

Learning for Life: How Continuous Education Will Keep Us Competitive In the Global Knowledge Economy

reviewed by Robert Sternberg – October 26, 2016

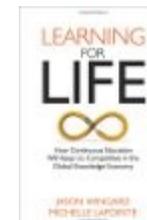
Title: Learning for Life: How Continuous Education Will Keep Us Competitive In the Global Knowledge Economy

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When I was younger, much younger, I read a science-fiction book where life on a particular planet was difficult because the landscape was constantly shifting. If one substitutes conceptual and occupational for physical landscape, one could as easily be talking about Earth at the beginning of the 21st century.

Our system of higher education was designed for a stable conceptual and occupational landscape, the kind where our parents and their parents grew up. One went to school, maybe even attended college, and took a job. One retired from this job, perhaps having been promoted along the way. Many of today's jobs did not exist during our parents' days and those still existing often have the same name as before but require much more sophisticated skills. Jason Wingard and Michelle LaPointe note in *Learning for Life: How Continuous Education Will Keep Us Competitive In the Global Knowledge Economy* that we have left many of today's citizens ill-prepared for the current occupational landscape. Our citizens' skills, even many of our youngest, mismatch with the demands of today's economy. Cynical politicians sometimes promise a return to the good old days, but they do so only to collect the votes of the disenfranchised. Similar to other educated people, they know that the old jobs are not coming back because the world has moved on; many people have not moved with it, are stuck in an occupational landscape that no longer exists, and have become lost.

Wingard and LaPointe's book consists of five sections and 18 chapters suggesting the necessary changes for continuing education to keep up with the changing landscape. Section One, The Context, poses the challenges facing continuing education in the United States. Sections Two (Education Providers), Three (Employers), and Four (Coordinating Agencies) describe current programs that attempt to meet challenges of contemporary continuing education head-on. Finally, Section Five, The Path Forward, summarizes what needs to be done for our society to move towards the future.

The editors point out that the basic problem is that our system of higher education is a poor fit for the needs of today's workforce, especially but not exclusively those who will go into the modern version of blue-collar jobs. I say *modern* because these jobs today require far higher levels of skill than they did in the past, levels that many older and even younger blue-collar workers do not possess. The U.S. is below the mean level of literacy among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, but even literacy is no longer enough. The editors suggest in the preface that the new knowledge economy requires not just 3 R's, but also 4 C's: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. To these, I would add one more C, common sense, and an E for ethical reasoning and behavior. Common sense is important because it is at least as important as other skills for success in the workplace (e.g., often more than academic skills) (Sternberg, et al., 2000). Ethical reasoning and behavior are important because when one seeks to understand spectacular failures in the working world, they are more frequently caused by ethical lapses than lack of IQ points, critical thinking, etc. (Sternberg, 2009).

Learning for Life describes a wide array of successful continuing education programs that could serve as societal models for national programs of practical and other forms of higher and continuing education. The book points out that many European countries have successful models of practical education. For example, my German wife came to the United States and was amazed at the marginalization of vocational education and its students. In Germany, vocational education is respected, well funded, and produces graduates prepared for skilled and high-paying jobs. The United States pays the price for its historical devaluing of vocational education, a track in education often seen as a secondary path for those who fail in academic curriculum. The editors point out the problem that we funnel students into traditional colleges and universities, a route that is

supposed to grant more prestige than a diploma. However, these students are ill equipped for college and often profit little from it. They may drop out before they receive a diploma or any meaningful kind of certification for the study they have completed.

Variants of the European model are found in some American institutions as the chapters in the book illustrate. Usually, they have close collaborative arrangements with business and directly prepare students for careers in these industries. I was once a senior vice president of Oklahoma State University for three years and the campus in Okmulgee has such a program. Students receive a liberal education but also prepare for jobs in tracks designed in collaboration with companies such as Ford, General Motors, Caterpillar, and Komatsu. In addition, Wingard and LaPointe's book provides examples of model programs involving companies as diverse as J. P. Morgan Chase, Aramark, Boeing, the National Football League, and United Technologies. Various agency programs are also described, like those provided by the North Carolina Community College System, National Urban League, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and Northern Tier Industry and Education Consortium.

Part of what is keeping us back from helping students today is a lack of money. However, the main issue is funneling young people into college programs that are not always the best fit for their talents and interests. The best preparatory programs provide a blend of liberal education and job-specific training. However, although the training is specific to a job, the skills students learn through work often transfer to a variety of positions. You cannot adequately learn the 4 C's solely in an academic environment.

In sum, *Learning for Life* is a timely and important book. It illuminates a path for American education to better meet the challenges of the 21st century. We live in a world of shifting conceptual and especially occupational landscapes. Many of the jobs of the future do not exist yet. In 5 or 10 years, many others will be similar to jobs of the present in name only. Will we be ready? Educators could be. A good place to start would be by reading this book.

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