PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMS BY OLDER ADULTS

by Lisa Ostiguy, Robert Hopp and Richard MacNeil

Why do older adults participate in certain lifelong learning programs and not in others? What reasons and variables influence participation? What are the barriers to educational involvement? In this article, authors Lisa Ostiguy, Robert Hopp and Richard MacNeil attempt to answer these questions as they examine studies on lifelong learning from around the world.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in concern on the part of educators with regard to the profound demographic shift that continues to occur during the twentieth century. This shift involves the dramatic increase in the number of older adults in North America. Older adults are the fastest growing age group in developed nations.

The increasing older adult population raises at least two issues which have direct impact upon educational planning. One issue concerns funding for education. As the number of retired older adults increases, there is a corresponding decrease in the number of working adults contributing to the tax base needed to fund educational opportunities. A second issue is that the demand for services is rapidly increasing as more and more older adults, freed from the responsibilities of full-time employment, are enrolling in educational programs (U.S. News, April, 1992). This is reflected in the increased numbers of older adults who are enrolling in degree programs, as well as adult and continuing education programs (Romaniuk and Romaniuk, 1982).

Paralleling the growth in numbers of older adults is a greater acceptance of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning embraces the concept of education free from age parameters. As described by the National Advisory Council on Aging (NACOA) in Canada, lifelong learning is: "Learning that occurs from infancy to old age, in
settings including the workplace, classroom, community centres and the home. It can be sparked by curiosity, life transitions or situational demands" (1980).

Access to Education

Lifelong access to education is increasingly accepted as both a right and a necessity in our society. Research indicates that older adults want and need educational opportunities, and benefit from participation. While education may not be a new concept for the older adult, policy makers have just begun to make conscious attempts to design educational experiences that have the needs and interests of older adult learners in mind.

Much research has been conducted on the motivations of older students (Brady and Fowler, 1988; Knowlton, 1977; Moody, 1976), their specific needs and learning styles, their learning outcomes (Cross, 1981; Morstain and Smart, 1974), barriers to education (Romaniuk, 1984) and their participation in nonacademic programs (Searle, 1987). Considering the data provided by these studies is essential for developing quality opportunities for older adults.

Providing meaningful educational experiences for older adults presents a major challenge for educators and programmers. The importance of lifelong learning to education cannot be overstated, yet the information

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on older adults as a community of learners is limited. Education providers will need to become more knowledgeable about why older learners choose to participate in order to meet the varied educational needs of an older adult population.

Why do older adults participate in certain lifelong learning programs and not in others? What reasons influence participation? What variables influence participation? What are the barriers to educational involvement? Questions such as these form the framework for this article.

**Reasons for Participation**

Many studies have examined the reasons for older adults' participation in learning programs. Tobias (1991) examined reasons given by older adults in New Zealand for undertaking formal learning. The most important reason given by those over the age of sixty was that it gave them an interest outside the home; they also cited learning more about a special interest and making a contribution to the community.

Investigations of reasons for participation in Elderhostel programs in Canada and in the United States found that intellectual stimulation and acquiring new knowledge proved to be most important. Other important reasons included meeting new people, the opportunity to socialize, and the opportunity to travel. These results were supported by Knowlton (1977), and Romaniuk and Romaniuk (1982).

Several other studies have been carried out to determine the reasons for older adult participation (Perkins and Robertson-Tchabo, 1981; Boshier and Ridell, 1978; Daniel, Templin and Shearon, 1977). These studies found that older adults seem to prefer educational activities related to sociocultural activities and to improving new skills.

**Variables Affecting Participation**

Numerous studies report different variables that influence participation in educational programs by older
adults. When planning lifelong learning opportunities for older adults, it is important to consider variables that may influence participation, including age, gender, educational background, health and life satisfaction.

Several studies have reported a decrease in overall participation in activities as people age (Heisel, 1981; Thorntaon and Collins, 1986). Others have noted that older adults participate in fewer activities (Singleton, 1984; McPherson, 1982). To the contrary, Peppers (1976) and Swindell (1990) reported an increase in people’s activity patterns when they retire. These conflicting results on studies related to age make it difficult to generalize results into practical terms for older adults. However, most studies show that participation in educational programs decreases after age seventy-five.

Peterson (1983) cited various studies, which indicated that no generalization can be made about the gender of participants in educational programs for older learners. Yet, few studies have examined gender differences of older adult learners. Author Ostiguy, in a 1993 study of Elderhostel participants, found significant differences between men and women with regard to their reasons for attending programs. Personal interest and motivation to improve oneself were the most important reasons for older women, whereas job-related courses, new skills, and hobbies were more important to older men.

In terms of frequency of participation, there is a tendency for women to participate in education more often than men. This conflicts with the earlier studies by Palmore (1968) and Swindell (1990), who found that men participated more frequently than women.

The link between educational attainment and social status is documented in the literature (Havinghurst, 1976). Covey (1980) suggested that because better-educated older adults are more familiar with the student role, the transition to the student role after the age of sixty is a continuation of life patterns.

Romaniuk (1984) found that previous education generally is one of the strongest predictors of interest and participation in learning in retirement programs. While
the effect of educational level on participation patterns for older adults is well documented, the evidence is mixed on the question of the relationship between previous education and nonparticipation. Previous education background can both facilitate and inhibit learning.

In contrast to the demographic data, the literature on nondemographic variables to participation is relatively sparse and generally limited by region and specific programs. The nature of one’s occupation has been identified as an important determinant of participation in educational programs. Foner and Schwab (1981) reported that an individual’s occupational status is generally considered an important factor in predicting life satisfaction and diversity of interests after retirement. People from certain occupations, such as teachers, lawyers and those in the medical profession, have an orientation toward continuing education. It is reasonable to believe that individuals with these occupations would continue with educational participation in retirement.

Health is cited in numerous studies as a variable that influences older adult participation in educational opportunities. Wagner (1991) looked at factors associated with participation in an older adult health promotion educational program. The results indicated that the self-perception of health is a powerful predictor of whether or not an older adult will decide to participate in educational programs.

The literature on life satisfaction and involvement in educational activities of older adults focuses primarily on self-directed learning. Several studies (Brockett, 1984; Salamon, 1985; Diaz, 1988) indicated the positive relationship between life satisfaction and self-directed learning of older adults. In other words, those with high life satisfaction were more likely to be involved in self-directed learning activities.

Barriers to Participation

A number of publications have highlighted barriers to older adult participation. Searle (1987) found that the most widely felt inhibition of older adults to participate
in educational leisure activities was the lack of a partner. Strain and Chappell’s study (1982) indicated that lack of a partner ranked third behind time and lack of facilities in leisure educational programs. In a study of older adults in church-based educational programs, Atkinson (1989) identified seven factors that limit participation including: time constraints, schedule conflict, lack of relevance, family constraints, low personal priority, personal problems and lack of confidence.

Cross (1980) formulated three categories of educational barriers: situational, institutional and dispositional. These barriers appear to apply to older adults as well, yet it is unclear how many older adults were included in the data base. Dispositional barriers include individual attitudes and beliefs that deter participation. Situational barriers are more temporary but are individually based. For example, a person may say, “I do not have the time” or “I have other responsibilities.” Institutional barriers are those practices and procedures that limit older adult participation. For example, a person may cite such conflicts as “lack of information provided,” “no courses of interest,” and “course scheduling.”

Older adults face a number of obstacles regardless of the instructional structure. Although there will be some problems specific to location or income, common obstacles often include: lack of transportation, lack of time, prohibitive costs, lack of confidence, negative stereotypes regarding education, and a lack of knowledge about specific educational opportunities.

Heimstra (1990) suggested that there are a number of health-related factors that also need to be considered because they also affect the learning ability and activity involvement. Fatigue, perceived health problems, and declining sensory abilities may also be identified as factors that limit participation.

What about the older adults who never participate in educational programs? Are there reasons and orientations that differ between adults who participate and those who do not? There is very little information on individuals who do not participate in educational programs because it is difficult to identify the nonusers of a
system. Most of the literature that exists on nonparticipation relates to educational day programs. Pevoto (1989) studied the reasons for nonparticipation in organized educational activities by older adults between the ages of 65 and 74 and found two major categories. A negative self-image and a lack of interest in the courses affected the lack of participation in formal education. The study also indicated that self-directed learning plays an important role in nonparticipant involvement in educational activities.

In another study involving older adult participation at The University of the Third Age in Brisbane, Australia, Swindell (1990) found that nonparticipants were influenced by "length of travel" and "no courses of interest."

Better Understanding Required

As the number of older adults increase, educational providers will require a better and continued understanding of the needs, interests, and motivations of older adults in order to deliver quality educational programs and experiences.

Older adults report a high interest in hobbies and self-directed learning. Educational programs need to provide opportunities for a network of peers with similar interests.
Anecdotal reports indicate that the most important reasons older persons participate in age-segregated educational programs are to acquire new knowledge and skills and to take advantage of the opportunities to meet and socialize with other people. Providers of educational opportunities should emphasize both the cognitive and academic elements, as well as the social nature of the programs, to encourage high levels of participation.

Older adults report a high interest in hobbies and self-directed learning. Providers of educational programs could encourage or provide opportunities for a network of peers with similar interests. Many hobbies, such as genealogy and collecting, are ignored in program offerings because of their individual nature. However, the exchange of ideas, skills and information in these areas may be very attractive. More programs based on the learner-centered format should be explored.

Reports consistently indicate a change in the level of participation of adults over the age of seventy-five. Further research is needed to identify the educational needs and interests of this fast-growing segment of the population.

Gender reasons for participation should be considered. Women tend to outnumber men among the older adult population, especially in the older age groups. Demographics and program preferences must be addressed.

Prior educational experience is a major factor in the likelihood of educational program participation of older adults. If educational background is as important as the findings suggest, then more programs should be initiated to improve the opportunities for those with less education.

A common barrier to older adult participation is lack of access to educational programs because programs are too far away and participants are deterred by transportation difficulties. It will be important for future service providers to develop community-based opportunities such as local offerings, annual regional workshops, regional conferences, as well as educational programs that use mobile facilities to travel to rural areas.
As the number of older adults in society continues to increase, the demand for quality lifelong learning programs and opportunities will be great. In order to meet the challenges, educators will need to address existing barriers and constraints. In addition, future research is needed to further identify reasons and motivation for participation of older adults in educational programs.

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References


**Additional Resources**


