

Lifelong Learning: Crossing Generations and Cultures

by Lorna Marsden



Every experience of lifelong learning is about at least three generations, but it is also about those outside the “system”.

From Victoria, Maria writes to her grandchild in Montreal. It is early morning and from her window she can see the five types of ducks that bob around in the bay just outside her apartment building. She describes them to her grandchild with lots of detail — their feathers, the shape of their heads, and their habits in the water in the spring. She even sends a photograph of them.

Three hours later, her grandchild, Lisa, replies to her e-mail. She’s home from school and has already finished her homework. She liked the photograph of the ducks and is going to take it to school with her tomorrow. She tells her grandmother *en français* about the school trip to the *Galerie des Beaux Arts* that her class took today and gives her firm and unflattering opinions of the artist in question.

Maria was born just before the Great Depression. During the depression her father died from wounds he received in the First World War. Everything conspired to minimize her own education and future. She was married during the early years of the Second World War, and she nursed in military hospitals for many years. In the 1950’s she stayed home with her three children and learned all the skills of keeping a house — things that her own mother had never been able to do: she sewed, she cooked, she gardened, and she did this with a group of neighbourhood friends whose background and experience were just like her own. This was her life for a decade.

Her children’s education benefited greatly from the Sputnik scare during the Cold War, when it became apparent that Canada needed to place more emphasis on education, especially on mathematics and science. Her daughter, who has completed executive education short courses at a business school at her employer’s expense, is a business manager, and her younger son is an engineer. But her eldest son was caught in the polio epidemic at the end of the 1940’s, before the Salk vaccine, and has walked with a heavy limp ever since. He is a musician; a man who married very late in life and who is the step-father of the young girl from whom Maria has just received a message. Maria, now living in a building of frail but independent seniors, trolls the web reading about the new health drugs and the new treatments . . . and particularly about the genome project. She sends many messages to her son on how to manage the various ailments that come from a long-term disability.

The fact that Maria can do this research and can describe events so vividly to her grandchild has little to do with her own schooling. She had only eight years of formal education before becoming a wartime nurse. But she finished high school by correspondence during her “home years”, then formally trained as a nursing assistant. And she was always a voracious reader. Without reading, without being able to write to her family, without constantly learning something new, she thinks she would not survive.



Language is not enough. It is the culture that can be so difficult to grasp. So much in the dominant cultures of Canada is simply “understood”, and if one does not “understand” it, life can be cruel and difficult.

The assistant who comes in daily to check on her and do some cleaning is a refugee from Vietnam. They get on well. They have both lived through wars, although very differently. Nu is also in school, learning English and trying to figure out how this very strange Canadian society works. Like most people who have left their own culture and family to emigrate, she is often miserable. She misses almost everything about Vietnam. But she likes working with these old people — mostly women — who have pictures of grandchildren, who have time to talk, and who are grateful for some attention and care.

When Maria was nearly 50, her husband died. She moved with her two youngest children near the university where both were studying, and continued to work as a nurse. At the YWCA

near the hospital, she took a course offered to nurses on shift work. She loved it, so she took another non-credit course offered in the university, and then a course for credit, and then another. She received some advanced standing for her previous experience and within six years — almost before she knew it — she had earned a B.Sc. as a mature student. She studied biology and found it fascinating. She took history and literature courses and learned to read in a different way. She made friends with many new immigrants at the university and sometimes went with them to neighbourhood restaurants. She even went with them to their church at Christmas. This was a different life. She was no better off financially, but life was better.

So she is not surprised that her engineer son is back in university doing an

advanced course in computing. She is interested that he does this in a joint college/university program in Toronto. She knows it is not an option for him. He needs it in order to keep his livelihood. She also understands why her daughter is replacing her workforce with university graduates — because the business requires the flexible problem solving approaches and the high level socio-cultural skills found most often in university graduates.

Maria expects that all her grandchildren will be university graduates — several times over. And she knows that if she didn't have the capacity to read and write well in English and know some French she could not cope on her own with many of the requirements of daily life.

Nu, on the other hand, cannot speak much English. She can read even less. She takes the same bus on the same route between her room in the house of a family downtown and the seniors building where she works five days a week. She learns English at a nearby community school, but she is tired and it is hard work. She believes that her life will never improve unless she learns English and learns to read. She has almost no money, no new clothes, no social contacts beyond those in her workplace and in the house where she lives. She does not expect to marry or have children. She lives to return to Vietnam but she will never save the money for such a trip.

When she fled Vietnam and came from Hong Kong to Canada, Nu believed she could work in a factory. But after two factory jobs, she found that work had dried up. Factories were leaving Canada. She started to work in nursing homes, moving from cleaning to food service, and then was hired by a fellow Vietnamese to work in Victoria — which was at least closer to Vietnam and warmer than Toronto. She watches TV programs about computers, and she watches Maria work on her computer, but she will never have one. She is not sure what it does exactly. She knows that she does not have the skills she needs to go anywhere or do anything, and she feels trapped. All she can do well is smile, serve people, and try to

survive. She doesn't see how she can change anything.

When the summer arrives, Lisa comes with her parents to visit. Flying across the country is no thrill, but she is glad to get to her grandmother's apartment and takes up the conversation with Maria which began on e-mail the day before. They examine the ducks together. Lisa assumes that Nu, too, is part of the family and that Nu must have a favourite Web page. Discovering that Nu is Vietnamese, Lisa finds a newspaper in that language and suddenly Nu has in front of her eyes the newspaper from home. She can read it; she recognizes one of the photographs taken on the main road. She sees that it is yesterday's paper. She is overwhelmed by this treasure, but she cannot explain to Maria what she has seen and Lisa has already returned to her own favourite website of cartoons. Nu is desperate to get back to the newspaper from home.

When Lisa has gone, Nu tries to turn on the machine one day when Maria is asleep, but she can't figure out how to do it. She watches Maria carefully but can't follow the steps. "Show me," she finally says to Maria one day, and Maria

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Désormais, la possibilité d'apprendre ne doit plus être l'apanage d'une génération ou d'une culture. Ainsi, une grand-mère qui vit dans une maison pour personnes âgées à Victoria a appris à envoyer des messages électroniques à sa petite-fille à Montréal. Avec satisfaction, elle constate en outre que ses enfants continuent d'apprendre au fil de leurs carrières. Sa propre vie, malgré des hauts et des bas, a toujours été remplie d'occasions d'apprendre. Cependant, l'avenir de la personne qui lui offre des soins à domicile, une immigrante vietnamienne, n'est pas aussi prometteur. Si les gens privilégiés de la société ont aujourd'hui facilement accès à des services d'éducation permanente, ce n'est pas le cas des moins bien nantis. Le défi auquel font face nos services sociaux et établissements scolaires est de satisfaire tout autant les besoins des uns que des autres.



does. Now Maria becomes the teacher, replicating for Nu the sequence of steps she herself learned from her son. But Nu cannot work her way around the web. She goes again and again to the site that Maria has bookmarked for her until one day when her Vietnamese employer calls by to check on her. It is essential, she tells him, that she take a computer course, and she wants him to pay.

He is bewildered. What does she mean? Where would she take such a course? What type of work would she then do? Does she think that she will no longer work in seniors' homes? He doesn't understand that she simply wants to learn so that she can travel to Vietnam everyday, at least for a few hours. He thinks she wants to change her job and refuses to pay for such a course.

Every experience of lifelong learning is about at least three generations, but it is also about those outside the "system". This system relates to our established ways of doing things in Canada and relies heavily on the dominant groups in society: those who went to school in the post-war period, those who had a chance to go on to higher education after school, those whose employers have provided some sort of workplace training and equipment, and those who have the means and the interest to attend classes on their own.

In universities, part-time, not-for-credit and special courses have catered to the needs of people in the system for a long time. Courses for retirees are offered at virtually every university. Colleges, such as Atkinson College at York University, are created to offer higher education to working people and to people whose occupations require special training. At the Schulich School of Business, focussed, customized executive training is offered for people like Maria's daughter.

The needs of people in this situation

are constantly changing, and colleges such as Atkinson are constantly changing their curriculum and their programs to accommodate them. For example, Atkinson's Centre for Distance Education recently launched a new Public Service Studies program to give people in the law enforcement, corrections, or emergency response fields additional courses to upgrade their skills.

In addition, people like Maria are accommodated in life-long learning programs that assess their prior learning experience and offer advanced standing. Of the 8,050 students at Atkinson College, for example, almost half have some sort of advanced standing. This helps people achieve some type of certification earlier than might have been anticipated.

But what about people like Nu — people outside the system? For them, learning the language of the workplace is the first key to getting ahead — never an easy task. Many places offer such courses, from Frontier College in which tutors work with people on the streets and in prisons to learn how to read and write, to the English as a Second Language courses in colleges and universities, to the York University English Language Institute that provides courses for incoming foreign students and for other residents of the GTA.

But language is not enough. It is the culture that can be so difficult to grasp. So much in the dominant cultures of Canada is simply "understood", and if one does not "understand" it, life can be cruel and difficult. For example, we trust governments and their services to support and help people. We go to hospitals and doctors for a lot of information that in other countries we might get elsewhere. Learning one's way around the social system — as well as learning the language — is essential. This learning has to be put within the grasp of people like Nu, who does not

have the basic infrastructure to support her need to learn.

For example, what if Maria gives Nu her computer? Will this help Nu? Not if she cannot afford the telephone connection or set up the machine in her own room; not if she cannot read enough of the instructions to get the equipment in place; and not if there are any complications with the software.

There are thousands of people like Nu in Canada — too many for even the best-supported social agencies to help them all. Colleges and universities have an opportunity to support such people through summer sessions and “bridging” programs. These programs help people who are not in higher education culture adapt to their circumstances. At York University, the School for Women’s Studies provides such programs to help women who have been out of school for many years regain their studying skills and their confidence to re-enter university. These very successful ventures have

helped many people. Several universities have first-year experience courses, or bridging programs, for young people who have dropped out of school but now want to return.

These programs, constantly adapted and reviewed as circumstances change, are truly what lifelong learning is about.

Technological change is both a help and a hindrance. It is marvellous that Maria and Lisa can keep up a correspondence every day that brings them together through the written word. Like the lost art of letter-writing, e-mail has a dimension that telephone conversations lack. It is wonderful that Nu can read the newspaper from her home in Vietnam on the Web. But for Nu, it isn’t enough unless it is accompanied by the support to make it all possible — knowledge of English, an understanding of how to use computers, and the income to sustain the electronic connections.

Those who are privileged continue to need ongoing learning, but those who

are outside the privileged world have at least an equal need. Both must be satisfied through social agencies, volunteers, schools, colleges and universities.

Building a comprehensive system requires sensitivity to the generations, the genders, the new arrivals, and the people whose life circumstances have so far prevented them from learning or from having a chance to learn.

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