

# Confessions of a lifelong-lifewide learner

## John Cowan



**JOHN** is an extraordinary teacher whose career spans over 45 years during which he has championed and practised student-centred learning. During that time he has placed an ever increasing emphasis on preparing students to exercise stewardship over their lifewide development while at University, and in lifelong learning thereafter. John worked closely with SCEPTR<sup>1</sup> to develop and apply the concept of lifewide

learning and education and took on the role of 'external auditor' which helped the delivery team check the effectiveness of its support and judgments.

### Preamble

In this foreword to the book 'Learning for a Complex World: A Lifewide Concept of Learning, Education and Personal Development, I will draw upon two papers I wrote for SCEPTR<sup>1</sup> in 2010, revisiting them now with a new emphasis on the interaction of the two words in that hyphenated adjective 'lifelong-lifewide'. For when I reread these papers, I noticed that they focussed beyond incidents and influences relating to my *lifewide* learning and development, in the immediate demands of my situation at the time. The generalisable lessons that I learnt were to serve me well and be consolidated and extended in subsequent life, where they featured as significant strands in my ongoing *lifelong* development as a person.

I shall attempt in what follows to abstract some examples of lifewide learning as these occurred, summarise the transferable learning which subsequently ensued for me and show how this influenced my lifewide learning and development in later life. In so doing, I will add some side comments as footnotes to provide a richer and more conversational perspective – by amplifying, and by questioning myself.

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<sup>1</sup> Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education  
<http://www.sceptre.org.uk/>

## Lifewide learning in my schooldays

I had to wear spectacles even before I went to school. My eyesight was weakening rapidly, and at that time the (inaccurate) professional wisdom was that the less I read, the less deterioration would ensue. So my reading outwith school was restricted to thirty minutes per day. I relied upon my mother to read to me, to enable me to do my homework. She also faithfully read for my diversion, at a time when we had radio but no television. In her company I met many wonderful characters in literature that I have ever since regarded fondly as personal acquaintances of mine, rather than as characters in books<sup>2</sup>. Not unreasonably, my mother did all she could to manage me in more than my use of my eyes. But I yearned to be my own person, and steadfastly resolved to make as many of my own decisions as possible. So, despite my mother's caring involvement and natural wish to manage me, I was determined to study, revise, prepare and manage my time and leisure in my own way. I went on making my own decisions when they mattered to me, even when some of them subsequently turned out to have been unwise<sup>3</sup>. I learnt from my mistakes!<sup>4</sup>

My father, who was a lecturer in a then technical college, encouraged and supported me in all sorts of ways. He was a gentle gentleman, who was ever on the lookout for people in need of assistance, which could include his son. He gave help willingly and with pleasure. He demonstrated in his life, and shared with me, his concept of a 'pool of goodwill' to which we should all contribute without expectation of direct return from the person whom we have been able to assist, and from which we can all draw at some time or another<sup>5</sup>.

Having been evacuated after the Clydebank blitz, I was to be taught during and after the Second World War in six different Scottish schools. In all of them, the learning was teacher-directed<sup>6</sup>. I was taught by several authoritarian and brutal teachers for whom the punishment of 'the belt' was a routine classroom activity. One took exception to my use of green ink, and threatened to belt me

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<sup>2</sup> Why is this not mentioned in the account of lifewide learning which follows here? (see ending.)

<sup>3</sup> My commitment to encouraging my own children (and my students) to make their own decisions was probably a reaction to my own childhood experiences and my determination then to be my own person.

<sup>4</sup> Lifewide learning can come from negative as well as positive experiences.

<sup>5</sup> My rewarding commitment, many years later, to unpaid educational development work in developing countries was influenced by values and practices I had admired in my father. This emerged slowly.

<sup>6</sup> Which is not necessarily bad, pedagogically. I found it effective to be instructed how to titrate using a burette, or how to integrate by parts.

every time I used it in his classwork. Deviously and pig-headedly<sup>7</sup>, I determined to be my own person. I ejected the green ink from my pen before his French classes, and refilled it with the watery school ink from the desk inkwell. This yielded horrible results, as the rubber reservoir in my fountain pen had become stained each evening with the green which now melded unattractively with the blue. 'You said I wasn't to use green ink, Sir, and I haven't. Can you belt me for doing what you told me to do?' I knew it was pointless to argue with him about my right to use green ink. I just outmanoeuvred him tactically (if not tactfully), until he gave up in desperation. And I avoided being belted, having even in these days seen the strength of intimating grounds for appeal to a higher authority<sup>8</sup>.

Fortunately, I was also taught by a few splendid characters. One, especially, revealed to me the delights of the integral calculus, which I'm sure I would never have discovered if left to my own devices<sup>9</sup>. Another introduced me to a range of wonderful English literature to which I often return. Generally, however, I soon learnt to concentrate on working out what was being asked of me in the examination system, and to concentrate on doing it well. I did not know then that I was sussing out, and following, the hidden curriculum<sup>10</sup>. My lifewide learning in this, however, was more general than that; it was about finding out what people expected of me in various situations, and as far as possible responding accordingly<sup>11</sup>.

At secondary school, I became secretary of the Rowing Club, selecting and organising crews and travel arrangements – my first experience of management, on a small scale<sup>12</sup>. I sensed from conversations between officials in the boathouse that it was likely that there would soon be a requirement for schoolboy oarsmen to be competent swimmers. Such a requirement, once made official, would have had to be respected. I grasped the bull by the horns, and went to consult our rector. I pointed out to him that our regatta-winning first

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<sup>7</sup> When and with what effect does determination become pig-headedness?

<sup>8</sup> I must have been quite an unattractive schoolboy. Being successful is not always the key to being likable – something I've found in lifelong development.

<sup>9</sup> The seeds of a love for mathematics led me to become an admirer of elegance in proofs a decade later.

<sup>10</sup> Lifewide learning is not assessed. What's the equivalent of the hidden curriculum, as a driving force, then?

<sup>11</sup> a) Notice how often lifewide learning broadens out into generalities. b) Not necessarily agreeing or conforming, but consciously taking account of that they expected of me.

<sup>12</sup> Seizing an opportunity as it arose – a characteristic of lifewide learning. I was soon to learn that schoolboys can be harsh critics of what they deem as incompetence. This was basic and important lifewide learning.

crew contained three non-swimmers, whose exclusion would be a serious blow to our prospects. We negotiated a short-term agreement, ahead of the anticipated ruling that all oarsmen must be able to swim. It was agreed that our non-swimming oarsmen might continue to train and represent the school in this their final school year, provided they took swimming lessons<sup>13</sup>. Anticipating the problem had made it possible for me to avoid it<sup>14</sup>.

An extra-mural activity which I enjoyed, and which also contributed to my lifewide learning, was the Drama Club. The master in charge was a Physics teacher, who had been in the Scottish National Players for several years. He would take us to local theatres and music halls (including the infamous comedians' graveyard of the Glasgow Empire). We would sit at the back of the gallery and watch the stagecraft with him. One of our many lessons was to watch and see that a comedian, however successful in raising laughs, would not win attention without beginning effectively, and would not be applauded warmly unless the closing two or three minutes had also gone down well with the audience<sup>15</sup>. Beyond this point, the general lifewide learning for me was the value of observation as a way into reflective<sup>16</sup> learning and development.

In my schooldays, then, my lifewide learning featured<sup>17</sup> the development of:

1. autonomy: making my own decisions about what mattered to me
2. goodwill: casting my bread on the waters of the pool of goodwill, without expecting immediate return
3. tactics: avoiding direct argument and preferring to manoeuvre tactically
4. expectations: finding out what was expected of me, and delivering it with minimum effort
5. observing: carefully and thoughtfully observing, before engaging in new challenges
6. anticipation: anticipating and dealing with problems before they arose<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Success (on a small scale). How critical is this in the early stages of lifewide learning?

<sup>14</sup> I was learning the secrets of how to be successful in a proactive way. Don't sit back and wait for things to happen; work on a solution to a problem that has yet to fully emerge.

<sup>15</sup> My enduring lifelong learning was the usefulness of objectively observing a new situation, and reflecting on how to engage with it – *before* so doing.

<sup>16</sup> Reflection has been important to me all my life. Maybe it is taken for granted in what follows here. Why?

<sup>17</sup> I notice that my chosen headings all relate to general abilities or beliefs and values, though they arise in the first instance from particular uses of abilities. None feature coverage of content.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this was the beginning of my appreciation of living in a constantly changing world.

I have implied so far that this lifewide learning was valuable<sup>19</sup> to me. But soft words butter no parsnips. It behoves me here to test out this claim. Are there facts from the next stages in my life which bear out that belief or assertion?

### **Subsequent use of my lifewide learning from my schooldays**

1. *Autonomy*: In 1987, I was interviewed for the post of Scottish Regional Director of the Open University (OU). The interview, by five OU personalities, went badly. When it passed to the Vice-Chancellor to conclude the questioning, he commented: 'You don't seem to appreciate, Professor Cowan, that we're looking for a manager who will live above the shop three hundred and fifty days in the year.' I responded that this was not how I had read the job description. 'Indeed,' asked the VC, 'and how did you read the job description?' I replied, 'I thought you were looking for someone whose first priority would be the quality of the learning experience of OU students in Scotland. But that's obviously not what you want, so clearly I'm not your man.' I went home, happy that I had held out, even in failure, for the values<sup>20</sup> to which I wished to subscribe as a senior university teacher<sup>21</sup>. The next morning I was phoned and offered the job. I sought confirmation that my interpretation of the job description had been accepted before I agreed to take up the post. I was so reassured<sup>22</sup>. There ensued ten fruitful and fulfilling years. In that period, alone amongst regional directors who were primarily administrators, I was the OU's academic maverick<sup>23</sup> regional director, concentrating on what I believed to be important.

2. *Goodwill*: As a young lecturer, I was saddened to learn of the problems facing a young Iranian researcher in our department. He had been schooled in Scotland, and gone on to obtain his degree there. Now he was having problems in confirming permanent residence. I did my best for him, dealing with several MPs in so doing. The campaign was successful<sup>24</sup>. He thanked me warmly. I was glad to have been able to help him towards a good solution. Some fifteen years after these events the OU in Scotland was having great problems obtaining suitable accommodation in central Edinburgh. I approached my former student, now a multi-millionaire property developer. He bent over backwards to obtain and refurbish wonderful accommodation for the OU in

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<sup>19</sup> Valuable – or satisfying?

<sup>20</sup> Where had these come from?

<sup>21</sup> At the time, I was contemplating a final appointment which would take me on to retirement.

<sup>22</sup> Was this my self-discovery of a male version of what was being taught to women in assertiveness courses? It was driven by my passion for what mattered to me.

<sup>23</sup> Is this a role I have relished during my lifewide learning? If so, is that significant?

<sup>24</sup> Was I attracted to this as another difficult battle to fight – or as a cause to pursue?

Scotland, at a viable rental. The bread cast on the waters years before was returned in great measure.

3. *Tactics*: As a young professional engineer, I specialised in jobs which had to be completed within tight time schedules<sup>25</sup>. In these settings, my lifelong learning developed my already established ability to manoeuvre tactically. On one occasion we were to tackle a difficult job, in a restricted site where it was impossible to increase the already large amount of expensive plant on site, or the number of men working there (having already planned for twenty-four-hours-a-day working). An obstructive foreman, determined to cover himself should we not finish in time, disputed the relationship between the resource to be provided and time available for completion in my carefully considered plan. I did not argue. Instead I manoeuvred tactically. I arranged to meet with the foreman and his non-union gang, and tabled my estimate of time required (which occupied the full period for which I had scheduled), and the costs, including overtime and plant hire, which was a major item. The men followed their foreman in expressing grave doubts about the practicality of my scheme. I then offered to share with the squad *half* the saving in the considerable plant hire costs if we finished within the scheduled period. In addition, however long the job took within the scheduled period, I was offering to pay each man for the full period including overtime. My offer was taken up – and the weekend job was completed by four o'clock on the Sunday afternoon, ahead of my plan. The job cost less than my estimate, as we saved a lot on our sharing of saved plant hire; and the men went home earlier than they had planned, with full wages and a bonus. Tactics paid off<sup>26</sup>.

4. *Expectations*: As a consulting engineer, I extended my practice of finding out what was expected of me – in this case by clients – and providing it to the best of my ability. I was often asked to advise on remedial measures for old or damaged structures. One early client waved my thorough report at me, and told me: 'I pay you to use your expertise and act for us as our engineers. I don't want long reports. Get it all on one side of foolscap, telling me what needs to be done, why, how much it will cost and how long it will take.' Another client asked for supplementation to a fairly detailed report. 'There's a lot of money to be spent on this work. I need a full report in which you explain to me your analysis of the problem and the situation, detail what you propose and why (with some consideration of possible options), and provide a detailed estimate

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<sup>25</sup> Serendipitously, my first such challenge had led to an effective response, judged impressive by the client and my line manager.

<sup>26</sup> But was it ethical?

of costs and a schedule for completion of the work.’ In subsequent jobs, clients were given what they expected of me, with the same professionalism behind each report<sup>27</sup>.

5. *Observing*: When I was in mid-career, my Head of Department persuaded me to represent our region on four central committees of our professional body. For almost eighteen months, I went to London to sit in meetings where most members were prominent and influential professional personalities. For a while I did not contribute to the discussions; but I observed carefully. In due course, I went on to use effectively what I had learnt from my observations, and from elsewhere<sup>28</sup>.

I had seen, for example, that if I expected to disagree with a strong personality and effective debater, I should arrive early and sit near him on his side of the table. He would find it difficult to confront someone alongside him.

I had seen that succinct statements, worded clearly in short sentences, were more likely to engage the members’ attention; so I prepared accordingly in hastily scribbled drafting and redrafting of possible wording on the margin of my agenda paper, before contributing.

I had seen the devastating power of the pertinent question to puncture a bubble of pomposity or lack of accuracy; and I used questions accordingly.

For a while I kept a score in my reflective diary of tactics that had paid off for me. It was quite effective<sup>29</sup>. Observation had extended my lifewide learning into yet another area.

6. *Anticipation*: As a university teacher committed to being innovative, I built upon my ability to anticipate problems and avoid them before they arose. I foresaw trouble when I launched the then utterly radical provision of a major course offering full self-assessment within an undergraduate degree. For this

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<sup>27</sup> My lifewide learning continued, lifelong. Never again would someone have to tell me what kind of report they had wished; from then on, I asked before writing. And I hope I also went on to find out what my students expected of me.

<sup>28</sup> a) How well? There’s not much being said here about where I obtained my criteria for my self-judgements? b) On the first occasion when I prepared my students for group work, I used that splendid Henry Fonda film *Twelve Angry Men*. We set ourselves to watch Fonda reverse the voting of his eleven fellow jurors. During this, we noted what made characters effective, and ineffective, in these group discussions. I learnt as much as my students did!

<sup>29</sup> I suppose this reflects my ongoing search for the secrets of how to be effective.

required approval by the Board of Moderators of my professional bodies, and I could foresee that the elderly and conservative visiting panel members would be horrified to discover that I was already allowing my students to choose what they would learn, how they learnt and to what standard – with their self-assessment providing final marks which contributed to their degree ratings. Early in the visit, it was apparent that moderators were highly unlikely to be persuaded to approve self-assessment and self-direction. Tentatively, I suggested that they would not be able to give approval until a suitably qualified panel had rigorously investigated my students' learning outcomes and their coverage of essential professional objectives. Sternly, they agreed. I told them that 'it just so happened' that I already had such an evaluative report, from an evaluation team whose members had impeccable professional qualifications and were currently serving the professional bodies in that capacity. Would the visitors like to see it? They expressed keen interest. So I passed over the report in which the professional experts whom I had invited had endorsed the outcomes of this self-assessed and self-directed course. Hoist with their own petard, the moderators were obliged to approve – because I had anticipated and coped with the problem before it arose<sup>30</sup>.

I admit that there is evidence in my schooldays and beyond of extra-curricular lifewide learning which was to prove of lifelong and deepening significance to me. But what of development which began during my undergraduate studies and apprenticeship?

### **Lifewide learning in my undergraduate studies and apprenticeship**

When I was seventeen I went, as an immature entrant, to university, where again the teaching was authoritarian and the lecturers far from approachable. I had wanted to become a lawyer. But that called for four years of study, and the opticians advised that my eyes would not last for more than three years of intensive reading. So I opted instead to study civil engineering, motivated by the prospect of designing and building useful things. Ironically, after six months, as I became physically mature, my eyes began to stabilise<sup>31</sup>!

In my first three-month summer vacation, I entered indentured employment with a firm of consultants, having sought and found an apprenticeship which offered me training continuing into the two years after graduation. The firm,

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<sup>30</sup> But I did not always succeed. I foresaw the most effective relationship for the OU in Scotland with the new Scottish Parliament long before events developed. I did not persuade my VC; I failed. It was only ten years after I retired that I saw the OU change policy, under a new VC, to follow the line I had advocated.

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this confirmed the wisdom of making my own decisions, rather than relying on advice?

with which I was to work in various capacities for fourteen years, employed many apprentices and few engineers or journeymen. Consequently, the apprentices were often expected to undertake tasks well beyond their professional status<sup>32</sup>. In this setting my relevant lifewide experience was of taking full responsibility for my own learning and development. This featured when I had only been there a few weeks. I was asked whether I could design reinforced concrete beams. I saw an opportunity to do something more interesting than simply colouring in prints of drawings, and dishonestly declared confidence. Quickly, I went off and found a couple of readable books in the office library, and went home that evening to teach myself how to design reinforced concrete beams. It was exciting and motivating to go on site when my calculations and drawings were becoming reinforced concrete foundations for an electricity sub-station. There was also scope for further learning when I had to solve the practical problems which my naive detailing had sometimes created<sup>33</sup>.

Everything I did that summer was either self-taught, or taught to me by other apprentices<sup>34</sup> – like how to set up and use surveying instruments. Senior apprentices also taught me effectively and supportively, and modelled for me the practices I wished to follow and abilities I set out to acquire. That same pattern was to apply in my second summer. However, little of what I studied at university was of any direct use to me. Even the university course in surveying techniques, when at last that subject featured in our timetables, was primitive in coverage compared to what was expected of me in practice, and in which I had already acquired considerable expertise. Worse still, it did not equip me to survey existing steel buildings sufficiently accurately to allow new steelwork extensions to be designed, detailed and fabricated – to fit. So quickly I went off again to discover for myself how to do these things.

In my first summer after leaving school, I became an officer in a Christian boys' club, which had recruited me to its Sunday meetings while I was at senior school. I managed to have a week at their summer camp, based in a forestry hut on the remote shores of Loch Fyne. My first appointment was as boating and bathing officer. They reckoned that my boating experience was without question, and that as the one non-swimmer in the camp, I would not mind

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<sup>32</sup> I wonder how different my lifewide learning might have been without this serendipitous circumstance?

<sup>33</sup> And so an activity arising from lifewide learning led to further engagement in lifewide learning

<sup>34</sup> Peers are often the most effective teachers. Watch children teaching children to play Monopoly, and see how much more effective they are than adults. This, of course, is socio-constructivism.

manning the safety boat at swimming parades<sup>35</sup>. Here it also was that I put into practice my Drama Club teacher's advice about public speaking. Each officer took an evening epilogue, when apart from conveying an evangelical message, our task was to catch and retain interest. I concentrated hard on beginnings and endings.

In my second year, I was camp quartermaster. For a camp which lacked motorised transport, this entailed ordering all that we would need for the advance guard and the seven-day camp of sixty-five boys. I had the assistance of my predecessor's record, but I had to adjust this for changes in menus and numbers. Woe betide me if I under-ordered, or missed something out<sup>36</sup>. Equally, I should not over-order, lest camp budgeting suffered. When I returned home, my last task was to write up my records in 'the Portavadie book', with my advice to whoever would do the job next year. This was my first experience of reflective record keeping, something I was to continue in one setting or another, from family holidays to innovative teaching.

I made one innovation that year at camp. I dabbled in entrepreneurship<sup>37</sup>. I learnt at a late date that we were to have a visitor, who would be coming down by car. I contacted him, and asked him to bring us a refrigerated container of ice-cream. This luxury I had to sell cost-effectively. So I negotiated to share the cost amongst my customers. Thus the first wafer cost (1951 values) twelve pounds. Once I had a second customer, the wafer cost went down to six pounds – and so on. My satisfied, but hard-up, customers became my keen salesmen.

In due course I graduated, having again found out what the examiners expected of me, and having supplied it in good quality<sup>38</sup>. But in my heart of hearts, I was far from convinced of the professional or other value of my education. Admittedly, I had relished the wonderful abstractions of the various courses in mathematics, when an inspired teacher helped me to acquire a lifelong joy in the concept of elegance in mathematical proofs and in computer programming. And an imaginative lecturer in geology had inspired me to see and read the countryside as if for the first time I had shed dark sunglasses<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Health and safety requirements?

<sup>36</sup> More learning by anticipating and avoiding mistakes.

<sup>37</sup> Why?

<sup>38</sup> And without much respect for a system in which the hidden curriculum dominated – and someone like me could identify that. But why was I never tempted to lead a revolt against a system for which I had little respect? Maybe because I saw no chance of success?

<sup>39</sup> Perhaps this is appreciating how different lenses allowed me to see and appreciate the world from an entirely different perspective? (Apologies for the pun.)

But I still felt dissatisfied<sup>40</sup>. I kept wanting to equip myself beyond my professional requirements<sup>41</sup>.

And so it was that I began a habit which was to persist for the rest of my life. In the August of that summer, I undertook something akin to self-appraisal<sup>42</sup>. In that first scrutiny, I came to the conclusion that my first class honours degree said little about me, except that I was an intellectual savage with a sound background in engineering theory. I knew little or nothing of art, literature, music, ballet or drama. I decided that I wanted to make good that deficiency and become a rounded person<sup>43</sup>. I consulted friends and acquaintances who seemed better equipped in these areas than me. I asked them to suggest what I should do, read, study, experience, to open up my education as a whole person. Some suggestions led me into richnesses which have occupied me for all of my life, and have in turn opened door after door into other wonderful areas and experiences<sup>44</sup>.

In my self-appraisals, I naturally also reviewed my professional competences. Visits to construction sites had shown me that my knowledge of the trades in the construction industry was slight, superficial and (in my judgement at that time) inadequate. I decided to sign up for evening classes leading me to a Higher National Certificate in Building. I didn't want to be able to construct timber roofs, install central heating or lay bricks. But I wanted to know enough to tell whether I was working with a competent joiner, plumber or bricklayer; and also to know the questions I should be asking, in order to tap into their advice and experience<sup>45</sup>.

For some time after graduating, my spare time was mainly devoted to competitive rowing. I was a member of several Scottish Championship crews. I was powerfully influenced by an older man who was our stroke, and who held strong views about self-imposed discipline – for the crew and generally in life.

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<sup>40</sup> Interesting that so much of my self-taught lifewide learning is driven by my own sense of need and insufficiency, which compares unfavourably with my formal education, which was mainly driven by someone else's idea about what I should be good at.

<sup>41</sup> In the beginning, this aspiration for breadth was disciplinary. But not for long.

<sup>42</sup> How did this begin? I cannot remember.

<sup>43</sup> Notice my growing awareness of my need for life balance. But why is there no mention of that in the rest of this account?

<sup>44</sup> Note that self-directed learning which is totally focused on one aim can miss many other worthwhile possibilities.

<sup>45</sup> I've often envied in later years the wonderful professionalism of top-rate advocates and architects. This is seen in their ability to ask perceptive questions of a professional like me, as if they were well versed in my discipline. I wanted to be such a professional, asking good questions, learning from the answers, and so contributing genuinely to interdisciplinary decisions and problem-solving.

Jack was in a way an avuncular or older brother hero figure for me, someone to whom I looked up, not least for the way he trained his thirty-two-year-old body to be competitive. From him, I learnt to never admit defeat<sup>46</sup>. We raced once at Aberdeen, and he caught a bad crab at the start of the final race. It was obviously hopeless to continue. Even before we had properly begun, we were lengths behind against a top crew. Yet he furiously drove us pointlessly on – to catch up, and then to lead and to win. I lost more than eight pounds on that unforgettable afternoon – but we had won, by a canvas. And I had learnt that day *never* to be put off because a challenge seems impossible<sup>47</sup>.

In the twelve years which followed graduation, I learnt a great deal on my own and from professional colleagues, and made relatively little use of my formal education. I swiftly gained professional status, and specialised in a variety of fields in civil engineering. I was a section leader at twenty-three years old, leading a section mainly consisting of apprentices of my own style and age or, in the case of our draughtsman, of more than my age. My section specialised in doing jobs against the clock which others had declared impossible or had proved by their failures to be so. But I never accepted that<sup>48</sup>, and always managed to deliver. My most noteworthy (and final) ‘impossible’ contract involved the re-roofing of an important paper mill building, set in the midst of other buildings. The re-roofing had to be completed in the sixteen-day holiday period, or we would never have contracts from that firm again. The most competitive tender insisted on a three-month contract period. I worked out a way to meet the sixteen-day window of time, by constructing the roof first above the old building, then beginning demolition of the old structure while hanging the columns below my new roof, and finally concreting the new foundations. It seemed crazy to all but me. I had to take full responsibility for men, management and plant in a direct-labour arrangement. I had little sleep in the first five days on site. But we completed the task almost a day ahead of schedule. For me, the lifewide experience of doing something that many fellow professionals had judged impossible had a surprise effect. Tackling tasks which were structurally impossible had lost its challenge and thrill. It was probably time to move on<sup>49</sup>.

Leading the motley crew of likeable individuals in my section had been a big challenge initially for someone with no training in leadership other than as a young officer in a boys’ club. I soon found, as I had in the camp kitchen, that

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<sup>46</sup> How important has learning from my ‘hero figures’ been to my lifewide learning?

<sup>47</sup> Maybe I *still* had to learn the distinction between being determined and being pig-headed.

<sup>48</sup> Surely an over-simplification. There must have been some requests which were, indeed, impossible. How did I distinguish?

<sup>49</sup> Of this, more later. Maybe an important feature for lifewide learning is learning when to move on.

groups who enjoy each other's company will usually work well together, and do a fair amount of laughing together. In the drawing office, I arranged professionally relevant diversions. For instance, I insisted<sup>50</sup> on a challenge to anyone (including myself) who was going out of the office to visit a site or conduct a survey. When any of us came back from such a site visit, we had to tell the others about something relevant to engineering which we had learnt, and which no one else in the section knew already. If they failed, or if they came back with something that someone in the section already knew, they had to stand us all a beer. The pecuniary hardship of an apprenticeship community meant that we all learnt to question and understand, and shared a lot in this way.

What, then, featured in my lifewide learning in this phase of my life? There were many strands interwoven<sup>51</sup>. Amongst the elements of my rambling tale, I hope you can discern as I do that I was learning and developing, again in terms of generalisable abilities and value.

1. self-direction: to take responsibility for my own learning and development – planning, monitoring and evaluating it
2. self-protection: to refrain from going public on what I was thinking and proposing, until I knew I could show that I could crack the problem
3. self-enhancement: to equip myself beyond my current professional requirements
4. persistence: not to give up in the face of apparent defeat
5. co-operation: to learn from and with my juniors and peers
6. flexibility: to be open to changing my mind, or starting again
7. capability: to learn, and learn quickly, and often informally, in order to achieve what mattered to me.

### **Consequent lifelong learning in later life**

Was all of this lifelong, as well as lifewide? Did it prove generalisable and transferable forward in time? Once again, I believe that examples from my subsequent life and career may illustrate, although not prove, that this was so.

*1. Self-direction:* Under this first heading, I have a profusion of examples; but then it is an important principle.

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<sup>50</sup> Why? And where did this idea originate?

<sup>51</sup> How important were my reflective conversations with such as Jack, and my fellow apprentices? Very influential, I judge – even if I didn't know it was socio-constructivism!

When I became a father, I felt committed to respect the autonomy of my children in their decision-making. This began seriously when they moved up to secondary school. I told them that *I* was paid by the month, so *they* should be paid by the month too. I would cover school fees and club subscriptions and family holidays. They should manage the rest. 'To begin with, estimate how much you will require from me each month,' I asked. They estimated for a week, and multiplied by four. I pointed out that eleven months in the year had virtually four and a half weeks. So I multiplied their weekly estimate by four and a half, and then increased the total liberally to cover items which I felt they had neglected. This largesse strained their ability to self-manage. My first son had spent his allowance before the first month was up – so he had to walk to and from school for the last days. I told him that *I* had nothing more coming in before the end of the month, so neither had *he*<sup>52</sup>.

Initially, my firstborn son was a brilliant pupil in primary school, so it was easy for me to say that he should make his own decisions, since they were obviously working out well. However, when he moved to secondary school, and was more interested in extra-mural activity with the audio-visual sound crew than in preparing for his important examinations, I found it was more difficult to remain disengaged<sup>53</sup>.

When my second son failed some examinations in engineering at his university, I foolishly departed from my principles and offered tutorial assistance with a subject which I was competent to teach. Fortunately, he adhered to *my* principles, so to speak, and politely declined. I then had the sense to let drop the suggestion I should never have raised.

When my daughter, with a good record at school, did not know what professional area she should pursue in her forthcoming university studies, I *almost* managed to refrain from giving advice. However, I advised just once, but only in general terms, that she should study what attracted her, and trust that she would discover in what followed what she would want to do. She opted to study Music, though she did not want to teach. After a year, around the time of the Children in Need campaign, a visiting speaker came to talk about music

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<sup>52</sup> I found it supportive that my children, after a family discussion many years later, reported that this delegation of financial responsibility had been the most formative experience in their childhood. All followed it when they raised their own families.

<sup>53</sup> The big question when things go wrong is: 'Should I think again – or persist?'

therapy<sup>54</sup>. My daughter quickly discovered what she wanted to do with her music, as a therapist to the severely disadvantaged.

My commitment to autonomy in everyone's learning and development extended from my family to my students. To first-year students who so wished, I delegated responsibility to decide what they would study, and how they would study, around the Properties and Use of Engineering Materials. In a presentation while I was in Colombia, they earned us an Education for Capability Award for 'A Course without a Syllabus'. Then some years later (as I have already mentioned), I pioneered a self-directed and self-assessed course in Design at third-year level, which was accepted by our professional bodies<sup>55</sup>.

2. *Self-protection*: All of the latter activity was not free from criticism and disapproval<sup>56</sup>. When I was appointed Scottish Director for the Open University, my supportive and scholarly Deputy Director, Judith George, presented a slim paperback to me one day. She described it, tongue in cheek, as a five-hundred-year-old handbook for educational developers like me. The immediate quotation from Machiavelli towards which she directed me was his advice that:

Nothing is more difficult to undertake, more perilous to conduct or more uncertain in its outcome, than to take the lead in introducing a new order of things. For the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old, and lukewarm defenders amongst those who may do well under the new.

And then I noted for myself that 'No enterprise is more likely to succeed than one concealed from the enemy until it is ripe for execution'.

The more I have thought about these words, the more accurately they sum up my experiences in trying to bring about radical changes in a Civil Engineering programme, and in dealing with the challenges I was about to face in enhancing support for isolated Open University students in Scotland. Plagued by petty objections and criticisms from academically conservative colleagues, I had already learned the hard way the wisdom of the old Scots saying that 'Fools and bairns (children) should never see a job half done'. Eventually, hard

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<sup>54</sup> Yet another example from my experience of serendipity triggering off extensive and valuable lifewide learning – in this case, for my daughter.

<sup>55</sup> In this respect I was encouraged many years later, after I had written a book about being an innovative university teacher. The great authority, John Biggs, was kind enough to describe it in his own book of that time as 'The clearest example of practice-what-you-preach that I have seen'.

<sup>56</sup> Was this a consequence of being innovative, or of being successful – or just of my interpersonal style? I've often wondered.

experience had shown me that it was time enough to present what I had been doing when I had assembled firm evidence to table, and had ingathered objective external judgements in support of my innovations<sup>57</sup>. Then I could confidently and effectively take the stance, in the words of our national poet, that 'My skill may weel be doubted; / but facts are chieils that winna ding, / an downa be disputed [My skill may well be doubted (pronounced 'dooted'); but facts are like children who will not change their story, and should not be disputed<sup>58</sup>].

On reflection, then, a great deal of my lifewide learning in the field of autonomous learning in my later years as an innovative teacher was about how to stall scrutiny, badly informed criticism and obstruction<sup>59</sup>. I stalled until I had strong evidence of the effectiveness of what I was doing, so that the merits of student-centred learning could not validly be doubted.

*3. Self-enhancement:* In my time with the OU, I studied for a degree in Social Sciences, to broaden my learning to cover another disciplinary area – and to give me experience of being an open and distance learner. One course I especially valued was Professional Judgement and Decision Making<sup>60</sup>.

Before I retired from the OU, I found myself assisting the Social Sciences course team in the University of the Highlands and Islands Project, where we designed some innovative modules. I taught on some of these for three to four years after retirement, until they had no further need of me. Thus my lifewide learning, driven by personal needs and interests, became the foundation for later professional practice. So it seemed natural (in my last year with the OU) to study a module in Arts about Homer's poetry, again widening my disciplinary base<sup>61</sup> and connecting me back to my love of literature developed at my mother's knee.

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<sup>57</sup> Echoes here of anticipating problems and coping with them before they happen. Lifewide learning is interwoven.

<sup>58</sup> Some quotations mean a lot to me. I have also found them useful. If a junior felt unable to do something, I might quote KoKo's protest that a man cannot cut his own head off, to which Pooh-Bah responded sternly, 'A man can try!'

<sup>59</sup> But my tactical commitment to ingathering objective data to inform my self-judgements was growing. Is this a desirable feature of lifewide learning?

<sup>60</sup> Maybe rather late in my development. Self-directed lifewide learning may sometimes omit or delay experiences?

<sup>61</sup> Lifewide learning can eventually become an established feature of my practice. Then I need a new challenge or opportunity or variety.

*4. Persistence:* I suppose the origin for me of explicit learner-centredness in my teaching occurred in my very first lecture to a final-year Design class. I had a catastrophic failure, and had to steel myself to find the resolve to try again.

I had prepared this important<sup>62</sup> lecture assiduously, and was determined to offer interesting examples and valuable content. Within five minutes of my opening, it was apparent that the students were bored to tears. I went home almost in tears myself, convinced that I had made a dreadful error in leaving the employment I had so much enjoyed in the design office. That evening, I prepared for my second lecture, determined to be more interesting and to have richer content than in the first one. If anything, the second was worse than the first. I left the lecture room in absolute despair. As I walked down the corridor, a student – to whom I shall be forever grateful and with whom I am still in contact after forty-five years – walked alongside me and asked politely whether I knew what was wrong. I responded that I did indeed know what was wrong: I had been boring. And I just didn't know how to rectify that. 'No,' he advised me, 'you weren't boring. It was just that you lost us all in the first five minutes. We aren't up to that speed and depth.' I thanked him, and went home with a spring in my step to prepare something more straightforward, and to explain in clearer detail at a pace which allowed assimilation<sup>63</sup>. From that day to this, finding out from my students about the learning experiences which I create for them has been a fundamental feature of my approach as a teacher. And that, in turn, has led to umpteen worthwhile learning and development experiences for me over the years. The student's insight made a powerful impact on me, bringing me important lifewide learning about the value of dialogue with students. And that leads me on to my next feature and example.

*5. Collaboration (and co-operation):* Throughout my teaching career I have sought feedback and advice from my students. I have then joined with them in becoming action researchers of our joint purposes, discovering how we could together make our learning and teaching relationship more effective. Eventually, I initiated similar activity on the part of some OU tutors in Scotland. One result of that has been the publication of papers jointly written with students. Other results have included restructuring of handouts, clarification of standards from past examples and my facilitation of online discussions in Taiwan.

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<sup>62</sup> Well, it was important to me!

<sup>63</sup> What would have happened if he hadn't spoken to me? Serendipity again.

6. *Flexibility*: My lifewide learning has often arisen from family incidents<sup>64</sup>. Some years ago my late son had taken up an attractive offer of appropriate employment while he still had a little work to do to complete his PhD. In his new job, he went to Paris with a van full of valuable equipment, his thesis, his laptop and disks. The van and contents he parked in a top-security car park. He returned after booking into his hotel to find that the van had been stolen. He phoned home to break the news, and my wife came through broken-hearted to tell me about our son's disaster. When he spoke to me later and asked what I thought, I just looked forward and said quite sincerely that I was sure his second thesis would be better than his first one<sup>65</sup>.

A few months later, I had a message from Lewis Elton about a conference paper which I had carefully written to the declared limit of 4,500 words, and had had accepted. At a late date he had decided papers should only take up 3,000 words. I was tempted to withdraw, but getting this thinking published was important to me. So I hastily began again, to produce 3,000 words – in poor grace. Long after the conference, I allowed myself to bitterly compare the two versions, to see what damage the curtailment and rewriting had done. To my astonishment, I found that I believed that the 3,000-word version was the better paper. I had learnt that starting again from scratch is no bad thing.

Often a complete change of direction can be transformative. A major development for me as a teacher happened when I was five years into the job of lecturing. I wanted to teach better than those who had taught me. I had a vague vision of establishing a teaching unit in the department where I was employed. However, I felt I could make better progress as a teacher than I had so far managed to do. So I signed up for a summer school at University of Manchester Institute for Science and Technology, run by a wonderful man called Bill Morton. It was a condition of attendance that we agreed to be in residence full time, and to undertake no social engagements outwith the school programme. We lived together, and Bill lived with us.

The programme was a wonderful combination of workshops, guest presenters and interesting speakers at our evening dinners – and time with Bill<sup>66</sup>. He

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<sup>64</sup> Our families and other close personal relationships are one of our most valuable resources and sources of insight. They have a habit of teaching us things we thought we already knew. I'll spare my wife's embarrassment by not relating the many ways in which she has contributed to my lifewide learning – and especially to learning from my mistakes.

<sup>65</sup> And it was.

<sup>66</sup> A powerful influence on me.

epitomised what Carl Rogers<sup>67</sup> has described as congruence, establishing a relationship with each of us in which, from the outset, he was genuine and real. In our conversations, especially in the residence in the evenings, he talked with us a lot about our aspirations and where they came from. He was genuinely interested in each of us. And in his conversations with us, as they developed, he shared with us his own aspirations, which centred on supporting student learning. He explained to us, without preaching to us, or trying to sell us his views and values.

I went back home as a convert, as did many others whose development as teachers had been lifewide during that fortnight, as mine had been. No longer did I want to establish a teaching unit. I wanted to establish a *learning* unit. My fortnight-long experience of lifewide learning had shown me what learner-centred activity could deliver, for me and my students. And my friendship with Bill Morton had shown me the kind of teacher I wished to become.

I would summarise all of this by saying that I was constantly trying to develop the capabilities I needed to achieve success and so I was trying to find ways that enabled me to do so. For example, I was increasingly putting my neck on the line to take risks in the belief they would lead to success. I put my trust in others to lead us to success; and I tried to create conditions and provide leadership that enabled others in my team to achieve their own successes<sup>68</sup>.

### **Lifewide learning within my university career**

Professional life was becoming less challenging, and more humdrum. For gradually, each new and even more demanding challenge felt less and less demanding, and more to be 'just another impossible job'. It was probably time to find new challenges.

Accounts of my lifewide learning as a university teacher have already featured in the examples I have given of transfer forward in time. So it will suffice to amplify that by reiterating how I was inspired early on by the writings of Carl Rogers and especially by the course directed by Professor Bill Morton. I came home from that, tore up all my carefully prepared lecture notes from the previous five years and decided to start anew. I moved as quickly as my conservative colleagues could tolerate<sup>69</sup> towards what was then called independence (or more accurately autonomy) in learning. I progressively

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<sup>67</sup> Another powerful influence. I am still rereading Rogers, and finding ideas I have missed.

<sup>68</sup> But, in all honesty, none of this was done consciously at the time – at best, it was intuitive. However, in the fullness of time, I began to see the merits of such an approach.

<sup>69</sup> Their toleration was low! Fortunately, the one exception was my highly supportive Head of Department.

offered my students meaningful choices in the rate and approach which they took to their learning, the outcomes which they pursued and their assessment of the consequent learning and development, which was objectively evaluated as a distinct improvement. As a result, I became less and less concerned with the content which my students would cover, and more with the capabilities<sup>70</sup> which I wanted to help them to develop and with what *they* wanted to learn. For I hoped that – as soon as possible – they would responsibly and ably take full charge of their own learning and development.

I went on to research (consecutively) in four different fields, to publish in all of them and to gain higher degrees in two of them – and all of this activity was almost entirely self-directed and self-managed<sup>71</sup>. Mindful of my father's example, I took advantage of British Council funding to undertake staff and curriculum development work in Third World countries, without a fee, for at least three weeks in every year – and gained great strength (and confidence<sup>72</sup>) from these demanding experiences. Eventually (as you now know), I was to take a further undergraduate degree (in social sciences). As a result I have taught in my career in four quite distinct discipline areas. Additionally, a feature of my teaching, which is partly a consequence of my advancing years and partly a consequence of the rapidity with which the world is changing, has been that almost everything I have taught has been outwith the curricula of the courses I took as a student<sup>73</sup>. And that has called for more self-direction on my part – and on the part of my students. It has also reinforced my belief in the transferability of generic abilities underpinned by values and beliefs developed through the experiences I have had applying such generic abilities in different contexts.

My lifewide learning still owes a lot to my juniors, in age if not in wisdom. Please bear with me as I close my anecdotes with a long composite tale eventually involving my seven-year-old granddaughter. It begins back in my days with the British Council. For some years I worked on educational development activities abroad, partnering an expert in that field, Alan Harding. On one occasion in Egypt, a rotund Turkish academic called Baha asked if he

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<sup>70</sup> I have long mourned the demise of the influence of the Education for Capability Manifesto. That is why I am so heartened by the adoption of the capability-based approach to lifewide learning advocated in this book (see Chapter 3).

<sup>71</sup> This is an interesting contrast with present-day postgraduate supervision, where fear of adverse dropout rates seems to have led to authoritative direction by many supervisors.

<sup>72</sup> It's easier to take risks outwith your own academic territory. If you fail, which I never actually did, you don't have to live on with the consequences of failure!

<sup>73</sup> Is this not true for most of us? The half-life of an electronics degree is said to be less than four years. And new methods of learning emerge rapidly. E-learning is now being overtaken by ubiquitous-learning.

might observe one of our planning sessions. Readily we agreed, provided he only spoke with us after we had finished. He honoured that agreement zealously. So at the close, Alan asked Baha what he had observed. Baha thought for a few moments, and then observed slowly that John did ninety-five per cent of the talking, and Alan did ninety-five per cent of the thinking. We laughed – and I hope I learned<sup>74</sup>. Since then, more and more I have disciplined myself to try to summarise, at least silently in my mind, what others are saying to me, before deciding what I should say to them. I don't always succeed in that resolve, but I judge this lifewide learning has made a difference in me.

One of Alan's favourite ways into development activities which stress learning rather than teaching was to make use of Kipling's famous rhyme<sup>75</sup>:

I keep six honest serving men  
They taught me all I knew  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who

For years I used this theme in introductions to some of my own workshops. But then it dawned on me, as someone committed to self- and peer-assessment, that there was a seventh question which was also very important to me, as a query that all learners should pose of themselves. This was and is: 'How well?' 'How well did I do that?' or 'How well do I want to do this?' Feeling self-satisfied by this awareness, I extended my list (but not the poem) to cover *seven* important questions which serve learning.

Then, one Friday afternoon, this being the 'in-service training' time for local primary school teachers, my granddaughter was with us as usual. She was working her way through her busy list of things she wanted us to do. Having cleared the list, she was wont to ask, 'What n'else, Granpa?' I once found myself thinking about her question. It dawned on me that she was posing another important question for anyone promoting learning. Learners, like curious children, should constantly be asking themselves: 'What *else* should I be considering, what *other* options need to be explored, is there *another* possibility?'

I notice that all of my examples so far have involved the active involvement of a third party in my lifewide learning<sup>76</sup>. I now close by pointing out that this agent

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<sup>74</sup> Because, at the time, this truth hurt?

<sup>75</sup> The Elephant's Child Rudyard Kipling (1902)

can be of any age. For it was thanks to seven-year old Rebecca that my lifewide learning took my list of questions to facilitate learning from seven to eight.

### **The 'Helen Wood' question**

In a workshop for part-time staff of the Open University in Scotland who sought Staff and Educational Development Association accreditation as university teachers, I challenged participants to identify the ability which lay at the core of their disciplines. Dr Helen Wood, after pondering, said that as a chemist, what was most important to her was to look at data and spectra, and notice what was not there. I rate that a central challenge in most disciplines<sup>77</sup>.

So what have I omitted in this long tale of lifelong-lifewide learning? A lot. I haven't thought sufficiently analytically about the role of serendipity in my lifewide development, and how I might or might not have developed in its absence. I have only hinted at the importance to my development of relationships of two kinds. There is the 'hero figure', such as Bill Morton; there is also the 'buddy', which Alan Harding was to become once he refused to occupy the pedestal on which I still (privately) place him. I've profited from having many splendid buddies. And I haven't expanded on the influence of passion for my aims which Richard St John mentions amongst other qualities for success, which seem to me more qualities which are missing in the unsuccessful. I haven't distinguished 'watchful anticipation', which is knowing that in an unpredictable and emergent world not everything can be controlled, and so the unexpected emerges and we have to be prepared in order to recognise it. Given that I am arguing that lifewide learning is emergent, I should have drawn attention to this phenomenon. Space precludes dealing with these and other omissions in an already overlong foreword.

However, I feel a need to squeeze in just one last example, guilty that it only occurred to me when I was adding the questioning marginal comments. I asked myself why I had said nothing about the role of familiar readings and literary characters in my lifelong experience. Suddenly, I remembered that the two most used volumes on my bookshelves, even beyond Rogers, are the glorious eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews<sup>78</sup>, which surely inspired that great Luther King speech in which he repeatedly told that 'I have a dream...'

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<sup>75</sup> I have reached this point late in this piece but it should be clear to you that my lifewide learning has essentially been a social affair kindled and emerging from some of the most important relationships in my life.

<sup>77</sup> As in the classic incident of the dog which did not bark in the night.

<sup>78</sup> A catalogue of heroes who fought against the odds!

The second is a book given to me as a boy by my scatty godmother, a book which I cannot recall my mother ever reading to me, which contained the adventures of 'Stalky & Co'. Stalky was a maverick schoolboy, derived from Kipling's own schooldays. He rebelled against authority. He mostly succeeded. He often took a stance for something which mattered to him on principle. I wonder how much that book shaped the young John Cowan.

### **Some provisional sense making**

My views about learning to be professional through lifelong lifewide learning have originated from the life history on which I have touched here. From Machiavelli: 'The more sand has escaped from the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should see through it.' I am now almost seventy-nine years old. I still regularly teach undergraduates and postgraduates – though not full time and mostly online. Each summer I still carry out a self-appraisal<sup>79</sup>, pinpointing what should feature on my forthcoming agenda for development. I identify the understanding I wish or need to acquire, and the abilities I should hone or develop. My aim is always to feel reasonably satisfied with my updating and uprating<sup>80</sup> of my personal and professional competences.

In this I am greatly in debt to Norman Jackson. At an age when most old men like me would be left in peace to sit by the fireside in their slippers, I found myself encouraged by him to write two reflective pieces in which I looked back over my life experience. In so doing, just as Moliere's M. Jourdain had discovered late in life that he had been speaking prose for over forty years, I discovered, with Norman's prompting and to my delight, that I had been profiting throughout my life from what he explained to me was lifewide learning<sup>81</sup>. This learning and development had gone far beyond, and was much more important to me than, what I had learnt in the various courses I have taken in my formal education<sup>82</sup> and the academic awards I have gained.

I now look forward with great anticipation to learning what the contributors to this volume have to share with us about this vital aspect of all our learning, and

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<sup>79</sup> With assistance, as ever, from peers and colleagues who help me to identify unperceived needs.

<sup>80</sup> I draw a distinction here. I am currently updating myself on new thinking about e-moderation. I am needing to up-rate my creative skills with PowerPoint.

<sup>81</sup> Incidentally, Norman has confided in me that I am also an important part of *his* lifewide learning enterprise.

<sup>82</sup> Perhaps I was fortunate in being unfortunate. I was unfortunate to be taught by men who stirred up my will to do better for myself than they were doing; and I was unfortunate to be taught my engineering by lecturers of whom only one had practised as a senior engineer. I was fortunate that I therefore felt free to manage my own learning and development.

to the unanticipated things that will surely emerge through the relationships of those engaged in creating this book.