

Chapter 12

Life-long Learning

Life-long learning appears to be necessary in the 21st century. There has always been so much to learn that a lifetime has never been long enough, but people could get by with learning less in the past. Previous generations could learn what was needed for their chosen career and it was sufficient for the duration of the career, with a few minor additions perhaps. Now, rapid changes in how even ordinary things are done make life-long learning a necessity. Students are preparing for personal and professional lives that will make demands on their knowledge, understanding, and problem-solving abilities that are not yet defined. *What should students be learning when facing such challenging futures?*

INTEGRATING LEARNING AND SHARING

We are already living in a world of global communications, global information access, and global interactions among governments and societies. Continuous learning will be necessary just to be participants in society; people will be forced to keep on learning.

Professors can help students acquire a desire to continue learning by providing meaningful opportunities for intellectual growth while acquiring enabling skills. When learning is intellectually stimulating and the skills that are acquired are used, the probability that students will want to keep on learning is increased. Teachers know that when students enjoy the learning opportunities and acquire meaningful skills in their courses, students do not want the

course to end. *Seamless courses do not end...the interconnected knowledge makes it difficult to set boundaries to courses.*

Professors can help students want to continue learning by giving them opportunities to share their knowledge with others. Competition among students may have to be reduced before sharing is commonplace, however. Students are less likely to share their knowledge with those whom they view as competitors rather than cooperators. How long should learning and sharing continue? *Learning and sharing ought to be rewarding life-long endeavors.*

Are there some basic premises on which life-long learning can be built? Consider these three.

- *Lead by example and learn by experience.*
- *Learn with others and from others.*
- *Learn for self-enrichment and for enriching others.*

Intellectual growth will be encouraged if these premises for life-long learning are part of the learning environment in higher education. *Learning is natural when people learn by experience, with others and from others, and are enriched by their learning.*

ARE THERE ANY BARRIERS TO LEARNING LEFT?

Theoretically, no. The human mind can learn, or try to learn, just about anything that can be conceived as learning. That's why each new generation does things that the previous generation didn't think of or couldn't imagine.

Practically, yes. Time will always be a barrier to learning, even with the most rapid information processing tools available. Students will reach limits to learning, even

in the most well designed learning environment because of time limits.

Professors should strive to give all students equal opportunities, but expecting to design a learning environment that will be “just right” for every student is not realistic. Less than 100% success is achieved in the best-designed learning environment because some students are simply not interested in a course. Teachers can not reach every student. We know, however, that an active learning environment provides more opportunities for learning than a passive one does; it is not necessary to do more research to prove that point. Rather, *research should be directed toward finding out how to design even more effective learning environments.*

Risk-taking

Working with people in any capacity always involves some risks. What is the real risk in education? The real risk is that teachers do not think broadly enough about education, communications, psychology, technology, philosophy, religion, politics, natural laws...the list of things that we risk not thinking about or understanding well enough is long.

Failure is detrimental only when people are ruled by their failures. When failure is used as steps to success, as learning points in a life-long endeavor, then mistakes can be excused because “...*mistakes are not failures but just stepping-stones toward the truth*” (Perelman 1992).

Ingredients for Learning Success

Is there a main ingredient or a particular combination of ingredients that result in learning success? As parents, my wife and I are aware of two ingredients in life that we share

with our children. Warner and Rosenberg (1976) verbalized them... “*Knowledge and love are a powerful combination.*”

Does the combination of knowledge and love apply at the college level? Of course it does. Professors are expected to have detailed knowledge in their area of expertise. What good is that knowledge if they don’t care about the students? The parental love we have for our children is not the same as my caring for the students, but the common thread of concern for students as people was there. That became much more meaningful to me after our four children graduated from Cornell University because, having my own children on campus made me realize how much the parents of my students might be caring about them. I have concluded that, for learners of any age, *how others care about us makes a tremendous difference in how we feel about ourselves, and that has a major impact on how much we want to learn.*

A TEACHER’S ULTIMATE GOAL

Helping students become life-long learners should be one of a teacher’s ultimate goals. When a student can say “*Thank you, I have learned how to learn*” a teacher knows the goal has been met. When a teacher can say “*I am no longer necessary because my students have learned how to learn*” the ultimate goal has been met. *Let’s put learning first.*