



You're Never too old!

The purpose of life is to love and to learn

In Ann Rice's [Servant of the Bones](#), a two thousand year old ghost, with all the wisdom of the ages, tells the reader "...*the purpose of life is to love and to learn.*" The happiest and most fulfilled people I know have instinctively followed that advice throughout their lives, some long after retirement and into their final years. Modern society seems to think education ends with a graduation ceremony after four years of college, from which we emerge *finished* educationally (graduate school being the exception rather than the rule). For some, there is a sense of relief: "I am finally done with school!" For others, although there is a withdrawal from the formal fountain of structured knowledge, the individual quest for wisdom has just begun. We addicted learners have to take our knowledge fixes when and where we can get them: newspapers, books, television, movies, and conversations.

We start our post-education working lives as "doing" beavers, busily chewing down trees oblivious of the forest beyond. To fulfill our educational destiny, we soon become organizers and directors of work. Ultimately, if we have distinguished ourselves at the first and middle levels of our careers, we get to be the philosophers who decide what we do and why we do it. The number of workers educated or not, who rise to the pinnacle of any corporation or organization as senior executives is about 4%, approximately the same percentage of drafted professional baseball players who ever makes it to the major league. What major league baseball players and chief executives have in common is that both study their craft and hone their skills throughout the course of their professional careers.

At some time or other in our working or personal lives leadership is thrust upon most of us. If we are prepared mentally and physically for the challenge, most of us will do a bang-up job as Little League coach, acting department head, commander of National Guard troops, committee chairperson, and so on. But I am writing about those people for whom leadership is not an event but a way of life. They are not seekers of glory who plot and scheme for position, wealth, and power. They are the hungry spirits who prepare themselves for anything and everything that life has to offer by continually seeking knowledge and understanding. When the opportunity to lead taps them on the shoulder, they are ready.

Training Leaders

The education of MBAs, more than any other common form of schooling, assumes that we are preparing students for a lifetime of leadership. In the past decade, however, business faculties have stressed that business schools have another role to prepare students for a lifetime of learning. Life skills such as interviewing techniques and motivating subordinates are increasingly part of the business school curriculum. Some schools go so far as to teach courses on how to enjoy the merry-go-round while reaching for the brass ring. John Nesheim's best-selling book [High Tech Start Up](#) includes a chapter on the *personal costs* of starting a business and how to lead a balanced life. Learning and leadership go hand in hand.

Students emerge from MBA programs well attuned to the learning resources aimed at their chosen trade. They all subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal*, watch the Bloomberg Channel on TV, read the latest popular management theory books, and follow the biographies of highly successful people in an attempt to discover their habits and their secrets (too often discovering only what brand of cereal they eat for breakfast).

The essential lessons of an MBA program rehash Fulghum's [All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten](#), updated for adult learners and future leaders: "Play well with others" (teamwork); "Share" (information); and "Don't hit" (what goes around, comes around). Missing is: read poetry and fiction; watch movies; look at art; play with children; smell flowers; keep a diary; practice laughing; dance and sing. The most successful humans on our planet have a continuous involvement with this "missing" list, *in addition* to the pursuit of their careers. They are special because of their ability to learn from these experiences and weave that learning into the fabric of their lives both on and off the job.

If this sounds like a "Pollyanna" endorsement of "all-of-life-is-learning," it is not. Most passionate consumers of "life's little lessons" are very selective in their learning activities and are impatient with gratuitous art and superfluous words. We learn most from what we understand least, and so explorations outside our comfort zones of expertise yield the newest and often most useful information. Our learning-leaders read widely in science, art, history, and politics. They have diverse fictional tastes, but focus on authors who can teach us new things about the world we live in, be it lessons in history, geography, another culture, or something as mechanical as photography, water tables, or warfare. Just as we exercise our bodies, the willing suspension of belief often required by good fiction exercises our imagination and invites us to think out of the box in our careers. This is a critical, though oft-undervalued dimension of the holistic learning experience.

I have often quipped to friends, "If you can't get an MBA, read [The Godfather](#)." In the early chapters, we get an insightful explanation of the

operation of a *favor bank*, the most important operating principle of any corporate culture. Successful leaders understand this principle and go through their careers reaping considerations for unsolicited past favors performed for others. Play nice and share. The power of this experience comes from the metaphorical mapping of a concept like the *favor bank* from one activity to another. That cross-pollination of concepts between disparate activities turns out to be the best way to solidify our conceptual learning.

Whatever we read, we are disciplined to process the written word in most of what we do. It is a linear activity and the primary mode for learning in our formal education systems. We do this almost entirely with the left side of our brain, leaving the right side on idle waiting for something two dimensional with which to work. Only engineers in our society are trained to systematically visualize relationships graphically. Their ability to use both sides of their brain and integrate the results makes them powerful problem solvers. The engineer learns this formally in college; our learner-leader understands it intuitively.

Lessons from the Internet

One of the most overused phrases of the Internet age is, “The Internet changes everything!” It is far from a universal truth, given that only 15% of the world’s population has daily access to telephones in their homes. But for those of us fortunate enough to be “connected,” the statement has a powerful ring of truth. For forty years, television was the primary venue for off-hours visual learning. The 90s saw all that change as desktop computers and high-speed networks found their place in the home. Our learner-leaders were probably the first to see the potential of this new interactive venue as a superior learning alternative to the scheduled push-technology of TV. Early adopters were often ridiculed, called “hackers,” and chided for “playing” with their computer toys.

The new venue, however, opened limitless vistas for our passionate lifetime learners. They had the perfect venue for self-paced, self-motivated, self-directed learning. It was non-judgmental and seemingly unbounded. It had copious amounts of written words to be sure, but over time, words gave way to pictures, sounds, drawings, and images of all kinds as the predominant way of communicating and navigating. Now, with faster networks, sound and video expand the learning experience.

There is nothing new here. All of this builds on the observations of human learning behavior discussed above. What is different is the ability of the Internet to build all this on the fly, on demand, and almost independent of time and place. Unlike the written word, the experience is only as linear as we want it to be. We can allow our whimsical personalities to drive us to any place in the world of knowledge that our imaginations desire. And we do so

using both halves of our brain, firing on both cylinders, learning at unprecedented speed.

Implications for Lifetime Learning

Educators charged with the responsibility for training future leaders must break free of the traditional bonds of learning theory and experience. There is no one answer as to what the future of learning will be. The new venue does not invalidate traditional education practices; it just provides more options and more freedom of choice than ever before. The new venue seems better able to take advantage of all that we have learned about “learning” over the ages and takes it somewhere beyond. More importantly, it extends the reach of learning to the underserved populations of the world and holds out the promise of the betterment of all humankind.

Gene Ziegler is Chief Learning Officer at Corpedia Education in Phoenix Arizona and has been an active eLearning consultant for Colleges and Business Schools. You can reach him by email at elz1@cornell.edu and check him out at www.geneziegler.com.



Copyright (c) 2000-2004 LiNE Zine (www.linezine.com)