

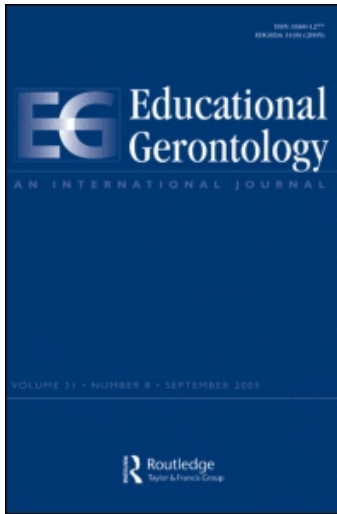
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LEARNING IN LATER LIFE: WHAT SENIORS WANT IN A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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By designing effective learning opportunities for older adults, educators can make a positive contribution to the problem of a “graying America.” Because older adults themselves may offer important insights on what helps and hinders their learning, this qualitative study explored the perceptions of 36 older learners on effective and ineffective learning experiences. The following are the main findings that emerged from the data: (a) effective learning experiences are involving, (b) the instructor is a key component in the classroom, and (c) familiar or relevant topics are interesting. Recommendations for designing, marketing, and delivering quality learning experiences for older adults are discussed.

The percentage of adults over age 65 in the American population is expected to increase from about 12% now to 22% by the year 2030 (Eisen, 2005). This demographic shift not only presents a significant challenge to policy makers regarding economic, political, and social issues, but it also mandates a serious role for education. Research has shown that education is one of the strongest predictors of sustained cognitive function (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Schaie, 1994). Older adults also need skills to cope with age-related concerns such as leisure, retirement, health, death, housing, and finances (Fisher & Wolf, 1998). By increasing older adults' knowledge and performance of wellness activities or financial affairs, for example, it may be possible to reduce their dependence on social welfare programs and enhance their quality of life.

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Despite the physical, mental, and psychological advantages of engaging in educational experiences, older adults participate in educational programs at a much lower rate than the adult population in general. Specifically, only 22% of adults over age 65 participated in educational opportunities in 2001 as compared with 55% of adults aged 41 to 50 and 41% of adults aged 51 to 65 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Older adults can learn new things, and they learn them very well (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). However, changes in physical and cognitive abilities as well as the unique life events and transitions associated with older adulthood make learning in later life considerably different than learning in younger adulthood (Jones & Bayen, 1998; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Merriam & Lumsden, 1985; Twitchell, Cherry, & Trott, 1996). Researchers have identified a number of physical (Glass, 1996; Jones & Bayen, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), cognitive (Brigman & Cherry, 2002; Czaja & Sharit, 1993; Echt, Morrell, & Park, 1998; Elias, Elias, Robbins, & Gage, 1987; Jones & Bayen, 1998; Zacks & Hasher, 1994), sociocultural (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Havighurst, 1972, 1976), and motivational differences (Boshier & Riddell, 1978; Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Daniel, Templin, & Shearon, 1977; Kim, Collins, Stowe, & Chandler, 1995; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Martin, 2002) between younger and older adults that affect the design and delivery of learning programs for older adults.

Despite important differences between older and younger adults, most suggestions for designing instruction for seniors are based on cognitive research findings (Glass, 1996; Jones & Bayen, 1998; Twitchell et al., 1996) or quantitative studies using large sample surveys (Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Chou, Chi, & Leung, 2003; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Laanan, 2003; Lamdin & Fugate, 1997; Walker, 2002). Cognitive researchers have offered a number of ideas for teaching older adults. However, the question remains as to whether the learners themselves would consider these recommendations effective. Large sample surveys provide an important overview of the learning interests and motivations of older learners. Yet, by their very nature, survey studies cannot adequately address the nature and meaning of the individual learner's experience (Lamb & Brady, 2005). Qualitative studies involving in-depth interviews offer a strategy for gaining a deeper insight into what learning means to the individual learner and what he or she considers helpful and hindering in learning situations. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of adults over age 64 on effective and ineffective learning experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a basic qualitative design (Merriam, 1998). The researchers conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with adults over age 64 residing in a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. In addition, they observed seniors in a variety of learning situations and reviewed documents relevant to their learning experiences.

Sampling Plan

A purposeful sample of 36 participants (26 females, 10 males) ranging in age from 65 years to 88 years with a mean age of 76.5 years participated in this study. In terms of education, 13 completed high school, 3 completed some college, 4 completed undergraduate degrees, and 16 completed graduate degrees. There were 4 Hispanic participants, and the rest were all Caucasian. Participants described themselves as Jewish (17), Catholic (5), Protestant (5), Buddhist (1), and no religious affiliation (8). Participants were recruited from a Learning-in-Retirement Institute (16), a senior center (9), and a large branch of a county library system (11). All of the participants were currently involved in learning experiences. Initial contact was made in person or by telephone, and meeting locations were mutually agreed upon.

Data Collection

Participants were interviewed for approximately 60 minutes using a structured interview protocol of open-ended questions. Prior to each interview, participants read and signed a consent form. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and pseudonyms were used in place of names to protect confidentiality. Using multiple collection methods, the researchers conducted a total of 18 observations at the three recruitment sites following a structured observation guide. They also analyzed course descriptions, handouts, and course evaluations to gain a better understanding of the structure and focus of the participants' learning experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the ATLAS.ti 5.0 software program.

Categories and codes emerged from a review of the transcripts, field notes, and documents, and they were compared across data sources revealing a preliminary set of high-level and subordinate themes. During the final stages of analysis, the preliminary list was refined into a set of themes that effectively characterized the perceptions of the participants about effective and ineffective learning experiences.

FINDINGS

Three major findings were identified in this study: (a) effective learning experiences are involving, (b) the instructor is a key component in the classroom, and (c) familiar or relevant topics are interesting and engaging.

Effective Learning Experiences are Involving

This first finding includes two related subthemes. At the classroom level, participants want to be involved in the learning process by asking questions, discussing ideas, and practicing new skills. From a broader perspective, learning also plays an important role in the successful aging process by keeping participants actively involved with friends, family, and the world.

In terms of the first subtheme, 31 of the 36 participants mentioned some type of interaction as an important part of effective learning experiences. For example, when asked to describe the ideal classroom situation for older learners, Tom, 69, stated, "There would be opportunity for interaction. . . There has to be an opportunity for discussing points or working in groups to consider alternatives to what is being presented." Similarly, Howard, 86, offered this advice to new instructors about teaching older adults, "Get them involved. Have them pick up a pencil. Have them tap in time to the music. Allow freedom of question and answer." During observations at the Learning-in-Retirement Institute (LRI), library, and senior center, older adults asked questions, shared ideas, and interacted with the material they were learning. Even participants attending formal lectures in a 500-seat auditorium felt that active involvement in the learning process was critical to their learning experience. David, 85, commented about the 10-minute question-and-answer period at the end of the lectures: "We like the question and answer because it's thinking. . . The questions are usually very, very stimulating. They give you something to think about." As David's remark suggests, interaction in the classroom helps to grab participants' attention, and it keeps them focused

on the learning activity. As nearly 66% of the participants mentioned increasing problems with concentrating and staying alert in learning situations, active involvement in a learning experience can be especially important for them.

Although interaction and discussion are important, nearly half of the participants emphasized that these elements can also significantly hinder a learning experience when they are not carefully managed and controlled. Charles, 83, stated, "Some professors don't control the class. . . A good professor will say 'Hold that till later.'" He added that "Too many times the question is not a question. It's a platform that the senior will get up and expound on whatever he wants to talk about." Similarly, Maria commented, "When the teacher does not have a strong personality and the students talk or interrupt in the class, this bothers me. When the teacher loses control of the class, I find this distracting." Sam, 85, made this suggestion for dealing with overly vocal students, "At the beginning of the class, put down the guidelines. Then any intelligent person can abide by it."

While the first subtheme for this finding focuses on involvement in the learning experience itself, the second subtheme indicates these older adults value learning experiences that keep them involved with others and the world around them. Learning for these participants is very much a social endeavor. Seniors were observed chatting, laughing, waving, and saving seats for spouses and friends at each of the three sites, and 30 out of 36 interviewees described how they learn with friends and family members. For instance, Judy, a 75-year-old retired bookkeeper, has been attending classes once a week at the LRI with a group of her friends for the past five years. Similarly, Lucy, 73, commented, "Sometimes it's just another person that says, 'Do you want to do this? I want to sign up for something. Come with me.'" Elmer, Margaret, and Sarah, who are all in their 80s, are part of a group that gathers weekly at the senior center to discuss current issues, share problems, and provide encouragement. Margaret, 83, the leader, shared that, "You have some people who never raise their hand and never say a word. But they're coming to the meetings. They're getting something out of it, even if they have no input." She added, "Whether it's the discussion, or just being with friends, or going to lunch afterwards, it's a day out. It gets them out of the four walls. It's something for them to look forward to."

As Margaret's comments suggest, learning in older adulthood can be much more than a social experience. Rather, it can be an important strategy for staying involved with the world. In fact, almost 66% of the participants mentioned one or more ways in which learning has enabled them to remain connected with the outside

community. While describing her participation in a lecture series, Sarah, 88, remarked:

Even if I went to them and didn't understand everything, I learned one thing. Even if I learned just a half a thing, it was something. And it was getting out. Just getting out and being with people and doing something different. Getting out is important.

Likewise, Ida, 72, who attends a class for widows and widowers, described the significance of learning by saying, "I think you have to keep your brain going. You can't isolate. You can't sit at home and say 'Oh poor me. Why did this happen to me?' . . . Through the group and friends, I just keep going."

To summarize the first theme, an effective learning experience for these participants involves engagement during the learning experience itself and engagement with the outside world. At the classroom level, participants want to interact with the instructor, with each other, and with the material. Yet participants also emphasized the importance of controlling the classroom to avoid domination by overly vocal students. Beyond the classroom, the participants expressed a strong desire to continue learning and to continue doing things. Learning is a highly social event for these participants. Learning is also keeping them actively involved with the world.

The Instructor is Key

The second finding of the study is that the instructor is a key component in the classroom. For many participants, the instructor is more important than the topic. In discussing his favorite professor, David commented, "The instructor is the whole thing. It's not the subject, it's the presentation." Dorothy, 79, also believes that the instructor makes a learning experience interesting. She said, "It's the person that's presenting it. Not even the material. It's the person. The person has to know what they're saying. They have to present it well. They have to be interested in the students. It's a magical thing." Hannah has been going to lectures by the same professor for the past 10 years while Judy and her friends have been attending classes with their preferred instructor for 5 years. Likewise, Charles religiously attends his favorite professor's lectures. However, he won't attend the lectures given by another professor, even though he is interested in the topic. He stated, "I'm interested in music. But Professor Henry who's giving the lecture is terrible. I don't enjoy him." Finally, Bernice, 76,

described a learning experience at an Elderhostel session that demonstrates the importance of the instructor over the topic. She remarked, "It [archaeology] could have been an interesting class I think, but the professor wanted us to know every detail that she had learned in her 20 years of studying all of this. She was overkill." Bernice went on to describe how the class of a more interesting instructor grew in size while the archaeology class emptied to about five people.

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized several important qualities of effective instructors. First, over 75% of the participants indicated that instructors should be enthusiastic, interesting, and knowledgeable about their subject. For example, Alice, 81, stated, "They should not be too introverted. They need to be somewhat outgoing. They need to know the subject. And they need to be able to make me understand it." Likewise, Ann, 70, described a recent enjoyable learning experience with an effective instructor saying, "He was enthusiastic. He knew his topic. He didn't rush, and he moved around. He didn't just stand behind a podium. His demeanor was wonderful. He made you feel comfortable, and he didn't read from his notes." In addition to enthusiasm, participants emphasized the need to grab seniors' attention through humor and stories because "older people have a tendency to fall asleep." For example, one participant advised, "Hold someone's interest. Every once in a while inject some humor. Make people feel comfortable so they want to listen. If you look around and see people dozing off, you want to wake them up."

In addition to a knowledgeable and enthusiastic instructor, four out of five participants emphasized the importance of a straightforward, comprehensible learning experience. For instance, Charles described why his favorite instructor's classes are special, "Probably the clarity, the fact that I can easily follow his trend of thought. It's very logical, very well organized. Some of the other professors wander all over the place." Sarah advised new instructors dealing with older adults to "Speak distinctly. Don't use highfalutin words. Keep it simple." David echoed Sarah's advice with, "I would say don't talk over our heads. It's almost like a doctor talking to you and telling you about your medications as if you were another doctor. They shouldn't use words that we need a dictionary to figure out." Participants also discussed how visual displays, such as PowerPoint, and other special effects to enhance the clarity of a presentation and help them to stay focused. For instance, Connie, 68, mentioned how a visual presentation positively impacts her ability to learn. She said, "I love the visuals. It keeps me focused. I'm a visual person. I have to see. I learn by visual so I can lose track if I'm just listening."

In contrast to the positive impact of visual displays on participants' comprehension, these seniors discussed how hearing loss makes it more difficult for them to learn. For instance, Delores, 86, said, "A lot of seniors have a hearing loss. So they really should speak louder sometimes. I find now with Rose [group leader] that her voice drops at the end of a sentence so we don't get the whole sentence." Hearing issues were also obvious during observations of classroom experiences as many participants were using amplification devices or requesting that the instructor speak louder.

Along with knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and comprehensible educators, these seniors also want instructors to be respectful of their knowledge and experience. Time and time again participants stated that they do not enjoy instructors who are narrow-minded, obnoxious, and arrogant. Gloria, 77, remarked about a difficult learning situation at a current events program. She said, "I found the moderator to be very aggressive and very opinionated. He was a complete leftist, and he kept spouting things that I disagreed with. He was vehement and antagonistic." Florence, 72, also expressed dissatisfaction with a former instructor. She stated, "I used to go see Dr. Thomas a lot, but he eventually developed an attitude. His ego got bigger and bigger and bigger to the point where he was obnoxious to me." Likewise, Dorothy advised new instructors of older adults with, "Don't treat them as if they're older . . . I think you must respect the fact that we can be just as interested and as alive and as motivated as young people." She added, "Think about what we want to learn. Maybe even ask the class, 'What are you expecting from this class? What would you like me to focus on?'" In essence, these older adults want instructors to recognize their lifetime of experiences and to respect their ability, enthusiasm, and desire to learn.

Finally, in the last subtheme for this finding, participants emphasized a strong preference for a pressure-free learning environment. They do not want to feel pressured to read a book, complete assignments, memorize material, or take tests. They enjoy learning as much or as little as they choose about their selected topic. For instance, one LRI participant commented:

I think the best part of this way of learning is that we're not under pressure. We don't have to answer questions in class, and we don't have to have read a book. We don't have to prove that we know it. We don't have to learn it for the exam . . . I can learn it because I want to learn it.

Data from observations and documents also supported this subtheme. Specifically, there were no reading requirements or mandatory

assignments at any of the three learning locations. And other than the computer classes at the library, prerequisite knowledge and skills were not referenced. Thus, as the data suggest, instructors need to facilitate enjoyable, stress-free learning environments that actively encourage, rather than require, these seniors to focus, absorb, and learn.

To summarize this theme, the instructor is a critical aspect of the classroom experience for these participants. They look for instructors who are knowledgeable, animated, and respectful of their opinions and willingness to learn. They want instructors to be clear, logical, and understandable and to grab their attention through enthusiasm, humor, interesting stories, and visual displays. Finally, they seek instructors who refrain from the pressures of assignments and tests. When the participants discover an instructor with these qualities, it is the instructor, rather than the topic, that tends to drive their decision to enroll in particular learning experiences.

Familiar or Relevant Topics are Interesting

Although the quality of the instructor is the key focus when the instructor's abilities are known, the final finding of the study suggests that the focus changes when participants are unfamiliar with the teaching skill of the instructor. In these situations, participants choose topics in which they have some basis of knowledge or topics that appear pertinent to them. For example, when asked what new things he would like to learn about, Howard responded:

In all candor, I am more interested in expanding my current interests. I wouldn't want to embark on a new language for example. I don't think I want to learn Russian at this stage in the game. I'd like to improve my German or improve my Italian as opposed to learning another language.

Sam remarked, "I like history. I'm not going to pick a course on physics when I can pick a course on history . . . I just assume to keep on learning what I know and what I am familiar with." In response to what makes a learning experience interesting, Barbara, 71, stated, "I can relate to actual examples that fit in my life. I have some relevance to what it is that they are talking about." Similarly, Susan, 81, said that she enjoys a topic when "it is in my experience and I can add something to it." When these participants can connect to the subject, it grabs their attention and keeps their interest. For instance,

Barbara, a former social worker, commented about an exciting learning experience.

I really enjoyed the Guardian program because I had experienced a lot of it with my social work background. I got a lot of new information and some reinforcing information. Because my background is in social work and education, I knew a lot of it, but it reinforced that and it also gave me some new ideas. And I enjoy hearing lectures about things that pertain to what I am trying to do.

In summarizing this theme, these participants are not interested in learning something that has no connection to their past, present, or future. When making choices about which classes to attend, they look for learning experiences that will either expand their knowledge about something familiar or teach them something that will have some relevance in their lives. When a topic is meaningful to them, it captures their attention and holds their interest.

DISCUSSION

Because older adults themselves can offer important insights on what helps and hinders their learning, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of adults over age 64 on effective and ineffective learning experiences. Three major findings emerged.

Effective Learning Experiences are Involving

The first finding demonstrates the importance of interaction in the classroom as well as the critical role learning plays in keeping the participants engaged in the world around them. This finding coincides with Malcolm Knowles' (1980) views that adults enter learning situations with a rich background of experiences that can serve as valuable resources for learning. Involvement in the classroom is important because "adults define themselves largely by their experience" and "they have a deep investment in its value" (Knowles, 1980, p. 50). Thus, they need to question, reflect, discuss, and experiment in order to integrate new information with what they already know and believe to be true (Zemke & Zemke, 1995).

In addition to enabling seniors to accommodate new knowledge with previous experiences, interaction in the classroom also helps to grab their attention and maintain their focus in the learning activity. As one participant explained, "You get opinions from the students

who are attending and that's usually interesting. I have always enjoyed the question-and-answer period. It's challenging." The participants in this study indicated that they want to interact with the instructor, with other learners, and with the material they are learning during an educational experience. Jones and Bayen (1998) suggest providing time and encouragement for student questions since research demonstrates that older adults are four times more likely than younger adults to request assistance (Elias et al., 1987; Zandri & Charness, 1989). Despite their desire for interaction, participants also emphasized that uncontrolled interaction can hinder their learning. To overcome this problem, participants suggested that instructors set ground rules for discussion at the beginning of a learning experience and postpone off-topic discussions or questions in large-group settings until the end of a session.

Besides interacting with the instructor, the participants emphasized that they enjoy interacting with each other and with the material itself. Small-group settings with chairs placed in a U-shaped configuration encourage interaction and discussion (Glass, 1996; Sisco, 1991). Participants also described how they enjoy working on crossword puzzles to learn English, acting out various roles to learn counseling skills, and reading books for a book discussion. Because many seniors enjoy learning on their own (Hiemstra, 1975; Roberson & Merriam, 2005; Sears, 1989), instructors should distribute handouts of their information and suggest exercises and resources for those interested in further study. In addition, if older adults are learning a new skill, it is critical that they have the opportunity to actively practice the skill in the learning environment (Jones & Bayen, 1998; Zemke & Zemke, 1995).

Classroom interaction, however, forms only part of the picture of this first finding. At a broader level, participants view effective learning experiences as important strategies for staying involved with spouses, friends, neighbors, and the world around them. Research shows that older learners are often motivated to engage in learning experiences in order to develop social relationships as well as to acquire knowledge for its own sake (Boshier & Riddell, 1978; Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Daniel et al., 1977; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Martin, 2002). Thus, educational experiences should encourage seniors to get to know one another whenever possible (Duay & Bryan, 2006; Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Peterson, 1983). Yet, beyond the social aspects, the findings indicate that learning is keeping the participants active and involved with the world. As one participant stated, learning often entails "just getting out and being with people and doing something different." According to Rowe and Kahn's (1998) model

of successful aging, active engagement with life is an essential ingredient to growing older in a positive, healthy manner. They state, "The fact is we need continued contact with others, and the lack of such social relations is damaging. Loneliness breeds both illness and early death" (p. 156). Clearly, learning plays an important role in maintaining, or even enhancing, cognitive ability. However, the findings of this study suggest that the role of learning in older adulthood goes beyond a positive impact on cognitive processes to active engagement with the world around them. By keeping seniors involved in life, learning may provide important physical and emotional benefits along with the more obvious advantage of cognitive stimulation and enhancement.

The Instructor is Key

The second finding of the study emphasizes the key role that the instructor plays in the classroom experience. These older learners seek out instructors who are enthusiastic, interesting, knowledgeable, and understandable, and when they find these instructors, they tend to take classes with them over and over again. Most seniors in this study attend educational experiences because they want to—not because they have to. They want the experience to be stimulating and enjoyable, rather than boring or frustrating.

Certainly, the physical and cognitive changes that occur as part of the aging process play an important role in this finding. Indeed, the participants in this study discussed how problems with hearing, concentration, and memory make it more difficult for them to learn, and they made a number of specific recommendations for addressing these issues. They emphasized the importance of a clear and logical presentation, and they suggested that instructors "wake them up" with enthusiasm, humor, and stories about the people involved in the topic. They want instructors to be knowledgeable, to speak audibly and distinctly, and to avoid "highfalutin words." In addition, they perceived visual displays and other special effects to be important factors in enhancing their learning experiences.

The participants in this study also want instructors to respect their views and their ability to learn. Seniors' experiences and sense of identity are extremely important to them (Knowles, 1980). The participants in this study emphasized that they greatly value the knowledge and expertise of their instructors. Nevertheless, they still want their instructors to be open-minded to their opinions and supportive of their enthusiasm and ability to learn. They consider instructors who are narrow-minded, arrogant, and/or ignorant of their capacity for learning to be significant hindrances to learning in later life.

Finally, at this stage in their lives, the participants desire a comfortable learning environment that is free from all of the pressures of traditional education. Such pressures include mandatory assignments, prereading, required note-taking, and tests. Instead, they seek educational opportunities that allow them to learn as much or as little about a topic as they choose. They also want relevant handouts, reading lists, Web sites, and/or practice exercises to enable them to pursue additional study on their own, if desired (Hiemstra, 1975; Roberson & Merriam, 2005; Sears, 1989).

Familiar or Relevant Topics are Interesting

When the participants are familiar with an instructor's abilities, the quality of the instructor takes precedence in enrollment decisions. However, when participants are new to a program, they select courses based on topics that are familiar or have some relevance in their lives. They have little interest in learning something completely unknown or meaningless to their lives, their families, or their future. Their preference for familiar topics is consistent with Ausubel's (1967) assertion that learning is meaningful only when new knowledge can be associated with concepts that currently exist in one's cognitive structure. Along with familiar topics, interest in learning new topics occurs for these participants when topics appear to be pertinent to their lives (Knowles, 1980). Learning experiences assist them in solving problems associated with aging such as adjusting to single life after the death of a spouse, using the computer to research health issues, speaking English, and using their leisure time productively. These findings support the work of Havighurst (1972, 1976).

This finding also has implications for designing programs. Because seniors accumulate a wide variety of experiences throughout their lives, they can have diverse learning interests and needs (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997; Merriam & Lumsden, 1985). What is familiar and relevant for older adults in one community or target group may not be applicable in another location or market. For example, the geographic area in this study consists of a somewhat large population of people from a Jewish cultural and religious background. Popular topics related to ethnically specific history, music, culture, and humor may not appeal to learners in locations with other ethnic concentrations. Through marketing techniques such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, seniors' needs and interests need to be determined (Manheimer & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995; Merriam & Lumsden, 1985).

In terms of delivery implications, instructors should connect new information to what the participants already know. Building on the

familiar promotes information integration, enhances interest, and decreases demands on working memory (Jones & Bayen, 1998; Twitchell et al., 1996; Zemke & Zemke, 1995). In addition to connecting new information to past experiences, instructors need to question participants early in the session about their learning expectations in order to ensure that the instruction is meaningful and relevant (Knowles, 1980; Peterson, 1983).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall, the participants in this study demonstrated a keen sense of self and a strong positive attitude about their life and the aging process. They were highly self-directed and interested in learning. These characteristics are often associated with learners from a strong educational background (Fisher, 1986; Fontaine, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Indeed, more than half of the participants in this study held college degrees, and all of the participants had a minimum of a high school degree. This sample represents older adults who are educated, self-motivated, continuous learners. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2004), only 22% of adults over age 65 participated in educational opportunities in 2001. Many seniors are missing out on the many positive benefits of learning in later life.

Research on motives and deterrents have revealed some reasons for the lack of participation in educational experiences among older adults. These include health issues, transportation and parking problems, lack of information about opportunities, and cost (Courtenay, 1989; Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003). However, none of these barriers indicate anything about the learning experience itself. Specifically, what do nonparticipating seniors want and need in terms of topics, instructors, interaction, activities, materials, tools, and learning environments? By interviewing those who do not participate in learning opportunities, it may be possible to gain additional insight on how to enhance educational programs for older adults.

In addition to nonparticipants in general, future studies need to examine the perceptions of both participating and nonparticipating seniors from more diverse educational backgrounds. For instance, senior adults have a lower rate of literacy than any other age bracket (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Clearly, seniors who are unable to read and write have very different learning needs than their literate peers. Research is needed on what seniors with poor or

limited literacy skills consider to be helpful and hindering in learning situations.

Similarly, because 32 of the 36 participants in the current study were Caucasian and the majority appeared to be in the middle to upper-middle income range, future studies should gather the perceptions of seniors from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Research is also needed on how the lifestyles of seniors from diverse backgrounds align or do not align with formal, informal, and self-directed learning experiences. For example, what proportion of older adults from various income ranges learn on their own, participate in nonformal community-based settings, participate in noncredit programs such as Elderhostel, and learn in formal educational institutions? Likewise, how do these various learning experiences evolve from, and contribute to, the differing lifestyles? Finally, how do different groups of seniors interpret and define the phrase “learning experience”?

Lastly, because the current study focused solely on the learners themselves, future studies should expand the sampling plan to include popular instructors and administrators of successful senior programs. Effective instructors can provide information about the strategies they use to keep seniors interested and involved while administrators can offer insight on marketing to older adults.

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