

## The importance of learning

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Taking an adult education course is one of the easiest and most enjoyable ways of meeting people. An organised course provides a kind of neutral space, in which different people can come together without having to justify themselves in any way, other than their shared interest in the topic. Focusing on the skill or subject is itself a way of sparking conversation – and of course it helps to keep your mind active.

Britain offers a huge variety of adult education activities, from evening classes to weekend schools, and field trips to online courses. Some lead to qualifications, others can be studied simply for their own sake. And they are extremely popular: the most recent official survey found that seven of every ten adults in the country had taken some kind of organised learning in the previous three years.

And we also have excellent evidence to confirm the value of adult learning. Older learners themselves report a range of benefits; they particularly value the way in which continuing their education helps them keep their minds active, acquire new skills and knowledge, and meet new people and make friends. They also generally say that they simply enjoy the experience – a good tutor, and a congenial group of fellow learners, make learning fun!

Researchers have a rather different way of approaching things. While we are certainly interested in what learners themselves have to say, we also tend to look for other types of evidence, including whether or not we can find external signals of the impact of learning. In recent years, social

scientists studying adult learning have shown that it produces measurable changes in health and well-being, and also promotes people's involvement in their wider community, as well as their ability to influence their own lives. There are even studies showing that participating in adult learning leads to higher levels of tolerance of others and helps to increase civic participation. Other research has found that learning helps people encounter transitions more successfully, and handle major changes in their lives.

These are truly valuable outcomes of learning, but the problem with many of these studies is that while they are extremely authoritative, they look at the adult population as a whole. More recently, though, researchers have started to turn their attention to learning in later life. The most systematic undertaken so far, by Andrew Jenkins and Tarek Mostafa of the University of London, suggests that learning in later life produces gains in well-being, particularly if the learning is of a relatively informal character.

Conversely, lack of learning can inhibit well-being. Finnish social scientists have found that poor education is associated with loneliness in later life. Other studies have confirmed this link, and have also in turn shown that loneliness is associated with decreases in cognitive function. So it isn't just that learning promotes sociability – relationships also matter for learning. We need other people to challenge us, support us and accompany us if we are to maintain our capacity to learn.

From a different perspective, neuroscientists have explored the ways in which learning in adult life leads to measurable changes in particular areas of the brain – a critical finding that confirms that the brain continues to develop through adult life. And we also know that education can be important in delaying the effects of such illnesses as dementia. We are still in the early stages of this important work, and we don't yet know much about the role of learning in later life in relation to cognitive resilience. Nevertheless, these are really encouraging findings which support other research

suggesting that adult learning has a role to play in maintaining people's ability to live independently and productively in later life.

So it is heartening that so many older adults embrace the opportunity with relish. Seniors flock to local authority courses (which often offer a fee concession to the over-60s), as well as to classes offered by voluntary groups like the Workers' Educational Association, or by other public bodies such as museums, sports centres, cinemas and theatres. And look at the success of the University of the Third Age, which has local groups in virtually every community in the country, who manage their own programmes with a minimum of outside support.

For many people, then, retirement from full time work brings the time and freedom to join a course. According to the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing, over two out of five 50 to 69 year-olds take part in some kind of organised learning activity. However, this tails off sharply with age, with a big drop among those who leave the workforce, and particularly steep falls in formal education and training among the older groups. Tragically, when we come to the oldest groups, the level of participation is tiny. One authoritative national survey, conducted by the National Institute of Adult Education, reported in 2013 that the proportion of adult learners among the over-75s was half what it was among 65 to 74-year-olds.

So our society is not doing enough to support learning among older adults, and in particular it is failing the oldest members of the community. And there are also marked inequalities in participation among older adults. People who stay in work beyond retirement are more likely to continue their education than those who leave the labour market. Women are more likely to take part than men. And, most worrying of all, people who have the highest levels of education already are much more likely to carry on learning in later life.

What do we need to do to improve the situation?

The first thing, in my view, is to change the mindset of people who don't see learning as something they can do. You really are, as the cliché has it, never too old to learn.

Unequal internet access is itself a barrier to participation. Consistently across countries, surveys have reported significant differences in internet use for members of different age groups, with older adults reporting much lower levels of internet activity than younger people. Often, when asked, older adults will simply say that the internet is somehow beyond them. This is, though, already changing, with rising use among the over-60s, leading some market researchers to talk about the growing number of 'silver surfers'.

Recent British research suggests that the digital divide is partly the product of generational differences: people who are accustomed to using the internet grow older, while those for whom the internet arrived relatively late in life are continuing to resist it. The key turning point are, perhaps not surprisingly, the 'boomers', born during or just after the Second World War, who have tended to embrace digital communications, while those who grew up in a slightly earlier period are far less likely to see the internet as part of their world (Gilleard and Higgs 2008).

Practices advocated by professional adult educators include:

- Intergenerational learning, where older adults can contribute their knowledge of past times to younger people, while learning from them in turn
- Improving older adults' skills in information technology, in order to reduce the digital divide between the generations
- Faith-based education programmes, which recruit volunteers from among the members of a congregation in order to provide learning for its older members alongside other forms of support (Wolf and Brady 2010, 372)

There are also many private organisations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, who see older adults as a potential market. For obvious reasons, these are likely to target more affluent older adults.

Finally, learning can be particularly valuable for the 'older old', who are most likely to be isolated as a result of losing friends and family. A number of recent initiatives have tried to bring adult learning to this group, and particularly those in care. A film on You Tube shows the positive effects of learning experienced by residents at Leicester's Aigburth Residential Home and Matlock's Tansley House Residential Home. NIACE publishes a range of free material for staff working in care homes (available at <http://tinyurl.com/yg9t9q9>).