

Lifelong Learning - a challenge

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the possibilities and the benefits of lifelong learning for information professionals, particularly for those in a later stage of their life. It is about my experiences as a mature German student at Queensland University of Technology. I returned to the University environment to pursue my Masters of Information Technology in Library and Information Science (LIS) after 27 years. This paper describes the challenge of studying in a foreign country, in a second language and in a new online learning environment.

"Lifelong learning, also known as LLL, is the lifelong, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. As such, it not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development, but also competitiveness and employability." (Wikipedia, 2011)

As this definition states, LLL is not only about development and improvement of professional skills and knowledge, but also about the growth of personal qualities and capabilities over the whole period of life. It is essential for each Information Professional, who is used to working in a fast changing library and information environment, to keep up to date with current user needs and technology as well as to increase their personal skills to provide a comprehensive high quality service.

Background

I tend to compare the challenge of LLL with a long- distance triathlon competition, which includes swimming, cycling, and running consecutively. As for the LLL process, a goal and a strategy are indispensable. It does require planned steps and a direction that needs to be revised frequently considering strengths and weaknesses during that journey. For both LLL and the triathlon competition it is essential you have some people along the road to pass you some water. Furthermore, the well-planned ongoing acquisition of capabilities through training is critical to success. I had done triathlon for about 11 years before I came to Australia in April last year. I have obtained not only benefits like balance, fun, and physical fitness, but I have also improved such skills as persistence regarding reaching a goal over a longer distance as well as improvising in tricky situations. In addition, I have enhanced my ability to deal with unpleasant conditions by keeping calm and optimistic.

I grew up in the eastern part of Germany. I enjoyed a very good education in the first 12 years of school as well as in my university studies. I got my Bachelor degree for Library and Information Science at Humboldt University in Berlin in 1983. I also studied German language, History, and

Law. I had my first experiences with libraries when I was only six years old and I enjoyed the access of the innumerable books and the library atmosphere. My desire to become a librarian at least stemmed from jobs in a Council library and a University library that I undertook during my school holidays. After my study, I worked in a medical library and in an information centre of a big company and I really enjoyed that.

The company that I worked for was closed after the Wall was broken in 1989 and I had to look for another job. It was difficult to find work as a librarian. Main structures of the former GDR (German Democratic Republic) were broken and many companies as well as libraries had been closing. Like many other people in that part of Germany, I had to start a new profession. I got the opportunity to do that in a bank and I kept working there as a Financial Controller and a Credit Risk Manager for 18 years. I changed my work area within the bank four times in order to develop a wide range of knowledge and skills and to avoid sluggish eddies of routine. Supporting this, I did use many opportunities of learning, be it a qualification, a workshop or to learn from other experienced colleagues.

During my entire work history of about 25 years, I developed excellent interpersonal skills and I have become a very good team worker as well as team leader. By doing many projects in libraries as well as in the bank, I built up very good organisation and problem solving skills. I had to develop initiatives to motivate people and to support a respectful work environment. I had to lead groups and it was not easy for me at the beginning of that learning process. I had to recognize the balance, which is crucial to be accepted and to motivate a team. Last, but not least I have learnt to work under pressure in the bank.

The ability of self-awareness and critical reflection about what I am doing is significant. I am not always right with my reflection, but it is vital to be honest enough to accept that and to deal with criticism in a positive manner. To understand and to acknowledge critique from other professionals, family, and friends is essential for the progress in the LLL process.

Life experiences are a valuable benefit in the later stage of LLL. This is helpful in decision-making and dealing with other people. The most important part for me regarding this is that I have learnt to be open and tolerant and to pay respect to other people.

One of my strengths is that I am very curious person and I am keening to try new things and to learn about it. My weaknesses are my impatience and my penchant for perfectionism. It took years to recognize these weaknesses and I try to improve on them.

Motivation

I lost my job after they closed the bank department I worked for in 2009. After the first shock about what was happening to me I recognized that it was not only a risk, but also a chance for me to do what I always desired to do: to refresh my skills in my first and favourite profession as a Librarian and to come back into a library and information work environment. The motivation for that came from the fact that I have always enjoyed providing library services. Additionally, I had the wish to learn other languages and to live and to work abroad.

Methods

First, I needed a clear goal and a strategy. To seek and analyse information is an essential step to define a strategy. It took me months to figure out which path was the best for me. Sampling all this information and inferring the direction from my research was my first exercise as an Information Professional. Yet, it is a demanding task for me to manage the huge amount of information in an appropriate way.

The goal at this stage of my LLL is to achieve the Master degree of IT for Library and Information Science. One sub goal was to pass the first semester. The second sub goal was to get a job in a library and information environment. The first sub goal was an essential requirement for the second one, because I needed to gain knowledge and skills during my study first before I could start working. In addition, my English communication skills were not good enough to work in an English speaking area at that time.

I have defined this period of my study into manageable units, which I frequently review on whether I am progressing with them.

The main objectives were:

- Improvement of my English communication skills
- Refreshing my knowledge about information contexts as organisation, literacy, behaviour, management, architecture and evaluation
- Development of academic presentation and research
- Getting work experiences in a library

I was aware that the second language and the new learning environment at a University would be very demanding to me. I needed to improve my English skills to be as strong as possible to be prepared for that. It was very difficult for me understand the mass of written information in a limited time. It took me too long to read at the beginning of my first semester and I needed to get an idea on how to deal with that issue. I did use the skills I obtained during the IELTS

preparation, where I learned about scanning and skimming. In addition, I read the abstract and the conclusion first, before I started with the reading.

I try to use as many supportive resources from the library as possible. I attended workshops, saw the Liaison Librarian, and got instructions for academic writing and researching a topic. I did use online training and tutorials such as podcasts and videos to learn about special applications. The Information Programs unit in particular, where we learned about applications of emerging technology in information services, was very difficult for me, because I had to learn a lot about new applications as well as current issues in libraries. I asked the teacher for help and we developed a learning strategy for me. I also exchanged ideas and queries with my peers in class as well as in the library.

Coping with all these tasks related to my study, my life in another country and the separation from my daughter, my family and friends left me feeling overwhelmed. Apart from that, I spent too many hours in the library and got too tired. Obviously, I need a change in my learning behaviour and in my planning. I did daily and weekly planning, because I did not see another option to deal with all these everyday jobs. I was not flexible enough and I could fulfil my daily plan hardly ever. That frustrated me and got me down. I noticed with the help of my friends that I needed more breaks and needed to limit my daily working hours. That worked. In addition, by that time I had gotten used to the University operating schedule and got familiar with the topics of my course.

The focus of the second semester was to improve my academic skills and to get my first work experience. I did 100 hours internship in a TAFE library and in a government library during the summer semester. This was a big step forward for me in developing my communication skills and practicing of library daily work. I recognized that I have learnt many skills that I could apply and I have learnt many new things. The most important outcome of these internships was joy. I enjoyed working in these libraries and I lost my fear that I could fail. I did, for instance, a small project about a database and presented the results to other staff members in a workshop.

I could use not only the knowledge gained in the Information Resources unit, but also my presentation skills, my improved communication skills and my project skills. Another important outcome from the internships are the very good references that I received from Library Managers.

The strategy for the second semester was to extend my skills and my knowledge regarding my study and to improve my overall grade. In addition, I wanted to improve my professional performance for getting a job. I changed my time management and made it more flexible.

I developed my professional performance by creating a blog for my ePortfolio and I started applying for jobs. I recognized a good opportunity to meet professionals, when I had to do an interview for the Management Issues unit. I met library managers from different libraries and these meetings were significant to me, because I not only became familiar with current trends and issues in libraries nowadays, I also used these opportunities to introduce myself and talk about my professional goal briefly. In addition, I started writing applications for jobs and learnt to provide professional paper work. I practiced some interviews and got a job after the second interview.

Support

As mentioned above, support from other people is essential in LLL process. This support does not come and find you – you need to find it. It is crucial to be active in identifying the issues and ideally finding the most appropriate support. That can be a person, an activity by yourself or a simple thing like a book or an article. I used to talk to people, if I recognize that I have an issue and I figure out what is the best solution considering my strengths and my weaknesses.

I got a lot of support from the University. I could talk to my lecturers in the faculty at any time. They gave me academic and mental support when issues came up and when I felt overloaded, in particular in the first semester. I realized that the University provides different scholarships also to international students. I was successful with my application and got a scholarship from the faculty in the first semester for my good result of my previous Library and Information Science study in Berlin.

I also get support from other departments of the University like the Career and Employment Service, the International Student Service and finally yet importantly from professionals in the library. Furthermore, I received great support from some of my peers. They exchanged their ideas with me, which often lead to a solution of my problem. I got assistance from my younger peers in particular in using technology and special software. In return, I sometimes could give some emotional support to them. This is a great experience to me.

A great aid came and still comes from a peer of my library studies, who I met 30 years ago in Berlin. She studied a similar course in Sydney and works as an eResource Manager in a library in Sydney.

She gave me much important information before I started my course including ideas on how to deal with the overload in the first semester. Moreover, she supports me with professional advice regarding course content and professional development. I applied for a project at Brisbane City Council and got learning support from there in preparing an application letter, selection criteria

and a resume. Finally yet importantly, I got backing from my family and my friends who encourage me and stand behind me. My mother and my daughter, who are the most important people in my life, are giving me confidence to keep me on track.

Conclusion

I have passed the first semester and improved my grade point average in the second semester. I have improved my English communication skills and have developed my professional performance.

I have learnt to write in an academic manner and to research a topic. I enhanced my information professional skills such as understanding user needs, applying library applications, and research skills. I have learnt to critically analyse a topic and to evaluate resources. I have learnt to write HTML code by hand and to create a webpage. I have learnt to write an article and to peer review the work of others. I have learnt about information resources and about Web content. I have created a podcast and a blog. I have learnt to study and to develop efficient learning strategies.

I have improved my time management. I have learnt new things about my personality and my limitations. I have learnt to live in another country and I really enjoy living and studying in Australia. I have had many opportunities here that I would never get in Germany to that extent. Finally yet importantly, I got a job.

The description of the steps taken for this part of my LLL process supports the professional, intellectual, and personal benefits of LLL. It not only broadens and deepens my skills and understanding, it provides a richer and more fulfilling life. The key of LLL is to keep in touch with new ideas and methods. It maintains enthusiasm and can help to avoid professional burn out. The process of periodic learning supports me to have a fresh and flexible mind.

I really appreciate all the opportunities and trust that I have got and I am grateful for that.