

LIFELONG LEARNING:

THE CHALLENGE OF THE LATER YEARS

**Dr. Ted Fleming Department of Adult and Community Education
Maynooth College**

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INTRODUCTION

I am not an expert on gerontology, and so it is with some hesitation that I start this conversation. What I would like to do is suggest a number of ideas, questions and possibilities which could form the basis for a conversation and this in turn may prompt a better understanding of the learning needs of older adults.

What I intend to do in this paper is present three ideas which could inform an adult education response to the challenge of lifelong learning in the later years. The three ideas are about:

1. A concept of adult learning that involves changing frames of reference or the framework within which we think, feel and act
2. The search for identity in later life and how it relates to this reframing learning
3. Research, or what we know already about the learning needs of older adults.

ADULT LEARNING IN LATER LIFE

My grandmother lived to be ninety six. She lived upstairs. And a good deal of my childhood revolved around her. Long walks in the country, out beyond the town boundary, were exciting adventures over ditches and across streams. I learned to read listening to her reading out loud. [My younger brother learned to read before me by not listening to her stories!] She was German. Well organised and determined to wash the outside of the house with the same enthusiasm as she cleaned the inside. She was the first old person I knew. 'How old was she?' we always asked as children.

I cannot remember thinking about old age very much until secondary school when the Latin teacher turned our unprepared attention to Cicero's *De Senectute*. We were barely coming to terms with adolescence and not even nearly ready for adulthood but the Department of Education in its wisdom had on the Leaving Certificate syllabus a text called *On Old Age?*

In these experiences, and many others, I was learning about old age. A whole layer of understandings, meanings, in fact a whole framework within which I was to come to understand and give meaning to old age was being constructed. Each one of us is such

a collection of experiences and stories. They are individual, unique, mine and yours. They are the background against which and out of which I think and talk about old age. And as I approach old age myself it is within this framework that I not only see old age but see myself.

Alongside this experiential reservoir there is another source of such ideas. The society and culture in which we live is a source of understandings and of misunderstandings. This Western, Christian, white, culture is a carrier of traditions, customs and expectations.

When you or I arrive then at old age we have already a tightly packed set of meanings which we have accumulated from our individual history and our society/culture. These meanings are always a mixture of experience, customs, conventional wisdom, prejudices and ideological distortions and together they form a framework or a frame of reference within which we interpret the world.

Arriving at old age then presents us with a unique situation. The framework out of which we operate and find meanings for a concept such as old age is not just some external reality but is an internal reality cemented into our personality. Inside ourselves. We spend many years as we go through life talking about older people out there; these ideas get inside, internalised, until when we are old we are talking about ourselves! If so many individual, social stereotypes and prejudices get internalised then the adult faced with old age is also faced with this set of ideas, images and stereotypes concerning themselves coming now from both inside and outside.

I am interested in a kind of learning that has to do with examining these personal and social frames of reference within which we think, feel and act. Various educators have put different language on this kind of learning. Freire (1970; 1972; 1973; 1985; 1994) calls it conscientization, Mezirow (1990; 1991) calls it transformative learning, Jane Thompson speaks of critical intelligence and 'really useful knowledge' (1996) and Brookfield calls it being critically reflective (1995). The learning is a process of becoming aware of the frame of reference within which we think, feel, and act; becoming critical of its adequacy; aware of where it comes from both in my own individual story and from the broader culture and society; developing newer more adequate frames of reference which are more inclusive, and discriminating of experience (the experience of old age) and finally acting out of this frame of reference. This is the most important kind of adult learning and it is lifelong!

If this is a kind of learning that is worth exploring I want to add another idea from the world of adult educational psychology.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

We are familiar with the idea of children growing through stages of development (Erickson 1968, 1977) and adolescents too moving through the important stage of finding themselves (Muuss, 1996). We have even in recent years begun to see adults as moving through various stages especially that of mid-life (Sheehy, 1996; Loewinger, 1976; Tennant 1988; 1993; Tennant, M. and Pogson, P. 1995). What comes before the stage of mid-life crisis and what comes after mid-life crisis are two other stages! But

we are not, at least in popular discourse, familiar with the content of this later stage of development.

One of these ideas is probably familiar: adolescents have an identity crisis. They are faced with the task of redefining themselves as not any more an appendage of their parents and family. At the end of adolescence they are in general expected to know who they are, what they stand for, where they are going in life (at least in broad terms) and what values they wish to espouse. Stephen Dedalus is the most famous, successful, if fictional, achiever in this area. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce lets Stephen tell his story. He starts as a young child remembering his parents and family and his father telling him stories. By the end of the novel Stephen has decided. He will become an artist whose task will be to "encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race". (Joyce, 1960, 253). Many other stories are told of such a search for who one is but one interesting aspect of this adolescent search is rarely explored: the search is never achieved in adolescence once and for all. It is always to be achieved anew in each stage of our lives. In old age it remains to be achieved in a way that was not capable of being dealt with until then. The psychological challenge of old age is to address the aspects of who we are in way and in a context that cannot be dealt with before that. The knowledge gained in the successful working out of this stage is called wisdom.

In our youth we work on who we are in the context of leaving home, going to college, exploring our sexuality, choosing our career (tentatively) and so on. In later and older adulthood the context in which we must work on who we are is quite different. Family may be grown, grandchildren may have come along, job and career are ending, health becomes a greater concern, partners and friends are dying, a life has been lived and so on. The search for who we are goes on in this new context and these new agendas for our growth and development constantly emerge. Just as children and adolescents have developmental needs which are learning needs, so too do older adults. One difference is that there are not as many facilitators about who can, from their own experience, facilitate the transitional changes of later life. These are lifelong learning needs - lifelong developmental needs!

To link the two ideas I have been discussing - a frame of reference and identity - we can say that the frame of reference in which we think, feel and act is the frame of reference within which we find our identity. Who I am is constructed by history, story and society. The learning needs of older adults are precisely those of adolescents and young adults and middle age adults: to work on our own experience and reframe the parameters within which we define ourselves. Just like all learners older people need *a safe space in which responsibilities and commitments can be set aside for a while and questions asked about life's concerns* (Marcia, 1980). This is the learning environment in which all adults can grow, develop, mature, reframe their meaning schemes and build a stronger sense of identity for the later years.

RESEARCH AND OLDER LEARNERS

Just in case these ideas are in danger of being seen as not grounded in anything more than having a particular granny or a particular idea of what adult learning might be, I would like to mention some research evidence that may back up some of these claims.

Some work has been done on the learning of older adults in Ireland but not a great deal. (McCarthy, 1988)

In Canada it has been found that the learning needs of older adults are: how to make new friends; how to age physically, intellectually and morally; how to live in harmony with oneself; how to develop a good philosophy and psychology on ageing; how to cope with changes in society (Leclerc 1985).

For adults from a less educated background the needs are different. Remember more than 50% of all adults in Ireland left school without a Leaving Certificate and as more and more young people continue on to third level the concentration of adults without qualifications clusters in the older years. Even mature students at university are predominantly under 45 year of age. The university sector has been particularly weak at attracting older people back to study. The needs among older adults are for personal health related information with literacy not a high priority (Courtney, et al. 1983).

Older adults have fears too about returning to learn and there are well documented barriers: of being seen as too old, having poor health, lack of time, cost, out at night, transportation, absence of a companion, lack of information about what is available, fear of competition with younger adults, fear of exposure of their background, fear of the unknown and location. Older adults are more likely to attend institutions which are accessible and familiar (Price and Lyon, 1982).

In adult education we are no strangers to this set of barriers and they sound similar to the barriers faced by other groups of marginalised adults. The problem of their marginalisation is made more acute because there is no economic motivation either from older adults or society. Part of the problem with the EU Year of Lifelong Learning was the emphasis on the young and the economic potential of learning throughout ones productive life. Though the job prospects are not a factor, an increasing awareness of the social economy and the cost and benefits involved should encourage a greater emphasis on the learning needs of older adults. Research identifies five areas of need of older adults: the need to have basic skills, the need to be expressive, the need to make a contribution, the need to be influential, the need for transcendence (McClusky). Educators working with other groups will recognise the potential of advocacy education, social action, learning for the sake of learning, spiritual needs.

You will be more than well aware that there are many issues I have not touched at all or even hinted at and which are also hugely worth exploring:

1. Once I mention Freire and consciousness raising I hinted at the idea of older people as an oppressed class. Along with women, young people, the unemployed they are not one of the social partners. Only those with economic muscle/ jobs are social partners. These exclusions and oppressions have serious consequences for us as a democracy.
2. Older people are not a homogeneous group. One issue about which much work needs to be done is that of gender. Major strides have been made in these areas for younger people (Gilligan, 1990) and also for young and middle aged adults (Josselson, 1990); for womens development in general (Miller, 1978; Belenky, 1986) and mens development in general (Kimmel, 1990; Brod and Kaufman, 1994) but women's and

men's development is not clearly researched or written about in the context of older people.

3. Coming to terms with a changing society is a huge area of concern To mention only one issue of current interest: society up to recently was a secretive place. So many adults and families had secrets - children born outside marriage, fostered, adopted at home and abroad. So many fractured lives. For each child adopted there are four adults involved in the process. Now in a more open [slightly anyway] society what was previously hidden is emerging to be confronted and confronting so many. These are the kinds of issues implied by older people's concerns to understand changes in society.

There is much work to be done. Practical solutions need to be found informed by the developmental needs of older adults; addressing the barriers and putting in place a learning society where lifelong learning for all is a reality.

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