What Is Lifelong Learning?

By Alison J. Head
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Who doesn’t believe in lifelong learning? Many librarians, educators, parents, and government officials are stalwart supporters of lifelong learning. However we’d argue that while lifelong learning seems to be a deceptively simple concept, it’s actually quite tough to pin down.

Is the elderly couple ambling arm-in-arm through the MOMA lifelong learners? Is the farmworker, taking a moment to read an online post about how to register to vote while his daughter checks out books from a public library, learning? How about the electrician taking a class on digital signal processing in an evening class at the local community college?

As lifelong learning becomes one of the most discussed topics in education today, there may be no better time to consider what it means to learn, both within the classroom and beyond.

According to its formal definition by the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learning, lifelong learning is a continuous, intentional, and self-directed process that people engage in throughout their lives to acquire knowledge and skills to remain employable and competitive in the workplace, to be productive citizens, and to enjoy personal growth.¹

Policy makers in education have identified a critical need for the encouragement of lifelong learning through undergraduate curricula to ensure a competitive workforce in times of turbulent global change, to promote personal growth, and to ensure social equality.

Librarians of all stripes have long maintained that the more adept people are at finding, evaluating, and applying information in their lives, the more empowered they will be as lifelong learners. For example, information problem-solving skills are lifelong information literacy competencies, and gaining expertise in information seeking and use will determine whether or not individuals or groups will be successful in our complex, information-centric world.

Lifelong learning is essential in a democratic society. Citizens need to stay informed in order to engage in the civic life of their communities, to navigate daily life, and to manage the myriad details of modern living.

Today, the pathways to and uses of information have drastically changed. The proliferation of information technology, of digital information resources, and the decreasing shelf life of information have transformed the need and nature for lifelong learning and the ways in which we search, use, and evaluate information.

Even as information seeking and use have become more complex and there is more information than ever, little is known about the information-seeking behavior of today’s recent college graduates. If higher education is to prepare today’s students to be lifelong learners, we must know more about strengths and gaps in students’ information behaviors.

Over the next two years we will lead a large-scale research study that asks a crucial question: How do recent college graduates find, evaluate, and use information for lifelong learning in the workplace and in their daily lives?

The study will be led by a team of researchers from Project Information Literacy (PIL) and the University of Washington’s Information School and was funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services with a 2013 National Leadership Grant.

We will investigate recent graduates’ information-seeking behavior for lifelong learning, while making recommendations for services, systems, and programs that will better meet their needs.

We will conduct a large-scale quantitative study investigating how recent college graduates find, evaluate, and use information for lifelong learning once they leave campus, particularly in areas such as staying competitive in the workforce, engaging in civic affairs, and personal development.

Using the data collected and analyzed, researchers will study graduates’ information needs and the information systems they use as lifelong learners. In a related analysis, the team will study the role of libraries in lifelong learning as well as opportunities in and beyond libraries to enhance lifelong learning that are feasible, practical, and affordable.

At the conclusion of our project, we will post raw survey data files and test tools to a digital repository so that other scholars can use it for their own research. We will also provide detailed summaries of findings and recommendations to assist librarians, educators and employers in their training, instructing, and engaging with students, while building upon the study of information literacy. Taken together, these efforts are positioned to lead to cumulative change in our understandings about lifelong learning and programs to improve students’ abilities.

There is much to be gained from a deeper understanding of the lifelong learning that is taking place both in the physical world and in the online spaces we inhabit.

We need to know not only what individuals’ needs for lifelong learning may be and what channels they use to satisfy them, but also how they evaluate and discern the information they find in today’s vast universe of information.

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