

Learning on your own

by Cynthia Silver, Cara Williams and Trish McOrmond

In the 1990s, the concept of life-long learning became widely recognized as being an important social and personal goal. This term is often used to describe a strategy whereby workers aim to increase their “human capital”¹ by improving their current skills or expanding the range of skills they can offer both current and prospective employers. But the value of life-long learning extends far beyond the workplace. People have embraced learning to enrich their ability to function within their communities and homes, to deal with family issues and to enjoy their leisure time. Increasingly, people are also being encouraged to view life-long learning as a means of combatting the mental deterioration associated with aging.

As an alternative to traditional courses in a classroom setting, many Canadians choose to develop their skills through informal training on their own time. Indeed, for many subjects and skills, this is the only practical option. This approach is sometimes called informal or self-directed learning. Participants can make the activity as structured as they wish, invest as much or as little money as they want, and fit it into their schedule when it best suits them. Informal learning, however, is not accounted for by most statistics on education and training. This article uses new data from the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use to provide information about people who increase their human capital by learning informally.

A popular alternative to formal learning

The 1998 GSS shows that informal learning is a popular alternative to formal learning. While 15% of Canadians aged 25 and over (3.1 million) reported that they took a course or training session in the last month, almost double that number (about 6 million) reported that they had engaged in an informal learning activity during the previous month. Most of those who learn informally (89%) pursued only one subject. And while the subject matter studied informally by Canadians is diverse, seven broad thematic categories are evident: computer and Internet technologies; trade-related subjects; business and finance; arts and sciences; hobbies and personal development; health and child care; and “other subjects” that fall outside the broad themes.

The 1990s were witness to the widespread adoption of the Internet and the personal computer. Not surprisingly, almost one-third of single-topic self-learners were studying computer and Internet technologies. Another 15% were studying subjects in the arts and sciences category, while over 11% were following business and financial topics. Hobbies and personal development commanded the attention of more than 16% of single-subject learners. An additional 10% were pursuing health and child care studies.

Trade-related subjects were also popular. Over 8% of single-topic self-learners were interested in construction and trades, carpentry and woodworking, or vehicle maintenance and operation.

Men and women share interest in some subjects but not all

Gender had little effect on whether someone is likely to study informally: 52% of self-learners were men and 48% were women. And several major subject areas — computer skills (including Internet), business and financial services, and arts and sciences — ranked high among both men and women. There is no question, however, that some subject matter areas were more appealing to men and others to women.

To some degree, the areas studied by women and men reflected traditional divisions of labour. For example, 17% of female single-topic self-learners studied health and child care, compared with just 3% of men. On the other hand, male learners dominated the study of trade-related subjects with 14% participation, compared with less than 2% for women.

An equal percentage (15%) of male and female self-learners studied subjects in the arts and sciences; however, within this category, more men than women studied natural sciences and the environment, while a larger percentage of women studied education and teaching. This pattern is consistent with the gender differences observed in both university enrolments and the workplace. The study choices of self-learners may indicate an intrinsic interest in these topics, or reflect membership in particular professions, or both.

1. Human capital is defined as the skills, capacities or abilities possessed by an individual, which permit him or her to earn income.

CST What you should know about this study

This article is based on data from the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use. The survey interviewed almost 11,000 Canadians aged 15 and over in the 10 provinces and provided information about how people spent their time during one day. In addition to information about time use, the GSS also collected data about learning activities conducted during the month preceding the survey.

Respondents were classified as self-learners if they answered “yes” to the following question:

“Many people improve their knowledge of a subject or upgrade their skills on their own instead of taking a course. They read books, watch television programs, use a computer, or talk to someone with the necessary expertise. Have you undertaken any of these activities during the past month?”

Self-learners were then asked to specify what they were learning (up to a maximum of four topics), their method of learning (for example, book, computer, or human interaction), and how much time they had devoted to this learning activity in the past month. Twenty-seven topics were defined as areas of study, ranging from child care to natural sciences and work-related issues. Because of sample size limitations, these subjects have been grouped into seven categories. Discussion of categories is based on responses of those adults who reported informal learning in only one subject.

Self-learning falls into seven broad categories

1. Computer and Internet technologies;
2. Trade-related subjects: includes construction and trades; carpentry and woodworking; and vehicle maintenance;
3. Business and finance: includes business skills, accounting, taxation, investment and other financial subjects;
4. Arts and sciences: includes environment and nature; natural sciences; social sciences; education and teaching; languages and literacy skills; history; current affairs and politics; fine arts; and music;
5. Hobbies and personal development: includes personal development; spirituality and religion; crafts and hobbies; cooking, food and beverages; sports; gardening; general knowledge and work-related subjects;
6. Health and child care;
7. Other: includes the study of agriculture and other subjects not elsewhere specified.

The definition of self-learning used in this study differs from some of the more formal definitions of self-directed study in which individuals in a course are working at their own speed but their work is monitored and evaluated by an outside party.

CST Men and women self-learners have diverse interests

| Subject area | % of single-topic learners | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----|-------|
| | Women | Men | Total |
| Child care and health | 17 | 3* | 10 |
| Arts and sciences | 15 | 15 | 15 |
| Hobbies and personal development | 19 | 15 | 16 |
| Computers and Internet | 28 | 33 | 31 |
| Trade-related subjects | 2* | 14 | 8 |
| Business and finance | 9 | 13 | 11 |
| Other | 4* | 4* | 4 |

* High sampling variability.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

Books are still the key teaching tool

People can use a variety of methods to teach themselves, and many use a combination of tools. By far the most popular means of learning was with

books, a method chosen by 68% of all informal learners. Books were most popular with the arts and sciences self-learners, with 81% using them. Even though people teaching them-

selves about computers were the least reliant on books, over half (55%) still used them.

About one-half of learners acquired their information the old-fashioned way — directly from other people. This approach to learning is the oldest way of transferring knowledge and skills. Human interaction was particularly important for hobbies, leisure and personal development topics and business and financial skills, with about 55% of those studying these subjects using this method.

Not surprisingly, the computer was used by most (78%) of the people who studied computers or Internet technologies. But the Internet also opened up a broad range of subjects to other learners, especially people teaching themselves about arts and sciences. It is interesting to note that men were more likely to use electronic tools as

at least part of their strategy for self-learning² — over 46% of male self-learners used a computer, compared to 35% of females. Women relied more on the traditional method of reading books (71% of women versus 65% of men) as part of their learning strategy.

Self-learners invest time in their subjects

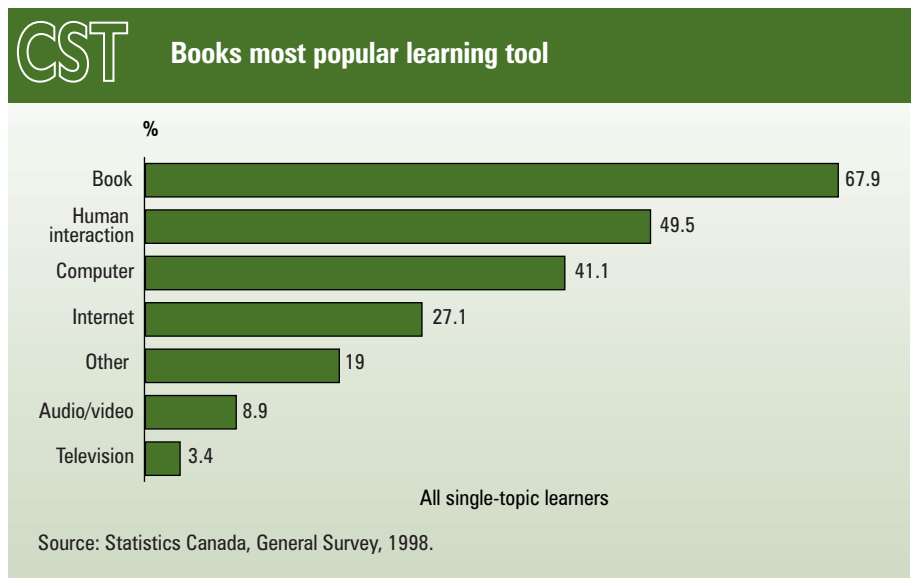
The intensity of interest in a subject might be measured by the amount of time learners devoted to its study. Informal learners committed an overall average of 18 hours during the reference month.³ Men spent slightly more time on self-learning activities (19 hours) than women, who spent about 17 hours on their subject. This average, however, varied considerably across topics; for instance, while women and men studying business and financial services averaged 22 hours a month, they only spent 15 hours on child care and health. Women and men also reported considerable difference in hours committed to self-learning, even if they were studying the same topic: men spent 7 hours more than women learning computer or Internet technologies, for example, while women dedicated a whopping 12 more hours than men on business and financial services.

Summary

Canadian adults seem to be sold on the importance of life-long learning. Learning is not confined to the classroom or to a period in a person's life. Even when adults don't enroll in formal classes or workshops, they are more than happy to study on their own. The 1998 General Social Survey

2. It was possible for respondents to report more than one method to aid in learning. For example, respondents could use both the computer and human interaction to learn a topic.

3. Excludes respondents who reported studying multiple subjects.



found that about one-third of Canadians aged 25 and over engaged in some type of informal-learning activity in 1998. These individuals are committed to their studies, averaging 18 hours of study each month.

In today's information age, it is not surprising that computer and Internet studies were the most popular topics for self-learners; however, there is great diversity in the type of subjects self-learners investigate. Men and women share some interest in topics such as hobbies and personal development, computers and the Internet, but many of the gender differences found in formal studies persist in informal learning. In terms of methods used to learn

subjects, books remain the most popular means for acquiring new skills and information, but there is no doubt that computers and the Internet have opened doors for many self-learners, allowing for access to unprecedented volumes of information.



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