

## Older People and Lifelong Learning: choices and experiences

In spite of the ageing of the population, little is known about older people's experiences of learning over the course of their lives, the factors that might influence whether they choose to learn in retirement and what role learning plays in their lives as they grow older. This study 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.

- A range of collective, individual and contextual influences interact to affect people's propensity to learn across the life course.



Educators need awareness of the historical and social contexts of older people's lives and how these affect their engagement with learning in all its forms.

- Older people define 'learning' in a wide variety of ways but perceive it to have a number of positive outcomes.



Older learners, especially those learning informally, need more support to develop their interests in the context of their beliefs about the overall benefits of learning.

- Many older people maintain a variety of interests well into old age and enjoy learning in a range of different ways.



To widen choice and stimulate interest, older people's diversity, varied circumstances and different learning preferences need to be acknowledged.

# The research

This project was originally funded through the ESRC's Growing Older: Extending Quality Life Programme (2000-2004). It was conceived at a time when the promotion of lifelong learning as a cradle-to-grave entitlement had become a cornerstone of educational policy in the UK, reflected in the reform of the post-compulsory education system and efforts to widen participation in higher education. In practice, however, older people were largely excluded from this vision. 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. Although demographic trends clearly demonstrate the ageing of the population, it was sadly the case that older people were more likely to be seen as a burden on health and social services than as potential learners and contributors to society with many years of life ahead of them.

Our aim was to draw attention to older people as learners and to identify and examine the factors that affect the extent to which they may become, or remain, engaged in lifelong learning, and the outcomes that learning has for their lives. We also wanted to explore what older people actually understand by 'learning'.

In 2005, the completed research was incorporated into the Teaching and Learning Research Programme as an associated project. This afforded the opportunity to re-examine our data in the light of the changing policy context in which the original concepts of lifelong learning have been largely replaced with an emphasis on skills for work, although other social policy debates and developments in relation to our ageing population have also emerged.

The research was carried out in overlapping stages over two years (2000-2002). Data collection and analysis made use of focus groups, postal questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and learning logs in order to gain an in-depth understanding of older people's experiences of, and beliefs about, learning. Some focus group members were recruited through the institutions in which they were currently learning. Others taking part in the study were members of larger groups of older people. Some whom we termed 'participants' were currently learning formally through an organisation which was not necessarily educational in focus. Others were not so involved ('non-participants') but may have been learning informally or in other ways. Although a considerable amount of data was collected and analysed, the chance to revisit the data from the perspective of the TLRP has enabled some additional insights to be developed.

# Learning over the life course

The focus group members' discussions revolved around the historical, social and cultural contexts of their lives, together with their experiences of learning during childhood, early adulthood and mid-life as well as during the post-work period. Four main themes emerged, relating to aspects of the life course and learning over time and these were followed up in the questionnaires and interviews. They were:

- a shared experience of disruption and change
- situational influences on access to education and learning over time
- institutional influences on education and learning
- varied individual influences on learning.

This multiplicity of influences over the collective and individual life course appears to operate in an inter-related but highly complex manner within a constantly changing and evolving social and cultural context. In addition, each individual is affected by situational, institutional and personal factors that influence the timing and circumstances of becoming post-work and the possibilities of subsequent involvement in learning.

This life course approach, although not without its methodological problems, enabled the older people in our study to begin to make their own links between different aspects of their life experiences and the changing social structure over the course of their lives.

Through descriptive analysis of questionnaire and interview data, we explored further the circumstances surrounding retirement decisions and their timing. Around 80 per cent of the non-participants who had been in the labour market had retired in what they considered to be generally favourable circumstances compared to only 64 per cent of the participants. They were more likely to have left the labour market due to redundancy or ill-health. It may be that retirement decisions which the retiree regards as adverse are an additional motivational factor in the decision to re-engage or continue learning after work. It may be that participation in formally organised learning comes in some way to represent a partial substitute for paid work, especially as it can offer some structure to the week.

We also noted the influence of individual and situational factors on learning in later life. Thus we found that three to ten years after retirement appears to be the optimum time for formal participation. Participants were more likely to have a retired partner, and to have access to a car or be able to use public transport easily. Levels of current caring responsibilities, and of support received to help with ill-health or disability, did not

differ significantly between the groups. But our interview data revealed that however predisposed to joining a course or class an individual may be, the ultimate decision to attend is often the result of word-of-mouth recommendation or, more importantly, being taken along by a relative or friend.

# 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 their courses. However, our data revealed that many of those whom we had designated non-participants had actually participated in the past or had thought about doing so in future, confirming a finding that being a non-learner is not a static status (Dench and Regan, 2000). In the interviews, 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 a course or class or considered they were too 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, often home-based, but also focused on learning from television programmes, reading and discussing books, voluntary work, visits to galleries and social activities. This was also true of those learning formally, but they were generally inclined to see this formally organised learning as more purposeful than learning undertaken on an informal basis. Supposed non-participants were much more likely to regard learning holistically and as an integral part of their daily activities, even if it was unintentional or unanticipated.

Evidence from the learning logs kept by nine older people for an average period of seven weeks confirmed the extent to which a great deal of later life learning takes place informally. Fewer than a third of the learning episodes reported took place in a formal learning environment. However, the logs also demonstrated that whilst some subjects such as computing are better studied formally with a teacher, others such as natural history lend themselves to informal learning. Interest in them is often sparked off through a television programme. Some subjects such as art or literature could be studied both formally and informally. This finding may be related to the nature of the topic or to older people's particular circumstances, or may be a reflection of individual learning style preferences.

Experiences of studying formally after retirement were generally favourable but there were some instances where course publicity had been misleading or when older learners found learning environments, the facilities available, the timing of the class or the teaching methods inappropriate.

## Definitions of learning and its outcomes

Sixty nine of the questionnaire respondents attempted the task of completing the sentence 'Learning is.....' A variety of definitions were offered, with over 40 per cent containing an explicit reference to gaining or increasing knowledge or developing skills. However, this was only part of the story. Overall, learning was also seen as a process that offered opportunities to become receptive to new ideas and to broaden one's horizons; or it was about achieving successful ageing and maintaining a positive outlook, as well as a way of understanding the modern world.

Certainly, perceived outcomes of engagement with learning in later life related to keeping an active brain through the acquisition of new knowledge together with enjoyment and a sense of self-satisfaction. Learning informally also helped people to maintain an interest in life. Overall, opportunities to continue learning in a range of different ways were seen as a vital and integral part of growing older. The comparative freedom offered by retirement and the ability to make choices about how daily lives were structured were important components of this.

## Major implications

Since our study was originally completed, the notion of lifelong learning has undergone something of a transition in more recent policy discourses at both EU and UK government levels. From the simple notion of a cradle-to-grave entitlement to education and learning, it has come to be seen both as a partial solution to concerns about the need to remain economically competitive in the global economy in the face of demographic trends, and as a way of promoting social inclusiveness and active citizenship. There is also a new emphasis on individual responsibility and social engagement as traditional notions of retirement gradually disappear (See Oancea, 2008).

In the UK, and in spite of government recognition of the value of adult learning, changes in funding mean that since 2005, a million adult learners are said to have been lost to publicly funded adult learning. The heaviest losses have been identified among the over-65 age group (see Aldridge and Tuckett, 2007). The government is currently consulting on the future of non-vocational adult education (what it terms 'informal learning' – a different definition from ours) and will report in 2009.

In view of these developments, our study represents a snapshot in time of the possible influences on older people's life course engagement with learning, how they interpret learning and the learning they choose to undertake in retirement. As subsequent cohorts grow older, their histories, beliefs and expectations may be very different; but our findings offer some ways forward in thinking about how later-life learning can be enhanced.

It is frequently stressed that older people are not a homogeneous group. Yet the different contextual and personal factors that have impacted on their lives, their experiences of learning over the life course and their individual motivations and aspirations in retirement are rarely taken into account when educational opportunities for older people are under discussion. Now that 'older people' tend to be defined as all those over 50 years of age, many of whom will continue working for much longer, our findings suggest that their very different experiences of education and beliefs about learning need to be considered more carefully in the design of teaching, learning and training programmes. This includes those that are specifically aimed at older

people and those intended for mixed age groups, whatever the setting. In particular, we found that people may drop in and out of learning according to their circumstances. Therefore publicity needs to be carefully designed so that potential learners know exactly what is on offer and at what level. Our findings also suggest that, rather than analysing the barriers that are said to militate against older people's participation, it would be better to concentrate on the factors that do encourage them to take part. These include recognition of the point in retirement when they are ready to try something new, and the importance of having a 'learning buddy' to accompany them to a course. This would also apply to peer-organised learning such as that provided by the University of the Third Age, although this mode of learning would not suit everyone.

Whatever their life course experiences, our findings also demonstrate the importance of informal learning in older people's lives even if they are already learning formally or plan to do so. As they grow older and perhaps more infirm, keeping an active brain through the processes of acquiring new knowledge or developing skills is highly valued as a way of coping with the world and the ageing process. Whether learning is self-organised or incidental, older people were found to make use of a variety of sources to follow up interests and hobbies to a greater extent than was previously realised.

However, we need a better understanding of the ways in which older people learn, whether and how they differ from those used by younger people and if so, how their learning could be enhanced. This is particularly important because older people could be given more formal encouragement to share their knowledge and skills with younger generations and to learn from them in return, as is currently proposed in Scotland. Such a move would help us to move towards a more inclusive society where all forms of learning are valued, older people are held in higher esteem for the contribution they make, and learning for everyone is truly acknowledged as a desirable lifelong process.

# Further information

For further information about this project please visit:  
<http://www.tlrp.org/projects%20sites/withnall/>

## Project publications are:

Withnall, A (forthcoming) *Improving Learning in Later Life*. London, Routledge,

Withnall, A (2006) Exploring influences on later life learning *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 25(1) 29-49

Withnall, A (2002) Reflections on lifelong learning and the Third Age in J. Field and M. Leicester eds *Lifelong Learning: Education Across the Lifespan*. London, Routledge Falmer, 289-299.

## References

Aldridge, F and Tuckett, A (2007) What older people learn. Leicester, NIACE

Dench, S and Regan, J (2000) Learning in Later Life: Motivation and Impact. *Research Report* 183, Department for Education and Employment

Oancea, A (2008) The promise of lifelong learning *Ageing Horizons* Issue No. 8 1-3

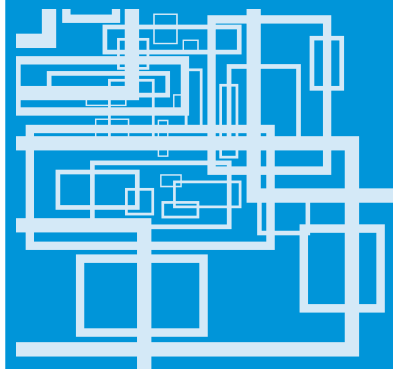
# The warrant

An important aspect of our study was to develop research strategies that would draw on a variety of different investigative techniques. In particular, we employed a team of seven older people as trained interviewers in order to maximise the involvement of those being studied. The research employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. Our findings are based on

- focus group discussions with ten groups of older people who were currently taking part in different types of formally organised learning activities in different contexts around the UK. From the outcomes of these discussions we constructed a model of life course influences on later life learning. This model was used to develop
- questionnaires completed by 77 older people, 38 of whom were currently involved in a formally organised learning activity and including a sentence completion task ('*Learning is...*') attempted by 69 respondents.
- To explore the findings of the quantitative study in more depth, 35 interviews were carried out with a sample of the respondents (21 'participants' and 14 'non-participants') by our trained team of seven older people. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Findings were triangulated against each other. A further nine respondents agreed to keep a learning log of all their learning activities over a period of two months.

The progress of the research was discussed at all stages with two project advisors working in the field of later life learning, with members of the Association for Education and Ageing and older people themselves via seminars and conferences and with other researchers within the Growing Older and TLRP Programmes.

# Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

**Learning:** TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

**Outcomes:** TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

**Lifecourse:** TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

**Enrichment:** TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

**Expertise:** TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

**Improvement:** TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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