Learning in Later Life: Researchers’ Initial Impressions

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Abstract: In this paper the researchers report initial impressions of a study in progress. Over 50 seniors have been interviewed about their informal learning to shed light on “third age” learning.

Background and Purpose
The new Approaches to Lifelong Learning survey (1998) of informal learning in Canada confirmed what adult educators have long know intuitively: that “virtually all Canadian adults are active learners” (Livingstone, 1999, p.68). While many studies focus on workplace learning, fewer explore the learning which people undertake after retirement. Lamdin and Fugate (1997) found that while older adults spend considerable time learning, surprisingly few are studying formally in universities and colleges; their learning experiences are more frequently informal, pursued in non-academic environments.

We are engaged in a study investigating informal learning experiences – the contexts, kinds, processes, benefits, barriers – among older Canadian adults. The stories of older adults’ learning affirm, encourage, and support their learning endeavours and provide important information for those engaged in program planning for this expanding portion of the population. We hope to help diminish stereotypes about learning among older adults in our society.

We have completed a pilot study and over 50 interviews for the main study and are currently involved in data analysis. From the pilot and our initial analysis, certain themes about elderlearners already stand out. In this paper we explain our methodology and share general impressions we have about learning in the “third age” of life. More detailed findings will be reported when the analysis has been completed.

Research Design
A pilot study was conducted of thirteen retired women and men ranging from 56 to 86 who were interviewed about their informal and formal learning endeavours over the past year. These interviews supported our belief that many older adults are indeed engaged in considerable learning about diverse topics. This finding was consistent across a variety of ethnocultural, educational, and work backgrounds. Furthermore this initial investigation raised questions as to the validity of viewing learning only as a discrete activity apart from daily living relationships. This was a point of inquiry which we listened for more carefully in the main study. The pilot helped refine the questions we needed to explore in greater depth in the main study.

Our initial attempts to involve seniors’ organizations in doing the research with us proved futile. Seniors’ organizations tend to be fluid in membership and leadership. As a result the interviews were conducted and analyzed by us, the research co-ordinator and graduate student research assistant. Potential interviewees were identified through seniors’ organizations, people who work with seniors, and personal contacts. Attempts were made to include people from a range of ethnocultural, educational, and class backgrounds with a balance of women and men.
Because of the wide range of age and health status within the third age, attention was also given to including people in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s.

Fifty-one people (28 women and 23 men) ranging from early 60s to mid 90s were interviewed. Participants came from varying ethnic background including English, Irish, Scottish, French, Jewish, German, Dutch, Italian, Philippino, Indian, Korean, and Japanese. Some had emigrated to Canada, others’ families had been in Canada for several generations. Thirty-eight lived in their own homes and apartments, 13 lived in retirement or nursing homes. Their formal educational background encompassed grade school, high school, university, and graduate school. A large majority rated their health as average or better.

The women’s careers had included fulltime and parttime homemaking, office work, teaching, sales, consulting, law, music, art, computer programming, educational research, physiotherapy, nursing, and social work. The men’s careers had included toolmaking, field engineering, teaching, advertising, civil service, business, university directorship, cooking, research, nutrition, music, social work, drafting, farming, construction, armed forces, clerical, medicine, and management.

We are now moving into the stage of careful investigation of the data collected. While formal analysis will provide more detailed information, being immersed in the interviewing process has already provided us with initial general impressions. In this paper we share some of these preliminary reflections.

**Impressions**

*Excitement about their Learning*

Overall we have been surprised by the strong emotional responses as these older people shared stories of their learning episodes. When asked what would make her learning easier, a 73-year-old woman quipped, “If I didn’t have to sleep!” One man declared himself to be “addicted to learning.” While we do not suggest that learning later in life is homogeneous or that everyone interviewed had such a high level of energy for it, there was without doubt generally great enthusiasm for learning. People were generally excited about their investigations and eager to tell stories of what they were exploring. A woman in her 90s, determined to share he life in the residence for a few hours, invited the interviewer to “learn by observation” by joining her as she delivered a birthday card to another resident turning 102. A number of people talked about the popularity of courses and lecture series for seniors to the point of having to get to the registration line early in order to be sure to get a place. Many exuded enthusiasm as they recounted adventures of the mind. The energy generated over conversations about learning was contagious; as we listened, we felt stimulated by their clear thinking and visible excitement.
After Retirement Learning Changes

An inner motivation to follow their own interests replaced the external pressures of learning in order to survive in the workplace. While some had prepared for retirement with care and were doing what they had planned, others were surprised with their new life. “Never in my wildest imagination did I think I would take a history course; I never liked history!” said a woman in her early 70s. In the middle of her second semester of French history at interview time, she was obviously enjoying it. An engineer who in the past had had to learn under pressure in order to keep up with his job described his present learning as joy. These seniors appreciated the freedom of retirement as they sought their own areas of learning rather than feeling pressured to learn for work requirements. No doubt being in charge and following their own interests rather than having the focus dictated by demands of a job contributed greatly to the sense of excitement mentioned earlier.

Intentionally Planned Learning Goals and Incidental Learning

These elderlearners indicated an openness to two different processes of learning. Sometimes people thought about what they wanted to learn and deliberately set out to find appropriate resources such as workshops, courses, books, websites, and experts. At other times people talked about the “perchance” learning which occurs in conversations and everyday happenings when one keeps open to possibilities for new insights. Most identified both kinds of learning journeys although certain individuals seemed more likely to pursue a goal-focused approach while other individuals were more intrigued with the surprises of learning from what Bateson (1994) calls “peripheral vision”. This approach was eloquently expressed by a man who answered a question about whether he had any plans for learning anything new in the near future. He immediately replied, “Yes, but I don’t know what they are. They’ll discover me!” This attitude of openness to discovery from the daily relationships and activities of their lives was common among many participants.

Learning Even from Negative Experiences

Some, working to make sense of painful traumatic experiences in their lives, identified insights and learnings which helped them reconcile their losses. A Jewish woman feeling the trauma of the holocaust always close linked that painful memory with her drive to learn. Another Jewish woman in her 80s who had escaped Nazi Germany remarked that she did not want to accept or forget; she was “still learning about the insanity of a nation.” She continued: “Hitler was a most profound teacher for me; I have learned about the evil of intolerance and I understand that evil is not accepting human beings.” Another woman who lived in England during WW2 stated that the war still provided learning as she continued to reflect on it; the experience has made her compassionate toward refugees from war-torn countries today. A number of people talked about learning from illness which befell them as they came to terms with accepting their decreased mobility and moved toward greater peace of mind in spite of failing health. Another painful source of learning for some was through their experience of death of a spouse or other loved one.
Self-discovery and Self-acceptance

Learning contributed to a changing sense of themselves for several people. One woman described it as “image building” and was delighted with this unexpected new self she was discovering. For some, learning led to increased confidence as they discovered unknown skills and competencies. Repeatedly people spoke of feeling better about themselves and becoming more interesting individuals as a result of keeping their minds active. Many also reported their children and grandchildren’s sense of pride as they engaged in intelligent conversations. They were concerned about keeping up with a rapidly changing world and did not want to be left behind. One man in his mid 80s was very clear that a strong motivator for his learning was the desire to have intelligent conversations with his grandchildren. Stretching their own minds through various learning activities was viewed as a critical way of maintaining meaningful connections with younger generations.

Learning Enriches Life

This theme recurred throughout the interviews. A man stated, “It energizes me to think of all the fascinating things out there I’d love to know about. It provides a focus for my day; it structures my time.” In feeling more alive and having a reason to get up in the morning, people expressed that learning was integral to their quality of life. Several talked as though learning was like breathing; once we stop we are dead. They could not imagine not learning. “Learning,” said one, “is a large part of having a life.” A recently retired man compared not learning with being a prisoner or hostage, a dreadful situation for him. The high level of intentionality in seeking books, courses (mainly non-credit), websites, documentaries, journals, and knowledgeable people to converse with indicated the strong hunger for knowledge and the joy they have when engaged in intellectual pursuits. These individuals were not coasting through the third age of life.

Sense of Immediacy

On several occasions the point was made that they were seeking education, not entertainment, when they watched TV or attended concerts and plays. They prized lectures given before a concert or read about a play before going to the theatre. They selected television programs such as documentaries, newscasts, biographies and the history channel because they were thirsty to learn; few watched TV just for entertainment. Many seemed aware of their shortening lifespan and were graciously learning to accept the limitations of failing eyesight and health which were constraining their efforts. They lived more in the present without making long-range plans for the future, accepting the realities of the end stage of life.
Learning Woven into Daily Life and Relationships

Few viewed it as a discrete activity outside their regular schedule. For most, learning is a thread woven throughout their daily activities and conversations, a natural part of ongoing affairs more than a separate activity which is done in a time and place set apart. Their natural curiosity discovered opportunities for learning in whatever they were experiencing at a given moment. This integration caused almost all the interviewees considerable difficulty in trying to quantify their learning. They were reluctant to state how many hours they spent on learning in an average week. At times they even had difficulty identifying learning since daily tasks and activities had elements of learning for them. One summed up the thought: “All our lives we are learning and then we still have to learn how to die.”

Summary

These preliminary general impressions from seniors’ learning experiences are intriguing. As we complete the final stages of the study, we anticipate discovering many more elements about learning in the third age which will affirm the stories of the many curious elderlearners in Canadian society and point directions for program planners offering resources to aging adults eager to continue learning.

References

