

Lifelong Learning at Okanagan College

The Kalamalka Campus recently played host to a group of educators from Sweden who were touring the province looking at alternative models they might adopt for delivering adult education to their home community. One of the questions they asked was, "What age group does your college serve?" The answer of course was, "Adults of all ages." While most of our students fall within the 19 to 40 age range, we have students attending classes at the campus that are well into their retirement years. In this article, Rod Torgerson, discusses a special project he has been working on that explores the growth of the lifelong learning phenomena.

I recently had the opportunity of speaking with 48 people who resided in the North Okanagan area about what motivated them to take training and how their current training needs had evolved compared to earlier in their lives. What I was struck by was that all the individuals that I interviewed were either engaged in formal training or were actively planning for some form of educational pursuit in the next few years. Skills upgrading was the emergent theme, despite the fact that the people that I spoke to ranged in age from 22 to 64 years. Clearly, for these people, *lifelong learning* is more than just a catchy phrase.

Although there was considerable diversity in the training subject, the format of the training, and who was or would be providing the training, all of these individuals felt motivated to embark on additional education. Why such a consistent theme across age groups?

The traditional model of a person's life consists of three parts: 1) the school years 2) the working years and finally 3) the retirement years and yet, based on my interviews, people in their 40's, 50's and 60's were taking courses to prepare for future careers. I decided to review what some of the literature said about adult education, participation rates and the older learner. What I found is that many young people are starting post-secondary education later in life, considerable numbers of women are entering or re-entering the labour market after their children have reached a certain age, many mid-career professionals are taking upgrading to stay competitive in their field and, of course, rapidly changing technology is putting demands on virtually all workers.

I found that the labour market has also evolved so that more people are engaged in short-term employment and contract work. For these individuals, their career path doesn't consist of 20 or 30 years of unbroken employment but a series of episodes consisting of: employment, between employment, and then employment once again. During the between-employment periods, some people choose to upgrade their skills, assuming they have the financial resources to do so.

But what about the people who are nearing retirement? Why are they actively engaging in training? A number of articles indicated that due to improving health and increasing longevity, many Canadians are choosing to embark on a new career after they have "retired" from their regular career. In addition, significant numbers of older workers prefer to work fewer hours rather than stop working abruptly. During this *phased retirement*, increasing numbers of Canadians are participating in job-related training. In a large national training survey published by Statistics Canada in 2003, the 55 to 64 age group had the fastest growth in participation rates and the fastest growth in the duration of training of any age group surveyed.

These findings would suggest that the traditional three-box model is no longer relevant. The boundaries of the compartments have become blurred so as to have little or no meaning. Adults move in and out of training as their needs dictate, rather than in some lock-step fashion dictated by their age. The challenge for the Continuing Studies department at Okanagan College will be to

meet the changing needs of adults in our community as they adapt to the ever-evolving labour market.

Soon Rod Torgerson will be completing the project that resulted in the findings he has discussed above. His full report will be available at the Kalamalka Campus library for anyone that is interested in reading more about his findings.

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