

## **IS LEARNING IN LATER LIFE LEISURE?**

*Sherry Coulson, University of Waterloo*

*Sherry Dupuis, University of Waterloo*

### **Introduction**

Approximately five percent of Canadians over the age of 65 years participate in some type of formal education program (National Advisory Council on Aging, 2001). It is estimated that the numbers of older adults participating in later life learning activities will increase as the baby boomers enter their retirement years healthier, better educated, and better informed than the generation preceding them. In fact, MacNeil (2001) predicts that increased educational attainment will mean that more and more older adults will seek out educational opportunities as a “pursuit and focal point for leisure interest” (p. 55). Despite the growing popularity of later life learning among older adults, little research has been conducted on the meaning of learning in later life. This study explored the meaning of learning for women and men over the age of 60 years who were participants in one of two learning activities, one formal (i.e., for-credit, university classroom) and one normal (i.e., non-credit, older adult classroom). Guided by a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer, 1969), we set out to explore learning in later life as a possible leisure activity and the role that learning plays within the lives of the older adult participants. This presentation will focus on the findings of this study relating to the relationship between later life learning and leisure. Specifically, how different meanings of leisure can impact perceptions of whether or not learning is considered leisure.

### **Methods**

This study drew on the grounded theory approach put forward by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Using both purposive selective sampling (Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, & Glenn Harris, 1992) and theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), participants were recruited from two different learning environments; half of the participants were enrolled in for-credit courses at the University of Waterloo, whereas the other half were recruited from the Laurier Association for Lifelong Learning (LALL), which offers non-credit, age-segregated courses based on the members interests. A total of 20 participants were recruited in order to reach theoretical saturation. The demographics of the participants were consistent with previous research. The final sample included 13 women and 7 men, ranging in age from 60 to 83 years, with the mean age of 70 years. The majority of the sample (n=11) were married and all were Caucasian. Most of the older learners had high levels of initial education (i.e., high school diplomas with some university/professional degrees), although it was difficult in some cases to distinguish initial education from continuing and later life education as many had participated in learning activities across their lives.

In-depth, active interviews (as described by Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) were used as the primary data collection strategy. Interview questions focused on the participant's past and current experiences of learning, the meaning of learning for the participants, the connection between learning and leisure, and the relationship of learning to the rest of the participants' lives. Interviews ranged from forty minutes to three hours in length. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis began with the first interview using the constant comparative method (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Once all the data had been collected and formally analysed into an emerging grounded theory, a member check focus group, lasting two and a half hours, was conducted with a group of five of the participants in order to enhance the credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Findings**

The main overarching theme that emerged from the data was that of “Learning as Life”. Learning, for these participants, was incredibly meaningful and played an integral role in their lives. The meaning that participants gave to their learning went beyond the traditional conceptualizations of lifelong learning and learning in later life. Learning was seen as more than just a pastime or something to do. Learning was really seen as a lifelong activity – it would never end, nor did the participants want it to. Learning was not compartmentalized as just one part of their lives – it was present in all aspects of their lives and in everything they did. Carol, a retired occupational therapist who was participating in LALL, for example, did not see learning as only one part of life. She stated: “I don’t compartmentalise it as, you know, that this is a learning opportunity and this isn’t. I think you’re sort of, sit down and read the paper, you’re learning something...I try a new recipe, I’m learning something.” Learning was seen as a gift and was described with words like love and passion. Participants found learning so meaningful and valued it so highly that they saw learning not only as a central part of their lives but also as life itself. Inez, a retired librarian originally from Germany who was taking courses through LALL described her learning as “you should always learn, because it is really life. Life is learning.” Three major themes reflecting Learning as Life for the participants emerged and included: satisfaction of needs through learning, learning as a source of enrichment, and new awakening through learning in later life. Interestingly, the context and content of learning was less important for these older learners than the act of learning itself. When examining the meaning of learning for the participants, there were no major differences between those taking courses for credit and non-credit learners.

One objective of the study was to examine whether or not older adults perceived their learning to be leisure. Whether or not learning could be considered leisure for these participants was really dependant on the meaning participants attached to leisure. Participants were asked how they perceived their learning: as work, leisure, a combination of work and leisure, or something completely different. Participants’ definitions of leisure fell into one of three categories. First, some of the participants viewed leisure as negative (e.g., doing nothing, drinking beer and watching TV, laziness) and, therefore, learning was not perceived as leisure for them. Another group of participants did not have a negative view of leisure, but believed that their conceptualization of leisure was not sufficient to describe their learning. These participants saw their learning as something more than leisure. Pam, for example, described learning as follows: “It’s more than that (leisure), isn’t it? I don’t know what I’d call it. It’s really more of a profound interest than just because I have leisure time. I think of leisure as more time filling. It’s more important than just a time filler. It’s fulfilling, fascinating, a sense of challenge and just the thrill of acquiring knowledge.” Finally, some of the participants felt that learning could be conceptualized as leisure according to their own definitions. Norman defined leisure as “whatever you like to do

with your free time. So I like to learn, so my activity, my learning is leisure.” Nonetheless, most of the participants viewed their learning as something greater than leisure – more meaningful, it meant more to them than leisure.

## **Discussion**

Learning was viewed as important, meaningful, intrinsically rewarding, and an integral part of life for the participants in this study. “Learning as Life” may be seen as an extension of the concept of learning for its own sake, an integrate attribute of leisure (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Other studies on later life learning have also found that learning is done for personal interest, the love of learning, enrichment and personal growth, and the joy of learning (e.g., Boshier & Riddell, 1978; Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Houle, 1961). Learning was done for its own sake; participation was an end in itself. This study shows that learning for these older adults does include a number of the traditionally defined attributes of leisure, however, for most of the participants, learning was given more value than “just a leisure activity”.

Additionally, while not every participant in this study could be considered a liberal arts hobbyist, their descriptions of their learning parallel many of the attributes that are associated with serious leisure. Participants experienced many of the characteristics of serious leisure, particularly the liberal arts hobby. Learning required effort on the part of the participant and there were many benefits associated with participation. Many of these later life learners negotiated barriers to participation and persevered over long periods of time to complete a program of study or develop new skills. Once again, however, these participants did not view their learning to be leisure, they saw it as life itself.

The disconnect between how these participants’ described their learning and how leisure attributes found in the research data suggest that learning is leisure, highlights an important issue facing leisure researchers. While many of the fundamental attributes of leisure cited in the literature could be seen in the participants’ experiences, when asked, most of the participants themselves did not equate their learning with leisure. As researchers, do we tend to accept our traditional definitions of leisure over the meaning that the participants attach to the activity? As illustrated in this study, how leisure researchers conceptualize activities and how participants conceptualize these same activities, can be quite different. As leisure researchers, especially those of us working within a qualitative paradigm, how do we reconcile these differences and how best can we further our knowledge in the leisure field, while acknowledging the meanings that participants’ attribute to their activities? In this study, two solitudes existed: “Learning as Life” as conceptualized by the later life learners; and “Learning as Leisure”, as suggested by the application of leisure attributes to the data.

## **References**

- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Boshier, R., & Riddell, G. (1978). Education participation scale factor structure for older adults. *Adult Education*, 28, 165-175.

- Bynum, L., & Seaman, M. (1993). Motivations of third-age students in learning-in-retirement institutes. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 57(1/2), 12-22.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Houle, C. (1961). *The inquiring mind*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, Press.
- Jamieson, A., Miller, A., & Stafford, J. (1998). Education in a life course perspective: Continuities and discontinuities. *Education and Ageing*, 13(3), 213-228.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- MacNeil, R. (2001). Bob Dylan and the baby boom generation: The times they are a-changin' – again. *Activities, Adaptation, & Aging*, 25(3/4), 45-58.
- Mannell, R., & Kleiber, D. (1997). *A social psychology of leisure*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- National Advisory Council on Aging. (2001). *Report card: Seniors in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada Publication.
- Sandelowski, M., Holditch-Davis, D., & Glenn Harris, B. (1992). Using qualitative and quantitative methods: The transition to parenthood for infertile couples. In J.F. Gilgun, K. Daly, & G Handel (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in family research* (pp. 310-322). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *New directions in the theory and research of serious leisure*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998a). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd. Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

**ABSTRACTS**  
**of Papers Presented at the**  
**Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research**  
**May 17 – 20, 2005**  
**Hosted by**  
**Department of Recreation and Tourism Management**  
**Malaspina University-College**  
**Nanaimo, B.C.**  
**Abstracts compiled and edited by**  
**Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson**  
**CCLR-11 Programme Committee**  
**Tom Delamere**  
**Dan McDonald**  
**Carleigh Randall**  
**Rick Rollins**  
**and**  
**David Robinson**



**Copyright © 2005 Canadian Association for Leisure Studies**  
**ISBN 1-896886-01-9**



Appropriate Use of Documents: Documents may be downloaded or printed (single copy only). Please note that this document is copyrighted and CREDIT MUST BE PROVIDED to the originator of the document when you quote from it. You must not sell the document or make a profit from reproducing it. You must not copy, extract, summarize or distribute downloaded documents outside of your own organization in a manner which competes with or substitutes for the distribution of the database by the Lifestyle Information Network (LIN). <http://www.lin.ca>