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ABSTRACT

Older people grow and develop psychologically; they do not necessarily decline in intellectual functioning; and they are capable of learning and enriching their own lives and the lives of others with their wisdom and experience. However, in a fast-paced and impatient culture, little time is given to hearing what older people have to say. Older persons, in turn, often do not want to speak; they are intimidated or they do not value their own abilities because society does not. These attitudes stand in the way of using older adults as the greatest informational resource in this culture. Not only have they had to grow and adjust for 60 or 80 years, but they also have witnessed the greatest changes in history. And they have much to tell about survival, about values, and about aging. One method that adult educators can use to tap this unplumbed resource is the life review. This autobiographical process, whether oral or written, can be a tool both to help older adults integrate the experiences of a lifetime and younger learners gain information about the culture and values that have shaped us and about their own aging. A productive process of facilitating a life review is the in-depth interview, a simple series of three interviews, each lasting 45 minutes and conducted over 3 weeks. The first interview focuses on the interviewee's past, the second focuses on the quality of life now. Finally, the third interview seeks some evaluation by the older person. It asks, "What sense do you make of your experience? What does it mean to you?" This technique has been successful in prompting life reviews and growth by both the older students and the younger interviewers. A 6-page reference list is appended. (KC)

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TAPPING THE WORLD OF THE OLDER ADULT

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American Association for Adult and Continuing Education,
Louisville, Kentucky, November 8, 1984.

Older people grow and develop psychologically; they do not necessarily decline in intellectual functioning; and they are capable of learning and enriching their own lives and the lives of others with their wisdom and experience. These are facts. I state them here because there are many people who are genuinely surprised by the facts. Indeed, many of those most surprised are over 60 themselves. This paper presents some recent thinking about the world of the older adult, that population of approximately 25 million persons over the age of 60 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983).

In a fast-paced and impatient culture we often find little time to hear what older people have to say. In turn, older people--many times active older adult learners--will not speak at all. They do not want to intrude or will take too long to say what they mean (Wolf, 1983). How can we, as adult educators, learn to listen? And how can we help older learners develop the skills to make sense of their experience and to share what they know?

The theme of this conference is "Designs for Learning in an Information Society" and I would like to propose that older adults are the ultimate "informational resource" that we have in the culture. Not only have they had to constantly relearn and readjust for six to eight decades, they have

witnessed the greatest changes in history. Imagine living in a world where your life expectancy has nearly doubled, where you have seen the invention of television, the space race, computer technology! In addition, you have fought in The Great War, lived through The Depression, seen birth control revolutionize women's lives, witnessed The Holocaust, the dropping of the atom bomb, the transplantation of the human heart. It is possible that you may see the results of regeneration of transplanted brain tissue as a cure for Parkinson's Disease. Finally, you have loved, you have been hurt, you have given birth and seen death. You may have survived the death of a life-long spouse--believed by life-span developmentalists to be the most devastating experience in old age (Neugarten, 1968, 1982). As Sharon Curtin says,

If you are going to be stranded on a desert island, you better hope that at least one person in the group is plenty old, because the rest of us have learned very little about survival. (1972)

Our goal must be to recognize the value of older adults for their sakes and for our own. First, older adults often suffer from poor self esteem. They have inculcated the lessons of a lifetime in the American culture, one of which is that to be old is to be obsolete. They often believe themselves incapable of learning and they may dread being

asked to demonstrate their perceived incompetence. I do not exaggerate. All of us know a lively active older person who appears self-confident and, yes, "young." Ask that individual to take a timed test, to produce a piece of graphic work, and you have an intimidated individual. That is because older people believe themselves to be less capable intellectually than their younger selves and they do not want to face confirmation of their fear that they are deteriorating.

At the same time younger cohorts are in the process of "growing old" and they, too, as good Americans expect themselves to become less capable. Bernice Neugarten suggests that we predict our own aging. Based on our midlife perceptions of what it is to be "old" we create our own old age (1982). Hence, our dilemma: as educators do we accept the negative stereotypes of aging and, do we inflict them on our learners, our older friends, and, eventually, on ourselves? Or do we "rediscover" the meaning that age can have for us and for the culture? I suggest we do the latter. We must do the latter or devalue a past that may teach us how to survive the future. Let us remember the advice of C.G. Jung who wrote, "A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs" (1933, p. 109).

First I would like to review some of the facts about older people, a short review of the literature on cognition and affective development. Then I would like to suggest a

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system for conducting in-depth interviews which may help to promote life review and learning with older adults. We can explore using the interviews in class settings.

We need to know what ^{can} we expect from the older adult. Research indicates that no loss of intellectual functioning need accompany aging if the individual is stimulated cognitively throughout the lifespan (Baltes & Schaie, 1982; Blackburn, 1984; Camp et al., 1983; Datan, 1984; LaBouvie-Vief 1978). Further, stimulation can revitalize and rehabilitate cognitive capacity when neural changes have occurred (Clutes, 1984; Hulicka, 1978; Lorschach & Simpson, 1984; Katzman & Terry, 1983). And, finally, older adults have adapted strategies and cognitive patterns which may be different but are more useful for their lives than the cognitive patterns of younger cohorts (Baltes & Shaie, 1982; Botwinick, 1977; Clayton, 1982; Cornelius, 1984; Elias, 1977; Datan, 1984; Hulicka, 1978; LaBouvie-Vief, 1978; 1980). Cognition, then is a adaptive process.

Further, research and theory of the psychological state of older adults suggest that reminiscence, or what Robert Butler calls "life review" is of serious consequence (1963, 1982). No one needs to be told that older people will spin memories at the drop of a hat, but now we are learning that this process--the recollecting of earlier times and the restructuring of life stories-- may be of the greatest possible educational value to older people (Kaminsky, 1983,

1984; McMahon & Rhudick, 1967; Myerhoff, 1979, 1983). The life review is "characterised by a progressive return to consciousness of past experience, in particular the resurgence of unresolved conflicts which can now be surveyed and integrated" (Butler, 1982, p. 25). It is through life review that older adults come to terms with themselves, their lives, their pasts, the history through which they have come. When individuals can integrate past and present, they can move into what Erik Erikson defines as the highest level of ego development: they conquer despair and achieve integrity. Thus, says Erikson, "death loses its sting" (1963).

What does this mean to adult educators? I suggest that we make a vigorous effort to appreciate the reminiscence of older people, to encourage it, to find ways to incorporate it into classroom activities, and to develop strategies for recollection in intergenerational settings. We can educate two, three or four generations of adults at once. Younger people will learn about aging in the most positive way; older people will make use of adaptive cognitive strategies that rely on experience and wisdom.

There are already some excellent programs based on autobiography, oral history, and reminiscence, notably B.J. Hateley's course at the University of Southern California, Mark Kaminsky's writing program through Hunter College in New York, and, of course, the late Howard McClusky's "Community of Generations." No doubt many educators here have been using

autobiography in their programs. (I remember when I "discovered" it ten years ago. I was teaching an adult education course in creative writing on Tuesday nights and I noticed how driven certain older people were to write their memories. That was the beginning of the trail that led me here today.)

Yet, there may be adult educators who have not given thought to the powerhouse combination of cognition and affect that is in operation when life review and education come together. It can be an extraordinary key to motivation, experience and meaning made of learning. I would now like to discuss a simple system which can be successful in developing life review and then to explore with you how you might incorporate it into your programs. It is a series of phenomenological interviews which can help educators and learners to experience that ultimate in informational resources: the world of the older adult.

The In-Depth Interview (Seidman, Sullivan & Schatzkamer, 1983; Schumann, 1982). This is a simple series of three interviews, each lasting 45 minutes and conducted over three weeks. It can provoke the kind of reminiscence that Butler characterizes as life review. The first interview focuses on the interviewee's past: it asks, "Where are you from?" The interviewee is encouraged to talk about his or her parents, early home experiences, anecdotes about school,

family and neighborhood life. The second interview focuses on the quality of life now: it asks, "What do you do daily? Tell the story of a typical day." Again, personal anecdotes are encouraged.

Finally, the third interview seeks some evaluation on the part of the older person. It asks, "What sense do you make of your experience? What does it mean to you?" We have had success with questions such as, "What values were you taught as a child? How are they different from what children are taught today?" "What advice can you give me?" Ideally, these interviews should be tape-recorded, transcribed, edited, and "published." They create a legacy for the older person to give to a class, family or library.

I have been using this simple phenomenological in-depth interview for research and have been training human service providers to do it as a field experience in gerontology classes. It has been quite successful (nearly one-hundred percent). Occasionally we find an older person who does not wish to verbalize his or her story; recently a student who was conducting a life review workshop in a nursing home reported that an old woman pointed to her head and said, "I think I'll just do it in here." Typically, ^{however,} the older adults are flattered that anyone would care to listen to their stories; the interviewers are impressed--often awed--by the lives of their older interviewees. The impact on the younger learner can be enormous and most positive. One young nursing

student confessed surprise that an old woman she had interviewed had had such an interesting life. This student said she had always been frightened by old people.

Let us explore ways that this strategy for life review can be working^{ed} into your programs. Remember that we will be teaching "aging" and that we will not grow as students or educators (nor, perhaps, as people) until we learn from those who have gone before us. "Information--the pathway to a better world" must start with a focus on the past. Further, we must not leave our older adults behind, for their sake and for our own.

Finally, I would like to quote Barbara Myerhoff who said that in the telling of our story we "grow a soul." This happens not just to the teller, but also to the listener. We say that "a life matters. . . a story is told and it is heard." We want to say 'We have a past, our stories matter, and therefore, we have a future'" (1983).

Our question, then, must be: can we risk that future by ignoring the past?

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