

EDITORIAL

“Lifelong education” has become prominent, to the point where “educational delivery” is sometimes reckoned as an entitlement to X years of education which can be cashed in at any time of a person’s life. Cashing may occur in consecutive years or in short periods scattered throughout the person’s life. While this effort to make education available to people of all ages is undoubtedly sincere and may often serve the needs of particular individuals, it also involves a short-sighted concept of education.

“Lifelong education” is sometimes based on a highly technocratic model of education — possibly even a factory model. In this context, “lifelong education” allows for retraining of workers whose skills have been out-paced by technological change — in the factory version, these workers need to be re-tooled. Alternatively, “lifelong education” is seen as a means for individuals to pursue their own interests. Whether “lifelong education” is based upon the factory model or upon the individual interest model, it seems somehow at variance with the most generous concept of education. In short, “lifelong education” seems to be predicated on the assumption that an individual’s former education is very limited and shallow, so much so that whenever he is called to strike out in a new direction he needs to be recycled through another course or program.

It is regrettable that we should ever conceive of education as being so specific and so limited that a new learning package must be parcelled out whenever a man would pursue a new interest. This narrow view of education has, perhaps, been spawned by the talk of the popular futurologists — notably Alvin Toffler — and the propaganda about the pervasiveness and the rapidity of change. If we believe that the future is rushing upon us at breakneck speed, or believe, with one writer of an educational report, “that many of today’s facts will be tomorrow’s fiction,” we may be led to despair of achieving any lasting educational result. If so, we have been led into error. The very idea of “re-programming” people to cope with changed situations betrays a gross misunderstanding of what education can, and should, be. It also betrays a dangerous inability to distinguish between superficial variation and substantial change.

If people have, in the first place, been educated so narrowly and have gained so little skill in acquiring information for themselves that they require additional educational treatments in order to cope with changed conditions, they are doomed to a hopeless and endless task. The essence of education is a breadth of outlook, a mastery of principles and techniques which permits adaptation and application to a variety of situations. Without this educational basis, the individual who would cope with change by taking another course is very much in the position of treating a major wound with a band-aid.

Thus, drawing attention to the nature of education and distinguishing it from short-term palliatives is not to decry the value of specific courses and limited training programs. All that is being urged is that we must not make the error of assuming that a substantial and far-ranging education is obsolete. When the idea of "lifelong education" is joined with the premise that it is best if individuals can learn what they want to learn when they need to learn it, we are far advanced on the dangerous argument which concludes that any long period of consecutive learning may be irrelevant to our rapidly changing world. Even worse, by directing educational programs to what is assumed to be relevant, we conclude by accepting a series of short-term compromises in place of education.

Perhaps much of this educational confusion stems from accepting technology and the apparent changes in our world as "givens," as things that are somehow so determined that men have nothing to do but accept them and adjust to them. Thus we are lured in the direction of re-tooling or re-programming men to suit the shifting scenes of our time, when the proper educational, and human, response would be to prepare men to deal with the changes that confront them. Dealing with changes includes resisting them or seeking to bring about counter-changes, in other words, to continue the endless human effort to improve our world.

However long education may take and however widely it may be spread throughout our lives, it cannot truly be education so long as it is merely a reaction to change, a matter of fitting men into a new job or into a slightly changed society. Education is anticipation rather than reaction, and it is founded on the confidence that there are skills and bodies of knowledge which have application over broad spans of time and space.

The true "lifelong education" is that which holds some promise of serving a man throughout his life. A series of courses which happen to have been spread across a man's life need not have any such effect. Truly, to engage in "lifelong education" we must have the courage to commit substantial effort to sustained programs of education. We cannot hedge our bets against the future by waiting until men think they are obsolete and then offering them a refresher course.