

# Creating a Buzz - 'Lifewide Learning': *The need for a radically revised pedagogy* John Cowan



John Cowan was born in Glasgow and was educated during and after the Second World War, in six different Scottish schools. As a child he suffered from poor eyesight. He had wanted to become a lawyer, or rather an advocate but that called for 4 years of study, and he was advised that his eyes would not last for more than 3 years. So he opted instead to study civil engineering, motivated by the prospect of designing and building useful things. After a successful career as a structural engineering designer he entered academia in 1964 as a teacher and researcher in structural engineering. His passion for and professional interest in student-centred learning now spans over 45 years. During

that time he has placed an ever increasing emphasis on preparing students to exercise stewardship over their lifewide development while at University, and in lifelong learning thereafter. In his developments, the practice of personal development planning is a central feature in enabling learners to take responsibility for their own reflective and self-assessed development. He continues to share his wisdom with higher education teachers at Edinburgh Napier University and his collegial spirit is well known. In describing himself he says, *"It's best just to think of me nowadays as an active part-time teacher, with personal history to draw on and a willingness to share with some colleagues, if they want to innovate in areas where I have some experience."* During the last two years John has worked closely with the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education to help develop and apply the concept of lifewide learning, development and education. In reviewing John's book 'On Becoming an Innovative Teacher', Professor John Biggs wrote *"...a delightful and unusual reflective journey...the whole book is driven by a cycle of questions, examples, strategies and generalizations from the examples. In all, it is the clearest example of practise-what-you-preach that I have seen."*

## Abstract

In the last half-century, higher education has progressed fairly steadily to a common pedagogical approach which centres on what Biggs (in Biggs and Tang, 2007) calls the *aligned curriculum*. In this arrangement, intended learning outcomes are identified and declared; assessment which calls for these outcomes is (ideally) carefully designed; and learning activities which will enable the desired learning and development to be achieved are conceived and undertaken with the support of effective facilitation. The same principles and practices have been applied to date in most purposeful schemes for personal development planning, and to learner-directed and managed learning. I argue that lifewide learning, wherein learning and development often occur incidentally in multiple and varied situations throughout an individual's life course, calls for a different approach. Higher education should visualise lifewide learning as an *emergent* curriculum wherein the outcomes emerge later on, and are often *unintended*. Consequently they cannot be defined beforehand as intended learning outcomes. The lifewide learning process begins from the choice of an area of activity which may be attractive to an individual for a variety of reasons, from which specific learning often emerges only later as a serendipitous by-product. Such activities are not purposefully selected and planned to enable the learner to achieve *specific* learning. So the assessment of their outcomes is analytical and reflective; they are judged against particular criteria that make sense to the individual in that context – rather than against more general criteria determined by someone else. Learners thus have to evolve their own frameworks for identifying, analysing and judging their own development in the particular contexts in which it has occurred – rather than being constrained to general criteria devised by others. Hence learning outcomes from lifewide learning are *identified from* the assessment or review process – rather than being *confirmed by* it. All these features of lifewide student development in higher education, I suggest, require a radically different and distinct approach and pedagogy.

## Introduction

Should we develop and adopt a new and independent pedagogy for curricula which feature lifewide learning? This paper sets out to answer that question. It has been prepared to support my presentation at the Student Lifewide Development Conference. I make there the somewhat bold assertion that trail-blazing efforts in lifewide learning have been hampered, to date, by innovators

and academia that have treated this innovation as something to be simply added to current practices. They have assumed that we can both have the main features of the established approach and additions (in various forms) to cater for lifewide learning. Hence I distinguish between treatment of the lifewide learning virtually as an extra-curricular activity, rather than as an independent co-curricular component of higher education, with its own appropriate curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. For I assert here that lifewide learning should be distinct in its own right, and so merits distinct consideration - especially where matters of pedagogy and curriculum design are concerned. If we want to see lifewide learning sited firmly in learners' programmes and featuring there in its own right, we are therefore confronted with the challenge to develop a new pedagogy.

### **The pedagogy of the status quo**

Over perhaps the last 25 years, a fairly explicit and directive pedagogy has emerged for programmes of higher education in the United Kingdom. The characteristics of this approach are outlined below:

1. Programmes are conceived by teachers.
2. Programmes or courses are subdivided into self-contained modules;
3. Each module has its own explicit learning outcomes which the course team has decided that learners should achieve;
4. Assessment is arranged by the course team to validly and reliably determine achievement of the intended learning outcomes;
5. Learning and teaching activities should be purposefully planned to support achievement of the intended learning and development;
6. The desirable integration and compatibility of items 3-5 is described as alignment, and is featured as a desirable goal or ultimate quality of well-designed curricula.

Consequently assessment by teachers of the achievement of specified competences by learners (confirming what they can do), according to predetermined criteria and at an appropriate level, is a core feature – except perhaps in those few schemes which embody self- or peer-assessment.

### **Accommodating Personal Development Planning**

The advent of planning for personal development as a central feature of learners' programmes (QAA, 2000) has created the impression of enhanced learner empowerment, within the traditional structure, compared with traditional programmes:

- The intended learning outcomes are certainly predetermined; *but they are now chosen and framed by learners who have not yet undertaken the learning journey, and who have an incomplete appreciation of its demands and potential;*
- The assessment is compatible with the intended learning outcomes; *it is conceived according to the same limitations as are the outcomes;*

- Learning activity is planned towards the achievement of the chosen outcomes; *but it is necessarily planned by learners who lack training or experience in the design of learning activity, and are unlikely to conceive innovative learning activities;*
- Most importantly, the overall programme aims, the programme structure and the criteria and levels for judgements, are still predetermined by teachers, and so can strongly influence the learners' subsequent exercise of autonomy.

### **Example of PDP-based development in a traditional programme**

I choose to test my suggestion that most PDP is to a considerable extent arranged to fit traditional structures. I do this by considering a complete programme where I am a tutor. The details are as follows:

- In a parallel set of activities, alongside their degree programme, post-graduate MSc(HRM) students have the opportunity to prepare for associateship of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD);
- By the time they have completed their MSc programme, students who so wish should have shown themselves capable of planning, monitoring and evaluating their personal and professional development;
- Most students begin with little or no experience of planning for development, or evaluating progress. A short introductory workshop, based on manufactured examples, centres on offering helpful advice to the authors of mid-standard plans and claims, and then helps them to summarise how to plan and claim on the basis of SMART objectives, in terms of advice to the themselves;
- The expectation (not requirement) is that students will be giving attention at any one point in time to around six objectives, divided between professional, academic and personal aims – without trespassing directly on the MSc syllabus, but otherwise freely chosen;
- During the introductory workshop, the need to begin to assemble relevant data from the outset, in order to inform judgements and substantiate claims, is stressed and exemplified. Students' forward plans should include consideration of the forms of relevant data which they can readily acquire and assemble;
- The learning communities in which students are grouped for course purposes should form supportive groups for their CIPD efforts;
- Students' learning communities have the facilitative support of a personal development tutor, whose function is to prompt but never to direct, the students' activities. This style of tutoring is "nudging", in the Brunerian sense, prompting progress into Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It takes the form of facilitative comment on claims and plans, assembled for this purpose at six-monthly intervals.
- Final claims are audited by tutors, to confirm that the requirements of the CIPD strand have been met and the procedures followed. But the claimed attainment of competences and standards is not assessed. The course team are confident in the ability and desire of self-managing, self-monitoring and self-assessing postgraduate students to prepare themselves

adequately for professional life and ongoing personal and professional development. Our confidence has not so far proved unfounded.

Notice, however, that on the face of it, this activity which is focused on personal and professional development appears to share many main features with the traditionally designed and delivered MSc programme. It has predetermined and explicit learning outcomes (albeit chosen by individual students), whose assessment is objective, systematic and appropriate. Criteria and the expected level of demand were decided initially by the course team. Assessment decisions are reported to assessment boards and acted upon in the usual way. The status quo remained secure.

### **The challenge of lifewide learning**

I now submit that lifewide learning is so radically different in its nature that, if we are to contemplate featuring it in learners' programmes, we should ensure that it is independent of constraints arising from the characteristics and practices of other accompanying components of higher education. In particular, we need to radically rethink our pedagogy, beginning from scratch. Again I choose to use an example to illustrate the points I make, which I claim are general for lifewide learning. My example this time is a mere component of an undergraduate module entitled *Developing Employment Skills*; but it is one whose features are not constrained to conform with those of its traditional senior partner, so to speak. Enrolment on this module is only open to students who have some kind of part-time employment, not necessarily discipline-related; and whose employers will permit these students to use this experience for development towards enhanced employability, including the identification of an issue or problem upon which they might reflect constructively.

One component of this module calls for the identification on eight occasions of a critical incident, involving the student or directly observed by them. This should be an incident from which they may generalise and by so doing identify a step forward in their development. If students so wish, they can pass their reflective logs to a tutor whose Brunerian comments are intended to facilitate deeper reflection. Another component of the module, often arising from a critical incident, is the identification by the student of a problem in their place of employment, and the generation of a possible solution to that problem.

During this one-semester module, a significant number of students find themselves awarded an increase in their basic pay rate; and some are promoted to a higher level of employment, especially when their project is deemed impressive by their employer.

It has not been simple to negotiate approval and ongoing validation of this module, within the traditional environment of a conventional university. For the outcomes which matter from the two components I have described are unintended, often highly personal, and only emerge as the experience progresses. The programme activities were not framed to facilitate specific developments; and the outcomes are at various levels, in a range of domains, and are often very difficult to substantiate, especially when they are in the affective domain. Although the module is assessed traditionally, the assessment which matters most to students is their own self-judgement, framed in their own ways, to their own criteria. The pedagogy to inform the effective supporting of

the students in their reflective and analytical thinking is as undeveloped as the methodology for e-moderation which is currently perturbing many academics. It features in our ongoing \action research for that reason.

### **Comparing and contrasting student-led lifewide learning with traditional teaching-led programmes**

Table 1 compares and contrasts features of typical schemes to support student-led lifewide learning and traditional teacher-led learning, as follows:

**Table 1: Comparing and contrasting student-led lifewide learning with traditional teacher-led programmes**

| <b>Traditional teacher-led learning programme</b>   | <b>Student-led lifewide learning</b>   |
|---|--|
| Planning concentrates on desired outcomes   | Design concentrates on worthwhile experiences  |
| These outcomes are intended   | These outcomes emerge  |
| Activity designed to achieve outcomes   | Learners have various reason for choice of activity  |
| Most of the spaces and places for learning are chosen by the teacher/institution          | Spaces and places for learning are chosen by learner   |
| Outcomes and criteria are general   | Outcomes and criteria are particular   |
| Assessment is usually by teachers   | Learners identify, represent (often in varied ways) and claim their own development  |
| Competence is external judged   | Self-knowledge is central  |
| Learning level predetermined against generic level descriptors                            | Learning level emerges: this level is problematic and is judged against an individual's notion of their previous level of learning         |
| Teachers are directive: concepts of tutor, manager, scholar, even instructor are relevant | Teachers are supportive and facilitative: concepts of coach, guide, mentor, facilitator are relevant                                       |
| Outcomes, Assessment and Learning & Teaching activities are aligned from the outset       | Learning experience leads to development, and, after reflective self-evaluation, to a Record of Development and a judgement on development |

## Ten propositions for an imaginative lifewide curriculum

Jackson (in press) sets out ten propositions, based to an elaboration of the concept of lifewide learning. These constitute a very real challenge for any programme designers who traditionally do not support these forms of learner engagement.

*Proposition 1:* gives learners the freedom and empowers them to make choices so that they can find deeply satisfying and personally challenging situations that inspire, engage and develop them

*Proposition 2:* enables learners to appreciate the significance of being able to deal with situations and see situations as the focus for their personal and social development

*Proposition 3:* prepares learners for and gives them experiences of adventuring in uncertain and unfamiliar situations where the contexts and challenges are not known, accepting the risks involved

*Proposition 4:* supports learners when they participate in situations that require them to be resilient and which enables them to appreciate their own transformation

*Proposition 5:* enables learners to experience, feel and appreciate themselves as knower, maker, player, narrator, enquirer, creator and integrator of all that they know and can do, and enables them to think and act in complex situations

*Proposition 6:* encourage learners to be creative, enterprising and resourceful in order to accomplish the things that they and others value

*Proposition 7:* enables learners to develop and practice the repertoire of communication and literacy skills that they need to be effective in a modern, culturally diverse and pluralistic world

*Proposition 8:* enables learners to develop relationships that facilitate collaboration, learning and personal development

*Proposition 9:* encourages learners to behave ethically and with social responsibility

*Proposition 10:* encourages and enables learners to be wilful, self-directed, self-regulating, self-aware and reflexive so that they develop a keen sense of themselves as designers/authors and developers of their own lives appreciating their learning and developmental needs as they emerge.

At first sight it might seem that this learner-centred arrangement encompasses no role for teachers. But closer inspection reveals that the propositions almost all imply teaching persons as the subjects for the various active verbs within their wordings, whose objects grammatically are the learners. If lifewide learning is to become part of the educational offer of universities, it will surely be teachers or tutors or teacher-planned frameworks which “enable”, “encourage”, “support”, prepare, and “give” or “empower” and ultimately recognise and validate the learning.

## Towards a pedagogy for lifewide learning

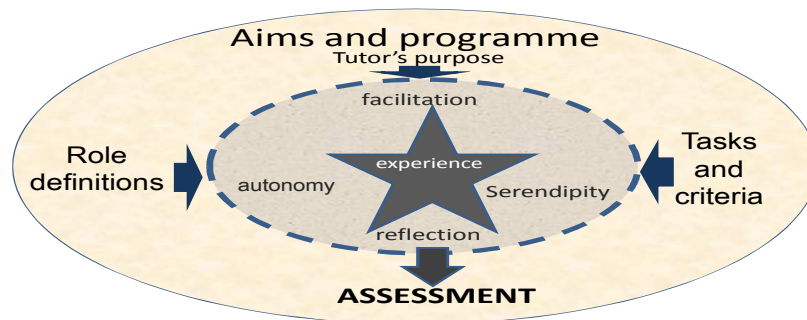
I offer these ideas are offered as tentative steps towards a pedagogy that might enable lifewide concepts and practices of learning and education to co-exist with other components of programmes in higher education – and vice-versa.

1. It is paramount that lifewide learners have freedom to choose – their aims, their activities and the criteria by which they will judge their learning and development in due course.

Hence their learning during the lifewide experience should be autonomous. The experience should be one within which they are free to plan, manage, monitor, change and evaluate their learning and development. In that sense it might be described as “ring-fenced”. (See Fig 1).

2. Outwith the ring-fence are located the various involvements of what may be described as teaching people. It is here that the design for a Lifewide Learning programme is conceived. It is here that the programme team will ensure that:
  - roles are defined for learner, tutors, administrators - and assessors, if necessary;
  - whatever statement is to be made about criteria is formulated;
  - the mode and expectations of assessment (the persuasive hidden curriculum) are decided and communicated to learners;
  - potentially useful inputs, whose use is never mandatory nor even presumed, are created and made accessible;
  - tutors and teachers are available and may be commissioned to provide specialist instruction, information or even advice (as in some problem-oriented project-based learning);
  - tools of enquiry, and methods used to support enquiries, are available in digest form, for reference.
3. Within the ring-fence, the learners should be free to decide, plan, prioritise, act, judge and interact as they so wish, as they direct and monitor their own self-taught learning. Any tutor’s activity within the ring-fence will simply be to be facilitative, to encourage, support, enable and prompt. The events which occur within the ring-fence, once the lifewide experience has commenced, will often entail serendipitous inputs, unexpected experiences, unplanned affordances and fresh challenges and opportunities – to all of which the learners will or should respond autonomously. During their experiences, the learners will draw on familiar sources such as the internet, libraries, and their own prior experiences. On conclusion of their project activity, the learners should reflect both on their learning and development. They should also reflect meta-cognitively on the processes they have followed, and how these, like their development, may benefit from enhancement in their next lifewide learning experiences.

**See new Fig 1 at end. I don’t know how to get it in here.**



**Fig 1: Ring-fencing learning activity**

**An outline summary of one possible lifewide learning format.**

1. Teachers design a programme framework which will encourage and permit learners to engage in the desired lifewide learning.
2. The framework provides for learners to freely choose their aims, the activity in which they will engage, and in due course the criteria against which they will judge their efforts and development.
3. As a preparatory activity, learners inform themselves about several lifewide learning experiences and their assessment, discuss their judgements and the objective making of such judgements with peers, and reflect on what they wish to carry forward from this induction into their own Lifewide Learning.
4. Learners now firm up on their intentions, presumably moving on from at least a vague intention which led them to express interest.
5. The course team offer an input on the collection and citing of appropriate data to inform judgements in due course by learners of their learning and development during, or as a consequence of, the lifewide learning experience.
6. The programme framework encourages formative and summative reflections by learners on the process and its outcomes. This can be facilitated by tutors, if the learners so wish.
7. The programme framework makes provision for, but does not require, constructive peer interactions between learners.
8. Learners, preferably beginning before the conclusion of their project, collate and analyse the data they have ingathered, and set their findings against criteria of their choice.



9. Having formulated their judgments, learners review their experiences and their evaluation of them, formulating a view about the standards of development and of the processes which they followed.
10. Learner's claims and reviews are then be audited by peers, seeking to check these against programme procedures and the need for objectivity and comprehensiveness.
11. Learners are expected, but not required, to carry their reflective self-evaluation forward into an iterative forward plan for further development.

### **Closing assertions**

Teacher designed programmes should support the ideals of autonomous lifewide education through careful consideration of propositions that encourage learners' lifewide learning and the pedagogy that supports and facilitates it.

Lifewide learning should feature learning and development for the learner, taking them beyond their level of attainment when the experience commenced. It should not centre upon the display and application of learning and competences which have already been acquired.

The most effective use of teachers to promote and support lifewide learning will be in the various activities outwith the ring-fence in Figure 1, and for some in facilitation within the ring-fence. There is a danger in this, of which all concerned should be aware. It would be readily possible for such activities to limit the students' freedom within the ring-fence, rather than to empower them as autonomous learners.

In some schemes for lifewide learning, there is a risk that catering for and encouraging individuality and individual choices may lead to disregard of the socio-constructivist potential of formative peer interaction. Learners should be encouraged and given recognition for their efforts to create their own networks and relationships for learning and personal development.

The making of objective judgements, about experiences, inputs and competences, is arguably the most demanding of the cognitive abilities, and one for which even graduate lifewide learners can profitably be prepared.

Concerns about the assessment of lifewide learning can readily proliferate. Possible areas of development include the demand associated with making personal assessments; the difficulty of informing judgements regarding some of the more sophisticated of the abilities developed in lifewide learning; and the fact that the level of learning and development cannot be known at the outset, and may well be lower than the learner – and society – would have wished. Perhaps the most adequate response to these concerns is to point out that, in subsequent life, in employment, social life and even in interviews, these learners will be judged and rated for what they are, what values they epitomise and what they demonstrate in interviews in practice that they can then do – not what certification they have acquired.

## Annotated bibliography

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student does*, Maidenhead; Open University Press.

In this well read text, Biggs' aligned approach to curriculum design and delivery is set out, although in a form which seems to concentrate on lower level and cognitive learning outcomes. The higher level interpersonal and affective outcomes may sit somewhat uncomfortably in Biggs' framework.

Boyd, H.R., Adeyemi-Bero., A. & Blackhall, R.F. (1984) *Acquiring Professional Competence through Learner-directed Learning*. London, Royal Society of Arts, Education for Capability Unit.

This report was written following an invitation from the Royal Society of Arts, after these three undergraduate students, still to graduate, had presented to an international conference an account of their experiences in an innovative major course which was self-directed, self-managed and self-assessed. This had been an unusual and somewhat traumatic experience and demand for them at that time.

Boyd, H.R. & Cowan, J. (1986). The case for self-assessment based on recent studies of student learning. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 10(3)

This is really a paper by Helen Boyd, facilitated and no more than that by John Cowan. In it, the impact of self-assessed study on the learner is reported, I hope effectively

Cowan, J. (1978). Freedom in selection of course content: a case study of a course without a syllabus. *Studies in Higher Education*, 3(2).

Here is a brief account of a first year course for civil engineers in which content was chosen entirely by the individual learner.

Cowan, J. (1984). Learning contract design; a lecturer's perspective. Royal Society of Arts - Occasional Paper No 7.

The Royal Society of Arts invited me to write a companion piece to the students' report, summarising my own (at times traumatic) experiences of learner-directed and learner-assessed activity. The students and I did no collude on our content.

Cowan, J. (2004). Education for higher level capabilities. Beyond alignment to integration? In V.M.S.Gil, I. Alarcão. & J. Hooghof. (Eds). *Challenges in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, University of Aveiro, and Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development.

This paper arose from a conference in Aveiro which John Biggs was unable to attend because of the bird flu epidemic. He delegated it to me to present his paper, and link that on to my own presentation of what might follow on from aligned curricula in the now established form. The result is a composite chapter.

Francis, H.F. & Cowan, J. (2007). Fostering an action-research dynamic amongst student practitioners. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 32(5) pp 336-346

Here you can find a brief account student-directed and virtually self-assessed continuing professional development, to meet the demands of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

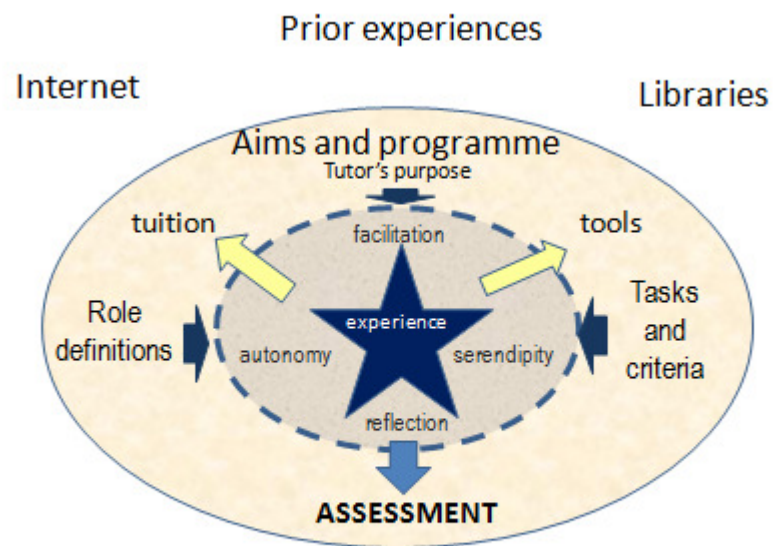
Jackson, N. J. (in prep) An imaginative lifewide curriculum: valuing all of a learner's life spaces, in N. J. Jackson (ed) *Learning for a Complex World: A lifewide concept of learning, curriculum, education and personal development* Authorhouse (June 2011)

This is one Chapter in a book that elaborated the concept of lifewide learning and sets out principles for a curriculum that would support, value and recognise students' lifewide development.

QAA: PDP site. Accessed at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressfiles/guidelines/pdp/> 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2011

This site is the gateway to current QAA documents associated with PDP

## Revised Fig 1



**Fig 1: Ring-fencing of learning activity/experience**