

Supporting a Lifelong Learning Agenda

By Professor Robin Mason, IET, The Open University

The concept of 'lifelong learning for all' has been an ideal promoted for many years by governments and NGOs. What exactly is lifelong learning? Wikipedia suggests that it is an attitude; that one can and should be open to new ideas, decisions, skills or behaviours. The vision involves the idea of citizens provided with learning opportunities at all ages and in numerous contexts: at work, at home and through leisure activities, not just through formal channels such as school and higher education. The term also encompasses the practice of professional development and updating throughout a working career.

There are two explanations for the increasing importance of lifelong learning:

1. The acceleration of scientific and technological progress which means that the knowledge and skills acquired during formal education are usually not sufficient for a professional career spanning three or four decades.
2. By 2021, there will be 12 million people of pensionable age. Communities can only benefit from an increasingly active, engaged older population that is encouraged and equipped to use its vast fund of experience.

We know from observation and from research that learning improves self-esteem and self-confidence, and has measurable health benefits both mentally and physically. The children of lifelong learners are also positively affected. If the advantages are so evident, why do so few adults engage in lifelong learning? An announcement from the Learning and Skills Council in 2006 showed a further significant drop in the number of adult learners in Further Education and Adult and Community Learning. Overall there are one in eight fewer adult learners since October 2005 with almost a quarter of a million people no longer engaging in learning. The figures illustrate dramatic falls for each five year cohort from adults aged 25 and over, with nearly one in three fewer learners over 60. There are now less than half the learners aged 60 and over than there were two years ago.

What are the barriers to lifelong learning? A recent study by Selwyn et al. shows that the availability of ICT has not increased participation and achievement in adult education. Only half of the adult population used ICT despite increased levels of access to computers and the internet, and using the internet to learn new skills, such as a language, was secondary to communicating with family and

friends, and searching for specific information. This study also found that the use of ICT was associated with the same socio-demographic factors that determine school-leaving age: age and socio-economic background. The study concludes that the key determinant of learning in later life was motivation, self-discipline, work experiences and family life as an adult.

The results of this study underline a longstanding issue about the use of technology in learning: what determinants underlie the successful appropriation of 'leisure technologies' for learning? Do learners resist the use of technologies which they consider communication and entertainment tools, for purposes of learning? There is no doubt that mobile phones, photo sharing, social networking, video downloading and podcasting are immensely popular tools. However, their use in learning is marginal. Is this due to a lack of understanding and know-how on the part of teachers and course designers? Or is there a more fundamental equation operating between learning and hard work, and likewise between leisure and no work? If true, the tools of leisure would never be considered appropriate as tools of work.

E-Portfolios

One of the latest tools for lifelong learning is thought to be the e-portfolio. Their use is endorsed by Ministries of Education, NGOs working with adults and increasingly by schools and universities. At an individual level e-portfolios are considered to be a portable, lifelong record of achievements, and hence there would be many advantages for individuals in maintaining them. Not only would they contain a certified record of educational qualifications, but they would be a comprehensive resource on which to draw for job interviews and promotions. In formal learning, e-portfolios provide a strong impetus for learners to take ownership of their learning. Given appropriate course design, e-portfolios encourage reflection on learning and hence a deeper engagement in which learners relate new material to concepts with which they are already familiar. Other lifelong learning scenarios envisage users storing their photos, reminiscences and significant events in their portfolio. As a workplace support, the e-portfolio would contain a whole series of documents related to a lifetime's career. The purpose of storing all documents in one place is that they are easily found, organised and reused for a wide variety of purposes: interviews, presentations, passing on to children and grandchildren etc. This rosy picture falls apart when we consider technological issues – interoperability of software and even hardware over a lifetime. Vinyl records are all but unusable today and tape recorders are not far behind. It is hard to imagine that the technologies for content creation today will be around tomorrow. However, even at the level of formal learning, we already see that students are resistant to maintaining their e-portfolios beyond immediate course requirements and tend to have a superficial

notion of reflection on learning. How will adults acquire the skills, motivation and dedication to maintain an e-portfolio throughout their lives? The answer seems to lie in two directions:

1. Top down initiatives, such as employers demanding e-portfolios from both new and continuing employees, and educational institutions requiring them for registration, assessment and presentations.
2. Bottom-up initiatives, such as children and grandchildren using them as standard tools and hence influencing adults to maintain them as well.

An example of a professional updating opportunity using e-portfolios is an Open University course for which I have been a co-author. It is accessed totally online including the content and the tutoring. It is called the E-Learning Professional and this indicates the intended learner. It both uses an e-portfolio for reflection, content development and storage, and assessment, and is also about the use of e-portfolios for education and lifelong learning. During the course, learners examine debates about professionalism in elearning practice and appraise the usefulness of tools for personal and professional development. They consider differing perspectives about the use of e-portfolios and assess the advantages and limitations of e-portfolio creation. They build an example e-portfolio during the course to provide evidence of their own competencies. This can be used in the workplace for their own professional development, and also help them understand the role these might play for students in formal education.

Web 2.0 Tools

Web 2.0 tools are currently the focus of outlandish promises and predictions about learners being content generators, sharing their resources freely and developing social networks of common interests. There is no doubt that this is happening and on a larger scale than anyone predicted. We need to look at the skills and learning outcomes that are resulting and to understand and capture the essence of the activity for lifelong learning practices. Web 2.0 thinking should be a real boon for lifelong learning. Self-generated content heralds the rise of the amateur and a culture of DIY, thus down playing the power of the traditional guardians of knowledge and learning. This change may not be as profound as some of the more ardent proponents of Web 2.0 indicate, but should offer serious benefits for lifelong learning none the less.

One project that I am involved with, is a good example of the kind of opportunities that Web 2.0 tools provide for lifelong learning. It is funded by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and involves all residents of the Galson Estate on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Using open source tools, the

community is building a website to promote tourism and community involvement by creating content about the local heritage sites, the flora and fauna, and cultural events. Using text, podcasts, video clips and some existing resources, the community is generating a range of materials to attract visitors to their website and also to visit the area. The local school is writing text on Galson Estate for Wikipedia; the Estate Ranger has a blog about the environment; music by local musicians is being recorded as well as poetry readings by villagers. Training sessions are being run in how to put podcasts online and videos onto YouTube. The aim of the project is to bring together an enormously rich set of resources relating to the cultural heritage, social history, environmental attributes, and the commercial interests of a unique geographical area. A significant outcome is already the engagement of many residents in new processes, reflections and learning activities. Because the focus is NOT on learning, but on activities which people enjoy and on an aim which they believe in, the lifelong learning happens as a by-product. Perhaps this is the 'lesson' we need to learn about lifelong learning!

Resources

NIACE: <http://www.niace.org.uk/news/current.htm#devastated>

Learning in Later Life - Motivation and Impact, Institute of Employment Studies (2000)
www.dfee.gov.uk/research/index.htm

Selwyn, N, Gorard, S and Furlong, J (2006) *Adult Learning in the Digital Age*. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.

Smith, M. K. (1996, 2001) 'Lifelong learning', *the encyclopedia of informal education*,
<http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-life.htm>

Stephanie, L, Mason, R and Pegler, C (2007) *The Educational Potential of E-Portfolios*. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.

Theta Project: <http://www.galsontrust.com/>

The eLearning Professional course: <http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12.dll?C01wH808>