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Leap into...

Lifelong Learning

This publication is designed for University of Adelaide staff who are interested in lifelong learning—what it is and how it can be put into practice to enhance learning and teaching.

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What is Lifelong Learning?

Different writers ascribe different meanings to lifelong education and lifelong learning. One such meaning is:

"The single crucial element in the notion of lifelong education is to be found in the word 'lifelong': it embraces a set of guidelines for developing educational practice ('education') in order to foster learning throughout life ('lifelong'). Lifelong education thus defines a set of organisational, administrative, methodological and procedural measures which accept the importance of promoting lifelong learning."

(Knapper and Cropley, 2000, p.9)

In essence, the basic idea behind the term 'lifelong learning' is that deliberate, focused learning does and should occur throughout a person's lifetime.

Therefore, for university education the following are considered crucial:

- student-centred learning;
- a focus on learning so as to equip students with the attitudes and skills to learn for themselves both in formal education and long after they have graduated;
- recognising that learning occurs in a wide variety of contexts both in the University's academic and non-academic settings, and beyond, in the community, the workplace and the family (i.e. "lifewide learning").

In a world of confusing educational jargon, it may help to think of lifelong learning as a broad educational goal rather than an educational process. Student-centred learning can be thought of as a process to help achieve that goal.

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What would a lifelong learner look like?

Consider the following criteria adapted from [Knapper and Cropley](#) (2000, p. 170).

Lifelong learners:

- Plan their own learning
- Assess their own learning
- Are active rather than passive learners
- Learn in both formal and informal settings
- Learn from their peers, teachers, mentors etc.
- Integrate knowledge from different subject areas when required
- Use different learning strategies for different situations.

There is much overlap between the scholarly skills required for research and for lifelong learning, a connection we will explore shortly. We suggest that these skills and attitudes should form part of the core of university teaching and learning.

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Why is Lifelong Learning Important?

There are numerous pressures pushing universities towards adopting lifelong learning as an educational goal. These pressures have been recognised for more than twenty years and include:

- the need to meet the expanding educational needs and expectations of larger numbers of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds
- the emergence of new occupations and careers and the rapid transformation of others
- the explosion in knowledge and technology
- the shift to an information society
- economic restructuring, organisational reform, and changes in the workplace and career patterns
- financial stringencies and the need to find more effective ways of learning and teaching within constrained resources.

For more on these themes.

see [Knapper and Cropley, Chapter 1](#) and [Candy, Chapter 3](#).

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Research as a Model for Lifelong Learning

The points on the preceding pages lead us to the idea that in a university dedicated to research excellence perhaps the best exemplar of lifelong learning in action is the researcher, in whatever field. Returning to our criteria adapted from [Knapper and Cropley](#) (2000, p. 170), researchers can be seen to:

- Plan their own research project
- Assess their own progress
- Be active in organising the information and other resources they need
- Learn in both formal (e.g. seminars, the laboratory) and informal settings (e.g. everyday life experiences that inspire a conceptual breakthrough)
- Learn from their peers, mentors, experts in other fields etc.
- Integrate knowledge from different subject areas when required
- Use different learning strategies for different situations (e.g. deep analytical reading of some papers, skimming of others, discussions with peers, attending conferences)

If these kinds of processes are seen as desirable for our students, we are faced with a large discrepancy between them and the methods we typically use for teaching. Some current teaching and learning practices in fact reinforce the opposite of the above criteria.

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Teaching for Lifelong Learning

Many teachers have traditionally been primarily interested in what and how much students learn and elaborate assessment methods have been devised to measure these. But in the last quarter of the twentieth century a considerable body of evidence has accumulated which suggests that we need to become much more concerned with how our students learn and the contextual forces that shape their learning.

Examples of teaching for the "how" of learning are listed below opposite the lifelong learning criteria we presented earlier:

Lifelong Learning Criteria	Teaching for Lifelong Learning
Students plan their own learning	<p>Formalise the process of planning learning goals collaboratively—if students can participate in developing their own learning they are more likely to feel internally committed to it. Internal commitment to learning is a hallmark of lifelong learning.</p> <p>For an example see the Leap case study from Dentistry, where the students partake in setting the learning goals for their course; also the learning outcomes page in the Leap into...Student Centred Learning document.</p>

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Lifelong Learning Criteria	Teaching for Lifelong Learning
<p>Students plan their own learning (cont.)</p>	<p>Use formative assessment (i.e. ongoing feedback)—this allows students to experience the learning benefits of assessment. They can uncover errors or deficits and use this knowledge to direct their learning. There are Leap case studies using a web based assessment tool in Molecular Biosciences, open book multiple choice questions and lateral thinking assignments in Physiology and email discussion lists in Applied and Molecular Ecology.</p> <p>Develop focussed internships—these can give students concrete real world learning goals that they will need to respond to with their own initiative. See a Leap example from Politics.</p>
<p>Students assess their own learning</p>	<p>Use self-assessment and peer assessment—students learn to take control of the crucial first step in learning; finding out what it is they do not know. Peer and self assessment assumes assessment is a skill that is vital for students to learn if they are to monitor their learning in an ongoing way. There is a Leap case study in Dentistry.</p>
<p>Learning in informal settings</p>	<p>Use learning and teaching strategies that start with the students’ present understandings—learning how to learn in informal settings first requires students to value the knowledge they have acquired informally. There is a page on this topic in the Leap into...Student Centred Learning document. Leap also documents two inventive strategies, one incorporating drama in Law and the other email discussion in English.</p>

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Lifelong Learning Criteria	Teaching for Lifelong Learning
Active Learning	<p>Use a research oriented curriculum—where students are seeking knowledge rather than being passive receivers. They learn how to acquire and filter information. For examples of a research oriented curriculum from Anthropology, Physiology, Politics, and Animal Science see the Leap index page for Research and Learning.</p>
Peer learning	<p>Use peer assessment and group learning—this helps students to learn from each other and also develops explicit peer learning skills. Leap examples include Leap into...PBL, and Leap case studies from Engineering and Medicine.</p>
Students integrate knowledge from different disciplines	<p>PBL is the prime example here, because it usually takes ‘messy’ real-world problems that almost invariably take the student across discipline boundaries.</p>
Different learning strategies are used in different situations	<p>Use strategies that stress the learning process at least as much as learning content—here students are explicitly instructed in how to learn. This can incorporate teaching attitudes and skills, and then assessing them, as discussed in the Leap into... Student Centred Learning document. Other Leap examples from Commerce, Mathematics, and Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences embed learning about the writing and communication process in the content curriculum.</p>

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Assessment looms large in the list on the previous page because it is well understood now that there is nothing that drives student learning more than assessment.

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[Boud](#) (1990, p.103) encapsulated the power of the link between learning and assessment when he wrote:

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"Learning is so driven by assessment that the form and nature of assessment often swamps the effect of any other aspect of the curriculum."

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Furthermore, assessment is integral to the notion of lifelong learning itself, for without determining what one doesn't know—which is assessment—one cannot know what needs learning.

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Evaluating Lifelong Learning

Evaluation and assessment are crucial practices in lifelong learning. Through assessment students can discover the knowledge, skills and attitudes they either lack or need to develop further. Lifelong learning begins with an appraisal of what needs to be learnt (see the assessment page on Leap into... Student-centred Learning). With evaluation we are monitoring how well our learning (and teaching) process is meeting the goals we set, and sometimes how reasonable the goals themselves are. We need to make sure that our practices are in line with our aspirations and rhetoric (for more see the evaluation page on Leap into... Student-centred Learning)

Often the assessment of our students achievements is taken as a de facto evaluation. For this to be a reasonable practice we would first need to be certain that our assessment was valid. That is, our assessment must be measuring, in this case, the variables that make up lifelong learning.

Take the following example:

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) has begun trialling multiple choice tests of university graduates' generic skills. These types of tests are sometimes seen as assessing lifelong learning skills.

We would take the view that tests of generic skills are fairly limited, in that they fail to take into account the attitudinal dimension of learning. That is, a student may have critical thinking skills or IT skills (or whatever else passes as a generic skill) but still not take responsibility for their own learning or even be capable of designing and assessing their own learning experiences.

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In fact it is probably worse than that. A test that purports to measure skills is another sign that these skills are best assessed by others, and so serves to reinforce student passivity. The validity of this assessment measure is thus questionable, and attempts to extend the interpretation of the results obtained as an evaluation of progress towards developing lifelong learning attributes in students would be invalid.

This is not to say we should not attempt to gauge our efforts, nor is it to say that assessment per se cannot be used as an evaluative tool. Indeed, it may be a very powerful, timely measure. However, to be a valid measure of lifelong learning means it must include the attitudinal dimensions at the heart of lifelong learning.

Taking lifelong learning as a goal, we would need to address these skills and attitudes as students go through university, much as we now require knowledge goals to be met incrementally. This does not mean abandoning or devaluing knowledge goals. It does mean that curriculum should address specific knowledge, skill and attitude objectives. It also entails that some of the skills and attitudes students learn involve gauging their own weaknesses and designing remedies. Making the acquisition of these skills specific means that students will also become aware of the skills they possess, something they often cannot do now.

For more on these ideas see the books on implementing Problem Based Learning, by Don Woods, listed on the Resources page following.

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Web Resources

[Leap Case Studies](#) for examples (many links are listed in this text)

[Leap into...PBL](#) (PDF document)

[Leap into...Student-centred Learning](#) (PDF document)

Print Resources

Angelo, T. and Cross, K.P. *Classroom Assessment Techniques*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Barr, R.B. and Tagg, J. From teaching to learning: a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27, 6, 13–25, 1995.

Biggs, J. *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying*. ACER, Hawthorn, Vic., 1987.

Biggs, J., *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*. SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham, 1999.

Boud, D. (1990). Assessment and the Promotion of Academic Values. *Studies in Higher Education*, 15, 101-111.

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Kember, D. A reconceptualisation of the research into university academics' conceptions of teaching. *Learning and Instruction*, 7, 255–275, 1997.

Kember, D. and Wong, A. Implications for evaluation from a study of students' perceptions of good and poor teaching. *Higher Education*, 40, 69–97, 2000.

Knapper, C. and Cropley, A. J. *Lifelong learning in higher education*. London : Kogan Page, 2000.

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Pascarella, E. and Terenzini, P. *How College Affects Students*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1991.

Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience in Higher Education*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1998.

Queen's University. Undergraduate Learning Experiences at Queen's; Results from the Exit Poll, 1997. Office of the Registrar, Queen's University, Kingston, 1998.

Ramsden, P. *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. Routledge, 1992.

Trigwell, K. Prosser, M. and Waterhouse, F. Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and student's approaches to learning. *Higher Education*, 37: 57-70, 1999.

Trigwell, K. and Prosser, M. Relating learning approaches, perceptions of context and learning outcomes. *Higher Education*, 22, 251–266, 1991.

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Woods, Donald R. *Problem-based learning: how to gain the most from PBL*.
Waterdown, Ont. : D.R. Woods, c1994.

BSL Main Collection 378.179 W894p

[Why Lifelong Learning?](#)

Woods, Donald R. *Problem-based learning: helping your students gain the most from PBL: instructor's guide to Problem-based learning: how to gain the most from PBL*. 2nd ed. Waterdown, Ont : D.R. Woods, 1998, c1995.

BSL Main Collection 378.179 W894p Suppl.

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Woods, Donald R. *Problem-based learning: resources to gain the most from PBL*. 2nd ed. Waterdown, Ont. : D.R. Woods, c1997.

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