

Lifelong Learning in the Metro-City: What's Trending in the Third Age

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Introduction

We do not wake up one day and suddenly declare that we are older adults but our notions of what constitutes 'old age' tend to change as we ourselves age (Findsen, 2002, p. 34)

This poster explores the educational topics in which Third Agers (persons 50 and older in this study) show the most interest. Registration data from a lifelong learning institute in the southwestern United States are analyzed. This poster presents the topics that generated the greatest degree of interest (enrollment), while also accounting for differences in gender, age, costs, previous enrollment, and number of sessions offered. These findings will help lifelong learning programs plan out their course catalogs by understanding seniors' preferences in education.

Research on third agers and lifelong learning has been very incremental in nature; "it builds progressively on earlier studies as part of a continuing process in which findings are replicated, refined, and used as stepping stones for what follows" (Fisher, 2008, p. 27). This reductive process can fail to understand third agers (Fisher, 2008; Chen, Kim, Moon, & Merriam, 2008). Third age research has also relied on an arbitrary conceptualization of old age that is assigned by researchers or governments (i.e. retirement) (Phillipson, 1998; Findsen, 2002). This has, unfortunately, led to a research direction that is focused on the problems associated with growing older (i.e. diseases and decline) (Kerschner & Pegues, 1998; Boulton-Lewis, 2010). Researchers like Boulton-Lewis (2010) have called for a more positive approach assessing what new knowledge third agers can acquire and what learning needs they have (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). Thus, this research broadly asks: Who are third agers and why, how, and what do they want to learn.

Who are the Third Agers?

Retirement today is a whole new ball game, with new rules, a longer playing season, and healthier teams! (Arsenault & Anderson, 1998, p. 5)

First Age

- This is an era of early socialization where children and adolescents are dependent on their parents (or others for care).
- This is a time of preparation for adulthood.

Second Age

- The is the time of working adulthood.
- Individuals take on social and job responsibilities and in many ways establish lives independent from their previous caretakers; this era also consists of attempts and success in individual achievement.

Third Age

- This is an era free of constraints (i.e. child-rearing and full-time employment) found in the second age.
- This is a time of fuller autonomy.
- Individuals have the opportunity to build upon their years of knowledge and experience further enhancing their individual capacities.
- It is seen as a time period focused on fulfillment.

Fourth Age

- The is the end or completion of life, where an individual depends on others for care and dies.
- This time period tends to be short.

Learning in the Third Age

The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast us – William James

Lifelong learning...

- ❖ Is innate providing people with meaning and purpose; it is a generative impulse (Freedman, 1997).
- ❖ Helps third agers navigate a rapidly changing world (i.e. changes in technology and science, survival skills, and fulfilling life goals) (Ardelt, 2000).
- ❖ Concerns public policy; specifically, lifelong learning may be linked increases in civic participation, civic engagement, citizenship behaviors, and social justice for older people (Bennett & Wells, 2009; Hafford-Letchfield, 2010).
- ❖ Strives to establish an inclusive learning society (Jarvis, 2000).
- ❖ Should be available to persons of all ages (Peterson, 1980).

Why Learn in the Third Age

"What do older adults need education for?" ...it is important for educators to be able to respond proactively to this question. (Findsen, 2002, p. 37)

Third agers have different motivations to learn (Albert & Dignam, 2010). They have multiple and different needs and reasons for taking advantage of learning opportunities (Morstain & Smart, 1974; Findsen & McCullough, 2008).

- ❖ Third agers learn to fulfill their needs (McClusky, 1974).
- ❖ Third agers learn to achieve personal growth (Boulton-Lewis, 2010).
- ❖ Third agers learn for the sake of learning itself (Yenerall, 2003).
- ❖ Third agers learn to become empowered (Boulton-Lewis, 2010).

How to Learn in the Third Age

Adult learners value learning by and through themselves and with and from others (Logsdall, 1990). They want to be more involved in the learning experience, and not just recipients of a lecture (Duay & Bryan, 2008). They want to draw on others' experiences and be able to share their own experiences (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010). They value experience, reflection, and wisdom-based knowledge, which are related to self-fulfillment and perceived quality of life (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010).

Many informal, nonformal, and formal groups have emerged to "tap the potential" of third agers (Boulton-Lewis, 2010, p. 222). Findsen (2002) identified four types of lifelong learning providers for third agers. First, there are agencies that create programs for third agers (i.e. Elderhostel). Second, there are mainstream institutions that develop some course that specifically appeal to third agers (i.e. continuing education programs). Third, there are self-help providers that are self-directed and ran by third agers, so that they can meet their own learning needs (i.e., University of the Third Age [U3A]). Finally, there are learning programs that neglect third agers.

What to Learn in the Third Age

A major question for individuals, institutions, and societies is: What will we do with these extra years? (Sadler, 2006, p. 11)

Far too often, education providers for older adults assume that they know what's best for learners to learn (Findsen, 2006). This paternalistic stance is not productive in research and practice (see Findsen, 2006; Collins, 1991; Meriam & Brockert, 1997). However, politicized and assertive third agers may also come forward and suggest that they know what's best (Findsen, 2006). A better approach to understand what third agers want to learn when looking to provide learning opportunities must be more grounded-in-research, more autonomous, and more democratic (Findsen, 2006). Registration data may be one answer to this issue.

The number of learning opportunities and number and variety of topics offered are important (Fisher, 1979; Lamb & Brady, 2005). Which topics are more important is still unclear. Simply put, it appears that topics that are familiar or relevant to lifelong learners are of interest to them (Duay & Bryan, 2008); yet, the third age is a time for learners to explore new topics that they may have set aside during the earlier stages of their lives (Ardelt, 2000). The table below summarizes and synthesizes covered topics.

Topics	Citation
Arts and Hobbies (Crafts, Music, Painting, Drawing, Theatre, and Dance)	Yenerall, 2003; Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Cherem, 2010; Jenkins, 2011)
Autobiography and Reflection	Ardelt, 2000
Computers, Technological and Scientific Advances	Ardelt, 2000; Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Chou, Chi, & Leung, 2003; Johnson, 1995; Older Students Research Group, 1984; Timmerman, 1998
Current Affairs, Politics	Boulton-Lewis, 2010
Finance	Gregg, 1993
Genealogy	Boulton-Lewis, 2010
Languages	Leung, Lui, & Chi, 2005; Boulton-Lewis, 2010
Liberal Arts, History, Humanities, and Cultures	Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Cherem, 2010; Johnson, 1995; Ardelt, 2000; Older Students Research Group, 1984; Yenerall, 2003
Life Skills (Health, Exercise, Safety, Transportation)	Leung, Lui, & Chi, 2005; Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Jenkins, 2011
Math and Science	Johnson, 1995; Older Students Research Group, 1984
New Subjects, Skills, Vocations (in General)	Boulton-Lewis, 2010
Social Science	Johnson, 1995; Older Students Research Group, 1984; Yenerall, 2003
Spirituality	Boulton-Lewis, 2010

Methods

This poster explores the educational topics in which Third Agers (persons 50 and older in this study) show the most interest. Registration data from a lifelong learning institute in the southwestern United States in a metropolitan area are analyzed. Students registered for short courses, one-time lectures, or cultural experiences over two semesters between July 2012 and July 2013.

The lifelong learning institute hosted 117 learning experiences. 7 out of the 117 experiences were cancelled due to logistical issues, such as the instructor being unavailable or not enough persons registered for the experience. 4 of the 117 learning experiences were offered at no cost to members of the learning institute. 4 experiences were offered at no cost; 106 were offered at a price of \$10 per session. Membership at the institute cost \$15.

Secondary registration data was analyzed at the end of the academic year. Demographic information (gender and age) was collected during the online, mail-in, or phone-in registration process. The data was explored for particular groupings of learning experiences that clustered together. Exploratory factor analysis and cluster analysis were used as statistical tools for data exploration.

Results

Describing the Third Agers

Nine hundred and twenty five persons signed up as members for one or both semesters. 268 of the members were men (28.97%), and 657 of the members were women (71.03%). 576 persons were first-time members of the institute that year (62.27%), 312 person were returning members (33.73%), and 37 persons were unclassified (4.00%). The minimum age was 50-years-of-age because of the institute's policy; however, one 39-year-old person was allowed to register. The oldest member enrolled was 98-years-old. The mean age was 72; the median age was 71. 234 members registered and/or took classes in the fall semester only (25.30%), 432 members registered and/or took classes in the spring only (46.70%), and 259 members registered and/or took classes during both semesters (28.00%). The average number of experiences third agers registered for was 2.82 (median = 2, mode = 1). 48 persons registered as members, but did not enroll in any courses (5.19% of total enrolled).

Demographic differences were hard to assess because the data consisted of two semesters. Comparing gender and previous membership status, a significant model emerged ($F[4, 883] = 2476.053, p < .001$) that explained 91.8% of the variance in dollars spent on learning. Controlling for the number of experiences enrolled in ($F[1, 883] = 8448.595, p < .001$), an interaction effect was not significant ($F(1, 883) = 1.083, p = ns$). A main effect remained for gender ($F[1, 883] = 8.641, p < .01$), such that men on average spent \$6.43 more than women on learning experiences at the institute. A main effect remained for previous membership status ($F[1, 883] = 42.583, p < .001$), such that returning members on average spent \$15.04 more than new members.

Describing the Learning Experiences

2,609 seats were registered for the 110 learning experiences provided. The average number of persons per experience was 23.72 (median = 20). Subject matter experts from the institute and professionals in community development categorized the learning experiences based the topics (see previous table) addressed earlier. Eight categories were agreed upon to classify each learning experience. The number of each experience in each category is displayed below.

Topic	Number of Experiences
Art	17
Art History	22
Autobiography	6
Computers, Technology, and Scientific Advances	4
Liberal Arts, History, Humanities, and Culture	38
Life Skills	3
Math and Science	16
Spirituality	4
Total	110

Inter-rater agreement was 81.77% suggesting that learning experiences can encompass multiple categories (only 41 experiences [37.37%] yielded 100% inter-rater agreement). Finally, 15 learning experiences were directly tied to current affairs (13.63% of experiences).

Two-Step Cluster Analysis using Schwarz's Bayesian Criterion (BIC) was used to explore significant groupings of learning experiences offered. The experiences were clustered based on the number of persons enrolled, how full the experience was, the percent of total members enrolled in the course, and the amount of revenue yielded. Two cohesive clusters emerged from data. Four learning experiences were excluded for not bringing in any revenue (3.6% of total experiences).

Results (continued)

79 learning experiences clustered into one homogenous group (74.53% of paid experiences). This cluster appeared to have a lower draw regarding enrollment and revenue. The average number of persons enrolled in the experiences was 17.304. The average capacity level was 44.38% full; none of the learning experiences in this cluster ever reached 100% full. Each learning experience in this cluster on average represented 2.81% of the total enrollment at the lifelong learning institute.

27 learning experiences clustered into a second homogenous group (25.47% of paid experiences). This second cluster appeared to have a higher draw regarding enrollment and revenue. The average number of persons enrolled in the experiences was 42.444. The average capacity level was 78.93% full; 6 of the learning experiences in cluster two reached 100% capacity (5.66% of paid experiences). Each learning experience in this second cluster on average represented 6.89% of the total enrollment at the lifelong learning institute. Finally, this cluster yielded 137.48% on average more revenue than the first cluster.

Comparing the Clusters and Learning Topics

There were no observed differences between the clusters regarding current affairs; the observed frequencies were consistent with the expected frequencies in each cluster. Notable differences arose when looking at the cross-tabulations of topics and clusters, though no significant chi-square was observed. However, categories observed frequencies differed from their expected frequencies.

Topic		Cluster		Total
		Low Draw	High Draw	
Art	Count	14	2	16
	Expected Count	11.9	4.1	16
Art History	Count	18	4	22
	Expected Count	16.4	5.6	22
Autobiography	Count	6	0	6
	Expected Count	4.5	1.5	6
Computers, Technology, and Scientific Advances	Count	4	0	4
	Expected Count	3	1	4
Liberal Arts, History, Humanities, and Culture	Count	23	12	35
	Expected Count	26.1	8.9	35
Life Skills	Count	3	0	3
	Expected Count	2.2	0.8	3
Math and Science	Count	9	7	16
	Expected Count	11.9	4.1	16
Spirituality	Count	2	2	4
	Expected Count	3	1	4
Total	Count	79	27	106
	Expected Count	79	27	106

Three categories were not found in the high draw cluster: (1) Autobiography, (2) computers, technology, and scientific advances, and (3) life skills. Additionally, art and art history had less of a presence in the high draw cluster than expected. Liberal arts, history, humanities, and culture yielded approximately three more experiences than expected in the high draw cluster. Math and science yielded about three more experiences than expected in the high draw cluster. Although there were only four spirituality experiences offered, one more than was expected was found in the high draw category.

Discussion

The large number of women in the sample was to be expected; however, spending differences were not expected. Additionally, the topic preferences when comparing clusters the lack of technology, autobiography, and life skills experiences in the high draw category were expected. Third agers may see the benefits of these sorts of experiences; however, they prefer to learn about other topics.

This discussion is still under development. What thoughts do you have regarding these findings? What lessons can be learned from these findings and the limitations and advantages of its method? Feel free to send your thoughts to Craig Talmage at ctalmage@asu.edu or Richard Knopf at Richard.Knopf@asu.edu.

