



“Am I a good lifelong learner?”

By Marianne Xhignesse, MD, MSc

In 1974, McClusky concluded that “continuous change requires continuous learning.”¹ In 1992, when the Association of American Medical Colleges recognized that what medical students learn in their first year is already out of date by the time they graduate, they recommended a new attempt to foster self-directed and lifelong learning skills.² Their recommendation was also adopted by various other medical organizations in Canada and throughout the world. In 1996, Hasan concluded that lifelong learning was finding ever-greater acceptance as a guiding principle for the reform of education on a worldwide basis.³

Despite the now frequent use of the term “lifelong learning” in higher education, answering a question like the one posed in the title of this editorial can be difficult, not only because it requires a certain amount of self-reflection, but also because

to do so implies having a clear understanding of what is meant by a “good lifelong learner.”

In this respect, Pacheu concluded almost 30 years ago that lifelong learning was a “rubber” concept that could be stretched to take on any desired shape.⁴ Knapper and Cropley suggest that this remains the case today.⁴ They do, however, propose that we consider both the ability of an individual to learn (knowledge, skills, abilities and thinking processes) and his/her willingness or readiness to learn (motivation, attitudes, values, self-image) in defining an ideal lifelong learner (Table 1).⁵

This outline complements Candy, Crebert, and O’Leary’s vision of the characteristics of a person well-qualified for lifelong learning (Table 2).⁶

With these elements in mind, we can now attempt to respond to our initial question. Although the exercise may be somewhat easier now, it also serves to illustrate a plea. Indeed, if we are to promote the importance of lifelong learning throughout the continuum of medical education, surely it is time that we arrive at an accepted operational defi-

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Table 1

The ideal lifelong learner according to Knapper and Cropley

The individual:

- is strongly aware of the relationship between learning and real life;
- is aware of the need for lifelong learning;
- is highly motivated to undertake lifelong learning; and
- has the necessary skills for lifelong learning.

These skills include the following:

- capacity to set personal objectives in a realistic way;
- effectiveness in applying knowledge already possessed;
- efficiency in evaluating one's own learning;
- skilled at locating information;
- effectiveness in using different learning strategies and in learning in different settings;
- skilled in using learning aids, such as libraries or the media; and
- ability to use and interpret materials from different subject areas.

Adapted from: Knapper CK, Cropley AJ: Lifelong Learning in Higher Education. Kogan Page Limited, London. Third Edition, 2000, p. 47.

Table 2

Characteristics of a lifelong learner according to Crebert and O'Leary

- an inquiring mind characterized by a love of learning, curiosity, a critical spirit and self-monitoring of their own learning;
- helicopter vision involving mastery of a particular field paired with broad vision and a sense of the interconnectedness of different fields;
- information literacy, including skilled in locating, retrieving, decoding, evaluating, managing and using information;
- learning skills focused on deep learning: deduction of general principles underlying specific knowledge that can be applied in novel situations, not just ones identical to the situation in which the learning occurred; deep learning is to be contrasted with surface learning, that consists essentially of acquisition of facts; and
- a sense of personal urgency deriving from a favourable self-concept, self-organizing skills and a positive attitude to learning.

Adapted from: Candy PC, Crebert RG, O'Leary JO: Developing Lifelong learners through undergraduate education. Canberra, Australia: National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1994 , p. 43 as cited by Knapper et al, 2000, p. 47.

dition. Such a definition would help us to collectively better understand what we mean by the term and identify exactly what is necessary to develop this competence, when and where it should be fostered, as well as by whom and how. [CME](#)

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