

Aging and lifelong learning Mélissa-Asli PETIT

The aging of the population is identified by the United Nations in the framework of the 30th anniversary of the International Year of the Family as one of the megatrends of the beginning of the 21st century. The impacts are considerable and can be seen in many areas, including learning. Educational time is no longer concentrated in the first stage of life. The three-stage of the life course (education during childhood - work during adulthood – retirement during old age), characteristic of the industrial era, is changing. We live longer, we work longer and differently, we benefit from longer retirement times, so the different stages of life are intertwined. Education thus permeates throughout life.

The longevity society is driving other ways of thinking about learning, with people of all ages able to acquire the knowledge they need at each stage of their lives and according to their experiences, and to access it in ways that fit their needs, interests, abilities, time, and budget.

In this paper, we will try to understand what lifelong learning means in a longevity society? What are the most important challenges to be faced from both the perspective of retired and older workers? How do intergenerational relationships fit into these learning contexts? And finally, what role can the family play in these new lifelong learning dynamics?

Lifelong learning in a longevity society

In the new map of life¹, researchers at The Stanford Center on Longevity make a distinction between learning and education. For them, education is about teaching in a formal context with identical instruction for all. Children, from kindergarten to high school or University, are primarily prepared for two purposes: entering the workforce and becoming citizens. The French Ministry of Education notes that "School is both the place where the knowledge and skills needed to live and integrate into society are acquired and the place where practices and habits are put in place to enable each child and adolescent to become a free, responsible and committed citizen, an inhabitant of a common planet."² Yet lifelong learning goes beyond the goals of the school. For Stanford researchers, learning is a process of acquiring or modifying knowledge and skills, which is often voluntary and self-motivated. These acquisitions can be made in specific moments as well as in informal spaces.

In this same vein, Bell hooks³ considers learning as an action that should be exciting, joyful, a practice of freedom and not as an "educational banking system" rooted in the notion that the only need for students is to consume information given by a teacher, memorize it and store it.

This is a change of perspective brought about by the dynamics of lifelong learning and the paradigm shifts mentioned above in terms of the division of the stage of the life course.

¹ <https://longevity.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Short-Report-2.pdf>

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<https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/16/Hebdo25/MENE1616142C.htm#:~:text=Le%20parcours%20citoyen%20est%20donc,%20dimension%20morale%20et%20citoyenne.>

³ Bell Hooks (1994), *Teaching to Transgress : Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

Today's society allows for changes in learning modalities (distance, hybrid, face-to-face, collaborative, alone), training times (replay or live, on various duration), learning practices (learning by doing, learning for a defined purpose, using learning for everyday life, reusing practices and knowledge to enrich learning, etc.) or even the reasons for learning.

Although some elements are changing, the benefits of lifelong learning remain constant. Numerous studies⁴ discuss how formal and informal learning provides older people with greater human, cultural and social capital, as well as better brain activity. Published studies prove that learning in old age is beneficial for improving quality of life, psychological well-being, physical health, etc.

However, several challenges to lifelong learning in the longevity society. We have noted seven of them, which we will develop briefly below.

- The life course of individuals regarding school and their relationship to education.

School is a place of social class domination (or social reproduction, to quote Bourdieu), and the relationship to learning built up during initial education can create obstacles to access to learning at the end of the career or during retirement.

- The social situation of individuals.

Studies on the learning of older workers have shown that blue-collar and white-collar workers are less likely to take part in training than managers. After retirement, the cost of training can be a barrier for people in precarious situations, particularly older women, and people with low incomes.

- Learning methods.

As with all learning moments, there is a need to adapt to the learners. We can therefore ask ourselves what the most efficient way would be to create a quality relationship with the trainer/teacher, to propose adequate methods in relation to the needs of the learners, to pay attention to everyone, to create social interactions between all the participants, or to use informal spaces to continue to transmit learning.

- Social representations of age.

The elderly are often perceived as stigmatized (ageism), as beneficiaries of a service or as people who need to be accompanied in the face of vulnerability. However, participation in learning activities (such as volunteering or babysitting grandchildren, etc.) leads them to be fully involved in society. However, some people who have integrated age-related stereotypes may become disengaged from learning. There is therefore a need to be vigilant about the social representations about ages, so that everyone can participate fully if they so desire.

- The reasons / drivers for learning.

In his book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Bell hooks mentions that the essential purpose of education is to learn complete freedom, in relation to oneself and to society. For Freire, the objective of education is to bring educators and the educated to learn

⁴ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377822?posInSet=6&queryId=04029ba5-690c-45ae-9e6d-c52696db00cf>

to read reality in order to write their own history. From these perspectives, it seems important to ask the question: why learn? What drives learning? What are the reasons for learning for retirees and older workers? It is on these elements that we will focus in the following two sub-sections.

- Interactions, and in particular intergenerational interactions.

It is less a question of asking how intergenerational solidarity can accompany learning, but more of asking how intergenerational relations fit into these interactions. We have noted several ways of acting that we will detail in the following two sub-sections: solution provider (the one who brings a solution), participant, trainer, support (present to accompany and learn by doing), collaborator (I do with, I create with, I collaborate in a common goal).

Learning as a retiree

In the research I have done, I have analyzed four reasons, certainly not exhaustive, that lead retirees to embark on learning: learning to gain a grip on a world that is unfamiliar or no longer familiar; learning to share common affinity values; learning for self-fulfillment; and learning to transmit. We will discuss these elements, as well as the intergenerational relationships that develop in each context.

- Learning to move from an "I" to a "we" where common affinity values are shared.

Let's take the example of Martin, whom I met during a study on the ecological and environmental practices of young retired women. Martin is a volunteer in a local association that organizes a vegetable garden. In his commitment, he participates several days a year in the vegetable garden: planting seedlings, picking, watering, etc. In an informal way, he has learned from the vegetable grower to master all these gestures. The intergenerational relations are also those of the participant or the trainer who can evolve as a support during the activities when it is, as here, an employee of the structure. Moreover, Martin regularly exchanges with the other participants in an informal way and has, for example, learned how to make preserves following these moments.

In this context, it is often a participation as a volunteer, as an activist or as a member of a structure (such as an association). Retirees are part of a collective to which they adhere both in values and in actions. Learning can take place during formal times or through interactions with other members. They gain skills on the subject of interest but also on technical skills.

Family members can participate in learning together. For example, grandchildren with their grandparents can take part in a competition after having followed a training course together in a specific field. The intergenerational relationship with the grandchild here is that of a collaborator (I do with, I create with, I collaborate for a common goal). All the informal moments also contribute to reinforcing the common bond.

- Learning to fulfilled and discover.

Whether it is to make a podcast within the framework of a retirees' association or independently, whether it is to learn a musical instrument, a language or to learn how to sew, the reasons are exclusively focused on fulfillment and discovery. The Universities of the Third Age are rooted in this dimension. The other generations are often there as trainers, especially if the learning is done among retired people.

- Learning to transmit and exchange.

In Zimbabwe, the Friendship Bench⁵ is a community-based mental health intervention in which trained community health workers (known as "grandmothers") provide structured, problem-solving talk therapy to community members who come for mental health support. Friendship Bench is unique in that it uses grandmothers, who are rooted in their community and are the keepers of local wisdom and knowledge. With no prior medical or mental health experience, each grandmother undergoes eight days of training, followed by a 30-day clinical placement. Other structures (e.g., Duo for a Job) engage retirees in knowledge transmission activities, where the learning is there to develop new skills and knowledge, and to reinforce the qualities of a good "transmitter". In this way, they act within their community.

- Learning to get a grip on the world we no longer know.

Nowadays, digitalization is infiltrating people's daily lives: filing taxes, buying stamps, making a bank transfer, etc. Everyday life is full of digitalized actions that can be problematic for some retirees, especially those who are vulnerable. There is therefore a need for support or training offered by the family or structures (e.g., associations, startup) to be able to take care of these tasks independently. This learning, when not delegated, allows retirees to still have a grip on the world around them. Digitization has consequences, not considering the need for certain groups, in this case retirees, to be accompanied.

It seems that the virtuous dynamic of learning will only take place if one or more reasons for the individual are identified, if the framework corresponds to him or her, and if the individual's life course and relationship to education are considered.

Learning as an older worker

Learning while working (apart from your personal skills to discover and develop) has as its main goal the support of professional transitions.

In France, access rates to vocational training drop as age rises, reaching only one third of people over 50. There are many obstacles to training for the over-50s⁶: cost, workload, company refusal of absence, personal difficulties related to health, etc. In addition to these reasons, there is the importance of the appropriation of negative stereotypes by certain older workers and certain managers. They would thus have doubts about their learning abilities, and the older workers would anticipate the manager's refusal. Thus, the issue of lifelong learning is symptomatic of the consequences of age-related stereotypes.

Moreover, with technologies that are transforming professions in depth, the obsolescence of skills is accelerating. A Deloitte study⁷ underlines that the "half-life" of a professional skill (period after which 50% of its impact or relevance disappears) has gone from 30 years (in the 1980s) to 5 years (today). This evolution means the need for lifelong learning while employed

⁵ <https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org>

⁶ Étude du Cereq Formation continue et parcours professionnels : entre aspirations des salariés et contexte de l'entreprise p. 83-92 Former les salariés seniors pour les maintenir en emploi : quelle réalité ? Jean-Marie Dubois et Christine Fournier : <https://www.cereq.fr/sites/default/files/2020-07/CECH-15.pdf>

⁷ Etude sur les tendances RH 2018, Deloitte

to reinforce technical skills, and to enhance transversal and human skills (team management, project management, listening, etc.).

Many opportunities exist to link several generations in a learning context: transmission of knowledge via mentoring (with a prior learning period on how to transmit and how to choose the elements to be transmitted), collaboration on projects, or participation in training courses to move on to other jobs and to branch out professionally. The last point is essential, especially in connection with the search for meaning in work, which is increasingly common to all age groups. Thus, during professional transitions, individuals of different ages may find themselves in the same training courses.

However, while lifelong learning in the workplace is essential to meet the challenges of aging populations, the economic priorities of business and industry should not threaten to undermine the priority of continuing learning for older workers.

What about the family?

On the one hand, the arrival of the baby boomer generations has increased the demand for formal and informal learning activities, with many positive examples that are rooted in local and community contexts. On the other hand, the employment context requires older workers to engage in lifelong learning to support transitions.

Intergenerational learning can be a powerful stimulus to improve learning uptake and success, as well as a sense of solidarity. It is about learning together and learning from each other and is therefore an effective way to address several issues such as building active communities, promoting citizenship, and combating inequality.

The family can take its place in this learning dynamic both to transmit information, to contribute to limit the risk of social exclusion of older people, to participate in actions with grandparents. Learning actions are particularly carried out between grandchildren and grandparents.

Moreover, lifelong learning policies can take up the main challenges mentioned above, considering the social situations of all, and thus promoting social inclusion. The family is of great interest here as a place of socialization that can participate in the integration of all family members. The reasons for learning remain an essential driving force to be addressed whether the intergenerational context is family or not.