

from

**Adults Learning**, Number 4: December 2006,

<http://www.niace.org.uk/Publications/Periodicals/AdultsLearning/BackIss/default.htm>

## **Older Adults Learning**

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*December 2006.*

The November Issue dealt with very many relevant factors concerning the need for a better policy on continuing education or re-skilling of older people. The figures gave a quite alarming picture of how the needs that have been in evidence for many years are still not being met. Taking this alongside the talk on BBC Radio 3 by Professor Sarah Harper, Director of the Oxford Institute of Ageing (Monday 6 November 2006 9.30pm: Free Thinking 2006 A Festival of Ideas for the Future), one is compelled to recognize how rapidly the role of the older population will become significant in maintaining worker skills levels in countries with changing demographics.

Government funding and employers' awareness as well as their contribution are clearly essential for those who would otherwise not consider, or be able to afford, further learning. The difference between educating older people for mental and physical health reasons, on the one hand, and for workplace reasons, on the other, are equally important. But, as Julie Perigo argued, it is not enough to provide educational and training opportunities. We also need to be aware of how many people in senior positions – who might have a great deal still to offer their professions after the notional retirement age – nevertheless do not even consider further training or re-skilling.

In spite of the excellent coverage of the several articles on the subject, I am surprised that nobody mentioned the one that underpins all the future learning of older adults:

Who is actually going to teach them?

the answer to which depends on:

Who is going to train the teachers of older learners?

Indeed, one might ask:

Who is going to train the trainers of teachers of older learners?

There is an infinite regress here, and we normally stop at the trainers of trainers, since it is normal to rely on academics to continue educating themselves as their field of professional work grows. Thus, as a trainer of teachers and trainers myself, I have informed myself of the field of older learning, and have started a training course in that area. That said, I hasten to add that this is a very new field, and – while commonsense might indicate that there are self-evident differences in teaching the young or the old – nevertheless very little is known about older learners. Any pronouncements have to be tentative at this stage.

The best that any training course can do until further research fills in some of the gaps, is to raise awareness of the significant principles of good practice in teaching generally, and ask appropriate questions for teacher reflection about how these might need to be adapted for older learners. I think it is undeniable that they will need to be adapted, but nobody can be certain of success just yet. There are too many unknowns, such as the influence of prior experience, especially of established literacy and numeracy [or lack of], or the effects of career success [or failure], or some decline in memory, or well established learning strategies and other abilities. Motivation, too, is likely to be rather different among older learners, and - as any teacher knows - it can be hard to maintain under the best circumstances.

It will take a very long time for any kind of consensus to develop among teachers and trainers. But of course we cannot wait for that. Indeed, it will not happen at all unless we establish training courses that have the effect, not only of heightening awareness, but also of generating research into the field. At the Institute of Education, our figures for 2005-6 show 11% of students to be over 50, and I am pressing for some research into their learning, especially since I expect the percentage to rise.

I would urge those who seek to influence government and other policy making to include the need for training of trainers.

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