

Good for your soul? Adult learning and mental well-being

John Field,  
Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning,  
Stirling Institute of Education,  
University of Stirling,  
Stirling, FK9 4LA  
Email: john.field@stir.ac.uk

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## **Abstract**

Although there is a widely held view that adult learning has a positive impact on well-being, only recently has this proposition been systematically tested. The paper reviews recent research findings on the influence of adult learning on earnings and employability, both of which may influence well-being indirectly. These are more important for some groups than others: in economically advanced societies, additional earnings produce limited gains in well-being for most groups except the poorest, while employability is most significant for groups that are most vulnerable in the labour market. The author then reviews recent research findings showing that participating in learning in adult life has some positive direct influence on well-being; analyses of cohort studies suggest that the influence is comparatively small, but nevertheless significant. There has been less study of learning's negative consequences for well-being, and the paper draws on life to history data to illustrate some of these less desirable influences. It concludes by identifying areas for further research, and outlining a number of implications for policy and practice. These are particularly important in the current context, where environmental

movements appear to be challenging the primacy of economic growth as the overarching goal of policy.

## Introduction

Well-being and happiness have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. There also seems to be a much wider public interest in research on these issues, judging by the success of Richard Layard's book on the economics of happiness (Layard 2006). This surge is starting to impact on research in the field of adult learning, as will be shown in greater detail in this paper. The issues are significant ones, both in general but particularly when considered from an environmental perspective. In affluent western societies, general increases in material wealth are now creating more problems for the wider community, and even for many individuals, than they solve. Yet most governments (and most voters) are currently committed to growth in both production and consumption, and accordingly see adult learning primarily as of economic significance, highlighting its importance – or lack of it – in promoting greater competitiveness and growth and enhancing the employability of the disadvantaged (Field 2006; Rubenson 2006; Schemmann 2007). In exploring the relationship between adult learning and well-being, then, we are raising fundamental questions about wider purpose and values.

This paper summarises research into adult learning that is relevant to well-being<sup>1</sup>, and explores implications for the field. Well-being is viewed as a positive mental state (Argyle and Martin 1991); it has been embraced by some psychologists as a means of focussing attention on health and satisfaction with life, rather than on mental illness and its remedies (Moore and Keyes 2003). According to two authors from the New Economics Foundation, "As well as feeling satisfied and happy, well-being means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community" (Shah and Marks 2004, 2). More precisely, well-being has been defined recently as

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<sup>1</sup> The thinking behind this paper has been informed partly by work commissioned for the current Foresight project on Mental Capital and Well-being, which I am helping to co-ordinate on behalf of the Government Office for Science, and partly by a seminar on adult learning and mental well-being organised by the Commission of Inquiry on the Future of Lifelong Learning. Leon Feinstein and John Vorhaus of the Research Centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning commissioned a series of science reviews on well-being and learning across the lifespan that influenced my thinking. Tom Schuller commented in detail on a paper given to the Commission of Inquiry seminar. Neither the Commission nor Foresight should be blamed for the content of this paper.

a dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society (Government Office for Science 2008, 11).

It is associated with such social qualities as confidence, optimism about the future, a sense of influence over one's own destiny, and the social competences that promote satisfying and supportive relationships with other people – and not simply with an absence of diagnosed illness, disability or dissatisfaction (World Health Organisation 2004). It also, critically, involves the resilience needed to deal with hard times as and when they occur (Schoon and Bynner 2003).

A considerable body of recent research has explored the relationship between adult learning and well-being. Some of this work examines the effects of adult learning upon factors directly relevant to well-being, such as self-efficacy, confidence or the ability to create support networks. Others address factors that are indirectly – sometimes rather loosely - associated with well-being, such as earnings and employability. In both cases, the accumulated evidence points to positive associations between participation in learning and subjective well-being, and between participation in learning and mental health. These are important findings, for even if the effects are comparatively small ones, they nevertheless offer policy makers one possible way of influencing levels of well-being among the wider population. However, participation in learning also has a downside, and there is some evidence that for some people, in some circumstances, learning can be associated with stress and anxiety, and erode factors that have helped people maintain good mental health. The paper illustrates these negative consequences with learner accounts drawn from a large scale study of agency, identity and change in the adult life course. It concludes by identifying a number of implications for policy and practice.

### **Well-being and adult learning in late modernity**

Many professionals in the field of adult learning firmly believe that their work makes people feel better about themselves and their lives. These claims have won acceptance in some if not all policy circles. As one government inquiry argued thirtyfive years ago, adult learning “is of crucial importance for the health of our society and the quality of life of individual citizens” (Department of Education and Science 1973, 20). Intuitively, these assertions make sense. Logically, it follows that as with muscles, so with the brain: “use it or lose it”. My own experience of working with adult learners – which, to my surprise, now runs to over thirty years in the field – has taught me that confidence and optimism are frequent and highly visible features of successful learning. Similar experiences have been reported by a wide variety of practitioners in community based, work place and college based adult learning (Aldridge and Lavender 2000; McGivney 1999).

These claims have until recently been repeated more often than they have been systematically investigated. This is not an original insight. Far from it: twenty-five years after the Russell Report was published, one of Britain’s leading adult education researchers – himself a trained psychoanalyst - wrote that:

Adult educators have consistently emphasized the re-creative function of informal learning and its importance to personal wellbeing, yet have lacked a language to describe the dynamics involved and to explain why these may be crucial to emotional and psychological wellbeing (West 1996, 97).

Yet there is still a dearth of rigorous investigation into the relationship between adult learning and mental well-being. Despite the importance of well-being to individuals and the community, adult learning’s claimed contribution has only in recent years come under close examination.

Of course, the concept of well-being is a notoriously difficult one. It is hard to define, and is therefore not easy to operationalise for research purposes. It refers to a subjective state, which represents the way that people feel about their lives. The idea of well-being has a strong orientation towards policy and practice, as well as having currency in everyday life, and it is attracting research interest in those scientific disciplines that have traditionally studied mental health, such as psychology (Huppert 2005). Setting the

definitional problems to one side, they have been adopted by researchers largely because they encourage a focus on positive outcomes rather than problems and disease. In the words of Kirstin Moore and Corey Keyes, two American social psychologists, “the investigation and application of positive human development is a new perspective that is needed now more than ever” (Moore and Keyes 2003, 2).

There are good reasons for considering well-being to be among the most important outcomes of adult learning, at least in their significance for the wider community as well as for learners themselves. It is not just that well-being is desirable in itself; it also has further consequences, not least for learning. For learners, a positive outlook on the future and a sense of one’s ability to take charge of one’s life are indispensable to further, continuing successful learning. Well-being is also associated with better health, higher levels of social and civic engagement, and greater resilience in the face of external crises (Argyle and Martin 1991). So if adult learning already affects people’s life chances directly, it can also affect them indirectly by enhancing their well being.

More broadly, the absence of well being is a cause for wider concern. Policymakers tend to be most concerned with the economic significance of ill-being (World Health Organisation 2004). In Britain, it is estimated that one worker in five reports finding their work either stressful or very stressful; official estimates are that around 13 million working days are reportedly lost through stress each year (Heath and Safety Executive 2005). Mental health problems are said to account for a high proportion of worklessness arising from incapacity (Bloch and Prins 2001). Again, if adult learning can raise levels of well-being, then, it follows that it should help reduce these costs on the economy.

But a flourishing society is not likely to be one that is concerned with wealth and consumption alone. On the contrary: one of the most consistent findings in the well-being literature is that the relationship between income and satisfaction (with work as well as with life in general) is a very loose one. Richard Layard has noted that while each unit of additional income has a marked effect on the happiness of the poor, its impact is reduced as income level raises; additional units of income make barely any difference to the

happiness of the wealth (Layard 2006; see also Bell and Blanchflower 2007; Oswald 1994). This in itself suggests that the obsessive pursuit of economic growth may be solving few of the problems that individuals and communities face, calling into question the primacy of the economic in determining education and training policy. But increasingly people are questioning the idea of growth itself as desirable goal of public policy, seeing it as part of the problem – in western nations at least – rather than the solution. If more – money, goods, services – does not make people happy, then what does? And can the education and training system help to produce it?

Well-being is a highly topical issue, which is of concern to a wide range of professions and relevant to a number of policy fields. It has come to the fore for a number of reasons. One is a general sense of malaise that appears to be common to most affluent, secular societies. More specifically, a number of happiness researchers have shown empirically that average happiness does not increase with rising levels of prosperity (Bell and Blanchflower 2007; Layard 2006; Oswald 1994). If that is not bad enough, given our society's obsession with growth and competitiveness, we can also frighten ourselves with headlines about a rising tide of stress and depression (see James 2007), though of course it is not clear whether rising levels of reported depression indicate a growth in misery or a change in socially (and medically) accepted definitions. What is certain is that in a post-scarcity society, personal and communal well-being acquires a new salience as a hot political topic.

At the same time, we are witnessing the apparent erosion of traditional sources of support. Family is the most important of these, and in recent years it has been transformed. Most public attention has focussed either on the emergence of post-nuclear families as a result of separation and divorce, or on the supposed growth of transgressive family forms (single parent families, same-sex parenting, and so on). These are certainly significant: reported levels of life satisfaction are significantly lower on average for separated and divorced individuals than for married people (Argyle 1998, 35). However, it is important not to overlook exceptionally dramatic changes in the role of women and the elderly in late modernity, as well as significant shifts in the nature and meaning of

work for both women and men. These have had complex consequences for the range of social support available to people at times of need.

Communitarianism, with its emphasis on the 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993), sees 'family breakdown' as the source of many of the ills of modern society. Undoubtedly, the high rate of divorce and separation in western societies has changed the context in which children acquire a sense of their own place in the wider world; it is quite conceivable (though as yet unproven) that this has had some effect on overall levels of social trust in the west. Nor can there be much argument that stability and security are needed in childhood; family breakdowns can be catastrophic for children's sense of self-esteem. Yet the non-nuclear family can also provide access to a wider range of sources of social support, and also enhance confidence and build social skills. Further, as Misztal points out, although step families have a higher rate of collapse during the first two years, thereafter they tend to outlive more conventional relationships (Misztal 1996, 169). Schoon and Bynner note that young people continue to see their family as a source of guidance, information and support, particularly in periods of transition, while parents continue to shape the educational trajectories of their children (Schoon and Bynner 2003, 25). So perhaps we should see the family as a changing source of social support, rather than one that must be in decline.

If the family is proving remarkably resilient and adaptable, some other established sources of social support are not thriving. Since the 1950s, faith-based organizations have generally lost considerable ground, despite continuing adherence among some social and ethnic groups; among the indigenous white population across much of Europe, church and chapel membership are collapsing. Trade unions have also experienced a long term wane of both their aggregate membership and levels of engagement among the members who remain; indeed, a number of large scale voluntary associations have undergone similarly processes of decline over the last half century. Established co-operative movements have become largely professionalized and institutionalized, and gender-based voluntary associations such as the Women's Institute report declining membership levels. This is a familiar story of 'social capital lost' (Putnam 2000). Newer social movements



have taken their place, but often in the form of ‘credit card activism’, rather than as social spaces where people directly interact over time to advance their common interests (Field 2008). There is also evidence of a growth in informal care networks like baby sitting circles and school run car-sharing, largely created by women and arising from the decline of the extended family and continuing increases in labour market participation (Lowndes 2000, 536). So there are grounds for suggesting that social support systems are changing, becoming more informal and heterogeneous, and less rooted in kinship and neighbourhood. Of course, this general pattern may obscure important variations in the experiences of different parts of the population; in industrial societies like Britain, middle-class participation may well be relatively stable, or even rising slightly, but working class access to social capital has declined significantly over the last three or four decades – particularly, it seems, among women (Li, Savage and Pickles 2003).

Finally, the welfare state has, if not declined, significantly changed its shape and emphasis over the last half century. For a variety of reasons, publicly provided welfare has been replaced or supplemented by policies designed to promote more active approaches to welfare, which seek to replace ‘passive support’ by ‘active strategies of insertion’ (Rosanvallon 1995). Such strategies typically require individuals to behave as entrepreneurs of the self, willing to be endlessly flexible, mobile and resilient – such as, typically, the ‘permanently learning subject’ of lifelong learning (Field 2006).

For Ulrich Beck, the replacement of collective support mechanisms by reliance on one’s own individual initiative is a characteristic feature of what he calls ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992). The sources of collective identity and meaning which underpinned western industrial societies - family, national state, faith community, ethnicity, class and job – are, Beck argues, exhausted and no longer provide for either personal security or social integration. While this may be overstated, it is clear that inherited social support mechanisms are no longer as widely available as in the past, and that increasingly responsibility for one’s well-being has fallen onto the individual.

## **The benefits of learning**

Until recently, much of the evidence on the benefits of learning was anecdotal, and some was frankly aspirational. This was particularly the case for adult learning; while there were serious studies of the benefits of schooling, further education and above all higher education, relatively little attention had been paid to the benefits of learning in adult life. As recently as 2003, a review of research on the benefits of workplace basic skills training concluded that “the available research base is extremely poor, and had never been thoroughly reviewed and evaluated” (Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf 2004, 291). The evidence base, then, was patchy and sometimes poor.

This is changing. International interest in the benefits of learning has generated a significant body of research outside the UK as well as within it, though again the great majority focuses on initial education (defined as school, further education and higher education). Since 1997, the UK government has promoted considerable research into the benefits of learning across the life span. The then Department for Education and Skills commissioned research centres to examine the economic benefits and the wider, non-economic benefits of learning, and their work has arguably produced a knowledge base in Britain which has no parallel anywhere else in the world. Both centres have attracted extensive international interest, and are widely recognised as at the leading edge of educational research (Schuller and Desjardins 2007). While limitations and gaps remain, recent studies of the benefits of learning have generated a number of significant findings on the impact of learning across the life span.

Much of the recent UK work rests on the analysis of large scale data sets, primarily national level cohort and household surveys. Birth cohort studies provide longitudinal information about peoples’ lives over time which allow for the presentation of statistical associations and outcomes through the life course, and allow us to infer estimates of causation (Bynner and Joshi 2007). While these datasets are particularly strong in the UK, and this has limited the data that can be analysed, they are increasingly common elsewhere, so comparative analysis will become more attractive in the future. Yet despite

their strengths, they also have important limitations. They tend to collect information about episodes of formal learning, or qualifications gained, and do not tell us much about informal learning. And methodologically the analysis of learning benefits is challenging, as while we may be able to identify clear measures of association between learning and various benefits, it is not always possible to conclude that learning is the primary cause of these benefits. Both participation in learning and any given benefit may arise from some unobserved third factor. The most frequently advanced such factors are inherited cognitive assets or ‘innate’ ability<sup>2</sup> and family background, which can produce non-cognitive inheritances of the type described by Pierre Bourdieu as cultural capital and social capital.

### **Economic benefits**

Human capital theory suggests that investing in skills and knowledge is an economically rational choice, since it leads to additional income. Most recent research on the rates of return to learning has focussed on the returns to the individual and less frequently the organisation (enterprise) rather than estimating the rate of return to the community. This research faces a range of well-known methodological challenges, including the difficulty of measuring educational investments and returns, and the problem of unobserved factors such as innate ability and individual commitment. There has also been a very marked concentration on initial education. The problems are illustrated in the frequent use of the number of years of schooling as an indicator of education investment, and formal qualifications as an indicator of output; both are very crude proxy indicators of what economists are seeking to measure, and both reflect a focus on the initial education system.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘innate ability’ is a controversial one, particularly in the social sciences. It has also been called into question, or at least redefined, by recent findings in brain science, which show that the brain’s potential capacity is profoundly affected by experience, for example through the process of ‘synaptic pruning’ by which areas of the brain that are not used are discarded. This process is particularly associated with infancy.

Much of the research into rates of return in the post-compulsory sector has concentrated on higher education, largely in response to debates over the financing of third level studies. Broadly, this research demonstrates a continuing return to higher education, even in countries like Britain where higher education entry rates rose sharply in the 1990s. In Britain, degree qualifications continue to show a higher rate of return than higher national qualifications (Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas recognise short cycle higher education courses); however both outstrip the return on Advanced Level qualifications, which are taken mainly by school-leavers at 18 (McIntosh 2004). These findings have been broadly replicated in a series of studies of rates of return from higher education. Studies of vocational qualifications again suggest clear returns both for men and for women for intermediate and higher qualifications, but with clear differences between men and women in respect of subject studied; low level qualifications produce rather low rates of return for women and men (Dearden, McIntosh, Vignoles and Myck 2002).

In adult learning, most of the literature concerns work-related training. Blundell, Dearden and Meghir (1996) examined changes in wages in Britain between 1981 and 1991, finding that employer-provided training leads to raises in average earnings for men; the findings for women were not statistically significant. Courses leading to a higher vocational qualification (National – or Scottish – Vocational Qualifications rated at Level 4 or above) produced a positive return of 8% for men and 10% for women. They also found higher returns for longer courses. A study of work related training found that participation yielded higher wages, but that considerable variations were hidden by the raise in average earnings rates, with mid-career male workers benefiting most (Vignoles, Galindo-Rueda and Feinstein 2004). However, they also noted a marked selection effect, with employers singling out the most capable employees for training, so that it was unclear whether it was the training or the workers' ability which yielded higher earnings.

Little research exists on general adult learning. However, two British studies have examined rates of return on basic skills improvements. An analysis of respondents in the National Child Development Survey (NCDS) between ages 16 and 37 showed little if any

changes in earnings as a result of taking basic literacy or numeracy courses. Underlying changes in numeracy and literacy test scores appeared to yield higher earnings for men, while self-reported improvements in basic literacy and numeracy appeared to produce higher earnings for both women and men (McIntosh and Vignoles 2001). A more recent study of participants in the 1970 British Cohort Survey showed significant gains in earnings associated with improved performance in literacy and numeracy tests; the gains were broadly comparable for both genders (Marcenaro-Gutierrez, Vignoles and De Coulon 2007).

As well as influencing earnings, learning also has an impact on employability. This is particularly significant for well-being, as the association between involuntary worklessness and mental ill-health is a well-established one (Warr 1994). As well as reducing income levels, unemployment also removes people from an important social network, and harms their sense of worth and self-esteem (Field 2008, 122-3). The relationship between employability and learning – including basic skills – has been demonstrated in a number of studies (see eg Bynner and Parsons 1997, 2007), and underlies assumptions about the value of training as an active labour market measure. Jenkins and colleagues (2003) examined the impact on individuals of qualifications gained between the ages of 33 and 42, controlling for a range of other factors, finding an overall effect on employability for all groups who gained qualifications in that period.

So there is good evidence to show that learning has positive effects on income and employability. Intuitively, then, it must have a positive indirect influence on well-being, since higher income and avoiding unemployment are important both in helping avoid sources of anxiety and stress and poor mental health, and in supporting people when times are hard. Yet as Layard's comments on income suggest, things are not quite so simple. A study based on Canadian data similarly shows that increases in income level are associated with very limited changes in levels of job satisfaction and life satisfaction; interestingly, it found that being able to trust your manager produced a greater rise in well-being than an additional \$200,000 income (Helliwell and Huang 2005). Further, Helliwell's findings suggest that relative income inequalities tend to cause dissatisfaction

and reduce well-being. Income improvements lead to high gains in well-being among the poorest; among the affluent, additional income has marginal consequences. On balance, then, improving income leads to relatively small gains in well-being for all but the poor, while improving employability is associated with a significant gain both in well-being and in resilience. The benefits that people derive from the economic outcomes of learning should not be overstated, then, and nor should they be generalised. They are significant mainly for those who are most exposed to economic insecurity and poverty, and this suggests that public support for vocationally-oriented learning should be concentrated primarily on these groups.

### **Wider benefits for well-being**

As well as helping to raise earnings and employability, which indirectly affect well-being, learning can also create wider, non-economic benefits. A number of these can be seen as directly influencing well-being, since they act as protective influences against poor mental health and low levels of life satisfaction. Examples of such factors include self-efficacy, autonomy, social competences, health maintenance, civic engagement, community resilience and a sense of agency or control over one's own life. Yet although these wider benefits are often said by policy makers and professionals to be important outcomes of adult learning, the research base is much less developed than in respect of the economic outcomes. A review of research into the benefits of basic skills workplace learning, for instance, was confined to reporting "on evidence relating to individuals' wages and employability probability, since we have not identified any well-founded studies relating to other outcomes" (Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf 2004, 291).

Few systematic studies have been undertaken into adult learning and mental health. McGivney's review reports that participation in learning has positive consequences for mental health (McGivney 1999). Feinstein et al (2003) summarise work showing that accredited learning appears to protect individuals against depression, though they also

conclude that it has little or no impact on happiness, and that there may be some association (whether causal or not) between depression and leisure courses. This was at odds with qualitative data gathered by the Research Centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning, which suggested that general adult education helped counter depression (Schuller et al 2004). However, the same study (Feinstein et al 2003) shows that participation in learning does have an impact on adults' levels of life satisfaction, which is an important aspect of well-being. A later study by the same authors showed gains among learners in optimism and self-rated well-being (Hammond and Feinstein 2006).

A number of studies have been conducted into adult learning and civic engagement. Field's study of social attitudes survey data demonstrates a close association between participation in adult learning and engagement in a variety of social and civic activities, though again survey findings can not show causation (Field 2005). The Research Centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning has demonstrated that participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others (Schuller et al 2004). Both studies showed that participation in learning can also cause stresses to close bonding ties. A survey of over 600 literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland over time showed behavioural changes including increases in the proportion going out regularly, at a level which was statistically significant for females and older people; greater clarity about future intentions on community involvement; and in the proportion who could identify someone they could turn to for help (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 154-7). The learners were particularly likely to have extended their 'bridging' networks, through contacts with tutors, other staff and fellow students (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 163).

A small number of studies have examined adult learning and health. Feinstein and Hammond (2004) used the 1958 cohort survey to compare changes in the health behaviours of learners and non-learners between the ages of 33 and 42, showing that participation in learning had positive effects in terms of smoking cessation and exercise taken. The same authors also found a growth in self-rated health among those who participated in learning as compared with adults who did not (Hammond and Feinstein

2006). Finally, Sabates and Feinstein (2006) found that adult learning was positively associated with the probability of taking up cervical screening for women. While the effect sizes are small ones in all these studies, again it is important to note that adult values and behaviour rarely change much, so this finding is of consequence.

Finally, a number of studies have examined the effects of adult learning on personal attributes. The most consistent finding in qualitative research and practitioner narratives is that adult learning produces gains in confidence (Knasel, Meed and Rossetti 2000). Recent research has tended to confirm this. Thus a study of basic adult education students reported a marked growth in average levels of personal confidence across a range of contexts (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 159). While the variations were statistically significant, they were also relatively small; and without a matched control group of people not taking similar courses, it is difficult to ascertain causality. A detailed qualitative investigation of adult literacy, numeracy and host language education in England found that participants identified both social confidence and personal confidence among the most highly valued outcomes of courses (Barton et al 2007, 111). Additionally, Hammond and Feinstein's longitudinal analysis (2006) found that learners were more likely to report gains in self-efficacy and sense of agency (perceived control over important life choices) than non-learners. There is, then, general agreement among researchers that learning produces greater confidence and self-efficacy.

Taken together, these findings suggest that adult learning has positive direct effects on well-being. This influence is measurable and consistent. While most of the quantitative studies suggest that it is comparatively small, this is by no means to suggest that it is trivial. Given that policy makers repeatedly find that influencing the behaviour of adult citizens is difficult, and sometimes downright impossible (as illustrated by the limited success of public health campaigns in many countries), it is highly significant that adult learning has these positive results, both for individuals and for collective groups more widely. Of course, these findings are usually at the aggregate level, and they tend to rest on bodies of evidence that take little account of the experiences of people who drop out along the way, or who are deterred from enrolling by poor provider behaviour. For some



people, experiences of learning are deeply unsatisfactory, and the next section explores this issue further. But we should not lose sight of remarkably consistent findings from research that suggests an overall positive influence of adult learning on the way people feel about themselves and their lives.

## **Learning and its discontents**

Much of the literature has focused on the positive consequences of learning. This is perfectly understandable, especially when so many researchers come from a background of practice. Nevertheless, there is also some evidence that participation in learning can sometimes have negative consequences; far from improving people's well-being, it can actively damage it. This section will be illustrated from interview material collected during the Learning Lives research project, a four year multi-method study that interviewed a sample of people repeatedly over time<sup>3</sup>. Several of these learners experienced anxiety, stress and frustration through learning, and I quote from interviews with Kathleen Donnelly, a working class woman in her mid-thirties from urban West Scotland, who had successfully completed a higher education course and was trying to become a youth worker. I present this case in order to illustrate what has so far been an under-researched dimension of adult learning and well-being, but I make no claim that Kathleen is typical. However, there is also some basis in the existing literature for the view that adult learning has some negative consequences for well-being in some instances. Thus Aldridge and Lavender's study of people nominated for Adult Learners' Awards – a sample that is likely to be biased towards comparatively successful learners – found that, while there were many benefits, most of their respondents also experienced 'disbenefits' such as stress, broken relationships and a new dissatisfaction with one's present way of life (Aldridge and Lavender 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> The Learning Lives project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, through its Teaching and Learning Research Programme. It was undertaken by a consortium of four universities, involving Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Holdkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorne at Leeds, Paul Lambe and Floral McLeod at Exeter, Norma Adair and Ivor Goodson at Brighton, and my colleagues Gert Biesta, Heather Lynch and Irene Malcolm at Stirling. Full details, including a description of methodology, can be found on the project website: [www.learninglives.org](http://www.learninglives.org)

A number of different mechanisms appear to be at work here. First, teaching styles can cause anxiety and stress. The most common experience of anxiety for learners appears to involve assessment. Even where assessments are routine, predictable and pedagogically appropriate, the possibility of failure is always present.

Kathleen Donnelly, for instance, completed a Higher National Diploma in a further education college before going on to study for a university degree. She was used to pressure in her work, as well as in her family life, and she was also used to study. She also experienced enormous fulfilment from academic achievement:

when ye get there there's nae feeling in the world, there's nae feeling in the world like when ye've passed an exam and ye've got a good mark and yer like that "Yeees!", d'ye know whit I mean, like "Celebrate!" and happiness like that doesnae really come in yer life a lot (Interview 2, 9 June 2006).

But "studying for a degree, I do know studying, see the pressure of exams, that was a whole new pressure" (Interview 2, 9 June 2006). Faced with the double challenges of preparing for examinations and lobbying to move away from housing conditions that she found extremely stressful, Kathleen left her course; although she hoped to return, or to take an Open University degree, she told us that "I don't think it's the right time for me tae go back tae university yet, I just feel as though I cannae deal wi' the pressures o' sitting the exams and studying tae late at night because when ye work and ye've got a family it's like, it's slotting things in" (Interview 2, 9 June 2006).

Second, there may be deep-rooted problems of curriculum structure. The examples cited most frequently in the Learning Lives interviews were connected with national vocational qualifications (NVQs), which are designed as ways of assessing competences gained primarily through work-based experiential learning. These NVQs, known in Scotland as SVQs (Scottish vocational qualifications), therefore involve learners in participation in a working environment that has not normally been designed primarily for learning and teaching purposes. They are also primarily designed to assess work-related skills rather than inculcate knowledge and understanding. Our sample is a small one and may not be

representative, but it illustrates the extent to which any problems can disrupt learning and demotivate learners.

Kathleen, who took an SVQ in community work after completing an HND and withdrawing from a degree, experienced the skills-led content of the SVQ as narrow and repetitive.

I kind o' knew aw the theory before it through daein' the HND in social sciences, so it wasnae like when I was daein' that - I was like "Oh my God is that how that's happened tae me", d'ye know whit I mean? While I've been daein' this it's been quite boring, really quite boring 'cause I already know it, but I suppose for the folk that have just started an SVQ and havenae been tae college before, I see it as a stepping stone for them tae get intae college and stuff like that, but for myself I feel as though it's been a backward step (Interview 2, 9 June 2006).

Her boredom meant that she effectively sat out the taught component of the SVQ, seeking simply to "tick boxes". The result was that "I made up my SVQ the whole lot aye it in a few weeks. It wiz easy, it wiz ridiculously easy" (Interview 3, 29 June 2006). In total contrast to her earlier studies, Kathleen experienced no sense of fulfillment from this achievement.

Kathleen was also involved in two unsatisfactory placements. On the first, she was largely left to her own devices with little supervision, and found herself unable to control the extreme anti-social behaviour of the at-risk young people she was supposed to be helping. She was unable to identify any ways of working effectively with her charges, concluding that "I think a lot o' these kids are crying oot for attention, that's whit it is and peer pressure and things like that, but I don't feel qualified enough tae help them, no at all" (Interview 1, 16 January 2006). She found a second placement, with another youth project where she undertook routine manual tasks – "crappy jobs" as she called them - like cleaning and shredding.

I kept thinking "Why isnae anybody using my skills" but naebody said anything but I complained and I complained tae [*name of training/support organization*] till it got tae the point where I talked tae my partner and he just said "Pack it in,

just leave, we don't need the money that bad, we'll manage fine, don't dae this tae yerself" and I wanted tae get the SVQ and I had one mair evidence log, five minutes tae write and I wid have been finished, so I done that I finished it (Interview 3, 29 September 2006).

Further, as she described it, the manager in the youth agency was authoritarian and a bully. The most important piece of learning for Kathleen was not to do with her SVQ, but discovering towards the end of her placement that she could stand up to her manager. Completing the SVQ, in itself, was more a source of frustration and even cynicism than of achievement and fulfilment.

Third, education can evoke – even if unintentionally – unpleasant and stressful experiences from people's earlier lives. In their study of adult basic education participants, a team from Lancaster University found that anxieties were particularly acute "if elements of the learning environment recalled people's previous negative experiences of education or authority, or other traumatic or painful events from their histories" (Barton et al 2007, 136). In Kathleen's case, this was only an issue where examinations were concerned. She spoke of her further education lecturers with praise, explicitly contrasting their friendliness and concern for her with her earlier experiences at school.

Further, although learning can help extend some social networks, it can also disrupt existing ones. This is inseparable from the processes of social mobility and change that learning produces. In particular, while it tends to extend those wider and more heterogeneous networks that some social capital analysts call 'bridging ties', in the ways described by Tett and MacLachlan (2007), it can also disrupt 'bonding ties', such as close kinship and neighbourhood connections. And while bonding ties can often form a barrier to social and geographical mobility, they do nevertheless provide access to types of social support – often unconditional and taken for granted – that can be extremely important in times of trouble (Field 2008). This can in turn increase vulnerability to ill-health, including poor mental health, and undermine resilience. Kathleen had built new networks of fellow mature women students, and she had also managed to persuade her mother and

sister to return to learn. She had managed to adapt her existing bonding ties, while creating new bridging ties that helped provide support in her new environment. Fraser Smith, another participant in the Learning Lives project from a working class West of Scotland background, had found a different solution. Believing that his old connections had held him back, he had cut his ties to his old friends and even his mother, who he described as “a hell of a person for saying “You’ll no be able tae dae, you’ll no stick that” (Interview 3, 4 December 2006); he had built new networks (including bonding ties with his wife’s family). Now in his mid-thirties, he had not spoken to his mother since “I was seventeen, eighteen which is quite sad”.

Social networks are important sources of personal support, but learning more generally involves a process of transformation, in which something is gained while something is left behind. Sometimes this loss can be felt as painful. In their detailed study of people engaged in adult basic education programmes, the Lancaster group noticed that learning does not simply mean the acquisition, and perhaps assessment, of new skills and knowledge. It can also involve people in “entering a different culture or taking on a whole new identity, a process that could be experienced as difficult and sometimes even as dangerous” (Barton et al 2007, 125).

## **Conclusions**

Participation in adult learning appears to have some influence on attitudes and behaviours that affect people’s mental well-being. Some of the influence is direct, in that learning appears to promote skills – particularly non-cognitive skills, including confidence – that lead to positive well-being. Other benefits, including economic benefits such as higher earnings and employability, influence well-being indirectly. In principle the benefits could be assigned an economic value, which could then be set against the costs of investing in adult learning. In practice, there are enormous data weaknesses, the relationship seems to be non-linear, and adults’ life courses are complex and highly context-dependent, so it is highly unlikely that a realistic cost-benefit analysis is feasible

or even worthwhile (some might argue that it is better not to know, either because the answer might be inconvenient or because they think it tends to reduce everything to cash). Nevertheless, if we cannot assign a simple economic value to the well-being that people derive from learning, in general the evidence suggests a clear positive relationship.

Yet a number of qualifications need to be made. First, at best these are probabilistic relationships; their existence does not mean that everyone who takes a course will feel happier and better about themselves. Simply put, a statistical relationship implies only that on average people are more likely to experience greater well-being as a result of adult learning than not. Second, in all the studies reviewed above, the relationship is a relatively small one. It is reasonably consistent, and we know – for example from health promotion campaigns or health and safety training - that attitudes and behaviour in adult life are entrenched, so even small shifts are significant. Nevertheless, the evidence does not suggest an enormous impact. Third, it is not possible to be confident about causation. While there are some grounds for believing that it is participation in learning that causes improvements in well-being for some people, the possibility remains that unobserved factors might explain both findings. This can only be clarified through further research. Finally, there are some areas of well-being where education and training are powerless. We do not have any evidence that learning inhibits the onset of dementia, for example, nor that participating in adult learning can counter infant-acquired or genetic disabilities such as dyslexia or ADHD (though it is possible that it can help to address some of the problems that these disabilities produce). So we should not over-state the case.

Nevertheless, we can say with some confidence that the current evidence base shows clearly that learning does impact positively upon well-being. As well as having a direct influence on people's feelings about themselves and their lives, it also shapes a number of factors, such as employability, earnings and health, which indirectly affect well-being. These important findings suggest that further research is more than justified in order to overcome limitations to the existing evidence base. As well as investigating the issue of cause and effect in greater detail, as suggested above, much of the recent quantitative

research has been carried out in Britain, so there is a strong case for looking closely at other types of society. For example, we know little about the role of adult learning in shaping well-being in European societies with different regimes for social support, particularly those characterised by strong and universalistic welfare states such as the Nordic nations, and those characterised by strong and particularistic family support structures such as the Mediterranean nations . Nor do we have much evidence in respect of non-Western societies, whether economically advanced (Japan), emerging (China) or poor (sub-Saharan Africa). In addition, we need a more differentiated view of the impact of learning. The quantitative studies draw on longitudinal datasets that tend to aggregate all learning together as if it were the same; qualitative studies tend to be confined to one very particular learning context. Can we bring these research traditions closer together, so as to investigate whether the general evidence for well-being effects are distributed across all types of learning? Or, as much well-being research and practitioner narratives might suggest, do people experience greater gains from types of learning that engage them in activities that create what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has described as moments of ‘flow’, of complete and utter absorption? And finally, we need to apply a differentiated view of learners. Are the well-being effects distributed more or less equally across different types of learner? Or do some people experience stronger gains than others?

Given that there are important gaps in the evidence, it is sensible to be cautious in exploring the implications of existing research for policy and practice. This is not by any means a blank sheet. The Learning and Skills Council for England has developed strategic proposals for improving services for people with mental health difficulties (Learning and Skills Council 2006). Learning providers have been encouraged to improve services to people with mental health difficulties. Local examples include Gloucestershire adult education service’s programme of activities for staff and users in care homes. The programme is offered in partnership with health professionals, the county primary care trust, and the local care providers’ association; it aims include ensuring that care home staff have an effective understanding of nutrition and hydration, as well as a basic understanding of dementia and expertise in person-centred care; it also aims to promote exercise programmes, reminiscence groups and arts and crafts for

residents; and it undertakes an outreach programme with preventative aims that includes development of second careers for older adults (Austin 2007).

There are at least five key messages for policy makers and professionals concerned with adult learning. First, people interested in promoting adult learning have a powerful argument at their disposal. Well-being is of growing significance in policy circles and in wider public debate, and adult learning makes a small but significant, measurable positive contribution to well-being. Any government that ignores this evidence is open to serious criticism – particularly if it neglects this means of enhancing the well being of vulnerable groups like the elderly, marginalised ethnic groups, stigmatised communities, people with learning disabilities, those particularly likely to experience toxic pressures such as debt or addiction, and institutionalised groups such as prisoners.

Second, professionals in adult learning may also need to align themselves with other services and campaigning bodies that are concerned with well-being. Health professionals and mental health campaigners, for instance, should know more about the possibility that adult learning might benefit some of their own clients. Organisations concerned with older adults should be aware of evidence that learning can help protect against cognitive decline (Valenzuela and Sachdev 2006), and support continued autonomy.

Third, organisations providing adult learning could consider how to promote well-being more effectively. Some providers already refer to well-being in publicity materials, but this may be largely aspirational. We are on firmer ground in pointing to a need for adult learning that promotes resilience and agency, and also supports social network building which in turn has a positive influence on self-efficacy and self-esteem. There is also a strong case for providing learning opportunities in subjects directly related to well-being, including depression and learning disabilities. This is likely to involve a stronger and more focussed investment in preparation and development for professionals working in adult learning. This is not to suggest that providers start offering ‘happiness training’ – yes, it really exists, and perhaps unsurprisingly, research into its impact is largely



inconclusive (Argyle and Martin 1991, 96) – nor that learners should dose themselves with fish oil during the tea break (Goldacre 2006). On the contrary: a basic understanding of neuroscience should help to dispel at least some of the most pervasive myths.

Equally, teaching should at the very least be organised so as not to harm well-being. Of course, this may involve therapeutic interventions for those who are most vulnerable to poor mental health, but more commonly it involves taking account of the ways in which adults' biographies can interact with learning environments. The Lancaster group noted that many of the teachers in their study were highly sensitive to these issues, and had developed strategies and tactics for dealing with them, usually unobtrusively (Barton et al 2007, 137). A well-being perspective also draws attention to the role of anxiety and stress in adult learning environments. It is neither possible nor desirable to eradicate stress from human existence, including education and training provision for adults, but it is hard to see how the rigid and universal application of assessment regimes can contribute to learner well-being. For example, a systematic review on school assessment regimes has shown that repeated testing reduces well-being and damages motivation among schoolchildren (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002). Yet a number of governments, including Britain's, link funding for adult learning to the number of qualifications gained by learners.

Fourth, organisations providing adult learning may need to consider the well-being of their workers. Teacher stress and burnout have been widely debated in recent years, with growing concern over the consequences in absenteeism and the loss of highly qualified staff, but virtually all of the attention has focussed on teachers working in the primary and secondary sectors (Guglielmi and Tatrow 1998). There is no reason to suppose that professionals working with adults are immune from similar pressures.

Last, and in my own judgement not at all least, we should envision a lifelong learning system that takes well-being as its primary *raison d'être*. Policy makers increasingly tend to justify adult learning in terms of its contribution to economic growth and social inclusion, with the latter usually being promoted through insertion into employment.

Such policy goals assume that continued economic growth is both desirable and possible, and these assumptions should be challenged. If nineteenth century industrial societies were founded on production, early twenty-first century western societies combine production with consumption as their twin economic goals. Powerful coalitions of interest – from corporations to labour unions – come together to promote increases in production (of goods and services) and consumption as shared goals, which are then pursued remorselessly, at enormous cost to other global regions and with huge risk to the delicate balance of the ecosphere. General agreement among environmental scientists on climate change, for example, has had minimal effect on the behaviour of western governments. Other than small minorities who have adopted alternative and anti-capitalist lifestyles, it has so far had marginal impact *at best* on the behaviour of western populations. Policies designed to promote growth at any cost are unrealistic, and there is also evidence above a certain income level, rising levels of consumption and prosperity have little or no impact on people's levels of life satisfaction (Shah and Marks 2004).

The end of growth as the primary objective of education and training must have implications for adult learning. If the choice is between different ways of judging the value and desirability of a range of policies and lifestyles, the question in developed countries is then whether we can imagine a system for lifelong learning that sees well-being not as an incidental (if desirable) by-product, but instead situates well-being as one of its core goals and values.

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