

Lifelong Learning: What? Why? How?

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June, 2007

“Lifelong learning” has become a popular topic over the past several years. A Google search of the term “lifelong learning” resulted in 11,000,000 hits. There have been thousands of papers on lifelong learning published in the U.S. in recent years and there are several journals devoted either entirely or in part on lifelong learning. The “University Continuing Education Association” is the major and very active U.S. national association which provides services and resources to university pertaining to their continuing/lifelong learning programs and activities. A number of states in the U.S. have organizations to promote lifelong learning. Many agencies and institutions sponsor centers which deal with lifelong learning. My own university, Western Michigan University, has a unit called the Office of Lifelong Learning and Education which provides individuals pursuing personal and professional goals a wide variety of credit and non-credit educational experiences.

Certainly, lifelong learning is not confined to the United States. Rather, it has become a worldwide issue. In 1990 Japan established the “Promotion of Lifelong Learning Law and a National Learning Council.” In 1996, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) initiated a research and development program which was intended to make lifelong learning a reality for all and in UNESCO’s International Commission on Education for the 21st Century made lifelong learning its core unifying theme.¹ In June of 2006, at a Moscow meeting of education ministers held in conjunction with the Russian presidency of the G8, the ministers issued a communiqué with 18 points, one of which read as follows:

Ministers underlined the need to develop comprehensive systems of lifelong learning, from early childhood through adulthood. They recognized the importance of vocational training for young women and men. Lifelong learning strengthens linkages between learning, enterprise training and the labor market in order to keep every person’s knowledge and skills current.²

Adult education and lifelong learning in Russia has a long and rich history dating from the reforms of Peter the Great, through the Soviet years, to the current era.³ Indeed, this conference on lifelong learning at the Leningrad State University n. a. A. S. Pushkin is a result of the leadership over the past several years of Rector Skvortsov and Professor Lobonov which has benefited colleagues in Russia, elsewhere in Europe, and the U.S. over the past several years.

As the concept of lifelong learning proliferates it is in danger of becoming a cliché. Это легко поддержать словами. Но тяжело поддelt can become something we can all comfortably support by assertions if not by action. Yet, I believe that lifelong learning is a tough issue and provides us with some very difficult challenges. In what follows I will briefly (because of sympathy for my translator!) set forth my thoughts dealing with three fundamental questions: What do we mean by lifelong learning? Why is lifelong learning important – particularly at this moment in time? How can lifelong learning be made a reality and, what are the challenges?

What do we mean by lifelong learning?

The historic naiveté of some who write on lifelong learning is disconcerting. Writing in a prominent British journal one author begins his paper with these words: “Its [lifelong learning] origins have been traced back to the writings of Dewey, Lindeman and Yeaxlee in the early twentieth century. The concept first came into prominence in the 1960s....”⁴ Although lifelong learning has become a particularly popular concept in the last several years, it is as old as human history. Lifelong learning was embodied in the works of the ancient Greeks. Plato and Aristotle described a process of learning for philosophers which extended over a lifetime. The Greek idea of a “paideia” comprised the development of a set of dispositions and capabilities which enabled and motivated the individual to continuous scholarship. Within the context of the Greek philosophers, lifelong learning was reserved for the elite social class and it was not associated with occupation or “making a living” but with the engagement in philosophic speculative inquiry. Plato recommended that adolescents study mathematics as preparation for abstract thinking. He felt the study of philosophy might best begin at about age fifty. Down through the ages, the idea that the person would be self-motivated to seek a life of continuous learning and would be empowered to be his or her own teacher has been a theme among a long line of educational thinkers and reformers.

There is another important aspect to the concept of lifelong learning. In an important and real sense, lifelong learning is a given. Unless the human being is profoundly mentally impaired, learning – if defined as the acquisition of information and/or skills - occurs as a natural human process from birth till death. Historically and at present, people learn things from family members, friends, and other information sources whether they reside on Nevsky Prospekt or the remote village of Khasan. Craftsmen continue to improve their craft through trial and error over their lifetime, women trade recipes, the elderly learn new skills in coping with the consequences of old age, etc.

Even though lifelong learning is often defined as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, whether formal or informal, there is strong bias toward formal education in conversations and program development activities pertaining to lifelong education. We are all products of the educational transformation that occurred worldwide in the nineteenth century which bonded the concept of education with the concept of schooling. If the decontextualizing of learning from life is harmful in primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling, it is even more pernicious in adult life after formal schooling has been accomplished. As I have continued my own lifelong leaning about learning, education, and schooling I have found more and more wisdom in the work of the great and radical thinker Ivan Illich who wrote these words in Deschooling Society:

The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring.”⁵

It is worth mentioning that Illich wrote these words twenty years before the establishment of the World Wide Web. When we really understand lifelong learning as a human process and a human process that is not merely the province of those who hold social status it becomes clear that lifelong learning is much less about degrees, diplomas, certificates and much more about capabilities, competencies, values, and commitments.

Why is lifelong learning important?

The big increase in interest in lifelong learning in the past several years is largely a consequence of the changes in society which have been caused by information technology. Knowledge is being produced at an increasingly rapid rate and technologies become increasingly complex. Using a cell phone is more complicated than using a rotary dial phone. Fixing a 2007 car or a human heart is considerably more complicated today than it was fifty years ago, and the skills that are required by a surgeon or an auto mechanic in 2017 will be quite different than they are in 2007. Thus, the conventional argument for lifelong learning goes like this:

Educators and employers are discovering that the changing demands of today's workplace call for workers who are adaptable to change and know how to enhance their job skills in ways that help them remain current with modern technology. The successful integration of workers into jobs with advanced technologies and processes will. More than ever, be dependent on how quickly workers are able to acquire new skills.⁶

I consider this to be only one leg in the rationale for lifelong learning but, I do not dispute the importance of it. In many instances, employers will provide the training that is required and will demand the employees take the training. However, fewer and fewer people can count on retiring from the firm that gave them their first job. Job mobility and career enhancement are contingent on continuing upgrade of skills. Thus, people involved in work that involves skills need to recognize their future depends on their continuing expansion of skills – even if their employer is not providing training for them.

In capitalist nations, in nations that formerly were communistic, and in nations that are currently communistic, economics is the driving rationale for education at all levels: primary, secondary, tertiary as well as continuing or lifelong education. The same argument is being used in the various nations about global competitiveness with only the names of the competitors shifting. Since I have not joined a monastery and taken a vow of poverty, I too appreciate money. However, I want to comment on two other reasons for lifelong learning (other than economics) which get less attention than they deserve. I realize some may consider these two other legs of a rationale for lifelong learning frivolous. I do not.

The first of these harkens back to the Greeks. Learning enriches human life. To be human is to partake broadly and deeply of the richness of human culture. We graduate from our schools in the U.S. individuals who know how to read but never read a book, who have passed their history tests but have little interest in deepening their knowledge of history, who have taken music appreciation courses but who never will attend a symphonic concert even when such is readily accessible. Sadly, too often schooling is a significant factor in curtailing rather than stimulating the individuals continuing interest in the arts, letters, and sciences of the culture. I do not expect our politicians in the U.S. to be particularly concerned about this but I remember what the pre-eminent American philosopher of education, John Dewey said, "The community should want for each child what the good parent wants for their own children." As a parent I feel it fine if my sons do not share my passion for the music of Verdi, Mahler, and Shostakovich or if they are not as deeply interested in the history of the Weimar Republic, Russia, or 19th century America as

am I, but I do want them to have their own continuing – lifelong - passions for intellectual and cultural growth. Following Dewey's advise, I want that for others too.

The other leg in the rationale for lifelong learning deals with the issue of sustainability in the most profound sense: our ability to sustain life on planet earth. Seven years ago we closed the door on the bloodiest century in the history of humans on earth. Much of that bloodshed occurred in the nation where today we are assembled. The 21st century has begun in a way which would not lull anyone to a false sense that the worst is over. H.G. Wells said that, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." If the second leg of the rational for lifelong learning pertains to the role that lifelong learning plays for the benefit of each individual person, this aspect of the rational pertains to the role of lifelong learning for the human race. The problems of the world are substantial and complex, the lessons of history can easily be misunderstood, and the national and cultural contexts which encapsulate us can all sow the seeds for the worst that human beings can do to one another. I recognize that there is the need for continuous learning in order to compete in, what Thomas Friedman,⁷ calls the "flat world" or a world where ubiquitous information technology has eliminated impediments to global competition. But, it is even more important for continuous learning to occur so we can raise the collective level of intelligence and understanding pertaining to the issues we face as a human race. That is, I believe, our best chance for getting out of the 21st century alive.

How can lifelong learning be made a reality?

It serves no good purpose to understate the challenges that are faced in making lifelong a reality but it is not foolish optimism to recognize that live at a time when the opportunities for lifelong learning are great and growing quickly. In the past several decades there have been developments which have led to incredible advances in devising practical solutions to widespread and effective lifelong learning. The resources which have resulted from the use of information technology – and in particular the Internet - are playing a very important role in expanding opportunities for life long learning. The prevalence and potency of these resources will continue expand. Intelligent agents and intelligent tutoring systems will increasingly provide rich learning opportunities, particularly as the relevant knowledge base on human learning expands and as that knowledge base is used to design learning appliances and applications. The availability of resources will be greatly augmented when machine translation is fully effective. Additionally, and of particular significance, are advances which are occurring in creating new social forms and in particular those which make use of human networks to produce knowledge and information artifacts. Learning communities, blogs, and Wiki applications are early examples of the use of social networking which challenge conventions about who are legitimate knowledge and information workers and how the knowledge they produce can be disseminated.

We can be assured that those who are developing hardware and applications will continue to make progress. The extent to which these new resources will yield the benefits which are needed will be determined by our ability to meet several challenges:

- Access – There are large numbers of people in New York city, Paris, St. Petersburg and other major first world cities who do not have good access to Internet resources. Access falls off sharply among those in rural, and particularly impoverished rural areas, of first world nations and it is obvious that access in third world countries is

small to virtually insignificant. My friend and colleague, Seymour Papert along with Nicolas Negroponte has been involved with the development of the one hundred dollar computer which is targeted for use in third world countries. There is on the market a ninety dollar computer.⁸ There is good reason to believe that the Internet will be as at least as ubiquitous as television worldwide in the next several years.

- Disposition – The fact that there will be greater and greater opportunities for life long learning via the Internet should not lead us to assume that the opportunities will be taken. Laws had to be written in order to compel parents to send their children to free state supported schools. Large number of people prefer to watch inane. television programs even though quality learning opportunities also exist. It is sad but true that often what happens in our schools at all levels kills rather than generates interest which can dispose the individual to engage in continuous learning. I wonder what would happen if we removed the motivation of a diploma for those attending our schools and universities and if their only motivation was their intrinsic interest in the content of the instruction being provided or their recognition of their own personal growth in capabilities and skills which they themselves consider to be valuable. If our students were able to decide whether to stay with us or leave on that basis, I do believe that a significant number of them would depart. If we want what we do in our classrooms to have impact on our students continuing learning, then we must make the very major and even radical changes in the instructional programs of our schools to cultivate rather than exterminate interests.
- Capability - Over the years, many who have thought carefully and well about education have recognized that ultimately each person needs to become their own teacher. The disposition of wanting to learn must be matched by the capability to be able to do so. It cannot be assumed that because a person has been in a school environment that he or she has learned how to learn. Explicit attention to the devolvement of self-directed learning should be incorporated into formal learning programs. The best indicator of success as a teacher is the recognition that he or she is no longer needed by their students. The issue of capability in using learning resources takes on an added element when such pertains to the use of the Internet. The Internet is a huge chest filled with the best and worst which humans can devise. It contains truth and error; the valuable and the worthless. In the U.S., a broad coalition involving both the public and private sector developed a framework called, “21st Century Skills”⁹ which provides a good example of the nature of the capabilities which are required in order for individuals to have the capability to use the vast learning resources available over the Internet in an effective manner.

One final note: While many in universities disparage the use of Internet in distance learning, it is clear that this is ultimately a losing battle. It is ironic that one of my colleagues who teaches a course on the global marketplace argues that distance education courses are not worthy offerings by our university. Universities which fail to see the world of learning as it exists today and which are trapped by their own bureaucracy in responding with flexibility to the needs of learners – and particularly the needs of adult learners – will become increasingly less relevant.⁹

We live at a time when we are confronted by political, economic, and human issues that are as serious as ever faced over the history of human life on our planet. It will only be as a result of the success we have in making learning over the entire lifespan of everyone a reality that we will move forward to a better future. And each of us who have dedicated our lives to education have an important role to play in making that happen. I have always liked the quote of Alan Kay. "The best way to predict the future is to invent it."

References

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