

# Centre for Teaching and Learning

Good Practice in Teaching and Learning

## Life long learning and self-directed learning

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## Introduction to life long learning

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*The material in the boxes is not an intrinsic part of the text, but it invites you to reflect on the content of the text in terms of your own experience, and to interact with the text to the extent that you may wish.*

In this unit we will look at definitions of the lifelong learner, what skills are involved in being an effective lifelong learner, what teaching and learning formats are more likely to encourage the skills and attributes of the lifelong learner, and how you can put these ideas into effect in the classroom.

The phrase "lifelong learning" is being used increasingly in university course and policy documents. For example, UCD's Teaching and Learning Policy and Strategy says that "The University will promote the lifelong learning perspective in all teaching and learning activity..."(p.6). "Lifelong learning" means literally what it says, and expresses the expectation that an important, indeed essential, part of undergraduate education will be to instill in students the ability and desire to continue to learn, long after the formal conclusion of their university studies.

### **Why is this expectation important?**

The days are long gone when a graduate could be confident that they possessed the sum total of knowledge in their discipline at the point at which they closed their books, did their final exams, and then collected their testamur. Knowledge is expanding. The old certainties of the same full-time job for life and of security in employment have all but disappeared. The state - and the world - needs flexible and educated citizens if we are to avoid catastrophes of all kinds. The hallmark of a good university education will in the future be whether graduates know that their third level work has merely laid the basis for their continuing flexible functioning as learners rather than having provided them with a meal-ticket for life, and whether the graduate has the skills and the desire to continue to learn both formally and informally in the future.

What sort of attributes would a lifelong learner need? Think about the skills and attitudes that would describe a lifelong learner. To what extent do your students currently display these skills and attitudes? What evidence could you bring to support your answer?

## Description of a lifelong learner

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According to the literature, a lifelong learner is someone who has the following attributes:

- An inquiring mind - someone who sees problems and asks questions and who is not afraid to question current orthodoxies
- "Helicopter vision" - someone who can rise above the surrounds and see the big picture.
- Information literacy - the ability to operate appropriately and control the seeking of information in print and electronic forms.
- A sense of personal agency - the belief that they can be effective in what they choose to do, and that they are capable of taking responsibility for themselves and their learning
- A repertoire of learning skills - the skills and attitudes that will facilitate lifelong learning

*(Candy, Crebert and O'Leary, 1994)*

What do you think are the important lifelong learning skills that students should be helped to acquire, in order to achieve the above attributes?

## Lifelong learning skills

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It is almost certainly the case that profound changes will need to be made to the way we mediate the student undergraduate experience, if we are to take seriously the

encouragement of lifelong learning skills in our students. These changes will need to be based on the new paradigm of teaching and learning, which identifies the learner as being of primary importance in the teaching / learning interaction, with teaching being of secondary importance. For instance, Candy makes the strong statement that "The enhancement and facilitation of learning should be viewed as the central purpose of the university..."(Candy et al, 1994, xii). You could find out more about this at Setting Learning Objectives / Learning Outcomes and at Deep, Surface and Strategic Approaches to Learning.

The important skills, which underlie the development in students of an orientation to lifelong learning, would appear to be:

- Independence in learning: the ability to learn independently and autonomously, to take responsibility for their own learning, to know what they want to learn
- The ability to reflect on performance, and to act on reflection: being clear-sighted about their own performance, being a realistic self-evaluator of their own performance, being able to identify problems and knowledge deficits, being able to find information and to make good, ameliorate or solve problems
- The ability to get on with others: good communication skills, interpersonal sensitivity, ability to work with others.

There are two further attributes, not skills, which are desirable in a lifelong learner:

- Being open to growth, development and change
- The desire to stay up to date and to engage willingly in continuing professional education

While this sounds fine, spend a minute thinking about what might be involved in curriculum design if we take this list of skills seriously. What changes in teaching and learning strategies would need to be made in order to facilitate these skills?

## Teaching Approaches most Likely to encourage Life Long Learning Skills

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The literature (and common sense), tells us that the following strategies are more helpful in encouraging lifelong learning skills than are the conventional university teaching formats of lectures and tutorials:

**Activity-based, self-directed and peer-assisted learning:** See documents '*Small and Large Group Teaching*' and '*Deep, Surface and Strategic Approaches to Learning*' for more on this and for a discussion of the importance of active involvement by students in their learning, and for active involvement as a stimulus for engagement and motivation. These documents also deal with the importance of choice in learning.

**Experiential and real-world learning:** we can all attest to the value of real experience in stimulating learning, as opposed to being lectured about things - we all know the power of the hands-on experience. Laboratory sessions are one way of making academic issues real, as are field trips and the practicum. As well, interviewing real clients, performing real tasks like e.g. writing for a newspaper or magazine, carrying out real jobs like e.g. designing a public space for a new suburb, working as a group to achieve a specific end such as the production of a radio program, utilising real work-based problems and opportunities are experiences which are bound to be have more impact than hearing about the issues in a lecture.

These experiences must of course be planned sensitively, supported, and debriefed afterwards if students are to gain the reflective insight that is possible from undertaking them.

What opportunities are there for real-world learning in the subjects you teach? If there are none, could any be programmed in to the curriculum? If you teach a subject with a clinical or practicum component, how much responsibility do students bear for their actions, decisions and self-evaluation in the component? What forms of debriefing are built into teaching and learning following the clinical or practicum component?

**Resource-based and problem-based learning (PBL):** the lifelong learner must be competent in identifying and retrieving information whenever it is needed and in whatever context or discipline framework. They must know where to search for it and how to navigate the process of evaluating the importance of the information when it is found. So teaching strategies must include the need for the student to identify learning deficits and must include the skills to make them good. Teaching must therefore include exposing the student to the Internet and give them the skills in its present and future uses.

Problem-based learning is the ideal format for achieving many of the desirable skills of the lifelong learner, as it places students in a learning situation where they must become actively involved, where teamwork is rewarded i.e. they are encouraged and rewarded for getting on with other people, and where choice and initiative are offered. See document '*Problem-based, Problem-centred, Problem-focused Learning*' for more about this.

Take your favourite subject. Critique this subject in light of the two paragraphs above.

**Reflective practice and critical self-awareness:** one of the most important changes that should occur during the period of undergraduate education is that the student is brought from a position of relying on others for judgements about their own performance, to the position of being a realistic self-evaluator of their own performance. Realistic self-evaluation is the hallmark of the competent professional, and indeed of the competent person in any context. Reflection is the basis for critical self-appraisal and improvement, so the curriculum should include opportunities for this perhaps through Learning Journals, Logs and or Reflective Diaries. See document '*Learning Journals, Logs and or Reflective Diaries.*'

One of the most potent ways of encouraging a mature ability to reflect is to build peer- and self-assessment into the formal assessment procedures. Other ways are to

encourage routine reflection and debriefing as a normal part of classroom or curriculum activities.

There are some interesting issues here, not the least being that of classroom climate. Much can only be achieved if there is trust between student and student, and between student and teacher - this allows risk-taking and self-disclosure, basic to the process of getting feedback from others and testing the estimation of one's own performance against the perception of it by others.

Consider a less than favourite subject which you teach. What teaching formats do you use? Are they your choice, or that of the course coordinator? What opportunities, if any, would you say you provide to students in this subject for building trust, for debriefing their experiences, and for self-evaluation?

**Open learning and alternative modes of delivery:** as well as being information literate, the lifelong learner will be flexible in their approach to learning, seeking appropriate structures and formats for appropriate reasons of needing to know, and taking what they need from these resources. Teaching arrangements thus need to be responsive to student needs for when, how and where formal teaching is to take place. The lifelong learner must be able to:

- learn in both formal and informal settings i.e. from lectures as well as, for instance, from books, the Internet and from experience.
- control and direct their learning whether it is occurring at home, in the workplace, or at the university.
- identify and value the opportunities for informal learning that come to all of us, from the power of personal experience to the advice of a friend.
- use the Internet as effectively as they use a library.

In the future it is likely that formal teaching may also be responsive to content needs as well, through Self-directed Learning. The issue of how much choice students should be allowed or encouraged to undertake in a degree program, or even in individual subjects, is an interesting one in this context - clearly, the more choice allowed, then the more opportunity is given to students to make sensible and relevant decisions about their needed or desired learning objectives. The era of the individual custom-built degree may be a real possibility in the foreseeable future. For more about all these issues see *Teaching Materials and Technology*

Consider the subject you most like to teach: How much choice do you give students in this subject? How do you justify your answer? In the degree program in which you teach, how much choice of subjects do students have? What is the reason for this? In some universities professional degrees like Veterinary Science and Dentistry give students no choice at all during the undergraduate program. Do you think this is reasonable? Why?

## **Building the skills of life-long learning into the curriculum**

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This final section attempts to distill the ideas and theories canvassed in the previous sections into a practical list of tips and suggestions, which are oriented to encouraging in students the skills and values of a lifelong learner. Even if you have little opportunity to influence the curricular experiences your students undertake, nevertheless the list below will contain some ideas for changes which are well within the ability of any classroom teacher to accomplish.

- 1. Incorporate activity-based learning strategies like groups, syndicates, projects, simulations and role-plays into your teaching**, in preference to passive strategies like lectures. If you are obliged to lecture, then build activities like buzz groups into the lecture (see document '*Small and Large Group*

- Teaching* for a description of buzz groups and other lecture-based activities, and how to organise them).
2. **When learning objectives have been given in a subject, let individual students decide how they will achieve them.** They can present an individual portfolio to demonstrate this at the conclusion of the subject. This will encourage students to think for themselves, make decisions and stand by them. This strategy works better in subjects where specified levels of identical material are not required. See document '*Good Practice in Assessment*' which contains units which expand on these ideas.
  3. **Whenever feasible allow choice of content, so that students are encouraged to follow and deepen their own individual interests** e.g. in history, or literature. It is also the case that choice within professional subjects can be offered to students to some extent e.g. choice of topics that illustrate a principle, or a practical task whose results can be extrapolated to other areas. The extreme example of choice of content is seen in the use of a learning contract, where the individual student contracts with the teacher concerning what is to be learnt for the semester, what learning strategies will be used, and how it is to be assessed. Such a situation clearly supports and encourages a student's ability to make sensible choices about their areas of interest, and to take responsibility for undertaking learning in these areas.

However, be aware that choice in formal exams in subjects which require specified levels of identical material will usually lead to students gambling on exam content. The consequence of this is that students may deliberately ignore sections of the course - and what is the point of awarding a pass to a student whose gamble has paid off but who may have large knowledge deficits in the subject?

4. **Eventually, flexibility in learning and delivery will become very important for the university.** Flexibility supports the concept of lifelong learning, by encouraging students to become familiar with unconventional learning milieus. Flexible approaches will allow students to study in the conventional manner via

lectures on campus, or alternatively by reading, or by the Web, or by any combination of formats e.g. tutorials may be asynchronously Web-based both for on-campus and distance students. This will allow students to study in their own time and in a variety of locations. This acknowledges that many students also have paid jobs and thus do not have the time for conventional attendance at the university. It also allows for the current bugbear of many employed students, which is the need to be available to travel at inconvenient times.

To institute flexible approaches to teaching and learning will need a conscious commitment by academic groups, however - it is difficult for an individual to re-organise learning in such a radical way without thoroughgoing technical, pedagogical and moral support. Nevertheless, there are persuasive arguments, as you can see, for flexible learning and flexible delivery, as it conditions the student to be independent, to take responsibility for their learning, and to use a variety of learning formats and resources.

5. **Investigate the possibilities of teaching your subject in a problem-based format** to promote activity, interest and independence.
6. **Build in the requirement to retrieve and analyse information as part of the assessment procedures** and thus of the learning process in your subjects. Students can be asked to research a topic, find and critique some appropriate Websites, compile an annotated reading list, use a data base, retrieve information, identify and follow up a problem, or whatever exercises will involve them in improving their information literacy.
7. **Build into your teaching strategy the requirement of students that they should verbally explain something to someone else.** Explaining well is not necessarily an easy thing to do; students must learn to separate the important from the unimportant, to prioritise, to construct a persuasive narrative, and to "think on their feet". The ability to explain well is a valuable asset, and as we all know, the need to explain to others is a powerful impetus for understanding the material oneself. Verbal explanation can occur in a one-to-one classroom

- situation, in the requirement of a formal presentation to the class or group, in the need to operate within a working group, and in the more formal aspects of assessment by viva or oral.
8. **Include peer and self-assessment in both formative and summative assessment procedures in your subjects.** Refer to document '*Peer and self-assessment*' for more information.
  9. **Use "authentic assessment" wherever possible.** For example, rather than simply asking for an essay, students might be required to write a book review, design an information leaflet, participate in a commission of inquiry, write a Web page with appropriate links to inform a lay audience, prepare a brief for a client, produce a poster for a conference. In other words, try and make the form of the assessment as congruent with real life activities and requirements as possible.

Where students work together in groups then they should be assessed as group members - it is often the case that while much of the process of a subject is carried out in groups, the assessing of groups is seen to be too difficult, but there are techniques for making the assessment of group members and group products fair and equitable. See document '*Assessing Group Work / Projects*' for further information.

Can you make a commitment to changing something in the way you teach or organise one of your subjects, along the lines suggested above? Be specific about this. You may wish to talk to a departmental colleague about this. If you are hesitant to do this, or unsure about some aspect of change, or would just like to pursue some of these issues further, then staff of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (formerly the Teaching Development Unit) would be pleased to be of assistance.

Although the obligation to your students to help them to become lifelong learners may seem intimidating, it is useful to realise that in the end you are not alone here - it cannot

be achieved unless the university itself displays the characteristics of a learning institution. Candy (1994) says the following:

*"The most vital determinant of whether or not graduates choose to become lifelong learners is the climate of intellectual inquiry in the institution, and the single most important factor influencing this climate is whether or not the academic staff members themselves manifest a lively curiosity, a passion for their subject and a predisposition towards being continuing lifelong learners themselves." (xiii)*

## References and further reading

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