

The Argument for Lifelong Learning for All

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education." - Mark Twain

What do we mean?

Schooling and education are both associated with learning but Mark Twain, for one, clearly differentiated between them. Education in its broadest sense is making sense of knowledge, fitting the pieces together to create some meaningful and, occasionally, practical whole. Education in a much narrower sense is a formalised programme of study; one with aims and measured progress. It is this second kind of education that is more often associated with 'school' and 'school' is often associated with 'learning' in a way that problem-solving in adult daily life is not – or at least, is not so often. This tangle of language means that 'lifelong learning' is sometimes seen as formal system and at other times as an inseparable part of life, something no conscious human being can avoid. This confusion makes it difficult for many to understand the noise currently surrounding lifelong learning in the popular press. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Do we want to do it or do we hope it disappears into some quiet political backwater never to be heard of again?

Reviewing articles on lifelong learning led to a simple classification with two large categories and one much smaller. They were, in order:

1. Lifelong learning is an economic necessity
2. Lifelong learning is good for you
3. Lifelong learning is fun.

Economic necessity

The World Bank¹ and the OECD have both produced several papers to show that the knowledge economy in which people in the developed world now live, is reliant on people with access to information and the ability to adapt and use that information effectively. Raw statistics show the percentile change in requirements for routine cognitive thought fell 8 per cent from 1969 to 1998 and rose about 13.5 per cent for expert thinking over the same period². In other words, simple thinking is no longer enough, you need to be able to put ideas together in new and 'expert' ways. Indeed, after stating that Western countries often compare unfavourably to some South-east Asian countries in educational ambition and generalised attainment, the OECD has stated that countries within its remit face four major challenges: "quantity, quality, equity and ambition in education"³. It is, perhaps, in that last word, ambition, that there is a key to what is perceived to be wrong: ambition implies striving not just to fulfil an externally defined target but to be the best, to be curious and find something new.

Good for you

Articles aimed at those over 50 those who gave up on school or those in some sort of life change frequently try the Mary Poppins approach: a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. The medicine (the learning for which you should enrol) is

¹ See, for example: *Constructing Knowledge Societies: new challenges for tertiary education*, World Bank, ISBN 0-8213-5143-5

² Autor, Levy, and Murnane (2003) "The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: an empirical exploration" *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

³ *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2006* available at www.oecdbookshop.org

sugared with promises of 'keeping your brain active', 'meeting new friends', 'having something to talk about'⁴. Of course, learning can have those benefits and many more besides but to make those the goal rather misses the point and dehumanises the target audience: humans are naturally curious and most will learn things if they are given the opportunity and made to feel welcome. Doing something because it is 'good for you' sets up all sorts of barriers especially if transport or cost or content of the course are less than ideal. However, take those same conditions and present the learning as an opportunity to find out something interesting or useful and people will demand the enrolment forms long before the registration date. Some people require more support than others and the topics that each choose will vary but, whether it is cooking a new dish for less than a dollar or doing the research to spend millions devising sustainable agrarian reform policy for a remote region in Africa or distinguishing between the ways in which famous painters use their brushes, it is all learning and, in its separate ways, interesting – even useful as life would be the poorer without new dishes to try, farms that supply sufficient food without destroying the land, new paintings to view.

Fun

Humans play: it is one of the defining characteristics of our species. Psychologists have long studied the development and use of play in children and the effect not allowing them to experiment/play has on their future actions. As adults, we continue to play and some organisations boast in their recruitment campaigns that their employees work hard and play hard(er) as this extract shows:

If you work hard, keep your activity levels high and hit your targets, you will be rewarded big [...]. A real work hard, play hard culture!

Seen on www.targetjobs.co.uk, job 11758

Executive toys for enlivening a dull office (webcam missile launcher, panic button key for the keyboard, lifetimer,,,) just fly out of the stores⁵. Adults in deeply repetitive jobs with no control over how to organise their time or their workspace easily become depressed and ways have to be found to allow them some autonomy⁶.

Educationalists have long known that mere lectures or reading produce very poor retention-of-knowledge rates (5 and 10 per cent, respectively, according to a study lost in the mists of time but still acknowledged according to the NTLI in Bethel, Maine⁷). People need to 'have a go'. Depending on their learning style⁸, their preference may be to have a go sooner or later than other people but, somewhere in their own personal learning, have a go they will. Most people recognise that doing something in real life is better than a simulation (trying downhill ski-ing on a board attached to a television monitor is not quite the same as falling over in a metre of snow on a mountain) but games created for online learning are becoming ever more sophisticated, sometimes necessary (cleaning up major chemical spills is much better practised in theory) and sometimes such good fun that people play them as games, forgetting any 'learning' connotations. (They do still learn – but that's a by-product.) There are, naturally, those who feel compelled to point out that SecondLife

⁴ See, for example, <http://seniorliving.about.com/od/lifetransitionsaging/a/lifelonglearnin.htm>

⁵ Try iwoot.com (no commission involved!)

⁶ See, for example, "A field study of worker productivity improvements", *Applied Ergonomics*, Volume 26, Issue 1, February 1995, Pages 21-27 Ashraf A. Shikdar and Biman Das

⁷ <http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/polovina/learnpyramid/about.htm> accessed 19/02/08

⁸ See Kolb D, *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, PrenticeHall, 1984 0-13-295261-0

is not 'just a video game on steroids'⁹ but while they can take an analytical approach, others just pick an avatar¹⁰ and join in.

Inclusion

In much of the discussions, lifelong learning seems to be aimed at the young or the career-development-oriented. Occasionally it is touted as a solution, almost a cure, for those made redundant or those who have reached a stage in life where the demands of the job just no longer fit physical ability or family needs. Lifelong learning does, of course, cover these phases in life but, at its best, it is genuinely lifelong: it is inclusive of everyone and all their learning needs from birth to death because learning is part of the human condition. Recently, there was uproar in the UK as the Government sought to deny access to many subsidised courses for those who already had first degrees, this despite the fact that degree choices are often made aged 16 while the State pension age is rising in stages towards the late 60s. Changing skills in the workplace and increased (often non-voluntary) job mobility can combine so that it is the individual, not the present/future employer, who has to organise the necessary learning. There was also fury that people who had finally reached a stage where they could change career or learn for fun would have to pay full tuition fees. The final outcome of this whole argument has not yet been seen but the point was well made by ordinary citizens that learning is part of a civilised society, not just an item under 'Education' in the national accounts. To deny people the right to learn, to be included, is a denial of their humanity.

Supportive frameworks

Inclusion can, of course, be conditional within a learning framework based upon some form of assessment of prior knowledge and skills. Few would expect to be allowed to sign up for a chemistry degree if they had neither a maths nor a science GCSE. Yet it is not impossible. The key is in having 'some form of assessment'. Most courses have an entry requirement clause that says 'or equivalent'. This clause may be well-hidden but it is there to meet the often genuine desire to allow people with non-traditional learning backgrounds to access a structured learning environment because it is recognised that their desire to learn and their non-standard history may bring some very positive new approaches to the subject – as well as the near-inevitable challenges. In the language of education, 'situated cognition' is a valuable asset in learning and as that can be roughly translated as 'experience' it is clear that adults are more likely to have a wide range of valuable, situated cognitions. That background can be incorporated into the individual's own new learning pathway and also shared with fellow students, either informally or formally through mentoring or teaching. In this way, learning communities are created and ideas from one discipline are transferred to another to the benefit of all.

Finally

Learning comes from life, learning is part of life and learning gives life. Enjoy learning.

⁹ <http://www.astd.org/TD/Archives/2008/Feb/Free/Feb2008.htm>

¹⁰ A pictorial screen character that represents 'you' as you wish to appear.