

Adult Learning : Implications for Lifelong Learning

Address to the State Library of Victoria by Francesca Beddie, Executive Director, ALA, 30 October 2002

I would like to congratulate the State Library of Victoria on organising this morning's discussion – which seeks to make lifelong learning more than just one of those hard-to-disagree-with slogans into an explicit policy and a call to action. For lifelong learning is not something confined to individuals –institutions too need to be explicit in their recognition of the centrality of learning—not just training—for their well being.

Secondly, let me introduce my organisation, Adult Learning Australia. The Association brings together a diverse group of individuals and organisations working in adult and community education throughout Australia. It represents the interests of these practitioners at the national level. We are funded by member contributions and also a generous grant from the Australian National Training Authority.

Our mission is to promote and foster learning. We strive to make a well-researched contribution to the debates on issues of adult education and training, as well on lifelong learning policies—of which there are currently too few. We also aim to be at the forefront of innovative learning methodologies.

What do we mean by lifelong learning? This is the question I will explore this morning because it is the topic of the day and because it is a question which as executive director of Adult Learning Australia I am always trying to answer in way that spurs people to go beyond concurring with a good idea to action. There are many definitions of learning. One that I think works was coined by the Campaign for Learning, a British charity with the specific purpose of promoting learning:

Lifelong learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve an increase in knowledge or understanding, a deepening of values or the capacity to reflect. Effective learning will lead to change, development and a desire to learn more.

Campaign for Learning, United Kingdom

This definition fits with our goal at ALA to harness learning as an agent of positive social change and as what a colleague of mine at the University of Technology in Sydney refers to as the fifth pillar of learning.

As you will have gathered from our name we are concerned primarily with adult learning. This causes me occasional difficulty as some members (or otherwise potential members) would prefer us to the Association for Lifelong Learning. I have no dispute with their argument that learning starts at birth—if not already in the womb—and that we should not ignore the crucial learning that occurs in the infant years and during childhood. We don't. But our particular focus is on the parents and other adults who so influence the young. And certainly more of our attention is directed at those adults for

whom that influence was a negative one and who, as a result, have been turned off learning, as they see it, for life. To have lost the love of learning or even the ability to learn to learn is a terrible thing. It can, in fact almost certainly will, have a negative impact on a person's happiness, on their financial wellbeing, on their health; as well quite possibly on their children, and more broadly on the society, particularly one trying to gear up for the information age.

And while there are certainly differences in the pedagogy of children and adults, teachers, trainers, learning providers do recognise that the principles overlap. This is not a new realisation. For example, Maybanke Anderson, one of the great advocates for lifelong learning in early 20th century Australia argued something that still resonates today, that

the secret of all reform must be sought in education ... you must begin with the heart and mind, because goodness that is forced, and has no root in character will not withstand temptation. Education must not be the three Rs, but the three Hs – Heart, and Hand, and Head.

Maybanke was speaking of children. Yet, here I see some firm adult learning principles which suggest that adult learn best when:

- their prior learning is appreciated
- the subject matter is relevant to their needs
- the learning environment encourages dialogue and interaction
- mistakes are seen as valuable opportunities to learn

The advent of the information age has brought lifelong learning back into vogue—for some of course it was never out of fashion and certainly it is no modern idea. Think back to Socrates whose insistence that learners find their own answers and never stop questioning is the essence of current thinking about lifelong learning.

I want now to concentrate on the adult end of lifelong learning, where so much learning takes place experientially and outside the formal institutions of education and training, in the home, at work, in the zoo. And of course in the State Library of Victoria which, I think I am correct in saying, attracts a majority of adult rather than younger users.

So what is adult learning? Finding the right definition is a challenge for our Association. Does it represent all adult learners in Australia, potentially around 80 percent of the adult population? Or the 1.3 million Australians who take a course in one of the institutions branded, in some States, ACE (adult community education). Where do we fit in relation to the university and TAFE sectors? What real learning value do classes in recreational subjects such as wine appreciation or Italian for travellers offer?

It is true that much of the structured adult education is non-compulsory or unaccredited. Though for some it is still crucial to survival, for example for refugees undertaking English classes, widowers learning basic cooking skills, or unemployed people doing a course in IT.

Moreover, the barriers between informal learning and formal education and training, between various sectors such as 'ACE' and 'VET' (that is Vocational and Educational Training) and work place training are becoming fluid. There is now a high demand for just-in-time classes and bite size courses (that's bite as in digestible not a computer byte) to fit into busy schedules and to respond to the trend of the day. The flexibility of more informal learning environments can often better meet these demands. I know for example of a provider near the Blue Mountains who conducts courses from midnight on at the Jenolan Caves Guest House, this being the most convenient time for some staff to study.

More informal learning environments can also cater better to those who are also having to overcome barriers to their learning, for example poor literacy and numeracy (you do know that 45% of Australians have inadequate literacy and numeracy skills to deal in a sophisticated society?) or lack of self esteem or fear of exams.

So, if informal learning is good, does that mean that watching the Simpsons or South Park should be recognised as a learning activity? For certainly it can give plenty of insights and tips on dealing with life. Is that learning?

Another earlier thinker about education, the American John Dewey, can give us the answer to this. (I do not know if there is any connection between John and Melvil.) In *Democracy and Education*, written in 1916, John Dewey said:

methods which are permanently successful in formal education ..
give the student something to do, not something to learn, and that
doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking.

So perhaps, for some, who are prepared to make TV viewing a conscious task of absorbing information, thinking about it and translating it into action, the evening in front of the box can be a fruitful learning experience. More importantly, it might also be fun, a message we must keep trying to get across to the non-learner.

Dewey did not have computers to help him introduce interactivity into learning. Now we have a powerful tool to do this—although there are new challenges to be faced with on-line learning, for example that the student's interaction with the keyboard and screen becomes an activity in itself — even a distraction from learning — rather than an opportunity to explore information and acquire knowledge. And remember learning is a human instinct and one that for many is a social activity, in which the learner needs contact with real people as part of the process of exploration and reflection that is learning.

This exploration of the nature of learning has brought us, naturally enough, to the modern library, a building these days characterised by a bank of computers but also a place for social interaction; a place for formal research and casual enquiry, nearly always a place for exploration, often into unanticipated realms. A hub of learning which is central not only to the knowledge economy but also to building a learning community, something Shanti will be exploring further in a few minutes.

Earlier I mentioned the challenges for ALA in deciding who it represents. Clearly the field of adult learning is incredibly broad and embraces a great diversity of players. So

how do we narrow things down to make us effective? For me the answer is straightforward. We need to concentrate on how we can increase participation in learning among those adults who currently are turned off the idea of any educational pursuit or who have difficulties gaining access. These might be a sixteen-year old who finds the school system stifling or an elderly person confined to a nursing home who does not find a game like bingo sufficient stimulus for the mind. Or they may be a much more mainstream group—those of us who are bombarded by information every day in the form of a TV advertisements or newspaper headlines or a letter to shareholders but may not be properly equipped to absorb and analyse all the messages they are being sent.

And concentrating on these people leads to the logical conclusion that we need to work together with libraries. Because it's quite possible that all these adults will find the library a useful place to resume their learning. For the person in the nursing home this might require an outreach program, for the youth a new way of presenting the collection which he or she would find attractive, for the other group just a reminder that the resources of a library might help them make sense of the information they receive.

The State Library of Victoria's strategic and business plans recognise that the library is well-placed to offer encouragement to adults taking their first step back into learning. I believe it can do so in a way that brings generations together, stimulating lifewide as well as lifelong learning.

I admire its commitment to promote information literacy as a tool which allows 'the citizen to reflect and develop his or her own approach to information—and not just be a passive receiver of information.'

I hope for the staff of the library this task will bring some personal reward when you share in the learner's moments of exhilaration as the pieces of a learning puzzle fall into place. More difficult to appreciate perhaps is your contribution to building our country's social capital. I adopt the language of economists for it is common these days to hear the materialist argument for lifelong learning. That learning is a driver of the knowledge economy goes almost without saying, but we must not let this argument overshadow the other values of learning—as a cultural good, as a civilising factor, and as a source of individual and collective happiness as well as jobs.