DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 612 CE 051 843

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TITLE Self-Development: What Older Adults Bring to Education.
PUB DATE 2 Nov 88
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Tulsa, OK, November 2, 1988).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Development; *Adult Education; Adult Students; Aging (Individuals); Cognitive Style; Educational Needs; *Older Adults; Postsecondary Education; *Self Actualization; Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics

ABSTRACT

Although educators know that older persons bring experience, curiosity, and motivation into the educational setting, they often do not consider the aged to be engaged in development, especially in the development of trust. Education can provide for older persons a means for focusing on society and self. The classroom can serve as a stimulus to creative thinking; discussion, as a catalyst for the individual undertaking a new task in life. The opportunity to reflect and socialize creates pronounced energy. This energy, in turn, sustains the learner in the process of self-discovery, for each older learner brings his or her own agenda to the adult education classroom. However, the adult education format also can be used to integrate elders into the community, to give them the opportunity to share themselves and their wisdom, and generations that will follow them. Educational experiences designed for older persons could include (1) activities based on reminiscence; (2) activities based on vocational redirection; (3) activities designed to teach coping skills; (4) education as empowerment; and (5) participation as education. Adult education can take the lead in creating experiences in which elders are given the opportunity to explore their developmental agenda. At the same time, elders can teach those who come after them how to trust. (KC)

SELF-DEVELOPMENT:

WHAT OLDER ADULTS BRING TO EDUCATION

by

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Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Tulsa, Oklahoma, November 2, 1988.

I consider the old who have gone before us along a road which we must all travel in our turn and it is good we should ask them the nature of that road.

Socrates

The Republic

Preface

Educators have begun to talk about what is unleashed in people as they age--the competencies, the capacity for renewal and growth, the spirit of hope and trust--and how education can support this development.

The New York Times of September 9, 1988, carried an article about Helen Elmore, age 90. Mrs. Elmore had been born the daughter of a slave. At the age of 70 she bought a house: she said she used "dimes and quarters" saved from a lifetime of labor. Now, at age 90, she had the desire to learn to read. When asked why, she answered, "To know." Her next goal, she told the interviewer, was to become a writer (James, 1988).

What is extraordinary about Mrs. Elmore is that she is indeed not extraordinary. Her trust in the future, her wish to learn, and her need to make sense of life reflect the human spirit. These characteristics do not go away with age. Rather, the urge to understand, to integrate, to know, may increase with age (Erikson, 1963, 1982). Adult educators and gerontologists often underestimate or ignore the abilities of older persons and what these individuals can bring into the educational setting. They know that older persons bring experience, curiosity, and motivation. Often, however, they often don't consider the aged to be engaged in development, that process of growth and maturity which does not end until the last breath. The cornerstone of this development is the virtue of trust: trust in oneself, the community, and the next generations. It is the first and last developmental task of the human being (Erikson, 1982).

Education and the Older Adult

The Special Committee on Education and Training of The 1981 White House Conference on Aging, chaired by Bernice Neugarten, made the following statement:

> Specifically, it is our collective judgment that the recommendations of other White House Conference committees cannot be implemented effectively unless older people have access to a full range of educational programs in keeping with their needs and interests, unless they are served by personnel who have been adequately prepared to serve their needs, and unless older people live in a society which has been enlightened about the processes of aging. (The 1981 U. S. White House Conference on Aging, Committee 10, p. 92)

The White House Conference declared that the purpose of education in late life is to provide learning opportunities for surviving, coping, giving, and growing. "By opening access to new possibilities, late-life learning makes it possible for older adults to take charge of their own development," writes Moody in 1988 (p. 7). What does this development consist of? How does the aging person "grow"? Adult educators who concern themselves with developmental potential of the populations they serve would do well to look at the literature of aging. Erikson (1963) states that great integrity and wisdom may be found in elders who can harvest the fruits of their lives in old age. The elder can adapt "to the

triumphs and disappointments adherent to being" (Erikson, 1963, p. 268). It is a time for the fulfillment of the self, the attainment of self-actualization (Butler, 1975; Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986; Maslow, 1962).

Nemiroff and Colarusso (1985) restate the ancient developmental mandate of human beings:

> Adulthood is not static; the adult is in a constant state of dynamic change and flux, always "becoming" or "finding the way.". . . . .There is continual need to define the adult self, especially with regard to the integrity of the inner person versus his or her external environment. (p. 12)

What is the role of adult education in the development of older persons? It can provide a means for focusing on society and self. The classroom can serve as a stimulus to creative thinking; discussion as a catalyst for the individual undertaking a new task in life. The opportunity to reflect and socialize creates pronounced energy. This energy, in turn, sustains the learner in the process of self-discovery, for each older learner brings his or her own agenda to the adult education classroom. Each learner's experience will be determined by his or her individual developmental journey. However, the adult education format can also be used to integrate elders into the community, to give them the opportunity to share themselves and their wisdom, to care for the generations that will follow them.

Educational Experiences Designed for Older Persons

1. Activities Based on Reminiscence

In 1963, Robert Butler wrote that reminiscence is a normal and universal process which had been misunderstood. "The prevailing tendency," he wrote, "is to identify reminiscence in the aged with psychological dysfunction and thus to regard it essentially as a symptom" (p. 65). He continued:

> In contrast, I conceive of the life review as a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particulary, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated. (Butler, 1963. p. 66)

Adult education activities which include historical perspectives are ideal opportunities for reminiscence. These may be courses which focus on specific eras of history such as The Depression, World War II, or those which ask for personal memories such as autobiographical writing and family histories. A burgeoning bibliography of such activities attests to the success of programming based on reminiscence. (See Hately, 1982; Jenkins, 1978; Kaminsky, 1984; McClusky, 1985; Myerhoff, 1979; Perlstein, 1981; Progoff, 1975; Quigley, 1981; Rowe & Mulhall, 1988; Telander, Quinlan, & Verson, 1982; Wolf, 1986.) However, the creative adult educator will not rely on already existing programs, but will seek to incorporate opportunities for reminiscence in new and creative experiences to respond to the individuals they encounter in class settings.

2. Activities Based on Vocational Redirection

Many elders seek to return to the work force or to volunteer in areas which require retraining. Such older persons are valuable assets to the community and a resource to the nation as a whole. In 1988, the over-65 population numbers forty million (U. S. Special Committee on Aging, 1985-86). After a year or two of retirement (or, indeed, soon after) these active adults begin a process of deciding how they ought to spend their time. It is a shock to some that the day, while busy and full, is not totally satisfying. Often, there is a sincere wish to contribute to society (McClusky, 1974), to help young people, and to supplement income.

Adult education programs based on retraining elders can serve a myriad of purposes: they can develop a clientele, provide knowledgeable tutors for public schools, and create a solid workforce. Lowy and O'Connor write: "Education can help meet these needs by assisting older persons to learn career development and job-search techniques, to acquire new and marketable skills or retool old ones, and to explore new options for earning money" (1986, p. 69). The Traveler's Insurance Company has developed a successful training and support program for retirees who are rehired: an "Unretirement Party" was held to celebrate its opening. Foster Grandparents Program, VISTA and Peace Corps volunteers are model conduits for contributing elders who wish to make a difference in the lives of others.

"But," ask adult educators, "how much can the older adult learn? Can he or she be taught the new tax codes, for example?" There is research evidence to support the response that they can learn anything that a younger person can learn, particularly when the content has personal meaning (Baltes & Schaie, 1982; Camp et al., 1983; Datan, 1984; Katzman & Terry, 1983; LaBouvie-Vief, 1980; Peterson, 1983; Willis, 1985). While an older adult may need a longer time to learn a new task, he or she is totally capable of learning new technology and its applications. A recent anecdote supports this claim: Two nuns were in charge of a hospital payroll in Massachusetts. When the hospital decided to computerize the total payroll process, the two sisters were sent to computer school, despite their ages, 52 and 80. After two weeks, the 52-year-old dropped out of the training program, claiming that she was too old. Feeling that she had nothing to lose at her age, the 80-year-old continued the program. She finished the course and is now wholly responsible for the automated payroll system at the hospital (Wolf, 1984).

3. Activities Designed to Teach Coping Skills

The achievement of life satisfaction is a life-long desire. With age, one adjusts and adapts to new psychobiological demands. In late life, when sensory deficits occur or health declines, there is a developmental need to compensate. Courses have been developed at Saint Joseph College that address topics such as stress deduction, nutrition, exercise, and dental hygiene; they have been successful, even with frail elders in long-term care settings. Crime-prevention campaigns which have matched high school students with elders have led to the extra benefit of new friendships.

Other programs have been developed around specific "need to know" concerns of elders. For example, a study of living wills in a retirement community led to a lecture series resource manual. One woman stated, "While I was frightened at first, I feel better knowing what will happen to me and I can get on with the rest of my life." The University of Michigan has instituted a "Memory Class" to train elders with failing memories in mnemonic strategies.

4. Education as Empowerment

Education empowers in many ways. Participating in a social gathering in which minds are the focus can be empowering in itself. Support groups in senior centers and commmunity centers address personal and family issues of concern to elders. Many older adults attend workshops and lectures to learn to care for their own parents (it is not uncommmon for a 65-year-old to be caring for an 85-year-old partent). ADRA (Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association) is an example of an educational/support group format which has played a pivotal role in the lives of many older adults.

A highly successful program at the University of Massachusetts in Boston trains elders in public policy and advocacy. Since 1984, this extraordinary student body has produced studies on "the impact of the federal budget on elders in Massachusetts," (The Gerontology Institute, 1987) demographics, the economic status of older women, fuel assistance, nursing home care, and home care. These studies and the accompanying lobbying have resulted in new legislation to correct inequities in the lives of elders. Students who initially feared the classroom continue after receiving the Gerontology Certificate; a large number have received the Bachelor of Arts. Graduates work in human service capacities and volunteer.

5. Participation as Education

Older adults have a role to play in the culture-at-large. One 85-year-old woman said, "No one really knows how to know us. Everyone is so busy and no one really knows what to do about us." Educators have to learn how to integrate growing numbers of community-living elders into everyday life and, by extension, the classroom. Finding ways to know elders and to hear of their worlds is a mode of adult education in its own right. In this mode, the elders are the teachers and the rest of the population is the classroom. The goal of adult educators should be projects in which elders and teenagers, school children, young adults, and mid-life adults mingle.

Short experiences which focus on history, neighborhoods, lifestyle, literature, or wellness might serve as arenas for exploration. Developmental perspectives would be the basis for "hearing" others' words. As an experiment, the following poem* was shown to several persons of varying ages, who were asked, "What does this poem mean to you?"

Ample Make This Bed
by Emily Dickinson

Ample make this bed.
Make this bed with awe;
In it wait till judgement break
Excellent and fair.

Be its mattress straight,
Be its pillow round;
Let no sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this ground.

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*I am grateful to Dr. Michael Brady who drew my attention to this poem in his unpublished paper, "Extending Houle's Patterns: Emily Dickinson as a Learner."

A young woman of seventeen responded with alacrity, "Why, it's about life! See, the 'bed' is life and the person is asking for a great and wonderful life ahead of her." Her forty-eight year old father said, "This poem is about death. The author is asking for her grave to be deep and silent." A high school class of mixed sexes, greeted the poem with embarrassment and scorn. One boy ventured, "This poem is about sex! See, the bed is big and you're judged by how you do at it." After class several students told the teacher, "Don't give us any more stuff like this." Finally, an 85-year-old woman read the poem and said,

> It means that this woman's mind wandered, just as mine does, while I do simple things in my home. She wanted the bed made ample, she didn't want it crimped--she didn't want it to hurt her toes when they stick up. And she has the feeling that I do: what a great place the bed is! Those quiet, lovely, beautiful moments when you rest. And you're just by yourself. And you have that wonderful sense of resting and thinking without your body tiring you out, without your body ruining everything.
>
> And you have said your prayers and you have a sense of peace and not fear. And you have God with you in the night. It reminds me of a prayer our mother taught us when she said, "Guide our little feet up to Thee."

> Maybe she is thinking of the last time she would be in her bed and she would wait, wait for her death. "Excellent" and "fair"--those two words go very nicely together.

When asked what she would like to do with the poem, Emma said, "I'd like to share it with some school children. They might learn to see beauty in the everyday things of life that they're learning to do. That way, the little things of their childhood can mean more to them."

Conclusion

A reading group focusing on Marge Piercy's best-selling novel, Gone to Soldiers, includes high school age, young, mid-life, and older women. In talking about living through a patriotic war, learning to work outside the home, and experiencing concentration camps, the older women shared first hand experiences. One sixteen-year-old said, "Sometimes, when my friends talk about suicide, I think that maybe things aren't really so tough, and maybe things can get better, no matter how bad they seem to be." An elder nodded and said, "It's amazing what you can live through. And then, with time, that you can be happy again." The girl repeated, "It's amazing what you can live through."

Adult education can take the lead in creating experiences in which elders are given the opportunity to explore their developmental agenda. With a clear sense of the potential at each stage of life, adult educators can create a world in which education is meaningful for all persons.

Elders must tell of the potential beauty in life. Recent survey data indicate that the majority of older persons in this country believe that the arts are "important for the quality of life

in the community" (Moody, 1988, p. 248). Elders must interpret the ways of the world. C. G. Jung (1933) 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" (p.109). It is the job of elders to teach hope and to guide the next generation; it is their job to inspire development. It their job to teach younger generations to trust the future. And for elders themselves, that is the mandate of their own self-development. Of the potential role of elders in the society, Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick write:

> Trust. . .is one of the constant human values or virtues, universally acknowledged as basic for all relationships. Hope is yet another basic foundation for all community living and for survival itself, from infancy to old age. (1986, p. 332)

It is the elder's role to teach trust.

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