

# Lifelong Learning—A Definition and a Challenge

Wilbur J. Cohen

**S**ENECA, the Latin philosopher, wrote, "As long as you live, keep learning how to live." Centuries later André Gide, the French critic and novelist said, "The wise man is he who constantly wonders afresh."

The scientific and technological explosion in this century has caused us all to recognize that learning is a continuous, permanent, lifelong pursuit. It is a process which commences with birth and only terminates at death and is then carried on by others in a never-ending continuum.

Education and learning are not synonymous with schools and schooling. While schools are a vital part of the learning process, they are only a part. Parents, peers, and community institutions also play a vital role.

I am constantly surprised at the number of people who assume that they have "completed" their "education" with some degree, certificate, or other credential. We give degrees in the United States in a ceremony appropriately called "Commencement." A degree is only a passport to enter the world of work and experience and to help improve the quality of life. It is permission to commence.

In my 40 years of adult experience I have employed many different kinds of people for many different kinds of work. I have

---

*Such a program "could unleash vast resources which would increase the productivity, happiness, and creativity in our nation."*

---

found that the person who learns by doing, who learns by thinking, who learns by experience is a valuable member of any team. The person who has a curiosity, a willingness to question the status quo, and to want to know more about his or her assignment is the person who most likely believes in lifelong learning.

Our educational institutions must become more flexible to meet the needs of these persons. We must find more ways to break out of the traditional lines of learning and living. There is no one right way to learn or to live. The human capacity for variety is unlimited. Our educational system today must take these elements into account much more than ever before.

We could have more institutes, workshops, and seminars on Saturday, Sunday, or evenings. We could encourage employers, unions, and individuals to give workers a sabbatical periodically to learn new skills or develop new careers. We could urge the extension and expansion of educational tele-

vision programs. Community colleges should take their programs into the community to serve the needs of disadvantaged groups. Schools and community institutions should provide early childhood education centers for every parent who wishes a child to have such an opportunity. Senior citizen centers should be established in every neighborhood so that every older person has an opportunity to continue to learn, enjoy, and experience new ideas and new relationships.

### A New Concept of Retirement

We should establish a new concept of retirement: *phased retirement or part-time retirement*. This would permit those persons who want to work and are able to do so to phase into total retirement over a period of years. Working part time or part year and "retired" part of the time, they could engage in new learning ventures in an educational environment or in travel or group discussions. Educational institutions should take the leadership in fashioning different kinds of programs for persons with different kinds of need. We must succeed in persuading people to the idea that no person is too old to learn new or old ideas.

These objectives must be accepted and advocated by leading educators and those publicists who circulate and perpetuate "conventional wisdom." Our state and federal educational leadership should emphasize lifelong learning and make it possible for people who believe in the concept to experiment and innovate in this area. We need federal and state funds earmarked for this specific purpose.

The idea of lifelong learning is both a

very conservative and also a very radical idea. It accepts experience and yet questions the existing order. It values the past and looks toward the future by maximizing the present. It does not repudiate credentials but it does not accept them as the only evidence of learning.

### "To Rise to Great Things . . ."

Lifelong learning is a challenge to our ingenuity and our versatility. It is our hope for a better world and for self-fulfillment for more people. It is not the exclusive prerogative of any group or any profession. It is an enterprise in which young or old may join as Charles Perrault once wrote, "to rise to great things and stoop to small ones."

Our society is bombarded today with the foreboding of "gloom and doom" about the future. I do not share this view. We can build a better world, a more just society, a better environment, and a responsible and responsive set of government, business, and labor institutions. But to do so we must apply our best thinking to our problems.

There is a vast reservoir of ideas among women, minorities, and the majority which goes unutilized and unrecognized. A nationwide program of lifelong learning could unleash vast resources which would increase the productivity, happiness, and creativity in our nation. Now is the time to take up this challenge and make 1976 the year we revolted against our apathy and disillusionment to create a new direction in our national life.

—WILBUR J. COHEN, *Dean, School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

---

## Future ASCD Annual Conferences

|             |             |               |                          |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| <b>1976</b> | March 13-17 | Miami Beach   | <i>Convention Center</i> |
| <b>1977</b> | March 19-23 | Houston       | <i>Civic Center</i>      |
| <b>1978</b> | March 4-8   | San Francisco | <i>Civic Center</i>      |

---

Copyright © 1975 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.