The Learning Journey

By Tim Sheppard

"To infinity and beyond!."
Buzz Lightyear (Toy Story)

Infinity, something that is boundless, endless, or limitless. Infinity is an interesting word. It's one that can be difficult to imagine in one's mind. People grow up with boundaries all around them. Physical boundaries such as a crib, a room, a city, the earth. Boundaries of time. There is, after all, only so much time living creatures have in a day, a year, a life. Boundaries are placed on behavior too. If you drive too fast for instance, sooner or later you get a ticket. Boundaries are everywhere. Scientists say that outer space is infinite, but we can't all go to outer space. At least not yet. So is there anything that human beings actually have that is infinite or boundless? Certainly. Potential is one. Closely related to potential, the ability to learn and gain knowledge, is another. We begin learning from birth and continue throughout our lives. But how much we learn and how valuable the knowledge gained, depends on how and what we learn. Learning is an endeavor that can be taken haphazardly or can be accomplished more effectively by applying a system. A systematic approach to lifelong learning is the only way to get "to infinity and beyond!"

So what is learning? Volumes of research papers and theses can be, and have been written on what is learning, what is knowledge, how we learn and all that kind of stuff. Suffice it to say for purposes here that learning is simply the act of gaining knowledge or understanding of something or of a skill, by study, instruction, or experience.[1]

What is Lifelong Learning?

"When planning for a year, plant corn.
When planning for a decade, plant trees.
When planning for life, train and educate people."
Chinese proverb: Guanzi (c. 645BC)

The European Community provides an excellent definition of lifelong learning. All learning "from cradle to grave", from the early years through adult life - encompassing a common core of knowledge and skills which goes beyond basic numeracy and literacy is what "lifelong learning" is all about. Not only about employment-related skills, but also about updating all kinds of abilities, interests knowledge and understanding throughout life. All kinds of learning, including non-formal, such as attaining occupational skills at the workplace or language skills from joining in a study group or learning how to play football or an instrument together with friends. Therefore, lifelong learning can be characterized as "all purposeful learning

[1] Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. www.m-w.com/dictionary.htm

activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence".[2]

The idea of systematic lifelong learning came about in contemporary terms after the Second World War. Millions of US veterans returned to the States with something new. Something called the GI Bill. Nearly two and a half million veterans flooded college campuses following the end of the War[3]. These men and women were older, more experienced than the typical students that teachers had experienced before. Not only were these veterans older, they had more experience and seen much more of the world than many of the professors themselves. This new class of student was not interested the undergraduate lifestyles of fraternities and beer parties. These people were there to learn and gain an education to help them improve their lives, and their country's standard of living, in the future. Alas "adult education" was born. It wasn't a far stretch from there to continuing education and lifelong learning.

The ability to continue education, in particular formal education, well into our adult lives is largely taken for granted in the US. However, it is a privilege that not all enjoy. Besides obvious factors such as the cost and time involved, adult education is not something engendered in all cultures. Japan, for example, has a high-quality educational system that can compete with any in the world. However, with few exceptions, educational institutions are geared solely towards younger students to prepare them for the workplace. Once they begin a profession it is very unusual for an adult to go back for additional formal education.

In the US it is not at all uncommon to see older people walking college campuses and sitting alongside 18-year olds in class. Even more common are night classes, correspondence courses, and classes held over the internet that are specifically designed to be convenient for people that are already in the workplace. Designed this way to let them continue to learn and improve themselves. Many universities compete for the lifelong learner by continuing to offer more convenient, yet high quality learning experiences, no matter a person's age or even where in the world they may be at the moment. Several colleges are rightfully proud of offering courses people can take even if sailing on a war ship or forward deployed on some far off land.

Some Reasons for Lifelong Learning

"Here is a test to find out whether your mission in life is complete.
If you're alive, it isn't."
Richard Bach

One reason people continue to strive to learn is to be of more value to organizations they belong to. Most people associate themselves with organizations for more than just a paycheck. People want to be involved in activities they believe in. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than with those that serve in the nation's military

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[2] European Communities "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality" 1995-2001 http://europa.eu.int/geninfo/

[3] Clifford Geertz. American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 45. "A Life of Learning." 1999. www.acls.org/op45geer.htm

services. Retired Major General Perry M. Smith discusses the importance of continuing to learn throughout one's career, whether military or in business. In his superb book *Rules and Tools for Leaders*, Smith discusses the importance of leaders taking time to mentor subordinates by encouraging them to read something new and challenging frequently. He also recommends the leaders establish a reading program for themselves. Noting that "the really tough jobs cause people to burn up intellectual capital because these individuals stay so busy that they have little time to read, research, or reflect." By establishing a systematic reading program for yourself and for your subordinates, Smith notes you can keep the cerebral energy of the organization active and growing.

Another reason for committing oneself to lifelong learning is that with the changing economy and job market one can no longer expect to have a single secure job that allows them to go to work everyday doing the same thing. Most people these days don't even want that. They want more challenge than just performing a routine task over and over. Even, however, if someone may be comfortable with a routine job, employers are not. Employers need people today that have good problem solving skills, work well with others, and are flexible, able to adapt quickly to changing business environments. The same is true within the military. Specialization is fine to a certain degree. But once you get past the jobs a trained monkey can perform, the military needs people that can think, decide and act based on an understanding of conditions such as a "commander's intent" coupled with "rules of engagement." In today's environment there is not enough time to pass all decisions up the chain of command for answers. The lowest-level teams out in the field must be able to understand the requirements, the changing conditions, evaluate alternates, and take decisive-action at the spur of the moment. This leads into another reason why those within the Department of Defense should embrace lifelong learning -- because you should.

Retired Marine Col. Robert E. Lee discussed learning when he was in charge of the Marine Corps "The Basic School" for USMC officers. Discussing the importance of transferring wisdom from experienced Marine officers to younger ones two very important facts are noted[4]:

1. War is confusion and the unexpected. As a (service member) you either learn to embrace it and even turn it to your advantage, or you find another career.

2. Because of this difficult fact, the only way to succeed is to have at your disposal a wide set of knowledge "templates," at least one of which can, with a little creativity, be applied to the situation at hand.

War strategies, operations and tactics are constantly changing just as situations and environment constantly change in the "fog of war." The only way to be prepared, as noted above, is by having knowledge. Knowledge like warfare is not static. It is indeed dynamic and constantly changing. Therefore, to be prepared, to be able to perform this

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[4] David H. Freedman. *The 30 Management Priciples of the U.S. Marines* Harper Collins, New York NY. 2000

most important task of national defense, lifelong learning is not an option, but is a requirement, for those that choose this profession.

Perhaps most important, most people continue to learn just because they want to. There is an old saying that people don't like change. This author thinks that is old news and not appropriate anymore. All people are different and of course no personality traits apply universally. However, too many pundits have stated "axioms" that people have an innate fear of the unknown, lack self-confidence, and lack knowledge thus gravitate towards mediocrity.[5] This couldn't be further from the truth. People are born with a desire, and indeed a biological drive to learn and grow. Life is not a state of homeostasis. Unceasing change is indeed the natural condition of life, thus there is a healthy human instinct and inherent desire to adapt to change. Learning and gaining knowledge is a precondition to change in the right way and to help control the manner of change. Change, whether personally or in the workplace is going to occur no matter if we like it or not. Therefore, to help change occur in a manner beneficial to ourselves, we must have knowledge in order to facilitate and steer change. Since change is inherently different each time we encounter this phenomenon, we must continually grow our knowledge of various subject to deal with change.

There so many different reasons that we continue to learn throughout life that no one paper could possible examine them all. Sometimes we have to learn. Perhaps Dad's car has a manual transmission and if you want to borrow it, you had better learn how to shift gears. Sometimes we want to learn to better ourselves, whether to get into a good college or learn how to drive a ship or tank so we can help our command get to where it needs to go. Often we learn new things like playing golf or how to knit just because we want to. But no matter the reason, like infinity, there is no end to learning.

Just as there is no end to learning, neither is learning itself the end of the journey. Once we have gained knowledge, there is the requirement, perhaps another inherited trait, to share that knowledge for the good of our organizations and communities. Sharing knowledge and teaching others is a whole new and exciting path on the same extraordinary Journey of Learning.

Not long ago, an old man slowly shuffled up a dirt pathway through stifling heat and humidity, finally coming to sit by this author and rest his tired bones for a while. We sat, comfortable, in this small community called Riversdale, etched from the jungle along the southern coastline of Belize. Mr. Oaks is the name of the octogenarian. Since there is no running water there, nor telephones, electricity or anything else for that matter, he patiently explained things like the best place to dig a water well, and more importantly explained where not to as storm swells would pollute a well dug in the wrong place. Mr. Oaks talked about the animals of the area and told of the curve in the reef just offshore where the best fishing is. Probably most important he explained what area of the nearby river the crocodiles liked and where was safe to take a fresh water dip. Listening to Mr. Oaks I realized how much knowledge he had and how much he had learned in his life. I also realized that by passing along some of his knowledge to me, he was still completing

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[5] See James O'Toole "Leading Change." O'Toole discusses speculation on root causes of resistance to change.

his Journey of Learning. Perhaps, as Neal Pollack notes in "Learning in Pace vs. Learning in Place" that "as we age, we achieve the state of "generativity" during which we are driven to share what we have learned during our tenure on the Earth." The journey, indeed, continues.

"When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice."
Cherokee Expression