

CHAPTER B2

Lifewide Learning Later in Life

*Wandering thoughts of an octogenarian
or
Even an old dog can learn new tricks*

John Cowan

SUMMARY

In educational circles we often concentrate, quite rightly, on the learning and development needs of younger members of society, or perhaps the needs of people developing themselves for new roles in work. But the learning needs and interests of older people also matter. Having just passed the 80 year milestone, I find myself still identifying lifewide learning activities which attract me, and which should have my attention. I offer this short account of these, to illustrate the relevance and potential of lifewide learning for senior citizens. The same principles apply as for other members of the population. Lifewide learning can enhance our capability in our working lives, it can enrich our lives by taking us into new interest areas, or it can be a delayed engagement with something worthwhile which we've always wanted to do - and never got round to, until now. This brief contribution identifies examples of each of these, albeit on a small scale appropriate to my advancing years and illustrated by anecdotal reporting of the assorted origins of my most recent lifewide aims.

BIOGRAPHY



John Cowan studied civil engineering at university. For the first seven years of his employment he concentrated mainly on designing structural steelwork, and moved to designing reinforced concrete structures for five years. He then became an academic, first as a lecturer, and then as the creator of the largest departmental resource-based learning unit in the UK. He was a pioneer in self-assessed learning and reflective practice by students. Throughout this period he also served as an educational consultant in the UK and for the British Council in Third World countries. After 14 years he moved to the Open

University as Scottish Director and occasional academic auditor, gradually becoming pro-active as Professor of Learning Development. On retirement he joined the course team for the social sciences degree at the University of the Highlands & Islands Project. He undertook an increasing number of commitments at Napier University, tutoring business students with a focus on their continuing professional development. He has just concluded three years virtually tutoring students of English as a Foreign Language in Taiwan, assisting in the development of their critical thinking.



RETROSPECTIVE

Mine has been a working lifetime in which the focus of my activity and associated research, and of my interests, has been constantly changing and has called for much self-directed learning and development.

Due to the war my schooldays were spread over six rural and urban schools, circumstances which contributed to an early application of my lifewide learning. This included maintaining Bren guns, milking cows, handling ferrets and lighting camp fires with two matches. When I left school, I studied civil engineering at university, while serving the early summers of my apprenticeship on site, learning to survey; and in a design office, with my self-learning necessarily moving ahead of what I would later be taught in class. Having rowed at school and university, I continued to compete for three dedicated and intense years during which I was in four Scottish Championship crews.

Looking back over my résumé, I can see a number of factors which are still present in my lifewide learning. I note a certain restlessness, or desire to pursue freshness, which has led to changes in the main focus of my activity at intervals of usually less than seven years. I have always been striving to be the best that I can be, and attracted by the challenge of doing something which had not yet been done by others. I have frequently yearned to dig deeper into learning and understanding than I had managed hitherto. And the John who was a husband, father of four, with a dog, house, garden, caravan and a love for remote family holidays, maintained his important family commitments and his fitness. These factors underlie the brief account of lifewide learning in progress which follows.

Throughout my adult life, I have regularly taken time to identify aims outwith my job priorities and requirements, giving thought as to how I might achieve them, and by what criteria I would judge progress. The nature of these aims has varied with the way my career, family and maturity have developed over the years. Yet my monitoring and evaluation of lifewide learning goals has changed little since the year of my graduation with a first class honours degree in civil engineering, when I sternly self-judged myself to be a technically trained savage, lacking in erudition, social skills and cultural sensitivities - and so set out deliberately to make good some of these deficiencies. That is a goal I have been addressing ever since!

MY CONTEXT

Some six months ago I decided that it was time to bite the bullet and call an end to my teaching days, which have meant so much to me. I felt I should stop before someone kindly (or worse still, unkindly) told me it was time for me to stop. So I made unobtrusive arrangements to close down my tutoring commitments. Meantime I planned to maintain my academic involvement as a reviewer and editorial board member on three journals. This I have found to be a very effective contribution to my continuing professional development, as it requires me to analyse and evaluate current developments even before they are published. I also continue making contributions on a modest scale to two research projects and to the Lifewide Education Community. I comfort myself that I am still modestly engaged in lifelong learning, even if *very* modestly.



Around this time of change, I had a return visit from the osteomyelitis bug which first hit me on a British Council trip to Yugoslavia about 25 years ago. On that occasion a grim infection spread rapidly up my left leg from an old skating injury in my ankle. It quickly progressed until that leg, up to the groin, resembled a plastic bag full of raw minced meat. I phoned my wife to confess that I was rather unwell, and likely to be delayed a few days in returning home. Two Yugoslav doctors came to examine me, and announced that I would have to go into hospital. I explained that I should call my wife again, and advise her how long I would be in hospital.

"How long before I can go home?" I asked.

They conferred: "You don't seem to understand that we don't expect you to get out of hospital"

"Are you telling me I'm dying?"

"Yes."

"How long have I got?"

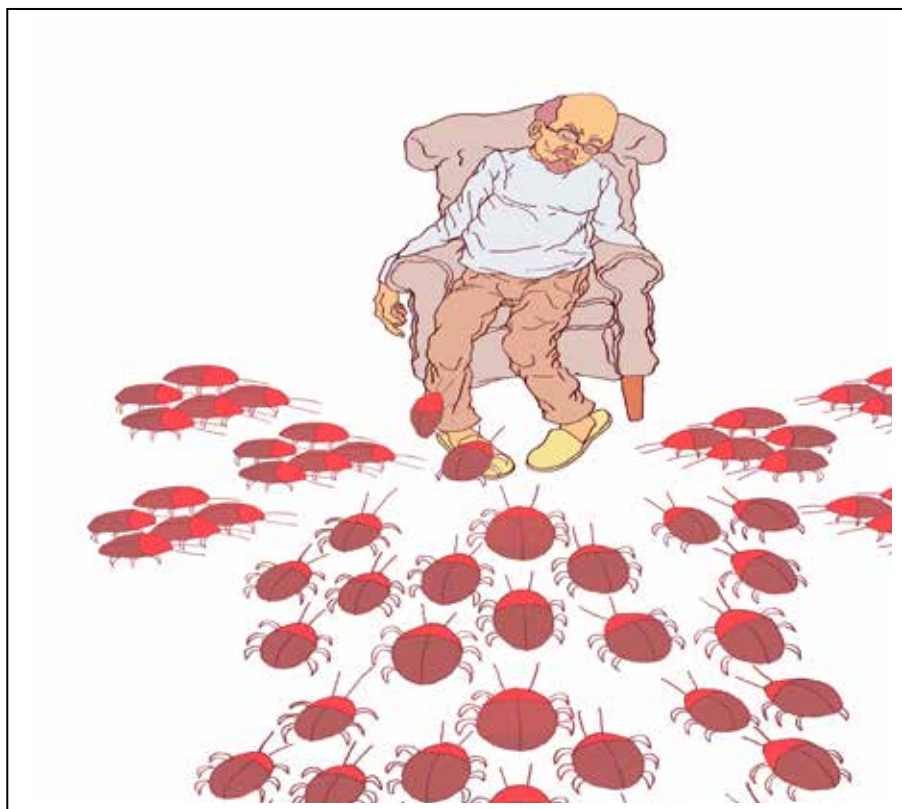
"Maybe three days after it gets past the groin."

"I think I'll just go back and die in Scotland, then."

"But they don't take dying people on airlines!"

"Well, I won't tell them I'm dying."

And I didn't tell the airline. And I got home. And intensive care and antibiotics in Edinburgh eventually had me back in action again.



Since then the osteomyelitis bugs have repeatedly emerged from their hideout in my shattered ankle bone, and tried to catch me unawares. Always the wonderful power of antibiotics has successfully beaten them back and enabled me to carry on with my usual activities, with but slight interruption. Well, so it was until this spring, when the bugs sallied forth and fought a tougher than

ever action with the drugs. There even came an occasion when the bugs mounted a counter-attack and gained ground. Over two long months I lounged around, indolently watching the action with but mild interest, while finding myself lacking in motivation to engage with the current items in my digital in-tray, or to contemplate forward planning, social or educational. For a while I called off completely from my commitments, pleading old age and ill-health. This experience brought home to me just how much engagement in learning and development has always been connected to the very essence of being alive and well enough to enjoy the pleasures of life, and to identify and deal with its challenges and opportunities.

A RENEWED URGE FOR LIFEWIDE LEARNING

Eventually the antibiotics beat back the bugs. Consequently, at the time of writing, I have found my energy and motivation returning. I have rediscovered the urge to engage with most of the almost atrophied inbox items on my computer. Already the list of things I want to find out about, to do and to explore, and of the abilities I want to develop further, has been growing with each passing day. Once again I am experiencing the fits and starts which are characteristic of my lifewide learning, in which review, planning and pursuit of aims happen with jerky step functions on the graph of progress.

Social networking

Even as I write, I am keenly aware that this old man still hungers for more than the bread and butter of familiar activity. I need to widen my experience again; for I am clear in my mind that I have more than three days to put to good use. I urgently need, for example, to discover enough of the potential of the new social networking facilities to let me link with colleagues, family and friends - and students? - as I have not done to date. Twitter has been a whole new experience in communication for me, and I have been scouring the internet to explore what those who are using Twitter in education have found to be its affordances, and its problems.

It feels good to experience once again an emerging agenda of items which matter to me, and which I would be sad to leave hanging. They're not just aims for more *life/long* learning; they are my daily objectives for my *life/wide* learning, taking me out sideways into new areas for my development.

Learning to do something new and different

A few months ago my laptop, like me, was showing signs of old age and had become slow and hesitant. I planned to replace it, and scanned on the web for what was on offer. I studied the reviews in Google. Nothing really excited me. I consulted my grandchildren, most of whom told me that they had Macs, and all enthusiastically advised me to become a MacGranpa. I've always yearned for a Mac, without really knowing what I was coveting; I have always felt that I couldn't justify the expense. This time I found myself saying "What the hell! I'll spend part of the kids'

inheritance." And in total ignorance of what was in store for me, I ordered a Mac. While awaiting its arrival, a friend purely fortuitously referred me to Randy Pausch's last lecture on YouTube (which is well worth watching, incidentally), where he briefly mentions his 'deathbed conversion,' on the eve of his three remaining months. This conversion had occurred when he, like me, decided to move to a Mac. I felt in inspiring company.



Talking about my conversion with my son-in-law, an IT expert, I sought his advice about software. He encouraged me to eschew the versions of Microsoft which can run on the Mac, and to learn to use what Apple provided. He told me that I would have to start at the beginning again, but that it would be easy. Half of that advice proved correct. It hasn't been easy. Going on a discovery learning journey from the beginning has been, and continues to be, tough. Nevertheless it's proving rewarding, because this old dog is having to learn new tricks, mainly on his own. I am getting quite a deal of satisfaction from this lifewide self-directed learning in the IT field. I've not found induction instruction easily accessible in comprehensible vocabulary for me on my Mac. Discovery learning it must be, and I'm enjoying it, and keeping my mistakes and much of my ignorance and failures to myself. I decided to try to follow Edward de Bono once more on his delightful metaphorical journey into discovery learning. He described this as going down a strange gully with steep sides, then encountering a rock wall blocking the way, wondering how to get past, and solving the problem by imagining yourself on the other side, and looking back to see how you got past the obstacle. This approach is proving a new lifewide experience in problem solving for me, often demanding, mostly successful, and always intriguing. It has taught me about more than the Mac. It has reminded me from first-hand experience about effective principles for discovery learning. I'm glad I can refer to my grand-daughters occasionally when I'm stuck. I have been struck again by how much close family and friends are unobtrusively involved in supporting my lifewide learning as well as influencing my decisions about the significant new things I am choosing to do.

It was while my conversion to MacGranpa was in progress that Norman Jackson, Director of Lifewide Education Community Interest Company, asked me to compose a short piece on what lifewide learning means to and entails for an older member of society, like me. I agreed, thinking glibly that I had this good and current example of lifewide learning example to hand, for a start. But there are others.....

Enhancing an existing skill

Being conscious of challenges on the Mac, I've noticed that the keyboarding skills which I developed from a tutoring CD about five years ago seem to have atrophied somewhat. My ten-finger skills nowadays aren't always using ten fingers, although I can't observe myself well enough to be sure what needs attention. My pangs of conscience and self-criticism have also made me remember that all those years ago I gave up on the CD tutor *before* I had mastered the numerals and other options on the top row. So I've looked out the CD, loaded it up, and gone back to the beginning again for short periods five times a week - to refresh and refine my ten-finger skills, and add that top row to them. In doing this I am hoping to make better and more effective use of my new tool. More lifewide learning - in renewal and enrichment of an existing if decayed skill.

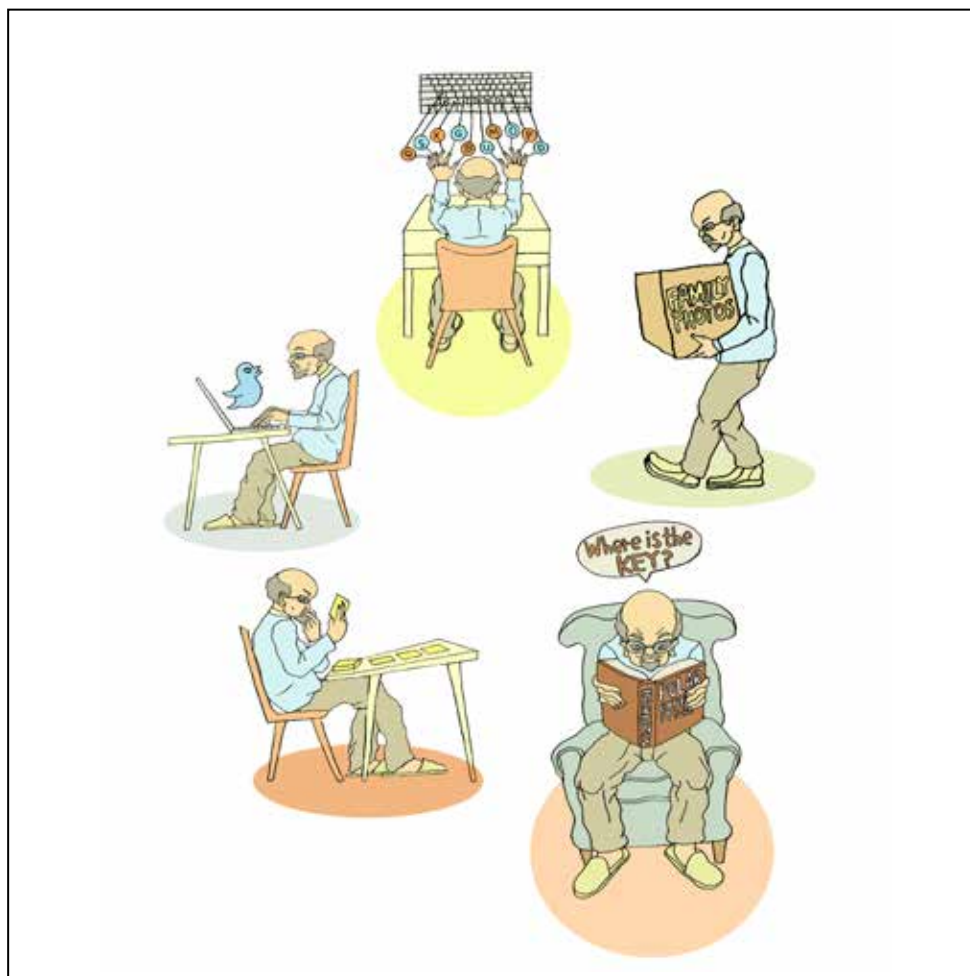
Recording family history calls for new skills

My students once began a description of me with the telling if verb-less sentence: "John Cowan, famous for his digressions." My children and grandchildren talk tolerantly about "Granpa's stories", which I notice they can get wrong when they repeat them. I've long had vague thoughts about leaving a record so that any tales they want to tell, or experiences they wish to describe, can be recalled accurately, and perhaps with illustrations. But so far, I've done nothing about it. While I was up in the attic, looking out that typing CD, my eyes rested in a guilty way on the boxes of early



family projector slides, which have accumulated since the kids were small. About five years ago my wife gave me a birthday present of a piece of equipment to let me load them all up digitally, and at the same time tidying up the slides which have black specks on them due to damp I never made time to engage with this technology. Well, I've got time now, so the equipment is ready to come down from the attic to my study, for attention in the next few weeks.

This will be something else requiring me to be a learner-directed learner. I need to master the technology to refine slides and get rid of black dots and red eye. I need to select slides for various family members, and to devise an effective way of filing them so that they are readily accessible to any who may be interested in a selection of them. Mild creativity as well as self-learning about wider use of technology are called for here. I am conscious that my learning and actions are being driven by a desire to maintain and sustain such family memories as the family may treasure. Life-wide learning prompted by family ties?



Returning to a lifelong passion; seeking for more comprehensive learning

My lifewide learning at the moment is not all focused on what my wife calls 'work things'. I'm back into writings about polar exploration. Ever since I was at school, I have been a fan of Ernest Shackleton. The rescue of his men from Elephant Island, by sailing to South Georgia in that incredibly small boat preserved at Greenwich; and then his crossing of the mountains there without

mountaineering equipment, was a tale which stirred my youthful imagination. I certainly admired and respected Fridtjof Nansen for daring to analyse scientific evidence and to logically deny the presence of land under the polar icecap, over which he set out to drift in a mere four-year frozen-in journey. But as a kid I hero-worshipped Shackleton. And I have always been very critical of Scott, because he went to the great Nansen for advice - and didn't take any of it.

Recently I found a book by a team member about Shackleton's first attempt to reach the Pole, which I bought and devoured eagerly. It was a bit of a shock for me to discover that Shackleton had also gone to Nansen for advice; and that he, too, had disregarded it. He and Scott were both separately advised to avoid ponies and man-hauling, and take dogs - and neither heeded the advice. No wonder the British expeditions failed! To cut a long story short, I've gone back to the beginning, and am carefully re-reading the many books I have accumulated about 20th century Antarctic and Arctic exploration. It's an interesting and demanding re-discovery of polar history for me. I am discovering that my selective memories and preconceptions are not quite sound. For little more than my own fascination, I am rigorously pinpointing and pursuing the gaps and inconsistencies in my collection of accounts. The feature of interest for me in this probing is that not all writers tell the complete story, and not all the stories are in agreement on some of the important points. So there's a bit of detective work involved before I can be clear, for my own satisfaction, what the full stories might be. More lifewide learning, for personal satisfaction I suppose.

And already, as a parallel field for study, I have eyed my considerable collection of the writings of Carl Rogers. I can see similar value to me in re-visiting them, chronologically, to find out what I've neglected over the years when I have been concentrating on the passages which were most meaningful to me on first readings.

Taking a competitive approach to maintaining (mental) fitness

Please bear with me as I indulge in one last digression. Forty years ago I was given as a present a box containing a polystyrene tray on which to play Solitaire, a pack of small cards and a book setting out the rules for 150 different varieties of what I called Patience. As I read through the various descriptions, my competitive spirit was immediately aroused by the entry for a variant called 'Calculation'. It declared that "Calculation stands at the top of the list of games that give opportunity for skill. Some devotees even go so far as to claim that two games out of three can be won by patience and application."

Over the years, what is now a battered old cardboard box labelled for "invalids, convalescents, travellers and children" has accompanied me on many rural family holidays, and has occupied me when I have been bed-ridden. I have followed one carefully considered and self-monitored tactical approach after another, sometimes managing to achieve 'two in a row' moderately often, even if not quite in every three games. At other times I have failed miserably to record more than a few successes, and never two in a row.

Meantime my senior citizen's habit of forgetting names of acquaintances and even of good friends has given me cause to fear the onset of deterioration in my brain, which concerns many of my generation. So it was without any optimism that I unpacked the box this summer, and set to. I thought about how and where to place the cards slowly - and perhaps more carefully and logically than in the past. Whatever the reason, I was delighted to find myself with a success rate of more than 50%, and several runs of 'two in a row' on the first rainy evening when my wife and I were



kept indoors. The next evening saw me record a triumphant 'three in a row'. By the end of the fortnight's holiday I could thrice claim to have had three in a row, and (after 40 years of mixed performances) was averaging the two out of three that the handbook had mentioned for skilled players. How did I do this? By thinking more carefully, logically, perceptively - aye and more intensely - than ever before, by considering the placing of every single card as a major decision, rather than by following carefully devised self-guidelines. So when I read in the weekend magazine of our Sunday paper that mental activity like this can stave off Alzheimer's and senility, I was hooked - on a game which I enjoy playing in any case, when I'm successful. It won't be left in the cupboard until next holiday - or illness. I'm self-challenged to 'up' my rate of gaining three in a row, and do my brain good in the interim. Life-wide learning for mental fitness.

Interestingly, I have come to see noteworthy and potentially useful resemblances between the reasoning I am now employing in Solitaire, and the reasoning I apply evaluatively when reviewing papers submitted for possible publication. I find that the challenge of this Solitaire experience is pushing me into more constructive and rewarding metacognitive problem-solving than hitherto.



WE'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN?

It seems, then, that (including Twitter) I currently have six modest strands of lifewide learning in hand. Writing this reflective piece has enabled me to appreciate that this is so. These strands are learning about and using social networking, and discovering what it has to offer me and mine; mastering and exploring the potential of the Mac; updating and uprating my ten finger skills; learning how to digitise, edit and index my old projector slides; making a thorough study of polar exploration; and exercising my capability for sustained logical thinking. I can see that each of these satisfies a different need or interest, but that all are connected to who I am and still want to become, and to the relationships I have with people who matter to me.



But what about keeping an open mind for other items? Just thinking about my current ill-organised agenda has made me realise that, having given up tutoring which entailed facilitation of reflective journaling in one way or another, I am no longer reflecting regularly to provide examples I can share with my reflective students. Consequently I am realising that I need to get back to my old habit, begun in the summer after I graduated. I must regularly sit down, perhaps once a year, to look back over the needs and yearnings which have emerged in the year that has gone, then forward into the year ahead - and set myself targets. I suppose I have almost done that while writing this short reflective summary. So I need to add 'restoring regular constructive reflection' to my sextet of lifewide learning targets.

Nowadays I do enjoy watching TV, tackling the crossword in *The Scotsman*, cutting the grass and socialising with children, grandchildren and great grand-sons. But I'm not yet ready to spend my days doing such things while otherwise sitting by the fireside in my slippers. And I am not wholly fulfilled when I undertake demanding academic tasks like reviewing, writing and even researching, because I have been doing these for some time; so engaging in them is not stretching me.

I feel that I need to be engaged with *new* challenges too - and so continue with my lifewide learning. For I have long been attracted to follow George Bernard Shaw¹ who declared:

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

George Bernard Shaw, Brighton, 1907

Well, that's *my* rationale for engaging in lifewide learning beyond the 80 year watershed. I hope this applies to any age of learner. The most valuable learning, in my experience, is not just the preserve of the young; it is indeed a lifelong-lifewide activity.