



# Lifelong Learning as Critical Action

*International Perspectives  
on People, Politics,  
Policy, and Practice*

ANDRÉ P. GRACE

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International Perspectives on People,  
Politics, Policy, and Practice

André P. Grace



Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.  
Toronto

**Lifelong Learning as Critical Action: International Perspectives on  
People, Politics, Policy, and Practice**

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## For My Father, Philip Joseph Grace (1928–2007)

Although his formal education ended when he completed Grade 9, my father was a lifelong and lifewide learner. Dad worked as a fireman, and he fished and farmed as well to supplement our family income. He had the knowledge and skills to perform each of these roles well. As a fisher and farmer, he knew about the migration patterns of fish species, crop rotation, and many other things that those formally educated in studies of zoology, economic botany, and other subjects would learn from books. In particular, I remember many winter nights, watching him as he deftly knit sections of cod traps while I sat at the kitchen table doing my homework in our house in the fishing village of Flatrock, Newfoundland. He was the epitome of the flexible citizen whose daily informal learning and work engagements were inspired by his collective need to be a contributor to his family and community economies. He was a good husband, a good father, and a good provider. I thought about him often as I wrote this book, which has left me with the realization that many ordinary citizens are truly extraordinary.



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# Preface

“Stupefying. Dizzying. Deeply unsettling” (p. 1): This is how Coy (2008) described the extraordinary panic that sped through the global financial market from October 6 to 10, 2008. These pivotal dates ushered in a global recession that is sorely testing the economic logic of neoliberalism (Engardio, 2008; Grace, 2009a, 2009b; Mandel, 2008), an ideology that Harvey (2005) describes as a longstanding economic convention and a practical influence on public policy. Many nations, including the United States and many European countries, have been working to rescue their financial institutions and key components of their corporate sectors (Francis & Sasseen, 2008). Indeed, financial rescue by governments and, in some cases, financial rescue of governments in a time of unprecedented unpredictability is now the order of the day. We live incessantly with the fallout of this great economic debacle in uncertain times when “our problems are vaguer and more systematic, not so much a matter of policy as of how we live, and seem to come from every direction at once” (Baird, 2012, p. 31).

Neoliberalism, which promised to advance the social as a corollary of advancing the economic, now appears as a false god whose wrath is choking globalization, keeping it from moving along what was once its apparent sure-footed and prosperous path. In light of this unparalleled global financial crisis, Mandel (2008) suggests that globalization, with its “long accepted patterns of cross-border technological transfer, foreign trade, and global finance[,] ... [is] simply not sustainable” (p. 1). He asks a key question that policy-makers, in response to the current crisis, must answer: “What if we face a wrenching readjustment of the global real economy rather than a crisis of confidence rooted in the financial system?” (p. 1).

What we have learned through the media blitz surrounding the latter-day global financial crisis, and what many citizens have personally experienced, is that neoliberalism has a profoundly dark side, which has led to global economic disaster: “Deregulation, corporate greed, irresponsible lenders, uneducated borrowers, a lack of criminal penalties, and abuse of credit cards and home equity loans are all cited as causes.... The financial system that is coming to an end was based on artificially creating wealth instead of supporting

tangibly productive activities” (Kinney, 2008, p. 1). From a US perspective, Engardio (2008) provides further explanation in this synopsis: “What makes this financial crisis so different from many of the others faced in the past three decades is that it did not originate with peripheral emerging markets. It struck the core of global capitalism. And unlike previous US recessions, this crisis cannot be fixed with changes in monetary and fiscal policy. It will require years of financial workouts and restructuring. The fallout, therefore, is likely to radiate out across the globe in countless unforeseen ways” (p. 2).

This has ramifications for lifelong learning, which, for some decades, has become largely technicized and commodified under neoliberalism. It is the profound overemphasis on the economic and the instrumental, and the consequential sidelining of the social, that undergird my call for lifelong learning as critical action that encompasses and nurtures social engagement, political and economic understanding, and cultural work to benefit citizens as learners and workers. The ongoing global economic debacle makes this call even more urgent. In today’s uncertain global change culture of crisis and challenge, lifelong learning ought to be an inclusive medium and a set of principles and practices to help individuals learn their way out of life and work conundrums in diverse instrumental, social, and cultural contexts. However, this is an ideal. As many critical, feminist, and other positional educators have frequently and effectively argued (see, for example, Edwards, 2000a; Field, 2006; Grace, 2000a, 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b; Walters, 2006), lifelong learning, especially as it has evolved under neoliberalism, has been exclusionary and limited in scope. Primarily, it has mandated citizens as learners and workers to engage in vocational and instrumental learning to produce a more skilled, flexible, and mobile workforce. Amid a public to private shift in responsibility for lifelong learning, which is a dynamic that is apparent globally, governments, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and others setting policy directions for lifelong learning have expected citizens to take individual responsibility for their own learning and to shoulder the blame when lifelong learning fails. In this milieu, the historically valorized concept of lifelong learning has become highly politicized and corporatized. Its widespread economic formation, ensconced in recent decades, provides an obvious reason for citizens to question what has happened to the social and what constitutes worthwhile learning, quality work, and the good life.

If lifelong learning is to be a meaningful discourse for today *and* tomorrow, then it ought to have a multi-faceted goal: to prepare citizens as learners for

work and for the rest of life as part of more holistic development. To incorporate and delineate these lifewide parameters, I use the idea of *lifelong learning as critical action*. In developing this notion, I provide perspectives on lifelong learning as a multi-dimensional historical and contemporary phenomenon with the potential to address instrumental, social, and cultural concerns within a more holistic approach to learning. I problematize the neoliberal formation of lifelong learning as a predominantly economistic venture as I examine contexts and change forces that have shaped contemporary policy-making and practice in governmental, educational, and other institutional contexts. I provide local, national, and international examples of critical, inclusive, holistic, and engaged lifelong learning that attend to matters of ethics, democratic learning, learner freedom, and justice in civil and economic contexts. These matters, as I see them, are at the heart of lifelong learning as critical action, which aims to be a multi-faceted contextual and relational formation that focuses on developing and actually implementing instrumental, social, and cultural learning projects.

*Lifelong Learning as Critical Action* is a useful text for university and college courses that focus on the policy-making and practice dimensions of lifelong learning in historical and contemporary contexts in diverse institutions. This book is also well suited to courses on the history and sociology of adult and higher education, which are key domains where lifelong learning as a concept and practice has long had an impact. It is an informative text for courses focused on inclusive education that highlights ethics and social justice, and is a valuable resource for community-based education courses that address democratic practices and learner needs and freedoms in local and larger contexts. It has utility in courses focused on educational theorizing, cultural learning practices, and learning in social movements. *Lifelong Learning as Critical Action* aims to be an instructive text that provides socio-historical, economic, cultural, and political perspectives on the effects of neoliberalism and globalization on education. The book contributes to the knowledge base in education by analyzing lifelong learning in both policy and practice contexts. It provides critical perspectives and challenges readers to engage lifelong learning as a lifewide phenomenon concerned with instrumental, social, and cultural learning. In the end, I hope the book is a stimulus for each reader's own critical action.

# Acknowledgements

As an academic, I believe my intellectual identity is caught up in the identities of those who mentored me as I found my way into academe. I would like to thank my two most important mentors: Henry A. Giroux and Michael R. Welton. Henry nurtured my love of theory and theorizing during my post-doctoral studies, challenging me to mediate the tensions inherent in juxtaposing critical and post-foundational perspectives. Like Henry, Michael, my doctoral supervisor, urged me to explore theoretical legacies innervating critical theory and other theoretical discourses today. Michael also nurtured my love of social history and taught me to look back before looking ahead. Their influences are evident in this book, and I am grateful for the opportunities I had to study with them.

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# List of Acronyms

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training (South Africa)
AERA	American Educational Research Association
AERC	Adult Education Research Conference (USA)
AI	Amnesty International
ALE	Adult Learning and Education
ALKC	Adult Learning Knowledge Center (Canada)
CCSD	Canadian Council on Social Development
CMEC	Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
CONFINTEA	Conférence internationale sur l'éducation des adultes (French for International Conference for Adult Education)
CCL	Canadian Council on Learning
CLI	Composite Learning Index (Canada)
CPRN	Canadian Policy Research Networks
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CQU	Central Queensland University (Australia)
EFA-GMR	Education for All – Global Monitoring Report
FISC	Foro Internacional de la Sociedad Civil (Portuguese for International Civil Society Forum)
GLOBE	Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Employees Group (United Nations)
HRDC	Human Resources Development Canada
HRSDC	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
IALLA	ICAE Academy of Lifelong Learning Advocacy
ICAE	International Council for Adult Education
ICSF	International Civil Society Forum
IFLL	Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (UK)
IGLHRC	International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission
LGBTQ&A	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Allies
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MERCOSUR	Mercado Común del Sur (Spanish for Southern Common Market)
NEPI	National Education Policy Investigation (South Africa)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development