

VTech Guest Article

Enjoying Lifelong Learning

By: Adriane G. Berg
CEO, *Generation Bold*

Learning doesn't have to stop with a graduation cap or at a certain age. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education show that adult students are the fastest growing educational demographic. Whether we seek to rekindle old interests, retool for a career or learn for a volunteer position, people over the age of 50 have plenty of learning opportunities.

Lifelong learning can be as broad as it sounds. In Nancy Merz Nordstrom's book, ["Learning Later, Living Greater: The Secret for Making the Most of Your After-50 Years,"](#) she includes formal academic courses, educational travel, community service and volunteerism as activities that serve to engage the brain and maintain healthy social relationships. [The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#) shares information about educational programming for older learners. Its learning experts emphasize the importance of making new friends and having discussions with like-minded people. Both Nordstrom and the Osher Institute show that lifelong learning goes beyond absorbing facts to meeting new people, challenging minds and improving skills.

You can see this broad approach to lifelong learning when you talk with older students. I asked a group of students at Princeton University and participants at our local senior center, why they take classes. Their answers included:

- *"I took a technology course to adapt to change."*
- *"I took the course in Asian history because I was never taught that in school, and I want to stay relevant to the world."*
- *"I took a cooking course just to have fun."*
- *"I took a philosophy course to meet younger people interested in philosophy and have engaging conversations."*
- *"It gives me confidence to see how well I'm doing. I still like to get an A."*

No matter why you're learning, the act of studying enhances memory and retention at any age. To illustrate this fact, a recent study published in [GeroPsych: The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry](#) worked with 82 students ranging from age 55 to 70 at Europe's [University of the Third Age](#) to measure memory, health, social relationships and productivity. The study showed that school activities helped older adults increase their memory function over time as well as their levels of physical activity. That's worth more than an A plus!

Bringing the Classroom to Students

Education providers are concerned with the total adult learning experience, including connecting to others. One challenge is access for those with mobility issues. An inventive solution is remote classrooms, pioneered by New York nonprofit, [DOROT](#). Its University Without Walls program offers hundreds of classes about the arts, health issues, current events, positive thinking and history. Classes and support groups are led by professors

and volunteers on the telephone. DOROT also offers teleconference health education taught by doctors and personnel from local hospitals.

Beyond the telephone, other groups, like the Riverdale Senior Center in the Bronx, have successfully experimented with video conference classes, including chair yoga for the home bound. Another use of video is the website, [GCF Learn Free](#) that uses videos to teach everything from how to count pills, to how to use Pinterest.

These innovative examples show a lot of promise, but are not the ultimate solution. Today, less than 40 percent of seniors have an Internet connection. Those who do have access may have slow-moving dial up, and others may be uncomfortable with online learning or feel further isolated with no personal contact.

On-campus Living

A completely immersive way to connect, learn and experience would be to move to a college campus. In Dr. Ellen Langer's "[Counterclockwise](#)" study during the 1970s at Harvard University, elderly men, placed in an environment reminiscent of their youth, acted younger. More recently, the [BBC magazine](#) informally replicated the study with the same results. Imagine turning back the clock and living in a college town, or on an actual campus!

The experience isn't impossible. [The Village at Penn State](#) combines a retirement community with special access to classes, activities and the environment of Pennsylvania State University. Lasell College in Newton, Mass., expanded its [Lasell Village](#) retirement community to include independent and assisted living services, as well as full nursing home care right on the college grounds. At Lasell, residents commit to 450 hours per year in academic, volunteer or paid work endeavors, the same as students do.

No matter how or why you are learning, keep at it! With opportunities at our fingertips, learning can indeed be lifelong.

Lifelong Learning Resources

- [Road Scholar](#) offers 5,500 educational tours in all 50 states and 150 countries.
- James Madison University gives free membership to first time applicants to its [Lifelong Learning Institute](#).
- [The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#), subsidized by a grant from the [Bernard Osher Foundation](#), offers individual courses and a lifetime membership.
- [OASIS](#) is sponsored by major corporations and offers classes in the arts, humanities, health, and computer technology in 26 cities around the country.
- The [Shepherd's Centers of America](#), founded in 1971 so older adults could use their knowledge and skills for their community, has 75 interfaith centers in 21 states providing lifelong learning courses.
- [The Jewish Learning Institute](#) holds classes all over the world each week.
- A federal program, [Experience Works](#), offers low-income and unemployed adults who are 55+ the training and skills they need to compete and retain jobs in the private sector.