Older People and Lifelong Learning: Choices and Experiences
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Little is known about older people's experiences of learning and education over the course of their lives, the factors that might affect whether they choose to learn in retirement and what role learning plays in their lives as they grow older. This research set out to explore these issues in depth using a range of different investigative methods including the use of a small group of older people themselves as interviewers of their peers.

Summary of key findings
- A whole range of different influences, both collective and individual, interact within a changing social and cultural framework to impact on people's propensity to learn and their learning activities at different times during their lives including the post-work period.
- Between three and ten years after retirement appears to be the optimum time for participation in formally organised learning activities but one of the findings of a previous study - that being a 'non-learner' is not necessarily a static status - was confirmed.
- The final decision to attend a course or class is often the result of word-of-mouth recommendation or of being taken along by a friend even for committed learners with a long-standing interest in a particular subject or activity.
- Older people understand 'learning' in a variety of ways but self-chosen formal learning activity undertaken in later life is seen as qualitatively different from the 'compulsory' learning that has been undertaken in various contexts earlier in life.
- The labels of 'participant' or 'non-participant' frequently ascribed by educationalists are, in fact, largely meaningless to many of the older people in this study who tend to see learning as a mainly informal activity which is an integral and important part of their daily lives.
- Overall, however, the study shows that older people are interested in a very wide variety of topics and subjects and continue to learn in a range of diverse ways.
- Learning in later life is perceived to have a range of positive outcomes with the simple acquisition of new knowledge being least important.

Context
The promotion of a culture of lifelong learning is a cornerstone of the present government's educational policy and recent reform of the post-compulsory education system and efforts to widen participation reflect this. Initially, however, older people seemed to be largely excluded from this vision in that there was very little mention of those who are 'post-work' in the sense that they are no longer primarily concerned with earning a living or with major responsibilities for raising a family. Nevertheless, as the research progressed, we took into account the changing policy context in which debates about the nature of lifelong learning are emerging together with other social policy debates and developments in relation to our ageing population.
Learning across the life course

Discussions of focus group participants' experiences of learning during their lives enabled us to construct a model of the pathways to, and influences on learning post-work. We then explored some of the issues raised in the focus groups in more detail and tested the model through the questionnaires. The majority of questionnaire respondents were aged between 70-79 with 25 per cent over the age of 80. There was a two/three male/female ratio. By focusing on respondents' experiences of learning in childhood, adulthood, mid-life and post-work we were able to confirm the validity of our model.

Childhood, adulthood and mid-life

In particular, our data revealed that, for current participants (Ps), overall formal educational attainment (respondents and their siblings) was higher than among non-participants (NPs) although there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of fathers' occupations. Ps were slightly more likely to have received a scholarship and were also more likely to have been members of a library in childhood suggesting an additional disposition to informal learning. Differences may relate to situational circumstances, particularly family expectations and to institutional time overlaid by the social and cultural expectations of the time (contextual). In mid-life, over 92 per cent of Ps had engaged in some kind of learning activity as opposed to 76 per cent of NPs - more of the Ps had also engaged in learning related to leisure or pleasurable activities (situational). The percentage of Ps with professional or semi-professional occupations was higher than for NPs and more of the female Ps had worked compared to the NPs group even though gender ratios between the groups were almost exact (institutional time). It may be that, for women in later life, the experience of paid employment in mid-life is a key issue in taking up or continuing to learn. It was also noted that, for Ps, partners were more likely to have been employed in professional or semi-professional occupations and to have children who also have professional jobs (situational).

Post-work choices

The data also confirmed the importance of the circumstances around retirement decisions and timing. Retirement due to redundancy (contextual/situational) and ill-health (situational) accounted for 25 per cent of Ps but only 11 per cent of NPs who were more likely to have retired due to caring responsibilities (situational). It may be that retirement circumstances are a factor in the kinds of later life learning taken up. We also noted the influence of situational factors on later life learning. For example, the length of time since becoming post-work appears to be a factor - three to ten years after retirement appeared to be the optimum time for formal participation. Levels of current caring responsibilities and support received in respect of physical disability or other kinds of ill-health did not differ significantly between the groups but Ps were more likely to have a retired partner and to have access to a car or to be able to use public transport more easily (situational). Certainly, problems with transport were seen as creating a barrier to taking up formally organised learning opportunities. On average, each P was engaged in six hours of organised learning activity per week and 71 per cent reported spending up to £5 per week on this. Sixty-five per cent of them were also engaged in identifiable informal learning activity compared with 33 per cent of NPs and 54 per cent claimed to spend more money than NPs on such activity (situational) suggesting that disposable financial income, intertwined with other situational factors, may be an issue in the type of learning undertaken post-work.

Further information gleaned from the in-depth interviews suggests that, however predisposed to the importance of learning and to taking part in a course or class an older person may be, the final decision to attend may be as the result of word-of-mouth recommendation or through being taken along by a friend. Only two interviewees had actively sought out information as to where they could pursue an interest. This suggests that an extra 'push' might be required to encourage attendance even for those committed to notions of learning as a lifelong activity.

Definitions of learning

Sixty-nine questionnaire respondents completed the sentence 'Learning is.....'. A variety of definitions were offered from which five main themes were identified. These ranged from the acquisition of knowledge/wisdom to definitions expressed in terms of possible outcomes such as encouraging
social inclusion, understanding change and, for a minority, helping to ensure good health. This might be compared with the views expressed earlier by several focus group participants who distinguished between the self-chosen 'indulgent' learning they were enjoying in later life and the 'compulsory' learning previously undertaken, usually at the behest of others.

Participation and non-participation

Educationalists tend to make use of these terms in order to understand what kind of activities might attract more non-participant adults to educational programmes. However, it became apparent that many of those who we had designated 'non-participants' had actually participated in the past or were considering doing so in future, confirming a recent finding that being a 'non-learner' is not a static status (Dench and Regan, 2000). In the interviews, where this issue was explored in more depth, it became clear that labels such as 'non-participant' or 'non-learner' are largely meaningless to older people. Of those who felt no current need to attend classes or courses or considered that they were too old or infirm to do so, most were able to describe a whole variety of ways in which they were learning informally. This included some self-directed learning around specific interests but also focused on learning from TV and radio programmes (especially through quizzes and documentaries), reading and discussing books and newspaper articles with family members and friends, voluntary work and social activities. This was also true of those who did learn formally but they were generally inclined to regard their formally organised learning as more purposeful than learning undertaken informally. 'Non-participants' were much more likely to see learning as an integral part of their overall daily activities, sometimes unintentional or unanticipated and indeed, not always acknowledged as learning until our questions prompted reflection on these issues.

Learning choices in later life

Evidence from the learning logs kept by nine older people for an average period of seven weeks revealed 274 examples of learning activity and confirmed the extent to which a great deal of later life learning takes place informally since less than a third of the learning reported took place in a formal learning environment. The logs also demonstrated that, whilst some subjects such as computing are better studied through formal means, others such as natural history, lend themselves to informal learning mainly through television. Aspects of, for example, art and literature were studied both formally and informally. This finding may be related to the nature of the topic, to older people's particular circumstances, or it may be a reflection of individual learning style preferences.

Outcomes of learning in later life

Interviewees were generally very content with the quality of their daily lives post-work and few wished to change anything. In spite of some health concerns or, understandably, feelings of sadness and loneliness following the death of a spouse, all the respondents described busy and active lives in which family, friends and the importance of getting out and about to take part in a whole range of different activities featured prominently. For some, this obviously included a regular time to attend a chosen course or class. Particular stress was laid on the freedom offered by retirement and the ability to make choices about how daily lives were structured even for those who were constrained to some extent by caring responsibilities.

Perceived outcomes of participation in formally organised learning activities - self-satisfaction, keeping the brain active, intellectual stimulation, pleasure and enjoyment with acquisition of new knowledge as least important - confirmed the findings of previous studies but were ranked differently. This may be because our definition of older people as being 'post-work' excluded anyone still in full-time employment and also meant that our respondents were generally older than those in previous studies so that priorities were different.

Policy and practice implications

Although older learners are now receiving more consideration in relation to the development of national and local lifelong learning policies, our study shows that lifelong learning needs to be inclusive and to be understood in the historical and social context of learners' lives and situational influences and their impact on later life learning decisions. It is also important to acknowledge older people's varied perceptions of what consti-
tutes learning, the considerable quantity of informal learning they appear to undertake in later life, and the place of learning, both formal and informal, in helping to ensure a good quality of life through intellectual stimulation and enjoyment. Although we discovered many older people already learning in a wide variety of contexts, including activities organised by older people themselves, there are challenges here for Learning and Skills Councils and other organisations concerned specifically with older people in devising more accessible, inexpensive and relevant opportunities for older people to learn. This might include, for example, broadcasters, who may want to consider whether a wider range of opportunities could be offered through radio and television in order to acknowledge older people’s circumstances and learning preferences, to widen choice and to stimulate interest.

**How the research was carried out**

An important aspect of our study was to develop research strategies that would draw on a variety of different investigative techniques. In particular, we explored the use of older people themselves as interviewers in order to maximise the involvement of those being studied. Our methods consisted of:

- Focus group discussions with ten groups of older people currently taking part in different types of formally organised learning activities in different contexts around the UK (including those organised by older people themselves).
- Construction of a model to illustrate pathways to, and influences on older people’s learning activities across the life course.
- Questionnaires to test this model to a further 80 older people (38 currently participating in formally organised learning plus 42 ‘non-participants’) and including a sentence completion task, ‘Learning is.....’ attempted by 69 respondents.
- In-depth interviews with 35 of the above (21 ‘participants’, 14 ‘non-participants’) carried out by a trained team of seven older people (age range 59-76) in locations across the UK.
- Analysis of learning logs kept by nine further older respondents over a one-two month period.

**Reference**


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