strategies (apart from conversations). They include but are not limited to:

- *Conversations* – which are integral to daily organisational activity and are a source of rich learning. They are central to how we interact and learn as human beings and can be a primary strategy for knowledge generation and relationship building. Candy (2004) suggests that conversations include dialogue with colleagues; asking questions of someone who knows more; and internally, involving introspection and reflection. Many models and tools are available to facilitate conversations. Popular models are World Café[7], Open Space Technology[8] and Strategic Conversations[9].
- *Talent management* - is about identifying, valuing, guiding and nurturing the talents and aspirations of employees (and not just the 'high fliers'). Untapped talent is a wasted business asset. Talent management strategies can cater for varying intergenerational needs; can identify what talent is needed to achieve goals; whether it is available within the organisation or needs to be 'bought in'; and how to recruit, retain and develop that talent.
- *Positive deviance* is about the people who function better and achieve more than others with the same set of constraints and resources as everyone else. These people are known as 'positive deviants' (Crom and Bertels 1999) and they achieve success by defying conventional wisdom. Identifying these people and the principles they apply provides the background to distil the principles of success within that culture.
- *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)* is based on the premise that organisations change in the direction in which they inquire (Cooperrider and Whitney 2002). An organisation which keeps inquiring into problems will keep finding problems and an organisation which inquires into what works

best will keep finding more and more that works well. AI amplifies what works well, thereby building a future where the best becomes more common. AI involves five phases: choosing an affirmative topic; discovering what gives life to an organisation; dreaming of what might be; collaboratively designing what could be; and delivering results through implementation and review.

- *Disruptive technology* - challenges orthodox ways of doing things (Christensen 1997). It can occur through the introduction of a new technology, product, process or service that eventually overturns the existing dominant way of doing things – even though initially it performs worse than the leading technology of the time. Disruptive technologies offer alternatives to established technologies and are perceived by some as being more agile, responsive and empowering.

Evaluation

Traditional methods of evaluation may not suit capability development in rapidly changing and complex environments. They are often deficit based rather than strength based, trainer directed rather than self-directed, past rather than future focused, pre-determined rather than emergent, and event focused rather than personalised. Many traditional evaluative processes are still relevant for certain areas of learning and development, although how effective they will be when evaluating in increasingly diverse, uncertain and complex environments with high levels of innovation and knowledge sharing is questionable.

The research identifies two evaluative approaches that appear to be more aligned to life based learning for capability development in the knowledge era:

- *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)* embeds self-evaluation into the processes used to discover the core strengths and best practices within an organisation. Key evaluative questions have been developed for each of the four phases in the AI process.
- *Most Significant Change* (Davies and Dart 2005) involves regular monitoring and the collection of significant change stories from the field that are shared and discussed across the organisation. The process is relatively easy to use, contributes to the sharing of values, and monitors and evaluates emergent and unexpected shifts and changes.

Life based learning offers a way forward at a time when many industrial era processes are no longer working. It opens the way to re-energising people, honouring what has worked well in the past and realigning current and

emerging strategies to a strength based orientation. Life based learning expresses what many people know and feel and provides a dynamic model for capability development in the knowledge era.

Life based learning is holistic in nature, being much more than an 'add-on' or piecemeal approach. It requires astute, context-specific thinking and an openness to intuition and serendipity. It is only a beginning and, as such, will be reinterpreted and applied in various ways.

Throughout the Chapter the reader will be struck by the fact that the thinking developed around the idea of life based learning is totally congruent with that developed for lifewide learning. Both view learning and education for work and future life through the lens of a complex and changing world and both reclaim the importance of the whole person element.

Both see learning and personal development as a whole-of-life venture (or *ed*venture). Learning cannot always be predicted and it emerges in partly intended and partly unanticipated ways. Both focus on the need for learners to take personal responsibility for designing their own learning and both encourage learners to recognise and take advantage of opportunities as they emerge through everyday interactions and relationships.

Both life based and lifewide learning recognise that individuals integrate and apply what they learn from different parts of their lives to the challenges and problems they encounter in their daily lives. In effect, they transfer their learning to a new context and adapt themselves to perform in, and deal with, the situations in which they are involved.

Although implicit in the lifewide learning idea, life based learning has explored the idea of a strength based approach to capability development much more systematically, and there is advantage in integrating this idea more firmly into the lifewide learning model in higher education.

Applying life based learning (some reflections)

It is five years since the 'Life based Learning' research report was published. During that time people have reacted in different ways to the research. Some have embraced it wholeheartedly and others have ignored it or resisted implementation.

Adoption of life based learning

Initially, the greatest interest was from those involved in e-learning. They viewed the life based learning model for capability development as more A realistic and inclusive than previous learning and development models. Life based learning gave them a holistic learning context through which they could incorporate their extensive global networks, and design when and how they learnt in both virtual and non-virtual learning environments.

Other groups that also responded enthusiastically to life based learning were community and outreach groups involved in on-campus and off-campus learning. The teachers incorporated elements of the life based learning model into their practice, particularly for groups such as refugees and those undertaking community projects. For some, the model aligned well with their community and family-based learning. Teaching section heads have used strength based approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry for planning and supporting staff. In one institute, the life based learning model was adapted to leadership development where potential leaders were provided with multiple self-directed learning options.

During the past two years anecdotal evidence suggests that managers and groups continue to take on board elements of the life based learning model rather than the whole model itself. Most interest is expressed in adoption of strength based strategies such as Appreciative Inquiry and conversation-based learning. The methodologies of these strategies are often modified and adapted to meet local needs. More people are starting to speak the language of learning ecologies, with particular reference to adaptability, diversity and multiple options.

Resistance

Change frequently brings resistance. The 'new' or different way bumps up against the 'old' or common way causing tension. At times, the resistance is strong enough to stall the change. This is not surprising as life based learning entails a paradigm shift. People find it difficult to sustain doing things differently or thinking differently within educational systems that are often bureaucracies that are slow-moving, rules bound, deficit based and teacher-directed. Resistance can come in different forms, such as:

- *Support in disguise*. Senior management can be very supportive until it is expected that they will need to change as well.
- *Change is great as long as it's the change I want to make*. People say 'I love change.' However, I have noticed that they love change provided it

is the change they want and that minimally challenges their world views, habits, attachments or desires.

- *Fear of self-organising systems*. Senior management frequently seem to fear self-organising systems. I assume they equate it with anarchy and loss of control and power.
- *A mismatch between rhetoric and doing*. Often the support for change is in the form of rhetoric and the actions do not match the words. For example, people now speak of facilitation instead of teaching, outcomes instead of outputs, capability development instead of professional development and perhaps in the future life based instead of work-based learning and strength based instead of deficit based strategies - while there is little real change in processes and practice. However, perhaps it is just a matter of time?
- *The need for instant results*. We seem to live in a 'quick fix' society. Change takes time, and when those providing funds cannot see widespread results in short timeframes they frequently withdraw resources and turn their attention to the 'next big thing'.
- *If we can't measure it, we don't value it.* The focus is frequently quantitative against set criteria. A limiting approach that can overlook the change that is actually happening.
- *We don't know our own values*. When people do not know or live by their core values, they may make decisions based on conditioned beliefs or the needs of others and 'sit on the fence', swinging one way and then the other. 'Just tell us what we have to do and we'll do it.' They are unable to follow through consistently with the change because the driver is 'external' rather than 'internal'.
- *Desire for certainty*. Funding bodies often want to know outcomes in advance and there is little (or no) room for emergence of the unanticipated. The surprises are ignored and some of the most important learning is disregarded.

Despite the resistance (which most of us feel from time to time), many do find ways to champion new thinking and doing and to support each other in following their own unique paths of learning and development. Shifts often occur 'underground' and the ecological metaphor suggests that meaningful change will be organic rather than driven through management. We can all make this happen and I hope that people will feel encouraged and supported by their leaders, managers, colleagues, friends and family in sharing their experience and knowledge and assisting others who would like to embrace aspects of life based (or lifewide) learning.

Implications for personal and professional development

During the last few years I have been able to reflect on the research and think about implications for personal and professional development planning. Through my own life experiences and learning I have altered some of my views and gained new insights[10]. Some of the areas I have further examined include: context, learning ecologies, role of attractors, core values, strength based orientation, designing your own learning and enablers.

Context before content

The research advises that application of the life based learning model depends on *context*. However I have observed that most people prefer to launch into *content* and strategies before considering context. Many want a common template for application that everyone can use. In reality this does not work simply because we all have such different realities or contexts.

So what is context? Context can be viewed as the 'container' that the content or learning will sit within. Context therefore varies student to student, lecturer to lecturer, faculty to faculty and location to location.

Learning ecologies – a metaphor for context

Learning ecologies is an exciting metaphor. It is more diverse, expansive and complex than previous metaphors such as 'networks'. It is in its infancy in use in educational settings. I suggest that learning ecologies can be viewed as a *metaphor for context through the lens of learning.*

The purpose of identifying a learning ecology (or context) is to gain a deeper understanding of a persons' (or groups) relationship with their lifewide (or life based) learning environment. This will be unique to each individual or group. For students, it can help them see the 'bigger picture' or have a 'helicopter' view. After examining their learning ecology they can reflect on:
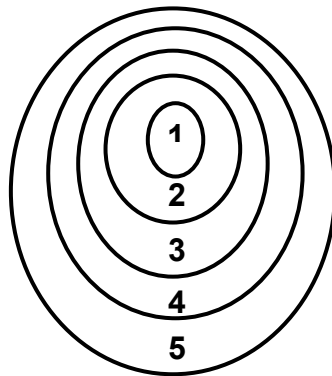- Assumptions – whether their assumptions about learning help them fulfill their aspirations.
- Strengths – whether their strengths align with their values, goals and purpose.
- Reality – recognise that their reality (or context) is both 'internal' and 'external'.
- What works and what does not work – so that they focus on what works for them and helps achieve their dreams.
- Different perspectives – from which perspective they view their learning ecology, whether mental, emotional, physical and/or spiritual, or

whether a formal, informal or lifewide learning perspective, and what this tells them about their relationship with their learning environment.

Learning ecologies can be expressed in many ways – drawn, written, spoken, thought about in whatever medium is meaningful to the learner A good example of this is SCEPTrE's 'educational vision' (Figure 1.1 Chapter 1 this volume) that symbolically shows the relationship of a learner with their learning environment.

Another way of portraying a learning ecology is through 'five circles' (Figure 8an approach adapted from Armstrong (2003).

Figure 8.6 The five circles of a learning ecology (Armstrong (2003)

To create your own learning ecology map, draw five circles (as shown in Figure 8.5), reflect on the following and within each circle draw or write your responses:

- In the first circle –those things that are *always, consistently* important and valuable to you in relation to your learning. It may be something about yourself, your friends, teachers, resources, feelings, goals, subjects, educational institutions, time, culture, hobbies, personal learning characteristics, work, skills, etc. It may be one thing or many things, or nothing at all at this point in time. That is fine as there is no right or wrong way to complete the circles.
- In the second circle –those things that work for you most of the time in relation to your learning. You do not have the same certainty about these things as you do for what is in your inner most circle, however they are important to you and influence your learning. You feel happy about these things most of the time.

- In the third circle – place those things that you feel are missing from your learning environment, that you want to acquire because you believe it will help you with your learning. It may be people you want to get to know, things you want to do, knowledge you want to achieve, personal attitude you want to change, etc.
- In the fourth circle –those things that you believe hold you back from maximizing your learning and your potential. It may be aspects of yourself, other people, lack of resources, life experiences, requirements of educational institutions, the work place, etc. Often these are the 'shoulds' in your life or things you resent. Acknowledge it, make peace with it and commit to re-focusing on those things that work for you.
- In the fifth circle –those things that have angered you or hurt you during your learning experiences, whether through family, friendships, life experiences or formal learning settings. Acknowledge it, witness (rather than re-experience) the hurt or anger and do your best to let it go. Turn the energy towards those areas that strengthen your development and creativity.

It may be helpful after completing the five circles to reflect on:
- The opportunities or 'openness' in your context – the areas (people, resources, policies, attitudes, networks, behaviour, technologies, values etc) that allow you some 'stretch' or opportunity to expand and achieve your goals.
- The 'non-negotiables' or barriers in your context – the areas (people, resources, policies, attitudes, networks, behaviour, technologies, values, etc) that inhibit or block your expansion or achievement of goals.
- How to make better use of the opportunities. (It is a bit like playing a game of darts – you want to find the spaces that lead you directly to your goal and to avoid or spend minimum time being blocked or losing ground.)

Sometimes what one person sees as a non-negotiable another sees as an opportunity, or vice versa. This is a reflection of people's differing realities or contexts. At other times there is clear agreement between people about the non-negotiables and opportunities – they share the same reality or context. What kind of a match or mismatch have you experienced between student and teacher learning ecologies? The aim is one of acceptance and making room for all realities.

The role of attractors

An aspect of the knowledge era that has not explicitly been referred to in the research is that of the role of attractors. As we try to make sense of all the information that bombards us, we let some in and filter out the rest. This reflects our *values* because what we value we 'let in'. However, if we are run by our conditioning (rather than our values) the attractor is external to us. We easily get distracted by the competing goals, purpose and tasks that the organisation has set for us. However, when we live our core values we hold the attractor inside ourselves and we attract to us those things that are compatible with our core values. Research suggests that organisations need values-driven people.

Core values

Values are the foundation or bedrock of any approach to personal and professional development. They are not our conditioned beliefs that shift and change over time. Core values (or gifts) are integral to our being. A core value(s) could be, for example, any one of the following: choice or creativity or beauty or happiness or security or transformation or friendship or travel or being in nature or knowledge or prosperity or service or physical strength or courage or faith or as in my case, being authentic – just to give a few examples.

Core values drive what we do – consciously or unconsciously. When strategies, plans or methodologies do not match our core values, then conflict or dissention arises. The core value of one person can 'clash' with the core value of another, such as security versus risk taking. The aim is to have an environment of allowing and space for all. Be clear on what your core value is and whether or not you are prepared to compromise it when you plan or design your learning.

Designing own learning

Designing your own learning is a feature of both life based and lifewide learning. However, designing learning may be quite different to that of planning learning i.e. a shift from rules to that of responsibility.

A design can be defined as the organised arrangement of elements and principles for a purpose (Wikipedia). A learner's own design for learning would therefore consist of:

- *Goals and purpose*. A goal is *what* the learner is aiming for, something that the learner wants to do, for example, develop skills in drumming. The purpose is *why* the learner wants to achieve the goal, i.e. the advantage or benefit, what it will enable, or the direction it will take the

learner in, for example, joining or forming a band who share your musical tastes, having fun, earning some money and recording the band's own songs. Goals are not set in concrete. It may be that when the initial goal (drumming) is achieved, the purpose (joining or forming a band) then becomes the new goal and a new purpose (earning some money or writing and recording a song) is identified. In this way purpose can relate to continual expansion. If goals are in conflict, find a way in which all goals can be achieved. And check whether goals and purpose are congruent with core values.

- *Elements*. In visual design, elements can be, for example, shape, texture, form, value, size, direction and space. They support the uniqueness of each design. They form the 'language' of the design and can be visible and exist separately to each other[11]. What elements in a *learning design* would support the uniqueness of a person's growth and development? I would suggest that it could be the learner's values, context (or learning ecology), vision, strengths, intuition, direction, skills, attributes, passion, life's purpose, etc. What do you think?

- *Principles* – the principles of visual design oversee the relationship between the elements and inform the way a composition is arranged as a whole. They provide a common framework for the design and usually reflect values. Principles for visual design involve balance, unity, contrast, focal points, repetition, harmony, etc. What principles would inform a *learning design* producing a coherent whole? I would suggest: freedom to choose, self-determined action, lifewide (or life based) experiences, strength based orientation to capability development, holistic engagement and holistic learning, openness to what emerges, balanced, contrasting, relationships, social settings, commitment to self-regulation and self-reflection.

Successful designs for personal learning and development incorporate the elements and principles so that they serve the learners own purpose and goals. In such designs teachers adopt the role of facilitator, mentor and coach. One of their important roles is to encourage questioning (see Staron 2011 for examples of questions that might be used to help learners design future learning from a strength-based perspective.

Closing comments

It is important to keep questioning and to accept that there is no one answer or one right way to proceed. However, there will always be ways to proceed that are more effective in one context than in another. In order to gain the full

benefits of a life based approach to learning we must be open to the ever-unfolding nature of learning and development and view them as a process rather than a product. Educating our young people for life begins in the home, embraces the world of family and friends and continues through formal education and work, and all the things people do to add value to and create meaning from their lives. Imagine a world where formal education embraces these ideas and you create a world where life based/lifewide learning for all becomes a reality.

Endnotes

1 This quote is from an anonymous participant in one of the national discussion forums that were organised as part of the research programme

2 The project was jointly funded by the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE NSW).

3The project team comprised myself as project manager at the time working in TAFE NSW, Marie Jasinski from Design Planet South Australia and Robby Weatherley from TAFE NSW. I would like to acknowledge the inspiring creativity of Marie Jasinski and Robby Weatherley, their extensive contributions to the research and the fun that we had together. Marie died in 2008 and we miss her.

4 The final research report is titled 'Life based Learning – A Strength based Approach for Capability Development in Vocational and Technical Education' (2006). A separate companion document was also produced titled 'A Business Approach to Capability Development – Considerations and Suggestions for Applying Life based Learning in the Workplace' (2006).

5 Participants in the research forums thought 'professional development was a restrictive term as they associated it with professional groups, training in occupational skills, short courses, workshops or project work. Most preferred the term 'capability development'.

6 Editor's note

7 World Café is a set of methods and tools for fostering an intentional creation of a living network of conversations around questions that matter (Whole Systems Associates 2002).

8 Open Space Technology is a large group process designed to promote conversations for solving real business problems and is a good example of a self-organising and emergent process (Owen 1977).

9 Strategic Conversations aims to create a strategic process and culture through stories captured from strategic conversation workshops (Strategic Conversations website)

10 I would like to acknowledge one my current teachers Catherine Wilkins of Xpand Consulting and her influence on my understanding of what my own truth is.

11 See for example designer Marvin Bartel http://www.bartelart.com/