

There's a New –gogy in Town:
Say Goodbye to Educational Inequality and Injustice with Senegogy

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Abstract

For the “Baby Boomer” generation, there exists inequality and injustice in education, both in dollars spent on education/programs and in amount of study devoted to their learning needs. “When the first baby boomers turned 65 in 2011, there were just under 77 million baby boomers in the population” (Colby & Ortman, 2014). The total population of the U.S. in 2011 was 310.5 million (Schlesinger, 2011), which made the “Boomers” 24.8% of the population of the U.S. in 2011. Unfortunately, higher education received less than 1% of the total dollars spent on education, and it is unlikely that the dollars were spent on programs or classes for the Boomers.

While syneogy, which is defined as elder learning or the study of learning in aging adults, cannot solve the problems of inequality and/or injustice in funding, it can address the problem of too little attention paid to the study of older adults’ learning needs. By using Alternative Learning Techniques, which are experiential in nature, and Integrative Learning Techniques, which are memory based, as well as Senior Learning Theory, more can be discovered about the lifelong learning needs and current learning preferences of older adults. Additional research into these theories can help address the issues of educational inequality and injustice as they relate to Boomers.

Everyone learns. For hundreds of years, theories about how people learn have been developed. Once people reach adulthood less money and time is invested in learning theories. However, when one-fourth of a population is receiving limited funding and research into their continuing learning needs, people should take notice. There is clearly inequality in funding and, by extension, injustice. Researchers and educators should explore more ways to build and fund programs for aging adults and develop learning theories to address their needs.

Inequality and Injustice

In education, inequality and injustice are usually measured in dollars as well as time, effort and attention devoted to study. Annual reports on dollars spent per student in elementary and secondary school districts throughout the U.S. are trotted out to show how students in one district are not receiving equal opportunities because they are not receiving equal dollars. The pool expands when community colleges, four-year colleges and universities are added. One specific example of fiscal inequality shows that in 2011-12, approximately \$682.6 billion was spent on elementary, secondary and post-secondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). From this \$682.6 billion, \$61.8 billion was devoted to higher education with an additional \$67.7 billion in work-study and grant money, as well as tax breaks, directed toward post-secondary institutions (Weissmann, 2015). Therefore, 19% of money spent on education was directed toward higher education; however, only 10% (or \$1.9 billion) was spent on adult, career and/or technical education (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, 2016). This means that less than 1% of the dollars spent on higher education in 2011-12 was earmarked for adult, career or technical education. These are the very same areas from which older learners might benefit, for example. Using the previous presumption that equality demands equal dollars, it is clear that the dollar amounts given to post-secondary or higher education are unequal to those given to primary and secondary education.

Another area of inequality is the number of individuals being served by the dollars being spent. The Baby Boom Generation (Boomers) has been defined as those born between 1946 and 1964. The “tipping point” came in 2008. That was the year when the oldest of the Boomers reached the age of 62. For everyone who could count,

the increase in senior citizens should have come as no surprise. However, as Gladwell (2002) predicted, the epidemic began, little changes had big effects, the changes happened in a hurry, and they started to spread. Between 2000 and 2009, there was a 21.1% increase in people over the age of 62 (Age and Sex Composition: 2010, 2011). This growth rate outpaced the increase in people under age 24 by 1.2%.

The total population of the U.S. in 2011 was 310.5 million (Schlesinger, 2011), which made the “Boomers” 24.8% of the population of the U.S. in 2011. “When the first baby boomers turned 65 in 2011, there were just under 77 million baby boomers in the population” (Colby & Ortman, 2014). A significant majority of those individuals were engaged in lifelong learning opportunities. It was documented through the American Council on Education (2007) that in 2005 approximately 75% of those individuals over 55 years of age were engaged in some sort of ongoing learning: 2.3% in part-time degree/ diploma programs, 32% in work-related courses and 40% in personal interest courses.

It could be argued that the federal government cannot provide equal funds because there are so few older Americans attending traditional courses in post-secondary environments. For example, the table below shows the top twelve grants provided through the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education. None of these grants were targeted specifically toward older adults, although all were used in post-secondary schools. It is notable, however, that only one, Critical Choices: Distance Learning for the At-Risk Work Force, might be applied to Boomers, but if it did apply to Boomers it is highly unlikely that it affected a significant number of them simply because Boomers have reached retirement age.

Table 1

FIPSE Data

<u>Grant #</u>	<u>Program</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>City</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Project Title</u>	<u>Start Date</u>	<u>End Date</u>	<u>Total Award</u>
P116F140034	FITW	College of New Rochelle	New Rochelle	NY	Mentoring, Undergraduate Research, and Augmented Libraries (MURAL)	10/01/2014	09/30/2018	\$3,998,781
P116F140051	FITW	Southern New Hampshire University	Manchester	NH	JUICE: An innovative, competency-based approach to helping under-prepared students reach completion by providing help that is Just-In-time, Contextualized and Empowering	10/01/2014	09/30/2018	\$3,953,360
P116F140301	FITW	TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM OF GEORGIA	Macon	GA	Increasing Access and Completion for Underrepresented, Underprepared, or Low Income Students in career and technical programs	10/01/2014	09/30/2018	\$3,215,009
P339B990305		PBS Adult Learning Service	Alexandria	VA	Project CONNECT	09/01/1999	08/31/2005	\$2,410,719
P339B990268		Arizona State University	Tempe	AZ	The e-Learning Network: Learning Anytime, Anywhere	09/01/1999	08/31/2004	\$1,953,172
P339B000061		WGBH Educational Foundation	Boston	MA	The SALT Partnership: Specifications for Accessible Learning Technologies	10/01/2000	09/30/2005	\$1,846,872
P339B990108		Indiana University Bloomington	Bloomington	IN	Learning to Teach with Technology Studio	09/01/1999	08/31/2004	\$1,570,324
P339B010339		Northern Illinois University	DeKalb	IL	Critical Choices: Distance Learning for the At-Risk Workforce	09/01/2001	02/28/2005	\$1,562,465
P339B000039		Governors State University	University Park	IL	Foster Pride Digital Curriculum	10/01/2000	08/15/2005	\$1,335,882

Table 1 (cont.)

FIPSE Data

<u>Grant #</u>	<u>Program</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>City</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Project Title</u>	<u>Start Date</u>	<u>End Date</u>	<u>Total Award</u>
P339B000058		University of Tennessee	Knoxville	TN	eLearnIT	09/01/2000	08/31/2003	\$1,170,339
P116Z080299	Directed	Minnesota State Colleges & Universities System Office	Saint Paul	MN	Statewide Veterans Re-Entry Education Program	07/01/2008	03/31/2011	\$1,099,451
P339B000133		University of Wisconsin – Madison	Madison	WI	Reach Out Project for Migrant Farmworkers and Their Families	01/01/2001	12/31/2004	\$1,002,278

The issue, then, may not be equal funding but *any* funding that is targeted toward older learners. In the competition for grant money, someone's or some group's "needs" must be defined and delineated, and the benefits to the group or to society must outweigh the cost. That cannot happen without considerable study and knowledge of the individual or group. The facts are that Boomers can continue to contribute to society in significant ways when they are able to find educational opportunities and study in their areas of interest. In addition to ongoing contributions in the workplace, Boomers can use their learning and experience to create small businesses or volunteer their time in existing institutions. They can pass their knowledge along to other people and help them master the skills the Boomers have acquired over the years. Without these contributions, society loses opportunities to rebuild families, businesses and communities. It is a catch-22: until there is study into the learning and educational needs of the Boomers, there will be little, if any, money devoted to it, and until there is money devoted to the learning and educational needs of Boomers, there will be little, if any, study of their needs. This is where senegogy may help.

Senegogy and Senior Learning Theory

There have been decades of study devoted to learning from infancy through adulthood – pedagogy through andragogy. Although there are various adult learning theories, none appear to study how learning needs and preferences may change as the population ages. Other than providing dollars to post-secondary institutions for the development of classes and programs that *might* benefit Boomers, what can make up for the years of non-study in the area of elder learning? Potential answers to this question may lie in The Baby Boomer Legacy research and the accompanying discussion of senegogy and senior learning theory.

Since 1970, Malcolm Knowles and others have developed many theories about adult learning, such as action learning, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, transformative learning, informal learning, incidental learning, and problem-based learning. Researchers such as Knowles, Jack Mezirow, K. Patricia Cross, Paolo Freire, David Kolb, and Roger Fry applied their theories to the entirety of adult learners with little or no attention paid to specific age groups, such as the Boomers. Therefore, the energy and attention given to adult learning could be said to have been both just and equal *some* of the time. At some point this changed, however, and it changed because the population changed. The population kept aging, but the theories did not change to recognize and address this inevitable fact.

Both common sense and empirical research show that the physical results of aging can affect learning. Diseases like Alzheimers and dementia impact the brain, causing loss of memory. Aging adults often find that their senses of sight and hearing are not as acute as during their youth.

Using a longitudinal study over a period of several decades, Schaie (1994) noted that scores on primary mental abilities improved gradually until about age forty at which time the abilities tend to stabilize until approximately age sixty. The decreases are small until the mid-seventies at which time scores are usually measurably lower than they were in the mid-twenties The significance of this seminal study seems to be that noticeable overall mental decline in the primary abilities does not generally occur until later in life. (Crawford, 2004).

That older adults can still learn is not at issue. They continue to display the traits common to adult learners: internal motivation, life experience, goal orientation, information relevancy, practicality, and respect (Knowles, 1970). However, as Strauch (2009) writes,

Teaching new facts should not be the focus of [older] adult education, she [Dr. Kathleen Taylor] says. Instead, continued brain development and a richer form of learning may require that you 'bump up against people and ideas' that are different (n.p.).

Learning new facts is not necessarily what older learners seek. As David Bernard (2011) suggested, older learners want choice in the topics they learn because they not only have the time to invest, but learning keeps older people sharp and socially engaged. It also allows older learners to continue contributing to society in important but less obvious ways. "While it is clear that adults aged 55 to 79 are participating in a wide range of lifelong learning programs . . . comprehensive information in many areas is lacking" (American Council on Education, 2007, pg. 7).

To bring equilibrium/equality back to the study of adult learning, the theory of senegogy has been proposed, along with Senior Learning Theory, Adaptive Learning Techniques and Integrative Learning Techniques. Senegogy is defined as elder learning or the study of learning in aging adults. Senegogy applies to any adult individual who perceives a change in how s/he learns as s/he ages. For some, that change may not be noticeable until they reach a more advanced age; for others, the change is noticeable at an earlier age. Realistically, specific ages cannot be used to define senegogy simply because the application of the term is both situational and experiential.

Like many of the adult learning theories that have gone before, the new senegogy-related techniques and theories have one thing in common: they build on a lifetime of experience. Senior Learning Theory (SLT) can be applied to anyone middle aged or older who is attempting to learn new information or utilize previously learned information in a new or different way. The theory maintains that older learners use a combination of techniques or preferences coupled with personal experience to work with information throughout the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The learners might use Adaptive Learning Techniques (ALT), which are experiential in nature, and/or Integrative Learning Techniques (ILT), which are memory-based.

Adaptive learning techniques rely on previous experience. The learner utilizes familiar actions and techniques to adapt to current needs. For example, a single previous act in a similar situation may provide the technique necessary to ensure the learner is successfully assimilating the lesson. Another example of an adaptive learning technique is collaboration wherein each participant focuses on his/her area of expertise while providing opportunities for others to learn from him/her. In some instances, older learners may focus on outcomes using comparisons to previous successes, processes

and/or procedures to boost their learning. Above all, adaptive learning techniques rely on the situational, what has happened in the past and what was learned from it.

Integrative learning techniques rely on memory, not just memory as thought of in the traditional sense but physical memory, such as muscle memory, as well. Nearly everyone has developed one or more methods to help improve memory. Acronyms and repetition are two examples of integrative learning techniques. Some learners find that key words help trigger memory. In addition, muscle memory is useful in learning new physical skills. The experience of using various tools creates some degree of muscle memory, which can then be used to acquire expertise with other tools, for example.

The degree to which educational researchers are willing to invest time and energy in the study of senegogy and Senior Learning Theory with its associated learning techniques will determine how successfully the inequality and injustice in this area of higher education will be overcome. Learning continues throughout life. The one-quarter of the population in the last quarter of their lives deserves to have as much study of their educational needs as every other age group has already gained.

In college learning was for a grade. Today, learning is for a purpose. I know who I am, what interests me, and what my strengths are. Therefore, I concentrate on learning more about things that interest me and concentrate in areas where I can actually make a difference (Krzyzak, 2016, n.p.).

Suggestions for Future Study

For decades, colleges and universities have provided educational opportunities for older adults—from noncredit lectures, to travel programs, to for-credit certificate and degree programs. . . . Because of the range of educational needs and motivations of older adults, colleges and universities must find the means and the messages to reach both the PhD and the high school dropout, the retired executive and the day laborer, and the boomer and the octogenarian (American Council on Education, 2007, pg. 22-23).

Since the American Council on Education published the information stated above, there has been additional research into teaching methodologies designed specifically for use with older learners. With these methodologies come knowledge of how people learn and the most successful types of lessons to present. It is important to cover the knowledge, comprehension and application levels of Bloom's Taxonomy; however, increased research into how Boomers analyze, synthesize and evaluate new information would be beneficial. This type of research could lead to more funding opportunities for lifelong learning initiatives in both traditional and non-traditional post-secondary environments. Furthermore, additional funding spent on Boomers in the realm of education has the potential to spill over into research on the Boomer legacy – how have the ideals expressed by Boomers during the 1960s and 1970s transitioned into the 21st century. From virtually any point of view, additional research into the Boomer generation, its needs as well as its legacy, should be encouraged.

Conclusion

When inequality, injustice and inattention can be shown to have affected individuals and their access or ability to participate in educational activities, the results can have negative ramifications for society. Further, the problem will only grow as the number of impacted individuals continues to increase. It has been clearly shown that individuals belonging to the baby-boom generation have had very little money spent on their learning needs as they reach retirement age versus the learning needs of individuals under the age of 24. This could be the result of negligence on the part of the schools and the government, or it could be inattention to the fact that the number of Boomers reaching retirement age is increasing. Regardless, the inequality and injustice related to dollars spent is undeniable and makes up the first half of the catch-22.

The second half of the catch-22 relates to determining and studying the educational needs of the affected age group, the Boomers. Senegogy and Senior Learning Theory are new terms that define some of the Boomers' learning needs. Whether formal or informal, Boomers want to keep learning and contributing to society. They cannot simply walk into a college classroom as though they still learn the way they did when they were 20 years old. As they have aged, their educational needs have changed. Unfortunately, without funding there is little likelihood that research into those changes will take place on an even moderate scale. Again, the inequality and injustice related to the amount of attention and study into the educational/learning needs of Boomers make up the second half of the catch-22.

The whole picture, then, is that one-quarter of the population in the U.S. receives only about 1% of all the government funds spent on education. This generation, like those that have gone before it, has made significant contributions to the socio-economic

well-being of the country. Their learning/educational needs must be acknowledged and addressed well before the last Boomers reach the age of 62 in 2026. People are not going to stop aging simply because their situations change. Any research into senegogy and Senior Learning Theory will have far-reaching impacts, and the dollars spent to support the research will be money well spent.

This Information Age is transforming so rapidly into the Knowledge Worker Age that it is going to take continual investment in our own education and training to stay abreast. Much of this will be done by the school of hard knocks, but people who see what is happening and who are disciplined will systematically continue their education until they acquire the new mind-set and the new skill-set required to anticipate and accommodate the realities of the new age. Hopefully, this will gradually morph into the Age of Wisdom, when information and knowledge are impregnated with purpose and principles (Covey, 2004, pg. 295).

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