

# CIEA 2006

## **Lifelong learning means effective and sustainable learning**

Reasons, ideas, concrete measures

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# **Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Action**

## **The Nature of Learning**

At a time when so much stress is placed on the economic benefits of formal education we tend to forget that learning is an entirely natural process. We begin to learn even before we are born, and indeed our very survival, as individuals and as a species, depends on our curiosity, our desire to explore things around us, and our ability to grasp new ideas and learn new skills.

All animals learn, but humans are especially good at it. Each of us not only learns what we need to survive and prosper, but we also are able to construct new knowledge and, through sophisticated cultural mechanisms, to pass on to others the accumulated wisdom of previous generations. And unlike other animal species, we structure and organise learning with the help of teachers, schools, and educational bureaucracies.

This reminds us that learning is primarily a social activity. Our first major learning achievements – walking and talking – are impossible without the stimulation and encouragement of parents or other adult carers. And almost all subsequent learning depends on interaction with others, either directly or indirectly (e.g. through books or other media).

Most of us encounter formal education by the time we are five, and it is at this point that the educational system achieves its greatest success – teaching us to read and write. This remarkable accomplishment almost always requires the intervention of a professional teacher using a formal system of instruction, and forms the basis for a good deal of our subsequent learning. Paradoxically, the teachers who perform this feat have the least training, remuneration, and prestige of all professional educators.

## **The Limits of Formal Education**

Almost all nations make substantial investments in education, for both social and economic reasons. In North America, Europe, and Australasia, for most young people formal schooling begins at age four and continues until a student's mid-twenties. Involvement in higher education has been widely asserted to be a driver of economic growth, even though such claims have not been without their critics. In the developing world, although many children are lucky to complete even primary education, there is also a push to create selective and elitist higher education institutions based on Western models.

One problem, however, with reliance on formal education involves a question of sustainability – in particular, the lack of transfer of knowledge and skills learned in school to situations in the outside world of family, community, and work. While it is easy to see how such basic skills as reading and writing can be applied in a wide range of contexts, as education becomes more specialised it transfers less readily to new situations. Contemporary higher education in particular is hugely specialised, yet only a small minority of graduates enter careers where their specialised knowledge and skills can be used directly. The problem is further compounded by the rapidly changing nature of professional knowledge and practice, which makes a good deal of what is learned in formal education rapidly redundant or obsolete. Hence in a swiftly changing world, the idea that “more education is better” seems a dubious prescription for fostering the flexible learning skills needed to tackle a wide range of new, unforeseen, and increasingly complex problems.

### **Lifelong and Life-Wide Learning**

The underlying precept of lifelong learning is that learning is too important to be left to schools and universities, and that the responsibility for learning *throughout* life and *from* life lies with individuals. In this sense lifelong learning is sustainable learning – in that it relies on self-directed individual initiatives rather than handing down of knowledge from experts or a central authority.

The term lifelong learning was first used 30 years ago by Edgar Faure in his seminal work, *Learning to be*, and adopted by Unesco as a blueprint for universal education. The concept was intended to embody the need for democracy, equal opportunity, and individual self-fulfilment, which would only be possible if the tools for learning were available to all, and not restricted to a privileged elite. Not only should learning be lifelong, it should also be “life-wide”: meaning that learning cannot be confined to formal educational institutions, but rather is seen to take place in a wide variety of settings – including the workplace and in social and recreational contexts.

With my colleague Arthur Cropley I have described the characteristics of a lifelong learner as someone who is strongly aware of the relationship between learning and real life, recognizes the need for lifelong learning and is highly motivated to engage in the process, and has the necessary confidence and learning skills. These skills include the following dimensions.

#### ***Lifelong learning:***

- People plan and monitor their own learning;
- Learners engage in self-evaluation and reflection;
- Assessment focuses on feedback for change and improvement.

**Life-wide learning:**

- Learning is active, not passive;
- Learning occurs in both formal and informal settings;
- People learn with and from peers;
- Learners can locate and evaluate information from a wide range of sources;
- Learners integrate ideas from different fields;
- People use different learning strategies as needed and appropriate;
- Learning tackles real-world problems;
- Learning stresses process as well as content.

## **Making Learning More Sustainable**

How do individuals become lifelong and life-wide learners? At the outset is important to recognise that all learning is self-directed -- in the sense that no-one can learn on behalf of another – but this is not to say that teachers and educators do not play an important role. That role, however, might be most effective if teachers focussed less on transmission of content expertise and more on facilitating the *process* of learning, in particular the skill of “learning how to learn”. In other words, the pre-eminent task for teachers is to equip students with the generic ability to guide their own learning throughout their lives and in the wide variety of situations they will encounter after leaving formal education.

What is that teachers and educators can do to encourage lifelong and sustainable learning? Here is list of suggestions, informed by a substantial body of empirical research on factors that promote effective learning.

- Teaching methods should stress **student activity and task performance** rather than just acquisition of facts (because learning is largely a matter of doing things, not memorising information);
- There should be opportunities for **meaningful personal interaction between students and teachers** (because teachers often play an important guiding, validating, and inspirational role in motivating students, modelling good learning, and helping students develop essential learning skills and make key life choices);
- There should be opportunities for **collaborative team learning** (because learning in real life nearly always involves working with other people, either directly or indirectly);
- Methods of **assessment need to be more authentic** (involving task performance in naturalistic situations), provide **constructive feedback** that can lead to change and improvement, and include elements of **peer and self-assessment** (because most life situations do not involve sudden, one-time validation of success by an external authority, but rather require people to

assess their own effectiveness and that of their colleagues, and then consider how improvements might be made in the future);

- Learning processes should be made more explicit, and students encouraged to **reflect on the way they learn** (because although experience can be a great teacher, this only happens when people consider their actions, including their learning strategies, and make appropriate changes based on those reflections);
- Learning tasks should encourage **integration of information and skills** from different fields (because most problems in the real world are multi-faceted and are rarely amenable to solutions that are confined to a particular discipline or single area of expertise);
- Teaching should recognise **individual differences** among learners (because not all learners learn in the same way, and because people can learn from other people's approaches to learning tasks);
- More work is not always better -- learning **tasks should be challenging but achievable** for the learners involved (because tasks that are too simple fail to motivate learning, and too great a burden of work tends to encourage superficial learning);
- **Control of educational goals and decisions needs to be shared** between teacher and students, including decisions about learning content, methods, and approaches to assessment (because if students are to take responsibility for their own learning, they have to be given the power to do so, as well as to live with the consequences).

Good teachers know and use these strategies, especially in extension education outside formal educational settings. But since as teachers we often feel we have studied long and must know more than our students, there is always a danger of recidivism to traditional didactic instruction that privileges the authority of the expert. However, since lifelong learning cannot mean possibly lifelong *schooling*, for learning to be truly sustainable it is essential we let go of our authority and empower students to take on the responsibility for their own learning.

## When did you last embark on a systematic learning task or project?

- What was it you set out to learn, and why?
- What learning methods did you use?
- Was your learning successful? How do you know, what evidence do you have?
- What obstacles did you encounter, and how did you try to overcome them?

## Lifelong learning

- Context
  - change and complexity
  - democracy and autonomy
  - diversity
- Faure's blueprint for education
- Nyerere: lifelong learning for rural development through self-reliance and liberation
  - informal education vs. elitism
  - collaborative
  - community-based, work-based
- European year of lifelong learning, 1996
- improving knowledge, skills, competence
- Intentional, lifelong, life-wide
- Need for "anticipatory learning" and ingenuity

## **New and Old Ways of Thinking (MacBeath)**

### **OLD**

- We know all there is about learning
- Intelligence is a unitary concept
- Intelligence is fixed at birth
- Intelligence is individual
- Learning takes place in schools and classrooms
- Learning is logical and sequential

### **NEW**

- We still have much to learn about learning
- Intelligence takes multiple forms
- Intelligence is created and recreated throughout life
- Intelligence resides both within and between people
- Little of what we learn takes place in school
- Learning is episodic

## Dimensions of lifelong learning

### Lifelong learning

- People *plan and monitor* their own learning
- People engage in *self-evaluation and reflection*
- Assessment focuses on *change and improvement*

### Life-wide learning

- Learning is *active*, not passive
- Learning occurs in *formal and informal* settings
- People learn with and from *peers*
- Learners can *locate and evaluate information* from a wide range of sources
- Learners *integrate* ideas from different fields
- People use *different learning strategies* as needed
- Learning tackles *real-world problems*
- Learning stresses *process as well as content*

## Candy and Crebert on lifelong learning

- Inquiring mind, love of learning, curiosity, critical spirit
- “Helicopter” vision, sense of the interconnectedness of different fields
- Information literacy: skill in locating, retrieving, decoding, evaluating, managing and using different sources
- “Personal urgency” deriving from a favourable self-concept, self-organising skills, and a positive attitude to learning
- “Deep” learning that can be transferred to different contexts

## **Lifelong learning skills**

- Goal setting
- Locating information
- Self direction and self evaluation
- Adaptable learning strategies (“learning to learn”)
- Integration
- “Helicopter vision”
- Application of knowledge and skills
  - critical thinking, analysis, synthesis
  - deep learning

## **Encouraging sustainable learning: what teachers and educators can do**

- Base learning on meaningful tasks, not memorisation of facts
- Provide for student-teacher interaction
- Encourage team learning and student interaction
- Use authentic assessment, constructive feedback and peer, self-evaluation
- Make learning processes explicit and encourage reflection
- Stress integration of ideas from different fields
- Recognise individual differences between learners
- Set tasks that are challenging but achievable
- Share control of educational goals and decisions
- Because doing is more effective than just than listening
- Teachers serve as role models, guides, motivators of learning
- Because of importance of team skills in real life

- Because self- and peer assessment is an important life skill
- Because we need to learn different learning strategies
- Because learning rarely comes in neat packages
- Because we can benefit from different learning approaches
- To ensure motivation yet avoid superficial learning
- To ensure students take control of their own learning

## Thinking back over the whole seminar . . .

- What was the main insight you have gained (or principle you have learned) about *sustainable learning*?
- ...and about learning for *sustainable action*?
- What ideas for changing practice will you take back and try to apply in your ongoing work as a teacher or educator?

## Christopher Knapper

Christopher Knapper is an international consultant on educational development. He is currently Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for Learning, Oxford University and Professor of Emeritus of Psychology at Queen's University, Canada. He has been a professional academic developer for 30 years, and founded two of Canada's major instructional development centres, the first at the University of Waterloo in 1977, and later at Queen's University. He also helped to found Canada's national organisation for educational development, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), of which he served as first president from 1984-88. In 2002 STLHE created the "Christopher Knapper Lifetime Achievement Award" in his name. He was also part of the group that established the International Consortium for Educational Development in 1992, and was a founding editor of the *International Journal for Academic Development*, published by Taylor and Francis.

Prof. Knapper has written many books, book chapters, and scholarly articles, with a special focus on teaching and learning in higher education. His book *Lifelong learning in higher education* (London: Kogan Page, 2000), now in its third edition, was recently translated into Chinese. Other recent books include *Fresh approaches to teaching evaluation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), and *Using consultants to improve teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). He is also in great demand as a workshop presenter, and has presented many hundreds of seminars and workshops on teaching and learning all over the world, including North America, Europe, Asia, Australasia, and Africa.

He is the recipient of many awards, including the Fellowship of the British Psychological Society (1975), the STLHE 3M Teaching Fellowship (2002), and the McKeachie Career Achievement Award of the American Educational Research Association (2004). In 1999 the Queen's University Alma Mater Society established the "Christopher Knapper Award for Excellence in Teaching Assistance". Prof. Knapper is listed in many national and international reference books, including *Who's Who in Canada*.