

Adult Education Quarterly

<http://aeq.sagepub.com>

The Self-Directed Learning Process of Older, Rural Adults

Donald N. Roberson, Jr. and Sharan B. Merriam

Adult Education Quarterly 2005; 55; 269

DOI: 10.1177/0741713605277372

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://aeq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/55/4/269>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[American Association for Adult and Continuing Education](#)

Additional services and information for *Adult Education Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://aeq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://aeq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://aeq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/55/4/269>

THE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING PROCESS OF OLDER, RURAL ADULTS

DONALD N. ROBERSON JR.

Education/Recreation Consultant

SHARAN B. MERRIAM

University of Georgia

Medical advances and lifestyle changes have resulted in older adults living longer and healthier lives. Nevertheless, older adulthood, as other life stages, requires change in work, family, and health. Self-directed learning (SDL) is one way of negotiating these transitions. The purpose of this study was to understand this process of learning. This study employed a general qualitative design incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews for data collection. The sample of 10 purposefully selected adults from a rural area reflected diversity in gender, race, education, and employment. The age of the participants ranged from 75 to 87. Data analysis guided by the constant comparative method revealed the following process: Self-directed learning begins with an incentive to learn plus an interest, leading to accessing resources; with systematic attention in their learning, some projects ended whereas others remained ongoing. There is also a catalyst, usually another person, interspersed in this process. The findings indicated changes in late life, especially those related to time, family, and loss are integral to the process of self-directed learning. Also, the rural setting of the participants was seen as a positive environment for learning.

Keywords: *self-directed learning; process of learning; qualitative research; older adults*

The increasing influence of older Americans as well as the imminent aging of 80 million Baby Boomers is causing many segments of Western society to reevaluate the concept of old age. Medical advances and personal lifestyles have resulted in older adults living longer and healthier lives (Haskell, 1994). Nevertheless, older adulthood, like other life stages, has its own set of changes and transitions. It is these transitions that often become the impetus for self-directed learning (SDL), or what Lamdin (1997) calls personal learning.

DONALD N. ROBERSON JR. is an Education/Recreation Consultant in Zagreb, Croatia (e-mail: dnrjr@uga.edu).

SHARAN B. MERRIAM is a professor of adult education in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia (e-mail: smerriam@uga.edu).

ADULT EDUCATION QUARTERLY, Vol. 55 No. 4, August 2005 269-287

DOI: 10.1177/0741713605277372

© 2005 American Association for Adult and Continuing Education

Although SDL has been a focus of research in adult education, there is a lack of research on how older adults engage in this process. Most of the scholarly interest of older adult learning focuses on formal learning such as higher education (Jensen, 2000), training in corporate settings (Foley, 2001), or semiformal programs such as Elderhostel (Long & Zoller-Hodges, 1995). The most pervasive aspect of learning—personal and informal learning—warrants further investigation (Lamdin, 1997). More specifically, we were interested in the *process* older adults engage in when carrying out a SDL project.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

SDL can be described as intentional (Hake, 1999) and self-planned (Tough, 1971) learning, where the individual is responsible for (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) and in control (Carre, 2000) of the learning. This learning can manifest itself in a variety of ways or projects from formal, informal, to nonformal, but is most often informal (Candy, 1991). “The important thing is that these projects are ‘owned’ by the learner who is in control of what is learned, when the learning starts, where it goes, and when it is complete” (Lamdin, 1997, p. 118). SDL can be evident by short-term projects lasting hours (Tough, 1971), as well as continuous and life-long efforts producing experts (Cusack, 1996; Garrison, 1997).

Various authors have pointed out that learning is actually a response to one’s situation in life and that the particular stage in one’s life becomes the context for learning (Kleiber, 1999; Knowles, 1984; Lamdin, 1997; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Of particular concern to this research is how late life development may affect one’s personal learning. The following list, though not exhaustive, summarizes the developmental issues of older adults. Each situation has its own set of positive and negative elements with an overarching theme of adjustment. These include the following: The cultural norms and personal expectations connected to retirement (Kleiber, 1999; Quadagno, 1999); the influence of and provision for the next generation (generativity), as well as the internal drive to leave a legacy (Erikson, 1950; Quadagno, 1999); the inward struggle to feel positive about one’s life and choices that have been made (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1990; Fowler, 1981); the change in one’s body (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Kleiber, 1999) and eventual death (Erikson, 1950; Fisher, 1993); and, the impact of loss—loss of respect, loss of one’s acquaintances, and loss of health (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Bee & Bjorklund, 2004).

Even though many older adults face common tasks and issues, a closer look reveals that each person arrives at old age differently because of the varieties of paths each has chosen to take (Eisen, 1998; Lassey & Lassey, 2001; Quadagno, 1999). Similarly, Jarvis (2001) states each older adult is unique because of 65 years or more of personal growth in one’s intellectual, emotional, physical, and social context. SDL allows for older adults to address their individual learning needs during this life stage.

It should be noted that the concept of self-directed learning is not without challenge. For example, Brookfield (1984, 1985) writes that SDL describes the process of learning of the majority culture and bypasses many subgroups and that it overlooks the impact of a skillful teacher as well as the social influence of the community where one resides. Furthermore, Brookfield (1984) states that proponents of SDL do not really distinguish between types or impact of learning.

MODELS OF PROCESS—LINEAR AND INTERACTIVE

Several authors have outlined a process of SDL. Tough's (1971) and Knowles's (1984) models are linear in nature. In Tough's (1971, 1979) discussion of highly deliberate efforts to learn, he presents a detailed linear process of 26 steps on how the learner plans this process. Much of Tough's model centers on the various decisions in the initial phases of the process. Knowles (1975, 1984) describes SDL in six consecutive steps: climate setting, diagnosing learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing, and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

Interactive models suggest that SDL is not as linear as Tough (1971) would suggest. One model that incorporates a variety of factors in SDL is Spear and Mocker's (1984) organizing circumstance. Their model is based on three interactive areas: opportunities the person finds in the environment, past or new knowledge the learner brings to the activity, and action the learner has taken to gain knowledge. Personal knowledge, opportunities to learn, and chance situations combine to shape a unique learning experience. They emphasize how the circumstances of one's life will shape the learning. Cavaliere's (1992) interactive model is a case study of the experiences of how the Wright brothers learned to fly. This historical research revealed an SDL process based on inquiring, modeling, experimenting and practicing, theorizing and perfecting, and actualizing. Garrison's (1997) three-dimensional model combines the social aspects of learning, the personal motivation of the learner, and how one regulates his/her efforts of learning.

Danis and Tremblay (1987, 1988) investigated the SDL efforts of 10 adults. They discussed how their participants incorporated multiple approaches in their learning process. Random events were seen as various opportunities to further their personal learning. Danis and Tremblay also found their participants specified learning goals after they mastered the skills, not before; that is, after becoming confident, the participants would often adjust their SDL goals.

SDL AND OLDER ADULTS

Researchers have linked SDL of older adults to a number of variables, especially life satisfaction. Brockett's (1985, 1987) research with 124 adults over 60 years indicated a significant positive relationship between the Self Directed Learning

Readiness Scale (SDLRS) (Guglielmino, 1978) with life satisfaction as measured by the Salamon-Conte (1981) Life Satisfaction in the Elderly Scale (LSES). Fisher's (1986, 1988) study also showed a positive relationship between formal education, SDL, and life satisfaction. His study of 786 adults over 55 years of age revealed that continued involvement in education had a positive impact by lessening anomie in the older adult's life: "Participation [in education] assumes control over one's life . . . participation may also represent an older adult's confidence in the self and its environment to a considerable degree" (Fisher, 1988, p. 144).

In Long's (1993) review of dissertations on SDL conducted from 1966 to 1991, three dealt specifically with older adults, SDL, and life satisfaction. SDL was associated with life satisfaction, specifically with the elderly in subsidized housing (East, 1987; Estrin, 1986) and with Spanish-speaking immigrants in Florida (Diaz, 1989). Lamdin's (1997) Elder learning survey with 860 adults aged 55 to 96 revealed SDL is far more prevalent and substantial than previously thought, and SDL has the potential to impact one's health and lifestyle. Lamdin's participants indicated they were involved in formal learning programs 17.5 hours a month and informal (self-directed) learning 28 hours per month. These learning projects included a variety of activities, with most relating to arts and crafts, health, home improvement, and finances.

Of interest in this study is the rural setting in which older adults conduct SDL projects. Leean's (1981) extensive research investigated SDL in rural adults in Vermont with less than 12 years of formal education. This 18-month project involved case studies with 14 participants. Three researchers spent 14 hours with each participant. Although this research did not focus on older adults exclusively, the findings are significant for this study. They found SDL occurs in overlooked ways such as in the activities of everyday life, when one is alone, and through individual thought processes and impressions. The participants emphasized most of the learning occurred in the rural area where they lived, especially at home, church, and community. Of special interest was the learning that occurred due to the quiet rural environment, carrying out chores, and with the problems encountered in rural areas. "Thinking is connected to times when people are alone, usually doing a mundane or repetitive chore or task" (Leean, 1981, p. 28).

In summary, SDL has evolved from a concept of a focused project of 7 hours (Tough, 1971) to an idea of personal responsibility in learning that can impact lives (Candy, 1991; Lawrence, 2000). SDL is an attractive, complex, and ambiguous concept that emphasizes human capacity, the potential for behavior change, and self-evaluation (Danis, 1992).

METHOD

The purpose of this research was to uncover and describe the process of SDL of older, rural adults. Purposeful sampling was used in order to address the problem of

this research; this is a process whereby the researcher carefully chooses participants who will provide the most relevant information (Patton, 1990).

This sample was comprised of older adults who live in a rural area. A rural setting in south Georgia was chosen for this study because there is a higher percentage of older adults in rural areas (George & Byland, 2002), and rural areas are often overlooked in favor of more accessible urban places.

Four criteria were used in selecting the participants in this study. These included the following: age, rural dwelling, diversity (race/gender), and evidence of SDL. The minimum age of the sample was set at 70, and the actual age range of the sample was 75 to 87. The study took place in one county in south Georgia. This county has a total population of 16,235 with 35.9 people per square mile. This county and all of the surrounding counties are listed as rural [www.census.gov]. The sample included three African American and seven Caucasian participants matching the demographics of the state of Georgia. This included five men and five women as well as a range in education from fifth grade to Master's degree. That participants were engaged in SDL activities was ascertained in a phone call prior to the first interview. Table 1 indicates the demographics and the SDL projects of the participants.

Each participant was referred to us from a source who knew about the community including a cooperative extension agent, librarian, church staff, probate judge, and a member of the Board of Education. From a list of 25 names of potential candidates, we selected the first 10 participants who volunteered to be in the study, had the time, and met the listed criteria.

Each participant was interviewed over a 2-day period in 2-hr segments. Three research questions guided the inquiry. First, participants were asked to discuss the main changes they had or were experiencing in becoming an older adult. Second, participants were asked what was important to them now and how they learned about these issues or topics. And third, they were asked to describe what it was like to live in a rural area. The data collection process was guided by the simultaneous analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). For example, after two interviews the data were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis. This analysis informed the subsequent interviews and helped to prepare us for the remainder of this research. A total of 2 months after the last interviews a member check of the findings was conducted at the local library. The 8 participants who attended felt the findings were an accurate representation of their learning. Through this analysis, a process of SDL was uncovered.

FINDINGS

The analysis of interviews with these 10 rural older adults revealed an interactive process of learning. Late life transitions often helped to initiate this process;

TABLE 1
Biographical Information

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Work (Current/Former)</i>	<i>C-GC-GGC^a</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>SDL Activities</i>
Robert	Male	42 years	75	2-year college degree	Retired/bookkeeper	2(3)-4-0	Caucasian	Bible, world geography, travel, genealogy, history
Norman	Male	Widowed	83	2-year college degree	Retired/jeweler	0(1)-1-2	Caucasian	Computer, health, bird watching, world events
Betty	Female	54 years	76	College degree plus certification	Retired/librarian	3-6-0	Caucasian	Computer, genealogy, psychology, religion
Sue	Female	Widowed	87	1-year college	Retired/secretary	3-7-11	Caucasian	Raising animals, organic gardening, health
Bill	Male	Widowed	82	5th grade	Retired/handyman for Georgia Power, started his own business	1(2)-3-0	African American	Health, community development
Hattie	Female	Widowed	76	High school degree	Retired/state mental health worker	6-19-15	African American	Bible, community development
Dora	Female	Widowed	79	2-year college degree	Nursing home assistant, housewife, assisted husband in business.	3-8-2	Caucasian	Landscaping, cooking, world events, church activities, Bible
Wilbur	Male	48 years	75	Sixth grade, GED certification	Handyman for local businessman	3(5)-3	African American	Community development, Bible, issues in community
Charlie	Male	56 years	84	College degree	Retired/postal worker	4(5)-10-1	Caucasian	Electronics, elections, health, editorials, gardening, history
Thelma	Female	Widowed	75	2-year college degree	Housewife	5-11-0	Caucasian	Bridge, community improvement, decorations, landscaping

a. This indicates children = C, grandchildren = GC, and great-grandchildren = GGC. The parenthesis indicates original number. For example 3(4)-5-10(11) indicates the participant had four children originally, three are living, there are five grandchildren, originally there were 11 great-grandchildren and 10 are living.

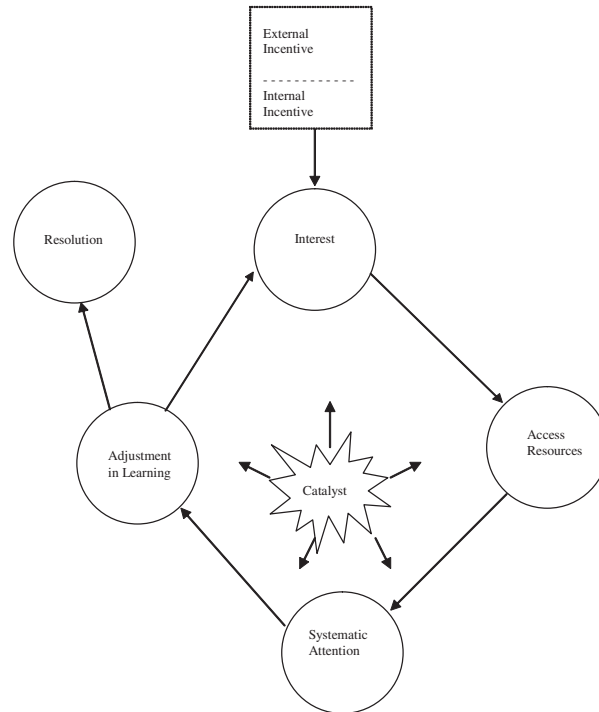


Figure 1. The Process of Self-Directed Learning

also, the rural setting seemed to facilitate the participants' learning. The process of learning will be presented as well as a discussion of the role of late life adjustments and living in a rural area.

PROCESS OF LEARNING

A loosely organized series of events constituted the process of SDL. As depicted in Figure 1, the process begins with an incentive to learn. If the person has an interest in the topic or activity, then he or she will pursue it. This procedure involves accessing resources. For this learning process to continue there will be systematic attention and time given to the project or activity. The individual will make some adjustments in order to fine-tune the learning.

At some point after making adjustments in the learning activity, the project comes to an end (resolution), or the person continues to pursue the learning activity. The motivation and intensity to learn are often enhanced during this process

through a catalyst. Although not apparent in this figure, there are multiple projects occurring at the same time with each participant.

Incentive for SDL

The process of learning originates with an incentive to learn that can be internal or external. An internal incentive is usually something the person wants to learn on his or her own; an external incentive is something that others ask the person to do. Of special significance for this study is that this incentive is often related to the late life changes of adjusting to time and/or retirement, changes in one's family, and loss—both social and physical. For example, Betty relates how much she wants to learn about religion and psychology:

And I was especially interested in religions, comparative religions. . . . My grandchildren were leaving for college, and I wanted to help them understand more about the complex issues of life. . . . You see I had to do this completely on my own. . . . I found a place in the library upstairs there, that had all of the psychologists . . . and there were so many different books that I just longed to read and I would bring four, five, and six at home at a time with me.

Changes in one's family were the motivation for Betty to continue to learn. Her grandchildren were beginning to leave home, and she wanted to provide them with some helpful advice.

Wilbur was diagnosed with high blood pressure. This also became an incentive for him and his wife to learn more about nutrition in order to benefit and perhaps lengthen his life. They read and studied how to prepare food that could lower blood pressure. Wilbur discusses this process of learning:

And we started using low fat food products and oils, you know, that are better for you, and now we understand how certain diet can change you. . . . I got a lot to do, and I want to keep up with my grandchildren.

Betty and Wilbur are inwardly driven to pursue these compelling topics. Although quite different, both have an incentive to begin learning.

In addition to an internal motivation, the participants also discussed an external incentive to learn. Norman shared how he began to use the computer. First, he saw his brother using the computer on a cold, winter day. Because his brother could not go outside, this appealed to Norman because the computer was available for use during harsh weather. After returning home there were classes offered in his hometown on using the computer, and his brother continued to prompt Norman:

My brother was into it, the last time I visited him about 3 years ago. . . . He was kind of showing me the computer and what is there and what it would do. . . . I just sort of got

interested in it, and I came back, and started going over to the library and picking up whatever I could from the folks over at the library.

This external incentive was related to a loss in Norman's life. After the death of his wife, he had been looking for something else to do at home; working on the computer seemed to be a good fit.

Interest

For the process of SDL to continue, there was an accompanying personal interest; otherwise the activity might be put aside. Sue states that she has many interests and some of these she pursues in detail:

I am *interested* in all types of animals and nature. . . . I have a wide variety of *interests*—archeology, the sea, sea life, cause we lived so long on the sea. . . . Goat milk—my daughter brings me up enough so that I can stay in goat milk. Milk and cheese. So I know that, I am quite *interested* in that [emphasis added].

Her interest in learning about natural foods came as a result of wanting to maintain a healthier body as she aged.

Similarly, Bill became interested in helping improve the social situation in the community and by giving input to those who are younger, especially young boys and their parents. This personal interest resulted in various activities on his part to learn about the difficulties that the younger generation faces:

All right, I been (pause) going (pause) different homes, over the courthouse, and talk with the probate judge, or the, talk with the, uh, sheriff, police department, you got boys in the community always into some misdemeanor. Talk to them. . . . And they need to stay out of trouble. I am trying to do what I can to learn how to help them.

He is interested in learning about this because he has the time, and he wants to help the next generation.

Accessing Resources

Accessing resources is part of the process in SDL. The resources seem to be as unique as the individual and many of the participants used several resources during their SDL. The priority of these resources is also important to consider. Besides the television, the most prevalent resource mentioned was the newspaper. This consisted of local, regional, state, and national papers. Some participants read newspapers over the Internet. The papers also provided a guide for other activities of interest in the area. Hattie said, "I don't get out of bed until I read the paper." Charlie

reads two newspapers “cover to cover.” Norman accesses a variety of papers from his childhood hometown to regional papers over the Internet.

The participants spoke of attending seminars and classes. There are several organizations in this rural area that provide useful information on a variety of topics. Many of the participants have discovered the variety of resources of a library and use it on a regular basis. Robert and his wife traveled to several libraries across south Georgia during the process of learning about genealogy. All of the participants are involved in church activities, and five of them mentioned how the church is also a resource for personal learning. Many churches go beyond worship service and provide learning seminars and topics on a variety of issues from religion to health.

One of the dominant resources for SDL is other people. A small community allows learners easy access to those with information. During the interview with Thelma, a lady that lives nearby interrupted us. Thelma had the information this lady needed to know about an upcoming event that highlighted the culture of south Georgia. Thelma discussed this interplay between various resources of learning, especially that of formal classes, her own personal learning, and people:

Well, I took the (class) on bulbs and other flowers, and so, and of course a lot of it was just, just learning from your neighbors and all. That I did. And of course you really don't have to go to a college or somewhere in order to learn, because you can go to nurseries, and, and do that. And my yard, I have shared with other people. And most everything I got growing in my yard back here is something, somebody gave me. So, we exchange, you know, things.

Systematic Attention

Participants discussed the systematic attention given to these activities. This particular part of the process is when the goals of SDL become a priority. Robert and his wife went beyond random readings about their faith to the study of inspirational literature: “I have been to the library, and pulled a lot of information up on the computer, that goes along with the Sunday school lesson. And, run printouts on it, so as I can have that accessible for the class.”

Hattie also related how she regularly read inspiring articles in the magazine *Ebony*:

And I will make sure that I read any article related to how women are having an influence. I regular read *Ebony*, and these articles about women, have motivated, you know, shown me, how to make a change here too.

Similarly Norman discussed how much systematic attention he will daily spend on the computer: “I may stay on there 3 or 4 hours. . . I just, was on there today . . . just finished just before you come a defragmentation process.”

Adjustments in Learning

Participants in the study often discussed difficulty, obstacles, and adjustments that took place during the process. These adjustments in one's learning activities are often the result of an error or mistake. As Doria said, "It's just been more trial and error. Trial and error. And you just get in there and, and do it."

Thelma described how she continually made adjustments when learning how to create a decoration:

Yeah, I did the wedding; for the rehearsal dinner . . . she wanted something . . . different. . . I fixed lanterns . . . and covered them with burlap. And then I used a big pinecone and drilled a hole in it, and put a candle in there. But a lot of it was just trial and error.

Similarly Norman changed the way he was learning while on the computer. He discovered that he could play a music disc over the computer. He stressed that this minor adjustment helped him to continue his process of learning:

Well, I might be learning about birds on the Internet, and this could be somewhat boring after a while, and you might want to stop. But if I put in a music disc that I like, I like to listen to gospel, and I learned you could put it right in the computer, it added something. It sort of helped you want to finish.

Resolution

This loosely woven and somewhat erratic process of SDL may eventually come to a close. Betty stated she had collected material from different learning projects and has them boxed up and put away. The participants discussed an interesting array of these short-term learning episodes such as a discussion group on the Great Books, learning to make a wreath, and a short course in health education.

However, each participant also discussed various SDL activities that have become ongoing projects of learning. Robert continues to learn more about the Bible as well as world events. The computer is the focus of Norman's interest, and it has become a resource for other learning projects. Betty takes time to learn more about religion and psychology. She wants to make these topics interesting for her offspring. Natural foods, health, and raising animals have been a mainstay for Sue; her home was full of literature and resources on all of these topics. Bill wants to help minorities in his community learn how to survive and be successful. Becoming a woman of influence in her community is Hattie's intent and she takes the time to learn how to help others. Dora's focus is to learn more about working in the yard and spiritual growth. How to live an enjoyable, long, and healthy life seems to be the essence of Charlie's interest. And Thelma's desire is to learn more about community involvement and natural, native decorations. All of these lifelong pursuits are sought with seemingly endless energy.

Catalyst

During this process of learning, the participants discussed the impact of some event that often speeds this process or motivates them to learn on a deeper level. Hattie tells a story about her project of trying to get a sidewalk built on her side of town. She lives in the Black part of town that many call "the quarters." She had been somewhat discouraged because she had not seen improvement in her area of town from the city taxes. Spontaneously, another lady in a meeting encouraged her to continue her fight for a sidewalk. Hattie says, "This became the means for me to come back and stress [motivate] myself." Although the sidewalk was eventually built, Hattie was not pleased with the results, feeling they had done an incomplete job.

Wilbur is involved in a variety of activities, but his involvement in the volunteer fire department dominated our conversation. During the interviews he and his wife discussed how they lost two children in a fire. Although he was interested in learning how to help the community, this tragedy remained a catalyst in his learning. He wanted to do anything he could to help his community in case of a fire. He would follow fire trucks to various fires to see if he could help. Eventually one of the firemen asked him to become a member of the volunteer department. This invitation led to an ongoing interest in fire prevention.

Of interest in this research is the relationship between the catalyst and late life change. Many of the catalytic experiences were related to change in one's life especially those concerning children, grandchildren, and changes in health. Charlie's wife, for example, has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. This became a personal catalyst for him to learn as much as possible about this devastating disease. "Yeah, I take several magazines on it; I am learning about it, we are going to make it."

LATE LIFE CHANGES

The participants discussed three main changes and accompanying adjustments in late life. These changes include more time because of retirement, the transitions in one's family, and the experiences of social and physical loss. These changes resulted in specific adjustments that were linked to the SDL process.

More Time

One dominant aspect of life for these older adults is that there is more time. This has come about because of retirement, or because one's children have left home. There is the sense that these participants now have time to do what they want. Some have chosen to be at home and some have chosen to work. Much of their time is used to pursue SDL.

Robert has been retired for 14 years. He has enjoyed this extra time in his life:

And when I retired 14 years ago, I was ready to retire. . . . And it was just time that I relaxed and enjoyed . . . *so to me retirement is a really a chance to learn more and to enjoy what you learn* [emphasis added]. While you are working you don't have but certain amount of time to enjoy anything.

Robert and his wife utilize this extra time to pursue various SDL activities from travel to genealogy.

Family

One of the most intriguing aspects of human development is the changing role of a parent with his or her child. Many of the participants emphasized the impact of a friendship with an adult child and the joy of grandchildren and great grandchildren adding to the richness of one's life and stimulating learning. Sports, hobbies, and careers of family members provide exciting new SDL experiences for these older adults. As Thelma stated, "I am learning a lot about soccer."

Loss—Physical and Social

More time and family relations often result in exciting and engaging SDL activities; however, older adults also continually face various losses in their lives. During the interview with Sue, we asked her what was motivating her to learn. She said, "Good health! Good health and activity. For 4 months, I have lost a lot of strength. Because there were so many things I couldn't do. But it's coming back." Because of the pain of an arthritic shoulder, Sue was motivated to learn about organic gardening and raising goats for their milk.

Social loss is a difficult experience for the older adult. Becoming widowed, being forced into retirement, and having to withdraw from former social activities were all discussed by the participants. Betty states, "We used to go a lot, and camp, and we would square dance, and now we can't and nothing replaces that." However, it was evident that Betty has adjusted to this by replacing something lost with new learning activities at home.

IMPACT OF LIVING IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The participants discussed a variety of ways that living in this rural area has characterized their life, and by extension, how it has influenced their learning. Although most of the comments were positive there were also some negative issues. The positive comments focused around the quiet and simple atmosphere, nature, and the people. The few negative comments centered on lack of resources.

Most of the discussion about life in a small community was overwhelmingly positive. Thelma explained that while living in this rural area she was able to pursue many activities that contributed to personal learning:

It was fortunate to live in a small community, because you have access to everything. If I lived in a city, probably I would have never done all of this. Well, one, you wouldn't have had the space. And two, you wouldn't have the close community here, like we have here.

Like a careful teacher setting the right atmosphere for a class, the rural context is seemingly a conducive atmosphere for SDL. Living in an area that is quiet, simple, close to nature, with people who are willing to help provides a positive environment for learning. However, resources may not be available to all, and some people may feel alone in this rural area.

DISCUSSION

As we wanted to explore the process of SDL of older, rural adults, we selected the participants based on some evidence of this activity. All of the participants were involved in the process of learning; each one had multiple ongoing learning activities in different stages. For example, Wilbur, one of the least educated members of the study, was involved in an assortment of learning activities including Bible Study, antique gun repair, firefighting material, and local laws. And Charlie, a college-educated retiree, has transformed a home and backyard into a venue for personal learning about gardening; he also has projects on history, computers, and electronics. This is similar to Tough's (1971, 1979) finding that 90% of the population is involved in one project a year, with the average adult involved in five to seven projects. Similarly, Lamdin's (1997) Elder learning survey also disclosed a high density of learning activities: "Older people are learning . . . at a rate far exceeding even our original expectations. . . . The average number of hours per month spent in informal (non-classroom-based or self-directed) learning was 27.86" (p. 85). Lamdin (1997) also found that "the self-directed learning project typically begins with a . . . need to know . . . triggered by some event or change in the person's environment" (p. 117). Aslanian and Brickell (1980) also found that transitions in life trigger learning.

The late life changes of the older adults in this study are obvious throughout the process of learning and especially within the internal and external incentive, the interest to learn, and in the catalyst that spurs one to learn more. Although the participants discussed a variety of late-life changes, the dominant ones were retirement or more time, change in family, and loss. Interest in learning arises from a personal need or curiosity of the person. This need is based on the personality, background, needs (Maslow, 1970), self-image (Lawrence, 2000), and stage of life of the person (Jarvis, 2001; Kleiber, 1999; Lamdin, 1997). Kleiber (1999) discusses how the individual takes actions as a natural response to their development and that often this response is seen in self-directed learning. Lamdin (1997) also states that learning is usually initiated by some particular event in one's life. The older adults in this

study were prompted to learn what was necessary to adjust to new developmental challenges associated with aging.

The process of learning for these 10 participants moved from an internal or external incentive to interest in the topic to accessing resources, from systematic attention to making adjustments with the activity, and eventually a final resolution. During this process there is often a catalyst that stimulates the process.

This catalyst, independent of the learner, was some external event or person who encouraged the participant to continue their learning. This catalyst occurred at differing times in the process. Close friends, children and grandchildren, and even strangers can be a catalyst. The catalyst could also be described as a late-life change such as a significant event, perhaps a tragedy, or a special occasion. The catalyst functions to encourage or provoke the learner to begin or continue to pursue an activity of learning.

A variety of authors outline a process of SDL. The model presented in this study is more interactive than Tough's (1971) and Knowles's (1984) descriptions of self-planned learning. Rarely did the participants purposely diagnose, evaluate, or set a climate, but this did not seem to impede their learning. Rather, we observed, these important aspects of learning were more subtle and hidden within the psychological dynamic of the learner and the rural environment. For example, the way Sue managed her flock of goats, or the manner of gardening Charlie incorporated, or the way Thelma would pick and choose decorations from native plants were never planned; rather, they were a function of living in a rural environment and the person's particular interests and approach to learning. Furthermore, the catalyst in this model allows for spontaneous interaction in the process.

Of the more interactive models of SDL, Spear and Mocker's (1984) model appears most congruent with our findings. Their model is based on three interactive areas: opportunities the person finds in the environment, past or new knowledge the learner brings to the activity, and chance occurrences. This model indicates the internal or external incentive to learn is a part of the unique situation of one's life. Chance occurrences and the fortuitous environment are included in the description of the random catalyst that spurs individuals to continue the process of personal learning. These participants also included past and new knowledge in their projects.

Similar to Spear and Mocker's (1984) emphasis on how one's environment organizes SDL, the rural environment in this study helped to "structure" the learning through access to the local library, personal involvement in community organizations, and by receiving input from local friends or acquaintances. Past knowledge was obvious in the way participants continued to refer to the early lessons learned in their lives, especially from their parents. New knowledge was gleaned from seminars, books, and even television shows. And chance or random situations were also instrumental in their process of learning, especially through specific late-life change. For example, one's children or grandchildren, as well as changing health, were often an incentive for learning.

However, unlike Spear and Mocker's (1984) model, our model emphasizes more of the role of adult development in the process of learning. Rather than focusing on external events in the environment, albeit important, this model incorporates the individual and internal factors associated with late-life development and its interplay with learning.

Perhaps because Cavaliere (1992) investigated the Wright brothers who were studying flight, her model is more cognitive than what we found with the more everyday SDL projects of older adults. Danis and Tremblay (1987, 1988), on the other hand, also studied 10 older adults as we did. They saw random events as various opportunities in the process of learning, and the learners took advantage of any opportunity to further their personal learning. Also, similar to Garrison (1997), who stressed the importance of personal motivation, each of these participants was motivated to learn specific topics. Their process of learning was also self-monitored and self-regulated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The contribution of this research is that it is based on learning experiences of older adults aged 75 to 87, and the process we observed indicates that SDL is often a response to developmental issues of that particular life stage. For example, generativity and health change seemed to promote SDL in all of the participants. Each person continued to learn about the interests of their offspring, and their various activities promoted SDL. Several spoke about learning so they could contribute to society and the next generation. Health was a particular interest in this sample. Every pain, sickness, and prescription promoted individual efforts of learning. In every interview, the incentive to learn, the interest in learning, and a catalyst to spur the learner was related to late-life change, whether it is having more time, changes in family, or loss, both physical and social. Researchers may want to pursue this connection by investigating how other life stages shape the learning, especially self-directed learning.

This study also focused on older adults in a rural setting, for we were curious how this setting would shape the process. We found that the rural setting had a predominantly positive influence on the process. Some of the projects could only have been carried out in a rural setting. Also, the participants discussed the communal aspect of rural life such as the friendliness, helpful attitude, and most important, the accessibility of neighbors, family, and friends. Cloaked behind the name of self-direction is a foundation of friends and family, clubs, libraries, and churches that support personal projects of learning (Wenger, 1998). Only one of the participants discussed feeling isolated in her pursuit of knowledge. However, the potential lack of resources was mitigated by the fact that all felt comfortable contacting neighbors for assistance in their SDL projects. The participants also discussed the peace, quiet, and beauty of life in this area.

Self-directed learning is not a random act of older adults who are attempting to fill extra time and empty days. Rather, these personal educational pursuits are motivated by the unique issues of one's life, especially that of time, family, and loss. The SDL process allows older adults to take specific steps to adjust to change in their life.

From this research, adult education practitioners who work with older adults can better understand how one's stage in life affects learning. Furthermore, formal institutional settings such as senior centers or libraries might incorporate a space for self-directed study. For example, medical and educational practitioners could include suggested self-care or self-directed activities in their programs. An increasing number of older adults enjoy using the resources of the computer and Internet for self-directed learning activities. Older adults are not only learning about the computer, they are also learning with the computer. Also, friends and family, clubs, libraries, and churches in rural areas were sources of support for self-directed learners. Practitioners can help make these resources more visible to older adults.

The findings from this study can inform those in social agencies, businesses, religious organizations, and community groups who work with older adults, and also various professional groups such as academic administrators and educators who wish to adjust their institutions to the learning needs of older adults. Finally, the results of this study should especially appeal to older adults themselves. This growing and influential group is motivated to learn what is necessary to continue to age successfully.

REFERENCES

- Antonovsky, A., & Sagy, S. (1990). Confronting developmental tasks in the retirement transition. *The Gerontologist, 30*(3), 362-368.
- Aslanian, C. B., & Brickell, H. M. (1980). *Americans in transition: Life changes as reasons for adult learning*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.
- Baltes, P. B., & Baltes, M. M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. B. Baltes & M. M. Baltes (Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1-34). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bee, H. L., & Bjorklund, B. R. (2004). *The journey of adulthood* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice-Hall.
- Brockett, R. G. (1985). The relationship between self-directed learning readiness and life satisfaction among older students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 35*, 210-219.
- Brockett, R. G. (1987). Life satisfaction and learner self-direction: Enhancing the quality of life during later years. *Educational Gerontology, 13*, 225-237.
- Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (1991). *Self-direction in adult learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1984). Self-directed adult learning. A critical paradigm. *Adult Education Quarterly, 35*(2), 59-71.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1985). The continuing educator and self-directed learning in the community. In S. D. Brookfield (Ed.), *Self-directed learning: Theory to practice* (pp. 75-90). New Directions for Continuing Education, No. 25. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Candy, P. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carre, P. (2000). From intentional to self-directed learning. In G. A. Straka (Ed.), *Conceptions of self-directed learning* (pp. 49-57). New York: Waxman.
- Cavaliere, L. A. (1992). The Wright brothers' odyssey: Their flight of learning. In L. A. Cavaliere & A. Sgroi (Eds.), *Learning for personal development*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 53. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cusack, S. (1996). Developing a lifelong learning program: Empowering seniors as leaders in lifelong learning. *Educational Gerontology*, 21, 305-320.
- Danis, C. (1992). Advances in research and practice in self-directed learning. In G. J. Confessore & S. U. Confessore (Eds.), *Guideposts to self-directed learning* (pp. 160-174). King of Prussia, PA: Organization Design and Development.
- Danis, C., & Tremblay, N. A. (1987). Propositions regarding autodidactic learning and their implications for teaching. *Lifelong learning: An omnibus of practice and research*, 10 (7), 4-7.
- Danis, C., & Tremblay, N. A. (1988). Autodidactic learning experiences: Questioning established adult learning principles. In H. B. Long & Associates (Eds.), *Self-directed learning: Application and theory* (pp. 171-197). Athens: Adult Education Department, University of Georgia.
- Diaz, P. C. (1989). Life satisfaction and learner self-direction as related to ethnicity in the older adults. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 50 (1), 51.
- East, J. M. (1987). The relationship between self-directed learning readiness and life satisfaction among the elderly. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 47 (8), 2848.
- Eisen, M. (1998). Current practice and innovative programs in older adult learning. In J. C. Fisher & M. A. Wolf (Eds.), *Using learning to meet the challenges of older adulthood* (pp. 41-55). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 77. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Estrin, H. R. (1986). Life satisfaction and participation in learning activities among widows. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 46 (12), 3852.
- Fisher, J. C. (1986). Participation in educational activities by active older adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36 (4), 202-210.
- Fisher, J. C. (1988). Impact of anomia and life satisfaction on older adult learners. *Educational Gerontology*, 14, 137-146.
- Fisher, J. C. (1993). A framework for describing developmental change among older adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43, 76-89.
- Foley, G. (2001). Radical adult education and learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20, 71-88.
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stage of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Garrison, D. R. (1997). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 18-33.
- George, L., & Byland, R. (2002). Rural Midwestern seniors and mobile homes: Characteristics and issues. *Rural Research Report*, 13 (4), 1-8.
- Glaser, B. C., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Guglielmino, L. M. (1978). Development of the self-directed learning readiness scale. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 38 (11), 6467.
- Hake, B. (1999). Lifelong learning in late modernity: The challenges to society, organizations, and individuals. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 49, 79-90.
- Haskell, W. L. (1994). Health consequences of physical activity. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 26, 649-660.
- Jarvis, P. (2001). *Learning in later life*. London: Kogan Page.
- Jensen, R. (2000). Altering perceptions of aging: Pursuing a degree as an older adult learner. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60, 3235.

- Kasworm, C. E. (1992). The adults learning projects. In G. J. Confessore & S. J. Confessore (Eds.), *Guideposts to self-directed learning* (pp. 55-73). King of Prussia, PA: Organization Design and Development.
- Kleiber, D. (1999). *Leisure experience and human development: A dialectical interpretation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Chicago: Follett.
- Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lamdin, L. (1997). *Elderlearning*. Phoenix, AZ: The Oryz Press.
- Lassey, W. R., & Lassey, M. L. (2001). *Quality of life for older people: An international perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lawrence, D. (2000). *Building self-esteem with adult learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Paul Chapman.
- Leean, C. (1981). *Learning projects and self-planned learning efforts among undereducated adults in rural Vermont*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED227-322.
- Long, H. (1993). Self-directed learning by the elderly: Review of dissertation abstracts. *Educational Gerontology, 19*, 1-7.
- Long, H., & Zoller-Hodges, D. (1995). Outcomes of Elderhostel participation. *Educational Gerontology, 21*, 113-127.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper-Collins.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Quadagno, J. (1999). *Aging and the lifecourse*. San Francisco: McGraw-Hill.
- Salamon, M. J., & Conte, V. A. (1981). *The Salamon-Conte Life Satisfaction in the elderly scale and the eight correlates of life satisfaction*. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Toronto, Ontario.
- Spear, G. E., & Mocker, D. W. (1984). The organizing circumstance: Environmental determinants in self-directed learning. *Adult Education Quarterly, 35* (1), 1-10.
- Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Tennant, M. C., & Pogson, P. (1995). *Learning and change in the adults' years: A developmental perspective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tough, A. (1971). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult education*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Tough, A. (1979). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning* (2nd ed). Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.