

It pays to be a lifelong learner

By Anne McDonagh

Although you have heard of lifelong learning and may have thought to yourself that you could improve your life by going back to school, you probably thought you couldn't afford it. In fact, the cost of post secondary education is the biggest deterrent to would-be students, and there is no denying that attending a post secondary requires financing. However, there are a number of government loans and grants that you can access. Also colleges and universities have bursaries, grants and scholarships. Corporations, private organizations and community-based agencies often offer special bursaries, scholarships, grants and awards that do not need to be repaid. These can be based upon academic performance, financial need or many other requirements. The college or university you are interested in attending will also offer bursaries and scholarships. If you really want to get more education or training, it's doable. Besides, you can go part time and work part time. Your motivation is the important factor. To find out about government loans and grants go to <http://osap.gov.on.ca/eng>.

If you decide to do an apprenticeship, you will find that you have to work very hard physically, but you get paid a living wage right from the beginning so you don't have to worry about financing your training. For more information go to this website:

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/apprenticeship/skills/officelocations.html

You may want to upgrade your skills before attempting college, university or an apprenticeship. You can achieve that goal quite cheaply. Adult Day Schools are free. All you have to do is manage your living expenses. Similarly GED (General Educational Development), classes which prepare you to take a high school equivalency test are relatively cheap or free depending upon the provider. The test itself costs \$80. Or you can take credit courses at night from the boards of education. Credit courses are free.

Getting back to school at whatever level will put you back on the path of lifelong learning that you began earlier in your life. If you stick it out, you will find it one of the most rewarding journeys of your life and not just in terms of eventually getting better jobs. You will find your world expanding as you encounter new ideas and meet all sorts of people from whom you will learn and who will learn from you.

In my former life, as an adult educator and head of a co-op education program, I met many adults who were taking a stab at improving their lot in life by attending an adult high school. Many of my students had had chaotic home lives as children: there was friction in the home, anxiety about money, frequent moves (and new schools). One woman told me, "I hardly remember school. It was so low on my family's list of priorities. I did not do well, so I just assumed I wasn't very smart."

Another student told me she smoked her first marijuana cigarette with her mother. She then went on to become a serious cocaine and alcohol addict. Her first time round the education system was a blur. Fortunately, she joined a 12-Step program, overcame her addictions, as much as one ever does, got her high school diploma and went on to community college. She wasted about ten years of her life—but not all of it.

Clearly these women were not able to take advantage of education when they were children for reasons beyond their control. However, it was in the best interests of society, as well as in their own, for them to go back to school as adults and make use of their abilities.

Many of my students were internationally-trained professionals who hoped that the co-op experience would solve the 'no Canadian experience' problem. Their needs for education as adults were completely different from the educational needs of the two women mentioned above. However, the school helped them to learn English, adjust to a new country and often to re-invent themselves.

These examples illustrate how taking advantage of learning opportunities can improve people's lives. What is often ignored is that society benefits as well. After all, students like these who become employed become taxpayers—no longer a drain on the public purse. Their lives are enhanced and their children's life chances are improved. They also clearly demonstrate that learning can occur erratically at different times in our lives. Ideally everyone would follow the usual process of elementary, secondary, post secondary education and then from time to time take courses to upgrade skills or for pleasure. But that ideal route is often not the case, and we have to recognize that all kinds of learning should be available to people at every stage of their lives. And we all should be open and ready to learn whenever we can.

Why Lifelong Learning Matters

If we are to flourish both individually and as a society, we will have to make maximum use of everyone's intelligence and talents. The challenges we face as a society are immense: saving the environment, global economic competition, terrorism, and bridging the gap between rich and poor, here and abroad, are some of the most urgent ones. As for individuals, we all know that there are fewer and fewer jobs for people without a high school education and that the better educated you are, the better the job you will get.

We live in a world where change and the exponential generation of information are proceeding at warp speed. Consequently, to succeed we have to be adaptable to change and able to absorb enormous amounts of information. Those who are successful in this fast-moving world are called knowledge workers, and they have the best jobs. They tend to be well-educated but also able to keep up with developments and innovations, because they have the tools for lifelong learning. Those who are not well-educated—high school graduates or those who have not even finished high school—are likely to be left behind, not just because they don't have the formal education or training but because they probably don't have lifelong learning skills.

For lots of reasons, not least of which are the aging population and declining birth rate in Canada, we cannot afford to let anybody's life go to waste. And so we need to examine what lifelong learning really is, what ingredients make a lifelong learner and how we all can develop the necessary skills to participate in a lifelong learning society.

What is Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning in Canada is not a luxury but a necessity claim many pundits from many walks of life. The business community considers lifelong learning to be the upgrading of skills by employees in order to keep pace with the quickly changing world of business and technology. Many people consider it to be simply continuing education programs, that is, courses people take in the evenings or on weekends out of interest or to improve job skills. Still others assume lifelong learning is adult education like the examples at the beginning of this article. Some think it means simply literacy training for adults. Some regard the informal learning that we all do when faced with questions we need answered to be a component of lifelong

learning. A lot of us think of it as learning we do after we have completed our formal education. It is all of these and more. The most comprehensive and useful definition of lifelong learning is, what its name suggests, a process that begins at birth and continues in countless variations throughout our lives.

Learning shouldn't be difficult for us because human beings like to learn. However, our natural instinct to learn is often thwarted by poverty, lack of encouragement, lack of access to good learning environments, learning disabilities, gender and so on. Still we all have on our side our natural desire to learn, and so we do learn in some way or another in spite of barriers. Nevertheless, the fact that some of us face barriers that others don't creates inequities with far-reaching consequences.

Barriers to Lifelong Learning

These inequities begin very early in life. According to many experts in education, if you are born into a stable family where boundaries are observed and discipline is consistent, you are likely to succeed at school. If, in addition, your parents are well-educated or at least value education, chances are you will be a well-educated adult, especially if your family can afford to pay for your post secondary education. Moreover, you are likely to participate in many different kinds of learning after you have finished your formal schooling.

On the other hand, if you are born into a family where the parenting is chaotic or neglectful, you will start school at a disadvantage. Moreover, if your family is not well-educated and does not value education, you will not likely get the education you need to realize your potential or even to live comfortably, and you probably will not go back to school to change your situation.

If you are born into poverty, you may have many barriers to overcome such as malnutrition, crowded living conditions, absent parents working several jobs to survive etc. Your chances of succeeding at school the first time around are compromised, and the likelihood of going back to school as an adult is slight. If you are female and born into a culture where women are not much more than slaves—certainly not worthy of education—it is unlikely that you will be able to overcome the prejudices and aspire to, let alone acquire, an education.

According to most experts, those most in need of learning as adults are the least likely to participate in learning activities.

Societal Supports for Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning requires you to know how to learn. If you have learned how to learn—and if you haven't, the sooner you start the better—the greater are your chances for economic, cultural and social success. While it is important for individuals to have lifelong learning skills, institutional support is necessary for them to achieve these skills. We need early learning opportunities for our young children, a school system that guarantees its graduates will have lifelong learning skills, a second chance that is well-funded for those who missed out the first time around and lots of non-threatening learning programs where adults can go to pursue their interests and gain confidence in their ability to learn without a lot of self-esteem at stake.

According to Clyde Hertzman of McMaster University, writing for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Newsletter, in 2004, "The early years last a lifetime. Although the statement can be dismissed as a truism, it is profoundly significant. There is now an impressive body of evidence from a wide range of sources demonstrating that early child development affects health, well-being and competence across the balance of the life course."

Because of the importance of early childhood learning, we need an adequate number of daycare spaces, early learning centres, parenting groups—organizations that encourage and support parents, provide stimulating, supportive environments for their children, and, at the same time, provide age-appropriate learning activities. All children benefit from early learning opportunities but these opportunities are most important in minimizing the difficulties of those born into disadvantaged families. ('Disadvantaged' does not mean necessarily financially poor. According to Dr. Fraser Mustard in **The Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain**, disadvantage has more to do with poor parenting.)

If we are serious about creating a learning society we will do something about child poverty, which is really family poverty. One of the root causes of poverty in Ontario is the low minimum wage which has a full-time minimum wage earner receiving an annual income of about \$16,000 per year. Even \$10 per hour yields only \$18,000 per year! Education will not be high on the list of a family trying to subsist on these meagre wages

We also need elementary and secondary school systems that provide a solid grounding in basic skills: reading, writing, mathematics and computer literacy. Students who do not have these basic skills are ill-prepared for further learning.

Both systems, but especially the secondary school system, must have embedded in the content they teach the skills for lifelong learning. These skills refer not to the specific information students acquire in school but the skills they develop to learn and to go on learning throughout their lives whether it is in post secondary institutions, apprenticeships or any form of continuing education. Students do not learn these skills by osmosis. They have to be intentionally taught. Below are listed some of these skills:

Skills for Lifelong Learning

<p><u>Research</u> skills require that:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You know how to access information in libraries and on the Internet; • You know how to interpret written information including graphs and charts; • You are able to take notes from research sources in an organized fashion.
<p><u>Critical Thinking</u> skills mean that:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You know how to reason, detect bias, construct logical arguments; • You know how to use abstract ideas to interpret information effectively and come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions; • You know how to think open mindedly about other belief systems, recognizing and assessing their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; • You know how to communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.
<p><u>Technology</u> skills indicate that</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You know the basic operations and concepts of technology • You know how to use technology for producing work and researching information • You know how to apply thinking skills, along with the necessary technology skills, to access online communities and manipulate electronic information

<p><u>Goal setting</u> suggests that</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You set goals to challenge your abilities; • You use goals to motivate yourself to learn; • You use short-term and long-term goals; • You make goals real by writing them down; • You know that goals are SMART, that is, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-limited.
<p><u>Cognitive restructuring</u> means that</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can and do restructure (state in different words) the information that you are trying to understand; • You know that this intellectual restatement makes it more likely that you will retain the information in your working memory; • You know that the information will be transferred effectively from your working memory to your long-term memory; and • You know that you will be able to retrieve it when you need it for subsequent use.
<p><u>Self-evaluation</u> means that</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You monitor your progress toward your goals; • You verify whether you are on track to achieve each goal you have set for yourself; • You know if you are not achieving your goals, that you will use this failure as the foundation for a better plan.
<p><u>Problem-solving</u> suggests that</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You know the problem-solving model of describing the problem, determining the desired outcome, selecting possible solutions, choosing strategies, testing trial solutions, evaluating the outcomes of these trials, and revising steps as necessary • You use this model in your studies and in your day-to-day life.

If we are truly to have a knowledge society, the purpose of lifelong learning must be more than to remedy learning deficits or to gain job skills. Society must foster lifelong learning by making it easy and affordable for adults to learn in order to make up for education they missed out on and to gain new job skills but also to learn in order to be more knowledgeable—knowledge for its own sake.

Time and money

If you have decided to go back to school, make sure you know why you are making this decision. It will not be easy. We have already discussed affordability. There are, however, other challenges as well. If you go on to a post secondary institution, you will find that the culture of college and university is still geared to the recent high school graduate even though about half the students are adults. So be prepared to feel a little like a fish out of water. As well, reading texts, doing research, writing essays will be quite a challenge at first if you have not been practicing these skills recently.

If you attend an adult day school or a GED program to get your high school equivalency before going on to post secondary education, be prepared for discouraging moments because it is a long journey you have set out on.

Whatever the learning environment you enter, set some short term and long term goals so that you won't forget why you are there. Success in making a change like this at whatever level depends upon your motivation, and setting goals can be a powerful motivator. If you don't have lifelong learning skills, the first thing to do is work on gaining them. Now that you know what some of those skills are, you can implement them in your own life—not just when you are taking a course. In fact, it would be a good idea just to practice some of those skills like problem-solving or goal-setting in your every day life. By making the effort to develop those skills you will set yourself up for taking a course with more confidence.

Finding the time to go school and do the homework is always a challenge to adults who lead busy lives. For single parents it is especially difficult. Distance Learning is a good option for busy people, and most of the educational institutions have some Distance Learning courses. Distance Learning allows you to work at home when you have the time, even if it is 10 o'clock at night. Even so good time management will be important to your success.

Remember that learning is as natural to us humans as eating and sleeping, and if you give it half a chance you will find learning one of your most enjoyable and rewarding endeavours.

Here are some institutions that provide various types of learning:

Kind of Learning	Information Sources
For those of you who want to learn for the joy of learning	General Interest courses sponsored by Continuing Education departments of Boards of Education, colleges and universities
For those of you who want a high school diploma	School Board adult day programs and evening courses; GED programs; Independent Learning Centre
For those of you who want GED preparation	The Independent Learning Centre, the Ontario test centre for GED has a list of all organizations in Toronto which offer GED preparation
For those of you who want ESL	All Public and Catholic Boards of Education; some Colleges
For those of you who want Co-op	Some School Boards, both public and Catholic; some College programs; some community-based programs
For those of you who want accreditation in a profession	Community Colleges; Universities. Usually these courses are offered in the evenings and/or on weekends
For those of you who want a certificate in a particular field	Community Colleges; Universities; some community-based programs; private career colleges
For those of you who want a college diploma	Seneca College, Humber College, Centennial College, George Brown College. You can attend part time or full time.
For those of you who want a university degree	University of Toronto; York University; Ryerson University; Transition year and bridging programs are offered to people who need to gain confidence and review skills necessary for success in university.
For those of you who want an apprenticeship	Government Apprenticeship Offices; community colleges, unions

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