

The Competitive Advantage of Lifelong Learning

UCLA Extension weighs in

BY DEIDRE ALVES, M.ED.

Lindsay Armstrong Vance Ed.D and Andrew J. Lau Ph.D.—two powerhouse voices in the field of adult learning from UCLA Extension, the continuing adult education arm of UCLA—share their insights with me as we thoughtfully continue to grow our comprehensive infrastructure education program here at IRWA, including enterprises such as IRWA University, The Monocle Digital Library, IRWA Certification, Curriculum Simulation & Engagement, Live Class-Room Based Social Networking, and our proprietary CLIMB Standards Based Instructor Development that focus on the learner through Reflective Practice and Contextual Awareness. IRWA Education continues to keep its finger on the pulse of leading edge adult continuing education research and practice—endeavoring each day to fulfill our collective purpose of improving the quality of life through infrastructure development.

1. What is the most significant challenge in adult education today and what is one way to meet this challenge?

Lindsay Armstrong Vance: The state of the economy is so rapidly changing and adults find themselves needing to constantly pivot to keep up with the rapid pace of technological, political and economic change on a global and local level. I believe that adopting a “lifelong learning” mindset is fundamental to overcoming this challenge and turning it into an opportunity for personal and professional growth. By understanding that intelligence and knowledge are not fixed quantities—

that our brains are wired to keep learning and adapting throughout life—adults are better able to navigate the rapid changes and challenges that will come in the future and can find ways to seek opportunities for greater growth and development. Lifelong learners recognize that there is always something to learn from every situation, and they actively seek new information and perspectives that may challenge or expand what they already know.

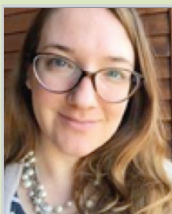
Andrew J. Lau: I would strongly agree that the most significant challenge is maintaining an attitude of always wanting to learn more. Embedded in this attitude of lifelong learning is the acknowledgement that society is always in a state of evolution and change. It requires a kind of adaptability that is at the same time a curiosity about the world and how it works. However, lifelong learning isn't just looking at the ways that society is changing and looking to find opportunities for new work or a new career. Lifelong learning is also an attitude of reflection that involves continually taking stock of what you know and have learned over the years, and as needed, revising those mental models to account for new facts, knowledge and ideas. Lifelong learning is an attitude that allows us to be critical about what we already know (or what we think we know). It's more than looking for an “encore” or second (or third or fourth) career. Lifelong learning is about recognizing the changing world and all of its complexities and finding new ways to engage with it to make it a better place.

2. What is at risk if we do not embrace the current and future needs of adult education?

Vance: Unfortunately, I think that we already see many people and organizations suffering from a lack of quality continuing education that aligns with the current economic and technological reality. Insufficient opportunities for lifelong learning negatively impacts organizations because the workforce cannot remain agile and responsive to industry needs. And while organizations often look to hiring new talent to meet emergent needs, they would benefit from developing talent from within. Lack of continuing education opportunities impact those who find their skillsets limit their employment opportunities and ability to remain marketable, especially people living and working later into life. In general, failing to embrace the needs of adult education leads to a general stagnation of economies, organizations and communities. Too frequently, we encounter individuals (and organizations) that think of education as only for younger adults and children—but the nature of the world we live in is rapid and ongoing change.

Lau: In addition to the stagnation of the workforce, I strongly believe that continuing and professional education has to go beyond giving learners the skills needed to be able to work because those skills often have a limited shelf-

On behalf of IRWA, I would like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Armstrong Vance and Dr. Lau for sharing their expertise and for their continued friendship with our organization.



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life. Technology is always changing and new economies emerge over time. We often hear in the news that automation and outsourcing have had major impacts on the United States' workforce and multiple industries, with some industries disappearing altogether (or are well on their way). In my opinion, what's important about adult education isn't simply providing opportunities for learners to gain new skills; it also has to provide learners with historical context about employment trends, the theoretical foundations and models for a given discipline and instill a sense of hope that they can meaningfully contribute to the field. This is more than simply gaining the skills needed to do a job, and involves thinking—and critically assessing—what one learns.

3. What is the most important skill an adult instructor/educator of today (regardless of discipline) can possess and why?

Vance: The ability to engage learners is one of the important skills that a continuing educator can practice. There are several practices that promote engagement: creating an environment that blends a sense of challenge with supportive guidance, encouraging peer and mentor connections that last far beyond the course or workshop, designing activities and assignments that are relevant to real-world issues and problems that students will (or do) face, and encouraging adaptive and creative problem solving. Asking learners to bring their experience into each activity and providing generative feedback also helps to make the learning a positive and captivating experience.

Lau: I am of the impression that the single most important skill an instructor/educator can possess is digital literacy. While not all education is fully online, much of it is at least enhanced by technology in some way or another (e.g., blended instruction that leverages

both in-person instruction and digital resources). The state of education today is such that we can no longer claim the online/ in-person modalities as entirely distinct. Moreover, many jobs require (perhaps implicitly) digital literacy to perform its functions effectively. The American Library Association defines digital literacy as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.” This also includes being able to use diverse technologies, judge the quality of information, engage with others socially using digital technologies and utilize these skills for participation in our communities and broader society. Technology can be scary for some, especially how rapidly it changes. But there is at least one place that educators can turn to learn more about digital literacy and practice being able to “read” technology: Your local public library! Librarians and other information professionals are deeply invested in digital literacy (and its sibling information literacy), and are always happy to help interested members of the public (adult educators included!) learn about how we access, use, store and share information, whether inside the (online or brick-and-mortar) classroom or elsewhere. As a skill, digital literacy is one that has the capacity not only to help us engage learners in the 21st century, but also engage with society at large as active participants. ★



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