

LIFELONG LEARNING: A NECESSITY

For the first twenty-two years or so of our lives, our main “job” is learning. The bulk of our time is spent in classrooms acquiring new knowledge. And then, once we graduate, we feel like the education phase of our lives is done and now it’s time to go out into the world. Have you ever thought about how odd that idea is? That only a quarter of our lives should be devoted to learning, and then we should simply rest on our laurels for the remaining three-quarters of it? It’s an erroneous idea – but one many have absorbed, at least subconsciously. But school need not be your exclusive provider of learning. Just because you’ve finished your formal education, doesn’t mean that your education is over!

Lifelong learning is the "ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated" pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. Therefore, it not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, but also self-sustainability, rather than competitiveness and employability. The term recognizes that learning is not confined to childhood or the classroom but takes place throughout life and in a range of situations. During the last fifty years, constant scientific and technological innovation and change has had a profound effect on learning needs and styles. Learning can no longer be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired (the workplace). Instead, learning can be seen as something that takes place on an on-going basis from our daily interactions with others and with the world around us.

Lifelong learning is one of the most effective ways to deal with change, and change is constant - change in our personal lives, change in our work lives, change in our local communities, governance, associations and organizations. The change in the iPhone alone has required constant learning and re-learning by customers. How much more important is learning that is geared towards serious enrichment or career-advancing pursuits?

This, continuous change requires continuous learning. Unfortunately, there exist in society many adults unable or unwilling to change, to learn, or to manage their own lives satisfactorily, adults who frequently are led to believe that a better life awaits if only more and more of the material things produced can be obtained.

Immense inadequacies exist in formal schooling programs throughout the United States and other countries. Some have suggested that normal schooling efforts and patterns are so designed that learners- especially the poor, the disadvantaged, and the ethnic minority- are inadequately prepared to cope with most of the main societal problems. The results are dysfunctionally schooled individuals who rely on further institutionalized education for problem

solving rather than self-motivated learners who know how to avail themselves of a variety of resources, both personal and external, to cope with various problems.

Autodidacticism (also autodidactism) or self-education is self-directed learning that is related to but different from informal learning. In a sense, autodidacticism is "learning on your own" or "by yourself", and an autodidact is a self-teacher. Autodidacticism is a contemplative, absorptive procession. Some autodidacts spend a great deal of time reviewing the resources of libraries and educational websites. One may become an autodidact at nearly any point in one's life. While some may have been informed in a conventional manner in a particular field, they may choose to inform themselves in other, often unrelated areas. Many notable contributions have been made by autodidacts, including Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison, Jane Austen, Bill Gates, Estee Lauder and Doris Lessing, the Nobel Prize winning author who ended formal education as a thirteen-year-old.

There are several established contexts for lifelong learning beyond traditional "brick and mortar" schooling: Home schooling involves learning to learn or the development of informal learning patterns. Adult education or the acquisition of formal qualifications or work and leisure skills later in life. Continuing education which often describes extension or not-for-credit courses offered by higher education institution. Personal learning environments or self-directed learning using a range of sources and tools including online resources. Knowledge work which includes professional development and on-the-job training. On the job training involves a worker learning how to perform a task by actually doing it, while receiving guidance from an experienced coworker, supervisor or manager. Jobs that don't require a large amount of preexisting knowledge may not require any instruction aside from on the job training. This method can be advantageous because it allows a worker to learn by performing the actual tasks that his job entails, meaning the worker is productive while he's training. An inexperienced employee may, however, produce poor quality work while going through on the job training.

E-learning is available at most colleges and universities or to individuals learning independently. There are even online courses being offered for free by many institutions, including Ivy League universities like Harvard and Yale. One new (2008 and beyond) expression of lifelong learning is the Massive Open Online Course (a MOOC), in which a teacher or team offers a syllabus and some direction for the participation of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of learners. Most MOOCs do not offer typical "credit" for courses taken, which is why they are interesting and useful examples of lifelong learning.

There are many reasons to continue your education outside of school. For one things, you'll earn more. Fifty or sixty years ago, you could finish college and you'd have all the education you needed for the rest of your career. You don't have that luxury in today's job market. Skills that were cutting edge five years ago are likely out of date, and the jobs that we will perform in the

next decade or two probably don't even exist yet. If you want to stay competitive in today's job market and potentially earn more money, you need to become an autodidact. Not only can becoming a lifelong learner help you earn more money in traditional employment, autodidacticism can be the gateway to self-employment and starting your own business.

You'll be more interesting and charismatic. Those who met Theodore Roosevelt were always greatly impressed with his ability to hold a conversation with anyone regarding any subject imaginable. Scientists were blown away with Roosevelt's knowledge of complex theories, socialites were smitten with his witty insights about the latest piece by Oscar Wilde, and cowboys out West respected the "Eastern Dude's" understanding of desert wildlife. How did Theodore Roosevelt become such a charismatic, conversational dynamo? Theodore Roosevelt was probably the most well-read president, and perhaps one of the most well-read men in all of history. He would read a book before breakfast every day, and depending on his schedule, another two or three in the evening (he was a speed reader extraordinaire). If he didn't have any official business in the evening, he would read two or three more books, plus any magazines and newspapers that caught his fancy. By his own estimates, TR read tens of thousands of books during his lifetime, including hundreds in foreign languages. As a result, he could connect with anyone, from any walk of life, on something that truly interested the other person.

You'll be a better leader. Being able to connect with others doesn't just make you more interesting. It also makes you much more influential. The greater your knowledge base, the more you can meet people where they are, and the greater the stockpile of solutions you have at your disposal to tackle problems and overcome challenges.

You'll be independent and handy. A diverse range of skills, when something broke or he needed something done, he could do it himself. He didn't have to call and pay an expert to do it for him. If he didn't know how to do it, he went to the library, got some books on the subject, and figured it out.

Lifelong learning keeps your brain healthy. Henry Ford said, "Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young." Nearly 100 years later science has validated this. Education seems to be an elixir that can bring us a healthy body and mind throughout adulthood and even a longer life. Research has shown that the more education an elderly person has – whether obtained formally or informally – the better they performed on cognitive tests than other elderly folks who had less education.

Learning new things can also help stave off old-age ailments like dementia and Alzheimer's. One study has shown that older folks who stay cognitively active and curious about the world around them are 2.6 times less likely to develop dementia and Alzheimer's than those who let their minds lie fallow.

You'll feel more satisfied with life. We need three things to feel motivated about, and satisfied with, our life: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Becoming a lifelong learner fulfills all three of these psychological needs.

When you're an autodidact *you* – not your parents, not your professor, not your boss — get to decide what you're going to learn about. Instead of being a passive consumer of knowledge, you're actively choosing what you're learning. In other words, you're *autonomous*. As you learn new skills, you'll enjoy the positive feeling that comes with *mastery*. And you'll find yourself with a renewed sense of *purpose* in life as you set goals for your self-education.

The satisfaction that comes with lifelong learning doesn't stop there. The more you know about the world, the deeper you can plunge into it, and the more levels of it you can experience. Whether you're traveling, conversating, visiting a museum, watching a movie, or reading a book, your library of knowledge helps you make connections that you would never have otherwise perceived. The more you learn, the more you realize how many references and meanings you've missed because the author/speaker simply took that background knowledge, that fluency in cultural literacy, for granted.

The economic impact of educational institutions at all levels will continue to be significant into the future as formal courses of study continue and interest-based subjects are pursued. The institutions produce educated citizens who buy goods and services in the community and the education facilities and personnel generate economic activity during the operations and institutional activities. Similar to health facilities, educational institutions are among the top employers in many cities and towns of the world. Whether brick-and-mortar institutions or on-line schools, there is a great economic impact worldwide from learning, including lifelong learning, for all age groups. The lifelong learners, including persons with academic or professional credentials, tend to find higher-paying occupations, leaving monetary, cultural, and entrepreneurial impressions on communities.

Lifelong learning in all its formats features many benefits that accrue to the individual and our communities. Lifelong learners are happier, healthier and live longer. Those who continue with formal education have a significant financial advantage over the course of a lifetime. And a well-educated citizenry makes for a better society for all of us. Why lifelong learning? Simply stated, because it is good for your health and good for everyone around you.