

Paper Presented at: First International Conference of University of Third Age,
Chitrakoot, INDIA.
8 – 10 February 2010.
Kathrine Fenton-May. Immediate-past President, U3A, Durban. South Africa.
THE UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL

Mr. Chairman, Fellow delegates. This is indeed a privilege to address you during the First International Conference of University of the Third Age (u3a). We are gathered not as scientists propounding theories or reporting on, sometimes obscure, time consuming and expensive research such as nano technology or cyber warfare, BUT as individuals who all believe in the Philosophy of the U3a – *Life-long learning for everyone in their retirement.*

We have followed the cultural psycho-social model, which developed in the UK, instead of the purely scientific approach, which the ‘parent’ in France (1978) started. This certainly expanded the *horizon* of the retired. Please do not get the mal-impression that within a community of professional individuals they cannot form a productive group for members with tertiary education and meet their learning needs – there are many such groups and no doubt more will be formed. The white collar and blue collar workers also fit into the ‘*learning for everyone*’. During the last two decades in particular, there has been phenomenal growth in the number of Groups, which have been, formed Globally. This Audience is the proof thereof.

When I was still lecturing I frequently had to remind the students of the global truth “The learner has to do the learning!” Why this reference? It immediately focuses on the individual, who in this situation is a very special member in villages, towns, communities and societies, et.al. There are many aspects of each unique individual which we all have in common *regardless* of race, creed, ethnic origin, religion, political persuasion, social status, formal education, gender or geographic habitat. There are no elitists in these common traits!

We have all walked a long journey, some longer than others, along life’s path with a multitude of experiences, some good, some not so good, others very precious, yet some best forgotten. We cannot overlook the average everyday routines which occasionally evokes *IT IS ONLY MONDAY, WHERE IS FRIDAY!!*

All this leads us to ask ourselves and give an honest, reflective answer - *Who is the most important person in YOUR LIFE?* (I will give you some moments to reflect on this) **YOU!** I see some surprised faces, a couple of shocked ones, some very unhappy ones, more than one is ready to jump up and argue the point (Not now!), and thank you for those who are quietly smiling and nodding their heads.

How can we be the best we can be if, we do not ensure that we are Happy, Healthy, Spiritually strong, Rested and Well Nourished, aware of the Beauty around us, Kind of disposition, Honest, be able to Handle joy, loss, anger, fear, sorrow, pain, disappointment, Loneliness, Give and Receive love, Glow with a sense of achievement, Blush in shame for some human error or failing and be Willing to repent and forgive. THESE ARE THE TRAITS WE ALL HAVE IN COMMON. This is only a random list and not in order of importance – YOU set your values within your unique environment, culture, learning and heritage.

Let us look at the Unique individual in the light of ‘lifelong learning’ – the Philosophy we uphold.

Learning is learning is learning!? In the early seventies there were a number of educators who realized that Adult needs in learning and teaching strategies (Andragogics) are different from those of a Child’s learning and teaching strategies (Pedagogic.)

Three broad domains for learning activities were identified: These three domains are the basis on which various courses in u3a can be offered, As, When and How, the need within the group is identified.

1. Knowledge or mind based – facts, understanding, application e.g. Mathematical problems and puzzles, Conversational French, German, Italian, Hindi, Story telling, History, Myths etc.
2. Skills based – imitation, practice, and habit, e.g. Music, Dancing, Yoga, crafts, etc.
3. Behavioral aspects – beliefs, awareness, distinction and integration e.g. Study of comparative religions, Art appreciation, Philosophy, Creative writing, Memoirs, etc

I have quoted only a few examples to facilitate the understanding of these three concepts, which can be summarized as – Knowledge, Skills and Behavior. In addition these concepts are valuable in eliminating such situations, which may arise: It is no good arguing about draining the Lake when you are knee-deep in the water, surrounded by alligators (crocodiles)!
OR

A group of u3a members are marooned on an ice-float in the Arctic and one member suggests that it is a good opportunity for Ivanovich to teach them the basics of Russian!! (Covert messages)

Each unique individual has the need to learn and use similar ways to acquire knowledge. Maslow and the Hierarchy of Needs that he proposed are relevant here and provide helpful guidelines. His outline is done in a pyramid – the base or primary (first) level needs have to be met before we look at meeting the needs of level two, thus progressing up to level five, where we all aim to be. This in fact indicates that all the lower level needs have been met adequately.

The structure of the pyramid also indicates that the higher needs are being met in smaller and smaller numbers of individuals. The pyramidal levels are:

1. Physiological needs: Food, water, oxygen, constant body temperature. These are the strongest and must be met because they will always dominate individual's actions and behavior
2. Safety needs: This is manifest in different ways in adults and children. Children often display signs of insecurity and the need to be safe. Adults are comfortable in their security UNTIL emergencies are thrust upon them or periods of disorganization in the social structure e.g. Natural disasters
3. Love, Affection and Belonging: People seek to overcome loneliness and alienation. This is reciprocal, give and receive love, affection and the sense of belonging. On our path of progress we now look to others outside our immediate circle which is the need for,
4. Esteem: The regard, respect, honor, recognition, a person receives from other. Humans have a need for a stable, firmly based, high level of self-respect and respect for others. When these needs are met, the person feels self-confident and valuable. When these needs are frustrated, the person feels inferior, worthless, weak and helpless. When these needs are satisfied the individual becomes aware of.
- 5 A strong sense of 'self': The Unique Me – my aptitudes and limitations, in other words SELF-ACTUALIZATION. A state which individuals aspire to achieve as it is reflected in happy and fulfilled individuals.

Having looked at the ideal scenario for learning, the question arises - is this not too much theory to be of any practical and basic use to anybody? As the saying goes – to be so heavenly minded that one is of no earthly good! My belief is - NO. These aspects need to be in the back of the mind of the individual when dealing with, and in this instance I am referring primarily to the retired, and problems, difficulties they encounter. Amongst the members of u3a the most frequently encountered one is 'so few of the members are willing to offer courses!'

SECONDLY. There are folk who have prepared for their retirement - some say 'If I had known what I know now I would have done things differently!' Some took the 'Ostrich Approach', buried their heads in the sand and hoped it would go away, but they ended up having to face reality. Many have had their working life and stable income just suddenly cut and left them feeling like tattered flags in a strong breeze, asking 'where and what now?' Yet thousands of others do not have the privilege of looking forward to the twilight years in happy contentment, rest and enjoyment.

What about the 'Baby Boomers' who will shortly join the ranks of the retired, and, we need to ask - are they preparing for their retirement economically, mentally, physically, spiritually and socially?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is relevant to all the abovementioned groups as well as many well into their retirement.

Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-changing events: retiring, losing a loved one, moving house, moving into a retirement complex or home, coping with reduced income, something which could supplement an income when learning becomes the means to an end.

What role can technology play in the unique individuals life? This is not an easy question in view of the diverse background of the delegates here today. Another important factor is – the vast majority has not grown up with technology and sees it as luxury and entertainment. To ensure maximum benefits from technology it needs some expertise in the preparation and use thereof. Although economically it is becoming more accessible to many more individuals, globally.

Communications between established members, on-line courses, teleconference etc. It is the most amazing tool, if not essential today. But, be alert and selective that it does not become an 'easy way out' for folk who fail to put effort into their projects, 'courses' etc. Technology can never replace that twinkle in an eye, the warm comfort of a hand, that smile of pride and encouragement. Too often we underestimate the power of touch, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.

THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE of this presentation is not an exhaustive outline of the subject, but, a challenge to each one present, to take a look at the Unique Individual through a different lens, enhancing life's experiences for self, thus promoting the continuing development of individuals within your circle, as well as the growth of the members and Groups of u3a Locally and Globally.

University of the Third Age website: <http://www.u3a.org.uk/home.html>