

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR OLDER LEARNERS AS A MEANS OF OCCUPYING DISCRETIONARY TIME THE CONCEPT OF AGE

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As the life spans of healthy, biologically and emotionally young baby boomers increases, society asks how they will spend the retirement years. Educational activities have been proposed as one alternative for older people's discretionary time. In order to examine the issues surrounding education for the elderly, three interviews were conducted with twelve individuals over the age of 60. The interviews were transcribed, and then examined for themes. Of the themes that emerged, eleven coalesced into two patterns: learning activities wanted by older people and academic opportunities available to the elderly. Respondents wanted learning opportunities to stimulate mental and physical activity, to learn practical skills, to cope with grief and mortality issues, to understand world news and to communicate with family members. Academic opportunities include Communiversity, Elderhostel, and informal activities including television, reading, and travel. The data support an andragogical learning model. Advantages accrue to university faculty who use the Communiversity and Elderhostel paradigms to structure learning activities desired by learners over 60

The concept of age is multidimensional. First, chronological age refers to the number of years since birth. In western society, the human life span has been increasing; people are living longer. Moreover, barring major catastrophes life expectancy will continue its upward trend. Second, biological age is chronological age relative to one's potential life span. Chronologically, two individuals may be the same age. But one, biologically young at that age, will live longer. In addition, our biological age seems to be declining over time. That is, we feel younger than same-age counterparts of several decades ago. Third, psychological age refers to the adaptive capacities of individuals to adjust their behaviors to fit the immediate context. An individual may adapt easily and quickly and behave as if he/she were younger than his/her chronological age. In general, we act younger today than same-age counterparts from past years. Fourth, the social roles played by individuals relative to those expected by their groups and by society establish social age. An active elderly person cognizant of current clothing styles may be socially younger than passive counterparts. Aging, therefore, refers to those characteristic patterns of biological, psychological, and social changes that regularly occur in people as they advance in chronological age (Birren, 1964; Birren,

Butler, Greenhouse, Sokoloff, & Yarrow, 1963; Birren & Renner, 1977; Bronte, 1992).

People in the large baby boom generation born during the fifteen years following the end of WW II are aging and entering their retirement years. However, most old people remain physically and mentally healthy until their final illness or death. No more than 5% of the over 65 spend their last days in nursing homes (Census of Population, 1990; Longino, 1994; Schick, 1986; Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1993; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994).

In dealing with issues surrounding aging, society must answer several basic questions. One in particular concerns this research. Though some will work past age 65, both employed and retired empty nesters will possess much leisure time. How, then, will biologically, psychologically and socially youthful and healthy baby boomers spend their additional years?

Friedan (1993) suggests that the over 60 will use educational activities that challenge and stimulate the mind to occupy some discretionary time. To test her conclusion, this study examined the issues surrounding education for people who are over 60, physically and mentally healthy, relatively young biologically, psychologically, and socially, and who possess discretionary time.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted three, ninety-minute (Seidman, 1991) interviews with each of twelve residents of a Midwestern community, six of each gender, falling into four age groups: 60 to 69, 70 to 79, 80 to 89, and 90 to 99. For ease of discussion, these are designated Groups I, II, III, and IV. Group I consisted of one woman, 63, and two men, 63 and 66 respectively. Group II included one woman, 71, and two men, 74 and 78. In Group III were two women, both 84, and a man, 84. Group IV included two women, 93 and 96, and a man, 96. The interviews were audio taped and the tapes transcribed. In addition to the transcriptions, the data included field notes taken during each interview session and written after each interview. Data analysis consisted of a search for themes in the data with the potential for providing information on the questions guiding the study. However, the investigation also looked for discrepant information.

All respondents completed the interviews thus attrition was not a problem. The selection process may have over represented white-collar, middle-class, middle-income groups using definitions by Davis, Gardner, and Gardner (1941), Hollingshead (1949), Warner (1963), and Warner and Lunt (1941). A conscious attempt to recruit people with working-class backgrounds met with some success because three male respondents could be categorized as working class. I used a nonprobability, convenience sample and my questions may have generated concepts that some interviewees, to that point, had not considered. Thus, the findings derived from the interviews should not be generalized beyond the sample. While the findings may provide useful information for a broader population, more research is needed to corroborate them (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993).

The unique historical experiences of the twelve respondents may limit comparability of the findings with other people over 60. However, the respondents did not comprise a homogeneous group with a common history; ages, education levels, and occupations varied greatly. Moreover, all respondents were probably Euro Americans and, though not wealthy, financially secure. See Alexander (1996) for a more complete discussion of the

methodology. Note that no differences in the data could be attributed to age.

FINDINGS: LEARNING ACTIVITIES WANTED

Of the themes that emerged from the data, twelve seemed to coalesce into two patterns: learning activities wanted by older people and academic opportunities available to the elderly. Taken together the themes provide partial answers to three questions. Do the aged want to engage in learning activities? What types of educational endeavors best satisfy their needs? What academic opportunities are open to the over 60?

Mental Activity

Five individuals, representing all four age groups, mentioned the necessity of keeping mentally alert through educational activities. One man in the youngest age group suggested that older people who don't keep their minds active vegetate. A Group IV woman stated that education serves to stimulate older people's minds. She welcomed undertakings "that's going to help me think or enjoy living." And a Group III woman enjoyed formal education for its enrichment value and expressed a desire to take more literature, philosophy, and language courses.

However, one respondent each from Groups II and III did not want to attend formal classes. And taking a practical approach, another two, both in Group IV, stated that as the elderly near the ends of their lives they don't need to learn any more. One noted that if older people hadn't learned what they needed to know by 60, they never would. Both admitted, though, that the aged would be better off and have more to live for if they took classes rather than remain inactive.

Physical Activity

Educational and physical activities are related. A male respondent, Group II, used recreational activities to increase his activity level. "There's too many people sitting in their . . . homes . . . and just wastin' [sic] away. And that's why I kinda [sic] enjoy the, tours and, and [sic] singing." The male in Group IV thought that old people "should have something to do rather than

just sit and, and [sic] rot away you know. Well I'd say physical, work of some kind would do him more good than mental work I would say so." Indeed, for the very old the line between mental and physical activities became indistinguishable when the need to travel from a residence to a learning site requires physical exertion.

Practical Skills

Formal education can teach old people practical skills. Two people in Group I mentioned that the elderly should learn about their bodies in order to remain healthy. "When you get older you know you should . . . be aware of your health that's the most . . . major thing you know," stated a male, 66. After developing diabetes he learned how to eat properly, test his own blood, monitor insulin levels, and inject insulin. He also purchased videotapes and books on auto and home repair. Two more respondents suggested that older people acquire knowledge about estate and financial planning. One woman, Group IV, knew widows who couldn't write a check because their husbands had taken care of all family financial matters. She listed other coping skills older women in particular needed including bookkeeping, preparing income tax forms, buying insurance, dealing with money issues, understanding living wills, dealing with death and dying, and obtaining the services available to older people

Ability To Cope With Grief

The aged need to learn how to cope with the sense of loss experienced when a family member dies. Two women, Groups I and II, observed that a surviving spouse wants help, first in alleviating grief and second in establishing ties with other people. The latter explained that when her husband died, "Your whole social setup changes when you're by yourself. If you're a people person you need to be where there are people to be around." She believed appropriate educational activities

Ability To Cope With One's Own Mortality

Older citizens want to know how to cope with their own mortality and inevitable death. The Group III male believed that the elderly postpone thinking about death and dying. People should teach methods for handling grief and provide a social context

at the same time

gain more knowledge about death but they often don't want it because "It's subconsciously a fear of of [sic] disability and fear of going down, fear of having to leave one's life work and ultimately death." That is, people concentrate on present, short-term enjoyments and block out thoughts about a future without them present. The Group II woman declared that the over 60 needed information to help them deal not only with these emotional consequences of impending death but also, "you probably should at least have a little notion of living wills and, and [sic] death and dying." Formal education can help the elderly come to terms with their mortality.

World News

The over 60 desire to keep up with world news and events. Several thought older people need to understand world news and current events including, for example, geography. The lone woman in Group I read newspapers and watched news programs and then referred to a world globe to locate the events discussed. A Group III woman read newsmagazines to remain current.

Communicate With Family

As they grow older, people want to know how to communicate with younger family members. The man in Group III wished to understand his grandchildren's language and the concepts they expressed. "The young don't think that the elders . . . know very much and they're probably right so far as certain subjects are concerned," he offered. A woman of the same age agreed but rather than grandchildren, she yearned to keep up with her adult children. She wanted to, "understand what the younger ones are thinking about . . . to talk with them and be able to have conversations on a meaningful level with them. I don't want them to know a lot of things that I don't know." She also desired to study the things her children studied so they would respect her opinion. The Group I woman stated that young people often describe activities that older relatives don't understand. She knew little of hockey and soccer, sports her grandsons played, but planned to learn more so she could converse intelligently with them.

A Learning Format

Aging citizens sign up for non-vocational courses that interest them. The respondents enjoyed the community courses offered by a local, private college. The school's faculty conducted these two-hour, non-credit, six-week courses during the winter months on the campus and at several age-segregated housing facilities. Faculty chose topics that would inform and entertain rather than for their vocational content. Four individuals in the first three groups, regularly attended these community courses. The woman in the youngest group linked her college education to subsequent interest and participation in learning activities after turning 60. "I think . . . people that went to college . . . have a more of an interest in, in [sic] things." Another woman, Group II, attended classes for her own enjoyment. And a Group III woman not only took these classes, she also served on their planning committees and helped organize them.

FINDINGS: ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE

Communiversality

Communiversality was the name given to a joint educational effort of community religious organizations and a private religious college. Learners of all ages paid nominal fees for non-credit, non-vocational classes taught by faculty from both the private college and nearby public universities, and from knowledgeable individuals in the community.

The woman in Group I enrolled in several Communiversality courses over the years and wanted to attend more. She retired at age 61 but spent winters in Arizona and summers at a lake and had not yet found time to sign up. As an extension of one course, however, she began to work at home on a family history. The woman in Group II registered for almost all the Communiversality classes held at her apartment complex. "Well uh [sic] I've been going to Communiversality out here ever since they started with it. And I love it," she observed. One woman in Group III had participated in Communiversality classes some years earlier, but not recently. She said she was coasting and no longer wished to participate in such activities. Unlike her, the other male and female in

Group III registered for almost all Communiversality classes held at their age segregated apartment complex. The 93 year-old woman in Group IV had attended several Communiversality programs in the past few years. She lamented missing one on Shakespeare, but enjoyed a class about Islam.

Elderhostel

Almost 170,000 people over 60 who want short-term academic experiences study and travel each year as members of the Elderhostel program (Elderhostel, 2006). Participants live at different institutions in the U. S. and abroad for up to four weeks. They study liberal arts courses, but neither take exams nor receive grades. The male and a female in Group III had enjoyed an Elderhostel program held on a college campus. "I've thought about and wanted to go to Elderhostel," said the Group I woman. But she had not at the time of the interview. None of the respondents in Groups II or IV mentioned Elderhostel.

Informal Learning

Several people noted that card games such as Bridge provided learning experiences because it required mental activity and compelled them to learn from their own and others' mistakes. The 78-year-old male in Group II played cards but considered the quality of the Bridge games at his apartment complex somewhat low. He preferred playing with friends who lived elsewhere. The woman in Group I and a female in III enjoyed playing Bridge. The former belonged to a Bridge club and played regularly and the latter read all she could find about the card game. A Group IV woman listed her Bridge games as a learning activity.

Some respondents attended religion classes organized by their churches. The Group I woman and a Group IV woman liked the Bible study classes held at their respective churches. The 96-year-old male occasionally attended religion classes conducted in his apartment building. A male in Group II was a member of the clergy. He frequently attended summer seminars at his alma mater, a religious college. The other male in Group II participated in seminars conducted by his church on a variety of topics related to death and dying, including wills and funeral arrangements.

Music provided learning activities for several interviewees. A Group II male and female sang in the choirs of their respective churches, an activity that required them to learn new music. As a member of a local music club, A Group IV female learned new choral music as it was added to the repertoire.

Health issues forced learning activities upon some. After heart surgery, A group I male received instructions on post-surgery care from a nurse. Following a diagnosis of diabetes, a home-health nurse taught him to test his blood and administer insulin. When, years earlier, the husband of a Group IV female fell ill, she completed a course in home nursing so she could care for him. "I was glad I could keep him at home and look after him [because] I knew how, then," she observed. After he retired, employer sponsored one-day investment and tax law seminars provided the Group I male with new information. And all three individuals in Group I had completed safe driving programs for older people.

The Group I woman attended Town Hall Lectures sponsored by local churches. She also attended dance and theater programs conducted by the colleges, the Community Theater, and a local dance company. One of the Group III women considered taking a creative-writing class offered at her apartment complex by local state college faculty, but did not. "Something just doesn't move me," she said. The male in Group III mentioned both the Peace Corps and a voluntary missionary program operated by his church as examples of learning experience for older citizens. And though he had not participated in either of those, he took part in a program to collect oral histories of retired missionaries' China experiences.

Television, Reading, Travel

The woman in Group I said she did not watch much TV and gained little from it. On the other hand, a male in her age group purchased a videotape on automobile maintenance and found it educational. He bought and read books on home repair and gardening as well. The Group II woman was less enthusiastic about the possibility of learning from TV. "I wanna [sic] say watching television but, I guess I can't with any honesty say that I like talk shows or anything like that." One

of the Group III women stated that she learned about animals and geography on the educational television station. And the 96-year-old male believed he learned from watching television, although he complained about some of the explicit material discussed on talk shows.

The respondents liked to read and believed they learned from some of what they read. The Group II male read hunting, fishing, and golf magazines. A Group III woman read popular newsmagazines, Taylor Caldwell books, and books on bridge. And the Group III male read religion and theology. He assisted his self-education efforts by borrowing from a national theological library and from a collection donated by a Jesuit priest to the library in his apartment building. His other reading included American history and British fiction, especially by P. G. Wodehouse. The other Group III woman read as well and, for assistance, referred to a set of encyclopedias and other reference books from her own shelves. A Group IV female read the local paper and enjoyed mystery stories and historical novels. She attempted, with limited success, to read books about religious philosophy sent her by a granddaughter. Until her eyesight became too poor, the other Group IV woman read newspapers and historical novels.

Travel offered learning opportunities for the respondents. A Group II male and his wife visited Hawaii and Canada four years before the interview and had registered for an upcoming tour of several European countries. The Group II woman toured Australia first at age 56, after her husband died, and then again ten years later. She also participated in a science tour of Great Britain, organized by a college professor. The Group III male mentioned three trips to China he had taken during the 1980s. A group IV woman traveled with her husband across the U. S. after their children left home and had planned a trip overseas. Upon his untimely death, she took the trip herself. She recalled fondly the two-and-a-half month odyssey to Great Britain, Europe, the Scandinavian countries, Japan, and other Pacific Rim countries.

DISCUSSION

To remain mentally alert, people over 60 need the opportunity to engage in formal learning

activities. Some want to take classes to improve their minds. Others see a practical, though not necessarily vocational, side to learning. They want information that will help them adapt to the consequences of aging. They want to know how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, how to cope with grief, and how to make decisions their spouses once handled. Coming to terms with their own mortality interests them. Older people want to understand what is going on in the world, especially when the knowledge enables them to communicate with children and grandchildren. The over 60 enjoy acquiring this knowledge in two-hour, non-credit courses which inform and entertain.

Knowles' (1984) andragogical learning model contrasts the art and science of teaching children, pedagogy, with the art and science of teaching adults, andragogy (Chapter 3). The former model is teacher directed and requires learners to play submissive roles. The latter is learner directed in which teachers create environments conducive to learning.

The andragogical model is based on several assumptions. (1) Before engaging in learning activities, adults want to know why they need to learn the content. (2) Although adults believe themselves responsible for their own decisions and lives, in an educational setting they suspend this belief. Rather than adopt a self-directed learning style they depend upon educators to direct their learning. (3) Adults enter into learning activities with sizable quantities and varieties of experiences. As they mature, they see these experiences as defining who they are. They view an educational setting that devalues these experiences as a rejection. (4) For education to become salient, adults must reach a state of readiness to learn. Events outside the individual, such as the death of a spouse, induce this state of readiness. (5) Adults are life, task, and problem-centered learners. They are motivated to learn things that help them perform tasks or deal with problems. (6) Adults are motivated most by internal pressures including self-esteem and quality of life.

The data from the present study support these assumptions. First, the respondents provided specific reasons for engaging in educational activities. They desired practical information such as

caring for their health and coping with the death of a spouse. They needed to know how to repair things around the house, to contend with finances, and to communicate with younger people. And the very elderly wondered how to conceptualize their imminent demise. Second, half of the respondents interviewed had attended community courses organized by a private college and conducted by its faculty. Though one of the Group III women served on the committee that suggested topics for these courses, neither she nor the other members sought a learner-directed teaching style. Instead, they allowed the professors to direct the courses while they remained passive participants. Third, the respondents perceived their experiences as defining who they were. Neither the 96-year-old male or female could see himself or herself taking courses. The former quit school early, never returned, and expressed no remorse. The latter completed high school and beauty school. But she believed people as old as she required no additional education. The Group I woman, however, perceived a link between her college education and interest in additional education. Moreover, the researcher collected data as a participant-observer in several Communiiversity courses. He observed a Group III woman's attempt to question her instructors about their material. These teachers seemed uninterested in tapping into her experiences.

Fourth, most of the interviewees had gone through one or more developmental stages in their lives and appeared ready to learn how to cope with them. Contending with the anguish and sense of loss experienced at the death of a spouse, for example, made this topic salient to the Group II woman. And the Group I male's diabetes rendered him ready to learn how to care for his medical condition. Fifth, the data demonstrated that the respondents were life, task, and problem centered learners. They were motivated to learn how to perform home and auto repairs, to care for their own health, to take care of their own finances, and to deal with death. Sixth, the over 60 clearly seemed internally motivated to acquire additional knowledge. At their ages, such external motivators as better jobs and higher salaries were irrelevant. Instead, they wanted to keep up with events in the news and with activities of children and

grandchildren. For example, self-esteem motivated a Group III woman to want to study the topics her children had learned. She wanted to know what they knew so they would respect her opinion.

COMMENT

Three points made above are relevant to college and university educators. First, older citizens believe they need educational activities in order to remain mentally healthy and alert. University teachers might wish to provide them. Indeed, a local, private college has conducted Communiversities classes for older students for a number of years. Though it charges only nominal fees for the courses, grateful participants have generously contributed in many ways to the success of the college. Second, those public schools that have experienced stable or even declining enrollments of traditional age students may wish to view the over 60 as potential replacements. Third, whether faculty members have traditional age students or the over 60 attending class, they teach adults. As Knowles (1984) states, the andragogical teaching model works well with adults. It offers advantages over the pedagogical model many faculty members now use.

The respondents liked and attended Communiversities classes probably because participants dictated the topics offered. The residents of an apartment complex, including a Group III respondent, served on committees to poll others and recommend classes. Second, faculty took their courses to the students. Individuals with mobility limitations easily accessed the meeting rooms at their apartment building. Third, Communiversities teachers neither tested nor graded the participants and this attracted the elderly (Alexander, 1996).

University professors might want to set up classes for the elderly using the Communiversities model. To appeal to older citizens, first ask what they wish to learn. Next, offer the desired courses at locations convenient to the older learners. Many would prefer that faculty bring the class to their own age segregated apartment complex. For those who wish to attend classes on the university campus, furnish them adequate parking close to classroom buildings. And third, make the educational

experiences user friendly, without exams. Rather than grades, award certificates of completion.

Elderhostel also serves as a useful paradigm for faculty to follow. University dormitories are empty much of the summer. If college enrollments continue to decline, some schools may also experience empty dorms in winter. Following the Elderhostel model, the university can bring retirees to campus, house them in dormitories, feed them in university cafeterias, and employ teachers to provide classes in university classrooms. For example, aging baby boomers have invested heavily in the stock market and experienced its fluctuations. In retirement, they may find investment seminars interesting. Finance faculty and investment counselors might describe suitable methods for choosing securities, the amount of risk to build into a portfolio, appropriate times to sell, and other topics older people identify. The Elderhostel participants could work with their own portfolios or set one up with an assumed level of investment, then evaluate their choices using quotations available on university computers. Some instructions on computer use may be necessary as well. A cautionary word on the Elderhostel model seems necessary, though. Older learners may find inappropriate those dormitory facilities designed for young people. To make Elderhostel work, universities must air-condition dorm rooms and provide comfortable beds and food pleasing to older palates.

Bridge requires players to utilize strategy and exhibit skill and thus seems appropriate as a university class for the aged. Courses in religion could draw upon the expertise of religion department faculty. They might discuss death, dying, and mortality in the context of religion. Music departments could provide music appreciation courses and voice training. And older citizens may find topics related to diet, exercise, and remaining healthy of interest.

Many colleges and universities offer travel opportunities for traditional-age students, but few provide the same for older ones. Retired people have the time to travel and many would enjoy educational travel programs build around Asian, European, African, or other societies. Faculty possessing expertise in the history, politics, art, music, etc. of various cultures can provide introductions sev-

eral weeks in advance of the trip, seminars during the trip, and debriefings afterward. And local experts can be engaged along with way.

CONCLUSION

Many people over the age of 60 want to fill discretionary time with educational activities. They know what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. University faculty can provide life-long learning opportunities to older learners. To begin, we probably should conduct additional research on the elderly in our communities to determine what they want to learn and to ascertain the most effective model for delivering it. We also should seek funding from grant awarding institutions, area businesses, and state and local governments to fund both the research and pilot programs. Then we should make a long-term commitment to the older learners in our respective communities and provide the classes they find attractive. Through these efforts, we can provide a service to a growing demographic segment within our respective communities while at the same time filling seats left vacant by the declining number of traditional age students.

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