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LIFELONG LEARNING: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL AGING

Article by Tina Grosso, EdD

Abstract

The silver tsunami brings new challenges to societies across the globe. At the forefront of this greying population trend is the desire for older adults to lead active and independent lives well into their later-years. As a result, lifelong learning initiatives that promote physical, psychological, and socioeconomic well-being are imperative. In particular, health education programs that assist with the detection, management, and prevention of chronic diseases such as diabetes, are at the forefront of public health discussions. Knowing when to retire, where to access long-term care services, and what to do if there is an Alzheimer's disease diagnosis are just some of the educational opportunities available to older adults through lifelong learning. Education about the aging process is not only essential for the increasing numbers of baby boomers reaching retirement age, but for society as a whole. Staying informed and engaged is the key to success.

Introduction

The silver tsunami – a term used to describe greying global population trends (Mitchell, 2014) – has prompted the evolution of social, economic, health, and educational norms across the globe. As the average life expectancy in the United States (U.S.) has continued to increase from 47.3 years in 1900 (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011), to 78.8 years today (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Life Expectancy, 2017) so have the learning needs of aging individuals and societies. As stated by Manheimer (2008), “the older learner movement is an outgrowth of the unprecedented demographic rise of aging societies characterized by lengthened life expectancy, low birth rates, improved health care and hygiene” (p. 112). This demographic shift has greatly affected the ways in which people view aging and how they perceive themselves as *growing old*. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2017), “Societies that adapt to this changing demographic and invest in *Healthy Ageing* can enable individuals to live both longer and healthier lives and for societies to reap the dividends” (para. 2). Therefore, providing lifelong learning opportunities is crucial to the prosperity of aging societies.

Literature Review

The baby boomers, a term used to describe the cohort of people born between the years 1946-1964 (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011; Morgan & Kunkel, 2016; Saxon, Etten & Perkins, 2015), have a keen desire to lead active, independent, and fulfilling lives well into their later years. Baby boomers have typically achieved higher rates of post-secondary education, affluence, and greater autonomy than earlier generations (Beal, n.d.; Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011; Manheimer, 2008; Morgan & Kunkel, 2017; Saxon et al., 2015). As a result, baby boomers are inquisitive about the aging process and are keen to seek answers to questions concerning their overall health and well-being. Questions of concern often pertain to topics such as health (How do I stay healthy and active?); retirement (When can I retire?); long-term care (LTC) options (How can I get help about home care assistance for my aging parent(s)?); and disease prevention/management (What is Alzheimer's disease? and Will I get it?).

Such questions are supported by research which highlights concerns surrounding unprepared health care systems (Mitchell, 2014), increasing numbers of older adults requiring mental health services (Bartels & Naslund, 2013), labor-market changes (Morgan & Kunkel, 2016), and the impending Alzheimer's disease epidemic (Alzheimer's Association, 2017; Sarkar, Irwin, Singh, Riccetti & Singh, 2016). In addition, researchers also reported increased demands for higher education (Cruce & Hillman, 2012; 2011), volunteer, and enriching lifelong learning opportunities (Horrigan, 2017; Manheimer, 2008) among the aging population. Accordingly, it appears that regardless of the age-related query, the premise is the same - to learn all one can in order to age as independently and successfully as possible.

Learning in Later-Life

Current aging demographic trends highlight the fact that learning can, and does, occur throughout the life-course, not just in childhood and adolescence (Morgan & Kunkel, 2016, p. 235). This dispels one of the major myths about aging - the notion that older adults are incapable of learning (Grosso, 2015). The common idea that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" is simply false, as older adults are both eager to learn and have the capacity to do so (Saxon et al., 2015, p. 391). Furthermore, the theoretical framework of neuroandrogogy, the study of adult brain functions and andragogy, the study of adult learning further support the fact that people continue to learn well into their later years (Wilson, 2006). Therefore, regardless of terminology used: lifelong learning, continuing education, and/or adult education, individuals continue to acquire knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, values, and interest (KUSAVI) (Henschke, 2011a; 2011b) throughout the life-course.

Researchers in the field of education have also, importantly, emphasized the need to use different learning methodologies with lifelong learners, versus traditional pedagogical techniques (Manheimer, 2008). In particular, researchers have differentiated geragogy, the teaching of older adults from andragogy, the teaching of adults and pedagogy, the teaching of children (Saxon et al., 2015, p. 391). This

distinction is significant given the large number of older adults, particularly baby boomers, seeking lifelong learning opportunities for both employment-related and recreational purposes (Horrigan, 2017). Furthermore, andragogical (Knowles, 1973; 1995) and geragogical (John, 1988) theories stress the importance of collaborative and individualized learning opportunities for older adults (Grosso, 2015; Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011; Morgan & Kunkel, 2016; Saxon et al., 2015) - key considerations for any lifelong learning initiative.

Andragogy. Knowles' (1973; 1995) eight process elements of andragogy include the following: (a) preparing the learner, (b) setting the climate, (c) involving learners in mutual planning, (d) involving learners in diagnosing their learning needs, (e) involving learners in forming their learning plans, (f) involving learners in designing learning plans, (g) helping learners carryout their learning plans, and (h) involving learners in evaluating their learning outcomes. In addition, Knowles' (1990) six assumptions about adult learners include: (a) need to know reason for learning something, (b) concept of learner, (c) learner's experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) motivation. Therefore, in order for educational pursuits to be successful, andragogical theory suggests that opportunities for lifelong learning must be self-directed, collaborative, and personally relevant to the learner.

Geragogy. According to John (1988), learning is "ageless" and societies must continue to educate the elderly in order to grow and increase productivity. John (1988) provided the following reasons for promoting learning opportunities for older adults: (a) to maximize contributions to society (sharing wisdom and experience), (b) to provide quality of life for all (physical, psychosocial, and educational stimulation), (c) to meet self-fulfillment needs (personal growth, inquisitives), (d) to improve mental and physical health (a healthy brain, a healthy heart), (e) to reduce economic problems (healthy older adults are more active and less dependent on community and/or family resources), and (f) to provide society with creative products (elders may uncover hidden talents they did not have time to explore previously). Thus, according to geragogical theory, lifelong learning opportunities must be engaging and enriching in order to benefit both the individual and society.

Research conducted by Grosso (2015) also found evidence of the application of andragogy and geragogy in helping older adults with developmental disabilities (DD) learn to successfully age in place. The study found that for this particular emerging population of older adults, lifelong learning opportunities helped prepare individuals for numerous age-related changes specifically physical, functional, and psychosocial. For example, learning opportunities presented in support group settings helped older adults prepare for general age-related changes such as sensory loss, disease prevention, disease management for diabetes, health promotion, safety, transitioning to retirement, and preparedness planning. Such educational programs promoted independence while simultaneously enhancing the quality of life for those aging with DD (Grosso, 2015).

Research shows that the above-mentioned learning needs are not unique to those aging with DD, but also the general aging population (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011; Saxon

et al., 2015). Therefore, lifelong learning opportunities that address myriad age-related health for obesity, diabetes, dementia, cancer, and socioeconomic challenges such as retirement, finances, housing, caregiver demands are imperative in order to meet the evolving needs of aging societies.

Life-Course Perspective and Successful Aging. Researchers have described lifelong learning as the key to successful aging. Although a single definition of successful aging (SA) is yet to emerge (Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014), the consensus among researchers is that it is multidimensional in nature. Troutman, Nies, Small, and Bates (2011) assert that “Successful aging includes multiple dimensions: a sense of meaning or purpose, and physical, functional, psychological, intellectual, social, and spiritual health for older people” (as cited in Kozar-Westman et al., 2013, p. 239) and aligns with Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) categorization of SA involving low probability of disease and disability along with high cognitive, physical, and social functioning (as cited in Morgan & Kunkel, 2016).

According to Horrigan (2017), the majority (73%) of Americans reported they are lifelong learners (para. 3). Whether learning is prompted by personal do-it-yourself-projects or for professional pursuits, adjusting to shifting workforce demands, many adults report engaging in lifelong learning opportunities throughout the life-course. For some, it is a matter of simply having extra time on their hands, whereas for others it is a keen desire to learn new things, meet new people, and engage in personally enriching activities. Regardless of its motivation, the consensus is that lifelong learning enhances an individuals’ ability - physically, psychologically, and socioeconomically - to age successfully. The life-course perspective also neatly aligns with andragogical and geragogical theories – whereby learning in later-life is intrinsically motivated and derivative from individualized learning needs.

Examples of Lifelong Learning Opportunities/ Lifelong Learning Institutions

As discussed earlier, lifelong learning opportunities exist in many forms (Beal, n.d.; Horrigan, 2017; Manheimer, 2017). For some older adults, it is the pursuit of higher education, continuing education courses, and certificates offered by college and universities. Reasons for such endeavors may include personal accomplishments such as completing ‘that’ degree or for professional reasons including enhancing technical skills to advance/change a career. For others, the desire to meet new people and ward-off loneliness are the motivating factors for enrollment in creative educational opportunities. Popular endeavors include travel, cultural enrichment, involvement in the arts, and participation in lifelong learning institute (LLLLI) programs. Examples of some relatively well-known lifelong learning opportunities include University of the Third Age (U3A), Road Scholar, and OASIS.

University of the Third Age (U3A) provides creative informal learning opportunities for older adults who are retired or semi-retired. U3A is a worldwide lifelong learning initiative, encouraging continual education for those in the ‘third-age’ of life

(U3A). Learning opportunities are held in colleges and universities, cafes and homes, and cover a wide-range of interests such as cooking, arts, sports, philosophy, and geography (Rotoura Daily Post, 2016).

Road Scholar, formerly known as Elderhostel, has been the leader in educational travel since 1975 (Road Scholar, Our Story, n.d.) and offer experiential learning opportunities through travel, designed to promote overall well-being through personal and cultural enrichment. Road Scholar opportunities span several continents, and even offer intergenerational programs, whereby participants can travel and learn with their grandchildren (Road Scholar, Collections, n.d.).

OASIS is a non-for-profit educational organization, headquartered in St. Louis, MO, whose mission is “to promote healthy aging through lifelong learning, active lifestyles and volunteer engagement” (OASIS, 2017, para. 1). OASIS provides educational opportunities and programs to seniors through collaboration with local healthcare, universities, and senior groups. The goal of the program is to help older adults’ lead vibrant and productive lives.

Researchers have found that participating in volunteer opportunities and lifelong learning endeavors promotes successful aging by staving off depression and loneliness in later-years, while providing opportunities for personal growth and enrichment (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). For example, Mrs. M, an empty nester and retiree, pursued a volunteer opportunity at a local animal shelter to keep her engaged in the community, active by walking the rescue dogs, and involved with a cause she was passionate about. This experience also helped Mrs. M develop a sense of purpose and responsibility in her retirement years (personal communication, December 5, 2017). In addition, researchers have found that volunteer programs can complement existing lifelong learning programs due to motivating factors such as generativity – the desire to help future generations as well as personal development (Yamashita, López, Soligo, & Keene, 2017).

Organizations such as the Alzheimer’s Association, local YMCAs and other healthcare entities, also provide educational resources and supports for those tackling a wide array of age-related transitions. Classes may include caregiver support group programs (Alzheimer’s Association, 2017), diabetes management classes provided by local community health centers (CHIPS Health and Wellness Center, 2017), SilverSneakers exercise programs provided by the YMCA (SilverSneakers, 2017), and case management services for those wishing to learn more about LTC options. For example, after a diagnosis of high blood pressure and weight gain, Mrs. M, also enrolled in a whole food and plant-based diet community health and wellness education program. After participating in the program for eight weeks, including attending weekly educational and support group activities, Mrs. M experienced lower blood pressure and weight loss (personal communication, December 5, 2017). These examples clearly demonstrate that participation in enriching lifelong learning opportunities, regardless of the cause, is imperative not only for the growth and prosperity of individuals, but also for the greater community.

Conclusion

This article highlighted several challenges facing aging societies. However, the silver tsunami has created new lifelong learning opportunities for individuals across the globe. At the forefront of the aging population trend is the desire for older adults to lead healthy, active, and independent lives well into their later-years. This warrants both formal and informal lifelong learning initiatives that promote physical, psychological, spiritual, and socioeconomic well-being across the life-course.

Health education programs that assist with the management and prevention of chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, as well as opportunities for volunteerism, travel, and personal enrichment, are key characteristics of future lifelong learning opportunities. In addition, knowing when to retire, where to access aging resources, and how to stay fit and healthy, are just some of the educational opportunities available to older adults through lifelong learning forums. Education about the aging process is, therefore, not only essential for the increasing numbers of baby boomers reaching retirement age, but for society as a whole. Helping older adults' stay informed and engaged as they age via individualized learning opportunities that align with andragogical and geragogical theoretical frameworks, is imperative for successful aging and prosperity in later-life.

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