A Holistic View of Life, Work and Self  
The Challenge of Implementing Lifelong Learning in Everyday Life  

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Lifelong learning has become the catchphrase for the new millennium. Authors abound stating that our survival depends on the lifelong learning of the earth’s citizens. Indeed, it seems clear that we need to think critically, incorporate new ideas, have open minds, welcome different perspectives, and seek out learning opportunities. It is equally important to take action as a result of our learnings in order to truly make a difference and implement our life’s work.

Longworth & Davies (1996) discuss the importance of supporting lifelong learning. They state that lifelong learning is “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments” (p. 22, emphasis in the original). This definition encompasses the instrumental, social and cultural aspects inherent in the field of adult education. Basic skills and knowledge must be complimented with understanding and creativity in order to support the development of the potential that lies within us all.

Even with a working definition of lifelong learning, putting the theory into practice is a tremendous task. The average adult works full time and raises a family; lifelong learning may sound like a wonderful concept, but how can it be translated into a reachable goal? In our society we seem pulled in so many directions with little time or money left to invest in our own learning. Gorz (1989) discusses the concept of disposable time, and that the lives of workers today are “determined by the rhythm of work and for whom free time is hardly more than time for ‘reproduction’ of their labour power, for recuperation and for entertainment…” (p. 97). Is there a purpose to working, resting, sleeping and working in an unending cycle if work and life do not fulfil us?

If we can become more aware of ourselves, our wants, needs, interests, strengths and experiences, we can find our passion and our purpose, and become motivated to work towards the fulfilment of our goals and the development of our potential. Only then can we apply what we have learned in order to change the infrastructures and beliefs that have helped to create the situations of the disenfranchised, the unemployed, and the impoverished. Moreover, those who have been historically placed at a disadvantage in our society will be able to use lifelong learning to take control over their lives, making them more able to empower themselves to change the way they are acted upon by the world. We must therefore recognize the importance of emotion, explore the role of the self, and examine the notion of learning as our life’s work.

The Importance of Emotion

The role of emotion is vital in our approach to learning and work, but it is often shunted aside. Rationality, reason and science are embraced, while feelings and intuition are ignored. This is ironic, considering the fact that recent research on emotional intelligence states that our
emotions are given neurological prominence when decisions are crucial for a biological reason. In other words, emotion takes over when rationality cannot be trusted to make the right decision. It is worthwhile to quote Daniel Goleman (1994) here at length.

Our deepest feelings, our passions and longings, are essential guides, and our species owes much of its existence to their power in human affairs...Our emotions, [sociobiologists say] guide us in facing predicaments and tasks too important to leave to intellect alone – danger, painful loss, persisting toward a goal despite frustrations, bonding with a mate, building a family...A view of human nature that ignores the power of human emotions is sadly shortsighted...As we all know from experience, when it comes to shaping our decisions and our actions, feeling counts every bit as much – and often more – than thought. We have gone too far in emphasizing the value and import of the purely rational...in human life (p. 4).

If emotion is discounted, then so is the essence of what makes us unique. If reason rules our lives, and emotion is understood to be inappropriate in work and learning, then we are losing key parts of ourselves that could be used to our benefit and that of society.

The Role of the Self

This disconnection between work and family, the professional and personal, emotion and reason, continually pulls our souls apart. When we lose ourselves in this way, we become automatons working for the machine of productivity. If we cannot accept our whole selves – our passion, our emotions, our intelligence and our creativity, then our lives lose purpose, leaving us unwilling and unmotivated to learn. “Collectively and individually, what is our purpose? What values should we uphold? How should we organise and live our lives? We need to engage in critical discourse and self-reflection. We need to break free from the power relations that inform our knowledge and define our self-interest” (Christensen Hughes, 1999, p.143).

Without considering the whole person, uncovering our full potential, and engaging the minds and emotions of our entire communities, we will not find workable, lasting methods to deal with societal challenges. These challenges range from poverty, crime, abuse and narrow-mindedness to violence, racism, genocide and war. If we cannot accept ourselves at an individual level, than we cannot make positive contributions to our societies, at home and abroad. And without society’s acceptance, we are likely to feel powerless to make changes.

Therefore, we must make changes at the societal and individual level simultaneously, according to our unique abilities and opportunities. However, it is difficult for marginalized peoples or oppressed workers to obtain this power, particularly through learning, when they feel devalued on a societal level. “Each individual is caught within a labyrinth of influence, repression, fear and self-censorship which swallows up everyone within it, at the very least rendering them silent. Every person is both the victim and supporter of the system – and potential opponent” (Welton, n.d., p. 10).

In order to become empowered human beings and citizens, we are searching for self-efficacy and self-esteem. Welton (1995) states that “without good work and active citizenship, infused by a sense of meaning of the whole, life goes sour and the pathological consequences reverberate in and out of the lifeworld...If the system blocks meaningful work and citizenship, what happens, in effect, is the creation of a powerful dam within the lifeworld. This dam will build up and eventually burst its walls” (pp. 148, 149).

If our lifeworld has been blocked, or worse, never explored, it can be extremely difficult to find our own way. Consequently, how can we help people believe in themselves and become lifelong learners? How can we help them find their own motivation and passion that will propel them to challenge themselves and grow? Kris Magnusson of the University of Lethbridge has
developed a model that is useful for us in discussing the motivation to learn. The “5 P’s of Planning” (Circuit Coach, B1.1) is a guide through five steps that generate purposeful motivation through self-awareness. They consist of Pride, Passion, Purpose, Performance and Poise.

Without enthusiasm for taking on new challenges, it is difficult to get going, make changes and decide on a direction. Pride can help us to begin. By helping learners recognize the points in their lives when they have felt proud, when they have accomplished something that was meaningful, learners can begin to find the key to their motivation, and consequently build momentum. Then, through an examination of this pride, it will be possible to identify and list the skills and knowledge used with the pride experience. In this way, a foundation of energy and perspective can be built. For example, the concept of going back to formal schooling after negative experiences with elementary and high school can be particularly intimidating; even the registration process can seem overwhelming. But, if the prospective learner takes the time to list all the informal learning that she has done, and the challenges that she has mastered, regardless of origin, she can begin to increase her confidence level. The recognition of her own accomplishments can give her the energy she needs to take on new challenges, and feel that she is equipped to handle them.

Prior learning and informal learning is gaining more recognition as the wealth of knowledge that adults hold is being recognized even if there is no formal slip of paper attached to it. Unfortunately, this is a slow process, and many institutions (educational and organizational) still look for formal certification. For instance, Statistics Canada (census 1996) only tracks formal learning that takes place in recognized schools, colleges and universities and results in certificates, diplomas and degrees. The informal learning that shapes our lives, our relationships and our minds is discounted. However, if this process serves to increase self-esteem to enable a learner to take the next step, then it is inherently worthwhile. Pride can help us hold our heads high, and carry us forward: recognition of self is the foundation of success. “The strength of peoples’ conviction in their own effectiveness is likely to affect whether they would even try to cope with given situations…They get involved in activities and behave assuredly when they judge themselves capable of handling situations that would otherwise be intimidating” (Bandura in Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p.476).

Passion (or intrinsic motivation) follows from pride. It consists of values, beliefs and interests. It is interesting that many people could not state what their passion is if asked unexpectedly, but it becomes apparent when the conversation turns to something that touches them deeply. The trick is to tap into this passion, and realize how it can be used. By examining accomplishments and pride experiences, a recurring pattern of values, beliefs and interests should become evident. This is what has generated pride and represents passion; it demonstrates what sustains people and keeps them going even when many things seem to be going wrong. Our work and our learning goals, our propensity to question and critically reflect, can be nourished by our passion. When reflected in our work, our lives can be improved. “Ideally, work should improve a person’s overall quality of life. Yet, too often, as we have seen, work is stressful, lacks meaning, and interferes with family and personal life” (Lowe, 2000, p. 63).

Passion can be powerful only when guided by purpose; finding purpose is about seeking opportunity and bringing passion into reality. This does not mean that the one purpose in life must be found (if such a thing even exists), but that a small purpose or set of purposes is a starting point for action. This purpose should be linked with a preferred future in order to set goals and follow through. With a definitive plan, it becomes easier to embark on a new, possibly intimidating, learning experience. This plan can be seen as a preferred future that gives direction. It is like a “North Star by which we can set our bearings and navigate toward the life we want to live…a preferred future sets direction without locking in any specific goals or destinations. It
allows the…person to move toward a more meaningful and satisfying life without attempting to
tie that life to a specific occupation. And, although the vision may change over time, it also
provides some stability and grounding” (Circuit Coach, E4.5).

This preferred future can become the North Star for lifelong learning that leads to
**performance** - taking effective action that is supported with skills and strategies. “Action plans,
by definition, focus on things that are achievable and set the stage for immediate action. They’re
not about the distant future, the vague unknown or a dreamier, better life; they’re about getting
things done here, now and in the near future. They’re not about past problems, they’re about
immediate movement” (Circuit Coach, B1.6). This learning can be formal or informal, through
courses, books, magazines, newspapers, community meetings, experience and conversations.
When passion is linked with purpose, learning becomes continuous and second-nature as new
ideas and perspectives are searched out.

Finally, with practice and success comes **poise**. As individuals perform, they get better at
what they do and see results for what they have done. When this occurs, the confidence and
grace of poise develops, leading to new pride experiences. “Many people put limitations on
themselves. Good lifelong learning practice takes away those limitations and provides the new
tools, techniques and motivations to learn” (Longworth, 1999, p. 8).

Ranson & Stewart also explore the concept of self-development. “At the centre of the
learning society is a belief in the power of agency: only an active self or public provides the
purpose and conditions for learning and development” (p. 79). Three conditions are required:
the self must be seen as an active, purposeful, able agent; the unity of a life is essential where
learning “becomes the end in itself, the defining purpose creatively shaping the whole of a life”
(p. 80); and, the self must be seen in relation to others as “the self can only find its moral
identity in and through others and membership of communities” (ibid).

**Learning as our Life’s Work**

An essential part of lifelong learning is learning about self and honouring self. Only
when we are engaged in purposeful learning that is meaningful to us can we learn what is truly
important with the goal of transforming our learning into purpose, individual growth and societal
change. “The utilitarian, socio-economic rationale of training to carry out a specific function, or
education to minimum standards for future employment at a particular age, is giving way to a
much more holistic and visionary view of education as a lifelong process…As Charles Handy
puts it…Learning [is] a wheel in which questions lead to ideas, which lead to the testing of those
ideas to produce reflections, which in turn lead to new questions” (Longworth & Davies, p. 9).

The research of Howard Gardner concerning multiple intelligences reinforces the idea of
a holistic learning process. If intelligences are multiple, then there are many ways to succeed and
to express ourselves: verbal, mathematical-logical, spatial, kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal,
and intrapersonal (Goleman, p. 38). For instance, an adult working at a call centre who has a
high mathematical-logical intelligence will likely not perform as well as someone with a high
interpersonal intelligence, and is likely to be miserable in the position. A mandated course on
communication skills may help with superficial job functions, but would not likely address
satisfaction at work. Not only would performance suffer, but there would be a resultant decrease
in self-esteem and motivation. When the worker realizes this, and decides that it is time to take a
step toward another field, or even a job transfer to another position that deals with research and
data, his performance and satisfaction would probably increase, resulting in improved
performance reports and higher self-esteem. Furthermore, it is likely that the worker would then
seek out related learning opportunities as they would represent his interest and skill base. Failure
to do a particular job well may have nothing to do with effort or intelligence. If we are not
spending our time in areas that interest us, it is no surprise that motivation and personal
satisfaction are low.

Finland’s strategy for lifelong learning states, “‘learning, and particularly learning together, is fulfilling when it helps solve genuine problems and when it helps to develop the good life, creativity and cultural skills, improved abilities and a sense of strong citizenship.’ This is a strong signal to educators to develop the whole person with a well-rounded personality and a feeling of self-worth” (Longworth, p. 89). Lifelong learning should benefit all aspects of our lives – our roles as citizens, community members, workers, family members and self-proponents. Those of us who have these beliefs should be working to help others instil them in themselves.

A polity is needed for our time which expresses a new vision of the public domain: in which the public are conceived neither as passive clients, nor as competing consumers, but as citizens encouraged to contribute to and take a shared responsibility in the development of their society – a learning society which grasps the value of opening itself to reflective understanding of the diversity of culture within as much as to the issues which press in upon it from without (Ranson & Stewart, p. 86).

Without the voices of all society’s members, we are wasting our resources and our opportunities to find workable solutions to our problems. If “lifelong learning should be treated like a social investment” (Longworth, p. 42), then our work should connect ourselves with learning, growth and contribution. It is how we affect our society, and includes paid, volunteer and unpaid work as well as our interactions with our community. For instance, a parent raising a child is contributing to society by guiding the next generation. Unfortunately, it seems that the work that is the most highly valued in our society is that which is paid. “Paid work is the organizing principle, privileged over all other activities and acting as the pivotal axis around which self, family, society and state revolve” (Butler, 2001, p. 64, emphasis in original).

By compartmentalizing spheres of our lives, and placing importance solely on paid work, we are doing a disservice to ourselves, our families, our communities and society. For example, an initiative by the Canadian National Life/Work Centre, the Canada Career Information Partnership, Human Resources Development Canada and the US National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee has created a plan for life/work designs. “Career development [lifelong learning] is now viewed as complex and multidimensional, involving growing through life and work – an interweaving of learning, experiencing, living, working, changing, and identifying and discovering pathways…the creation of an individual’s life/work designs” (Blueprint brochure, emphasis in the original).

Barnet also addresses the problem of separating life and work that limits our contributions to society:

In the end, the job crisis raises the most fundamental question of our human existence: What are we doing here? There is a colossal amount of work waiting to be done by human beings – building decent places to live, exploring the universe, making cities less dangerous, teaching one another, raising our children, visiting, comforting, healing, feeding one another, dancing, making music, telling stories, inventing things, and governing ourselves. But much of the essential activity people have always undertaken to raise and educate their families, to enjoy themselves, to give pleasure to others, and to advance the general welfare is not packaged as jobs [or learning]. Unless we rethink work and decide what human beings are meant to do in the age of robots and what basic economic claims on society human beings have by virtue of being here, there will never be enough jobs (Welton, 1995, p. 152).
Success should not be measured by job status or income, but by an eagerness to contribute, to learn, and to help others. Good work is the culmination of all we accomplish in our lives – those we help, what we learn, how we contribute to society and the next generation. Our life’s work is enhanced by the lifelong learning that we are continually engaged in; the key is to recognize our learning, build on it, support it, and act on it. This can only be accomplished by creating an environment where self-awareness, passion, and a holistic view of work and life become catalysts for learning and positive change. Only in this way can we begin to Chart the Learning Society.

References

Welton, Michael. (n.d.). Perspectives on citizenship in the age of information.