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ABSTRACT

At each age learning is a complex interaction of motivation, cognition, and development. In older adults, motivation is often related to a lifelong personality construct or personal meaning that an older individual will seek to play out when given the opportunity in late life. The needs of the older adult learner can be discussed in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which include physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, self-actualization, knowledge and understanding, and aesthetic needs. A review of the theories of various developmentalists suggests that because older adults often have the opportunity to play out the repressed sides of their personalities for the first time and need to relive past experiences, pass their legacy to future generations, and find meaning in their lives, they may be best equipped for reminiscent learning. Studies of intelligence have suggested that there are two areas of intelligence, crystallized and fluid. The indications are that older people continue to do well in, and perhaps even improve in, the former type, which involves verbal comprehension, syllogisms, and arithemtical reasoning. Thus, older adults may very well be best equipped to make sense of things than are the members of any other age group. (MN)

BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS:
AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE OLDER LEARNER

by

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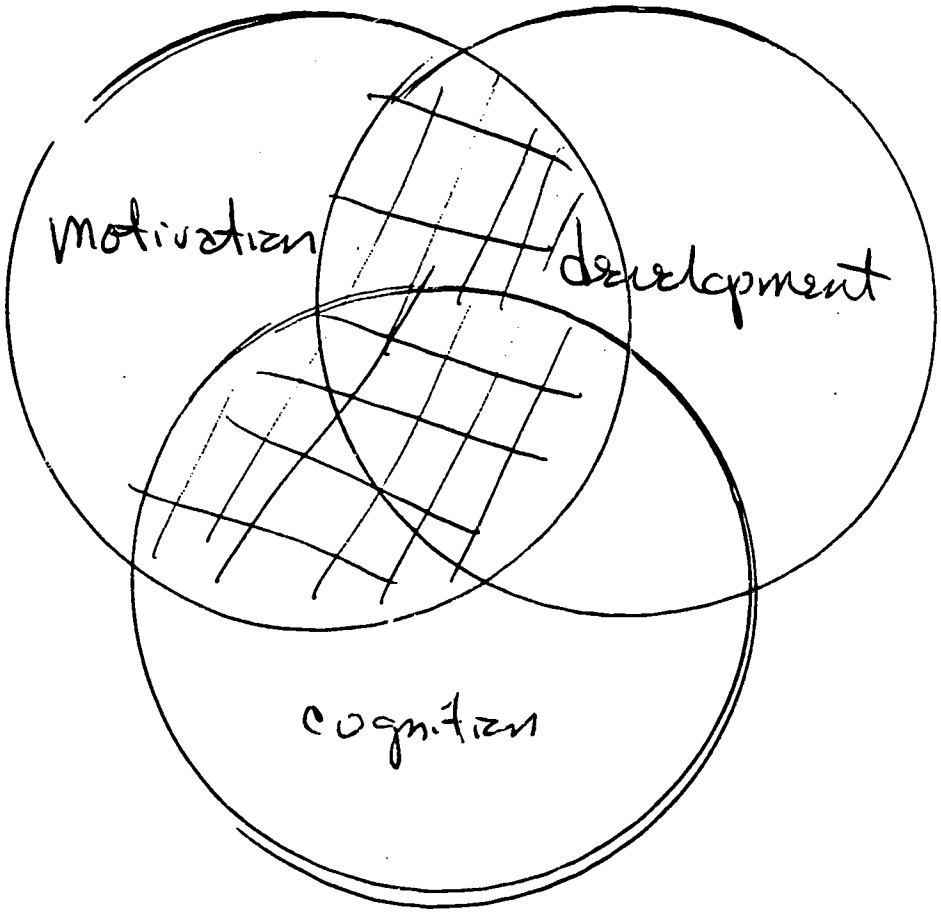
In my youth I sought wisdom. In my old age I continue to seek her.

Ecclesiastes

Learning is a lifelong process. Each of us follows and creates a personal journey as a learner. As we change what we need to know changes, and how we go about making sense of what we're learning changes. Yet, as we grow and develop, each of us remains the same, carrying our individual personality characteristics throughout life and adapting in new--but characteristic ways--to our environment (Block, 1971; Elder, 1981; Maas & Kuypers, 1974; McCrae & Costa, 1984; Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1968). And, over the course of our lives, the experience of learning changes.

When we talk about learning we often act as though we have a definition of the process. Perhaps each of you has one. Or perhaps, like me, you have come to feel that learning is different for each and every one of us: the motivation, the emotional or affective involvement, and the cognitive process. Obviously, for each of these components there is a vast array of possibilities. This is especially true for older adults who are more diverse than any other cohort. I would like to explore some of these with you today. And we will ask how motivation, development, and cognition come together. (Table I)

A MODEL OF ADULT LEARNING TABLE I



At each age learning is a complex interaction of motivation, cognition, and development.

Motivation

Motivation is highly personal. In older adults, motivation is often related to a lifelong personality construct: a personal meaning that an elder will seek to play out when given the opportunity in late life. That is what I mean by backwards and forwards. While we are learning new things we are also reliving the past. In old age the past and present can be collapsed.

In Houle's (1961) analysis of adult learners, three major types emerged: the goal-oriented learners, the activity-oriented learners, and the learning-oriented learners. In older people, all three can be compressed into one. For example, motivation can appear to be primarily social (activity-oriented). In one study (Wolf, 1982) an older woman attended classes at an adult learning center because they happened to occur on Tuesday evenings when she could go with a friend who drove. Yet this learner found herself deeply reminiscent in the classroom. When the class dealt with psychology she fell to remembering her own childhood.

The following poem by an older learner describes the complex nature of his involvement in a class (Brooks, 1986, p. 40):

> Why study Spanish?, our charming teacher asks.
> The others, answers ready, all reply--
> tourists-to-be--sound reasons for their tasks. But
> I,

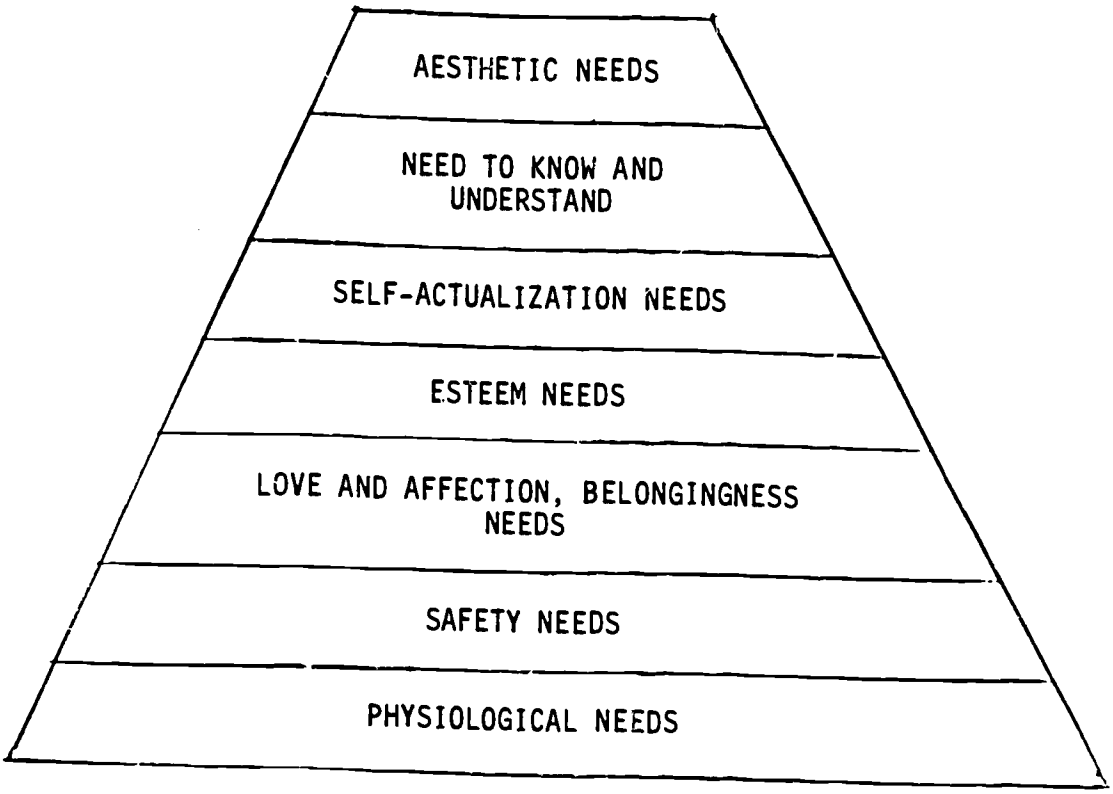
no travel plans, hold back. Shall I
admit. . .confess.. .? I hardly know to what.
The pleasure of their company? Quite true.
The fun of learning something new? There's that.
A spur to my imagination? Ah, that too.
I think, "Thou shalt make castels than in Spayne
and dreme of joye, al but in vayne.". . .In vain?

My dreams go counterwise. Out of dark sleep,
the land of no words, in si'ent hope they creep.
Mute, demanding to be taught to speak,
they seek the light and clarity of day.
My dreams would go to school to learn to say
the things they show. Lacking workds they die
or sulk like shadows in the night. So dream-
impelled, I blunder into class and vaguely try,
in love with words, to weave them into speech,
thinking somehow that doing so may teach
my dreams how words are patterned to explain
the news they bring of lost worlds found again.

Perhaps this level of motivation seems unfocused to many adult educators. You see, the learner is involved with the <u>now,</u> and with the <u>future,</u> but he is also involved with the <u>past.</u> He moves forwards and backwards simultaneously, He is the older adult learner and, often, he is involved in a personal dream. For many older learners, that dream may be the reason for seeking educational experiences.

Several theoretical constructs are of use in discussing motivation of older learners. Certainly Maslow's (1962, 1971) hierarchy of needs is an appropriate beginning. (Table II).

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



Many pictures of Maslow's hierarchy stop at self-actualization needs. In his 1970 revision he included the needs to "know and understand" and the "aesthetic needs" as higher need states after discovering many people are motivated by them as a part of self-actualization.

Maslow, A. H. Toward a Psychology of Being. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1962.

_____ Motivation and Personality, 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

_____ The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. New York: The Viking Press, 1971.

Only when the individual has fulfilled the elementary physiological needs, the basic need to be free from pain and hunger, can he or she can move up the hierarchy. In dealing with older adults, it is essential that we recognize the existence of real pain (often medicated) and malnutrition. Psychological status is often a central issue in working with frail elders (Weiss, 1984). We have found that timing activities in the nursing home and creating an atmosphere of trust is essential in working with elders who would ordinarily be ignored by educators.

It is essential that older learners feel safe. Are we careful to hold our classes in areas where elders feel physically and emotionally secure? At night, particularly, elders may need to be escorted to and from buildings where classes are held. Do we create places where they can feel emotionally secure? The need for love, affection and belongingness follow. Elders, too, need to feel part of a group that affirms their being. This can be social--as in developing a theater piece--and it can be emotional. Barbara Myerhoff (1979) tapped into one of the magic experiences of belongingness that a life history project can provide. Such a project--where elders collect their stories to pass on to another generation--creates rich experience of personal

validation and belonging. This can be multi-generational. Here is how one participant describes her Living History class:

> This group brought out such beautiful memories, not always so beautiful, but still, all the pictures came up. It touched the layers of the kind that it was on those dead people already. It was laying on them like layers, separate layers of earth, and all of a sudden in this class I feel it coming up like lava. It just melted away the earth from all those people. It melted away, and they became alive. And then to me it looked like they were never dead. (p. 39)

Telling one's story can reaffirm a lifetime of work and love, create a milieu for self esteem and affirmation of self. Doing this with others is essential. First, it may never happen if one is left alone, (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), and second, the integration of person and community is essential to our culture (Moody, 1985). Maslow's hierarchy continues into areas called "need to know and understand" and "aesthetic needs." These, too, ask the elder to reassess what he or she knows and to enhance each new appreciation of fact or art with a lifetime of experience.

Development

The above view of motivation which comes out of behavioral psychology meshes with that of developmentalists whose framework is ego psychology. Two theorists particularly contribute to the understanding of older adults who are seeking the means to merge their old and new selves. These are Gutmann (1975), and Erikson (1963). Gutmann suggests that older men will seek to play out their "feminine" selves which had to be put away earlier in life. Because of the division of labor in our society, men found themselves in the work world and women in the family world. (Many elders were raised and lived in this model.) With the "parental imperative" past, men and women can again play out the repressed sides of their personalities. Men may choose activities which encourage sentimentality and affiliative emotions. Women may want to learn about business or arenas in which they can explore their assertive skills. This is a part of the balance of life and a natural motivation for adult education.

Erikson (1963) posits a stage sequence view of life in which individuals pass along a lifelong journey of growth and development. Each of the eight stages is created by a crisis which requires one to complete a task. The tasks of adulthood are to be creative (generative) and wise (ego integrity). For the older learner, this may mean several things. There may be a need to relive past experiences (tasks) metaphorically. This is possible in reminiscence. There may be a need to pass one's legacy to future generations. This can be done in historical exercises. And there may be a need to find the meaning of life.

Robert Butler's (1963, 1982) description of life review as a normative and universal task has created an opportunity for response in the academic community. If it is true that mental health in old age depends upon one's reexamining the conflicts of earlier life, we can place emphasis on the task of creating reminiscent experiences in the educational setting. Several useful guides have been developed particularly Kaminsky (1984), Koch (1978), Weiss (1984), Weisberg and Wilder (1985), and Wolf (1985).

What we may find is that elders are best equipped to do reminiscent learning. That there is an underlying order in the development of learning throughout the lifespan and that Aristotle's definition of intelligence may best express the ultimate learning of a culture. His view was teleological: that humans progressed from simple to complex, from lower to higher levels from birth to death. Certainly older adults may be asked to interpret their experiences, to tell us how they adapted and continue to adapt, to a rapidly changing world. They are survivors.

When we ask why they learn, we often hear surprising stories of battles and storms, or peace and joys. And in those stories we hear what it is to be a human.

Cognition

One of the more interesting dimensions of understanding the older learner comes in the area of cognition. What is the older adult capable of learning? "Many prominent researchers argue that there is little, if any, decline in intellectural functioning with advancing age" (Elias, 1977, p. 48). Their learning is seen as a purely adaptive attribute and, when motivated, learn as well or better than younger cohorts (LaBouvie-Vief, 1980). Certainly one of the most interesting areas of research has been the work of Baltes and Schaie (1982) who state that when studied in a longitudinal mode, older adults do not decline in intelligence. They suggest that there are two areas of intelligence: crystallized intelligence and fluid intelligence (also Elias, 1977; Horn, 1975; Katzman & Terry, 1983). Crystallized intelligence consists of verbal comprehension, syllogisms (indicate which conclusion follows. . .), arithmetical reasoning, (which use can be made of a range of tools . . .) (Elias, 1977). Fluid intelligence consists of acuity in figure and letter groupings, associative memory and tasks which do not require accrued knowledge. Older people do well--and even improve--in crystallized intelligence. Perhaps the Aristotelian vision of development is correct: that humans do grow from a lower to a higher level as they move through the lifespan. If intelligence is making sense of things, older adults do this better than any other population.

> 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.
>
> C.G. Jung

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