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No end to learning: how older people engage with learning informally

This paper is based on part of a research project *Older People and Lifelong Learning: Choices and Experiences* which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK as one of 24 projects that made up the major national research programme *Growing Older: Extending Quality Life* carried out 2000-4. In this stage of the project, the aim was to gain in-depth knowledge of how older people who are 'post-work' understand learning and how they engage with it. Interviews were carried out by a team of seven older people themselves with 21 older people who were currently taking part in a formally organised course or class (participants) and with 14 others who were not (non-participants). Nine other older people kept logs of their learning activities over a one/two month period. All these people had previously completed a questionnaire about their learning experiences across the life course and had agreed to participate in a further stage of the research.

It was felt that using older people themselves to interview their peers would enable them to gain a deeper insight into older people's thoughts and feelings about learning than would have been possible with younger academics. The seven interviewers (aged 59-76) were recruited through press publicity about the project and were sent a training booklet with detailed advice on how to conduct the interviews together with a semi-structured interview schedule. They were also asked to keep fieldwork notes to record their feelings about the process of each interview. Interviews were taped and transcribed and fieldwork notes were incorporated into the overall analysis.

Results showed that the term 'non-participant' often used by educators of adults was largely meaningless to these older people. All the interviewees were able to describe ways in which they were learning *informally* although those who were also taking part in a course or class were more likely to regard this formal learning as being more purposeful. Informal learning for both groups included self-directed learning around specific interests but also focused on learning from TV and radio programmes. Many of the interviewees spoke of a need to 'keep the brain active' and particularly enjoyed quiz programmes such as the ubiquitous 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' and other fast-paced light entertainment where they could pit their wits against the clock. Others thoughtfully followed up issues of interest from nature programmes and historical documentaries that they may have watched by chance. Learning also took place through reading and discussing newspaper articles and books with family members and friends, through voluntary work and social activities. Evidence from the learning logs suggested that whilst some subjects such as computing are best studied through a formal class, others such as natural history, exploring heritage and various creative activities lend themselves to informal self-directed learning using a whole variety of learning aids.

It was concluded that informal learning among older people needs further research to understand how it could be better supported and enhanced. Meanwhile, broadcasters might want to consider whether a wider range of learning opportunities could be offered through TV and radio with appropriate back-up materials in large print and at low cost in order to acknowledge older people's circumstances and learning preferences, to widen choice and stimulate interest.

Visit <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/gop/index.htm> for more details.