

## **University of L.I.F.E.**

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### **Abstract**

We explore the idea of a society where learning has become second nature to us and we are self-motivated to continuously expand our own knowledge and to improve our own skills.

Online learning, both m(mobile) and e-learning, is removing the barriers of entry to lifelong learning, by combining the three main streams of learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning, it has become part of our daily lives.

An important barrier that still remains is psychological. There is a perception that only formal learning done in schools and institutes of higher education is meritorious. Formal education is revered, as it should be, and we receive recognition for this type of learning in the form of certificates, diplomas and degrees. It improves our station and status in life but it comes at a cost. The cost in time, money and energy is high so we try to complete our studies as soon as possible and continue on with our lives. This model has served us well up until now, but with the rapid pace of technological change we need to keep upgrading our “brainware” and therefore we need a parallel system that is less formal but can still improve our lives. With an estimated 200 million people unemployed globally, learning is not a luxury anymore but a basic need. Of particular concern is the high youth unemployment and the increase of the average global life expectancy.

We need a new approach to improve the recognition and acceptance of all types of learning thus providing practical value to the learner. The concept of the University of L.I.F.E, where L.I.F.E stands for Learning, Innovation, Finance and Exploration, aims to do just that.

Lifelong learning can lead to innovation but new innovations needs to be financed. Once financed it can become a business but that business needs to grow and hence further opportunities needs to be explored, which brings us back to learning again.

This paper puts forward a model to seamlessly integrate: learning, innovation, finance and exploration into an individual's life.

**Keywords:** formal education, non-formal learning, informal learning, online learning, m-learning, e-learning innovation, finance and exploration.

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### **Introduction**

Traditionally we used three forms of education and learning: formal, informal and non-formal.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) gives the following definitions for each

(“Recognition of non-formal and informal learning,” n.d.):

**Formal learning:** is always organized and structured, and has learning objectives. From the learner’s standpoint, it is always intentional: i.e. the learner’s explicit objective is to gain knowledge, skills and/or competences.

**Informal learning:** is never organized, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner’s standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience.

**Non-formal learning:** is rather organized and can have learning objectives.

Online education is a combination of all three forms of learning. Massive Open Online Courses or MOOC’s covers formal education, learning from other peoples mistakes or success stories, interviews with successful business leaders for example, can be seen as informal learning and tutorials and “How-to” videos can be seen as non-formal learning.

In today's fast changing and ever increasingly connected world we are relying more and more on the online stream to keep us up to date with new innovations and technology. The formal education sector is by its nature and design not always able to keep up with this rapidly changing world or with disruptive technology (Senser, 2012). Being “professional students” is not something most people can afford, or have the time for, and teaching someone about something that is not even invented yet is obviously impossible. Even if formal education can keep up and sometimes lead innovation it will still be required that all graduates go back for further study at least every two to three years and hence non- and informal learning has become essential.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and others are currently developing policies for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning to integrate with, and support formal learning. In South Africa SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) in conjunction with various other stakeholders defines recognition of prior learning or RPL (SAQA RPL, 2013).

## ***Lifelong Learning***

We'll start with some quotes from W. Edwards Deming (n.d.):

“One is born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity, co-operation, curiosity, a yearning for learning, these attributes are high at the beginning of life but are gradually crushed out, diminished, year by year, throughout life. Why crush them out, why not nurture them?”

“Learning is not compulsory.... neither is survival.”

“Two basic rules of life are: 1. Change is inevitable. 2. Everyone resists change.”

We learn something new every day. Without learning and adapting to changes around us we will not survive, it is the most natural and essential thing we do and yet we have managed to disconnect ourselves from learning. We make learning out to be this difficult thing that we have to suffer through and pay a lot of money for. This erroneous perception is the route cause of many of the problems in modern society. It has caused a “mental block” to learning and feelings of inferiority in many, even in highly educated people.

We did not have to go to school to learn how to walk and talk. Walking on two legs and talking, communicating our needs to others, are some of the most complex things we'll have to learn and yet it happens quite naturally, and for free, in the first 3-5 years of our existence.

Informally we learn from a variety of sources: family, friends, TV, books, co-workers, games (real and virtual), Google, YouTube, experimenting, failing, talking to others, Facebook, Twitter,

etc. Most of this learning is quite effortless and easy but that does not mean that it is not important or essential to our well-being. The only difference between formal and in/non-formal learning is that most people do not see the latter as valuable. There is no system for evaluating the relevance of these forms of learning which makes it harder to define and value, unlike the accreditation system for formal learning which can be “officially” recognized.

We complicate things way too much.

So what will happen if we incorporate formal “higher” learning into our daily lives as naturally as we do informal learning? We need an alternative way to present formal learning and to change the perceptions associated with it. We could present it more in the form of a film or series and make it much more interesting through the use of animation, music and interviews with different people compared to the traditional one lecturer “talk-and-chalk” approach. “Stories are the enactment of the whole mind in concert with itself” (Fisher, 1984).

All forms of learning should be part of our culture and our normal life and in so doing we will nurture and not crush our natural yearning for learning.

Let's explore the possible ways that this can be achieved.

### **Learning in a relaxed informal environment**

Creating an informal and relaxed physical environment where people of all walks of life can meet and learn from each other is advocated. “Educational studies provide a strong argument for the importance of learning in informal settings” (“Informal learning settings.” n.d.). This is not a new idea and has been around since antiquity, take sitting around the campfire and sharing stories as an example.

The coffee shop is a more modern example. First established in the Ottoman Empire in 1555 and later in Europe in 1645 it was a place to discuss politics, debate, get the news and learn from each other (Ellis, 2011). The Knowledge Café (Gurteen, n.d.) is the most recent variation on the theme.

Many people working online today are using coffee shops as their office because of one very important technological development, access to the internet via Wi-Fi. People are telling us how they want to work, so let them study and learn in an environment where they are comfortable as well.

An informal virtual space is as important and Web 2.0 with social media provides this environment. “A Personal Learning Environment or PLE is a potentially promising pedagogical approach for both integrating formal and informal learning using social media and supporting student self-regulated learning” (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2011).

Why would you go to a coffee shop if you can work in the comfort of your own home? The answer will be explored in the next section.

### **Social interaction**

We are social creatures and need to feel part of society. In the “real” world fear of rejection stops us from interacting with most random strangers. This fear could be overcome if we create a relaxed environment which is purposefully designed to encourage people to interact with each other.

This is the reason why the formal educational facilities will survive into the future. We can talk to fellow students; we are all there for a common goal so it makes it easier to meet new people either by being in the same class, studying the same subject, sharing the cafeteria or just sitting under the same tree on campus grounds.

We can use virtual or social networks and chat rooms and forums and Skype but at the end of the day nothing quite beats looking someone in the eye and having a long in-depth conversation with them.

If we want to integrate the virtual and the real worlds for a more holistic learning experience, and make this available to all people, we need to create this physical common purpose environment in places other than educational institutes and make it readily accessible to the general public.

## **Social learning**

One of the most practical and efficient ways to keep up with our changing world, and to continue learning, is to use the online resources available on the internet.

The problem with individual studying is that it can be confusing, lonely and extremely daunting if faced with the mountains of information that is out there today. Personal social contact remains important and meeting face to face first, will enhance the use of technology afterwards (McDermott, 1999).

The learning experience can be greatly enhanced by forming small study groups of 3-5 people that have similar interests. The group can support each other, share information and ideas, work on new innovations, and start joint business ventures.

The two most pressing issues facing us today is the level of youth unemployment and the aging population. Bringing people from across the generations together will combine the daring of youth and the wisdom of the more mature to learn from each other and to mentor each other.

“Knowledge flows through professional communities, from one generation to the next” but also in social communities. “To develop knowledge develop communities” (McDermott, 1999).

Knowledge is information **and** thinking, Sharing and discussing ideas about the information will expand the knowledge of all.

Learning for the sake of learning feels like a waste of time. Although this statement is not true at all, we as humans do need some incentive in the form of: a qualification, an increase of salary, increase of social status, or just a better life to show as reward for our efforts. If one day we can break the pre-conceptions that go with learning, this will change and it will just become part of who and what we are, continuously learning creatures, and we will not need any external affirmations. The aim of lifelong learning is to enhance one's life and not just to get recognition for what was learned. Being able to apply your learning in your own life and thereby improving it, is the ultimate goal.

## **E-learning**

There is wealth of knowledge online, which covers almost all topics. Everything from top universities offering Massive Open Online Courses or MOOC's to simple user demo's on YouTube or blogs and user forums, digital books, user manuals, and step by step tutorials is all online. More information than we can learn in a thousand lifetimes.

## **Portfolio of evidence (PoE)**

Individuals have a wide range of interests and learning will therefore be multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. This is where the challenge lies.

For example, Mary went online and learned how to boil an egg but also studied the chemical changes that happen and tried explaining it using quantum theory, she also looked at the environmental impact of an egg and the economic impact of small chicken farmers. Not to mention the genetic modification of the feed and the conspiracy theory behind that. She now keeps her

own free-range chickens monitoring their health using wearable technology which feed into a database on a cloud which she helps to analyze. She also controls their coop with automated climate control run from an app on her iPad. She uses the latest nano-fiber egg-catching nets which she developed in collaboration with a leading university on the other side of the world and got crowd funded in a day.

She might be the leading authority on eggs but she only has formal Grade 6 education because her country is still at war after 20 years.... How do we accredit that and what qualification do we give her?

She wants to emigrate but her country of choice does not have “egg-expert” listed as a scarce skill and she is denied entry. She applies for a lecturing post at a university but can't be employed because she does not have a PhD, ditto with the big corporate who wants an MBA so she is stuck and could spend the rest of her life in abject poverty because her coop got bombed and she lost everything except her cellphone which she uses to make a movie about her life and puts it on YouTube which goes viral and now she tours the world giving talks at universities and big corporations and runs her own multi-billion dollar company.

Moral of the story- be a content creator not just a content user.

The portfolio of evidence can consist of a mind-map which can be used as a Digital Curriculum Vitae (DCV) or as PoE for recognition of prior learning (RPL), starting with the individual and listing all her/his interests or fields of study. This can then be broken down further into credits, qualifications, papers, blog articles or preferably into short movies explaining what was learned. The ubiquity of cell phones with cameras and microphones and free open source video editing software ([List of video editing software](#), n.d.) makes creating your own movies relatively easy.

My suggestion is to blog or Tweet or even a Facebook update about what was learned daily (public declaration should incentivize self and others) (Dalsgaard, 2006), make a 5 minute movie once a week summarizing and detailing what was learned and then compile that into a short film at the end of studying a particular subject and posting that to YouTube or a similar site. This could turn out to be a career for a gifted communicator. Telling the story of your own learning fits in with the idea of homo narrans where the current rational world paradigm becomes a subset of a larger narrative paradigm. (Fisher, 1984)

If the PoE ties in with a progress report (<http://www.khanacademy.org/>) or good Learning Management System (LMS) (<https://moodle.org/> and others) the new potential employer can have an in-depth overview of the work-applicants field of study. An institute that accredits Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) will also have a complete Portfolio of Evidence to work from. And the learner will be completely amazed at the amount of knowledge they gained in a year.

Understandably this will take a lot of discipline in the beginning and a big change in mindset but I do believe that once people see the benefit and start gaining self-confidence that it would be something that they will start looking forward to doing. If only a few people can improve their self-esteem and embrace learning daily, no matter what their circumstances, current educational level or income level, we could see a big change in the world. The individual's world would certainly change and it would give them hope for the future.

## Innovation

The more we learn about different subjects, the greater the chance to integrate various aspects of these subjects into a single solution, resulting in a new innovative approach to a problem. Similarly, a diverse group of people studying one topic together, each with a different knowledge base, skill-set and background, has an even greater potential to discover an unique solution.

The rate at which technology is moving and all the new tools that come online daily makes innovation even easier. Computer modeling, crowd sourcing and 3D printing can be of great benefit to the learners helping them to test new ideas and to solve problems much faster.

Innovation Incubators assumes learning to be in place already and provides additional support to members, whilst the Maker Hubs/shops (Cavalcanti, 2013) have more of a learning element to them but both of these models can be easily integrated into the learning environment.

## Finance

Financing for individuals or small groups still remains a problem if you are not connected in the right networks.

We have a lot of options: micro-financing, crowd funding, angel investors, venture capital, banks, grants, competitions etc.

The option that we would like to explore is micro-franchising and angel investors.

If the Angel Investor is part of the original study group s/he can get to know the people, assess their learning and critical thinking ability, work and learn with them and thoroughly problem solve an innovation before he invest his money. If the investor does not want to be personally involved s/he can also anonymously sponsor a field of study and pick the best teams to work with or purpose build a team from the study groups.

Study groups with low income can also look at starting a co-operative or a micro-franchise. Examples of this will be ice-cream sellers on bicycles, the Coca-Cola distribution networks, etc. (Conde, 2013)

Another example will be to implement the ideas in this paper and let's say we call it L.I.F.E centers and we are starting with no or very little money and hence cannot afford premises or the IT infrastructure needed. We can approach an existing coffee shop, maybe one that is a bit quiet and needs some more customers. They have the space, the atmosphere and most of them the Wi-Fi. We can partner with them and start with one or two groups and grow it from there until we are able to afford our own place.

We could start a group in a normal family house if they have ADSL and Wi-Fi. We are assuming that the groups will have at least one smart phone or tablet amongst them or we can loan/rent them one.

In rural areas where there is no or limited infrastructure we can use mobile vans or busses or use shipping containers, install solar panels and broadband access (satellite in extreme cases) and have a small internet cafe and charging station. Obviously this will take some investment but we could get that sponsored or work with one of the cellular companies because it will be beneficial to them as well.

Through this we can build up a network of small operators as franchisees and provide them with the branding and technological support, negotiate better rates for data and devices and do national marketing and promotion.

Even if we look at a mostly free service for the learning provision part of this, the small operators can still make money indirectly by selling food and drinks, offer battery charging or rental services, or charge a small membership fee.

There is also a growth path open to them in the form of accredited testing and practical centers. As the business grows they could offer these services to offshore or non-local universities if they have adequate facilities.

For universities and other educational institutions providing their online course content for free, these centers can provide a source of income because they facilitate the assessment and accreditation provided by the universities, benefitting from economy of scale these fees can be kept small and be split with the franchisee making the courses profitable.

With the backing of larger corporations, NGO's and Governments and with enough funding this can be scaled and bring employment and education to almost everyone on this planet.

## Exploration

Once the learning and the innovation is in place, companies or partnerships are formed and financed and they grow to be successful, constant exploration into new ideas and business models will follow.

Exploring new ways to deliver content and increasing our collaboration will provide new models of learning. By eliminating the fear and competition that is now associated with formal learning we will regain our intrinsic motivation to learn. Our dignity and self-esteem will be restored because we won't feel judged and condemned but supported in our quest for self-enhancement and self-discovery. We will be encouraged to fail and to learn from the mistakes as to enable deep learning and fuel our curiosity. We will not be focused on short term outcomes and results but on living a rich meaningful life.

Who knows where this exploration will take us..... nanotechnology that deliver information straight into the brain, direct connection with artificial intelligence (AI) and an integration with other technologies as we approach Singularity (“Technological singularity,” n.d.)

One day we might even truly understand the Unified Field Theory and realize that we are always and in all ways connected to everything in the Universe and that we can tap into that infinite knowledge at will (Hagelin, 2011).

We have not scratched the surface of the world's biggest unexplored and untapped resource, the human mind. Imagine what can be achieved using this resource by itself, all 7.2 billion of us (World Population, 2014) and now add in the power of super computers, the web of things, bio- and nano tech, AI and most importantly of all, the human spirit and soul..... “to infinity.... and beyond” as Buzz Lightyear would say.

## Conclusion

To seamlessly integrate learning, innovation, finance and exploration will not be easy but it could be achieved if we were to combine all of the above in a L.I.F.E center that has facilitators to assist the lifelong learners in their endeavours. The way forward would be to start a pilot program so that we can learn from our mistakes, explore various options, innovate and of course find a sustainable financial model for it.

The short term challenge will be to develop a generally accepted format for a Digital CV. The long term challenge will be to get buy-in from all stakeholders and establish DCV's as a viable alternative to formal education or to incorporate it into formal education.

All big changes start with small steps and this shift can be achieved if ordinary people start to live to learn. We **can** rid ourselves of our preconceived ideas about learning and education. If we embrace learning as part of who and what we are, we will discover that it is as important to us as eating, breathing and sleeping and that it is essential for our survival both as individuals and as a species.

“Some people believe that intellectual ability is purely genetic or fixed.

This is a myth. Research now shows that your brain is like a muscle; the more you apply it and struggle, the more it grows. People who learn to recognize this fact about their own brain develop a 'growth mindset' and are able to persevere and achieve more.

Imagine what the world would look like if everyone knew what they were capable of and had the mindset to learn anything.” (Khan, 2014)

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## Biography



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