Informal Learning: Mid-Life Learners Forging a Learning Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: This case study research examines the learning attitudes and practices of adults who have earned less than a college degree. Their beliefs are probed in regards to their self-educative efforts in relation to their self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy. Data were collected primarily through interviewing four adult learners identified through purposive sampling. These learners reflected the vision and valuing of wanting to be educated persons. Through them, as they forge their learning philosophy, we are given a lens through which to view and appreciate all learners in our midst especially as it applies to the learning philosophy developed by mid-life learners beyond their formal education.

RESUME: Cette étude de cas examine les attitudes et les pratiques pour étudier chez les adultes qui possèdent un diplôme scolaire inférieur au niveau universitaire. Leurs convictions sont analysées en respectant leurs efforts d'autodidactes par rapport à leur auto orientation, leur motivation pour apprendre et leur propre efficacité. Les données ont été d'abord recueillies lors d'entretiens avec quatre adultes étudiants qui ont été choisis dans un échantillonnage dirigé. Ces étudiants ont reflété l'image et la valeur de personnes désireuses de recevoir une instruction. Par eux, alors qu'ils se façonnent une philosophie des études, nous regardons et apprécions à travers un objectif, tous les étudiants adultes dans notre milieu, d'autant que cela s'applique à la philosophie des études que les étudiants de la quarantaine développent bien après leur formation initiale.

Introduction

Educators and society in general publicly embrace the concept of lifelong learning and the goal of developing a learning society. They reinforce the assumption that human beings are learning creatures as surely as they are living and breathing beings. Research suggests that there are certain predictors of individuals becoming lifelong learners, the most compelling

of which is one's level of formal education (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1979, 1981; Houle, 1961, 1980; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; LaValle & Finch, 1999; Livneh & Livneh, 1988; Valentine, 1997). "The amount of schooling is, in fact, so significant that it underlies or reinforces many of the other determinants, such as occupation, size of community, length of stay in it, and nationality and religious background" (Houle, 1961, p. 7). Cross also suggests that, "the more education people have, the more education they want, and the more they participate in further learning activities" (1981, p. 15). She predicts the probability of an "echoing effect" emanating from the children of individuals with a high degree of formal education, as children of these parents are more likely to become well-educated in a formal sense themselves. Support for this argument is found in Valentine's (1997) investigation that, "non-participants [in educational activities] tend to have less formal education, with the participation rate for high school drop-outs only ¼ of that of college graduates" (p. 105).

Despite this recurring theme in the literature, history is replete with cases of men and women who have become lifelong learners without the benefit of a great deal of formal education. As of 2000, 70.99% of the adult American population had not earned a college degree (U. S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Therefore, consider the conundrum raised by this statistic: We live in a society where most of the adult population in the United States do not hold a college degree, yet we live in an era where credentials are becoming increasingly necessary to gain access to many preferred employment opportunities. The time has never been better to reconsider how society defines being educated and what role being a lifelong learner plays in one's overall educative efforts.

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes and practices of adults toward their own learning. The participants have earned less than a college degree, yet have chosen to actively learn throughout their lives. Through a qualitative, life history approach, this research examines these adults' beliefs regarding their experiences and practices related to their perceptions of the qualities of self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy. It is the premise of this research that individuals who do not have high levels of formal educational attainment may provide valuable insight into better understanding and promoting the practice of lifelong learning and in defining or redefining what it means to be *educated*.

In a very practical sense, the average person rarely distinguishes between the oft used terminology of lifelong learning – continuing education, non-formal education, informal education, formal education, autodidaxy, incidental learning, and adult education, as examples. Even among scholars in the field, these terms may have multiple and overlapping meanings, as it is believed that most adults participate in many types of learning throughout their lives albeit with varying degrees of intensity and purpose (Livingstone, 2001). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, lifelong learning will refer to and include any combination of formal (classroom) or informal (non-classroom) educative endeavors undertaken for any purpose deemed important to the adult learner.

Literature Review

The knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained throughout an individual's life contribute to and support the concept and practice of lifelong learning. Aspin and Chapman (2001) cite three foci regarding the benefits of lifelong learning – economic, personal, and societal. Fueled in part by the pressures of a global economy, the Internet and other media communication means, and environmental concerns, adults find themselves in a society where it is all but impossible to predict personal or collective destinies and the learnings required to support a happy and successful life. Lifelong learning itself is a complex, inter-theoretical occurrence and typically involves formal venues as well as the "iceberg" of informal learning endeavors (Livingstone, 2000). Participation in learning activities looms as a major indicator of one being a lifelong learner, as adult learning is largely voluntary in nature, is a product of individual interest and initiative (Courtney, 1992), and corresponds with adults tending to have a strong self-concept and the desire to manage their own lives (Maehl, 2000).

A review of the literature suggests numerous factors and strategies that influence the practice of *cacöethes studendi* – the itch to learn (Houle, 1961, p. 29). Examples of these are practical engagement in adult learning (Knowles, 1975, 1984), experimentation and reflective judgment as part of an overall learning cycle (Brookfield, 2000; Kolb, 1984), motivation that is self-generated due to perceived professional or personal needs (Dinmore, 1997), the role of one's life mission (Kroth & Boverie, 2000), adult learning alliances (Bennetts, 2001), learning ladders (Longworth, 1999), learning how to learn (Smith, 1990) and the ability to use life's experiences to support, reinforce, and integrate new

learning tasks (Lindeman, 1926). Other manifestations and dimensions of lifelong learning in the literature include cultural differences (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000), the significance of learning syles (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006), and the uneven and sporadic nature of adult learning (Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002).

From these and other contributors to the body of adult learning literature, three recurrent constructs emerge that inform adult learning theory and practice – self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy. Armed with these qualities, adult learners seek to find their way in life in a productive, self-satisfying fashion. Figure 1 diagrammatically illustrates the linkage of these three core constructs in a connected and interrelated configuration as components of the phenomenon of lifelong learning. Each construct will be discussed briefly in turn.
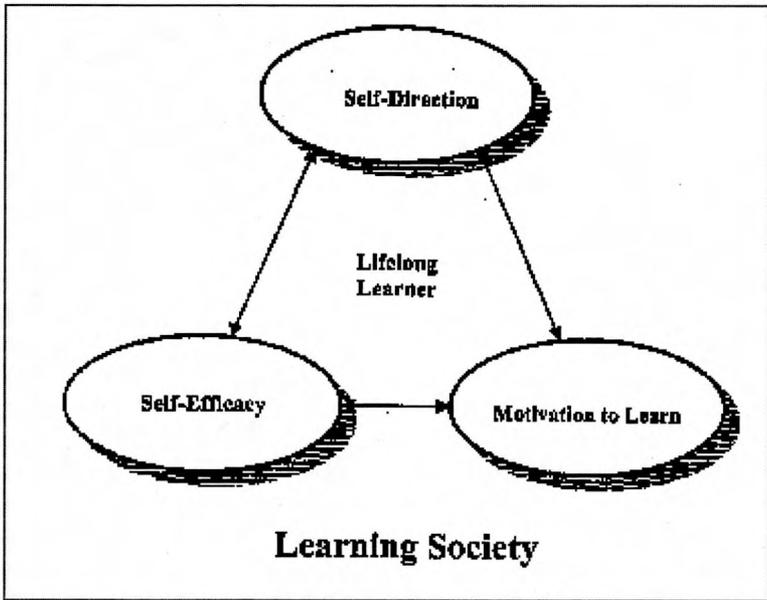

Figure 1.   Diagrammatic representation of the interrelationships between certain influencing characteristics related to becoming a lifelong learner in a learning society.

Self-direction is an essential ingredient in one's quest for self-education – a pillar of adult learning theory (Merriam, 2001). It is the process by which a learner takes control of his or her own learning. This entails

setting learning goals, securing necessary resources, selecting an instructional method to use, and evaluating progress and success (Candy, 1991; Knowles, 1975; Moore, 1980; Penland, 1977). Self-directed learning in its most mature form is a product of and a producer of internal change. Studies exemplifying this (Brookfield, 1981; Danis & Tremblay, 1988; Gibbons et al., 1980; Leean & Sisco, 1981; Spear & Mocker, 1984) portray self-direction as a viable and important construct among individuals who are lifelong learners despite limited formal education. They pursue their own self-education, contribute to their communities, and seek practical and psycho-social satisfaction from their learning activities – much like their more formally educated counterparts. This may, in part, be responsible for Field's (2000) observation of "the general explosion of informal and self-directed learning that is undertaken by individuals in the course of their daily lives" (p. x).

As Knowles (1975) observed over a quarter of a century ago, "most of us only know how to be taught; we haven't learned how to learn" (p. 14). He contends that, "people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners)" (p. 14). Whereas formal education continues to provide a valuable element among the choices for those who pursue their own education, it is but one option. Gibbons et al. (1980) studied 20 individuals, all acknowledged experts in their fields, none of whom had earned beyond a high school diploma. The authors of this study suggest that education is a product of acquiring a "range of knowledge, a refinement of taste, strength of character, and a concern for issues that transcends self-interest" (p. 52). They further conclude that to be truly self-educated, the ideal system for learning would be initiated by formal, teacher-directed learning, ultimately replaced by the learner assuming the responsibility for becoming an educated person.

Motivation, too, is essential to the learning process. As the study of adult education and lifelong learning has evolved, the locus of responsibility has shifted from the institution providing formalized educational offerings to that of the individual as the "heart" of lifelong learning efforts (Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). Elusive to define or observe, Wlodkowski (1999) suggests that "we look for signs – effort, perseverance, completion" (p. 2) to recognize its occurrence. As it applies to lifelong learning, Danis (1992) promotes the importance of integrating new learnings with previously learned knowledge in such a fashion that

the learner perceives the new learning as meaningful. This dovetails with Vygotsky's (1979) assertions that, "development ... proceeds ... not in a circle, but in a spiral, passing through the same point at each new revolution while advancing to a higher level" (p. 56). He posits a scaffolding process of learning where the learner builds upon previous learnings using these previous learnings as an anchor; in this way, learning is constructed.

Motivation can be generated by curiosity or interest or simply the enjoyment derived from something (Sargant, 1996). Motivation can derive from any one of many needs – work-related, spiritual, home, leisure, or personal needs, for example. Individuals tend to work longer and harder when they are sufficiently motivated to learn. Wlodkowski suggests (1991) that motivation, although an innate human characteristic, becomes a "personality trait largely determined *through* the process of learning" (p. 1). He further notes (1997) that "when learners can see that what they are learning makes sense and is important, their intrinsic motivation emerges" (p. 21).

As in self-direction and motivation, self-efficacy is an important characteristic of individuals who are lifelong learners. Self-efficacy, the perceived belief in one's abilities to organize and execute a learning task, also involves the issues of competence and control. Perceived self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), "is not a measure of the skills one has but a belief about what one can do under different sets of conditions with whatever skills one possesses" (p. 37). Self-efficacy beliefs may vary from one situation to another. Consequently, learning tasks that individuals undertake are predicated more by self-efficacious beliefs (Bandura, 1986) than by the results of previous experience (Pajares, 1996). Furthermore, in the spirit of Dewey (1933), our own self-generated feedback loop provides a mediating factor in making decisions to attempt new learnings – or not. Self-efficacy, in other words, embodies the adage, "Nothing succeeds like success."

Method

Using a qualitative research paradigm, a descriptive case study approach lends clarity in exploring and describing perspectives and meanings held by the participants of this study. In the context of lifelong learning, the participants illustrate the complexities of becoming and being lifelong learners, take advantage of hindsight as it informs the

present, and describe various viewpoints as has been their experience (Merriam, 1998).

The participants live in a small town and its surrounds in rural, Southwestern Pennsylvania about 45 miles from Pittsburgh. The community's population is approximately 12,000. All interviews took place in the homes of the participants in order to increase the comfort level of the learners and to provide a better opportunity for the researcher to observe examples or documentation of some of their learnings. The participants in this study were selected by purposive (snowball) sampling. Krathwohl (1998) suggests employing this type of nonprobability sampling to identify members of a group that may not otherwise be easily identifiable. Creswell (1998) recommends that the researcher select no more than four cases in order to give the collective case studies a sense of an "emergence of regularities" (Merriam, 1998, p. 124) and an integration of data.

To identify participants for the study, the researcher chose ten community members based on their longevity in the community and their daily interactions with a wide variety of people. As a point of reference, these individuals included a minister, entrepreneur, health care professional, businessperson, and restauranteur. These individuals accepted the responsibility to suggest adults known to them who had not earned a college degree and who exhibited the criteria as follows: (a) be an avid reader; (b) exhibit qualities of self-confidence, self-awareness, and curiosity; (c) be self-reflective and use knowledge gained for the betterment of him- or herself personally and the community; (d) exhibit a personal motivation to learn in the absence of external pressure or reward; (e) be considered as a person of character; and (f) be of both sound psychological and mental health. This process generated the names of 34 individuals, six of whom were listed two or more times. Of these, two males and two females, ranging in age from 52 to 78, were available, agreed to participate, and granted written approval to participate in the study. Participants were assured that they would be identified by pseudonyms in any publication of the data resulting from the study. A demographic summary of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Demographic Data of Study's Participants.

Participant, Age, Occupation	Highest Level of Education	Parents Level of Education	Community Affiliations
Charles Nolan Age: 78 Occupation: Tool and Die Maker (Retired)	High School Graduate; Tool and Die Apprentice	*Father:* High School Non-completer *Mother:* High School Graduate	Volunteer, Social Clubs, Civic Organ., Political Office, Church
Jack Moore Age: 64 Occupation: Coal Broker	High School Graduate; College courses; Adult Education Courses	*Father:* High School Graduate; *Mother:* High School Graduate	Volunteer; Social Clubs; Political Office; Church; Sports Teams
Jill Mason Age: 61 Occupation: Homemaker	College: Less than 1 yr.	*Father:* High School Graduate; Ministry Cert. *Mother:* 6th Grade	Volunteer; Social Clubs; Civic Organ.; Church
Kim Lindsay Age: 52 Occupation: Printing Broker (Self-Employed)	College: 2 yrs Adult Educ. & Self-Improvement Classes	*Father:* High School Non-completer *Mother:* High School Graduate	Volunteer; Social Clubs, Civic Organ.; Church; Sports Teams

Interviewing served as the primary method of data collecting. This technique allowed the researcher to probe the attitudes and perceptions of the participants related to their beliefs and practices as lifelong learners. There were 15 interview questions designed to elicit critical reflection and to correspond in varying degrees with beliefs and attitudes related to self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy. Specific attention was devoted to life experiences, the construction of meaning, and the participants' perceptions of their place in a learning society. The researcher provided a copy of the interview questions to each participant

approximately one week prior to his or her interview session. Secondary, probing questions were asked during the course of the interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify or extend data, as necessary. All interviews were audio-taped from which written transcripts were made. Anecdotal data took the form of viewing completed or ongoing learning projects and evidence of plans for future learnings. A cross-case analysis was conducted to determine similarities, differences, patterns, or "particularizations" of the data (Stake, 1995) in order to more thoroughly understand the phenomenon of lifelong learning. Content-analytic methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990) was performed in that the interview provided a text or narrative of the study. Data were identified and organized relative to the themes of self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy beliefs. The emphasis was placed on how the participants saw their world and their place in it and how they made and shared meaning based on their experiences and beliefs.

Techniques employed to enhance internal validity focused on issues of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and therefore congruence with reality. Triangulation of data involved the selecting of participants for the study, interviewing participants in their home setting, and viewing artifacts of the learning process. In addition, member checking was employed as a strategy to confirm the researcher's observations and interpretations (Stake, 1995).

As generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, the notion of external validity is problematic. Krathwohl (1998) suggests that qualitative research requires "an inferential leap – a leap of faith" (p. 343) in deriving any degree of generality. The findings afford the readers of this study the opportunity to make decisions regarding transferability of information to other settings or situations (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998).

Findings

All of the individuals in this study expressed pride in their accomplishments in life and pursued their own self-education as a matter of routine conduct. All readily volunteered that they were not educated in the societally-held sense, that is, in formal degree or credential-bearing ways generally accepted as societal proof of being educated. However, all considered themselves to be well-educated by other standards, even if simply their own. Self-direction and motivation

to learn were valued, self-evident tools of the participants in this study. Both served as a means and an end in the learning process and provided a framework for the meanings they made from life and the subsequent avenues, found or made, to use their learnings.

As an adult, family life, career strivings, and societal factors can provide great joy and opportunities to learn, and, conversely, the specter of uncertainty, fear, and failure. Although a sense of efficacy varied from one situation to another, these learners professed an overarching belief that they were generally efficacious, indeed. They were quick to recognize when their own control, time, motivation, and cognitive or physical abilities were not able to see them through a given task. This realization, however, was viewed as a testament to their own cadre of learning skills, not as a weakness or a lack of efficacy on their part.

Competent, resourceful, intelligent, successful, purposeful, and involved: These are key descriptors of individuals who are essential to building and maintaining a learning society; these are qualities that characterize the participants in this study. It would be unthinkable to consider or refer to these individuals as uneducated or undereducated, yet doing so is often the case in education and business settings, as well as in other areas of society. This discrepancy highlights the need to consider how the term *educated* is defined and applied. A synopsis of representative findings from this study (Helterbran, 2000) related to the issue of what it means to be educated is as follows:

1)   A well-educated person is one who is also well-rounded, that is, knowledgeable or experienced in many areas of interest. All participants considered themselves to be well-rounded individuals and were insistent that their self-educative efforts were essential to the total quality of their lives. In support of their own learning, as suggested by Field (2000), they cited the number of years they hoped to live beyond their initial or formal schooling, the need for the development of an identity beyond the workplace or home, and the influence of technology in knowledge acquisition and communication. Furthermore, the participants acknowledged that their more informal educative efforts are largely taken for granted (Evans, 2003; Gorard & Rees, 2002) by formal learning institutions and by society in general. This did not dissuade them from holding fast that their orientation to learning increases their level of being well-rounded or curious about a variety of phenomena (Knowles, 1984). From their point of view in true Jeffersonian fashion (Carpenter, 2004), they believed that developing their interests and their knowledge-base were critical components to being an interesting person

and a positive contributor to society. They viewed learning as an act of becoming the people they were destined to be (Hayes, 1998) and believed that this could only be accomplished through developing acumen in many and varying areas of interest.

Jack Moore, a 64-year-old coal broker, summarized his thoughts on being educated as follows:

A well-educated person, in my opinion, has nothing to do with the number or types of degrees that he or she may have. A well-educated person is one who is well-rounded and versed in many different subjects [and] being involved and knowledgeable in many different things – the world around them, their local government, personal interests, and in other words, to make them not only a more interesting person to others, but making them a person more interesting unto themselves.

Jill Mason, a vivacious mother of four grown children and a grandmother of 10, echoed Moore's remarks:

A well-educated person to me isn't just someone who reads books and has the formal training. It has to be a lifelong thing where you are constantly being challenged, challenging yourself, constantly growing and acquiring as you get older that thing we call wisdom. I think that's a crucial part of being well-educated. I know a lot of people who gear themselves in one direction and, while they may be interested in that particular topic, they can't get aside from that. They haven't really become people who have continued to educate themselves in other areas.

2) The amount of formal education engaged in may not be as important as the self-directed learning engaged in after formal education has concluded. Long considered a fundamental characteristic of adult learning (Maehl, 2000; Merriam, 2001), self-direction is recognized by the participants as a key component of their continuing personal education. There is a strong belief that what learning they have accomplished in formal settings is but a rudimentary start, a way station (Bash, 2003) to what is "out there" to be learned. If one discontinues participation in learning activities after childhood education has concluded, the quality of one's life becomes greatly diminished. Jack Moore noted:

Others are content to be told what 'is'. I prefer to go the extra mile to check things out for myself, to see if a thing can or cannot be done. I simply can't accept the opinion of others if, with some investigation on my own, I find it can be done; I can find a better or a different solution. You know, [he chuckled] my friends have said that I have a Ph.D. in experience.

Although adversity can contribute to negative self-perceptions and, therefore, the undermining of a learner's self-educative efforts (Giddens, 1994), the participants cited no debilitating attitudinal or situational barriers (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965) in their own experience. Age, life crises, occasional lapses in confidence, were not identified as defining factors nor did they appreciably diminish the participants' enthusiasm for learning. Instead of hampering these adult learners, they tended to sharpen and redirect their efforts. Mistakes made and disappointments suffered are viewed in retrospect as positive life events. Wlodkowski (1991) summarizes this phenomenon by stating, "this kind of learner is graced with a perspective that makes the difficult desirable" (p. 1). As an example, Charles Nolan dreamed of attending the United States Military Academy at West Point, but, "here again is a good example of me not applying myself in high school like I should have. I wasn't accepted in." He used this disappointment as a springboard to redirect his efforts:

I got a job through influence at Westinghouse and decided to enter the tool and die apprentice program. Four years in tool and die is almost equivalent to a college education – in that field, of course. In an odd way, what happened about West Point forced me to look in a new direction, giving me opportunities I would have never considered.

3)   The value of one's formal education is diminished if, after that point, self-education is neglected. All of the learners in the study expressed awareness that degrees and certifications were becoming increasingly important as a key to career success, especially for the younger generations. They recognized, too, that a college degree in many instances is a "door opener" to gain entry into professions or for promotions within companies or organizations which historically did not require one. They were appreciative of what formal education they had achieved and actively worked to build upon it. Their collective point of view echoed Craik's (1866) prophetic words:

> The truth is, that even those who enjoy to the greatest extent the advantages of what is called a regular education must be their own instructors as to the greater potion of what they acquire, if they are ever to advance beyond the elements of learning. What they learn at schools and colleges is comparatively of small value, unless their own after-reading and study improve those advantages. (p. 61)

They view lifelong learning similarly to Bahr (2000, p. xiii) in their belief that it is a passport to expand their human potential, the value and importance of their work, and the worth of their life in general. They recognize that their formal schooling provided only varying degrees of support and skills, or lack thereof, to their enthusiasm for learnings (Evans, 2003) and patently agreed that their schooling, as well as that of their children and grandchildren, should focus more attention on building a culture of lifelong learning where students are challenged and engaged in their schoolwork to better appreciate the value and necessity of learning throughout the life span.

Jack Moore opined that:

> *Having a degree is a wonderful thing, especially now. I wouldn't necessarily want to start my career now without a degree. However, you cannot rely on a degree to do all of the work. A degree without involving oneself in education beyond that is such an unfortunate situation. A person can say, 'Yes, I am educated.' But is he really?*

Jill Mason commented on her learning endeavors by saying, "pushing yourself beyond your formal education, whatever that may be, is the key." She further suggested that learnings should be tied to the improvement of society or at least the immediate community. She mused, "what good does all the formal education do you if you can't put it into use or help someone else put it to use?"

Participants in this study were philosophical when contemplating whether or not they now regret not continuing their formal education. Jill recalled that at one point in her life she regretted not earning a college degree:

> *Particularly when my children were in their teens, because, and this is my own feeling – they never expressed this – I thought that they may have thought less of me because I hadn't gone on. But at this stage of my life now, no, I don't regret my lack of formal education. I feel I've learned as much or more than many college graduates.*

4) Lifelong learners believe themselves to be self-directed, motivated to learn, and self-efficacious in nature. Self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy beliefs are qualities and characteristics that they find indistinguishable from who they are and what they are as human beings. They provide a framework for the meanings they make from life and the subsequent avenues found or made to use their learnings. Field (2000) suggests that "you cannot stop yourself from being a lifelong learner" (p. vii). Further, he credits the "explosion of informal and self-directed learning" (p. x) as integral to success in day-to-day living and the achievement of goals.

Charles Nolan summed up his life experiences as follows:

During the war [World War II], I spent eighteen months in solid combat in Europe not knowing from one moment to the next whether we were going to be here, or gone, and it got me to thinking, 'What is the meaning of my life? Why am I here?' I thought if I ever got out of this there's meaning to my life or I probably wouldn't have come home safe and alive. I'm going to do something with my life as far as my fellow man is concerned. I'm going to serve my community and fellow man to the best of my ability as much as I possibly can and that's why I got involved with service organizations and in political service as a councilperson and mayor to my community. Hopes, dreams, and goals – if you don't have these things, you're done, forget it. Then, successes as they come along motivate interest in trying harder and more often. Learning and succeeding in life is a disease, I guess. [throwing back his head in laughter] Help me here, not a disease really, but it's an infectious situation.

Kim Lindsay, a 52-year-old print broker, cited a theme of survival when she spoke of her qualities of self-direction, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy beliefs:

I have had many challenges thrown at me, and I guess, going back to the childhood thing, wanting to survive. My "can do" attitude has permeated my life. I don't like relying on other people to do things for me if I, myself, can learn how to do them, if I have the time to do them. Again, coming from a strong work ethic background, it's simply something that makes me proud of myself and eager to take on new challenges.

"What I need is more time!," Jack Moore concurred and concluded by citing a quote he got many years ago from a Salada tea bag: "It said, 'To

rest is to rust, to be active is to achieve.' This saying has affected me in a very, very serious way. I've never forgotten it. It's been a part of my life, and I go by that."

These findings give rise to the need for thoughtful consideration and reflection on their meaning, individually and collectively. Of particular interest and concern are the implications derived relative to what role childhood education could or should have in reinforcing and promoting lifelong learning, how society defines being educated, and the role in society of the less formally educated lifelong learner.

Implications and Discussion

Although this study focuses on adult learners, the concept of lifelong learning is deeply rooted in an individual's entire life from birth to death. Therefore, the implications of this study cannot be confined to adulthood or adult education alone. Parents, for example, are ideally poised to prioritize family goals to better focus on their crucial role of inculcating the desire and benefits of learning in their children. Professional educators at all levels are responsible for taking a leadership role in promoting awareness of and contributing to actualizing the prospect of lifelong learning for *all* learners, not just the college-bound or college-educated. Lifelong learning has its roots in and is directly influenced by all initial or formal education that precedes it and by society in general. Questions must be asked related to the level of emphasis placed on the securing of degrees, certifications, or scoring at desired levels on standardized tests, and indeed, the specter of using the level formal education for discriminatory purposes (Field, 2006).

There needs to be support by voice and deed by all components of society to devise a better articulated vision of learning throughout the life-span.

The findings in this study question the very definition of what it means to be educated and provide an alternate view from which to appreciate the strivings of adult learners as they continue to satisfy their thirst for knowledge. They also challenge those who hold college degrees to question their own personal assumptions, practices, or biases in this regard and provide a different set of lenses through which to better serve and interact with adults in our society. As a society and individuals in it, we must reconsider what it means to be educated and learn to appreciate, encourage, and capitalize on what knowledge and

skills that *all individuals* in our society possess, regardless of their quantity of formal education.

The participants in this study, without exception, consider continuous learning to be an integral and critically important contributor to their success and happiness in conducting their lives. Their awareness of their penchant for learning and their seeking a variety of ways to learn is chiefly responsible, from their point of view, for an enhanced self-image, development of a more interesting personality, support for life accomplishments, and allowing for positive interactions with others. They also actively enjoyed the metacognitive aspect of participating in the study as they felt validated regarding their own adult learning and felt pleasure at "thinking about their own thinking." The forging of their own learning paths continues to bring a deep satisfaction, as does reflection on past learnings and active planning for future learnings.

Better understanding the learning quotient of the particular learners in this study presents an obvious contradiction to the commonly held definition of educated and, indeed, in many ways makes the familiar, strange. There is no linear pathway or single truth to discover as we consider how or why these adults forged their learning philosophies. However, this alone is emancipating as we continue to reflect and explore this central issue related to the process and joy of learning in adulthood.

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