

Life-long Learning — Causes and Concerns

'Life-long Learning' (hereafter, LLL) is one of our turn-of-century buzzwords. It envisages a major shift in the relationship of education to life and work, in which 21st century people keep on learning in one way and another as they go through their careers and lives, rather than preparing for adult life and work with a single period of formal education, as has been the case conventionally up until now.

Like all buzzwords, LLL carries with it confusion, ambiguity and uncertainty. What does it really mean? Who is responsible for it? Who will pay for it? Who will regulate it? These questions will no doubt receive attention from others. My interest is in causes and accompaniments. So let's begin with what has produced the movement for LLL. There seem to be three principal engines of change, and they are of course related.

1. The demand for skills

The second world war was a war in which technology was critically important. Someone portrayed the first world war as 'the generals' war', and the second as 'the scientists' war'. The economic boom which followed the second world war allowed much wartime technology to be translated into consumer products and processes. That translation in turn caused a great demand for new skills, and the process has since become almost continuous: new products lead to further new products, and each innovation prompts the need for new skills, new knowledge and new training.

A half-century later Western societies have virtually no unskilled jobs available for their work-forces, and there is always an acute demand for certain types of skill. Today's deficit is in information technology; tomorrow's is likely to be in biotechnology. And the speed of change means that new skills and knowledge may only have a short half-life. We keep needing to acquire new skills in our daily lives, and our society needs new skills to support the extraordinarily sophisticated civilisation we inhabit.

2. The enormous growth in knowledge

The world of academic knowledge has increased some fifty times in scale since 1950. No doubt the same order of magnitude has occurred in other forms of knowledge too. There are now more than half a million academic journals in circulation. No library contains them all, and no library now can claim to be comprehensive.

What should we learn, what should teach, given the extraordinary increase in matters that could be learned and taught? The older style was cumulative, or vertical: we learned a 'subject' from its robust bases to its less certain heights. If we did that long enough we became an expert, wrote a PhD thesis, and taught about it at university, or we filed patents for a new product or process.

But the 'subjects' of 1950 are now empires, with thousands of journals and dozens of adjectival sub-fields. What does a historian or a physicist need to know today? Life is not long enough, despite the advances in medical knowledge, to acquire total competence across a whole discipline. Not only that, there are many other branches of knowledge that one needs to know in order to be really good at any discipline. It is commonly said that the places of intellectual excitement are where the bodies of knowledge intersect. To be there usually requires competence in several areas, not just one.

There used to be half a dozen 'learned professions'. The phrase now applies to any occupation, the entry to which is essentially governed by formal preparation at university. Like medicine and law, the new professions make reference to an ever-expanding body of knowledge, use familiar research paradigms, have governing bodies which use various forms of accreditation, and publish journals to disseminate new knowledge. My own University prepares people for entry to and advancement in 28 professions. It is very likely to be the case that in twenty years' time we will be teaching students seeking entry to professions which do not presently exist.

Much professional knowledge also has a short half-life, and professions are now themselves involved in 'in-service' education, and require practitioners to maintain their knowledge base by taking part in courses of one kind or another. Good professionals are already engaged in 'life-long learning'.

3. The discovery that human beings are all intelligent

In 1950 the prevailing model of intelligence (based on so-called 'intelligence tests') had only 2 per cent being really intelligent. Unsurprisingly, nearly all of them seemed to come from the educated middle class. The great demand for skills and the retention rates in school and university have made clear that this was not an accurate account of the distribution of intelligence. Today's university enrolments approach 700,000; those of 1950 were around 30,000. Then, as now, some teachers complained that we were 'scraping the bottom of the barrel'.

The work of Howard Gardner and others suggests that all human beings are intelligent enough to succeed in pretty well anything. What prevents them, apart from location, the laws of supply and demand, and so on, are the differing degrees of encouragement, motivation and preparation we all enjoy. Gardner has proposed 8 1/2 different 'intelligences', and that as children we present one or more of them early. Our parents and teachers then mark us out early as 'musical', 'good at numbers', 'sensitive', 'good at words' and so on. He argues further, and I think that this is even more powerful, that all of us, given appropriate amounts of training and the requisite encouragement and motivation, could be good at employing those intelligences which we do *not* present early.

That Gardner is at least on the right track can be inferred by the astonishing proliferation of courses that purport to train anyone to do anything, by the huge enrolments in formal education, and by the abundant stories of success of people who have mastered skills and learning despite poor or almost non-existent schooling. Indeed, were Gardner not right, we could never have reached where we are today.

A peal of trumpets, and an anxiety or two

I am in favour of what has occurred. Indeed, it would be pointless to be against it! The capacity of all human beings to receive as much education as they want, and to gain in proficiency and self-confidence thereby, seems to me to be a necessary background to a successful 21st century, socially, democratically and economically. LLL is already part of our lives, and will become much more obvious in the next decade.

If we started with a general degree after high school, before long we will need a specialist qualification of some kind. The movement can and will go the other way, too. If we want to transfer from one profession to another, we will most likely do that by another period of specialist learning. We will build up 'knowledge portfolios' to accompany our 'career portfolios'. In mid-life we will start to build up our knowledge of areas of life that are pressingly important to our development as human beings — art, music, history, spirituality, self-awareness, and so on. In later life, perhaps through U3A (the University of the Third Age) or its equivalents, we will pursue other learning possibilities: we will have become habituated to do so. All of this seems to me welcome, and to be applauded.

But I have some worries, nonetheless. It may be an old-fashioned attitude of my own, but I have found it possible to explore the utilities offered by other disciplinary perspectives than my own because I have a decently solid disciplinary knowledge base myself. It worries me that 21st century Australia is likely to have a lot of people who may know a lot, but who don't know a lot about anything in particular. Perhaps I am over-anxious, but I write at the time of the sending of Australian troops to East Timor, and am conscious, for example, that the Australian populace seems to have no understanding of the historical dimensions of the conflict there, and that Australian and Indonesian perspectives hardly meet.

A second anxiety flows from the first. Our last two hundred years has been built on the principle of division of labour. In terms of knowledge it is as though there is only so much we can know and use, and we are all becoming more and more specialised. Has it gone too far? I feel an almost daily need to extol the virtues of a generalist education and generalist approaches to problems.

On the same tack, some of our energy and learning will need to go into citizenship: we have given the labour of politics to politicians, and while they have done a reasonably good job over the last century we are going to have to

learn to take political questions more seriously as individuals. Fortunately, both the capacity and the knowledge are available.

A third anxiety follows from Gardner's work. If all humans are intelligent enough to do almost anything, and what points to success are encouragement, motivation and preparation, then questions of access and equity — for anyone who is concerned about the underpinnings of a good, democratic society — return with speed. I worry that these issues are less of concern today, yet they seem to me to be most important, and that LLL needs to be discussed with some concerns in mind.

It will follow that I do not see LLL as some kind of panacea for all society's ills. It is necessary, important and potentially most virtuous. But like all good things, it needs to be thought about and handled with care and sensitivity.

Oddly enough, LLL has always been supported as a means of self-fulfilment by the adult education sector and the middle class. While I support and work for its translation to a mass scale, so that our education and training systems can bring its benefits to all Australians, part of me wants to insist that the self-fulfilment part is going to be increasingly important in what looks like humanity's most challenging century.

And we need to realise that in funding terms there will continue to be a public responsibility for LLL, no less than a private responsibility. That bit looks quite difficult at the moment.

1999