

# Naturally connected:

## Lifelong learning and wellness

by **Guy Ewing**

**How can adult learning support wellness?** An important part of being well is knowing that one has opportunities to continue to learn and grow throughout life. So a commitment to individual and social wellness entails a commitment to lifelong learning.

Here in Ontario, adult education programs do not add up to opportunities for lifelong learning. They were not designed through a policy that makes education continuously available to adults, to be accessed as needs and opportunities arise. Instead, they were designed with their own internal logic, as complete learning programs in their own right: literacy programs teach you to read and write; English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs teach you English; adult high school programs give you a high school diploma; community college programs give you a trade.

It has been possible to move from one program to another, but the transition can be difficult. In recent years, it has become more difficult as funding cutbacks and accountability measures have created pressures for programs to concentrate on their higher-level students. Students who are already at a higher level will be more likely to succeed, minimizing the investment of time per student and maximizing results. They are less costly and generate better statistics. Focusing on these students may seem to make sense from a program perspective, but creates problems from a system perspective because this focus makes it difficult for students to move from one program to another. As each program reduces programming at its bottom end, it raises its entrance requirements. This is a particular problem for adult students who start at a beginning level.

The problem of moving from one program to another could be fixed with better funding and accountability mechanisms, ones that focused on learners' needs rather than on the Treasury Board's



bottom line. Of course, that would only be the beginning of the creation of lifelong learning opportunities for adults in Ontario. It would build bridges between programs, improving a system that has been described by some adult educators as an archipelago without bridges. But building bridges is not enough. The whole notion of adult education as a group of islands is limiting. Why should adult education be an archipelago when it can be the mainland?

A system of separate, complete adult education programs reflects a view of adult education as repair work. In this view, adults get a chance to learn something that they did not learn as children. The deficient part is identified, and programming is provided to fix this deficient part.

A program to fix something has a definite end in mind. Once the problem is fixed, the program has served its purpose. I call this an end-point learning approach to adult education.

Lifelong learning, on the other hand, does not have a predetermined end point. This way of describing

adult education assumes that learning can continue for various lengths of time, to be determined by circumstances and the adult learner's objectives and ways of learning. Lifelong learning means continuous access to learning opportunities that are responsive to a variety of learning needs.

Lifelong learning is not repair work. It is access to learning opportunities that can develop in response to the changing needs and objectives of the adult population. It is learning that does not have to be arranged into separate programs, but that can exist on a continuum, a mainland.

From a policy perspective, a government that supports end-point learning makes one-time investments in individual learners whose education is considered to need fixing. A government that supports lifelong learning invests in an environment for adult learning that provides continuous access. The expected outcome in end-point learning, the return on the government's investment, is that particular individuals will reach particular end-points in their learning. The expected outcome in lifelong learning is that a broad range of learning opportunities will continue to be available for those who want them.

End-point learning is attractive to governments who think about the return on their investment in adult education as a monetary return. The government can specify end-points that will benefit the economy, such as making students qualified for skilled jobs, or end-points that will minimize government expenditures, such as giving people with disabilities the skills they need to live independently, with less government support. These are worthy end-points, which benefit people as well as seeming to provide a better bottom line for government. But, in this approach, students whose objectives do not match those of government will have to find ways of adjusting to one of the island programs. An ESL learner who did not receive much education in his or her first country may have to attend an adult literacy program meant for native speakers in order to improve his or her written language. The end point of ESL programs has been specified as learning English, not upgrading one's basic education. Basic education programs for ESL students do not exist because ESL basic upgrading has not been specified. So the ESL learner swims to one of the islands and joins a program that is not designed for his/her specific needs. Similarly, an adult who wants to learn about health, but who will need help reading any written material used in the course, must join a continuing education course in a board of education night

school. The student already attends an adult literacy program, but the adult literacy program is not funded to teach general interest courses, only to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills.

If these students are lucky, the instructors in the programs they have joined will be flexible enough to accommodate their special needs. If they are unlucky, their learning will be blocked. This has personal, social, and possibly even monetary costs (associated with trying to accommodate programs to students for whom they were not designed).

A lifelong learning approach would allow programs to be established in response to the changing needs and objectives of the adult population. If basic upgrading courses for ESL students or health courses for adult basic literacy learners were requested, it would be possible to create these courses. The people in charge of creating and teaching courses for adults would not have to ask whether requested courses fit onto one of the islands. There would be no islands, only a mainland. It would be possible to establish courses anywhere, without consulting a list of acceptable end points.

Such an approach would create spaces for adult learning, and the sense of wellness that comes from knowing that continuous learning and growth are possible. Of course, in a society that takes wellness seriously, lifelong learning opportunities would not be the only source of a sense of wellness. Other kinds of opportunities, including access to housing, recreation and services would also create this sense. All of these kinds of opportunities could be based on the premise that government should provide social leadership, not just repairs.

Are we up to the challenge? It is encouraging that the Ontario government is undergoing an adult education review. It is also encouraging to read article after article in the popular press arguing that we need to move away from a strictly medical approach to more holistic approaches to health. Recognizing that health involves the whole person cannot but help us to recognize that learning is more than repair work. Just as health care should be about more than fixing ailments in our various organs, learning should be about more than repairing perceived deficits. It should be about whole lives. ■

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