LIFE LONG LEARNING, COPING AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN ELDERLY PEOPLE

Aparna Pathak and P. S. N. Tiwari

Abstract: Lifelong learning is the continuous building of skills and knowledge throughout the life of an individual. It occurs through experiences encountered in the course of a lifetime. These experiences could be formal (training, counseling, tutoring, mentorship, apprenticeship, higher education, etc.) or informal, (auto didacticism, life experience, etc.) Coping is considered as an important resource that may help individuals to maintain psychosocial adaptation during a stressful episode. In scientific and policy discussions on active ageing, the notion of quality of life is receiving increased attention in improving the Quality of life of older people. Quality of life is defined as individuals’ perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. Some useful predictors for the quality of life of individuals are: Wealth (working, getting money), Social relations (self-actualization, loneliness), Health (physical and cognitive). These all affect how an individual perceives his own happiness and are related to different challenges in the ageing context like Ageing well at work, Ageing well in the community and Ageing well at home.

Lifelong learning is the continuous building of skills and knowledge throughout the life of an individual. It occurs through experiences encountered in the course of a lifetime. These experiences could be formal (training, counseling, tutoring, mentorship, apprenticeship, higher education, etc.) or informal, (auto didacticism, life experience, etc.)

Lifelong Learning is the provision or use of both formal and informal learning opportunities throughout people’s lives in order to foster the continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills needed for employment and personal fulfillment. It shares mixed connotations with other educational concepts such as Adult Education, Training, Continuing Education, Permanent Education and other terms that relate to learning beyond the formal educational system.

Evolution of the Lifelong Learning Movement

Lifelong learning crystallized as a concept in the 1970s as the result of initiatives from three international bodies. The Council of Europe advocated permanent education, a plan to reshape European education for the whole life span. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) called for recurrent education, an alternation of full-time work with full-time study similar to sabbatical leaves. The third
of these initiatives, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, learning to be (1972), drew most attention and had the broadest influence.

Lifelong learning is learning that extends beyond the traditional years of schooling and beyond the traditional areas of job-related training. It has the potential to improve the quality of life for an aging population. It can enrich the lives of people as they age by the intellectual stimulation of new ideas, and by providing older persons with new opportunities. It may strengthen democracy by enabling the informed participation of more citizens. Job-related training, which is part of lifelong learning, may provide older workers with opportunities that offer psychological as well as economic benefits to continued employment. Continuing education and training are important for developing the adaptability and flexibility of workers so that they can take advantage of opportunities that develop and are able to extend their work life if they wish to do so. Working longer can be an important option for people who reach retirement age with insufficient savings.

Ageing of population (also known as demographic ageing, and population ageing) is a summary term for shifts in the age distribution of a population towards older ages. Population ageing is a shift in the distribution of a country’s population towards older ages. This is usually reflected in an increase in the population’s mean and median ages, a decline in proportion of the population composed of children, and a rise in proportion of the population.

Most developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of ‘elderly’ or older person. The UN has not adopted a standard criterion, but generally uses 60+ years to refer to the older population (personal correspondence, 2001). “The ageing process is of course a biological reality which has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. The age of 60 or 65, roughly equivalent to retirement ages in most developed countries is said to be the beginning of old age (Gorman, 2000).

A related measure of population aging is the elderly dependency ratio (EDR): the number of individuals of retirement ages compared to the number of those of working ages. The ratio of the elderly dependent population to the economically active (working) population is also known as old-age dependency ratio, age-dependency ratio or elderly dependency burden and is used to assess intergenerational transfers, taxation policies, and saving behavior.

Since population aging refers to changes in the entire age distribution, any single indicator might appear insufficient to measure it. The age distribution of population is often very irregular, reflecting the scars of the past events (wars, depression etc.), and it cannot be described just by one number without significant loss of information. When the age distribution to change in a very irregular fashion over the age range, for instance, much information would be lost by a single-index summary. Therefore, perhaps the most adequate approach to study population aging is to explore the age
distribution through a set of percentiles, or graphically by analyzing the population pyramids. Demographers commonly use population pyramids to describe both age and sex distributions of populations. Youthful populations are represented by pyramids with a broad base of young children and a narrow apex of older people, while older populations are characterized by more uniform numbers of people in the age categories.

The term “lifelong learning” involves a cradle-to-grave perspective, which recognizes that learning occurs at all stages of life, in different forms and in a variety of arenas.” - Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2008) in both higher and further education opportunities available for older learners have fallen sharply with adult community learning losing over 1.4 million enrolments in recent years. Adult education in universities has been affected by policies such as the decision that funding will not be allowed for adults with an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ). The rise in the membership of the University of the Third Age is testimony to the wish many older people have to learn but cannot compensate for the huge reductions in opportunities in the public sector.

Characteristics of Lifelong Learning

The concept of lifelong learning spans a wide range of education and training issues and speaks to many different audiences. Common themes conveyed in literature on lifelong learning articulate four characteristics which transform ‘education and training’ into the concept of ‘lifelong learning’. Informal learning -The first characteristic of lifelong learning is that it encompasses both formal and non-formal/informal types of education and training. Formal learning includes the hierarchically structured school system that runs from primary school through the university and organized school-like programs created in business for technical and professional training. Informal learning describes a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educational influences and resources in his or her environment, from family and neighbors, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media.

Self-motivated learning - The second common theme of lifelong learning is the importance of self-motivated learning. There is a heavy emphasis on the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own learning. Lifelong learners are, therefore, not defined by the type of education or training in which they are involved, but by the personal characteristics that lead to such involvement. Cassandra B. Whyte emphasized the importance of locus of control and successful academic performance. Personal characteristics of individuals who are most likely to participate in learning, either formally or informally throughout their lives, have acquired:

- The necessary skills and attitudes for learning, especially literacy and numeric skills;
- The confidence to learn, including a sense of engagement with the education and training system; and
• Willingness and motivation to learn.

An Australian survey of participants in adult education courses identified a range of factors motivating people to undertake adult learning, such as:

• To upgrade job skills;
• To start a business;
• To learn about a subject or to extend their knowledge;
• To meet new people;
• To develop self-confidence;
• To get involved in the community; and
• To develop personal skills;
• To participate in social networking

By acknowledging the range of factors that act as both a motivation and barrier to engagement in education and training, lifelong learning policies tend to promote participation in learning for its own sake rather than as a means to a specific end (i.e. employment). The goal of participation in learning thus appears to be more significant than the reason why. This can be seen as an acknowledgment of the range of factors that motivate people to participate in formal and informal learning other than, or in addition to, instrumental goals.

Learning plays a key role in ageing societies as it can help to address many of the related Challenges and opportunities, such as increasing social and health expenditures, older people’s participation and contribution to the economy, re-skilling and up-skilling in the knowledge based information society and inter-generational sharing of experience and knowledge.

Despite a generation of discussion of the concept, a number of questions divide lifelong educators and policymakers. Several still prefer the term lifelong education because it implies a more explicitly intentional learning than the casual, unintended learning implied by lifelong learning. To many observers, lifelong learning itself is a contested concept with varying meanings and values. In practice, most innovation has come in programs conceived specifically for adults.

Coping is considered as an important resource that may help individuals to maintain psychosocial adaptation during a stressful episode. Review of literature on coping, suggests that it has to different connotations. Coping has been used to denote the way of dealing with stress or the effort to ‘master’ conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available. Psychologists have discussed coping in different terms. McGrath (1970) has viewed coping as the covert and overt behavior by which the organism actively prevents, removes or circumvents stress inducing circumstances. Moos and Billings (1982) have organized the dimensions of appraisal and coping into three categories.
1. Appraisal-Focused Coping: It involves attempts to define the meaning of a situation and includes such strategies as logical analysis and cognitive redefinition.

2. Problem-Focused coping: This seeks to modify or eliminate the source of stress to deal with the tangible consequences of a problem or actively change the self and develop a more satisfying situation.

3. Emotion Focused Coping: This includes responses whose primary function is to manage the emotions aroused by stressors and thereby maintain effective equilibrium.

These categories, however, are not mutually exclusive, their primary focus is on appraising and reappraising a situation, dealing with the reality of the situation, and handling the emotions aroused by the situation.

In scientific and policy discussions on active ageing, the notion of quality of life is receiving increased attention. Improving the quality of life of older people requires taking into account their work environment, their community and social relations, their home environment, and their personal well-being. They have different types of learning needs, related to improving knowledge or their ability to accomplish practical tasks. Learning can also be considered as an important activity in itself, improving personal fulfillment and social connections.

Quality of life is defined as individuals’ perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. According to McCall, S.: 1975, The best way of approaching quality of life measurement is to measure the extent to which people’s ‘happiness requirements’ are met - i.e. those requirements which are a necessary (although not sufficient) condition of anyone’s happiness - those ‘without which no member of the human race can be happy.’

There is no common agreed definition or measurement of Quality of Life (Gilhooly et al, Forthcoming). The WHO defines it as “an individual’s perception of his or her position in life in the context of the culture and value system where they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept of the complex relationship between a person’s physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs and salient features in the environment.” And as people age, their quality of life is largely determined by their ability to maintain autonomy and independence. This concept is so broad and vague that its separate aspects need to be differentiated in order to support the discussion.

As discussed by Gilhooly et al (forthcoming), simple, but useful predictors for the quality of life of individuals are:

- Wealth (working, getting money)
- Social relations (self-actualization, loneliness)
- Health (physical and cognitive)
These all affect how an individual perceives his own happiness and are related to different challenges in the ageing context. Ageing well at work, as staying active and productive for longer with better quality of work and work-life balance.

• Ageing well in the community, as staying socially active and creative, improving quality of life and reducing social isolation. • Ageing well at home, as enjoying a healthier and higher quality of daily life for longer, assisted by technology, while maintaining a high degree of independence, autonomy and dignity.

These three areas are linked to different learning needs for older people as jobs, living environments, social networks, and their own health change in old age. Learning is necessary for improving knowledge (e.g. learning health related issues) and for improving capabilities for practical tasks (learning to use new tools, such as online banking or learning new activities). Learning is also a rewarding activity in itself, improving the individual’s perception of well-being and also the individual’s social relations when he interacts with, and learns from, others, be they young or old.

Education is often seen as an important tool to increase the participation and quality of life of older people. In addition, the social context is important for both activating older people and providing young people with the possibility to learn from the life experiences of older people in inter-generational interaction. Increasing choice and diversity in adult education can widen the participation of adults in education and training, improving the inclusion of older peoples’ groups that have not traditionally engaged (OECD, 2006). Also the teachers support this, as in the 2007 Eurobarometer survey, 87% of teaching professionals in EU27 agreed that universities should open up for adult learners.

To improve the Quality of life, there are five key areas for countries to consider when seeking to implement strategies for lifelong learning for all and in determining the priorities for policy reforms.

First, recognize all forms of learning, not just formal courses of study. Secondly, the importance of developing foundation skills that are wider than those traditionally identified as central, including in particular, motivation and the capacity for self-directed learning. The international evidence clearly shows that those people without an upper secondary qualification and without strong literacy skills are among the least likely to participate in further education and training as adults, or as adults to take part in training within enterprises. Thirdly, there is emphasis on the reformulation of access and equity priorities in a lifelong context, by looking at the opportunities that are available to individuals across their life-cycle and in the different settings where learning can occur. Fourthly, the OECD stressed the importance of considering resource allocation across all sectors and settings, including – one might add – the incentives facing the various participants and the likely effect of such incentives on outcomes in terms of lifelong learning. Fifth, to fulfill the requirement for collaboration in policy development and implementation among a wide range of partners, including ministries other than education.
It is a fact of life that all humankind will age, how one chooses to respond to the aging process is important to maintaining a good quality of life. Reading, working puzzles, journaling, and discussing or debating with another are positive ways to keep functioning at a higher level. Even with disease or disability in one’s life, physical and mental functioning can be continued as one ages, allowing one to be actively engaged in life. A combination of avoiding disease and disability as much as possible, maintaining physical and mental functioning, remaining positive, and being engaged in one’s life represents a successful aging concept.

As this suggests, if one is actively involved in thinking and learning it would help to keep them engaged in their life by improving mental cognitions. And if one has the capability to think and learn, they will learn more about how to stay healthy and how to cope with disease or disability. To be involved in looking at ways to maintain and improve health, it is also important to maintain a positive attitude that is required in maintaining emotional health as well as physical. The mind, body, and spirit connection is a very important concept. Therefore if one continues to learn and seek knowledge they will find just how their emotional health and their spiritual health, effects their physical health. And they will find ways to keep themselves as healthy as possible while being aware of the coming declines they may start to experience, being proactive in keeping a positive attitude while understanding what is within their control.

With a good mind and healthy body, as well as some sense of the universe and where they fit into all of it, one would be much more likely to remain engaged in life and therefore perceive life as good and their quality of life as high-quality.

A number of important socio-economic forces are pushing for the lifelong learning approach. The increased pace of globalization and technological change, the changing nature of work and the labour market, and the ageing of populations are among the forces emphasizing the need for continuing upgrading of work and life skills throughout life. The demand is for a rising threshold of skills as well as for more frequent changes in the nature of the skills required.

It has also been said that:

*Lifelong learning’s core values of learning, exploring, and serving, coupled with benefits for the mind, body and spirit make it an incredibly powerful tool for personal transformation and enhancement.*

Nancy Merz Nordstrom, M.Ed., lists the top 10 benefits of lifelong learning as such:

1. Lifelong learning helps fully develop natural abilities.
2. Lifelong learning opens the mind.
3. Lifelong learning creates a curious, hungry mind.
4. Lifelong learning increases our wisdom.
5. Lifelong learning makes the world a better place.
(6) Lifelong learning helps us to adapt to change.
(7) Lifelong learning helps us find meaning in our lives.
(8) Lifelong learning keeps us involved as active contributors to society.
(9) Lifelong learning helps us make new friends and establish valuable relationships.
(10) Lifelong learning leads to an enriching life of self-fulfillment

**Barriers for Learning among Older People**

One of the consequences of ageing is an increasing number of problems with physical health. Physical limitations in hearing, sight, and motor skills may cause problems for accessing learning resources and for participating in learning. In addition, cognitive abilities, such as working memory, reasoning, and speed of processing information decline with age, which can make it more difficult for older people to learn new things. However, the pace of these changes is highly individual and can also be reduced with specific cognitive training activities (Willis et al. 2006). On the other hand, older people’s knowledge about themselves and their long experience of work and other areas of interest are valuable assets when learning new things, helping them to be more determined when learning. Overall, learning skills do not disappear when people get older, but learning may need more time and more focused approaches.

However, *A Blueprint for Action* also identifies the many challenges to aging in place: a lack of affordable and appropriate housing options; few opportunities for physical activity, making it difficult to remain healthy and involved; a lack of mobility options; limited information about community services; concerns about safety and security; and inadequate opportunities for meaningful volunteer service. Moreover, there are limited avenues for lifelong learning. Too few community-based arts and culture programs, the report finds, target older adults, and in many cases, the programs that do seek to draw in older adults neither attract nor engage them. *A Blueprint for Action* also identifies the many challenges to aging in place: a lack of affordable and appropriate housing options; few opportunities for physical activity, making it difficult to remain healthy and involved; a lack of mobility options; limited information about community services; concerns about safety and security; and inadequate opportunities for meaningful volunteer service. Moreover, there are limited avenues for lifelong learning. Too few community-based arts and culture programs, the report finds, target older adults, and in many cases, the programs that do seek to draw in older adults neither attract nor engage them. *A Blueprint for Action* also identifies the many challenges to aging in place: a lack of affordable and appropriate housing options; few opportunities for physical activity, making it difficult to remain healthy and involved; a lack of mobility options; limited information about community services; concerns about safety and security; and inadequate opportunities for meaningful volunteer service. Moreover, there are limited avenues for lifelong learning. Too few community-based arts and culture programs, the report finds, target older adults, and in many cases, the programs that do seek to draw in older adults neither attract nor engage them.

Furthermore, although today’s older people are generally healthier, wealthier, and better educated than their age cohorts of previous generations, they possess a range of educational backgrounds and work experiences. Many older adults, due to earlier educational experiences, limited finances, or health problems, do not see lifelong learning as an option or are unaware of the opportunities (Framing New Terrain: Older Adults and Higher Education, October 2007). A lack of transportation and heavy family responsibilities often decrease opportunities for lifelong learning as well.

Demographic change will have an influence that is widespread and will challenge many assumptions about the contributions of older adults. It will affect processes of production, consumption and the environment in which we all live and work. If societies are to adapt, steps will need to be taken to release the social capital that is locked up in their older citizens. This potential would include the application of accrued social and emotional intelligence, an understanding of the ways things interact with each other
and an ability to place single events in their wider perspective. Given access to updated skills through lifelong learning and through age-friendly design, older adults can contribute to new forms of adaptive innovation. In fact, a combination of lifelong learning and social adaptation can drive innovation. It leads to a virtuous circle, releasing further social capital in a way that is imminently suited to a world needing new ways to interconnect.

References


European Commission (2006a), Time to move up the gear. The new partnership for growth and jobs, Brussels.
Marcia Conner, (2009), Introducing Informal Learning, Marcia Conner, viewed 30 September 2010.
The World Bank, (2003), Lifelong Learning in the Global Knowledge Economy: Challenges for Developing Countries, The World Bank, viewed on 30 September 2010, p.g. 43.


Yeaxlee, B. A. (1929), Lifelong Education: A sketch of the range and significance of the adult education movement(London: Cassell).