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This is the Published version of the following publication

Holford, John, Milana, Marchella, Webb, Susan, Waller, Richard, Hodge, Steven and Knight, Elizabeth (2022) Shaping the field of lifelong education through three critical debates in the International Journal of Lifelong Education. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 41 (6). pp. 549-571. ISSN 0260-1370

The publisher's official version can be found at
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2160020>
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To cite this article: John Holford, Marcella Milana, Susan Webb, Richard Waller, Steven Hodge & Elizabeth Knight (2022) Shaping the field of lifelong education through three critical debates in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 41:6, 549-571, DOI: [10.1080/02601370.2022.2160020](https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2160020)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2160020>



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Shaping the field of lifelong education through three critical debates in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*

John Holford , Marcella Milana , Susan Webb , Richard Waller , Steven Hodge  and Elizabeth Knight 

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ABSTRACT

The editors approached the 40th anniversary of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* as an opportunity to consider the field by exploring how a corpus of 1462 articles (the first 40 volumes of the journal) questioned and shaped the field. A subset of advisory board members and the editors gathered in 2021 in groups to analyse major topics. The records of the reading, analyses and discussions of these groups offer a unique snapshot of the field and the journal's place in it. In this paper, the editors draw three topics from that work which delineate fundamental debates of lifelong education and reveal how the journal's authors have contributed to them. The topics are: citizenship and its learning; learning in, through and for work; and widening participation and higher education. Comparing the works contributing to these topical areas indicates how the field is evolving. It becomes clear that research and theory in lifelong education should remain vigilant, critical and robust if the field is to continue as a site of hope for future citizens, workers and students, rather than appropriated as an object for measurement, calculation and deployment for relatively narrow, less-than-human interests.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 September 2022
Accepted 12 December 2022


KEYWORDS

Citizenship; work; higher education; widening participation; lifelong education

Introduction

Established in 1982 the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (IJLE) was conceived as a forum for research, theory and debate about a field then – as now – in flux. If we are to find a theoretical – as opposed to an emotional – justification for celebrating the 40th anniversary of the journal, it may lie in the opportunity it provides to deepen a collective understanding of the nature of the field. In fact, the journal was not invented in a scholarly vacuum. A tradition of adult education was flourishing, albeit in forms constrained by national, linguistic and cultural boundaries. It was not an international movement as such, although clearly movement it was with activists in multiple geographical contexts advocating, developing and defending a secular humanism centred on education and learning as complementary terms in a fundamentally hopeful agenda with practical, academic and political dimensions. In what follows, humanism is regarded as a broad perspective on human individuals and society that assumes that human potential, values and flourishing should be the key reference point in policy making in general, and in education policy in particular. At the inception of the journal new ways of thinking about adults were emerging alongside the movement promoting a secular humanism centred on education and learning. Developments in the field of economics included conceptualisation of education and training throughout life as an investment in

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2160020>

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'human capital' (Schultz, 1961) that could be measured, manipulated and factored into economic policy. Argyris and Schön (1974) provided a novel conceptualisation of learning in organisational settings that offered business leaders new tools to promote productivity. UNESCO's Faure report (Faure et al., 1972), which updated and reconceptualised the concept of lifelong education introduced by Yeaxlee (1929), demonstrated that adult learning could become a concern of policy makers. By the start of the 1980s, then, the time was ripe for a new journal that could take stock of growing interest in adult learning and education that had overrun the boundaries of the tradition of adult education.

The founders of the IJLE – Peter Jarvis and Teddy Thomas – sought to enrich the theoretical foundations of the burgeoning field. As one of them wrote, 'practical activity which has no theory underpinning it can look suspiciously as though it is trivial and therefore expendable' (Thomas, 1998, p. 47). Jarvis and Thomas recognised that the incipient field required its own theoretical bases if it was not to be absorbed (because trivial and expendable) by fields of theory and practice with little regard for the humanist values that infused a radical tradition that continued to inspire practitioners and researchers throughout the world. They also understood that the radical tradition needed to be placed in a larger perspective. The contributions of thinkers like Faure signalled an irreversible development but one which still had scope to retain a basic commitment to humanism. The journal would be a vehicle for establishing the theoretical foundations of a field which could remind policy makers that their work should be about human values. The journal would also be a prism for the radical elements of the earlier tradition to elaborate critical positions that could hold to account economists, management consultants and public administrators who were reckoning with the productive potential of lifelong learning. 'Lifelong education' was the label affixed by the journal's founders to this new field, conceived not only as a place wherein the phenomena of lifelong learning could be observed but an area of humanistic educational practice facing new challenges in an increasingly complex world.

Forty volumes later, what can we say about the initial ambitions for the journal and field? Obviously, this is a question that requires significant effort to answer, and would likely elicit an 'answer' that would need significant space to elaborate. Two overarching strategies have been adopted on the occasion of the journal's 40th anniversary to provide at least partial answers. In the first special edition devoted to the anniversary (41(1)), Nylander et al., (2022) published a bibliographic analysis of the 1462 articles covering the period. Their paper maps the corpus of articles in terms of influential contributors and themes of investigation. The analysis offers an overview that broadly confirms the thematic priorities of the journal's founders while drawing attention to a range of concerns that have emerged in the meantime. The second strategy, the basis for the content analysis below, undertaken by the journal's editors, was more qualitative in nature. A subset of advisory board members and the editors gathered in groups to analyse major topics and debates that the journal's many authors explored.¹ The records of the reading, analyses and discussions of these groups which commenced in late 2021 provide material for a unique snapshot of the field and the journal's place in it.

In this paper, the journal's editors aim to provide a systematic overview of contributions to the journal in order to critically explore the journal's role in shaping the field of lifelong education over the last four decades. Three topical areas were selected for analysis. These were identified from the work of the groups of advisory board members as topical areas which both delineate fundamental debates of lifelong education and importantly reveal shifts in attention the journal's authors have given to those debates. Additionally, the three topics chosen complement the findings of the bibliometric analysis (Nylander et al., 2022). The first topic centres on *Citizenship*, along with cognate concerns including democracy and emancipation. We suggest this theme links with the aims and ambitions of the journal's founders and their humanistic perspective, and it has been a continued presence in the journal, albeit diminishing, since the early 1980s (Nylander et al., 2022). Arguably, presenting an account of the contributions of this first topical area is of intrinsic interest because an enduring interest of 20th century adult education scholarship has been the relationships

among individuals and society under conditions of freedom and justice. The next topic revolves around *Work* – how lifelong education occurs in, through, and for work. A significant shift in the concept of adult education is signalled here, with the field widening to respond to recognition of the personal and societal importance of work as a site of learning. This topical area was identified by the editorial advisory board groups as growing in importance from the 1990s onwards. Similarly, the bibliometric analysis highlighted that the focus on the workplace has become more pronounced (Nylander et al., 2022). The third topic addresses a cluster of interrelated topics including *Widening participation and higher education* that the bibliometric analysis also highlighted as indicative of a shift in the centre of the journal's attention. As with the 'work' topic, this focus expands on the tradition of adult education acknowledging the way formal, post-compulsory education can be a vehicle for adult learning and an opportunity for adults, including older learners, to develop themselves and remain engaged in society and in economic productivity. Comparing the works contributing to these three topical areas, the paper aims to explore how the field is evolving, with interest in the citizenship cluster giving way to more intense research and debate around work and participation in formal learning as influenced by national and transnational policies that have progressively increased in ambition and scope to cover the field. It becomes clear that research and theory in lifelong education will need to remain vigilant, critical and robust if the field is to continue as a site of hope for future citizens, workers and students instead of being appropriated as an object for measurement, calculation and deployment for relatively narrow, less-than-human interests.

Methods

The three topical areas in focus in this paper were derived, as mentioned, from the work of groups of IJLE advisory board members and editors. Four groups convened, each devoted to analysing the articles of a given decade. Methodologically, their work reflects the practice of *close reading* described by MacLure (2003) as constitutive of discourse analysis. For MacLure, following the lead of Derrida, reading can become 'scenes of worrying away at problematic gaps and spaces – between self and other, theory and practice, rhetoric and reality' (MacLure, 2003, p. 3). The 'decade groups' (as they became known) thus enacted collegial projects which 'engage[d] with the unavoidably discursive nature of educational realities, including those realities that are created by educational research itself' (ibid, p. 4). The approach to elaborating the material of the corpora into topical areas reflects the identification of what is described by Flyvbjerg (2006) in terms of *critical cases* which have 'strategic importance in relation to the general problem' (p. 229). For us, the general problem is the emergence of the discourse of lifelong education as a humanistic endeavour, and the three topics of strategic importance for understanding how the journal – as addressing and shaping that discourse – has or has not realised its ambitions.

By the acts of close reading undertaken by the decade groups, several topical areas (or *critical cases*) were identified as being of intrinsic interest to the broader discourse of lifelong education that in a sense is both inscribed and troubled by the journal. Given the purpose of this study, however, topical areas needed to be represented across all or most of the decades so that an account could be developed of the way they were taken up across the history of the journal. Accordingly, the editors restricted attention on three such topical areas that were highlighted as becoming either less prominent (*Citizenship and its learning*) or more pronounced (*Learning in, through and for work*; and *Widening participation and higher education*) in the bibliometric analysis by Nylander et al. (2022). An in-depth qualitative analysis of the contribution of these three areas is deemed critical to understanding how the field is being shaped through the journal. Selecting three topical areas meant that other areas such as changes in the attention given to different types of learners, in theoretical approaches, in modes of learning and teaching, and other specific areas of interest, such as policy, were only considered in so far as they cut across the three topical areas under consideration.

The corpus of 1462 articles needed to be reduced to create three distinct corpora relating to each of the topical areas under consideration. To create those collections of articles, a search strategy was

Table 1. Stem word and article search results.

Topical areas	Citizenship and its learning	Learning in, through, and for work	Widening participation and higher education
Stem word(s)	CITIZEN	WORK TRAINING	MATURE NON-TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY
Initial search result (no. articles)	86	81 (WORK) 183 (TRAINING)	162
Dataset (no. articles)	30	60	54

determined based on the identification of key words that were inductively selected based on synonyms or well-known associated words. The publisher’s system did not allow searches for title, keyword and abstracts at the same time as the purpose of the publisher’s website is not to derive a corpus of articles. Therefore, the group was grateful that in a collegial act, the authorial group from Nylander et al. (2022) was able to share the database that they created for that bibliographic research. The Nylander et al. corpus had been compiled by members of their team and had been hosted in *Github* which collected abstracts, keywords, authors, institutions and so on. Therefore, the three corpora could be produced by identifying articles through searches from title, keyword and abstract separately for each of the keyword ‘stems’. All searches were combined and a unique filter was run on them resulting in a set of articles as shown in Table 1 with no duplicates. Thereafter, drawing on bibliometric data, we considered each of these topical areas and, after a close reading and judgement on relevance, identified articles for inclusion in the dataset (see Appendix 1). Individual authors generated draft text, which were then discussed with the other authors and revised again. The overall findings and conclusions have been prepared in discussion between all the authors. Table 1 summarises stem words, search results and articles included in the dataset for each topical area. These articles are referred in square brackets in the next sections.

Each of the topic discussions below is structured according to themes with common threads or additional concerns following. Specific decisions made in creating the distinct corpora are explained in each topic’s introduction.

It should be noted that previous research has highlighted the dominance of the English language and authors from Anglophone countries in academic publishing (Fejes & Nylander, 2015). Since the implications of who publishes research in peer reviewed journals have been highlighted and problematised in previous research (Fejes & Nylander, 2019; Field et al., 2019; Larsson et al., 2019; Milana, 2019), the present article has not considered this aspect of the knowledge produced. However, it should be acknowledged that there were in the early years of the journal publications in languages other than English and also abstracts were published in French and German.

Citizenship and its learning

This topic had been identified at first as a topical area by members of the editorial advisory board, who reviewed, synthesised, and discussed all articles published in IJLE in the 2010s decade; the relevance of this topic beyond the 2010s decade was later confirmed in discussion with other members of the editorial advisory board, who had undergone similar work for the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. On this ground, the search was confined to the stem word CITIZEN, resulting in a total of 86 articles, which were read for relevance. An article was considered relevant if: 1) it examined civic or citizenship learning in either formal, non-formal or informal settings, or 2) it was concerned with conceptualisations of citizenship and its learning. Accordingly, articles that, for instance, examined types of adult education provision (e.g. higher education, adult community education, adult literacy, adult career guidance) or lifelong learning conceptualisations, and only mentioned citizenship or citizenship learning in passing were excluded. Editorials (3) and policy statements (2) were

equally excluded. This led to a final data set of 30 articles, published between 1999 and 2021, a close reading of which brought to the fore four main themes deemed relevant for the decades under consideration: the social purpose of adult education, learning *for* citizenship, learning *through* citizenship and emancipation, citizenship learning and lifelong learning.

The social purpose of adult education

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a first theme, from the late 1990s onwards, is concerned with the social purpose of adult education, and the need for reclaiming forms of citizenship education and learning [Johnston, 1999] that support development [Van Der Veen & Preece, 2005], transcend cultural and religious difference and particularity [Guo, 2010], create democratic conversations [Wildemeersch, 2017] and inclusive learning spaces [Gouthro, 2007], building, among others, on human rights-based approaches [Thomas, 2016], and ‘political listening’ as a pedagogical condition [Welton, 2002].

Learning for citizenship

Noticeably since the 2000s, a second theme is concerned with the learning *for* citizenship that occurs through participation in extra-curricular activities [Clayton, 2000; Idrissi, 2020], non-formal settings – in English for speakers of other language courses [Han, Starkey & Green, 2010] and other citizenship education programmes [Mojab & Carpenter, 2011], and informal settings [Kim, 2010; Li, 2017], as well as the learning about civics and citizenship that occurs lifelong, through individuals’ lives, and lifewide, across diverse learning settings (formal, non-formal, and informal) [Ngozwana, 2017; 2021; Schugurensky & Myers, 2003]. While this theme is consistent over time, in a few instances, the focus of attention shifts from the learners to the providers of education programmes aimed at supporting civic and citizenship learning and how this changes over time in response to broader societal transformations [Tobias, 2000], or thanks to the initiatives of international organisations, such as the Council of Europe [Forrester, 2003].

Learning through citizenship and emancipation

Also, since the 2000s, a third theme concerns the learning that takes place *through* citizenship practice, when citizens engage with others in some form of community learning, for instance, through involvement in grassroots, action-oriented citizens’ groups [Hill, 2004; Roy, 2012], or in discussions on environmental policy plans [Vandenabeele, Vanassche & Wildemeersch, 2011], but also when citizens engage in council housing [McCormack, 2008]. A few articles applauded ways to integrate reflective popular knowledge and social action, bringing to the fore different forms for challenging official codified knowledge through local wisdom mobilised by grassroots environmental groups [Hill, 2004], or practical wisdom assembled through participatory planning [Vandenabeele et al., 2011]. Additionally, some articles valued citizenship learning that occurs through active engagement in public or social enterprises [McCormack, 2008], or the creation of public spaces for citizenship learning like independent film festivals [Roy, 2012]. One thing these articles have in common is an interest in those forms of emancipation that citizens’ involvement in social learning promotes. Remarkably, this theme seems to have faded away over the 2010s.

Citizenship learning and lifelong learning

Persistently since the 2000s, a fourth theme is preoccupied with the relations between citizenship learning and lifelong learning. Such concern encompasses, on the one hand, reflections on citizenship learning *through* lifelong learning being either intrinsic to traditional African society [Avoseh, 2001] or challenged by post-war British and colonial education practices [Holford, 2006] and, on

the other hand, radical views on citizenship learning as a key dimension of lifelong learning [Regmi, 2017; Zepke, 2013]. Along this line, policy documents by either nation-wide organisations, like the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in the United Kingdom [Bagnall, 2010; Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele, 2010], or international organisations [Field & Schemmann, 2017; Koutidou, 2014] were put under close scrutiny to tease out and critique policy discourses and legal frameworks that conceptualise (active) citizenship, and operationalise it as a lifelong learning objective from a functionalist and reductionist approach.

Further inductive exploration of the four themes revealed three cross-cutting topics of interest that developed over time.

Shifting perspectives on citizenship learning

Since the late 1990s, with the popularisation of lifelong learning as a mantra, several articles have strongly criticised the predominantly functionalist and economic imperative that permeates it. Drawing on available literature, as well as the authors' standing and experience in the field of adult education, several speculative contributions brought forwards new conceptual frameworks to reclaim the social purpose of adult education. Some considered multiple kinds of citizenship (inclusive, pluralistic, reflexive and active) at the heart of adult education [Johnston, 1999], while others considered both citizenship and belonging as a citizen a 'moral imperative' for lifelong learning, if concerned with individual and collective well-being and welfare [Bagnall, 2010]. Some brought this reflection forward stressing the promotion of democratic citizenship as a 'coming into presence in the public sphere' that involves citizens' confrontation with issues of common concern [Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele, 2010]. Accordingly, others have argued for inter-subjective learning, transformative learning, and citizenship learning as critical dimensions of a 'comprehensive model' of lifelong learning [Regmi, 2017]. Yet, the shifting perspectives brought forward by critical adult education scholars have at times raised concerns for women, new comers to a county of choice, and transnational migration more broadly, thus arguing for lifelong learning needing to engage women in active citizenship in both educational contexts and society [Gouthro, 2007], for 'a pedagogy of publicness' that builds on the learning potentials of dissensus [Wildemeersch, 2017], and for recognitive justice and inclusive citizenship via transnational lifelong learning [Guo, 2010].

Adult educators and (civic) teachers

During the 2000s, a few contributions paid attention to those who educate for or facilitate citizenship learning. One contribution suggests that, for deliberative democracy to work, adult educators should foster communicative infrastructure and develop innovative learning forms to make themselves and help others to learn and practice how to listen [Welton, 2002]. Another contribution demonstrates how (civic) teachers are themselves lifelong civic and political learners but that their civic and political knowledge is often acquired tacitly through family socialisation and activism [Schugurensky & Myers, 2003]. Meanwhile, a different contribution also cautions adult educators engaged in citizenship education to avoid negating the material and social relations determining their experience and that of learners [Mojab & Carpenter, 2011].

Educational spaces

During the 2010s, some articles reflected on the educational spaces for becoming citizens, for example, through the sharing of citizen narratives [Vandenabeele et al., 2011] or exposure to independent movies [Roy, 2012]. A couple of contributions also emphasised the relevance of extra-curricular activities in schools and universities for young people and adults to learn about global citizenship [Idrissi, 2020] and practice active citizenship [Li, 2017]. Finally, one article examined

how learning spaces varied over time, alongside shifts in understandings of democracy and citizenship that came about when a country (Lesotho) transited from a traditional to a modern societal structure [Ngozwana, 2021].

In short, the articles under consideration varied in terms of theories they mobilised, yet with a predominance of critical and social justice theories, and recurrent reference, across articles, to Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action, and Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, among others. Albeit differently understood, research articles draw almost exclusively on case studies, encompassing a variety of cultural contexts (Britain, Britain's overseas colonies, Canada, China, Flanders, Iraq, Lesotho, Morocco, New Zealand, South Korea, United States). Overall, the way citizenship and its learning were researched, debated and critiqued, through the period under consideration, foregrounds the entanglement between the way citizenship is conceptualised and its effects on educational provision, but also the tensions between the different purposes of adult education, the learning intrinsic in social relations, and what adult educators and learning facilitators can do for shaping more or less democratic learning spaces.

Learning in, through and for work

This topic had been identified at first as a topical area by members of the editorial advisory board, who reviewed, synthesised, and discussed all articles published in IJLE in the 1990s decade; the relevance of this topic beyond the 1990s decade was later confirmed in discussion with other members of the editorial advisory board, who had undergone similar work for the 1980s, 2000s, and 2010s. In addition, Nylander et al. (2022) noted that learning in workplaces and non-formal settings had become pronounced in IJLE and in response to this growth in interest in the field, other specific journals had emerged during the last two or more decades focusing on this topic. One of these journals, the *Journal of Workplace Learning* has also recently undertaken a bibliometric analysis to map the themes of the journal from 1997 and 2020 (Huang & Liew, 2021) with the intention of setting a baseline for future research. Informed by the discussions with the editorial advisory board and recent bibliometric analyses, the search of IJLE was confined to two stem words WORK and TRAINING. A search of titles, abstracts and keywords resulted in a total of 183 articles mentioning training and 81 articles mentioning work (-place, -based, -related). A close reading and search of all articles led to a final list of 60 articles that discussed work-based learning, training or learning in and through workplaces.

The close reading of 60 articles published between 1982 and 2021 generated three distinctive themes that have had varying prominence across the four decades: critical employee focused learning; understanding access and participation; and changing methodologies to build knowledge in the field. Inductive exploration of these themes revealed two further topics or research areas of interest: improving practices and developing conceptual and theoretical thinking.

Critical employee focused learning in, through and for work

A main theme that is present across all four decades is an alignment with the perspectives and concerns of critical or radical adult education with a specific focus on what the learning in and through work is *for*. In the first decade, the 1980s, the topical area of work-based learning was barely present, yet in 1983 Mackie [1983] called on university adult educators to consider the potential for expanding liberal adult education and learning into workplaces outside universities (also addressed under the next topic). Learning in, through and for work had been tied to learning for the economic benefits of work organisations during this early period, for example, to understand why an economy such as Japan's had been so successful [Yamada, 1994]. Despite a research agenda framed by human resource development concerns in the first 12 years of the journal, an interest in employees' access and social mobility through learning at work emerged [Mulder, 1992]. Recognition that work-based

learning was contested led researchers to see its potential to support critical analyses of labour markets and the learning needs of those excluded from paid work [Forrester, Payne & Ward 1995]. Others argued for a shift, away from the behaviourist learning concerns of employers focused on employees' competence development, towards a focus on adults with educational needs [Tang & Cheung, 1996], or to instructors who recognised employees as learners [Wales, 1995]. Subsequent decades have confirmed that learning in, through and for work has put the interests of adults as learners at the centre of research, rather than the interests of employers [Bauer & Gruber 2007]. This shift towards employees as learners often aligned with discussions of transformative learning for individuals wanting to change their lives [Eastman 2014]. Alongside this were discussions of the potential for such learning to disrupt ideas of how knowledge is produced and for whom [Armsby, Costley & Gamett, 2006].

Understanding access and participation in work-based or related learning

A second theme concerns who has access and participates in learning in, through and for work. Twenty years after the journal was first published Cervero [2001] critically analysed trends in the growing field of continuing professional development. He noted that overwhelmingly workplaces were the loci for continuing education. From that point on many of the 60 articles reviewed highlighted the role of formal, non-formal and informal workplace learning in meeting the technological turn to new skill formation needs and identified the issue of who has access to these learning opportunities. Illeris [2006] asked what form of learning at work is effective and for whom, with a particular focus on the experience of the low skilled. Older workers were noted as a group often experiencing excluding practices [Dymock, Billett, Klieve, Johnson & Martin, 2012; Meyers, 2017]. Employers have been identified as more significant in providing learning through work for new skills formation compared to the role of training organisations and formal initial skill formation programmes [Churlyayeva & Kukushkin, 2013]. Different employment sectors and different employment conditions were identified as affecting who is able to access learning in and through work, with the lower skilled and those employed in manufacturing, as opposed to knowledge-intensive industries, experiencing the greatest disadvantages [Riddell, Ahlgren & Weedon, 2009]. In the most recent decade, a growing number of articles has applied quantitative methods to large data sets, such as those made available by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) or Eurostat, to examine a range of factors affecting the access, participation and outcomes of work-based learning. The factors studied include employment sector, types of firms, full or part-time working, employee characteristics (age, prior qualifications, gender, citizenship/migration status, and different immigrant groups) and differences in national welfare and education systems [Icardi, 2019; Kalenda & Kočvarová, 2020; Karmaeva & Zakharov, 2020; Kyndt, Michielsen, Van Nooten, Nijs & Baert, 2011; Lee & Desjardins, 2019; Livingstone, 2018; Pullman & Chen, 2020; Støren, 2013; Støren & Børing, 2018a; 2018b; Tikkanen & Nissinen, 2016; 2018]. Several of these articles appeared in a 2018 special issue on work-related training and workplace learning [Tikkanen, Hovdhaugen & Støren, 2018].

Changing methodologies to build knowledge in the field

The third theme that emerged was methodology and the warrants the articles presented for building knowledge. Across the 60 articles considered, there was a predominance of qualitative studies often using a case study approach, but also including policy analysis [Forrester et al., 1995; Mackie, 1983; Yamada, 1994] and literature reviews or commentaries to draw together knowledge of how this form of learning works, and under what circumstances [Billett, 2014; Cervero, 2001; Edwards, 1998; Olsen & Tikkanen, 2018; Rappel, 2017]. Fourteen studies used quantitative research of which twelve were published in the last decade. Taken together these twelve articles have argued that the growing availability and use of such large cross-national data sets has enabled new understandings of

learning in, through and for work [Olsen & Tikkanen, 2018]; of the two earlier articles one used structural equation modelling to measure the gendered effects of job-related training [Quinlan, 2008], and the other a descriptive survey to identify research priorities for this field [Mulder, 1992].

Building concepts and theories to understand learning in, through and for work

Alongside the three themes discussed above, the two further concerns or interests identified were more pedagogically focused, albeit often framed within one or more of the three themes already identified. One related to understanding the processes of learning to improve work-based learning and teaching practices. The other offered more generalisable conceptual or theoretical thinking about these processes, often linking the arguments to theories drawn from other disciplinary areas such as sociology, psychology and philosophy.

Improving practices. Articles concerned with improving practices described different forms of learning in workplaces such as: identifying the practices needed for technological development, structural changes and formal learning [Lemmetty & Collin, 2020]; engaging workers in innovations for problem solving in office work [Rausch, Schley & Warwas 2015]; engaging workers in the transformations needed for ‘Industry 4.0’ manufacturing [Rangraz & Pareto, 2021]; and developing a model to recognise experiential learning in doctoral education [Armsby, 2013]. Often these articles drew on existing socio-cultural theories of learning (Illeris, 2004), or theories of learning through practice, such as Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of communities of practice. One study informed by situated learning theory showed how supportive social networks provided by trade unions using collectivist and activist learning principles increased learners’ confidence and participation in mathematics classes at workplaces [Kelly, 2019]. School or college-based learning was compared with learning in the workplaces. The apprenticeship model was found to be effective for novice workers [Filliettaz, 2013] and new sales assistants [Aarkrog, 2005]. Educators and their professional development were identified as crucial in supporting workers engaged in non-formal education and training to support their career development and move into employment [Manuel, vab de Linden & Popov, 2017; Mayombe, 2016; 2017]. Tanggard [2009] and Kubiak, Rogers and Turner [2010] each argued that being a learner in a workplace is just one aspect of adults’ complicated lives; there may be good reasons why they will accept or resist such learning and a more comprehensive situated perspective is needed to understand learning in, through and for work.

Similarly, complexity theory was used to show that learning is not something to be imposed by employers to fix a deficit problem, rather it emerges through collective endeavours based on interactional understandings with others [Johnsson & Boud, 2010]. Identity development was highlighted as both a necessary process of learning in, through and for work and an outcome. Articles drew on literature on perspectival learning or transformative learning or cited literature about the social reproduction or transformation of inequalities. Edwards’ [1998] discussion of the need for pedagogies of reflection to enable flexibility among lifelong learners to manage changes in workplaces and their lives in the age of reflexive modernisation may have stimulated this turn to exploring learners’ identity development through learning at work. Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction, Foucault’s work on surveillance and discourse, and sociologists of education such as Archer, Reay and Walkerdine, as well as post-structuralist feminist scholarship on social inequalities and education were often drawn on to explain these identity development processes. Articles extended or added complexity to existing understandings by highlighting how learning in work enhances critical reflexivity [Blåka & Filstad, 2007; Bovill, 2012; Eastman, 2014] or constructs communities and their cultures, such as masculinity or femininity practices in the military [Taber, 2011]. When workplace cultures and learning are management-led, the processes can constrain identity, especially that of women, who have found themselves struggling to recover an authentic self [Fenwick, 1998].

Developing conceptual and theoretical thinking. Theory building across these four decades was relatively light. For the most part articles extended or applied existing theories. Practice-based learning theories, such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice, along with Engeström (2001) and Fuller and Unwin's (2004) concepts of expansive and restrictive learning focused attention on the organisation of workplaces and workers' conditions of employment. This focus on workplaces as organisations, job designs and the cultures for managing change led to mid-level theories of how learning in, through and for work operated at the level of organisations [Fuller & Unwin, 2005]. Management practices were found to result in a workplace literacy programme becoming complicit in controlling workplace knowledge [Schied, Carter, Preston & Howell, 1998]. Workplace educators' role was seen as critical. Fenwick [2007] highlighted the delicate balancing act educators played between transformation and reproduction pedagogies in order to survive the complex hierarchies of power in a garment factory and give workers the hope and ability to make changes in their lives. Employers also recognised that since employees with 'high potential', often in 'high tech' positions, operate as free agents, employers needed to go beyond offering traditional training and focus more on their employees' career development opportunities [Opengart & Short, 2002]. This attention to the power dynamics of workplaces drew on theories of emergence (Nicolini et al., 2003) that argue that knowledge is constantly changing depending on the balance of power within workplaces; the hierarchies of power can affect opportunities to learn. Focusing on talk at work using discourse analysis, Solomon, Boud & Rooney [2006] argued that everyday learning at work takes place at the intersections between work and social spaces, such as lunch rooms and tearooms. In a further development, Boud, Rooney and Solomon [2009] counselled that management can utilise talk in these spaces and incorporate informal learning in ways that might undermine the interests of workers. Ownership of organisations can also affect learning opportunities. Limits to how professionals learn in practice were shown to be particularly stark in the globally concentrated and controlled media [Ng & Cervero, 2005]. Even those in elite professions such as judges need to consider the politics of workspaces in identifying where they can safely share and transfer ideas from participation in formal learning with their peers without undermining their codes of conduct [Daffron, Cowdrey & Doran, 2007].

Theories of practice were taken to another level through the concept of personal epistemologies with critical reflection developed to explain how older health workers negotiated workplace blocks and affordances to learning [Billett & Van Woerkom, 2008]. This study drawing on Habermas' work on criticality, Freire's on knowledge and empowerment and Brownlee's and Berthelsen's (2006) on personal epistemologies was further developed in an account of learning through practice that stressed the active processes learners use in the face of cultural, societal and situational factors [Billett, 2014]. Phenomenal accounts were also the focus for understanding professionals' judgements and the role of informal learning at work in a study that drew on Dewey [Beckett & Hager, 2000]. Finally, social materiality was invoked in a study of individuation that showed that when an individual makes an object and the object enables the individual to make new processes and procedures, there is personal development and learning [Goudeaux, 2013].

In sum, the way learning in, through and for work was researched and discussed in the 60 articles drawn from the forty years of the journal shows a continuing engagement with the purposes of adult education by disentangling human resource development from critical education, and learning and exploring who has access and who is excluded from such learning. Additionally, the reading has highlighted the importance of improving practices to ensure that work-based learning is responsive to the needs of different learners. Studies have sought to deepen understandings of the work-based learning processes, its affordances and constraints in order to extend theories of adult learning to workplaces.

Widening participation and higher education

Initially, 162 articles had been identified for consideration through keyword searches employing the terms: MATURE, NON-TRADITIONAL, and UNIVERSITY, the third of which was the most productive in respect of the numbers of articles generated. The total included 13 articles in the 1980s, 29 in the 1990s, 38 in the 2000s, and 77 in the 2010s, a gradual but significant increase across the four decades under consideration, and one that demonstrates increasing academic interest in these areas over time.

This number was reduced by a factor of approximately two-thirds to the more manageable figure of 54 for a more detailed consideration by reading through the titles and, where there were areas of doubt, the abstracts for each of the original 162 articles, and setting aside articles that did not focus upon the chosen areas. This smaller number underwent a closer reading to identify topics in greater detail, and to consider how we best characterise each of them with respect to their prime foci, geographical setting, and, in some cases, methodological or theoretical approach. From this process, five broad and sometimes overlapping subthemes were identified as outlined below.

University continuing or adult education

Many of the earlier articles in the forty-year period focused upon university continuing or adult education programmes, particularly in the UK [e.g. Fordham, 1983; McIlroy, 1989], and other parts of the global North including Elsey [1986] in Australia, and Guri-Rozenblit [1992] in Israel. This was especially true throughout the 1980s, and by comparison, articles on this theme had largely dried up by the mid-2000s; some of the last were Osborne, Sandberg and Tuomi's [2004] comparison of continuing education provision in Sweden, Finland and the UK, and Ho's [2004] critical review of the development of Taiwan's community university movement. The few, later, exceptions include Bowl's [2010] comparative study of university continuing education in a neoliberal landscape, analysing provision in both England and New Zealand, and Tagoe's [2012a; 2012b] analysis of the incorporation of cultural action models in Ghanaian university-based adult education. Fleming [2013] employed Clark's notion of 'the expanded developmental periphery' within a comparative study of 'entrepreneurial' universities to better understand the role of continuing education units within institutions in Australia, Hong Kong and the USA.

Lifelong Learning and Older Learners in University Settings

A related theme, that is the notion of the university as a potential site for lifelong learning, came to the fore largely through the latter half of the journal's 40 year lifespan across a range of very different national sites, the first of which was perhaps Liu and Wan [1999]. There was one notable exception bucking this trend in Kulich's [1982] study of Canadian universities and lifelong learning, which appeared in what was only *IJLE*'s second ever issue. Examples of the later increase in articles covering this theme include Müller, Remdisch, Köhler, Marr, Repo and Yndigegn's [2015] study of various northern European models for university lifelong learning, and Openjuru's [2011] analysis of provision in eastern Africa.

By contrast, the articles covering much older learners, for instance, on the University of the Third Age (U3A) which had originated in France in 1973, did not begin appearing until significantly later, and tended to focus on work undertaken in Australasia. These include Williamson's [1997] Australian study which proposed that 'Third-Age perspectives' on life and on learning could be employed to broaden the concept of lifelong learning and argued for 'age-integrated' rather than 'age-segregated' educational programmes. Swindell [1997] published his work on the health and other benefits of participating in U3A in both Australia and New Zealand, and later [Swindell, 2002] traced the affordances and benefits of U3A's move to online learning for geographically isolated

older learners in rural Australia. Duke's [2002] article argues powerfully for the creation of learning regions and in new modes of knowledge protection in relation to universities and lifelong learning.

The topic of mature students, especially those attending university, has been the frequent focus of articles in the journal. These include Kwong, Mok and Kwong's [1997] study of the socio-economic positioning and motivational factors amongst a community of learners in Hong Kong, and Davey and Jamieson's [2003] comparative study of pathways of early school leavers back into university in both the UK and New Zealand. Waller, Bovill and Pitt [2011] looked at the 'hidden costs' of lifelong learning for mature students; Jamieson [2016] examined the changing meaning of learning across the lifecourse; Hardy, Oprescu, Millear and Summers [2017; 2019] and Hardy, Summers, Millear and Oprescu [2019] explored the later life learning of Australian 'baby boomers', including in the specific field of health promotion interventions.

(Higher) educational gerontology or 'elder' learning articles have often focused on East Asian countries, Tam and Wu [2020] for instance, in Hong Kong, and both Kee [2010] and Lee [2014] in Korea. Meanwhile, in the West, both McAllister [2010] and Jamieson [2016] have written of this topic in the UK, as have Talmage, Mark, Slowey, and Knopf [2016], whose study of so-called 'Age Friendly Universities' in Ireland, Scotland and the USA argues persuasively that they have the potential to bring social, personal and economic benefits to both older adults and universities and their wider communities alike. This was a theme echoed in many of the journal's articles published on the subject across its own lifespan.

Part-time Students and Recognition or Accreditation of Prior Learning

Many mature students study part-time, including for work-related learning as discussed in the previous section. Examples of articles explicitly concerning part-time learners came from a number of national contexts, including Kember, Lee and Li [2001] in Hong Kong, McLean and Rollwagen [2010] in Australia, and Swain and Hammond [2011] in the UK. Studies on this theme often included a discussion of the particular challenges faced in terms of developing a sense of belonging to the wider student community.

Another recurring concern for studies of mature students was that of the recognition (and/or accreditation) of prior learning before undertaking a programme of study. The more conventional admission requirements for younger university students in particular (i.e. entry grades), are, as readers of IJLE will be aware, often waived for older learners who can demonstrate appropriate but non-credentialised knowledge. These articles generally originated from studies in the global North, e.g. Brinke, Sluijsmans & Jochems [2009] in The Netherlands; Cooper and Harris [2013] in South Africa and both Pitman and Broomhall [2009] and Pitman and Vidovich [2013] in Australia.

Widening Participation to Higher Education

As we would perhaps expect from our academic community, the significant majority of whom would probably align themselves with progressive politics, much of the work on this broader theme that has appeared in IJLE throughout its lifetime argues for an expansion of educational provision and greater opportunities for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds [e.g. Benn & Burton, 1995]. The notion of 'social class', which has greater resonance in Western capitalist countries than other parts of the world, has been the focus of many publications in the journal, including for instance, Walker [2000] and Walker et al. [2004]. This review exercise has highlighted how the notion of 'non-traditional students' has become a frequent proxy for 'working class', particularly recently, with notable examples from a range of national contexts including O'Shea [2015] in Australia, Tumuheki et al. [2016] in Uganda, and Siivonen and Filander [2020] in Finland.

Consideration of learners' demographic characteristics was increasingly prominent across the four decades under review. Examples included disability [e.g. Jotham, Ellis & Lamerton [1996], ethnicity [e.g. Pickerden, 2002] and, as discussed earlier, age [e.g. Mackenzie, 1994; Mallman & Lee,

2017]. In terms of gender, probably the most frequently addressed of these demographic factors across the period, the search approach failed to highlight any articles that primarily concerned with male learners across the forty years. By contrast, women learners were the focus of a significant number of published studies, including Cox and Pascall [1994], Jang and Kim [2010] and Bovill [2012], although we did not notice a particular tendency to adopt feminist research approaches or theoretical frameworks for analysis of these learners and their experiences.

Shifting Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

Throughout this analysis of the journal's content, we noticed a general shift away over time from quantitative analyses of large data sets, for instance, Roderick's [1983] study of trends in UK university applications and admissions, and Gooderham and Dale's [1995] account of graduate outcomes. Later work on this topic featured in the journal was more likely to be qualitative in nature, and focusing on what we might categorise as processes and experiences, for instance, Stuart, Lido and Morgan's [2011] study of how students' social and cultural life histories interact with the field of higher education, and Finnegan, Valadas, O'Neill, Fragoso and Paulos's [2019] longitudinal study of how Irish and Portuguese graduates were searching for security in economically precarious times. Later qualitative work within the period such as those cited above tended to be more theoretically informed, with Bourdieusian analyses, for instance, being increasingly popular [e.g. O'Shea, 2015].

Our examination of the 54 published articles across the journal's forty years on the topic of widening participation and higher education has highlighted a number of common thematic areas of concern, and some developments in approaches to the exploration of such areas. The shifting nature of the relationship between universities and their local communities across the period has been highlighted by the contributions focusing on their continuing or adult education departments, especially in the global North. Our analysis has also highlighted developing concerns over who should have access to higher education, and how those who have traditionally being excluded can be incorporated into it and able to benefit both themselves and the wider university community accordingly. Older learners in particular have been the focus of much of the scholarship in discussions of widening university participation. Our exercise also highlighted some of the challenges of being a part-time university student in a range of national settings, notably in terms of the acknowledgement and accreditation of prior knowledge and experience, and in achieving a sense of belonging to the wider student community.

Discussion and conclusion

Our interest in the three topical areas: *Citizenship and its learning*; *Learning in, through and for work*; and *Widening participation and higher education*, has focused on the question of how the field of lifelong education has been reflected in, and shaped by, contributions to the journal during its first 40 years of publication. The purpose has been to provide a systematic overview of contributions to the journal in order to critically explore the journal's role in shaping the field of lifelong education over the last four decades. Inevitably, there are limitations in focusing only on three topical areas, and in the way these were identified; but it was our intention to complement and extend the topic modelling analysis developed by Nylander et al. (2022), through in-depth qualitative analysis, rather than do a comprehensive review of the journal's publications over its 40 years of existence.

We now consider how the topics and any changing emphases that emerged from our analysis might be related to changing contexts in the field of adult and lifelong education and its research.

The close reading of these three topics provides a complex account of how they have developed or fallen away over the four decades. Nevertheless, there are some similar threads to the themes identified as well as differences across each of these topics. The purposes of adult and lifelong

education in the various settings and the extent to which learning is life-changing for the individual or emancipatory for groups and society can be discerned as a major cross-cutting theme in all three topical areas. Similar to the bird's eye view produced by the topic modelling (Nylander et al., 2022), all three topics presented in this article have shown some concern with political and social change. However, not surprisingly, the topical area *Citizenship and its learning* exemplifies this thematic concern to the greatest extent drawing on critical and social justice theories. However, even in relation to this topic, as with the other two, the centre of attention has very often been on learners, teachers and practices or modalities for learning - indicating a second thematic concern for discussing who are the learners, what is being learnt, and under what circumstances. Where articles considered contexts of learning, the organisation or institution, or the practices of educators or teachers, were central - rather than the role of regional, national or international organisations in structuring systems, affordances or opportunities. Only a few articles considered system-level issues, mostly those articles focusing on *Citizenship and its learning*.

Participation by whom and in what context was central to the two topics *Learning in, through and for work* and *Widening participation and higher education*. In these topics, many examples of the pedagogical challenges and successes were documented, often through small-scale qualitative studies. New learning sites, including public spaces for informal and non-formal learning, were identified across all three topics, highlighting the changing roles of adult educators. Such concerns echo the themes of the field identified through Nylander et al.'s (2022) topic modelling analysis that showed an increase in attention given to publications with an empirical orientation and a focus on participation, learners and students in higher education, the workplace, and a wide range of educational institutions.

As lifelong learning for social and economic benefits (for the self and beyond) has become a ubiquitous policy framework, each of these three topics engaged with policy critiques. The critiques ranged from questioning the purposes of particular policy practices and reimagining learning for social, civic or collaborative purposes in a variety of cultural contexts, educational and learning settings (higher education, workplaces, or public spaces). Each of these topics has noted that the all-encompassing purview of lifelong learning policies has increased the range and diversity of who is an adult learner and therefore the object of these policies. As a consequence, research recognising this increased diversity of learners has drawn on new perspectives to understand exclusions and inclusions and hierarchies of power, including critical pedagogy, neo-Marxist theories of reproduction and change, Foucauldian post-structuralism, various forms of feminist thinking, socio-cultural situated ideas of learning and non-human understandings of learning. In this context, the concerns of non-traditional students, different sub-populations of learners (by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, prior schooling, work or experience as migrants), their motivations and access to learning, have become central concerns. However, the attention to these categories of difference and inequalities has tended to focus on one or two dimensions of difference, rather than advancing analysis of the interplay between categories of difference, privilege and oppression. Moreover, as policy generation has often placed greater emphasis on 'big data' and quantitative argument, adult education researchers have also turned to recognising the value of policy oriented national and international surveys such as the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences - PIAAC. The topical area *Learning in, through and for work* demonstrated most clearly the growth of research legitimising these forms of data collection and analysis, as compared with policy critiques based on voicing learners and adult educators' calls for democracy, social justice and collaborative or intercultural forms of learning.

Nylander et al. (2022) offer some suggestions (that accord with reflections presented in the introduction to this article) for the shifts in topical area focus over time and the falling away of system level critical research on lifelong education as a focus on qualitative studies of teaching and learning and more quantitative surveying of the practices and participation has increased. The journal's beginnings, steeped in notions of practice and a need for theory development at a time when academic publishing was not tightly aligned to national evaluation systems and funding,

perhaps accounts in part for the diversity of offerings and concerns in relation to the purposes of adult learning, as Nylander et al. (2022) suggest. Yet, within less than a decade after beginning of IJLE, national research evaluation systems were established to justify the distribution of public funds. Particular forms of research were often prioritised for funding, and many adult education researchers turned to small-scale low-cost research, often of their own or other local practice. At the same time, as funding shifts (especially in relation to which educational organisations should provide adult education) the themes of *Learning in, through and for work* and *Widening participation and higher education* have been given a boost compared with *Citizenship and its learning*. This may be because in many Anglophone systems there has been, on the one hand, a shift away from universities providing extension classes or extra-mural programmes, with a focus on humanist adult education to universities' focusing on community engagement or widening participation; and on the other hand, to more work-focused skills development in the vocational and community sectors. Likewise, the growth in the role of national, regional and international agencies undertaking large-scale surveys and making available large data sets for analysis has facilitated more quantitative research. Although there are limitations in exploring how the field is being shaped by a close reading of only three topical areas, looking forward, the review of these three areas does indicate where research is heading. There is growing evidence that the topics have been documenting the following: new practices such as intercultural, intersubjective and transnational learning; building theories of learning in new places and spaces for new and diverse learners; and acknowledging the fluidity of institutions and their boundaries. Moreover, running through the discussions prompted by the close reading of these three topical areas, the paper shows that there are continuing tensions between the different purposes and effects of lifelong education that still need exploring and debating.

If we may import, and perhaps distort, a concept deployed in our field for other purposes, the themes explored in this paper show the bounded nature of scholars' agency (Evans, 2007; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). Learning and work, learning citizenship, and access to higher education, have all been created and reformed by larger forces, yet they have also been shaped and influenced by scholars. The IJLE has attempted, with some constancy, to encourage scholarship in the field that is grounded in a humane moral framework, and that reflects humane – and rational – methods of interpersonal discussion and collective learning. In a world dominated by human beings – yet where humanity is often at a discount – our success has inevitably been qualified. We shall press on regardless.

Note

1. Advisory board members included: Pepka Boyadjieva, Ulrik Brandt, John Field, Vicky Duckworth, Sarah Galloway, Shibao Guo, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, Tim Ireland, Nalita James, Kaela Jubas, George Koulaouzides, Anne Larson, Tonic L. Maruatona, Henning Olesen, Kevin Orr, Shirley Walters, Danny Wildemeersch, Robin Redmon Wright, Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha, Michael Tagoe, and Li Zhen. Editors were: John Holford, Sue Webb, Richard Waller and Marcella Milana.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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