

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

CESBA Conference

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Friends, good evening:

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I am delighted to be here and congratulations on your celebration of the tenth anniversary of the founding of CESBA – a very important organization for adult education in Ontario.

Some of you in the audience know the close affinity I have with continuing education. I am one of those who kept going back to school, and I will be telling you some of my personal experiences. I strongly believe that, for Canada to maintain its competitiveness in our globalized world, continuous learning is a necessity.

According to the Canadian Council on Learning, although Canada leads OECD countries with the highest number of adults with higher educational attainment, one quarter of our adults have only a high school education, and 42% of our adults lack the literacy skills considered essential in today's economy and society. And, the bad news is, over the next decade, the situation is not expected to improve.

What is adult learning? There is the formal kind, where you work towards a degree, a diploma, or a certificate, and informal learning, such as taking courses, reading extensively, attending lectures, and volunteering in your communities. Continuous learning is important to civil societies because those who keep learning are better citizens, have healthier life styles, and are role models to the younger generation.

On a personal note, the first time I went back to school, the question was asked of me, "Why?" Why didn't I just sit back and take it easy. After all, I already had an honours bachelor degree from McGill when I was 21, and I was married to a medical doctor. And by the time I was in my 30s, I had 3 sons to take care of, and we were financially comfortable. So what else did I want out of life? Well, a lot more.

I wanted to pursue knowledge. I read voraciously, and was taking language courses, but it was not enough. Many of us who continue with our education want that degree or diploma that tells the world that we have the qualifications. I have heard the arguments that it's superficial, and that a piece of paper doesn't mean that you are really knowledgeable. This argument is always put forward by those who don't want to be bothered with continuing their education anyway. I would say: what if you have both the knowledge and that piece of paper? Returning to school as an adult means that one has to be focused and very disciplined in order to graduate. The thought of that is very daunting to some people.

When I went back to school for the first time, I was already in my late thirties, and that was because I waited until our youngest son was in full-day school. The reason, at that time, was to satisfy the need to learn particular skills and to have a profession of my choice.

I enrolled at Seneca College in the Fashion Arts Department, and, naturally, I was the oldest student in the class. The reason I chose this course was because of an inborn artistic talent that, up to that point, had only been used in paintings. And, having grown up in an entrepreneurial family, I wanted to be able to apply art towards something functional. Artistic talent cannot be taught, however, skills can be learnt to execute ideas, and that was what I was after.

I entered a 3-year diploma programme at Seneca College, which was close to home. This meant that I could see my children off to school before I left for classes, and be home around the time they returned home.

I have always looked after our children myself, and because of my need for privacy, I never want live-in help. Yes, I did everything any mother would do – making breakfasts, cooking dinners, doing laundry, packing lunches, and driving our children to lessons after school.

I know what it's like going back to school as an adult student, especially as a wife and mother, with so many extra responsibilities. There was a lot of juggling, but I managed. The students in my class were mostly teenagers, with a couple in their early twenties. I can attest to the fact that adult students are the best students. I was there to focus on learning, and I got through the programme with flying colours.

I want to tell you a story about my pattern making teacher, who was still teaching a number of years after I left. On one of my visits to Seneca as a member of the Advisory Board of the Fashion Arts Department, she told me that whenever her students complained about the amount of work they were assigned, she would always tell them about me, and that since I could do it with all the extra responsibilities of a household with a husband and 3 children, they had no right to complain!

When I started my design business, I gained confidence and a great deal of hard work - in hiring staff, executing and producing my designs, running a boutique and wholesale distribution. To test my own creativity, I also did custom designs for clients for special occasions. I purposely kept the business reasonably small so that I had time for my family. I made a lot of friends, and gained a great deal of experience and confidence from those years. Most important of all, I learnt how to promote myself and my product.

I believe that the opportunity to learn, at any age, should be available in any developed society. We often come across people, or read about them in the papers, whose joy could hardly be contained when they finally graduated from high school and made it into university.

I have personal friends, as many of you here would have also, who have returned to school to complete their high school diplomas, so that they can enter university. I can think of one person, in particular, who did just that. She completed her high school requirements to enter university, and has since graduated with a professional degree. Besides the change in economic status, the pride in her own achievements really shone through.

I know many adult learners in our society are keen to acquire knowledge, and there are also many who need to go back to school out of economic necessity. Regardless, when an adult wants to return to school, at any age, it is important that the opportunity is there.

In the present economic downturn, continuing education is a necessity. When times are bad, we need to have other options to turn to. At present, those options for many have to be immediate – meaning returning to school for retraining.

Our present jobless rate in Ontario is sky-rocketing because of the global economic downturn. Many of our unemployed will need retraining.

Language and math literacy, as well as basic education, which now include computer technologies, are obstacles for many adult learners.

CESBA offers guidance to those workers who may need to get back into the workforce as quickly as possible. Sometimes, they just need a few courses or a better understanding of the current job market, or to learn how to look for work in a world that has dramatically changed.

CESBA helps ensure that school boards have the resources they need so that adult newcomers can find the best way to apply their skills and qualifications. With the jobless rate rising, and with the continuous influx of immigrants to Ontario, this aspect of your work is crucial.

I have always believed that human beings are capable of learning a lot more than we do, and most of us are only using a small part of our brains. I am sure many of you in the audience would agree with me. For that reason, many of us continue to learn, in many different ways. Others go through different careers, by choice, during the course of a lifetime. Therefore, having the opportunity to continue our education is important.

In my early fifties, I was ready to go back to school again, this time to graduate school in the Department of History. I closed my design company and applied to the Masters programme at the University of Toronto.

In one part of the application, recommendations from former professors were required. Since my last university graduation happened more than 35 years earlier, I called the university, and told them that most of my former professors at McGill were either long retired or dead!

Anyway, I had to be innovative. Due to the fact that I was very actively involved in the community in Toronto, I asked if I could substitute recommendation letters from community leaders instead of former professors. To make a long story short, I was accepted. And, again - guess what - I was the oldest in all my classes.

I took on a huge challenge when I made the decision, at that age, to pursue a Masters degree and to continue onto a PhD programme, but I was focused and determined. I was really ready then to pursue my other love, which is history.

When I was completing my MA thesis on the porch at our cottage, I received a call from Hong Kong that my mother had passed away in her sleep. That meant immediately booking flights for my husband and me. We left for Hong Kong within 48 hours.

On our return, my thesis was handed in 10 days late for me to graduate that November, so I had to wait till the next spring to get my Masters degree. Since I like research and writing, I completed writing another book while waiting to start into the PhD programme the following January.

The History Department at U. of T. probably had the longest and the most difficult course for PhD candidates at that time. It was hinted to me, by the Dean of History, after I completed, that the department realized it was too difficult for most students, and a process was underway to make it easier.

At one of the university events I attended, some professors had suggested to me that I should go to England, because in the English system, the PhD programme only took 2 years. I really wasn't interested in finishing early, because my reason for going back to university was to learn, and the more I learnt, the better. I didn't just want another degree, and I have never been afraid of hard work anyway.

The only hiccup I encountered during my stint as a PhD candidate was my appointment to the Senate of Canada, just when I was studying for my comprehensive exams. Not having a political background, and not knowing anyone in Ottawa, I needed to have time to find my way around. So, I arranged a meeting with my supervisor and my committee, and asked to delay my exams for one year, in order for me to learn to survive in Ottawa.

Well, I survived Ottawa, and I received my PhD degree in 2003, which took a total of five and a half years. At the same time, I was also elected as the Chancellor of U. of T. by the College of Electors made up of the alumnus. But, that is another story. Whenever anyone asked why I took on what I did, my usual answer is that it is my way of warding off the onset of Alzheimer's!! But truthfully, I love to learn, and I love meeting challenges head on.

During my term as Chancellor of the University of Toronto, I had the opportunity to congratulate many mature students at their graduation

ceremonies. Some were my own age, and some older. I remember one woman graduate who whispered in my ear, “Not bad for an old girl, eh?”

Getting a PhD is not an end in itself. It is only another new beginning. I was able to use the skills, discipline and insight I acquired during my academic studies in my role as a Senator, an academic, and in my daily life.

As a Canadian who was not born in this country, I know how important immigration is to Canada. My husband and I, with our 2 year-old son, moved to Toronto from Montreal in 1967. At that time, Toronto was a very stodgy and sleepy city compared to cosmopolitan Montreal. We have seen how Toronto has evolved over the years, partly because of the political situation in Quebec, but mainly because of the immigrant population that has made Toronto the cosmopolis it is today.

Our immigrants add spice to our lives, diversity to our foods, to our schools, and to the streets of Toronto. It is the city in which people from all over the world feel at home. This is a characteristic of our city that we treasure.

Ontario, and Toronto, in particular, is often the number one choice for immigrants coming to Canada. Due to our stringent selection process, it is generally known that the education level of these newcomers is higher than that of our Canadian born citizens. However, the lack of recognition of previous skills and experience, as well as academic credentials, is a serious barrier to adults who would like to pursue additional learning and training opportunities.

In addition, these newcomers may not be fluent in either of our official languages. That is where CESBA can help. Those who choose to come to Ontario should be given a chance to succeed, otherwise, they will just move elsewhere, and we can't afford to lose the talent in our midst.

The most important welcome that the Ontario government can give our adult newcomers is access to language and job training, along with housing and settlement. In Ontario, the ESL and FSL programmes are indispensable. Being able to communicate fluently in one of the official languages is the key to successful settlement in a new country.

In my years being active in the community, I have come across many adult new Canadians who find it difficult to find the time to learn one of our official languages. They are often the parents of young children, under-employed, and holding two jobs in order to keep their families clothed and fed. Life is not easy for them. They usually tell me that they immigrated to Canada in order to give their children a good future. I would like to think that Canada should give these adults a good future. In Ontario, CESBA's advocacy can assist them to improve their skills, and help them deal with issues they face as adult learners, be it ESL or FSL, or upgrading their qualifications.

It is never easy learning a new language as an adult. I know because I am still struggling with French. True enough, in Ontario, the languages I use all the time are English and Chinese, but when I went to Ottawa over 10 years ago, I realized how important French is in our federal government. I was only taking lessons when I could fit them in, and that was not the way to learn a language properly. So, now, I am learning French on a regular basis.

After having talked so much about formal learning, I want to add that life experiences are the greatest teachers if we accept them as such. You would be familiar with the saying that old people are wise. I would add that wisdom only comes to those who keep learning throughout their lifetime.

When I opened my design business in the early 1980s, I had to use everything I had learnt in my past to make it successful. The courses I took at Seneca College did not teach survival in the business world. In turn, what I learnt from the years running my design business - from having to bring out a new line more than a year in advance, to the skills I acquired in dealing with clients and with people I normally would not meet in my daily life - is very useful to me now, in public life.

In a similar way, our adult immigrant population comes to Canada with a great deal of life experience that is often not recognized by Canadian companies. Failing to be hired, many of these immigrants will open businesses of their own, and their life experiences serve them well. However, they will need to continue training in our official languages, and in Canadian business and accounting practices, in order to be successful. They will also need continuous education in order to become engaged Canadian citizens.

I know the creative school board educators that CESBA serves are constantly striving to meet the unique needs of both immigrants and Canadians, who are struggling in this economic downturn.

Today, I continue to learn by reading a great deal, attending talks given by learned individuals, and by interacting with people from all walks of life. I keep my eyes and ears open, and continue to absorb knowledge every day. And, there is no better place than the Senate of Canada to learn about public policies and issues of concern to the various regions of Canada.

This evening, in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the establishment of CESBA, we are also looking towards the future. I would like to hope that The Canadian Council on Learning's prediction does not come true. They suggest that, unless educational conditions are improved, in 2031, 48% of our adults will continue to have low literacy skills. That is depressing. We all know that literacy is the foundation of a civil society. To this end, CESBA has an important mission to fulfill.

In Ontario, the Department of Education must recognize that education is not only for the young. Our aging population needs to be encouraged to keep learning, because access to adult education and training is not only important to drive productivity and innovation, it will also bring about a much healthier and more engaged society. I believe in Ontario, no one should be left behind. Thank you.