

THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER



VOL. 60, NO. 4
APRIL 1979

The Learning Revolution

Adults in Canada are returning to a life of learning in massive numbers. And they are doing so largely of their own accord. The impulse to learn is getting to be contagious. Could it be that the ancient dream of lifelong learning is coming true?

"If I shall not be learning now, when shall I be?"

— Lacydes of Cyrene, philosopher, on being asked why he was learning geometry in old age.

□ The door of a lecture room in Winnipeg creaks open and a 39-year-old mother of three slips into a back seat, late again for her psychology lecture. In Northern Ontario, a 68-year-old woman drives 14 miles through a sleet storm to the home of another elderly lady who is teaching her how to weave. A secretary in Montreal foregoes her lunch to attend a political science seminar; she is trying to lose weight anyway. In Saint John, a recently-retired ex-soldier shifts uncomfortably on a wooden chair in a library and ponders a complex paragraph on the habits of bees.

Could this be a preliminary glimpse of the ancient Utopian dream of a lifelong learning society? It would almost seem so as Canada's colleges and universities get set to deliver their crop of graduates this year. Among them will be thousands of adults who have taken a successful second run at formal education. And they comprise but a fraction of the multitude of adult Canadians who are learning a vast variety of things in their spare time.

A mass return to learning is underway, the dimensions of which are difficult to measure. It is known that adults make up the fastest-growing segment of educational enrollments in North

America, and will probably continue to do so for a long time to come in an era when classrooms are being emptied by low birth-rates. But the bulk of planned — as opposed to casual — learning is being done outside of schools, and surveys show that the great majority of Canadians are engaged in planned learning of one kind or another. The situation here is thought to be much the same as in the United States, where an expert has commented: "It appears the major question is no longer participation versus non-participation. Almost everyone undertakes learning projects to some degree."

The philosopher Benedictus Spinoza concluded that permanent happiness in life can only be found in the pursuit of knowledge and the joy of understanding. In their pursuit of knowledge today, people are indeed finding happiness and joy. "It has brought a new dimension to their lives," one adult educator says of his students. "They look better and feel better," another affirms.

People who have taken up part-time learning tell researchers that it has brought about a real improvement in their family and other personal relationships, mainly because of the satisfaction and sense of self-esteem it engenders. Merely having an interest and something to do outside of the normal home and work routine helps to combat the boredom which is so often the underlying cause of marital and other inter-personal stress.

Studies show that learning often becomes a family affair, bringing new interests to share with

family partners. It is catching; a wife who embarks on a learning project is likely to influence her husband to do likewise, even though they may not take up the same subjects. This may help to account for the growing strength of the back-to-learning movement in the past few years.

One driving force behind that movement is the realization that education does not and cannot cease when a person graduates from a school, college or university. All of us are obliged to keep on learning whether we want to or not — often the hard way. That being so, there is an advantage to systematically learning the things we need or want to know.

Mortimer Adler, the American philosopher and educator who founded the Great Books program, once offered a pungent explanation of why our education cannot end with our formal school days. "The obstacle to becoming educated in school is an inherent and insurmountable one, namely youth," he said.

The young people who graduate this year will enter a school of experience and responsibility which, for better or worse, will give them their real education in the trials and joys of living. But in the meantime they would be well-advised to continue learning in a deliberate fashion if only to cope with this rapidly-changing world.

The public recognition that learning is necessarily a continuing pursuit arises partly from hard economic reality. It now has been more than a decade since the Economic Council of Canada cautioned that no one in this country can expect to live out a career without having to be retrained in a new set of occupational skills.

But even when people are not compelled to learn, they have adopted a new attitude towards adult education. Gone are the days when to say that you were learning something after working hours was tantamount to admitting to a social disability. People no longer talk about "night school" in a pejorative tone, connoting language courses for recent immigrants and remedial education for school drop-outs. It has now become a point of pride to be learning in your spare time.

A positive eagerness to learn is in the air, proving the truth of a statement made 2,300 years ago by Aristotle: "All men naturally desire knowledge." This was a fact that was lost sight of for many centuries in the western world, while the ruling classes propagated the doctrine that the masses were neither capable nor worthy of learning. To put it cynically, they believed that by keeping the people ignorant, they would keep them in their place.

The Koran admonishes believers to learn from cradle to grave

Public education is a relatively new phenomenon in the historical scheme of things. Even after most children in western nations were guaranteed the right to a basic education in the late nineteenth century, continuing education was tightly restricted to a chosen few.

Now that ordinary people have the educational background, the leisure, means and facilities to continue to learn, they are making the most of the opportunity. And they have rejected the hoary canard that you can't teach an old dog new tricks in favour of the Koran's admonition to continue learning from the cradle to the grave.

It is no longer unusual for people in their sixties and seventies to be enrolled in university courses. One of the brightest ideas in years is being put into effect at the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco, where retired people are being taught a full curriculum by retired professors, making good use on both sides of the wisdom that comes with age. A *New York Times* feature on this interesting project noted: "The Fromm Institute is one of a growing number of college programs being set up to provide education for old people and to give schools a way to maintain enrollments as the birthrate declines."

But learning is no more the province of the old than it is of the young. Many youthful adults are finding it possible to continue studies while building a career and/or raising a family. The urge to learn among those active in the work force is being

mobilized by employers in job-related educational programs such as the one offered by the Institute of Canadian Bankers, in which more than 3,000 men and women participated last year.

The appetite for learning among all age groups is keen and sustained. Dr. Allen Tough of the Department of Adult Education of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education estimates that 80 per cent of all adult Canadians annually undertake at least one "major learning project". He defines such a project as "a highly deliberative effort to gain and retain certain definite knowledge or skill, or to change in some way".

Most have chosen to learn more or less by themselves

His definition encompasses all learning methods, from attending classes through reading, listening, observing, reflecting, practising and getting answers to questions. "Learning for highly practical reasons — to make a good decision, build something, raise a child, perform some task — is included," Tough writes, "as are learning efforts motivated by curiosity, interest, puzzlement, and enjoyment." Looking at the subject in this broad framework, he sees a picture of "fascinating diversity and energy. The vast panorama of adult learning is certainly not dull!"

Among the striking figures cited in a recent study by Tough is that about 73 per cent of these major learning efforts are planned and executed by individuals. A further 7 per cent are conducted with the aid of the learner's friends or peers in clubs or self-help groups. This means that immense numbers of people are learning more or less by themselves, without recourse to professional teaching.

They are finding the experience sufficiently rewarding to continue to learn in this way when they pass on to different fields of knowledge. Adult learners rarely terminate their efforts when a single project is complete. Though they spend an

average of 100 hours per project, they are quite ready to take on another at the end of it; a person who, let us say, has mastered building log cabins might then start studying guitar-playing. The typical North American learner in Tough's study undertakes five major projects a year, for a total of 500 hours or almost 10 hours a week.

The range of subject matter is vast, running from disco dancing to philosophy, from basic reading for the functionally illiterate to international economics. There are some adult educators who would dismiss much of this as mere dilettantism, or of making a virtue of a necessity in the case of job-related projects. "If lifelong learning only means taking courses in wine-tasting and bridge-playing while millions are discriminated against or starving, then it is not what I seek," Paul Bertleson, chief of adult education for UNESCO, told a recent conference. "Lifelong learning is essential because the crucial issues that face us — such as environment, peace, energy, and unemployment — are too momentous and too urgent to be solved by our children some time in the future. Our duty is to provide learning opportunities on these disparate issues — to help everyone learn what we all need for our collective survival."

Clearly it is better to learn anything than to learn nothing

It is hard to reconcile this apocalyptic call to pedagogic arms with the typically modern spectacle of a young woman learning macramé. Yet researchers have noted an escalation in the seriousness of subject matter as people — once they have tasted the satisfactions of learning — move on to more difficult things. Clearly it is better to learn anything (with the obvious exception of criminal or morally reprehensible activities) than to learn nothing. And, since people are not going to stop learning on their own in any case, it is up to the educational system to adapt to their needs.

This suggests that a fresh look be taken at the teaching of the fundamental skills of reading,

writing and arithmetic in the primary and secondary school systems. The focus would be on teaching people how to learn after they have finished school. That distinguished student of the workings of the human mind, Dr. Wilder Penfield, once observed that a person with a deficient education in youth does not make a likely candidate for adult education. Fears are now being expressed that North American school systems are turning out graduates with serious deficiencies in basic learning skills, leaving them ill-equipped to continue learning in their adult years.

Concentrating on individuals, and how to help them to learn

On the level of adult education, a need exists to provide more assistance and guidance to people who prefer to learn by themselves or with friends and peer groups. This preference is strong and abiding, as indicated by a recent survey of 1,500 adult learners across the United States. It had always been believed that the main factors in preventing people from taking adult courses were shortages of money and transportation problems. In this survey, however, the respondents overwhelmingly picked the flexibility of self-planned learning as the chief reason for choosing that approach over attending classes. Lack of the money and transportation required to attend courses ranked at the bottom of the nine reasons given for choosing to learn on their own.

"One finding is clear," writes Dr. Tough. "Adults want additional help and competence with planning and guiding their own learning. Hopefully adult educators will respond by adopting a fresh, broader purpose: to foster the entire range of major learning efforts, not just group instruction and pre-planned courses." He suggests that adult education organizations gear themselves to helping adults to clarify their learning aspirations,

choose their goals, plan their strategy, and guide their work. This could be done both through counselling and by publishing printed material designed to aid people to learn on their own.

Such thinking comes under the heading of "mathetics", which has become a vital term in the vocabulary of adult education. According to Dr. Teresa MacNeil of the famed adult education program at St. Francis Xavier University at Antigonish, N.S., mathetics concentrates on how the individual can be assisted to learn. "It implies a switch in emphasis from instructing to learning, and implies that teachers are educators, helpers, rather than transmitters of knowledge. ... [The] assumption is that people learn most effectively when the learning experience is rooted in their specific learning needs."

What are the learning needs of people in this world of constant changes? They are mostly connected to the individual's personal needs in other aspects of life. They may be expressly related to coping with a job. They may be psychological — to achieve an understanding of others and oneself, and to find spiritual contentment. They may be recreational; we all need something that will occasionally take our minds off our immediate concerns. They may be to feel the joy of having mastered a skill. They may be to further our knowledge of the world around us. They may be to become a better citizen — or simply a better human being.

Whatever they are, these needs are demonstrably strong; and taken all together, they have great social import. The fact that people are now responding to them as never before presents a challenge to the educational system to respond to them too. The lifelong learning society may not have arrived yet, but it certainly seems to be coming. And we can all help to speed it on its way by resolving to continue to learn as long as we live.