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Older Adults' Motivation to Learn in Higher Education

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Keywords: older adults, motivation to learn, higher education, educational gerontology

Abstract: A limited amount of literature has discussed older adults in formal education, especially their motivations to learn in higher education. This study aims to understand older adults' learning in the context of higher education. Specifically, this study argues that higher education can function as a stimulating learning environment that helps older adults meet their late-life development needs and can lead them toward a meaningful and positive aging experience.

Introduction

The number of older adults is increasing dramatically around the world. The proportion of people age 60 and over is growing faster than any other age group (United Nations, 2010). Due to this trend, learning has become an important pathway to improve older adults' quality of life in many countries. Numerous studies show that older adults are increasingly engaged in both formal and informal educational programs (Danner, Danner, & Kuder, 1993; Pearce, 1991). Specifically, there has been a recent increase in the number of older adults enrolled in higher education. The data from American Council on Education show that half of the college-going adults age 50 and older attend community colleges, but only 33 percent of students under the age of 25 attend community colleges (American Council on Education [ACE], 2007, 2008).

However, with the increasing number of older adults entering higher education, a limited amount of literature has discussed older adults in formal education, especially older adults' motivation to learn in higher education (Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Little, 1995). Therefore, this study aims to understand older adults' learning in the context of higher education; specifically, what are older adults' motivations in the context of higher education and what are the difficulties they face in the university classroom. Most important, the researcher argued that higher education can function as a stimulating learning environment that helps older adults meet their late-life development needs and can lead them toward a meaningful and positive aging experience.

Psychosocial Development of Older Adults

Theories of adult development attempt to predict both changes and stability. Particularly, some theories of psychosocial development show the tendency of older adults' motivation is toward positive and growth. For example, Carl G. Jung (1933) stated that old age is the period when the elderly withdraw themselves from the outside world and focus on themselves. Additionally, he believed that people are meant to progress in a positive direction and not just adapt.

Of particular importance to this research is Erick Erickson's (1986) last two stages of adult development. Generativity is to concern for the next generation, going beyond love for

one's own children or grandchildren to a humble and caring desire for the next generation. Integrity reveals the need for older adults to find meaning in their existence and to make meaning of what they have done and are doing in their lives. Specifically, generativity helps people to achieve integrity, which is an experience that conveys some world order and spiritual sense (Erikson, Erickson, & Kivnick, 1994).

Additionally, Laura L. Carstensen's (1995) Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) provides the lens to understand the participation and motivation specifically of old-old adults and above. SST also suggests that generativity is one of the motivators for older adults which includes goals such as being or becoming a keeper of the meaning as well as taking responsibility for future generations (Lang & Carstensen, 2002)

Motives for Older Adult Learning in Higher Education

Motivation plays an important role in the adult learning process (Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Presently, much research in the field of educational gerontology has centered around this issue. Specifically, many studies showed that cognitive interest and a desire to learn are older adult learners' primary motivation to learn, whether in non-formal education (Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Scala, 1996) or formal education (mostly at the college level) (Jones, 2000; Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Villar, Triado, Pinazo, Celdran, & Sole, 2010). Also, O'Connor (1987) found that these motivations appear to be more important for older than for middle-aged students.

Furthermore, personal growth and satisfaction are also older adults' motivators for learning, with some studies finding these motivators particularly salient. Pourchot (1999) indicated that older adults' participation in higher education appears to be both a response to motivational needs toward personal development and a source and context for ongoing personal growth. Little (1995) found the functions of older adults seeking a degree in higher education including improvement of self esteem, reduction of some adverse effects of aging, facilitating a sense of caring and providing a new focus while grieving. Furthermore, Gram and Donaldson (1996) indicated that higher education experiences were a stimulus for a change in attitudes, values, and interests for older adults, and many of these changes had begun prior to entering school. Also, they argued that for adults, college attendance was often a continuation of and a response to a growth process that had already begun.

Additionally, social contact or other social interaction is an important motivation of older adult learners (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Mulenga and Liang (2008) reviewed the literature and indicated that older adults who chose to participate in traditional higher education settings where courses are highly structured and the majority of the students are between 19 to 25 years old reported that forming connections with younger students was of major importance in their participation. It is often expressed that associating with and learning from younger generations made them feel younger and gave them a sense of well-being.

Overall, most studies show that motivation for the tendency of older adult learners is toward intrinsic. Although there are few studies in exploring older adult learners in higher education but these few studies suggested that older adult learners show intrinsic motivation compared to young adult learners in higher education (O'Connor, 1987).

Difficulties Faced by Older Adults in Higher Education

Because of their special learning needs, older adult learners might encounter numerous barriers that could influence their motivation to learn. ACE (2008) indicated that older adult learners in higher education might have three types of barriers including demographic, attitudinal, and structural barriers. Demographic barriers relate to age itself including health, time, race and geography issues. Attitude barriers mean that the ageism can come from older adults themselves or other people. Older adults might have negative attitudes toward becoming active participants. Also, educators may possess stereotypes of older adults. These all can result in older adults' having challenges in higher education. Structural barriers, including lack of transportation, support services, and financing, often keep older adults from succeeding in higher education. Lack of funding is consistently cited as one of the top reasons why older adults don't pursue higher education.

Purpose and Design

The purpose of this study is to understand older adults' motivation to learn in higher education. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand what older adults' motivations are in the context of higher education and what difficulties they face in the university classroom. The methodology of this study is a qualitative study with an in-depth interview for collecting the data. The researcher interviewed three adults over 60 years old who are studying in a university campus with a semi-structured, open-response interview guide. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Patton, 2002).

Findings

The participants of this study are two male and one female older learners who are currently enrolled in graduate and undergraduate program. They ranged in age from 60 to 65 years of age.

Older Adults' Motivation to Learn in Higher Education

Desire for knowledge. Learning new knowledge and constructing knowledge are the important motivation to learn of older adults in this study. The participants in this study each mentioned this motivation. Sunny said when she thought about where she should go for learning new knowledge or a new language, university was her best option. Sometimes older adults want knowledge that is based on their prior experiences. Mack mentioned that he thinks of himself as a lifelong learner. Nothing excited him like learning and he loved to research and construct knowledge. John also spoke about being a lifelong learner. He stated that he learned the Turkish language, because he recently visited Turkey and now wanted to see if he could pick up or learn its language.

Desire for stimulation. Having the chance to exercise their mind is also one of the vital reasons that participants engaged in learning in higher education. Mack mentioned that learning in the classroom stimulated his mind so he could learn at a higher level. Additionally, the participants not only enjoyed the chance to exercise their brain but also the chance to gain a deeper understanding and sharpen what they had known or learned before. John's statement illustrates this perspective:

There may be other ways to sharpen one's mind such as an interesting hobby, or travel, or reading good books, but the university can sometimes provide a complete makeover in one's outlook. Old things from past learning may not get any sharper, but using previous learning as a base, a subconscious base, a person can develop further understanding and, to me, this is a sharpening, through learning.

Desire for self-fulfillment. Studying in higher education provided chances for self-actualization for the participants. Mack mentioned that he has wanted to obtain a doctorate since his 20s. Therefore, after supporting his parents through terminal illnesses, he decided to get education loans to finish his PhD degree. Also, John stated that although he has a PhD, he was employed outside of his field for many years. Now, by returning to his studies, he is able to plug in his new academic accomplishments into his employment mix, and the degree is once again relevant.

Desire for generativity. Being or becoming “a keeper of the meaning” as well as taking responsibility for future generations are also the motivations for participants studying in higher education. Sunny said the reason she entered university to learn was not to seek a higher position or another career, but to go to developing countries to teach students how to learn new concepts or new languages. Furthermore, Mack mentioned that he would like to teach at the post-secondary level in the future. He further explained that when he is teaching, “I feel like I am passing on to others. I have learned for my own mentoring and I should be sharing with others. I feel self-esteem and doing good to provide service to others.” These also showed that this position provides feelings of integrity for older adult learners.

Learning as a transition. Studying in higher education provided participants the chance to transition to another life or career Mack mentioned that he decided to leave the corporate world and teach in higher education. Additionally, he knew that colleges would require mostly doctorates to do so. Therefore, he decided to pursue PhD degree. Furthermore, John mentioned that he still sees his useful horizon in the workplace extending for at least another 10 years and that he would like to transition from his current job. John mentioned that his studying in higher is also to seek to begin another career after he retires from teaching school.

Difficulties Faced by Older Adults in Higher Education

Demographic barriers. All the participants expressed demographic barriers to learning and their studies, which resulted from age. Issues around memory are the main barrier that participants experienced. John described that the largest challenge for him is slow rate of moving information to his long term memory. Sunny mentioned that motivation, energy and memory capabilities become her worst enemy. Additionally, lack of time was a demographic barrier that the participants mentioned; the participants were all working while studying in higher education. Sunny stated that she was a part time tutor at an elementary school and took the job very seriously. She felt that she did not have enough time to prepare for her own school work and

needed to schedule time for her course work. John said that he needed to have more flexibility in his job and that in order to finish the school work, he needed more time.

Attitude barriers. Age bias existed for participants themselves and others when they were studying. John stated that his language teacher was 22 years old, and her bias was very apparent in the beginning. He believed this experience had been an unfortunate aspect in his studies. Mack mentioned that his learning environment did not respect adult students enough and this influenced his learning and outcomes.

Structures barriers. Courses that were too structured were a barrier for participants. Mack mentioned that although he appreciated that courses were organized and very structured in his study, the inflexibility made him exhausted. Sunny also mentioned that too many courses made her tired enough to lose some motivation.

Discussion and Implications

Increasingly older adults are entering higher education to learn. Therefore, the reasons that this age group seeks higher education and the challenges they face doing so are an important current topic.

This study examines three older adult learners who are engaged in studying in higher education. Similar to the suggestions raised by the literature, older adult learners desire to learn. Findings suggest that the motivation of older adults learners in higher education are a desire for knowledge, a desire for stimulation, a desire for self-fulfillment, a desire for generativity, and learning as a transition. These motivations fit with older adults' development. Therefore, this study suggested that higher education can function as a stimulating learning environment that helps older adults meet their late-life development needs and can lead them toward a meaningful and positive aging experience.

Additionally, this study found that older adult learners in higher education face some barriers that influence their leaning. For example, demographic barriers such as memory decline, lack of time; attitude barriers, specifically ageism by older adults themselves or by others. Structural barriers such as required course load and inflexible course schedules also influenced their learning.

Implications to adult education are that increasingly older adults engage in higher levels of educational activities for self improvement. It is important to design various programs to meet their needs. The data have policy implications; for example, two participants articulated that a free tuition policy facilitated enrollment. Overall, university administrators and educators need to understand older adults' motivation to learn, and the age-related changes that affect their learning. This could result in flexible scheduling and establishing an ageism-free environment for older adult learners.

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