***What will
YOU***

LEARN?

Whether you take up first aid, flower arranging or French, **Michael R. Young*** says that embracing lifelong learning is essential for an enriched life.

A great deal of emphasis is now placed on people acquiring not just formal qualifications, but also other life experiences as part of lifelong learning (LLL). What is LLL? It could be described as the acquisition of skills and knowledge through formal (courses) and informal (experiences) channels. There is inevitably going to be a great deal of overlap. This article looks at what you can do above and beyond the mandatory continuing professional development (CPD) that is very much a part of your professional status. LLL should be seen as part of your personal development, your development as a person.

I will begin with a general outline of LLL and then finish with my own experiences of LLL over my 25-year dental career and beyond. I hope the last bit will not deter but instead inspire, and will show you how and why LLL should also be part of your professional life.

Up until you leave school or complete your higher education, your learning is mainly formal, but once you are 'qualified', your learning can and should be a mix of formal and informal. School is compulsory; college is optional; LLL requires a great deal of self-motivation and self-discipline. The days when you walked out of college with a piece of paper that proclaimed your capabilities are long gone. The modern work place is ultra competitive and you need to continuously update and upgrade your skills and knowledge, not necessarily to move forward, but rather to stop yourself from falling behind.

However, improving your job prospects is just one of the reasons why you should embrace LLL. You need to focus on making yourself a more rounded person.

You could learn about a new subject or extend your knowledge of something you already know a little about. Once the pressure of having to learn to pass exams is removed, many people enjoy learning about things they did not have time for when they were at school or college. Some people enjoy learning for the fun of it. I know people (myself included) whom, having studied science all their life, suddenly feel the urge to explore and discover the arts. Of course, the reverse is also true.

LLL is often seen as a way of meeting new people, people from different social and cultural backgrounds. The social side of LLL is important. If you are going to take a course then find one that has some level of student interaction. Distance learning has its place,

but it is no substitute for courses that offer personal contact with others.

Your working environment is a microcosm of the outside world, but it should not be *the* world. There is often a hierarchy, a pecking order at work that keeps everyone in their place (rightly or wrongly). You may feel inhibited by your age (old or young) or lack of experience to express yourself at work. Moving out of a working environment and into a new learning environment can help you to develop self-confidence at work. Engaging with new people who are totally unconnected with your work often allows you to be 'yourself' and to compare your knowledge

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and experiences with others in a non-judgemental environment. You may be pleasantly surprised by how little those who you think know more than you actually know. LLL is a great way of socialising and of building your self-confidence.

Acquiring new skills can sometimes lead to a new career. I know a dental nurse whose ambitions in the dental world were thwarted, so she used the skills she'd learnt at evening class to open a new and entirely non-dental related business.

Perhaps one aspect of LLL that may not be so obvious is the desire to get involved in the community. Doing something for its own sake, and something that you have never thought about doing before, is a good way of developing your ability to empathise with other social groups. This is a skill that can be easily transferred into your working life.

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Most towns have colleges that run classes that cater for the majority of tastes and interests. Courses usually run for weeks, but can sometimes run for a term or terms, or even for a whole academic year. Search the internet to see what is available near you. You could also look at distance learning courses, but for reasons already outlined above, these should not be your first choice.

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shapes and sizes; too many to explore here. Pick something you want to do and go and do it.

You could become a volunteer; as you participate in something new, you have the opportunity to soak up as much information and knowledge as you can, and gain new skills along the way.

Formal LLL might involve course work or even an exam.

You should not shy away from these courses.

The discipline of having to meet deadlines and of having to be really well organised is going to help you at work.

My own experiences of LLL have been wide and varied, but every one of them has enriched my life, both on a personal and on a professional level. I embraced LLL long before CPD was mandatory for the dental profession, for no other reason than as a practice owner I felt that I had to keep abreast of clinical innovations etc. I got a part-time teaching role at the local dental hospital, which meant I was in touch with new research and ideas, and I also gained a new social and professional network. The culmination of all of this was that I eventually studied for and gained an MSc.

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Away from dentistry, because my education had been so biased towards the sciences, I'd always felt that somewhere along the line I'd missed out by not studying or learning about the arts. One day I resolved to put this right, but I wasn't quite sure at that stage how to go about it. My personal preference is to 'study' in a structured way, and so I began by looking at what the Open University had to offer. Ten years later I finally gained a BA. Along the way I learnt about ancient history, how to read Latin and Ancient Greek, archaeology, and the history of art. How relevant were these to my previous job and to what I do now, but perhaps more importantly, to me as a person? Each one taught me analytical skills, improved my organisational and time management skills, and broadened my understanding of where our culture and language came from and how they evolved. Most important of all, I learnt how to write, and that ultimately led to my career as a writer. I think that apart from anything else, LLL has enriched my life. Of course not everything you do has to be as highbrow as this, or as academic; it was my choice, but it doesn't have to be yours. But what I would say is, whatever you decide to do, it will never be wasted.

It's not been all study, study, study. I took a short cookery course, which taught me that I can actually cook, but I still leave much of it to my wife because she's still much

better! I am considering taking a watercolour painting course next year, which has been sparked by my study of art history and my love of the paintings of J. M. W. Turner.

Over the course of my LLL I have met numerous people of different backgrounds and different ages, whose reasons for learning were extremely varied. Interestingly, there have been a few dentists, practice managers and dental care professionals on some of the courses, all obviously keen to discover new things and to enrich their lives with knowledge.

You must embrace LLL and its sister CPD, and regard them both as being part of your professional status, and not as something that has been imposed on you. Spread your net far and wide when looking for subjects and topics to study. Nothing you learn, whether it is flower arranging or ancient history, will ever be wasted; at some later stage the skills and knowledge you pick up along the way will come in useful in some shape or form.

I can remember thinking that once I finished my undergraduate training I would never have to look at another book again (this was pre-CPD). However, the added enjoyment I now get from, say, visiting an art gallery and being able to 'read' the paintings, or visiting an ancient historic site and understanding the historical context, are things I would never have been able to do had I not embraced LLL all those years ago. I daresay that had it not been for LLL I may never have become a published author.

Finally, I could summarise the benefits of LLL as '*Learning to do, learning to be, learning to know, and learning to live together*' (Jacques Delors, 1996, UNESCO report).