Time and meaning in later-life learning

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With an increase in life expectancy in modern complex communities, there will be a prolonged period, post-retirement, in which older adults will seek meaningful projects. Juxtaposed with the longer period after retirement is the realisation that life is nearing the end. This paper draws on research undertaken from 2003–2010. The purpose of the research was to investigate the lived experiences of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) learners. The participants identified as being in the post-work phase of their lives and their ages ranged from the mid-70s to the early 90s as at 2010. The study used a qualitative methodology and interpretations were elicited from a phenomenological perspective. A significant finding from the study was that the existential concept of time was at the core of the learning experiences and their need to develop and grow.

Introduction

As modern complex societies enter an era of a 'top-heavy' population the older adults in these communities will be faced with the existential questions of the purpose of their life, coupled with the tensions of the need to grow and develop. With an increase in life expectancy, there will be a prolonged period, post-retirement, in which older adults will seek meaningful projects. Juxtaposed with the longer period after retirement is the realisation that life is nearing the end. These two aspects of time (having time on their hands and time is running out) are considered important in understanding and interpreting the lived experience of learning in later life.

This paper is based on a qualitative study of 16 older, adult, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) learners. Participants' ages ranged from mid-70s to early-90s (as at 2010). Participants were interviewed twice over a period of seven years, from 2003 to 2010. The purpose of the study was to investigate the lived experiences of older adults in learning to use and using a range of ICT. Case study analysis provided data that drew on phenomenological interpretation to elicit themes. A significant existential theme to emerge was time. The unique time period in the lives of older adults, not constrained by the demands of work commitments and career decisions, provides an opportunity for significant growth and development with an increasing focus on time and meaning.

Grounding studies of later-life learning in the socio-cultural world

Many authors highlight the need to ground human research design and interpretation in a socio-cultural context because of the generally held belief that humans are inseparable from their social, cultural and historical context (van Manen 1997; Williamson 1998; Illeris 2002; Findsen 2005; Jarvis 2007). In studies of older adulthood, an understanding of the social context of ageing is considered essential

because of the belief that the self and ageing are socially constructed in unique and complex ways (Tennant 1997; Thorson 2000; Findsen 2005; Jarvis, 2001a, 2007). Findsen (2005) highlights the need for greater understanding of later-life learning experiences in the broader cultural, political, economic and social circumstances of older adults, in other words, their lived experiences. For older adults in modern complex societies, the socio-cultural context has changed over time and those now in later life 'need the skills to manage more complex lives' (Clifton 2009: 19).

The rise in older adult organisations and retirement villages, and the increasing number of older people travelling, suggests a re-defining of old age that may be explained by the notion of development as an 'ongoing dialectical process' (Tennant 1997: 54). This developmental process is believed to occur in response to the modern changing world in which individuals likewise change, thereby gaining a better understanding of their lives and greater participation in society. Tennant advises that, in understanding the lived experiences of older adults, it is important to focus on 'how the various factors in development interact, such as biological, cultural, historical, psychological and physical' (1997: 54).

The view that learning and life are inextricably linked has been explored as an existential phenomenon (Jarvis 2001b; Jarvis 2007) that goes to the very core of the Being and is 'as crucial as breathing' (Jarvis 2001b: 201). Jarvis explains the integrative and life-affirming nature of the dimensions of learning in saying that 'learning is about becoming a person in society, about transforming the experiences of living into knowledge, skills and attitude so that human individuality might develop' (1992: 237). Van Manen's (1997) notion that experience implicates the totality of life accords with Jarvis and supports the view that the socio-cultural context is vital to an understanding of the lived experience of learning in later life—

the humanness of the experience, in particular the aspect of human endeavour (of learning).

The integration of learning with lived experience provides a way of understanding and interpreting approaches and meaning from the standpoint of older adults. While Findsen (2005: 3) asserts that there is merit in the investigation of learning processes as they apply to later-life learning, he notes that such studies have limitations because they do not take into account the 'contradictions, tensions and paradoxes of ageing'. Learning is believed to be a fusion of the intellectual and emotional, of meaning and value, an emotive process as well as a cognitive process (Dewey 1933; Brookfield 2000). For older adults, learning is 'qualitatively different from learning undertaken in the past' (Withnall 2010: 104).

Making meaning through learning is thought to be 'an interaction of both social practices and ontogenesis' (Keating & MacLean 1988: 298). These interactions place both the self and the social within the construction of knowledge and, in fact, when a connection between life, age and learning is investigated, societal conditions are seen to be of crucial importance (Illeris 2003).

Although learners are the chief actors in the drama of learning, the Being is also a member of a human family (Kidd 1973), so any individual experience is never truly just one person's experience, and it is inexplicably linked to the social. Humans are in constant interaction with their surroundings and 'these interactions constitute the framework of all experience' (Dewey 1933: 36). Environmental interactions are fundamentally social and, as learning rarely takes place in social isolation, most learning can be thought of as social (Jarvis 2007).

Methodology

Five male and 11 female ICT learners, with ages ranging from mid-70s to early-90s (as at 2010), were interviewed at least twice over a period of seven years, from 2003–2010. An approach was made to non-profit organisations that offered ICT lessons for older adults and learners volunteered to take part in the study. The main aim of the study was to understand and interpret the lived experience of later-life, ICT learners. Participants were learning to use technology either in small class settings with peer tutors or in their own home with an individual peer tutor. Peer tutors were voluntary and not qualified teachers. On average, each learner attended regular weekly lessons for a period of 12 months.The initial face-to-face interviews took place during the period of learning and then participants were again interviewed when they had ceased lessons. All participants had retired from paid work and self-identified as older adults.

A hermeneutic, phenomenological methodology was chosen because it enabled rich existential and ontological insights into the learning experience by privileging the voices of the participants. Ontological insights were interpreted from the lived experience of the participants, whereby questions of the Being's relationship with the world were explored. Understandings of phenomenology and hermeneutics were influenced by the work of Heidegger (1962) and his ontological 'account of the human-world relations which determine and outline the dimensions of human existence (*Dasein*)' (Ihde 1990: 23). Heidegger's link with ontology influenced an orientation to phenomenology and enabled a focus on the Being's relation with the world and the nature of lived experience.

Three phenomenological analytical and interpretive tools were used at various times throughout the analysis and interpretative phase. The three tools were: within-case, cross-case and thematic analysis. Within-case analysis focused on the individual and enabled insights into the ontological experience, that is, those elements that seek to

answer Being questions. Narratives as told by the participants in the interviews were constantly examined, comparing them with other stories told by the respondent and also comparing them with stories told by other participants in cross-case analysis. Data from within-case and cross-case analysis were placed within a thematic framework so that the data could be examined and referenced as emerging themes. Various understandings such as *a priori* understanding (based on the literature review), emerging understanding (based on field data) and analytical understanding (based on recurring data in within-case and cross-case analysis) were used.

Unique time factors influencing later-life learning approaches

The time factors that contribute to an understanding of the complex context of learning in later life are unique to older adulthood and may influence approaches to learning. It is thought that an 'individual temporal perspective has a significant impact on learning' (Allan & Lewis 2009: 40). Two time factors will be discussed:

- Limited number of years left
- Longer period after retirement

Limited number of years left

The most fundamental, existential dichotomy is that between life and death and this awareness (that death is inevitable) 'profoundly influences man's life' (Fromm 1947: 42). The heightened awareness of death is relevant to older people because they are closer (than they were when they were younger) in clock time to death. The cognisance of time running out, of coming towards the end of their life, is recognised by researchers and older people alike. Various authors have reported on this in the past (Erikson 1950; Lebel 1978; Maslow 1970; Moody 1985).

The personal insight that the self has a limited number of years left is referred to as the 'life turn' by Illeris (2003) and a 'certain threshold' by de Beauvoir (1978: 555). The 'life turn' is a significant psychological and sociological turning point that changes the way the Being thinks about their life and life in general.

In a number of autobiographies and biographies, references were made to 'the end' by people in older adulthood (de Beauvoir 1974, 1978; White cited in Marr 1991; Lessing cited in Ingersoll 1996; Hepburn cited in Berg 2003). Faced with the inevitable end of life, older adults become more sensitive to notions of time. In Erikson's (1950) psycho-sociological 'ego integrity' terms, older adults search for a sense of wholeness in their lives, for the continuity, the meaning and purpose of their lives. Older adults know that life will continue without them but would like to believe that their contribution to the world was significant and that they will be remembered. In Being and Time (1962), Heidegger suggests that being is time, hence, time is pervasive and significant. The sense of self in the past, the present and the future constitute the 'horizons of the Being's temporal landscape' (van Manen 1997: 104). The intensity of the awareness of time in later life means that time as an influence cannot be overlooked. Time contextualises the life-world of all beings, in particular those in later life, and in a form not present at other stages in life.

As life approaches the end, the Being 'must give account to the self, of the self, and of the meaning of its existence' (Fromm 1947: 41). In the quest to make sense of a life in relation to the whole of life and to the lifeworld, not only are questions asked of the self about what the past means but also what the present means. The search for the meaning of one's life becomes an imperative as the inevitable end of life approaches. Learners are faced with choices that are ontologically and existentially grounded in the ageing process (Jarvis 2001b). Time is seen as running out and hence the search for meaning becomes an intrinsic, developmental task of ageing with an intensified focus on

value and meaning. 'The endless quest for meaning to make sense of existence … might well become more important to some of us as we age' (Jarvis 2001a: 98).

The tensions of 'what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish is inherent in the human being and is therefore indispensable to mental well-being' (Frankl 1984: 127). The 'polar field of tension' sets up an 'existential dynamic where one pole is represented by a meaning that is to be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it' (Frankl 1982: 127). The sense of sustaining the life-force is significant for older adults who are faced with the tensions of withdrawing from their lifeworld or continuing to develop and grow and remain active (Erikson 1950; McClusky 1971; Moody 1985; Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick 1986). When the Being truly examines the self and balances the consequences of no-learning versus the outcomes of learning, they will choose the sometimes painful but ultimately rewarding path of growth (Rogers 1969). This seems to suggest that human endeavours are intrinsic to growth and development and to the Being. From extensive research, Jarvis clearly makes the link, that there is an inherent imperative to learn and that learning is as essential as food and water to human growth and development (2001a, 2001b, 2006, 2007).

The time imperative is at the core of the final two stages of Erikson's (1950) psycho-sociological model, and Moody's (1985) tensions of life-expectancy versus the need to grow and develop. Sartre in his 70s alluded to the inevitability of his own death (Sartre & Contat 1975). He claimed that the thought of death did not cause him to be melancholy, nor did he grieve for the past, rather he wanted to make the best of the years he had left to him. Maslow's (1970) notion that self-actualisation can only be realised in older adulthood means that learners may decide it is 'now or never'. With a heightened awareness of longevity, older people engage in an existential search

for the answers to ontological questions and do so through learning experiences (Russell 2005).

In relation to later-life learning, time as a dimension of influence is recognised by a number of researchers (Wolf 1991; Jarvis 2001a, 2007; Findsen 2005). The temporal structure of the final stage of life differs qualitatively from the structure of time in mid-life, causing older adults to seriously contemplate the expected life-span, number of years left and how they want to spend the rest of their lives (Lebel 1978). The omega of their life provides older adults with the unique opportunity for the wisdom of age to combine with the search for meaning in an active form (Moody 1985). Not wanting to waste time in meaningless pursuits, older learners are highly selective, more so than younger adults who are known to engage in learning only when they are interested and the learning is relevant to them (Knowles 1984). Older adults' choice of learning is no longer determined by career goals and in this sense is voluntary and self-initiated (Illeris 2002).

Considering the vastness of learning opportunities in the lifelong learning culture of developed countries and the rapid changes in knowledge, there are many sources of learning potential. Elderhostels are popular in America in arranging study tours and holidays for thousands of older people each year. Programs such as Elderhostel and the University of the Third Age (U3A) offer retired people opportunities to pursue learning interests. Older adults are increasingly participating in large numbers in emerging and expanding activities, and may be drawn especially to those that involve new experiences (Peterson & Masunga 1998). Many older adults state that they do not know how they found time to go to work pre-retirement (Jarvis 2001a). It seems that people in later life have all the time in the world (longer period after retirement) but no time to spare (limited number of years left). From the Russell (2005: 247) study, Gill described what it was like to be a computer learner—it is

the most magnificent thing: 'What would I do without it? What did I do with all my time before? It's just so rewarding, fulfilling'. Life-on-earth time was running out, yet later-life learners claimed they have all the time in the world and there is no hurry as the following comments demonstrate. 'You've got all the time in the world. There's no deadlines.' (Russell 2005: 248); and 'I'm not desperate for time. I just think eventually I'll get there' (Russell 2005: 248).

Despite their claims that they have all the time in the world, participants in the study also accepted that they were not going to live forever and that they needed to plan for the future and look beyond their lifeworld and themselves. Participants in the study made explicit remarks about the finitude of their lives and identified the self as a being in the omega stage of life. The later-life learners appear to resolve the tension between the two principles of finitude and self-development, because this particular time of life provides a unique opportunity for the wisdom of age to combine with the search for meaning in an active form.

Longer period after retirement

Greater life-expectancy as a result of good health and medical advances results in a longer period of time after leaving paid employment in which people are still healthy. If life expectancy is 80 years and people retire from paid work at 60 years, there is still one quarter of a life yet to be lived. In fact, at least one third of life can be spent outside the workforce. This increased, 'uncommitted' time available to people means they are inevitably faced with how to occupy themselves in meaningful ways over a prolonged period. When people first retire, they think it is going to be an opportunity to spend more time on leisure activities, but it soon becomes obvious to them that it is not feasible to spend the rest of life in 'trivial pursuits' and there is a need to find worthwhile things to do (Thorson 2000; Russell 2005).

The long period after retirement presents the time dilemma of having a lot of time to spare, yet needing to do more than just fill in time. People in retirement may seriously consider the choices of doing more of the same, such as a hobby they now want to spend more time on, or taking up something entirely new, such as a long-held interest they have previously been unable to pursue. The extended period of relative freedom, coupled with the desire to be actively involved, fosters the notion of active retirement in which 'older adults are encouraged to achieve learning goals and participate fully in life' (Findsen 2005: 60).

In fact, retirees have an 'increase in unobligated time' (Blit-Cohen & Litwin 2004: 386) and, in a way not possible at other stages in life, have the ability to control their time. This flexibility with time appears to empower people in later life and provides them with choices. From the study of later-life learners, Quentin described the time immediately after retirement and his imperative to learn something of value:

> After I retired, I had a few years out just appreciating my freedom. Then I thought, well, everything around me seemed to be computer. It seemed to hinge on computers, banking, everything. I just thought I was being left further and further behind and I had to do something about it. (Russell 2005: 257)

The participants identified as being in the post-retirement stage in life when there was time to pursue personal interests. Retirement presents its own challenges and one of them is to find meaningful activity. As previously described, Quentin referred to the few years after retirement as being a period when he pursued things he had always wanted to do, but then he started thinking seriously about how he wanted to spend his time and the rest of his life. Reflection such as that described by Quentin may enable those in retirement to set challenging and meaningful projects, rather than just keeping busy.

Freed from the time constraints of full-time work commitments, older adults are able to selectively undertake meaningful learning projects. Learning in later life is characterised by personal instincts, the innate desire to learn and the absence of external incentives (Illeris 2003). Illeris affirms that older adults learn out of interest for a particular subject or thing, and the desire to understand or gain experience in specific contexts. One study found that older adults learn for spiritual or personal growth, for pure enjoyment in learning something new, and to keep up with what is happening in the world (AARP 2000). A majority (70%) of participants in the AARP study also said they engage in learning in order to enrich their lives. Maslow's (1962) self-actualisation, at the pinnacle of human needs, provides a way of understanding learning in later life, as an opportunity to reach individual potential in interests and natural abilities. The true value of learning for older people is in the ability of learning to expand and challenge learners to search and explore their growth and development (Moody 1976).

Goals and time

Older adults do not measure time by the number of tasks they have completed, as they may have done when younger (for example, 'I had a very busy day, I did this and this and this and this') (Erikson et al. 1986). Older adults are not bound by clock time or quantitative measures of tasks. They think in terms of 'I got one task done really well. It doesn't matter that it took all morning'. Erikson et al. (1986) suggest that the time factor, as described earlier in 'The limited number of years left' and 'The longer period after retirement', may catch older adults unaware and this is why those in later life need to reconfigure time in order to be able to become competent and realise a sense of achievement. Later-life computer learners in Russell's (2005) study changed goals when they found they had to reconfigure time. They initially thought they would devote a certain amount of time to learning, but discovered that learning required more time

and they shifted their goals to reflect the amount of time they were prepared to spend on learning. Another possible explanation is that they allocated more time to learning by shifting around their time priorities.

Participants in the study were satisfied when they have made achievements. They were not concerned about how long it took them to reach a level of competence and they did not dwell on the time factor of learning. From the study of laterlife ICT learners, Coby's initial goal was to email her children by Christmas. Coby's description captures the wholeness of her approach, her goals, purpose, and satisfaction with achievements and progress:

> I made up my mind that I would be able to send an email by Christmas. Well, in fact, I couldn't. I couldn't send it out by that time but I had progressed a bit. Fairly soon after Christmas I did achieve my goal. My first goal was only to be able to send an email to our daughter in Denmark and our son in London. So, having achieved that, I felt I'd reached my aim at that stage. Now I want to progress a bit but I don't want to do anything complicated. I just want to read the emails and read some information that comes up. (Russell 2005: 173)

Coby set out with a specific goal but accepted that, while she did not achieve the goal in the set time, she learnt other skills. Coby reconciled the initial goal not being achieved with unanticipated skills learnt. It seemed more important for her to be able to do the things she wanted to do on the computer that were relevant to her lifeworld than to learn skills that were not important to her. Her main purpose in learning to use the computer was to have closer communication with family living overseas. She also wanted to be able to 'pick up information' in relation to travelling overseas to spend time with her family (Russell 2005: 174). Coby's overall purpose of being able to enhance the relationship with children and grandchildren living overseas drove her learning. Each skill achieved brought her closer to achieving her overall purpose. Coby's description appears to align

with Dewey's (1964) notion that 'ends-in-view' give activity greater meaning and direct the future course of learning. Coby's end-in-view, of enlarging family relationships, was more significant than the focus on achieving specific goals within a given timeframe.

Erikson et al. (1986) believe that later-life learners replace goals with the achievement of single tasks that provide older adults with the same satisfaction as achieving goals. The authors link this behaviour to the heightened perspective of time. Goals are re-assessed in light of the time older adults have left to live and the time they are prepared to spend on learning. In the process, it is believed that older adult learners move the goal posts. Erikson et al. suggest the learner drives the shifting target based on allocating time and being able to achieve one thing. The empowerment is once again an essential dimension of the learning experience that relates to time.

In conclusion, Erikson et al. (1986) advise that it may not be possible to refer to goals in the same way as for younger people and that the notion of goals needs to be re-defined for older adult learners. Some of the later-life ICT learners in this study (Russell 2005) started out with goals as they would when younger. However, with the overwhelming nature of ICT and the seemingly infinite learning potential, they re-thought their original goals. It was not a question of lowering the standard or of shifting the goal posts, but more about getting one thing done and done properly. This seemed more important to the learners in the study than achieving specific or general goals. The notion of defining intents and purposes was further complicated by the ability of the technology to present unanticipated challenges and the potential for learners to achieve these.

Summary

The period of older adulthood is unique in the lifecourse as an opportunity to learn something of interest. There are no time

constraints, so devoting time to learning and exploring new pursuits is possible. Learning at this stage of life is not compulsory (school) or work-related (career); it may be self-initiated and voluntary. People in retirement have a choice of learning, to learn or not to learn, and also a choice in the topics they learn. They are able to be more flexible with time in a way not previously experienced. Learning that occurs after leaving full-time, paid employment is unique as a time when learning is not related directly to paid work and there is no requirement to gain the accreditations and qualifications that at an earlier age would be valued for their economic potential. Devoid of work commitments, older people are in a position where they are able to voluntarily engage in learning. They are not bound to learning for financial gain and they have no career aspirations.

Maintaining a sense of self is important to later-life learners as they negotiate their place in a changing environment. They seek continuity, inclusion and integrity in their relations with others and preferred autonomy to dependence. Later-life learners acknowledge their closeness to the end of their lives, but do so with a sense that they intend to live fully until they die. They are in a unique position of being able to weigh up their lives in a way not possible when younger. Older adults are acutely aware of time and in a sense they 'play' with it, that is, they are able to look back while looking forward from the position of the present.

Later-life learners use reflection to reconfigure and reconstitute time, to maintain integrity, and to have a sense of who they are. With an awareness of time as in the finitude of corporeality, older adults make the best of the time left to them and continue to be themselves using new measures of time. They reposition the self in relation to goals to enable growth and development within the time left to them and they look to the future beyond their own lifetime. The paradox of time felt by the participants—that they have all the time in the world and yet

very little time left—lies at the heart of the uniqueness of time in later life.

Time is a value for those in later life. They are in a state of time luxury because they have no work commitments but they do not want to merely fill in time in meaningless pursuits. They have a notion that they have plenty of time (or at least more than they had previously to spend on themselves), but they also believe that time is not to be wasted. In tandem with this is the realisation that they are facing the inevitable end of life and coming to terms with the finitude of life. It is a paradox for the Being that, in order to be able to consider pursuits to be worthwhile and to spend time on them, the Being has to realise that life could end tomorrow. The older adults appear to follow the adage 'plan as if you are going to live forever and live as if you are going to die tomorrow'. However, they also have the attitude that there is no urgency, that they have all the time in the world and that it does not matter if something does not get finished today, as there is always tomorrow.

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