LEARNING IN LATER LIFE: UNIVERSITIES, TEACHING, INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY COHESION

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ABSTRACT

There are no settled concepts in the field of learning in later life. The paper begins by suggesting that generalised statements about older people's learning are suspect and that the way in which we talk about it shifts over time. In particular, there is a range of claims about methods of learning and teaching appropriate to older people but most have little support from empirical research. The paper then focuses on the evaluation of a small innovation project, funded by national government, at Lancaster University, 2009-10. The project sought to involve members of a local University of the Third age group in learning activity on the nearby university campus, partly using undergraduate teaching provision. It aimed to test ideological reservations within the U3A group about association with a public institution of higher education and about mixing the 'purity' of self-help learning for older adults, in the British U3A tradition, with more formal methods of learning. The outcomes of the project evaluation suggested that most older learners participating valued their opportunity to use university learning resources and that the British U3A ideology did not inhibit them from doing so. It also suggests that the University benefited from the presence of the older learners and that the surrounding community potentially might have done. A brief discussion of implications for intergenerational learning, community cohesion and marginalised older people follows. The paper concludes that British universities should and, perhaps, could relate more dynamically and emphatically with the provision of opportunities for learning in later life.

Keywords: *university, older learners, university of third age, intergenerational learning, community*

UČENJE V POZNEJŠIH LETIH: UNIVERZE, POUČEVANJE, MEDGENERACIJSKO UČENJE IN KOHEZIVNOST SKUPNOSTI - POVZETEK

Na področju učenja v poznejših letih ni ustaljenih pojmov. Članek sprva opozori, da posplošitvam o učenju starejših ne kaže zaupati in da se načini obravnave spreminjajo skozi čas. Srečujemo se z vrsto trditev o tem, kateri načini učenja in poučevanja naj bi bili primerni za starejše, vendar je za večino v empiričnih raziskavah najti le malo podpore. Članek se potem usmeri na oceno manjšega inovativnega projekta, ki je potekal na Univerzi Lancaster v letih 2009/10 in ga je financirala britanska vlada. V projektu so skušali člane skupine lokalne univerze za tretje življenjsko obdobje pritegniti k učnim dejavnostim v bližnjem univerzitetnem centru, pri čemer so uporabili študijsko ponudbo na preddiplomski stopnji. Namen projekta je bil preveriti pomisleke, ki naj bi jih imeli člani univerze za tretje življenjsko obdobje glede povezave z javno visokošolsko ustanovo in s tem izgube »čistosti« načela samopomoči pri učenju starejših, značilnega za britanske univerze za tretje življenjsko obdobje, na račun bolj formalnih oblik učenja. Rezultati raziskave so pokazali, da je večina starejših, ki so bili vključeni v projekt, cenila možnost uporabe univerzitetnih učnih virov in da jih ideologija britanskih univerz za tretje življenjsko obdobje pri tem ni ovirala. Nadalje se kaže, da je s prisotnostjo starejših pridobila tudi univerza, morda pa tudi okoliška skupnost. Sledi krajša razprava o pomenu teh ugotovitev za medgeneracijsko učenje, za kohezivnost skupnosti in za marginalizirane starejše. Članek se zaključi z mislijo, da bi se britanske univerze morale oz. mogle bolj dinamično in izrazito zavzeti za odpiranje učnih možnosti za starejše.

Ključne besede: *univerza, starejši, univerza za tretje življenjsko obdobje, medgeneracijsko učenje, skupnost*

UDK: 374.7

LATER LIFE: LEARNING AND TEACHING

There has been a great deal of literature – most of it theoretical but some empirical – published in the last forty years on the learning and teaching of older people. What it often seems to disregard is the evident heterogeneity of older people. There are, in fact, few statements which we can make with validity and truth about teaching and learning which i) apply to older people *specifically* ii) apply to *all* older people. Older people are everybody who happens to have lived beyond a certain age. They will differ in terms of age, gender, social class, education and employment background, income, nationality, culture, religion, health, values, learning interests and more. Any one of these factors might affect what older people want to learn, their readiness to learn and the methods through which they can learn effectively. So, universal statements about older people and learning are difficult to make.

There is a fascination in the way in which we do talk about older people and learning and the manner in which our vocabulary shifts over time and, more importantly, the content of what we regard as important shifts. We talk about 'learning' and 'education' almost interchangeably. Twenty years ago we talked quite happily about 'educational gerontology' and 'gerogogy' but have now slid imperceptibly into using softer terms such as 'learning in later life' or 'later-life learning'. A good example of shifting definitions in this field is the increased association of the notion of 'wider benefits of learning' with learning in later life. In this, now virtually dominant paradigm, learning for older people is not justified intrinsically as a good in itself but in terms of its possible other benefits connected to health, longevity of life, well-being and savings on the health budget. There is nothing wrong with this but we need to be conscious of what is occurring and be aware of the connection with political, administrative and financial priorities.

In a related manner, there are many assertions and assumptions apparent in the claims made about the learning and teaching methods appropriate for older people. We leave aside, for the moment, the question of when does one become older, having ceased to be younger. It is relevant to review some of these claims, as exemplars, asking if there is anything about being older, compared to being younger, which means that particular learning and teaching methods or approaches should be chosen.

For example, it is said that older, compared to younger, people need methods of teaching and learning that match their age. Such a statement seems close to being self-evident, a tautology. There will clearly be physical aspects of older age that affect learning and should be borne in mind by a teacher. It is not necessary to detail the obvious, but factors connected to sight, hearing, physical conditions, illnesses, concentration span and more – experienced variously by older people – will be among them. Memory is obviously relevant. There is a great deal of detailed research about the effects of ageing upon memory and some of these effects may require adjustment in teaching and learning methods. Almost as important are the beliefs, often negative, which older people have about their memories. Thus, believing, perhaps falsely, that s/he has a poor memory could inhibit, or even prevent, an older person's learning.
It is often urged that the teaching of older people should use their 'life-experience'. Findsen & Formosa (2012), write "the learning experience must take advantage of the extensive experiences of older learners". This is

probably both true but also in need of definition and qualification. Using life-experience can be a way of making learning immediately meaningful, of allowing older people to find examples in their own experience which exemplify or confirm what is being taught and can be compared with the life experience of other members of a class. By definition older people have a longer life experience upon which to draw but the claim that teaching should take account of life experience must be true for all ages of adults. A thirty year old already has significant life experience which can be drawn into the process of learning.

Over the past 20 - 25 years there has been a significant body of academics and thinkers concerned with learning in later life who, following Paolo Freire, think that teachers of older people should be concerned with their liberation. Essentially, Freire argued that we are all prisoners of the ideas and concepts which socialisation processes and schooling have made us absorb; most of us accept the *status quo*, we accept a society which is hierarchical and in which people and groups are disadvantaged, marginalised and oppressed – older people among them (Freire, 1972). Over-simplified, Freirean thinking implies that teaching and learning should assist marginalised older people to realise that they are oppressed in their minds as well as in their lives. An older person thus liberated and aware of his or her disadvantaged situation, the argument continues, is more likely to seek to take action, to become involved in civil society, to seek to change things.

Some critics have rejected the application of the Freirean approach to the teaching of older people on the grounds that the individual older person should be left to decide whether she or he wants to be 'liberated'. Further, that at the classroom and subject learning level, it is difficult to see how the Freirean approach can be universally applied in practice (Percy, 1990).

Another view is that older people should learn from each other and do not require didactic teaching .The British U3A, the University of the Third Age, has grown up since the 1980s with a particular ideology. It is that older people have passed beyond the age and the stages in life when they want an 'expert' to stand in front of them and to transmit knowledge to them as passive learners. The ideology maintains that a group of U3A members, experienced people and motivated learners, can function as a learning community and teach each other. Some will know more and help the others; some will take turns to prepare so that they can pass on their knowledge to others. A recent empirical study into a British U3A group (Marsden, 2011) confirmed that this ideology was still being voiced strongly.

Teachers of older people should be concerned with their liberation.

However, within a programme range of several dozen classes and interest groups, Marsden identified four different kinds of learning situation, four different kinds of teaching and learning, in the U3A group investigated, including formal didactic teaching. The truth was that among the 800 or so members in the group, a variety of teaching and learning methods were both desired and made available by these older people.

AN INNOVATORY PROJECT CONNECTING OLDER PEOPLE TO UNIVERSITY LEARNING

The previous British government, in the last year or so of its existence, took a limited but real interest in informal adult education and,

through what it called its Transformation Fund, funded a range of short-term innovation projects nationally. The Department of Continuing Education at Lancaster University (DCE) received funding for a 7 month project, in 2009 – 2010, which was called a "New Learning Adventure" (abbreviated to NLA). The evaluation of this project provides some empirical input to the largely theoretical discussion of the teaching and learning methods which older people want and/ or need.

DCE already had a considerable track record in developing innovative programmes for older people alongside its general adult education provision. Some were for University credit, some were not. Some were repeated year on year; others were tried and dropped or re-developed. They had culminated in a year-round, once a week programme, called the Senior Learners' Programme. And, importantly, there had developed out of these programmes a core group of self-organising, self-motivating, older learner activists who were determined that university provision for older learners should be developed. They came to be known as the Senior Learners Group and they became one of three partners in the New Learning Adventure project

The other partner in the project, apart from DCE and the Senior Learners Group, was the local Lancaster and Morecambe University of the Third Age (U3A) and its presence was central. For, the project's main objective was to attempt to open some of the learning resources of the University to members of the U3A group. The group, of course, was one of many hundreds in the UK. It is a voluntary self-help organisation for older people which, at the time, had about 750 members and was growing fast. It ran a very wide range of meetings and classes for its members from popular interests such as walking and bridge to the academic subjects such as philosophy, science and languages. All classes were taught or facilitated by U3A members. The NLA project was to explore whether U3A members would make use of University teaching and would conclude that they benefited from it.

There was, of course, a historical challenge here. When the University of the Third Age was established in the UK in the 1980s, it took on a very different form from that current in continental Europe and elsewhere. It turned its back, ideologically, on the mainstream British universities as not matching its mission. It claimed that it would be the only true University in the UK – a 'universitas', a democratic community of equals and, of course, older learners who would teach each other and learn from each other. One could argue that the U3A ideology stereotyped universities by identifying them with the notion of experts teaching passive learners. Nevertheless, local U3A groups largely did not seek out close association with local universities (Midwinter, 1984).

So the NLA project, nearly thirty years on from the beginning of the British U3A movement, sought to explore the strength of the U3A ideology. Would members of the Lancaster and Morecambe U3A come to Lancaster University and would they judge that they had benefited from its teaching?

Like the U3A, British universities, such as Lancaster, make claims about the particular style of their teaching and learning. They, too, have an ideology but it is not built on the notion of the passive learner. As the present writer demonstrated in a large empirical project early in his career (Entwistle & Percy, 1971) university academic staff regard knowledge as provisional, subject to clarification

by research and dispassionate appraisal and reflection. In this ideology, the key qualities which students should learn are self-directed learning and critical thinking. However, the author's study went on to show the gap between ideology and reality. The expansion of higher education, the student hunt for good grades and jobs and the demystification of the role of university teacher brought new imperatives into the higher education classroom which compromised but did not destroy the university ideology.

The New Learning Adventure project at Lancaster University was presented to local U3A members as a 'scheme' in which they could enrol, free of charge. It was also promoted to those who had attended DCE provision for older people in the past. In fact, the NLA proved to be a popular offer. 149 older people enrolled in it; 120 were current local U3A members (about 16 % of the total U3A membership). Table 1 shows the characteristics of the total enrolment:

Table 1: characteristics of U3A enrolees in NLA

total enrolments	149
gender	74% female
ages	70% between 60-74 [range 46 – 89 years]
age left full-time education	73% at 21+ years
current u3a members	80%

The typical participant could be characterised as female, aged between 60 and 75 years, educated to degree or professional level, having left full-time education at around 21 years and currently a member of the Lancaster and Morecambe U3A.

What did the NLA 'scheme' offer to these older people? The project lasted for 7 months. Table 2 shows what learning opportunities were made available to them during that period.

Table 2: the NLA learning programme

'Open lectures' – attendance at timetabled undergraduate lectures
Specially programmed lunch-time lectures and discussions with university academic staff and research students
Topic-based learning circles facilitated by University, particularly DCE, staff
Use of University Library and Virtual Learning environment
Access to University public lectures, events, exhibitions, etc.
U3A group facilitators assisted by University department

To some extent the offers detailed in Table 2 were a pragmatic menu based on what was possible and what had been tried before in other contexts. Some parts of it proved to be more popular than others. This paper will discuss only one offer - Open Lectures - which was among the most popular. In it, many day-by- day courses of university undergraduate lectures (typically with 50 to 300 students present) were made open to attendance by the older learners if there was a seat free in the lecture hall on which they could sit. There was a process of application and registration. Seminars and tutorials (discussion-based learning modes for 10-20 students or fewer) were not formally included in the scheme.

Overall 38% of the total NLA participants (56 people) enrolled to attend undergraduate lectures. We know that some of them dropped out quickly from attendance because, for example, lectures in a course might be on more

than one day per week. An 85 year old gentleman told the evaluators that he could only spare one day a week - "otherwise it would have taken over my life".

However, there were some very committed NLA learners who came to campus for lectures throughout the whole period. Some wanted to attend seminars or laboratory classes too, although they knew that it was not part of the scheme. A few did ask successfully to attend seminars and others were invited by the lecturer to do so. We have ample evidence that lecturers thought that these few older students were a valuable presence. One told the evaluators "older people are a lot more willing to participate and the younger students just sit there and wait for somebody else to say something." Another, who asked questions of his large lecture audience, said " There were one or two times when I'd asked a question and it was a deadly silence and then they [older learners] answered and I thought 'thank goodness'. It was much appreciated."

The evaluation of the New Learning Adventure project confirmed the achievement of learning outcomes for many of the older learners which had been anticipated in the project proposal and also others which had been unanticipated.

In terms of anticipated learning outcomes, NLA older learners claimed to have been stimulated and given new horizons in subjects or topics in which they were already interested and, sometimes, in others which were new to them. They gave examples of when they had been introduced to new ideas or critical standpoints and when they had been challenged intellectually; some said that they gained new insights into subjects of interest to a U3A study group which they attended and that they would report back to that group with those insights. Most reported that they enjoyed university learning and some said that they had gained new confidence in study skills at higher education level.

In terms of unanticipated learning outcomes some NLA older learners learned and debated with undergraduates who were mostly in the age range 18-21 years old and thus generated a form of intergenerational learning. Some U3A members said that they had been stimulated to learn by the international and cosmopolitan nature of the University student body. A few U3A learners said that "at last" they had studied in a university. One elderly lady said to us: "For lots of people like myself who missed out on university it's wonderful to just sit in the lecture, to feel part of Lancaster University. "

REFLECTIONS ON UNIVERSITIES AND LEARNING IN LATER LIFE

There is a sense in which the New Learning Adventure was a very successful. Individuals gained; we would contend that the University gained and that the community around it potentially gained. Clearly, many of the older learners who were members of the U3A gained intellectually by attending undergraduate provision. Nobody reported that the style or level of university teaching did not match or suit their ages. Some implied that they thought that they coped better with the teaching than restless or inattentive younger students. Several of them, and several lecturers, talked about how the older learners' life experience had been useful in illustrating subject matter. Some found the critical insights to which they had been exposed caused reflection and new awareness of their own situation in society.

The possibility that there were theoretical differences between the ideologies of U3A

learning and of university teaching, which would become manifest in learner dissatisfaction, never materialised. The general view of the NLA participants seemed to be that the U3A and the University approaches to teaching and learning, if one could characterise them as that, were complementary. It was good to go from one to the other and back again. The truth is that there was a heterogeneity of teaching and learning approaches in both the University and the U3A. But the University had a significant body of current researchers and scholars and many U3A learners valued the chance to learn from their expertise. One lady spoke for others, apparently sincerely, when she said to us "university lecturers do not know how fascinating and interesting they are. People hang on their every word".

This paper has already implied that the University gained from the presence of the older learners. The latter actively contributed to the teaching and learning experience when invited to do so and enhanced it for younger students and staff alike.

Moreover, and this was not anticipated, lecturers in a range of disciplines quickly realised that these older people, appearing in their lecture rooms sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, but with varied life experience at their fingertips were potential research material and even, as proved to be the case, possible research assistants, fieldworkers, even advisers on impact and assessors of social relevance of research.

Thus, empirical hints from the evaluation of the New Learning Adventure Project suggest that the claims discussed in Part 1 of this paper about teaching and learning methods appropriate for older people are too simply presented. Reality is more complex and more heterogeneous.

However, we think that a greater value of the NLA project was that it began to lay down the framework of what, in another context, could have developed into a very powerful model of a multi-generational learning community open to all ages, albeit in different ways and with different rights of access to the institution's learning resources. Such is Lancaster University's predominance in the local and regional community – economically, politically, symbolically - that this would have been bound to have effect in the community and may have stimulated imitation in other organisations. And the fact that the project integrated older people, even up to their eighties, with students who were the age, or younger, of their grandchildren made it a real intergenerational activity of substance which deserved to be mirrored elsewhere in the community. Such ideas and such examples would have made a contribution, possibly small but much needed, to community cohesion. They went unexplored at Lancaster not because of any deficit in the outcomes of the NLA but for extrinsic political and financial reasons.

However, 'community cohesion' is a term which merits careful unpeeling of successive layers of meaning. It surely must include a consideration of the relationship between 'the haves' and the 'have- nots', the advantaged and the disadvantaged in the community. The older learners who were part of the NLA project could not be described as disadvantaged. It has already been demonstrated that a majority of them had not left full-time education until age 21 (and for some that was 60 or 50 years ago when educational opportunities were fewer). A majority of them had professional or higher qualifications. They were largely middle class and comparatively healthy. They could not be described as coming from the ranks of the disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, and this is more an article of faith than an empirical conclusion (but is bolstered by a considerable body of non-specific adult education literature), there is a large hinterland of other potential older university learners. They are, perhaps, not so highly qualified in educational terms as the NLA older learners, but they are curious, intelligent, critical and questioning and could only benefit from, and contribute to, an opportunity such as the NLA programme run by a university. Universities in the United Kingdom have great freedoms and considerable prestige when compared to other social institutions and not infrequently change their organisational shapes and business models as they adjust their missions. Intergenerational learning and community cohesion ought not to be concepts at which they nod superficially but then fail to think through and adopt. Properly shaped, they should be goals and drivers which universities import dynamically and positively into their missions.

The NLA project showed a powerful undertow of staff goodwill towards the presence of older learners. One member of Lancaster's teaching staff said to evaluators "I'd really like to encourage older learners to participate more. I would do anything I could to encourage more older learners and more direct involvement." And another urged that "I think the University sector has to cater for all and education is all about enriching people's lives. If I've got something to give, I'm quite happy to give it to anybody who wants to hear it".

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