An Introduction to Life Long Learning Skills

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Language Learning for Life

Learning is a never-ending process that should be recognized as such. It also requires constant effort and active participation. If teachers can expand the repertoire of learning activities for students, it may be possible to greatly increase both students' motivation and learning success. What is needed is an overall understanding of how students learn and what they need to develop to be able to fulfill their life long goals. Engaging in such a developmental process will provide many paths to success and help students develop into real life long learners.

　学習とは生涯とおして続けられるべきものであろう。それには常に努力し、前向きに参加していくことが必要である。教師が学習指導のレパートリーを拡げられれば、学習者のモチベーションや成果を大いに高めることが可能であろう。肝心なことは、学習者がどのように学習していくのか、また生涯を通しての目標を達成するために何が必要なのかを総合的に理解することである。このような発展的な過程に関わることで様々な成功への道が見つかり、学習者を本来の生涯学習者へと導くことができると思われる。

When does "learning" end?

The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as we continue to live. Mortimer Adler

When does learning end? Many of my students seem to hold the view that their studies end with graduation. To illustrate this point, last year, after introducing several easy articles on medical topics in English to my fourth year students, I was trying to impress upon them that they would need to study a bit harder to improve their reading and writing skills in order to be able to read, and perhaps write, much more complex medical articles after they achieve their medical degrees. My statement seemed to surprise the class and one student in particular because he answered back saying, "But we won't have to do this after we graduate…" I replied, "No, but you will be expected to. Would you want to be treated by a doctor who hasn't read a medical article since he left university?" I then asked them to think about the old adage, "If you are not going forward, you're going backwards." In other words, unless graduates continue to pursue new learning in their chosen profession, their knowledge becomes stale and their careers could stagnate. If, on the other hand, they can stimulate their interest and find the right motivations to augment their learning, the path they will follow can be referred to as "life-long learning".

This paper will introduce some of the basic elements of life long learning by first examining how it can be defined, followed by the attributes often seen in life long

learners, the role of motivation and finally how teachers can facilitate the development of life long learning skills.

Life long learning is a poorly understood concept because it is rarely discussed or even thought of by teachers and students in the years they are together in schools and colleges. Just take a moment to ponder the following; how would you define life long learning, what particular elements spring to mind at first, and how does this concept fit into your teaching approach. The next section will address how the term life long learning can best be defined to provide a solid foundation for the discussion that follows.

Defining Life Long Learning

You must learn day by day, year by year, to broaden your horizon. Ethel Barrymore

A simple definition of life long learning is not as easy as it might appear. More often than not, it has been used in a narrow sense to describe courses or programs developed for mature citizens and thus thought of as re-training, or worse, something old people do in their twilight years to keep busy. However, it is my belief that life long learning is relevant to all learners, for it is not only about learning duration but rather finding one's learning strengths and weaknesses and building up a repertoire of learning skills and strategies to enhance their learning experience. It is in this area that teachers can help put students on the right track.

First, to develop a better definition, I believe several important aspects of life long learning need to be considered. In a broad sense, it can be described as the active continuation of learning during one's career or life.

In addition, my experience in trying to develop life long learning skills suggests that there are several essential active elements that give this concept its dynamic potential:

- recognizing the need to learn more,

- trying new learning strategies to enhance the learning experience,

- making efforts to expand one's knowledge base or acquire new knowledge for some specific purpose,

- exploring additional learning opportunities,

- not ceasing to seek new or relevant knowledge after some pre-determined event (e.g. high school or college graduation, achieving some degree or license, a test or final exam),

- gaining tangible pleasure or satisfaction from this pursuit of knowledge.

In summary, life-long learning can be defined as the active process of continuing to think of ourselves as learners in order to pursue the acquisition of knowledge beyond any pre-determined limits to achieve self-improvement, self-betterment, and self-fulfilment. Or as life long learners might say, "You're never too old to learn new tricks."

Armed with this definition of life long learning, the next step is to consider what attributes are desirable to develop for our students to become life long learners.

Attributes

Learning is finding out what we already know. Doing is demonstrating that you know it. Teaching is reminding others that they know just as well as you. You are all learners, doers and teachers. Richard Bach

Life long learners display specific organizational skills and strategies that make them superior learners. The following are attributes I believe are common in life long learners and are all firmly grounded in the direct and indirect learning strategies I've observed in exceptional students in my own classes as outlined in O'Dowd (1999):

1. They develop good study habits. They think about how they will learn, trying new skills and building a repertoire of strategies that work for them.

2. They think positively about learning and plan their study. They plan their learning activities and evaluate their own progress.

3. They pursue learning outside of class hours.

4. They look for opportunities to expand their knowledge.

5. They realize it takes time to build their knowledge base and grow as learners.

6. They plan their time to maximize its use.

7. They discuss their studies with teachers and other students, seeing it as an opportunity to reinforce their learning and exchange points of views.

8. They are usually not afraid to speak up or ask questions. They don't hesitate to ask teachers to clarify points or to give more examples when they don't understand something.

9. Life long learners focus on what needs to be learnt and pursue it with determination.

By developing these attributes (and others that could be added to this list), even average students can become successful life long learners. However, my past research shows that they may need a teacher's guidance to understand how. In the next section, the critical element of motivation as it relates to developing a positive attitude to life long learning will be briefly discussed.

Motivation is the key

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. Anon

Of course, our students are individuals, each with a unique combination of attributes, strengths and weaknesses. Teachers recognize that of the individuals in each of their classes, some have many of the abovementioned attributes, some have a combination of these factors, and some don't combine these factors as well as they could. How much effort a learner is willing to invest in their learning processes depends primarily on their attitude which is in turn based on their motivation. Indeed, Brown (1994) strongly emphasized the role of intrinsic motivation in language learning and the "strategic investment" that successful learners make. The issue of learner motivation and subsequent success in learning has been the focus of a large number of studies, with two basic kinds of

motivation being identified: integrative and instrumental (Littlewood, 1984). Briefly, integrative motivation stems from the learner having a genuine interest in the field of study, while instrumental motivation views acquisition as a stepping-stone to achieving other desired goals such as skills, qualifications, or employment. It is indeed discouraging for teachers to see learners who seem to lack any type of motivation; such students continually procrastinate, persuade themselves they are "dumb", that their teachers are dumb or the class work is dumb, and do too little too late. What is needed to help our students find the right path and stay on track is a better understanding of their motivation (or lack of) and in particular why they undertake a particular course of study in the first place (O'Dowd, 1996). By doing so, teachers may be able press the right motivational buttons earlier during courses of study and encourage learners to make the necessary strategic investment to build a more successful future.

The final step is now to consider what teachers can do in the classroom to facilitate the development of their learners' skills and attitudes.

What teachers can do in class

> *Learning is what most adults will do for a living in the 21st century*. Sidney J. Perelman

Once students have found the motivation to engage in life long learning, attention needs to be given to how to provide the opportunities and avenues for continuing personal growth and development. A key focus should be on the provision of more flexible learning opportunities to engage student interest. To achieve this, students should be re-directed to investigate, develop, and where appropriate, adopt alternative learning strategies.

An excellent place to start is Bloom's seminal work entitled *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956). Bloom correctly observed that traditional classroom learning usually centered on low-level cognitive skills like remembering facts, terms, and definitions; as a result, many students lack the motivation to push themselves beyond a superficial acquisition of basic facts to a deeper understanding of the subject material. He then identified and organized cognitive levels from simple to complex (see table 1 below) and highlighted the need for teachers to break the traditional learning mold by presenting learning materials and activities at the higher levels where students are required to apply principles, analyze information, synthesize ideas and evaluate their results.

Table 1. Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's Cognitive Level	Student Activity
Evaluation	Making a judgment based on a pre-established set of criteria
Synthesis	Producing something new or original from component parts
Analysis	Breaking material down into its component parts to see interrelationships / hierarchy of ideas
Application	Using a concept or principle to solve a problem
Comprehension	Grasping concepts; explaining & interpreting the meaning of material
Knowledge	Remembering facts, terms, definitions, principles

In my classes, I first focus on what knowledge and skills students need to acquire. Using the example of my medical students, most have entered Hamamatsu University School of Medicine by being successful crammers of information trained in cram schools for the entrance examination in particular (O'Dowd 2003); it is therefore necessary for me to survey each new intake of students to determine their strengths and weaknesses in the use of learning strategies and their attitudes to learning. Then, based on my learning skills inventory, I determine what new learning strategies can be introduced at various stages of the curriculum I have developed for each program. And as my students are usually already comfortable on the knowledge-level of Bloom's taxonomy, I also incorporate activities to introduce higher-level cognitive skills in a measured but progressive manner so as not to cause too much distress or confusion over my departure from the students' expectations of "traditional" university practices.

My aim is to give students opportunities to explore topics and engage in higher level cognitive activities using multiple learning strategies, and at the same time to provide frequent feedback, encouragement and advice. Of course, providing a variety of flexible learning opportunities and introducing alternative learning strategies cannot be regarded as a panacea for all the problems associated with learning inside and outside the classroom, because no teaching approach is absolute or guaranteed. As mentioned earlier, the adage "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink" reflects the common situation in most classrooms where not all students are following the teacher in a uniform manner. Student choices, preferences and behaviors are also affected by numerous personal and environmental factors over which the teacher may exercise no control, so individual exceptions will continue to persist. And even though my classroom approach has on the whole been largely successful in achieving the goals I have set for my students, I am still aware that I can't win them all. I firmly believe it is nevertheless important that all students be made aware of this new agenda for developing life long learning skills through their course work so that they can redefine their own role in their learning process. Only in this way can they truly confront the daunting challenges ahead of them in their long and arduous studies before graduating and the even longer path beyond that milestone as they develop in their chosen careers.

Conclusion

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. William Butler Yeats

This paper started with the question, "When does learning end?" and I have tried to show that for most of our students it is in fact a never-ending process that should be recognized as such. Learning is not easy; it demands effort, active participation, sound management and constant practice. If teachers can expand the repertoire of learning activities for students to incorporate higher-level cognitive skills as shown in Bloom's taxonomy, it may be possible to greatly increase both students' learning success and motivation.

What is needed is a better understanding of what motivates each student, the learning skills they bring with them to the classroom, and what they need to develop to be able

to fulfill their life long goals. In my own research, I have employed a variety of data collection methods such as survey instruments, classroom observations, interviews and action research questions to develop the framework for my subsequent interactions with my students. Engaging in such a developmental process will provide many paths to success. It also needs to be emphasized that changes in student learning styles will not occur overnight; it often takes some time for learners to become comfortable with "new approaches", and some may resist any change altogether (O'Dowd, 2003). Even so, our professional responsibility as teachers requires we do as much as we possibly can to prepare our students for the challenges that lay ahead of them after graduation and to use all the tools and knowledge available to us to achieve this end. It is therefore up to each individual teacher's judgement as to how they should proceed with their students; here, I have described the particular path I have travelled in the hope that it will stimulate the interest of other teachers and may even be used as a guide to those who take up this challenge. Progress may initially be slow and uncomfortable for some students, especially those who may need help the most. However, persistence and understanding by the teacher in identifying learning style differences and seeking to expand students' learning horizons will not be without some benefit to most students and help them develop into real life long learners.

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