
LEARNING IN LATER LIFE

Brian Findsen

Keywords: critical gerontology, educational gerontology, later life learning, older adults, seniors' education, third age

The phrase “learning in later life” has assumed major significance for educators and allied professionals in their efforts to understand the dynamics of learning for older people across the globe. In earlier times, the phrase “educational gerontology” was used to describe a similar set of ideas but is now deemed too restrictive for the vast range of learning in which seniors participate, whether organized *for* them or *with* them, or self-initiated. The purpose of this article is to provide a solid platform for conceptualizing the complex array of learning opportunities open to older adults in diverse cultural contexts.

Fundamentally, later life can be interpreted in different ways across and within cultures. There is no benchmark chronological age at which a person may become an older adult (Phillipson, 2013), though many nations signal this transition through the award of pensions in accord with a social welfare regime. For instance, in Aotearoa, New Zealand, there is a universal pension available to all citizens at age 65 regardless of gender, ethnicity, or other social attributes, but this is not the case in many countries and societies. Hence, older adulthood is context-specific (Phillipson, 1998). Within the scope of later life, there are vast developmental and social distinctions between young-old and old-old (Neugarten, 1976); people entering retirement at age 60, for instance, are likely to have very different (learning) needs from individuals in their 90s. Hence, heterogeneity among older people should be acknowledged. Laslett (1991), in describing the *third*

age—typically one of increased freedom to spend time less encumbered with the multiple responsibilities of the *second age* (entering and/or sustaining a career; building a family; striving for financial security)—has identified the considerable period of life beyond paid work in which adults continue to learn. The *fourth age*, often neglected by the majority of society (Formosa & Higgs, 2013), is one of returning to dependence and preparation for death.

A significant distinction needs to be made between *learning* and *education*. On the one hand, learning can occur anywhere and anytime for an individual, aligned to one's chosen pattern of living. It is both lifelong and lifewide (Findsen & Formosa, 2011), synonymous with life itself. We learn as we live. On the other hand, *education* refers to learning that is systematically organized, often credentialed and hierarchically constructed and frequently associated with an agency/provider. This distinction for (older) adults is important because learning is often self-directed and individualistic and not necessarily aligned to an organization's objectives. Further, we need to distinguish among informal learning (often incidental and unintentional), nonformal education (that which is organized, frequently in an organizational context—for instance, associated with volunteering for a social agency)—and formal education (usually assessed and for credit, led by a teacher in an education setting). For the majority of seniors, learning is informal or nonformal, away from universities and vocational institutes (Withnall, 2010).

Motivation and Needs Assessment

The motivations for learning for older people have been fairly comprehensively examined. Drawing on the well-known typology of learning needs devised by Howard McClusky (1974), these needs reflect different aspects of older people's lives. He distinguished needs as follows:

- *Coping* needs: adults engaged in economic sufficiency, physical fitness, and basic education
- *Expressive* needs: adults learning for their own sake, where creativity is emphasised
- *Contributive* needs: adults engaging actively in society as contributors (not just as consumers)
- *Influence* needs: adults becoming politicized to effect social change
- *Transcendence* needs: adults achieving an advanced state of consciousness

Although it is common for people in later life to spend larger periods of time on coping and expressive needs fulfilment, the two other domains should not be minimized in importance. Increasingly, older people want to “pay back” to society, commonly in volunteering roles (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008), their labor often propping up fledgling not-for-profit, socially oriented agencies. Further, as the numbers of people over the age of 60 increase in most nations (Tuckett & McAulay, 2005), their physical presence cannot be ignored, and, indeed, their political force is something that governments ignore at their peril (see the actions of Grey Power, an explicitly political organization that advocates for the rights of older people). Another way in which older persons’ needs have been described is in the continuum from expressive to instrumental (Jarvis, 2001). From a humanistic perspective (e.g., Laslett’s third-age description), the focus of later life is on leisure-oriented endeavors. Arguably, this is a highly romanticized view of later life. The neoliberal economic-political context in which many older people conduct their lives is one of enduring hardship as governments find it difficult to sustain a social benefit for elders. Instead, the reality for many older people—often regarded as a marginalized group in society (Findsen, 2005)—is that they need to continue in the workforce for as long as feasible to maximize their economic futures. Those from working-class backgrounds may find themselves locked out of job opportunities where, for example, information and communication technology (ICT) competencies are high in demand.

Provision of Learning Opportunities

The issue of participation in education for older adults is long-standing. The truism that “those who have, get more” applies strongly in older adult education. People in earlier life who have established considerable human and social capital (Field, 2003) are usually adept at arranging their own education later in life because they have the requisite skills and social networks to acquire further nonformal or formal education. It is important to note that older adults have access to educational programs designed for the general public, although these may have been designed without seniors being a target for the program. Hence, it is possible to envisage education agencies according to the extent to which older people feature as incidental and/or primary targets of the program. At one extreme, an agency may focus almost exclusively on older people (for example, Seniornet), and on another, seniors might be invisible in planning or engagement (Findsen, 2005). However, there is a strand of provision that is self-initiated, typified by the establishment of the University of the Third Age (U3A), where the learning is controlled by older people themselves; the program itself relates to their own learning needs, the program

is taught by members themselves, the administration is minimal, and the costs are intentionally kept low. In effect, it epitomizes peer learning of seniors for seniors. On the other hand, the U3A has been heavily critiqued for its cultural insensitivity, middle-class bias, and conservatism (Formosa, 2000).

Recent and Future Developments

Learning in later life has developed a much more critical edge in the most recent decade, linked to *critical educational gerontology* (Battersby, 1987; Glendenning, 2000). In addition, its internationalization has been quite rapid (e.g., see Boulton-Lewis & Tam, 2012; Findsen & Formosa, 2016). Emergent issues in this field have focused on the strengthening links between health and learning, obviously because in later life health is a dominant personal and societal matter (Aldridge & Lavender, 2000). In the context of family learning, intergenerational learning/education has assumed more significance (see Schmidt-Hertha, Krasovec, & Formosa, 2014). As more people in most nations have increased life expectancy, the issue of third-age learning gains more prominence (Formosa, 2015). Although most older people will engage in learning for expressive reasons, the demands for workplace learning/education for older workers will continue to increase (Beatty & Visser, 2005). In addition, tertiary education providers need to expand their horizons to more readily embrace older people as lifelong learners in formal education.

The field of later life learning continues to grow exponentially and develop fresh perspectives as issues for older people gain more societal prominence. Whereas it is nearly always a governmental approach to give lip service to the importance of older adults' *learning* (because it is perceived that it is the individual's responsibility to choose what to learn), the *educational provision* for seniors remains much more problematic.

Suggested Cross-References

For more information on concepts and ideas discussed in this article, please see the following articles in the compendium: 1, 10, 12, 19, 52, 57, 61, 70, 74, 80

References

- Aldridge, F., & Lavender, P. (2000). *The impact of learning on health*. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Battersby, D. (1987). From andragogy to geragogy. *Journal of Educational Gerontology*, 2(1), 4–10.

- Beatty, P. T., & Visser, R. M. S. (Eds.). (2005). *Thriving on an aging workforce: Strategies for organizational and systematic change*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Boulton-Lewis, G., & Tam, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Active ageing, active learning: Issues and challenges*. New York, NY: Springer International Publishing Switzerland.
- Field, J. (2003). *Social capital*. London, England: Routledge.
- Findsen, B. (2005). *Learning later*. Malabar, FL: Kreiger.
- Findsen, B., & Formosa, M. (2011). *Lifelong learning in later life: A handbook on older adult learning*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Findsen, B., & Formosa, M. (Eds.). (2016). *International perspectives on older adult education: Research, policy and practice*. New York, NY: Springer International Publishing Switzerland.
- Formosa, M. (2000). Older adult education in a Maltese university of the third age: A critical perspective. *Education and Society*, 15(3), 315–339.
- Formosa, M. (2015). *Ageing and later life in Malta: Issues, policies and future trends*. Valletta, Malta: International Institute on Ageing, United Nations.
- Formosa, M., & Higgs, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Social class in later life: Power, identity and lifestyle*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Glendenning, F. (Ed.). (2000). *Teaching and learning in later life: Theoretical implications*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Jarvis, P. (2001). *Learning in later life: An introduction for educators and carers*. London, England: Kogan Page.
- Laslett, P. (1991). *A fresh map of life: The emergence of the third age* (Revised ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McClusky, H. Y. (1974). Education for aging: The scope of the field and perspectives for the future. *Learning for Aging*, 324–355.
- Neugarten, B. (1976). Time, age and the life cycle. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 136, 887–893.
- Newman, S., & Hatton-Yeo, A. (2008). Intergenerational learning and the contributions of older people. *Ageing Horizons*, 8, 31–39.
- Phillipson, C. (1998). *Reconstructing old age: New agendas in social theory and practice*. London, England: SAGE.
- Phillipson, C. (2013). *Ageing*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Schmidt-Hertha, B., Kravosec, S. B., & Formosa, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Learning across generations in Europe: Contemporary issues in older adult education*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Tuckett, A., & McAulay, A. (2005). *Demography and older learners: Approaches to a new policy challenge*. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Withnall, A. (2010). *Improving learning in later life*. London, England: Routledge.

