Older People and Lifelong Learning: Choices and Experiences

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Full Report of Research Activities and Results

Background

This research project in which we investigated older people’s choices about, and experiences of lifelong learning and how these relate to their lives, is one of 24 projects funded under the ESRC Growing Older: Extending Quality Life Programme (2000-3). It was grouped with two other projects under the theme of Participation and Activity.

Policy issues

The impetus for our study came, initially, from an examination of a range of major policy reports relevant to the development of lifelong learning in the UK (Kennedy, 1997; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Fryer, 1997). Within all three documents, it was striking that a strong priority was accorded to vocational education and training in spite of some general rhetoric about the non-economic, personal and social benefits of lifelong learning (Tight, 1998). The Green Paper The Learning Age – a renaissance for a new Britain (DfEE, 1998) was also subsequently criticised for its emphasis on the economically active and its lack of any coherent philosophy of lifelong learning (Cole, 2000). In addition, although there was a brief mention of the supposed benefits of learning for older people within the White Paper Learning to Succeed (DfEE, 1999) which set out the Labour government’s plans for the re-organisation of post-16 education, it did appear that older people who are ‘post-work’ in the sense that they are no longer primarily involved in earning a living or with major responsibilities for raising a family were generally excluded from educational debate. They were largely marginalized in educational policy circles by emphasis on economic imperatives alongside continuing concerns about the financial support of an ageing population, which, although of major importance, tend to conceptualise later life as a social problem.

Theoretical and philosophical issues

A further impetus for the research came from a critical review of the admittedly limited number of attempts that have attempted to address theoretical and philosophical issues in relation to older people’s educational activities. This literature review has now been expanded and published as an integral part of our study (Withnall, 2000). It was apparent that existing theory is located largely within a functionalist paradigm and derives mainly from sociological theories of role change and from activity theory. There is an underlying assumption that older people must deal with role loss and adjustment to role change post-work. Learning and educational activity are seen as contributing to this process and to a good quality of life through assuring good health, well-being and personal satisfaction in later life – that is, a sense of “successful ageing”. In practice, this approach has been translated into a concern with older people’s participation and non-participation in formally organised educational activities together with discussion of appropriate provision (Schuller and Bostyn, 1992; Carlton and Soulsby, 1999) and attempts to assess the impact of learning on health status (Dench and Regan, 2000).
Although there is now some emerging medical and neurological evidence concerning the beneficial effects of continued mental stimulation in later life (e.g., Khaw, 1997; Kotulak, 1997), other published work is underpinned by a moral emphasis on older people’s rights to have access to educational opportunities, derived from notions of the relative deprivation and structured dependency of cohorts of people in later life (Elmore, 1999). There has been little consideration of the learning undertaken by older people on an informal or self-directed basis although Schuller and Bostyn (1992) tried to address this issue in their work for the Carnegie Inquiry into the Third Age. Indeed, there was little attempt in the literature as a whole to distinguish between concepts of ‘education’ and ‘learning’ in relation to older people.

We concluded that none of the existing theories or philosophies of education or learning in later life dealt adequately with the impact of the social structure nor with the historical and cultural contexts in which people grow up and grow older. Some attempts at redressing this omission have been made by Glendenning (1997; 2000) in his attempt to develop a critical gerontology linked to the study of education and older adults; our research offered an opportunity to explore the issues he raises but we subsequently challenged his position by moving from a focus on ‘education’ to ‘learning’ in later life.

Objectives

Within the overall framework of the Growing Older Programme, our study had five principal objectives:

**Firstly**, we wanted to move away from a simple conceptualisation of lifelong learning as ‘cradle-to-grave’ provision that nevertheless privileges vocational education and training. We aimed to develop a new theoretical perspective on lifelong learning that would be located more appropriately in a post-modern social reality (Cole, 2000). Accordingly, we adopted an inclusive perspective in which all kinds of learning have validity at any age and in which learning is located in a range of social and cultural practices. We have shown that lifelong learning needs to be understood within the context of the life course and the different influences that may impact on people’s learning activity at different times. In achieving this objective (see Results section), we have been aware of the changing context in which debates concerning the nature of lifelong learning have emerged together with other social policy debates and developments in relation to our ageing population over the period in which our study has been carried out.

**Secondly**, we aimed to formulate and to test a conceptual model of the reasons for, and pathways to, involvement in learning activity of all kinds, in later life. In adopting a life course approach to this stage of the research we wanted to understand older people’s experiences as learners, past and present opportunities, experiences and situational constraints together with the influence of different contexts and discourses over the life course. Our model offers a useful perspective on the factors that might influence older people to continue or to take up learning activity at any stage of their post-work lives (see Results section). Using a life course approach has also provided a way of investigating the relationship between learning undertaken in a range of different contexts and encouraged reflection on learning that was unintentional or unanticipated. However, we became aware that the adoption of a life course approach poses considerable methodological problems. For example, we could not completely unravel the very complex interplay of individual characteristics and personality factors and the variety of individual and collective experiences over a lifetime combined with
possible genetic and environmental influences on the processes of growing up and growing older (Bergeman, 1997) that a holistic life course analysis would properly require.

**Thirdly**, central to our study and to the Programme as a whole, we tried to assess any outcomes that involvement in learning activities of any kind might have for the quality of older people’s lives. Here, we have been able to collect rich qualitative data on how older people understand learning, its place in these older people’s lives, the values they ascribe to it and the possible obstacles to learning some older people may encounter at different times. Our main findings are briefly summarised.

**Fourthly**, an important aspect of the study was to develop research strategies that would draw on a variety of research techniques and also integrate both older people and us, as researchers, into the research process. From the outset, we adopted a reflexive approach that acknowledged our own ages (grant holder, fifties; contract researcher, twenties) and the possible impact on our initial stance, our interpretation of findings and changing perspectives as the study unfolded. We also explored the use of older people themselves as interviewers in order to maximise opportunities for involvement of the population being studied. Unfortunately, unavoidable disruption to our timetable as the result of joint transfer to a new institution together with the grant holder’s subsequent move to another new post in the second year of the research meant that we had insufficient time to prepare summary reports of interviews for questionnaire respondents, interviewees and selected user groups as we had originally intended although we did achieve this in relation to focus group participants and found it a useful way to check on our own interpretations of what we had heard (see Methods section). However, we received written field notes from interviewers and informal written and verbal feedback from some of the research participants and from our transcriber, herself nearing retirement, to the effect that our questions have stimulated intensive debate and discussion in their learning groups and/or with family members and friends plus an encouragement in some cases, to explore new learning opportunities. We will keep in touch with participants and other research users through our Project Consultants (see Methods) to invite *post hoc* reflective comment.

**Fifthly**, we have kept in mind our aim of influencing national and local lifelong learning policy formulation, implementation and practice together with systematic dissemination of research findings to (a) potential research users through various presentations and publications and to (b) relevant interest groups through regular reporting (see Outputs and Impact sections).

**Methods**

Our research was conducted in two main phases involving five overlapping stages, each designed to build on the others. We made use of a range of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to explore the backgrounds and circumstances of respondents and to try to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of their involvement in learning. At all stages, we also drew on the expertise of two Project Consultants both of whom were involved with older learners on a day-to-day basis. Our methods were primarily designed to establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships with all participants in the research process at every stage although, as explained above, this was not achieved to the extent we intended because of slippage in the original timetable. However, at each stage, we discussed our findings and our interpretations of them with each other from our individual perspectives. In
analysing our qualitative data, we made a decision at the outset not to use computer packages for data analysis since we felt that these mainly facilitate the organisation and management of data rather than allowing the researchers’ interpretations to be paramount. All stages of the research were informed by the professional Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles and Guidelines produced by the British Psychological Society (1997).

**Data collection and analysis**

**Phase 1 (Stage 1)** In the initial stage of the research, we decided to use focus group discussions with groups of older people who were taking part in formally organised learning activities. Although there have been few focus group studies with older people to date, we felt that this would be the most appropriate method for exploring the characteristics of older learners’ involvement in learning activities over the life course, their shared perceptions of the historical and social contexts of their lives and current forms of involvement in learning. We made use of the Mapping Tool produced by the UK Secretariat for the International Year of Older Persons (Soulsby, 2000) as a sampling frame and approached a range of organisations in each category offering formally organised learning activities specifically for older people until we had the agreement of 10 groups with the widest possible geographical spread (England, Scotland, Wales) and representing a whole variety of activities including those organised by older people themselves. One group was composed entirely of ethnic minority members and one was based within a residential home. As an experiment, an attempt was also made to host a focus group discussion with members of an e-organisation for older people via the internet but this proved unsuccessful. We concluded that possible participants did not yet feel sufficiently confident to discuss personal histories in on-line debate. In finding groups of learners prepared to participate, we were also made very aware of the role of ‘gatekeepers’, sometimes younger professionals who displayed a particularly protective concern with regard to the older people in their organisations.

In preparing for the discussions, we made use of the guidelines suggested by Quine (1998). In total, 98 older people participated in the 10 focus group discussions. Group size ranged from 5 to 22 participants with a mean of 9. Although gender ratios were not recorded for the largest group, within the remaining 9 groups, 70% of participants were female and 30% were male. Each discussion lasted for an average of 2 hours and followed a standard discussion schedule although other topics raised by participants were noted. Discussions were recorded in a set of detailed field notes accompanied by our own observations. The field notes were used to produce individual focus group summary reports; participants were asked to validate that we had fairly reported and accurately identified the main issues raised in their focus group discussion prior to detailed analysis. Comments received were incorporated into a new version of the summaries in two cases.

Aware of the complexities of analysing focus group data, we used a systematic approach to uncovering themes from the discussions (Frankland and Bloor, 1999), taking the context in which each group discussion took place and the composition of the group into account. In interpreting the data, however, we also referred to our own observational field notes relating to any sensitive topics raised, how these were addressed and the language used by participants.

**Stage 2** From analysis of focus group discussions, we produced a conceptual model of the pathways to, and influences on older adults’ learning activities (see Results section).
Phase II (Stage 3) In order to test the model, we constructed a substantial 7-section, 97-item questionnaire based on the main themes uncovered through analysis of the focus group discussions and designed to gather more information about older people’s experiences both of education and of learning throughout their lives including any current learning activity whether formal or informal. The questionnaire allowed for some open comment and respondents’ own definitions of ‘learning’ were sought through use of a sentence completion task – “Learning is……” The questionnaire was piloted with two older people known personally to us and some questions re-worded according to their comments.

For this part of the research, we contacted a further 10 organisations offering formally organised learning opportunities specifically for older people using the same sampling frame. We planned to systematically recruit 5 older learners from each organisation (‘participants’) and to ask them to nominate another older person they knew who was not currently participating in organised learning (‘non-participants’). This would give us 100 potential respondents and we felt that this snowballing technique was acceptable in a largely exploratory project. Those who agreed to take part were also to be asked to participate further in one of two follow-up activities ie. to take part in an informal interview or to keep a learning log for a 3-month period - or to do nothing further. However, this method of recruitment did not prove particularly successful. Feedback from potential host organisations suggested that, whilst there was considerable interest in the project, many potential respondents were unable to nominate a ‘non-participant’ or found uncertainty about which activity they would be asked to take part in a barrier.

In the event, we retained the 19 people who were interested in taking part with their ‘partners’ and then made further attempts to recruit people from a number of new host organisations in which educational/social activity was the main focus, partly with the help the team of older interviewers (see Stage 4a). This stage took considerably longer than had been anticipated but we were eventually successful in having 80 mailed questionnaires returned (80%) from locations across the UK. The questionnaire responses were coded and the data entered into SPSS for analysis. Of those willing to participate in the study further, 35 were randomly selected to take part in an interview (see below) and 20 asked to keep a learning log.

Stage 4a) In tandem with early attempts to recruit Stage 3 respondents, we also sought to employ a team of 10 older people who we proposed to train to carry out follow-up informal interviews designed to investigate some of the issues raised in the questionnaire responses in more detail. We also wanted to obtain a wider picture of the here-and-now by exploring how older people describe their lives post-work and their experiences of learning (see Objectives section, above). Potential interviewers were reached through personal contact, through press publicity in the early stages of the research and with the help of the Project Consultants. We did manage to recruit 8 older people although one subsequently withdrew due to a spousal bereavement. Because of the emerging complexities of providing face-to-face training to such a widely scattered team, we prepared a comprehensive training booklet for interviewers to study at home. We were also available to answer any queries and provide any additional support throughout. Interviewers were provided with 2 semi-structured interview schedules - one for those who reported current involvement in organised learning activity and one for those not so involved - although interviewers were encouraged to follow up any other topics mentioned by interviewees. They were asked to complete a field note form immediately after each interview detailing their impressions of how the interview had gone and as an aid to discovering themes and patterns.
Stage 4 b) It still did not prove possible to recruit exact ‘pairs’ of potential interviewees so that, finally, 35 interviews were conducted with 21 people who were currently participating in some form of formal learning activity (Ps) together with 14 ‘non-participants’ (NPs). Each interviewer conducted 5 interviews in locations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed with interviewees’ permission and the transcriber also completed a brief questionnaire on her interpretation and reactions. Interview transcripts were analysed manually using the general guidelines for discovery of themes outlined by Luborsky (1994) and incorporating the interviewers’ field notes to help us understand the context in which the interview took place. Account was also taken of particular topics and concerns raised during discussions and of the strength and impact of a particular issue on an interviewee’s life.

Stage 4 c) We also designed a simple learning log designed to record older people’s involvement and experiences of both formal and informal learning activity, as defined by older people themselves, over a 3-month period. 9 further questionnaire respondents (out of 20 approached) completed this admittedly somewhat difficult exercise. The learning logs were analysed to identify the amount and types of learning activity these older people reported undertaking.

Stage 5 For the final stage, of which this Report is a part, we have assembled all our material in order to reflect on our overall findings and to provide an account of carrying out the research. We will invite comment from selected research users on our main findings as part of our continuing dissemination procedures.

Results

For brevity, we have concentrated here on identifying the main themes and topics that emerged at each stage and which have most relevance for our research objectives bearing in mind that this was largely an exploratory study.

Phase 1, Stage 1: Focus group discussions The ten focus groups (see Methods section, above) discussed the historical and social contexts of their lives and the changes through which they had lived together with their experiences of learning during childhood, in adulthood and mid-life and post-work. They also compared these experiences with what they perceived to be current educational practices. Although acknowledging that historical events would have been experienced differently according to their different ages, the groups collectively identified a range of what they saw as important issues. We have prepared a comprehensive analysis of each topic discussed together with our own observations; here, we briefly summarise the themes that emerged.

Firstly, the groups identified the importance of the social and cultural environment and the various changes they had experienced during their lives. The Second World War (and its aftermath) was seen as the most important event that had set changes in motion. However, structural changes in society – the family, the economic position of women together with changing concepts of childhood – were considered at length together with observations about changes in the workplace and the current lack of security in employment. The groups further commented on the growth of technology and the increase in the amount and nature of information available as well as commenting that life these days has become more materialistic with the pressures of consumerism. Throughout these discussions, there was a
sense of continual structural and operational change in society and the necessity of keeping abreast of this.

Secondly, an emergent theme related to situational experiences, both collective and individual, that impinged on group members’ educational experiences at all stages of their lives. For example, the Second World War was viewed both negatively as having disrupted some people’s education and positively in the sense of having opened up a range of new opportunities for others. However, groups also traced a more recent sense of growing uncertainty and an ability to control events that affected people’s lives on a daily basis so that situational changes were seen as operating within the broader context of social and cultural change. Closely related to the above, groups put considerable emphasis on the situational influence of family expectations and individual life events on their educational and learning experiences, both formally organised and informal. These were seen as intertwined with issues of gender, race and perceived class, for example: “Boys, to be educated......girls, marriage or work” although several female group members had gone on to carve out professional careers for themselves in adulthood, sometimes through necessity.

Thirdly, groups discussed at length the influence on their education and learning of the various institutions with which they had been associated – not just in compulsory education but the opportunities that had come their way through, for example, national service or in the workplace, especially if there was an expectation that employees would undertake training of some kind or where continuing professional development was a requirement. It was recognised that these institutions were themselves products of a changing social context.

Fourthly, and related to individual circumstances, the timing of becoming post-work and the reasons for it appeared to be an important factor in being amenable to continuing or taking up learning in later life. It was noticeable that many of the different group members participated in a whole range of formally organised learning activities run by a variety of different organisations often offering new interests. The phrase “indulgent learning” used by one group sums up how self-chosen learning in later life was seen to differ from the compulsory learning undertaken in earlier life which is frequently prescribed by others. Nevertheless, it was generally considered that people who are involved in formal learning post-work also exhibit certain personality traits - “determination”, “guts”, “courage” and “have an inquisitive and alert mind.” Some groups discussed structural and situational barriers that prevented many older people from participating but there was a very strong condemnation of those who made little effort to do so.

Finally, a whole range of positive outcomes of later life learning was mentioned and these were explored in more detail in Phase II.

**Phase I, Stage 2** Based on the outcomes of the focus group discussions, Appendix I provides a graphic representation of a conceptual model of the pathways to and influences on learning post-work. Here we have used the notion of time to try to “construct bridges between biography and the social structure” (Blakie, 1999). We show how the multiplicity of influences on the collective and individual life course operate in a complex and inter-related manner within a continually changing social and cultural context and how the individual is bound by situational influences to affect both the timing of becoming post-work and the likelihood of becoming involved in learning activity post-work. However, as previously
discussed, we became aware of the many complexities to be considered when adopting a life course approach (see Objectives above).

Phase II, Stage 3 Questionnaires explored some of the issues raised in the focus groups and aimed to test the model (See Methods section above). Of our questionnaire respondents, 38 (47.5%) were involved in some form of organised learning activity at the time they completed the questionnaire (Ps) and 42 (52.5%) were not so involved (NPs). However, most of the latter subsequently proved to be learning in other ways or had participated in the past or were intending to do so at some future date, confirming a recent finding that being a non-learner is not necessarily a static status (Dench and Regan, 2000). There was a 2:3 male/female ratio with the majority of respondents aged between 70-79 with 25% over the age of 80.

A considerable amount of data was collected at this stage of the study and through a focus on respondents’ experiences of learning in childhood, adulthood and mid-life and post-work, we were able to confirm the validity of our model. In particular, we noted that, for Ps, overall formal educational attainment (respondents and their siblings) was higher than among 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 a 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% of Ps had engaged in some kind of learning activity as opposed to 76% 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 the experience of paid employment in mid-life is a key issue in taking up or continuing to learn for women in later life. 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).

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% of Ps but only 11% 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 – 3 to 10 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 learning opportunities. On average, each P was engaged in 6 hours of organised learning activity per week and 71% reported spending up to £5 per week on this. 65% of them were also engaged in identifiable informal learning activity compared with 33% of NPs and 54% 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.
Finally, 69 respondents completed the sentence “learning is ……” Five main themes were identified, the first being, as expected, that learning equates to the acquisition of knowledge/wisdom. Secondly, learning was seen to relate to the different ways in which it can take place and thirdly, that it ensured social inclusion and made for successful living. Fourthly, other respondents adopted the view that learning is a way of understanding change in the modern world and keeping up. Finally, a minority discussed the therapeutic value of learning as a way of ensuring good health. These definitions reflect some of the issues raised earlier within the focus groups but it is noticeable that some of the definitions were expressed mainly in terms of perceived individual outcomes.

**Phase II, Stage 4a)** The next part of the study was the series of in-depth interviews with selected questionnaire respondents (See **Stage 4b**). As part of our study, we examined the interview team’s individual perceptions of each interview they carried out. Some interviewers chose to discuss this in terms of an evaluation of the structural elements or context of the interviews, drawing out how well the questions had flowed and had enabled probing of particular topics when an interviewee was not forthcoming. However, 60% of the responses fell into two broad categories – those where the interviewer reflected on interviewees’ lives and/or their outlook on life in general and those in which some aspect of learning was seen as the most significant element of the interview. In addition, the transcriber commented on how the interviews were carried out from her point of view and offered some useful additional pointers for improving interviewers’ listening skills. All the observations will be incorporated into any new interviewer-training document developed.

Overall, we felt that interview team members carried out their duties very effectively and engaged with interviewees at a level that may not have been achieved by younger interviewers.

**Phase II, Stage 4b)** The focus of the interviews was on the context of interviewees’ daily lives now and their current experiences and perceptions of learning. The main finding from both groups was that they particularly valued the freedom offered by retirement and the ability to make most of the choices about how their daily lives were structured. Ps were particularly content with the quality of their lives and few wished to change anything. For both groups, any concerns related largely to their health or that of close relatives or, understandably, continuing sadness at the loss of a spouse. However, whatever their circumstances, all interviewees described busy and active lives in which family, friends, “getting out and about” to take part in a very wide range of different types of activities featured prominently. Obviously, for Ps, these included regular times to attend their chosen learning activities usually at a local FE college or learning centre. For many of them, these were the result of a long-standing interest but it was noticeable that 10 had actually come to participate initially though word of mouth or through being taken along by a friend rather than actively seeking out opportunities. This suggests that, for some older people, an extra ‘push’ is required even if they are committed to formal learning as a result of life course experiences. Half were satisfied with the activity they attended but others would like to effect various changes, mainly in the way learning was offered but also including becoming more self-motivated! Outcomes of learning included self-satisfaction, keeping the brain active, intellectual stimulation, pleasure and enjoyment with the acquisition of new knowledge being least important. These perceived outcomes largely reflect those identified by the focus groups and in other recent studies (eg Dench and Regan, 2000) but are slightly different from the outcome-related definitions of learning given by other questionnaire respondents in that they
relate more to personal rather than general perceptions. In addition, 13 of the Ps felt that learning was ‘very important’ or ‘important’ to their lives and others responded with examples of its place in their lives with only one respondent feeling learning was not important to them.

The other main finding was that these NPs did not see themselves as non-learners and that categories of ‘participant’ or ‘non-participant’ frequently ascribed to adults by educationalists are largely meaningless to these older people. Whilst most felt no current need to take part in organised learning activity or considered themselves too old or infirm to do so, many related a whole variety of activities they undertook naming specific interests, self-directed and family learning, types of radio and TV programmes enjoyed, especially quizzes and documentaries, reading and discussing books and newspapers, voluntary work and social activities. This was also true of the Ps but whilst 6 of this group thought that social activities could promote learning in some way, 8 considered that learning activities were specifically different from social activities in that learning was more purposeful. NPs were much more likely to see learning as an integral part of their overall daily activities, sometimes unintentional or unanticipated and indeed, not always recognised as learning until our question encouraged reflection on the topic.

Phase II, Stage 4c) Several of the learning logs were returned incomplete and contained data relating to a period of from 4 weeks to 8-9 weeks (2 months) of learning activity. In total, 63 weeks of activity were recorded (mean=7 weeks) and 274 examples of learning activity were logged. We have constructed a grid to illustrate this in detail. Analysis confirmed the extent to which later life learning takes place informally since less than a third of the learning reported in the logs took place in a formal learning environment. The logs also served to highlight the diverse ways in which older people continue to engage in learning activities and the variety of topics in which they are interested. It was further demonstrated that some subject areas, such as art and literature, are approached both formally and informally. Other topics, such as computing, are studied exclusively as a formal activity whilst natural history, for example, lends itself to informal learning mainly through television. This finding may be related to older people’s particular circumstances or, to some extent, it may also be a reflection of their varied learning style preferences.

Stage 5 We have been intrigued by the various themes that have emerged from each stage of the research notably the historical and social context of older learners’ lives and the impact on later life learning decisions, their perceptions of what constitutes learning, the considerable quantity of informal learning they appear to undertake in later life and the place of learning in helping to ensure a good quality of life through intellectual stimulation and enjoyment. We intend to elaborate on each stage in subsequent publications and in the light of reflective comment from participants and research users. However, a preliminary recommendation is that providers of learning opportunities for older people (including those older people who devise activities for their peers) might want to consider whether a wider range of opportunities could be offered through informal means in order to acknowledge older people’s circumstances and learning preferences and to widen choice and to stimulate interest.

Activities

As the project forms part of the ESRC Growing Older: Extending Quality Life Programme, we have attended regular GO Programme meetings to share information about progress with
the Director and other research project teams. We have been allocated a policy link contact at the DfES and have kept the Department informed of progress primarily through meetings of the NIACE Older and Bolder Advisory Group. The grant holder also made a presentation on findings to members of the Department of Work and Pensions in June 2002.

The grant holder has given refereed papers on different aspects of the research at the Sixth Conference of the International Federation on Ageing, Mar del Plata, Argentina (September 2000); the 17th Congress of the International Association of Gerontology, Vancouver, Canada (July 2001) contributing both to a GO Symposium and to an invitation International Symposium on Third Age Education; British Society of Gerontology Annual Conference, University of Stirling (September 2001); and the Annual Conference of the Association for Education and Ageing held in conjunction with the Institute of Health, University of Warwick (September 2002).

Outputs

Publications to date that have resulted from the research have been entered into the REGARD database but a particularly important output was developed from an invitation from the Open University to produce a paper for a Global Internet Colloquium, Supporting Lifelong Learning, June-October 2000 and a preliminary UK meeting held at the University of East London in July 2000. The paper produced, Older Learners: Issues and Perspectives triggered an international discussion over the internet and has been retained as a reading for the Open University’s MA in Lifelong Learning via distance learning. In addition, the grant holder has contributed to regular GO Newsletter, has been interviewed by Radio Stoke and has written press releases for local newspapers. Brief research updates have been published in the members’ Digest produced by the Association for Education and Ageing and oral reports given to members of the ‘Older and Bolder’ development project advisory board. It is intended to produce further papers for peer-reviewed journals in both gerontology and adult education.

All the supporting materials as outlined in the original grant proposal have been offered to Qualidata with the exception of the questionnaire data and interview tapes and transcripts. In accordance with informed consent procedures, permission was not granted from 75% of respondents with respect to these data.

Impacts

Some of the theoretical implications of our study have already been addressed in a peer-reviewed academic journal paper by Glendenning (2001), a leading educational gerontologist, who has come to endorse our arguments. We expect that future publications will continue to stimulate debate at both national and international level.

Growing interest in later life learning has led to invitations to the grant holder to speak at practitioners Seminars organised by the Pre-Retirement Association (London, June 2000) and the Scottish Research Forum on Ageing (Edinburgh, December 2000). She also gave the opening lecture to an accredited course in educational gerontology for social work practitioners in the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Granada, Spain (January 2001). As a result of the internet paper (above), she has been contacted by individual researchers and practitioners working in similar fields in Denmark, Japan and Australia. She
has also been asked by NIACE to co-produce a practitioner guide on how older people learn commissioned by the DfES. This will be presented to the DfES in February 2003.

We have been asked to share our experiences of the use of older people as peer interviewers by researchers at the University of Lancaster who are carrying out research into older people’s housing decisions managed jointly by the University and Counsel and Care (Leamy and Clough, 2001)

**Future Research Priorities**

Within this exploratory study, we have become aware that older people are keen to have their learning acknowledged and that it is possible to engage them in reflection on the learning paths they have followed over the life course and the influences on it. We have also explored the use of participatory research methods on a small scale. However, in the course of the study, we became aware of the paucity of research findings as to how older people learn in different contexts especially when they are involved in acquiring new knowledge or developing new skills. This is the topic of a proposed new research bid which has been short-listed under the ESRC Teaching and Learning Phase III Programme and which will incorporate further exploration of the use of participatory methods as its contribution to research capacity building.

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