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AUDIO | Preparing Adults for Lifelong Learning

By [Jeff Cobb](#)
Managing Director, Tagoras

The following interview is with Jeff Cobb, the author of 10 Ways To Be A Better Lifelong Learner—a book providing strategies to help adults become better learners—as well as the Mission to Learn blog. Cobb has worked in the continuing and professional education field for over a decade and has taken some time to talk to The EvoLLLution about the state of adult higher education and how more adults could be encouraged to become engaged in lifelong learning.

To listen to The EvoLLLution's interview with Jeff Cobb over your computer's audio player, please [click here](#).

AA: In a recent webinar you said that today's adults are absolutely unprepared to be lifelong learners. Does this include both prospective and current students?

JC: If I used the word absolutely I may have just been speaking in the heat of the moment. I think we're all prepared to learn through our



PHOTO BY DAVE HEUTS

In a knowledge economy that is increasingly demanding employees to continuously learn and upgrade their skills, adults must be supported in their drive to become better lifelong learners.

lives—it's really how we're wired as human beings—we're just always learning whether we're conscious of it or not.

That said, I don't think we're ad-

equately prepared in the current day and age; I think that does include both prospective and current students. Students, we tend to be accustomed to very structured, for-

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mal approaches to learning—that’s just so much of what traditional education is. But we’re living in a world that’s increasingly chaotic, complex and fast-paced and we have to continually ask ourselves questions like, “How do I decide what’s important?”, “How do I organize the flow of information that I’m experiencing?”, “How do I decide who my trusted sources are?” And I don’t think it’s a matter of simply knowledge anymore, it’s an active ongoing process—more so than it’s ever been before.

It’s commonplace, and it has been for a while, to say that we live in a knowledge economy, but I think that’s too static now. I think we live in what I characterize as a learning economy—and that’s not just a matter of our business and professional lives. It permeates every part of our lives at this point. ...

AA: What are the major gaps keeping today’s adults from effectively continuing their education?

JC: There are two ways to come at that question, at least. It’s high-level at first, to differentiate between education—which I consider to be primarily a formal, structured activity—and learning, the vast majority of which is informal and not necessarily structured. And learning encompasses education, but learning is just so much broader.

When it comes to education, there can be any number of barriers that prevent an adult from continuing her education. Time and money tend to be two of the biggest. Those barriers can be overcome; like anything in life it’s just often a matter of priorities and planning, both on the part of the individual and the society, but they do have to be overcome.

On the other hand with learning, there’s really nothing that can prevent an adult from continuing learning if they are in fact dedicated to doing that. We really can’t help doing it; we’re pretty much hard-wired to be continually learning. But we all know how overwhelming the flow of information can be around us these days; on the one hand it’s this sense of being overwhelmed that can hold people back, I think another factor is that we simply don’t look at a lot of the amazing new opportunities that we have, primarily through what the web now enables. ... We don’t necessarily look at these as learning tools and as things that can really help us to engage with and grow in life.

Really, once you recognize that and once you start thinking in terms of effective strategies and effective approaches, the sky’s the limit.

AA: What can higher education institutions do differently to better

serve their adult student populations?

JC: I think—and this is obviously a long-term solution and it points to the previous book I wrote called *Shift Ed* which was about transforming the K-12 education system—I think the first place we have to start really infusing out entire primary education system with a philosophy and a vision for lifelong learning. More so than is the case right now, we have to elevate that as part of the conversation that we have on an ongoing basis with students from the moment they enter school and with parents. ...

As far as higher education itself goes, I think in the first place really continuing to keep and to grow liberal arts programs is essential. We see more and more focus on specialization at the higher education level and that has its place—obviously—but I still think there’s just a huge argument for a breadth of education.

I think at all levels of education, this is both primary education and higher education, really focusing on keeping learning as active as possible so that it’s not just the traditional “butts in seats listening to a lecture”. We don’t need to be wed to traditional notions of what a classroom is or what grade levels are or what a traditional school

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year or school day looks like.

I think we really need to have courses and initiatives within the higher education context that are really focused on learning strategies. Semester-in or semester-out or however we divide the time, that needs to be a continual part of how individuals in higher education are trained, instructed and to help them personally cultivate those skills.

The one other point I would make relative to continuing education beyond higher education is that most people are going to exit higher education and then they're facing what I call "the other 50 years." That time in their life where they're going to go through a career, they're going to go through all the major changes in their life. Some of them are going to go back to school and engage in degrees and other types of formal higher education but most of them won't.

I think employers have a role to play, obviously, but I think one of the institutions that has the biggest role to play... is trade and professional associations. Because when people exit into a field, they may work for many employers in that field across time but often they are going to be a member of the same trade or professional association for decades. Those associations

really have an opportunity to help lead lifelong learning, to really be the core resource and to help their members become better learners; not just to access the right content but to be more effective and more productive as learners in this learning economy we now live on.

AA: Do you think many professional associations will follow the example of the medical industry and develop rules and regulations related to continuing learning for its members?

JC: It's already a huge part of the association role to offer different types of continuing education, and it's more of a requirement in some fields than in others but in most fields there's at least some of that going on.

I think some of the things that are missing—and actually the medical field is a good one to point to on this—is how are you actually making sure that... the continuing education you are delivering is actually doing something for the learners and perhaps for the employers that the learners are going back to. In the medical field they're starting to do much more to actually measure performance improvement based on continuing education and I think that's an enormous advance. ...



AUTHOR PROFILE

Current Position and Past Experience

Jeff Cobb has been the Managing Director of Tagoras—a consultancy firm geared towards continuing education and professional development—since 2008.

He is the author of a number of books on continuing and lifelong learning, including *10 Ways to Be a Better Learner* and *Shift Ed: A Call to Action for Transforming K-12 Education*. He also contributed to *The Decision to Learn: Why People Seek Continuing Education and How Membership Organizations Can Meet Learners' Needs*.

Prior to Tagoras, Cobb was the Co-Founder and CEO of the Isoph Corporation, a company that provided e-learning products and services to the association sector. The company was bought by LearnSomething, and Cobb spent two years as the Vice President before moving to his current position.