

THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

Learning as a 21st Century Survival Skill

***At the forum, “Lifelong Learning Matters: Taking Steps Forward,”
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Recently I went to see the documentary film *Waiting for Superman*, which shows how the US education system is failing American children. One of the most poignant scenes shows kids and their parents awaiting the results of the lottery required by the State of New York to gain entry into the higher performing secondary schools in New York City—the outcome of which will significantly influence their entire lifetime trajectory. The notion that a person’s life chances should be determined by a lottery before even the teen years is so abhorrent, so unfair. Yet, to a significant extent that is true of everybody today—our lives may not be determined by a lottery, but they are certainly largely influenced by the quality of schooling we have received and, even more, by whether we have been prepared for a lifetime of learning to cope with a world of incessant change. What we *know* by the time we leave secondary school is less important than whether we have learned to learn—to thrive in a world where young people can expect to have between ten and fourteen jobs by age 38, where technical information doubles every two years (so half of what first year students learn in university is out of date by their third year), and where the top ten in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004.

Of course the world has never stood still, but the pace and scale of change today is unprecedented and our education systems have not adapted. When change is relatively slow, predictable, and linear, we can use history and apply lessons from the past. We gather data, use evidence based approaches, and knowledge becomes increasingly specialized. But when change is discontinuous, involving unknowns and uncertainty, experience is less useful as a guide; we need to develop skills in understanding system dynamics and thinking across knowledge sets. Insight and intuition may be more useful than factual knowledge, and experimentation more important than relying on what is already known. But there is also change that is disruptive and deeply unknowable. How can education help us to navigate those waters? For that we need *resilience*, in other words adaptability, the capacity for innovation and continuous learning.

I would argue that we are called upon increasingly to deal with the third kind of change—but with the tools developed for the first. There are two already visible shifts taking place in our world, namely the shift of the centre of gravity of the global economy from the North Atlantic to Asia and the demographic changes facing Canadian society as we become an older, more diverse people. But in addition, there are changes triggered by global phenomena like climate change or terrorism or the impact of new information and communication technologies, that are so new and so far-reaching that we cannot yet foresee how they will affect us.

The focus of the McConnell Foundation is on helping communities to respond to change, to create a culture in Canada that celebrates and supports continuous innovation, that develops and sustains resilience. We view ourselves as a learning organization; consequently grants are more often than not a kind of learning partnership, testing whether an approach or activity can produce positive results for a given problem area. We understand that creating long-lasting change requires that we alter the social systems that created the problems in the first place, that we are necessarily part of that system and therefore must change as well.

Organizations and institutions may be slow to adapt, but even harder is to change how people think. Yet openness to new concepts and ideas keeps a society flexible. In business there is acceptance of the need for innovation, indeed what Joseph Schumpeter termed “creative destruction” ensures a continual redeployment of resources. The public sector struggles to renew itself, but disruptive change sometimes requires some form of social upheaval or radical breakdown of existing institutions. The voluntary or community sector exhibits a paradox: established bodies are slow to change because feedback mechanisms are weak or lacking (people receiving services, for example, do not pay for them), yet there is a constant upwelling of new organizations and informal groupings in response to new needs or causes, which lead to new and resourceful ways of addressing problems.

At a time of rapid change and new challenges, we need new actors—social innovators and “institutional entrepreneurs” who can re-frame an issue and mobilize new or re-direct existing resources. We need broad thinkers who can integrate knowledge from different fields and who can collaborate across sectors. There is a societal challenge in developing ways to work effectively on what have been called horizontal problems from within our vertical institutions. The community sector’s role is central, because a resilient society requires active citizens, not clients or customers.

The importance of what used to be called adult education is self-evident in this new world of change and complexity; yet adult education has become invisible in Canada. How ironic and tragic that Canada, which occupied a leadership position in the worldwide adult ed movement not so long ago, is now absent. Even creating a culture of learning is problematic when evidence and expertise is devalued, and the experience of school is profoundly unfulfilling. There is a recognition that the best learning is driven by “pull” not “push,” and that motivation is key; yet schooling is based on fixed curricula and standardized methods. In our experience at

the Foundation we have seen how experiential learning through the arts (as in our ArtsSmarts/GénieArts program) or the environment (formerly Green Street/Ma rue verte, now Imagineaction run by the Canadian Teachers' Federation) can change attitudes and improve learning outcomes among disengaged students.

For all these reasons your goal of creating a Lifelong Learning network in Canada is to be applauded. This meeting demonstrates the breadth of interest, and the active presence here of participants from both English and French communities, and especially from First Nations and Aboriginal communities, suggests that the time is right.