The Older Adult in Education

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The self-fulfilling prophecy

Eleanore L., a 68-year-old former teacher, took a graduate course in counseling. She plans to open a therapy center for parents of autistic children. The other day she came into my office and asked, “Do you think I should do a doctorate?” Andrew B., a retired lawyer, aged 79, attends the New York Artists League. “I feel more creative at this point in my life than ever before,” he says. “What shocked me, though, was receiving an offer to sell one of my paintings!” Jack M., aged 82, is taking a course called Writing the Novel You’ve Always Dreamed of Writing at the University of Connecticut Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (USA). The course description announces, “The final class will stress rewriting and working with a professional editor” (OLLI, 2009: 15). Weezi and Cynthia (they decline to give their ages: “Just say ‘over 21,’ dear.”) have signed up for Kayak the Low Country. This is a weeklong program sponsored by Road Scholar, formerly Elderhostel, a program designed for active older adults. The catalog copy for Kayak the Low Country reads: “Wildlife abounds … including alligators, wood stork and dolphins. Expect a physically active week of learning on water and on land about the region’s history and natural resources” (Road Scholar, 2010: 13). Six women gather in an enrichment program at a long-term care facility to reminisce about growing up in Danbury, a small Connecticut (USA) city; all have memory problems. The facilitator shows pictures of Danbury and suddenly the women are girls again with perfect recollection. One has not spoken in days, but is now exclaiming, “And that’s where I took my piano lessons!” Her husband sobs in the next room, “There she is! God bless you!” All of the above are “older adult learners,” but each individual is constructing his/her experience of learning within a highly personalized context.

Who imagined the burgeoning population of people over the age of 65 who would want to learn? And who thought many of them would be starting new careers? There is clearly a revolution afoot, and it is an international phenomenon! In 1975, Dr. Robert Butler wrote in Why Survive? Being Old in America, “Human beings need the freedom to live with change, to invent and reinvent themselves a number of times through their lives” (in Martin, 2010). At the time, this was a revolutionary concept: people do not stop growing and learning because of an age barrier. Indeed, Butler was a visionary: according to developmental theory, older adults have the greatest need to know, learn, and process their experiences in ever-more nuanced and richer ways (Peck, 1968; Wolf, 2005). Older adults who have diminished memory can enjoy fulfilling educational experiences, including museums, dancing, poetry, and reminiscence. Formerly they had been stringing macaroni.
With the mean age rising in the United States of America and elsewhere, new paradigms for learning have evolved. Many people choose education for personal and professional transitions. *The New York Times* recently carried a story about an 82-year-old woman who got a law degree so that she could stop development in her town; I met a 90-year-old nun who was taking computer classes to redesign the payroll system for the hospital she runs. An older woman in my class writes:

> From reviewing my life, I see clearly I need change and have sought and continue to seek growth opportunities at every chance I have had. I have consciously and unconsciously sought change, gone back to school, changed jobs and realized in the last few years that stagnation is my enemy. I need to have variety to keep my creativity alive. I write, have had a few poems published and created many other things but without change and variety, I felt stifled. But now, with this educational opportunity I am growing again in many different ways. It feels right.

The time is ripe for educators to examine the place of the older adult in educational settings. This is not just a result of demographics, but also recognition of research and theory of human development. While the expectation in the USA is that some 20 percent of Americans is coming into the “golden age” in the next 20 years (US Census Bureau, 2010), there is a concomitant understanding of the capabilities and verve within this population. We know that some will want to exercise—not just their physical capacities, but also their mental stamina. They may want to experience new meaning-making perspectives and to contribute to the general culture. “Giving back to your community may slow the aging process in ways that lead to a higher quality of life … . It potentially could have great social impact if taken to a large scale” observes Linda Fried, director of the Center on Aging and Health at Johns Hopkins University (2010). Indeed, aging may become the newest horizon.

**Who knew?**

Psychologists and sociologists considering the life-long socialized and adaptive patterns of adult behavior have had to revise previous assumptions about the life interests of older adults. Nearly 50 years of gerontological research have gone a long way toward debunking what were once common myths about life after 65. We know that older adulthood—what the Europeans call the Third Age—is not a serene and halcyon stage of dwindling energy and interest in life. Nor is it a hellish, disease-ridden empty time of inevitable senility. Recent medical evidence and psychological research into the last years of life indicate that it can be a creative and highly rewarding time of growth (Cohen, 2000; Rowe and Kahn, 1998; Vaillant, 2002, 2009; Wolf, 2005; Wolf and Brady, 2010; and others). Dementia is not a given in the majority of older adults and sexual, intellectual and interpersonal development can continue in later life, often beyond what an individual had expected. This creates ever-new challenges and transitions. One older learner observes:

> As I think of life, constantly changing and challenging, I recognize that we change in response to it and I wonder if for all the planning and goal setting we do if we can really plan our lives. It seems to me whenever I reach one of those end points it is not what I had anticipated. It seems as though the progression – the very act of getting there – actually somehow changes the goal and might be more important in terms of enriching life. What a surprise to be 65 and have new dreams and accomplishments!

**Do we need a rationale?**

There are myriad reasons for the burst of older adult learning experiences taking off across the globe. The foremost, of course is the increase in the over-65 population and in their educational levels (Turkel, 2006).
Across the world, there are nearly 600 million people over the age of 60 years (US Census/Global, 2010). Here are some factors that contribute to growing numbers of older adults participating in learning activities:

- **A sense that we can route our own aging.** A principle of aging—of life—is locus of control (Beatty and Wolf, 1996) and we have seen lifetime examples. Technically, “locus of control is the belief of an individual that events in his or her life result from personal actions (internal locus). Or, they are determined by fate or powerful others (external locus)” (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2008: 168). There is a growing sense, now, that we can avoid the diseases and morbidity of previous generations. Bedrock in this belief system is the role of continued physical exercise and mental stimulation (Beatty and Wolf, 1996; Butler, 2010; Shenk, 2009).

- **Technology: the new frontier.** Older people do want to be part of the future (Shenk, 2009; Willis, 2006). At a recent panel discussion with older adults living in a continuing care community, the strongest wish was for computer classes. “We need to learn to text,” announced one 80-something-year-old. “I simply must be able to stay on top of things.” A recent finding in a study of older learners was that looking up medical conditions was essential to the majority of that population (Wolf, in preparation). Beware the physician who assumes that elderly patients are passive and compliant.

- **Higher educational levels with each cohort.** No one will age as one’s grandparents did. Each generation is a historic phenomenon, given that it has lived through different environments and circumstances (Schaie and Zanjani, 2006). In the United States of America, for example, this means that the 65 and over generations (some 35 million people) have lower educational levels than the coming cohort does, the 55 to 65-year-olds (often referred to as the “leading edge of the Baby Boomers”). To put it another way, in the 85-year-and-over population, there are over 14 percent who have not completed high school. In the Boomer group, this will be 9 percent. Given this situation, we may see more older adults enter adult education with diverse motivations, including new careers, informed citizen roles, and sophisticated versions of volunteerism.

- **New roles.** One major motivation for the coming cohorts of older adult learners will surely be the discovery of new directions, perhaps new employment opportunities. For men, these new roles will surely be affiliative; for women, they may be in service of leadership and instrumentalism (Bateson, 2010; Gutmann, 1987; Vaillant, 2010; Wolf, 2005, 2009).

- **Socialization.** According to Paulo Freire (1970): the most powerful of human capacities comes into play when we experience our worlds as centered within a mutual universe. The crucial element of connection, trust, is the pathway to transformation (Erikson, 1968). In adult learning environments, relationships spark awarenesses and personal differentiation. Denise K., a midlife faculty member working with older adults, discovered:

  There were some people who were quite candid. I would sit around with them after class and talk. I think they like that. They like the class setup; they like information; but I think they just want to get to know you—I mean, personally. You really have to spend time with them. So we sat around after class and I didn’t realize that some people were eighty-two and eighty-three.

- **Well-being.** “When I am here, I know I am all right,” observed an 80-plus in my water aerobics class. We know now that physical and mental challenges enhance the lives of everyone, well into old age. The Johns Hopkins University “Prescription for Longevity” describes exercise as the “single most important anti-aging measure anyone can follow, regardless of age, disability, or general level of fitness” (1998: 4–6).

Similarly, mental exercise, the challenge of cognitive stimulation, is essential for older persons (Rabins, 2010). Schaie and Zanjani (2006) cite research findings that professional retirees experience mental decline,
whereas those retirees who had “more routinized workplaces” gained in cognition. Snowdon (2002) found that elderly nuns who enjoyed mental challenges “gained in intellectual prowess.” I call this Brain Magic. While we still know little about cognitive growth—growth of dendrites—in those who choose learning in older adulthood, we do know about rats and how they do build dendrites (Diamond, 2010). Diamond, for example, has added longevity to those rats that, 1) receive loving touch, and 2) are given stimulating environments (i.e. jungle gyms) in their cages. That is it, then: puzzles to solve and attention. Surely, there is no older adult who wouldn’t benefit from this miracle combination.

- **Adulthood is dynamic.** Developmentalists have come to rely on the work of Erikson (1968) and Jung (1933) to speculate on the nature of psychosocial tasks for elders. Both theorists adopted ontological frameworks for understanding meaning-making in late life, i.e. becoming generative. Butler (1975, 2010) contributed the notion of emotional legacy—opining that a process of evaluative life review is universal. Erikson talked about the final stage of life as one of integration (“integrality”), in which the individual achieves the “harvest of life.” Our understanding of the meaning that older learners find in educational activities may be the explorations that they make into their own understanding of life—their own lives and the meaning of their place in the world (Peck, 1968). This is ontological development: a process of reaching to our greatest potential. It is also a reflection of hope and trust. Nouwen and Gaffney observed, “When hope grows we slowly see that we are worth not only what we achieve but what we are, that what life might lose in use, it may win in meaning (1976: 71). Dave W., aged 70, in reviewing his experience as an instructor in a class of older adults, admitted that he had initially had “an uneasy relationship” with his own aging. Now, he found:

> I’d like to think this is a part of the whole humanizing process of life itself. Just a sense that, “Hey, we’ve got a common humanity here … . We are sharing—in a joyful way—that underlying sense of a common humanity. They have a richer sense, a deeper sense, than at a younger age. People are less of a threat to each other. … Ultimately, this is the way it’s supposed to be: that the whole life process is intended to be an opening up to the world and to the resources of joy and richness, love and compassion. We are called to live out our lives. To me, it is simply a confirmation of this: a growing, richer sense of life. And for my own aging, too.

The other side of this concept was recently expressed by Butler (2010): who said, “We shouldn’t romanticize aging; there are hardships … I think a lot of older people are sitting on their asses, playing golf, and not making a contribution to society” (Tapper, 2010).

- **Retrospection.** Educational gerontologists often attribute wisdom to the aged: surely, that is an ontological bias. We hope that by the time we are elders, we will achieve the Eriksonian height of ego integrity “which conveys some world order and spiritual sense” (1968: 268). Yet, there is surely a rhythm to the life cycle and tasks of the last stages of life (Jung, 1933; Peck, 1968). We seem to come into the world equipped to take on the adaptive demands of a myriad of environments. It is only logical to think that the last stages of life involve a final phase of meaning-making that includes retrospection and learning. We recall C.G. Jung’s statement, “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he [she] belongs” (1933: 109).

At the 2009 International Reminiscence Conference, a large component of Japanese scholars reported on the use of life review and reminiscence with their older learners. Irish, British, Australian, Dutch, and other scholars sat together to explore the process of story-telling, finding meaning and commonality.
Ninety-something Dr. James Birren led a workshop in memoir writing and seemed to exemplify the elder-at-his-finest: giving, listening, questioning and being open to the new and untried.

Ritual and development: the need for structure. If one is growing, developing, and fully integrative, why the need for educational formalities? It seems that we may be socialized to experience our own “ahas” in public—or at least, in the company of like-minded individuals. In that case, educational settings take on new guises. Here is what one older adult said about her experience in a class setting:

This group not only affects the individual but also those who surround me. The act of becoming is therefore never over, never complete and never alone. I see myself as a bubble floating in a stream.

Changing shape, getting bigger and smaller, responding to my surroundings, arriving at a final destination, intact but changed.

The self-directed, field-independent learner. Just as there is no prototype of an older adult, there is no one kind of learning. Some older people had enough of the classroom when they were 10 years old. Although curious, striving, and engaged in meaning-making, many older adults have projects that satisfy their leanings. Henry S., an 80-year-old working plumber, has developed an elaborate investigation into variations of bees in the north-eastern states of America. He is as knowledgeable as any professor, but he is a solitary scholar. Field independence is a cognitive style in which the individual orients him or herself independently of the environment (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010), although he/she may enjoy researching in libraries, museums, online, or in laboratory settings.

Engaging older learners

What do older adults find supportive in educational settings? We know that the “holding environment”—the place within which we find ourselves at any given time of growth and development—must support the individual’s motivation to learn. For older learners, especially the “Baby Boomer” clientele—those born between 1944 and 1964—this environment must include some level of collaborative activity. A successful example in the USA is the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI). They were established in 2004; there are now over 400 centers (Wolf and Brady, 2010). They are community based and member driven, typically established on university grounds all over the USA. Many of the courses are designed by the learners themselves or in partnership with interdisciplinary faculty staff (Wolf and Brady, 2010). One learner observed, “I think it was designed just to make me happier and smarter and more aware of the world.”

Museums and other arts facilities have developed broad partnerships with long-term care institutions and senior groups to expand programming in creativity and the arts. These include dance programs, play readings, arts, and something called “sand building” (National Center for Creativity and Aging, 2010). Programs include: Stage-bridge, Kairos Dance, IONA Senior Services, Arts for the Aged, Elders Share the Arts, Meet Me at MoMA, Time Slips, Story Corps Memory Loss Initiative, Minnesota Creative Aging Network, EngAGE, Song-writing Works, The Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts, and Pregones (Hana, 2009).

Programs for older learners have proliferated in the past 30 years. In the USA, they include The Third Age Initiative, Civic Engagement, Encore Careers (Reserve), New Chapters Centers, Older Adult Service and Information Systems (OASIS), The Second Journey, The University Without Walls, The Shepherd’s Centers, Transitional Keys, Elderhostel, Roads Scholars, and Centers for Creative Retirement (NCCCR). Pruchno and Smyer (2007) explored the challenges of an aging society and conclude that education is an integral part of the themes of “autonomy, responsibility and distributive justice … that resonate in personal and public life” (p. 14). A model program has been developed in Portland, Maine (USA) to teach English
to Somali refugees (Wolf and Brady, 2010). Even the need to find work (perhaps part-time) and like-minded socialization drives older adults out and into learning environments.

**Conclusion**

With the change in health and expectations, older persons present a completely new population of active learners, who now view the world sharply from a vantage that had long been assumed to be silent. How do practitioners tap this capacity and hunger to learn? One principle of learning in old age is that, although there is no one “older learner,” there is an underlying rhythm to the life cycle, and old age can be as productive as any other time of life. There is, indeed, developmental “work” that occurs in the last stages of life (Erikson, 1968) and that is the integration of one’s life. One mysterious and particularly intriguing component of human adaptation is the construct of numinous development.1 It appears to be an active process at work in older learners whose experience can now be integrated and tweaked for new “ahas.” It carries the potential for wisdom and great generativity, and is a quality of recalling a life lived and a transformative sense of meaning. Anthony Powell wrote, in *A dance to the music of time:*

Nothing establishes the timelessness of Time like those episodes of early experience seen, on reexamination at a later period, to have been crowded together with such unbelievable closeness in the course of a few years; yet equally giving the illusion of being so infinitely extended during the months when actually taking place.

*(1995: 23)*

Indeed, older adulthood brings this opportunity for human beings to explore their internal resources, find new dimensions for growth, and reexamine their histories. Among the older adult learners (N = 280) in a recent study by this author there was a heightened sense of curiosity in personal development, autobiography, the journey of life. Integration occurs among sorrows, losses, recalling early life adventures, and later life passions. Many find new directions. Mary observed, “I just have to repot myself every few years.” The majority were flexible and resourceful in later life and, in their historical narratives, described lifelong philosophies of adaptation and the ability to recenter. They used these philosophies to process change and to achieve optimal development, relying on recalled strengths and practiced adaptive behaviors. This has been cited as “resilience” in seminal work by McMahon and Rhudick (1967): who found that those veterans in a hospital setting who bragged about their feats got significantly better.

Recent evidence on long-lived elders indicates that learning in old age is essential to development, if only as an adaptive strategy. Perls and Silver (1999): in a study of centenarians, found that a “stress-resisting mindset” is conducive to longevity. Brady and Sky (2003) found that older learners who did journaling were able to cope better with day-to-day situations, experience joy of discovery, and nurture individual voice and spirit. Learning activities in late life were found to enhance longevity and vitality (Rowe and Kahn, 1998; Vaillant, 2002; 2010). The distinguished Israeli gerontologist, Jacob Lomranz, had a recent opening of his late-life paintings. It was widely applauded, a break-through event for someone who had never painted. A leading authority on creativity and aging, Dr. Lomranz found himself a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Another learning principle is that learning is essential to the human being, a form of nurture and strength. Let us hope that research on healthy older adults continues to debunk myths of automatic senility and decline. On the contrary, narratives of survival and renewal through lifelong learning and adaptation confirm the potential of old age. We see the need for a new perspective that teaches others via their greater wisdom. Indeed, older learners have new lenses that illuminate life experiences and lessons. We know now that the learning of older adults can be far more vigorous and challenging than prior stereotypes had inferred. Armin Grams (2001: 108) wrote:
This making sense of life, so inexorably bound up with what has been termed reintegration, can result, when it is successful, in wisdom. I think Samuel Johnson put this so well when he wrote: “Design on the passing world to turn thine eyes, and pause a while from learning to be wise.”

Note

1 Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines “numinous” as “spiritual … surpassing comprehension of understanding; mysterious; arousing one’s elevated feelings of duty, honor, and loyalty.”

References

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