

Lifelong Learning

New Opportunities Abound in the World of Continuing Education

BY PETER SHERER

With 20 to 30 extra years after our first careers, Boomers are going back to school to get new credentials, using on-line learning sites, studying fun stuff at places like the Smithsonian Associates, and creating new venues where “each one can teach one.” All of this is happening fast.

Used to be that you went to high school and then to a job for 25 years. A few went on to college and fewer still went on to get a graduate degree. So education was time-limited and targeted at young people.

Not so anymore.

The way that education is being delivered is changing dramatically, and so too are the people served. Dan Pink in his book *Free Agent Nation* says, “Within a few years, the number of thirty-five-plus-year-old college students will exceed the number of 18 and 19 year old college students.” Boomers will be right there at the next desk, or in a lively chat room satisfying more than just a healthy curiosity.

Why? Lots of reasons.

To Make Money

In *The World is Flat*, Tom Friedman argues that the unit of organization in the world has transitioned from the country, to the corporation and finally to the individual. A person in Toledo can cook up a net-based scheme with a partner in Vladivostok and start a business practically overnight. That means if you have a business, you better keep getting smarter. Almost 12 million boomers will start their own business sometime during the third stage of life. That’s a lot of demand for new knowledge.

The Credentialing of New Professionals

Boomers are going to demand a wide variety of new services, from gyms and trainers that cater to the above 60 crowd, to the many kinds of coaches for our varied interests ranging from violin lessons to high-altitude rock climbing. Some of us will want to learn to read Chinese or Hindi to understand the future world economy, and others will tackle a whole host of European languages as we reconnect with our past. Every one of the trainers, coaches, and teachers will have to become credentialed sooner rather than later. Not only do Boomers want to avoid working with someone who is not world class, but we demand “professional quality” in all our purchases. Why else, as David Brooks explains in *Bobos in Paradise*, do we buy hiking boots that are suitable for the Andes to navigate the produce section at Harris Teeter?

Immigration, Education and the Good Life

As the U.S. population diversifies, newcomers will continue to flood into junior colleges and then into four-year universities. More than ever, the ticket to the U.S. middle class is through the schoolhouse door. The idea of lifelong learning has been a part of many other cultures for generations, and émigrés coming to the U.S. will only reinforce that attitude. Boomers as a whole are likely to join in, in order to keep up.



The Rate of New Knowledge Development

Some experts say that many ideas that are more than five years old become outdated by newer research. In some fields like computer science and electronics, the half-life of a product or service is much more time-sensitive. Chat rooms, professional on-line peer groups, the immediate sharing of discoveries through open-source software will push us to stay current. Local libraries will morph into hubs of peer-led sessions on topics from French Cooking to Extreme Sports. Books on hand-held electronic devices, more magnet schools, and improved technology education starting in first grade will multiply new ideas logarithmically.

Learning Communities of Interest

Whole neighborhoods will organize around interests. There is a community in Arizona of racing car fans who have built their houses around a two-and-a-half-mile racetrack. The *Wall Street Journal* had an article on this that said in part “would you like your house to come with a physical trainer? That’s the draw of an \$800 million development focused on wellness, CooperLife at Craig Ranch in McKinney, Texas, which features a 75,000-square-foot aerobics center, a large amount of fitness equipment, healthy meals delivered to your door, trainers and fitness coaches, and annual physicals.” Six pack abs type Boomers will be wall to wall.

Living Where You Learn

Twenty-two colleges and universities have already built housing on campus to attract Boomers to move permanently. Some are even figuring out how to provide in-house health care in addition to housing and the use of university facilities as part of the live-on-campus model. Others are beefing up courses designed to attract us. A leader, the Bernard Osher Foundation, has established Osher Lifelong Learning Centers at 120 colleges and universities here and abroad. American, George Washington, Georgetown, George Mason and many other local schools are using Osher grants to offer relatively cheap courses aimed specifically at Boomer interest in the visual arts, music, literature, technology, science, fitness and spirituality, to name just a few.

Learning for the Fun of it

In 1975, Elderhostel pioneered educational services for older people under the guiding assumption that if you were over 50 years old, you could still think. Today Elderhostel sponsors 8,000 programs each year in about 90 countries. For years, Elderhostel enjoyed richly deserved industry leadership free of serious competition. Now every website and school on the planet wants into the game.

Want to improve your golf game? Google golf camps and your fingers will fall off before you have read all the programs available. How about learning to belly dance? There are 10 pages of websites for belly dancing classes just in the DC Metro area. How about a trip to Greece? Is there a college or university around that won't hook you up with your alumni class to tour the islands? Want to make beaded necklaces, learn to sing operetta, fly fish with skill, throw pots, drive a Segway, hang glide, and become a puppeteer to sick kids, and on and on? You get the point. If you want to do it, someone is prepared to teach you at whatever level your wallet allows.

The Future

The Boomer cohort can count on a lot more innovation and scope when it comes to learning opportunities in the years ahead. Millions of people are going to pursue additional learning for fun and profit. Ten years from now, I can imagine an elaborate on-line barter system so that the jewelry makers can trade their know-how to learn to say "hola" from the Spanish language speakers without a lot of cash trading hands. I can imagine whole apartment buildings being inhabited by a group who shares the same interests. After the rest of us trade our houses in the burbs for sensible living in the city, a new learning experience will be only a Metro ride away.

Become an expert and join the parade.

You can contact Peter Sherer at peter@expmatters.com. ★



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