

# **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

## **Building a Learning Society**

**HKUSPACE**

**May 19, 2009**

Ladies and Gentlemen, friends:

Good morning. Today, I am going to share with you my views on the importance of building a learning society, and my personal struggle to keep up with the continuous advances in knowledge that are all around us.

Before I begin, I want to thank Prof. C.F. Lee for inviting me to speak on lifelong learning. This all started when Prof. Lee and I were sitting next to each other at a Colgate University event in Hamilton, New York, a couple of years ago. He knows that I am always going back to school, so he thought I would be a good candidate to speak on the topic of lifelong learning. And here I am!

When I checked the website of your School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE), I saw that continuing education at HKU started in 1956. I remember taking German lessons after school at this university in 1958, the year I was here between England and Canada, and that was part of the programme then. It is important to note that, in the 1950s, continuing education was recognized as an important component of education by the University of Hong Kong. The reason I mention this is because most people connect youth with education, and not many think of adults and seniors.

I have always said that the day I stop learning is the day I die. To me, learning is fun. It keeps me challenged, alert and energized, and my friends tell me that it also keeps me young.

There are different kinds of continuous learning: the formal and the informal. Some of us want to go back to school to get a degree or a diploma, for personal reasons, or to upgrade our skills for better employment. Others like to read a lot, take courses to improve ourselves, travel, and volunteer in

the community. All these activities drive innovation and productivity, as well as contribute to the health, happiness, prosperity and civic wellbeing of our societies.

In my case, continuous learning has transformed my life. I was married at the age of twenty-one, right after I graduated with an Honours BA degree from McGill University. Instead of continuing with formal education, I felt the need to learn many things that, up to then, I hadn't had time to learn. So, aside from reading voraciously, I taught myself to cook, to bake, to sew, and to type.

As you all know, growing up in Hong Kong society, we were never exposed to most of these activities. My mother didn't know how to sew or to do anything in the kitchen. In fact, the kitchen was off limits to us as children. I had to teach myself all that after I got married in Canada because I wanted to be independent. I can say I am a handy home-maker, but, today, I still type with 2 fingers.

When my husband and I were in England during his year of overseas Plastic Surgery training there, I attended classes at the Institute of Archeology at London University. And, after we returned to Canada, after I had my first child, I took German and French language lessons, for personal fulfillment, whenever I had the time.

With respect to formal continuing education, I have gone back to school a couple of times. The first time, I made the decision to return to school when I was pregnant with our third child, because, I decided, that was also going to be my last pregnancy. Reading and taking courses just wasn't enough for me.

Being very much a hands-on mother of three, I wanted to wait until our last child was in full day school before I went back for formal training. By then, I was already in my late thirties.

At that time, I felt the need to train for a profession in which I could use my artistic talent. Having painted since I was a very small child, and having grown up in an entrepreneurial family, I wanted a profession that would combine art with business. So, I applied to Seneca College in the Fashion Arts Department for the three-year fashion design diploma course.

For the interview at Seneca, I had to bring drawings and clothes that I had made. So, it was a good thing that I had taught myself to sew. Nothing we learn is ever wasted, and we never know when we may need to put our knowledge to use.

I am sure many of your students in your school of Professional and Continuing Education have returned to school, because they need professional up-grading or they want to change to another profession. In my case, it was to have a practical profession.

My friends really wondered what on earth I was doing. Why didn't I just sit back and relax. I was married to a plastic surgeon and had three beautiful sons. But you know what? I couldn't sleep well because I was restless. I called it my "demon." I needed to be challenged.

Over the three years at Seneca, I would see my children off to school in the morning before driving to Seneca, which was about ten minutes from home. At the end of classes, I would be home around the time the boys got home from school.

I am one of those mothers who wanted to look after her children herself, and so, I wouldn't have any live-in help. It is also about privacy, because the homes in Canada aren't built like the ones here in Hong Kong. If you have a live-in, you have her around you all the time, and I didn't need an extra member in the family.

Yes, I made breakfasts, packed lunches, cooked dinners, did laundry, and helped our boys with their homework, as well as drove them to extra-curricular activities after school, like most mothers do in Canada. There was a side benefit to my hectic life. Our boys learned to do a lot of things around the house because Mom was always too busy, and they couldn't wait. I would teach them how to do get things done. They even learned to shorten their own pants. They were my sous-chefs in the kitchen, and in time, they became good cooks, and very independent young men.

The Fashion Arts courses at Seneca were applied arts, and it was necessary for the students to work in garment factories for a certain period of each school year. That was my chance to be involved in mass production. Hong Kong society would have frowned on someone like me working in a

factory, but it didn't bother me one bit. I have always wanted to learn everything from the ground up.

Studying applied arts subjects also meant that everything had to be produced by the students, such as garments, knitwear etc. As you probably know, producing these items takes time and patience. I used to stay up all hours of the night just to complete my projects in order to hand them in the next day. My patience and endurance, as well as my ability to survive with little sleep, certainly came in handy.

I remember one particular instance, around five o'clock in the morning, when I suddenly heard a little voice, saying, "Mom, you are still up!" It was Carter, our youngest son, who was up to go to the bathroom. He saw the light on in my work room, and I was probably in the same position as when he went to bed the night before. I told him I had a project to hand in, and it had to be finished. No sleep for me that night.

During those three years, cooking for dinner parties was reduced to a minimum. But, no matter what, I always prepared special family dinners for all festive occasions, such as Christmas, New Year, Chinese New Year, Thanksgiving, Easter, and family birthdays. I tried to keep life in the family as normal as possible.

There was one Christmas, my husband wanted to have a large dinner party for friends, and at that time, we couldn't afford a caterer. Since I had projects that were due, I told him I couldn't manage. To which he said, he would do the cooking. Now, that's from someone who had never cooked in his life! So, instead of being stressed, I told him to go ahead, on the condition that he tested the recipe first, which he chose from the newspaper.

One evening, before we were about to go out to a friends' home for a special celebration, he decided to experiment with making that recipe which was port wine lobster. Due to inexperience, he didn't know he was supposed to bring the port wine to a boil. We had it for supper before our evening out. I became light on my feet, and then passed out.

However, we did have our dinner party. My husband knew then how to avoid mishaps with our guests, and everything turned out fine. Incidentally, he has never cooked again, except barbecuing in the summer.

We all know that adult learners are good students because we are there for a purpose. In my case, there was no such thing as socializing at school, especially when I was so much older than the other students in my class. Most of them were teenagers, with a couple in their twenties. At that time, computers weren't used in design. I used to lug around my huge portfolio up many flights of stairs to class. I considered it a part of my daily exercise.

After three years of hard work, I completed the programme with flying colours. The day of my convocation, my husband was away at a medical meeting, so I asked our eldest son to attend with me. I told him that that was the only convocation he would ever see me at, because I was never going to go back to school again. I was exhausted. Well, never say "never"!

When I established my knitwear design business at the beginning of the 1980s, what I gained most was a sense of confidence and self worth. It was the beginning of another challenge, but I had made it that far. The learning curve started again in the management and execution of a knitwear design business.

We all know that most of our knowledge does not come from school; otherwise what we know would be dated very quickly. This means that, we need to continue to learn. Those who do, become wiser as the years go by. For that reason, the common belief that all old people are wise does not hold water.

Continuous learning can mean reading a wide selection of books and magazines, travelling, taking courses, up-grading one's skills, or volunteering in one's community. And, instead of training for a new profession, adult education can just be for personal fulfillment. Interpersonal skills, which are an important part of continuous education, are usually learned in volunteering, and problem solving is learned through overcoming challenges.

When I started my design business, I was in uncharted water. In many ways, I had to use my common sense, and I do believe common sense comes with continuous learning. Everything we have learnt and experienced in our past hones our ability to use common sense in making decisions.

To have a successful business, I had to learn to hire good staff, as well as to promote myself and my designs. Yes, I have made mistakes, but I learnt from them and moved on. Meeting a lot of people whom I normally wouldn't have met was a very useful lesson in human psychology. Those experiences have become very useful to me now in public life.

After running my business for fourteen years, and after I wrote my first book, I decided to close my design business and go back to graduate school. I was ready then to pursue my other love, which is history. I love books, as you can imagine, and I wanted to continue onto the PhD programme after my MA degree. By then, I was in my fifties, and I thought it would be kind of neat to get my PhD degree as a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday gift to myself.

On the application form for the Masters Programme at the University of Toronto, I needed recommendation letters from former professors, but it had been more than thirty-five years since I was last at a university. I called the admissions office and told them that all my former professors were either long retired or dead.

I had to be innovative. Since I was very active in the community in Toronto, I asked if I could have community leaders write those letters. So right there, volunteering in the community was helpful to me in getting into graduate school.

The year before I applied, I was a member of the Governing Council of the University of Toronto. In order to become a student again, I needed to resign. Other members wondered why I would want to be a lowly student! But that's me.

Well, I was accepted, and of course, I was the oldest student in all my classes. I have sometimes wondered why it didn't bother me, being the oldest, but it didn't. I just knew I was more disciplined and more focused than most of the other students.

Being fairly recognizable in the Toronto community, and wanting to be a student indistinguishable from other students, I bought a totally non-descript winter coat to go to school so that I could fade into the background, or into the walls of the library. One of my sons gave me a big strong school bag which had served me well as a student.

I still remember having to attend important social events or press conferences downtown, in between classes or right after school. Since I had no time to go home to change, because we live uptown, and my classes were on the U. of T. campus downtown, I would bring tops and shoes that I could change into quickly from my car trunk - a little bit like what superman did in the phone booth, but not as dramatic! I managed both the life of a socially active member of the community as well as that of a student. It was a bit of a split personality that continued until I received my PhD degree.

To make a long story short, I completed my Masters and continued on with the PhD Programme. My deadline for myself was compromised, because, when I was writing my Masters thesis on the patio of our cottage, I suddenly received a phone call from Hong Kong that my mother had passed away in her sleep. This meant dropping everything, and immediately booking flights for my husband and me to return to Hong Kong. For that reason, I was 10 days late in handing in my thesis in order to graduate that November. So I entered the PhD Programme a year later.

Wanting to be successful in a PhD Programme as an adult meant one has to be even more disciplined and determined than a younger full time student. Fortunately, I am.

When I was studying for my comprehensive exams in the summer of 1998, I suddenly received a phone call from the Prime Minister's office. The Appointments Officer told me that I was on a short list to be appointed to the Senate of Canada, and would I be ready to serve if I were appointed. My sense of curiosity was piqued, and as usual, I was willing to take on a new challenge, so I said "Yes", but I added, "how am I going to finish my PhD?"

As you can surmise, interesting things happen to me, and it is because of my involvement in the community – in education, the arts and charitable organizations. Up to that point, I had little interest in politics. I had never received a call from the Prime Minister's office, nor had I ever met the Prime Minister.

Well, I was appointed to the Senate of Canada. Two months prior to that fateful phone call, I was appointed by the Heritage Minister as a trustee of the National Gallery. Since there was a conflict of interest, both being federal appointments, I had to resign the former, earning me the reputation

as the shortest serving member of the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery, having only attended one meeting.

I knew no one in Ottawa, and Parliament Hill has a culture all its own. I was like a freshwater fish in an ocean. Since I had accepted the appointment, I needed to learn how to be an effective Senator. At the same time, I was determined to complete my studies. I knew I could do it with a lot of discipline and hard work.

I arranged a meeting with my PhD supervisor and my committee, and asked for permission to delay my comprehensive exams for one year to get my bearing in Ottawa. It was fortunate that a candidate's thesis title cannot be determined until after the comprehensive exams, because I was able to change my focus to immigration in Canada. This is very useful to me in my role as a Senator.

Well, I survived Ottawa, and with no breaks or holidays, I completed my PhD in 2003. By then, I was 62. So, I was late in giving myself my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday present, but I had good reasons for that.

I want to say that getting a PhD was not an end in itself, but another new beginning. I have been able to use the knowledge, discipline and skills gained through the PhD Programme to keep learning, and apply these to great advantage in my role as a Canadian Senator and as an academic, as well as in everyday life.

For persons who like to learn, there is no better place than the Senate. We have access to a great deal of information, and are invited to participate in a variety of forums that an ordinary citizen doesn't have access to. I have earned a reputation as someone who attends many of the early morning breakfast talks on the Hill, to the extent that, in the series called "Bacon and Eggheads Breakfast," I was asked to give suggestions as to what scientific topic I would like presented!

Learning is a habit of mine – one that I find exciting. I want to learn something new everyday, and for that reason, I read a variety of articles, magazines and books, and my husband and I travel widely. As an Asian Canadian in the Senate of Canada, I try to learn as much about Asia as North America. This means trying to keep up with the news from Asia. In order to improve my spoken Cantonese, I listen to Cantonese news on TV as often as

is possible. Since I also have to use Mandarin and French in my speeches, I am learning them as well. I fly to Ottawa for committee every Monday, and I go a couple of hours earlier so that I can have my French lesson first.

I want to thank the HKU School of Professional and Continuing Education for playing an important role in the lives of Hong Kong citizens, in building a learning and well informed society in Hong Kong. Adults who keep learning are not only role models for our youth, they have higher level of health literacy, which, in turn, translates into better health for themselves, their families, as well as their communities. In our present global economic downturn, continuous learning also translates into better job opportunities, higher incomes, and greater civic engagement. I do believe that Hong Kong is a successful, flourishing, civil society.

Looking at my own life, if I had chosen to stay at home and be a Tai Tai, my life wouldn't be what it is today. Continuous learning has enabled me to sleep very well, and I can say that I have an interesting life. Thank you.