Chapter 2
Part I: Introduction

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The chapters in this section of the book deal with gendered choices in learning. While this is the principal focus, gendered learning is interwoven with the other two themes of the volume, as learning experiences affect work and identities. Drawing on critical analyses of the field, the authors discuss the interaction of learning and gendered pathways, examining how policies and pedagogies frame both women’s and men’s learning. The chapters investigate lifelong learning at various sites, including in the virtual environment. While the data on which the authors draw reflect the diversity of UK society in the 21st century, discussions and analyses are of significance beyond the UK, reinforcing the book’s international relevance. This is further supported, for example, with an account of research that is based on a continental European study (see Chap. 6). All of the chapters in this section draw on empirical research into learning experiences: Chaps. 4, 5 and 6 are based on sizeable research projects with research council, institutional and government funding, and Chap. 3 is a vivid and detailed analysis of learning in the author’s own classroom. The authors include teachers as well as academics; they highlight the problems of gendered choices and advocate ways of overcoming them in lifelong learning.

The writers analyse the ways that current policies enhance or restrict learning, casting doubt on some policies that claim to extend equal opportunities (Thomas 2001). The notion of widening participation that is at the heart of neo-liberal thinking emphasises everyone’s rights to access (Leathwood and Francis 2006). Yet, as all of the authors in this section show, complexity and disjuncture surround such policies in lifelong learning. In promoting the rights of individuals as more significant than valuing shared experience, neo-liberal economics and related educational policies affect learning pathways by stimulating competition, not just among nations in globalised markets (Brine 2006), but also among the individuals and institutions in these markets. The analyses in the chapters that follow illustrate how pathways that emerge from such policies are both gendered and classed, as they derive from imperatives that promote the survival of the fittest (Davies and Saltmarsh 2000).
Sometimes this has the effect of reinforcing existing hierarchies (Chap. 6): At other times, the constraining influence of neo-liberal policies appears to be in tension with contradictory discourses of enablement (Chap. 4).

An important feature of present lifelong learning policies examined in the following chapters is the skills-based approach. Curricula that promote skills and measurable outputs as the prime goals of learning are widespread among western countries and have their roots in the introduction of marketisation in education (Apple 2006). In the discussions that follow, the authors subject this approach to critical scrutiny, demonstrating how the over-concentration on measurable outputs detracts from broader aims and diverts attention from pathways that promote social and relational learning. In the first two chapters, both Ursula Murray and Penny Jane Burke draw attention to the inadequacies of approaches to lifelong learning that fail to take account of complex learning processes to engage situated and embodied learners (Boler 1999). Developing this argument further in Chap. 5, Clem Herman and her colleagues discuss the evaluation of a learning programme that offers a broad developmental base, linked to shared experience and peer support. In this chapter, as in the final chapter of the section by Esther Olivier, learning is conceptualised in relation to critical engagements that draw on life experiences which are shared as well as individual (Merrill 2007). In this way the authors offer an alternative vision to neo-liberal domination of the lifelong learning agenda.

In Chap. 3 Ursula Murray introduces the theme of gendered learning pathways by drawing on qualitative research from her own teaching. She explores the benefits that derive from attention to the learners’ own experience. Against current policies and practices, Murray discusses the advantages of a relational model of learning which she reasserts as a counterbalance to an over-concentration on skills. Murray begins the chapter with a detailed overview of neo-liberal policy in UK public services. She discusses instances where academics and educational institutions are enlisted as market players (Davies 2003), compromising critical distance to the detriment of educational provider and learner. Drawing on ethnographic data from a reflective journal, Murray uses narrative analysis that is nuanced through psychosocial understanding and complexity science (Stacey and Griffin 2005). In data excerpts from her engagement with three groups of learners, including some who are studying for employer-sponsored Foundation degrees, Murray explores the importance of taking learners’ experience seriously and bringing this into dialogue with theory. The author points to some of the problems entailed when learning pathways are dominated by curriculum outcomes that are driven by short-term economic goals: In response to this Murray discusses the benefits that can be gained from a critical and reflexive focus on learning processes.

In Chap. 4, Penny Jane Burke develops further the theme of gendered learning pathways. She examines widening participation frameworks in education policy through a study of learning, aspirations and complex identifications (Hall 1992). Her analyses add to the themes initiated in the previous chapter as she highlights the implications of marketisation for learning choices. Using data from an ESRC (UK Economic and Social Research Council) funded study of learning identities and masculinities, Burke examines gendered influences on goals and decision-making.
among men who are accessing higher education. Her research is based on language analysis, drawing on data from her engagement with policy discourses and with the discursive repertoires of interviewees. Like Murray, Burke contextualises her analysis in a critique of policies that affect lifelong learning in the UK and which are replicated, or have parallels further afield (Allen et al. 2005). Burke locates the needs of the economy and the market as strong imperatives in many lifelong learning policies. The complexity of neo-liberalism’s impact on lifelong learning is captured in Burke’s account of the paradoxes in policy discourses where transformation and social justice are linked to competition. At the same time, her critique underlines the problems entailed when learning that seeks to embrace social justice is aligned with technologies of self-improvement.

Burke finds that gendered identities exert a strong influence in shaping the learning experiences and subsequent ambitions of the men in her sample. Rather than focussing only on individual perspectives in decision-making and the formulation of aspirations, Burke draws on sociological insights to illuminate relational and contextual dimensions of learning. In her analysis, the aspirations of lifelong learners emerge as complex and nuanced, produced through gendered identifications and intricate social negotiations.

While the first two chapters in this part of the book deal with the policy influences of neo-liberalism, the writing of Herman, Hodgson, Kirkup and Whitelegg in Chap. 5 and Olivier in the final chapter, deal with broad cultural factors that affect women’s choices and their lifelong learning (Colley 2006). Chapter 5 furthers the critique of gendered learning choices by describing a possible route through these in a learning programme designed for women. The findings in this chapter draw on the analyses of data from the authors’ action research based in the UK. In an example from teaching and curriculum development, practitioners address the constraining influence of existing power hierarchies in SET (Science Engineering and Technology). They consider the rationale for and the impact of a programme of generic, personal and professional development that offers a broad range of support to women wishing to take up SET careers after career breaks. As the authors explain, women are underrepresented in SET, not just in the UK (Faulkner 2007), but across many countries on an international scale (Faulkner 2004).

On the basis of a critical review of the policy background of SET in the UK (Murphy and Whitelegg 2006), the authors highlight the benefits of certain initiatives, while drawing attention to the detrimental effect of short-term funding. The authors describe the crucial role played by a collection of women academics and activists at one institution who were able to draw on interdisciplinary strengths to access UK and EU funding. They emphasise the innovative nature of the resulting programme, where women’s networking is central to its pedagogy, design and outcomes. The prominence given to reflective activities that draw on the learners’ experience links the pedagogies described in this chapter to those discussed by Murray and Burke.

Despite the achievements of the programme they describe, Herman and colleagues identify continued challenges presented by structural and institutional factors that militate against women pursuing careers in SET. In addition, the authors identify a prevalent male culture in SET workplaces that makes it difficult
for women with appropriate qualifications to develop their careers. In the light of the international dimension of women’s underrepresentation, the authors conclude with a series of recommendations that are relevant to HE institutions in a number of countries. The theme of addressing constraints on women’s learning and participation is continued in the final chapter of this part of the book.

In Chap. 6, Esther Olivier gives an account of her research into gender violence as a barrier to women’s full participation in the academy. The author challenges the stereotypical notion that only certain women are affected by gender violence, while emphasising the scale and international character of this hidden problem in universities. Olivier draws on a review of international literature as well as on her own research data to analyse how the phenomenon crosses boundaries and affects women’s learning and careers (Osborne 1995). Her study data are taken from interviews conducted with representatives at a number of universities, in addition to daily life stories elicited from feminist and student organisations. Using a qualitative methodology, Olivier obtains an institutional view that complements the individual perspectives captured in her data from interviews with those who deal directly with the impact of gender violence. While Olivier’s data gathering is conducted at UK universities, her research originates in Catalunya and is funded by the Catalunyan government, in cooperation with the University of Barcelona. Olivier points out that unequal conceptualisations of gender relationships create the preconditions for violence (Bondurant 2001). It is this in particular that makes the academy susceptible: it is principally male-dominated, with complex hierarchical power relations that affect women’s learning and career choices. By studying gender violence in the academy as a workplace, as well as a site of learning, Olivier brings together the themes of women’s learning and work, preparing the ground for the discussion in the next section of the book.

References


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