

## **Personal Reflections on Lifelong Learning**

Dr. Angela Lewis

*I recently received my PhD and I would like to share my adult learning journey with you. Less than 1% of the adult population in the world gains a doctoral degree, and this achievement is considered the pinnacle of the academic success, so I am of course very proud of this accomplishment. You might assume that I am employed by a university and perhaps did my PhD while on study leave from academic pursuits; however this was not the case. I would like to share my learning journey with you, so you can see how an ordinary person was able to achieve her goals through adult education.*

My parents took me out of school at 16, as they decided that it was time I went out to work. I was consistently the top of my classes and hoped to be a schoolteacher, so I was completely devastated when I found out what they had done. Without thinking about the consequences I left home, got a full time job and enrolled at night school so that I could complete what was then called HSC. I went to school at night, worked full time and did my homework and studied for exams on the weekends. It then took me another 12 years to do a bachelors degree then a postgraduate IT degree, after which I took a small break.

While skimming through the weekend newspapers one lazy Sunday afternoon, I read an advertisement for the Masters degrees available at Deakin University and before I knew it, I had enrolled. I had a wonderful supervisor for my Master of Education course and seeing how much I had enjoyed it, she suggested I apply for the Doctor of Education program. I thought about that for three months, as I couldn't believe that I would be good enough to apply, let alone get into such a program. It was also a degree that could not be completed in less than six years part time and would probably require some time off work when I had to write up my thesis. But I couldn't get the thought out of my head and I had to give it a shot. When I talked it over with my best friend, she said 'well, why not?' and I thought indeed, 'why not?'. Five or six years go by in a flash and for me it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

I was awarded a fully funded place in the Doctor of Education program at Deakin in 2001, and my thesis was accepted in July 2006. In the last two years of my candidature I was offered a change to Doctor of Philosophy, and that is how I graduated. During the five years I worked on my PhD my father died in an accident, my son did his VCE, I developed painful RSI in my thumb (too much keyboarding) and I managed to work full time and keep running my IT training business. I didn't take any time off to write my thesis, choosing to do it on weekends and in the Christmas breaks. I won't say it was an easy journey, but it was my choice and not mandated by anyone. As a result, it was the most

fantastic thing I have ever done and shows that if you can dare to dream it, you can certainly do it.

So many adults don't take up learning because they think studying while working will take too long, or they fear they won't be up to the task. For me, success came from my mindset; I didn't look at it as years of drudgery, or self-imposed torture, but as a privilege, the privilege of learning. I also studied for me, not to impress my friends or because I thought I could make more money as I became more qualified. Ultimately, the end result wasn't as important as the process. If you can dream it you can do it, isn't just a new age catch phrase, it really is as simple as that, so just take the first step.

From my experiences, these are some of the things I think you need to take into account if you are considering a Masters or Doctoral degree, but could equally be applied to other facets of adult learning:

**Discipline:** compared to structured coursework, which usually carefully planned by a teacher, PhD and Masters study will have less structure. This can really suit some adult learners, as it means you will have freedom to set your own goals, determine your daily and weekly study and research schedules and follow interesting ideas. There will be nobody but yourself to invoke any type of discipline on your study and research efforts. Take the freedom as a serious responsibility, because the quicker you structure your study and set goals, the easier it will be. Unfortunately, for people who are not particularly self-disciplined, it can be difficult to police their own study schedules and they can fall into the habit of putting it off week after week. This results in some people taking 9 years to do a PhD or 5 years to do a Masters degree and feeling like they have committed to a life sentence. Study then becomes an onerous, never-ending responsibility, rather than the exciting journey it should be.

**Time:** You need to think about how you might be prepared to tackle a project larger than any you might have undertaken previously. Think about it as you might a business plan for a large work project or in terms of renovating a house; what allowances do you need to make, what needs to shift in your life to accommodate the project? Once you have committed to multiple years of study you need to be a little creative about how you fit it in. Perhaps you need to reduce or forego other activities, maybe you need to speak up and ask your partner or family for more help, or request some study leave from your employer. Be prepared to be serious about starting some time-tabling and set up daily and weekly study goals. See 'discipline' above.

**Don't make study your whole life:** While it is a big responsibility and it will at times feel like study consumes all your energy, it isn't your whole life and nor should it be. If your course of study is going to take you some time to complete, you need to accept this as a fact of life and accommodate it without making it the pivotal focus of the coming years. There is no need to turn into that boring friend

or colleague who is constantly sighing heavily about the burdens of study, because before you know it, instead of supporting your achievements, friends and family may end up resenting them. Committing to study was your choice, and while we all want friends and family to support us, your completion isn't their goal and they won't be as interested in it as you are. Think about the person who goes on a diet and then talks endlessly about what they are consuming, how much weight they have lost or how hard it is to count the calories. Try not to be that person with your study program.

**Self-motivation and adaptability:** Be prepared to be out of your comfort zone. Sometimes you will feel overwhelmed, unsupported, or out of your depth - but that's ok – it is all part of the process. It can be disconcerting to have no classes to attend, or to have to chase up your supervisor for help or to review work. Most of us would have previously studied in a formalised program such as high school or university where we have had deadlines for essays, or exams to study for and it was up to us to meet those pre-defined obligations. In a PhD or Masters Program, your work is not generally neatly divided into assignments or separate units of study (though some Masters courses will award on coursework, which follows the traditional units per semester setup). Instead, you may find yourself largely left alone, accountable to a supervisor who may be busy herself and not checking what you are up to for months at a time. Mine for example went on 6 months leave in my third year, so I set myself the goal of having a certain amount of work ready for her to review the minute she returned. You may need to adapt to new ways of thinking, to expect less hand-holding or encouragement and to being confident enough to search for your own answers and find your own way. As a result, studying at this level frequently means you are forced to look inwards for the inspiration to continue working towards your goals, as well as being self-motivated enough to work towards them alone.

Remember, successful completion is *your* goal, nobody else's, so be prepared to own the process so you can achieve the end result - because taking charge of what you want to achieve is something only you can do. And I can guarantee you – it is totally worth it!

*Angela Lewis has run an IT training business in Melbourne for the past 20 years and was among the first group of AITD members to be granted the Accredited Practitioner (AP) status. She teaches adult computer skills in both the government and corporate sector and works on various projects as an independent learning consultant. Angela is also an accredited counsellor and acts as the IT Education Adviser to the Australian Counselling Association*