What motivates them? Some adult learners' perceptions of and reasons for engaging in lifelong learning

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Introduction

Lifelong learning refers to learning across the lifespan, and it encompasses the personal, cultural, social, and environmental contexts that relate to and impact on, the nature of education in general and learning in particular. As Plomp, Anderson, Law, and Quale (2003) point out, lifelong learning is a direct response to the need to equip people to live and work successfully within today's rapidly changing society. It is particularly concerned with improving access to learning opportunities and encouraging people to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Ellyard (1992) argues the education system needs to create both a system and a culture of lifelong learning as one of its missions if we are to prosper in the 21st century. We need, he says, to be as broadly educated as possible, so that we can adapt to the changes we will experience throughout our lives. Dewar (2004) considers ongoing learning a vital element of a successful, healthy, vibrant, democratic society for the future.

In line with these considerations, Chapman and Aspin (1997) define lifelong learning in terms of three major elements: education for a highly skilled workforce, personal development for a rewarding life, and the creation of a strong and inclusive society for the future. The study documented in this article looks at the reasons a group of adult learners gave for undertaking further education from two perspectives. The first is the extent to which the reasons accord with the concept of lifelong learning, as it is commonly understood in the literature. The second is the extent to which these reasons align with reasons generally put forward as to why adults engage in ongoing learning.

Literature review

There is no doubt that we live in a world that is rapidly changing, with certain work skills being made redundant and modern products and services being dependent on the synthesis of knowledge from all areas. As Ellyard (1992) observes, people rarely stay in the same career or job for their entire working life. They are expected to upskill and retrain as an ongoing part of being employed. New jobs are constantly being created, and new skills are required for these. We can no longer, Ellyard argues, pack into a brief and busy period of formal education, most of the knowledge that is needed for success in
today’s society. People must, therefore, be encouraged to leave school with a
desire to be a lifelong learner, and to have the skills needed to sustain lifelong
learning. These skills include high levels of literacy and numeracy and
knowledge of how to access and synthesise information. People, Ellyard says,
should also be supported to attain the confidence to be a lifelong learner and
the opportunities to take up lifelong learning. He also argues that lifelong
learning provides people who fail in our school system with “second chance
learning”. He concludes that a lifelong learning system of education, in which
the focus is on the process of learning rather than on content, must be our
destination.

Hicks and Slaughter (1998) cite Boulding, who conducted futures workshops
with groups of adults. Boulding aimed, in these workshops, to help
participants visualise their preferred future worlds. Amongst the first seven
themes regularly emerging from her workshops was “education taking place
on the job”. In a subsequent study (also cited in Hicks & Slaughter), Boulding
reported that 30% of her workshop participants wanted education for all,
ongoing for life, holistic and community-based. Her findings suggest that a
good number of people perceive some form of lifelong learning - whether on
the job or throughout life - as necessary for a desirable future.

Tough, cited in Hicks and Slaughter (1998), considers what future generations
might ask us to prioritise for an ideal world. He suggests their answers would
include providing futures-relevant education for all ages, fostering learning
about “big questions” and offering widespread learning opportunities for all,
from early childhood to late adulthood. He contends that they would ask for a
wide array of methods and environments for people of all ages to learn about
the future prospects of their civilisations and their regions. This range of
learning opportunities would help people of all ages understand global issues,
think sceptically and critically when appropriate, and encourage them to
engage in learning throughout their lives.

These findings give an implicit indication of why adults in today’s society
participate and engage in forms of lifelong learning. But do their stated
reasons tally? A cross-national study involving Norway, Great Britain and
Spain looked at what motivates adults to participate in adult learning (Sargant,
2001). The motivators identified related to work, personal development and
acquisition of formal educational qualifications. Comments such as “to
develop myself as a person” and “I am interested in the subject or topic” were
prevalent. The need to develop self-confidence, an intrinsic interest in learning
for learning’s sake and recognition of the extrinsic utility of learning were
particularly evident in the participants’ responses.
In his study of factors facilitating adult learning in the United States, Justice (1997) found that 80% of adults attending the School For New Learning reported personal change and growth and the opening up to them of new areas of knowledge and experience as the most significant outcomes of their studies. He suggests most adults in their 30s come to learning with a need to produce and contribute, with a second area of concentration centred on a personal or family agenda. Beyond the age of 40, the need for learning as a path to personal growth and development is especially evident.

Nunn’s (1998) investigation in Britain of motivational differences between Open University (OU), mature, and traditional university students revealed that the OU and mature respondents were more likely than the traditional students to rate intrinsic approaches to learning (gaining personal satisfaction, developing the mind, stretching oneself mentally) as very important factors in their education. The difference in rating scores between these students and the traditional students was statistically significant. For example, 25 of the 34 OU students, 29 of the 36 mature and 4 of the 35 traditional students gave a high rating to intrinsic motivation.

In a New Zealand study by Stewart, Cartner and Gibson (2004), the learning stories of adult learners enrolled in an Adult and Community Education course were researched for two reasons: (i) to gain an insight into the learning pathways of adult learners; and (ii) to explore the motivations for and challenges of participation in adult learning. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors were investigated. The researchers concluded from their findings that adults participate in adult learning for many reasons that tend to be interconnected and difficult to separate out. However, opportunity to engage in learning at a time the learners found convenient and relevant to their present work/personal needs, and the ease with which they could access the learning, appeared vital in encouraging the study participants to take up learning. The benefits the participants saw accruing from their learning - enhanced employment prospects, greater work satisfaction, personal confidence and self-esteem, and a new love of learning - suggested those factors would see them continuing to access lifelong learning opportunities.

The primary purpose of the present study was to try to confirm the suggestions in the literature as to why adults decide to engage in lifelong learning. More specifically, the study endeavoured to document the study participants’

- perceptions of lifelong learning
- motivation for engaging in an adult learning course
views on how lifelong learning could help them personally and society as a whole in the future.

Methodology

The people participating in this study had enrolled in the Christchurch College of Education’s Certificate in Adult Teaching (CAT) for one week at the beginning of the 2004 academic year. The course caters for individuals who are either involved or interested in teaching adults. The 20 people who took the course came from various sectors of the community, including education, health, business and unemployed. Sixteen of them were female and four were male.

I met with the class during the latter part of a session towards the end of the week to outline the area of interest of the study and to explain that those electing to participate would be asked to provide some personal information about themselves and to answer a brief questionnaire. Each class member was given, along with the personal information sheet and the questionnaire, a sheet providing details about the study and a consent form. They were asked to complete the information sheet, the questionnaire and the consent form within the remaining time of the session and to place these in the envelope provided. I returned to the group later in the day to collect the envelopes.

The personal information requested was gender, age, ethnic background, highest formal qualification, current employment and an indication of whether school had been a positive or negative learning experience. They were also asked to briefly list which of their hobbies and interests they considered to be ongoing learning. (This question was asked to remind participants that learning could be both formal and informal, undertaken in groups or individually). This personal information was then compared with the responses on the questionnaire. The aim was to identify any commonalities or trends connected to the questionnaire responses.

The questionnaire used questions requiring open-ended responses in the hope of obtaining rich and personal data. The questions asked were:

1. What are your perceptions of lifelong learning?
2. Why are you participating in further formal learning activities?
3. How do you perceive lifelong learning will help you personally and society as a whole in the future?
Because these questions were open-ended, participants’ responses to and comments on each question were initially listed. Similar comments were then assigned a number code. This process allowed the generation of frequency tallies and these, in turn, allowed identification of themes across the group of participants.

Findings and discussion

Fifteen of the 20 class members completed and returned the material. For various reasons, it was not possible to find out why the five adults who chose not to participate in the study made this decision. Other than knowing all were women, details about them were not available. Whether their input to the study would have changed the findings in any way is, of course, unknown.

The 15 participants included 11 females and all four males. The gender imbalance reflects the proportions of females and males commonly evident in College of Education courses. Two of the participants were under 30 years of age, three between 31 and 40 years of age, six between 41 and 50, and four over the age of 50. Fourteen of the participants identified their ethnic background as Pakeha/European and one as part Maori. Twelve of the 15 participants in this study were in paid employment, and eight had a tertiary-level diploma or degree as their highest formal qualification.

The majority of the participants said their school learning experiences had been positive. Of the four who said they were negative, two were male and two female. The range of hobbies and interests that the participants considered involved learning were: computers, music, exercise, sports, reading, horticulture, cooking, languages, the arts, model ship building, travelling and other cultures, and wood turning.

The themes that emerged from analysis of the participants’ responses to the questionnaire are discussed here under each question.

4 What are your perceptions of lifelong learning?

The main perceptions were that lifelong learning enables people to regularly acquire new ideas, to develop new skills and ways of operating within their spheres of life and work, and to develop new skills to meet life’s challenges. Words and expressions like “empowering”, “expanding”, “discovering”, “growing”, an “ongoing process”, “stepping out of one’s comfort zone”, “regularly acquire new skills, ideas and methods”, and “upskilling” were typical of the answers. These perceptions accord with Chapman and Aspin’s (1997) notion that lifelong learning is characterised by personal development
for a rewarding life, and with Ellyard’s (1992) claim that in today’s society people need to upskill and retrain as an ongoing part of being employed.

There was no notable difference in responses between those with positive experiences of school learning and those with negative experiences. The variety of hobbies and interests the participants listed as learning also did not appear to influence the participants’ perceptions of lifelong learning.

5 Why are you participating in further formal learning activities?

There was greater diversity of themes here than there was for Question One. In descending order (denoted by the numbers, in brackets, of participants giving this response), the themes identified for Question Two were:

- to be better at my job/upskill (6)
- to grow as a person (3)
- to be able to change career to be a teacher (3)
- to gain more skill as a communicator and teacher (3)
- to gain the paper qualification for what I am already doing (2)
- to teach others (2)
- my employer requires it (2)
- my employer provided the opportunity and funding (2)
- for the challenge (2)
- to grow, expand horizons, to be in paid work and to find work in areas I am enthused about and believe in (1).

Taken together, these responses emphasise the work-related, motivational aspect of participation in ongoing learning: to be better at jobs, to move forward in careers, to gain paper qualifications, and to teach others more effectively. This emphasis is perhaps a product of the high number of participants in paid employment and with a tertiary-level qualification, and also the nature of the particular course participants were engaged in (learning how to teach adults). It is also in line with Stewart et al.’s (2004) claim that employment considerations are a primary motivator for people considering whether to engage in ongoing learning.

As 10 of the 15 participants were over 40 years of age, it is interesting to note their responses to this question in relation to Justice’s (1997) suggestion that, beyond the age of 40, the need for learning equates with personal growth and development. Although the reasons the participants gave for their involvement
in further learning do not conform to this idea, perhaps for the reasons outlined above, personal worth and satisfaction were trends that emerged in relation to the third question.

6 How do you perceive lifelong learning will help you personally and society as a whole in the future?

This question produced many detailed responses. These are presented under three separate sub-headings: personal, particular life areas, and society as a whole.

(a) How lifelong learning would help participants personally in the future
The following three statements exemplify the most commonly given responses: “provide a sense of purpose”, “keep me in touch with where it is at”, “for personal satisfaction and achievement”. Other comments included “to discover and be useful”, “to promote self-growth and interest in developing personally”, “keeping an active brain will help you live longer”, and “keeping me passionate and humble”.

These views resonate with Sargent’s (2001) claim that people engage in ongoing education to enhance their self-confidence, because they have an intrinsic interest in the value of learning and perceive that ongoing learning has an extrinsic utility (that is, enhanced skills). The views also align with Justice’s (1997) finding that people in this age group tend to identify engagement in learning as a path to personal growth and development. Personal growth and worth also emerged as important reasons influencing participation in adult education in Stewart et al.’s (2004) study. Self-confidence is also confirmed in Field’s work on the advantages of engagement in lifelong learning. Such learning, he argues, empowers people because it helps them cope with change.

Only three responses mentioned professional/career/work issues. These concerned the acceptance and acquisition of new skills and being held accountable for one’s own education by working with like-minded colleagues. Two of these three responses were from the youngest members of the sample. The paucity of this type of response in relation to future personal benefit seem to go against a commonly held view in the literature, and also, perhaps, in government policies on lifelong learning. This view is that one of the main motivations for engaging in further formal learning is to upskill for employment-related purposes. The lack of response in this area is also at variance with the participants’ reasons (above) for taking the College course. However, the inclusion of the word “personally” may have encouraged the participants to consider life outside of work, which could explain the focus on
work in relation to the next theme. Should this study be redone, this question could be broken into its constituent parts to compare the responses given.

(b) Areas of participant's life that would be enhanced in the future
The most common response here related to improved employment opportunities and promotion, mentioned by six of the participants. The next most common response was personal confidence and satisfaction, followed by becoming a better facilitator/tutor. Single responses were "emotional", "spiritual", "mental", "financial", "enable new opportunities", "meet new friends", "stimulation of the mind and memory", and "family and leisure". No discernible patterns were evident in these responses in regard to gender, age, educational qualification and hobbies and patterns.

(c) How society as a whole could be enhanced in the future
This question provided responses that tended to be more thoughtful and detailed than the first two questions, and they are presented here in their entirety.

- Learning helps us adjust to change and not stagnate as a society.
- If we believe we don't always have the answers, we are more open to change and ideas.
- We need to keep up with new knowledge, otherwise you get left behind and this would be a cost to society.
- Would give these people confidence and purpose to their lives.
- Personal growth.
- Older people would have totally different attitudes to work, technology, being active, being able to teach youngsters their wisdom.
- People may have more than one career because they would be multi-skilled.
- We would have greater scientific advantage because people would be stimulated to think, not plateau and vegetate.
- Expands your horizons and causes you to reflect on where your life is going.
- All of our society and the world would strongly benefit to pursue lifelong learning.
- Without the ability or desire to change, to stay employed and upskill continuously, there will be a negative effect on society.
- Work/environmental issues/international connectedness.
Information, understanding on world/national/regional basis.

The greater detail here may be because of the relatively mature age range of the participants and their consequent likely breadth of life experiences, including rapid changes within society. Also, 13 of the 15 were parents (this factor was ascertained through their comments), which may have encouraged the more holistic focus and hopes for a better future.

The particular benefits for society that the participants identified support points made by other researchers. For example, Dewar (2004), in his analysis of lifelong learning programmes in Scotland, concludes that lifelong learning works to the betterment of society for the following reasons. It gives people greater confidence, a greater sense of achievement and purpose, a better chance of staying employed through upskilling, and opportunity to keep up to date with new technologies and knowledge. Plomp et al. (2003) draw much the same conclusions from their documentation across 33 nations of the role information technology plays in achieving a global, knowledge-oriented society. Their findings highlight the necessity for nations to develop new mechanisms, particularly those involving information technology, which will allow their citizens to engage in lifelong learning. This engagement, the authors then argue, contributes to the learners’ own betterment, the betterment of their societies, and (presumably) the betterment of the world. The stories of the learners in Stewart et al.’s (2004) study support claims made by the adult education sector Adult Education and Community Learning Working Party (2001) that adult education brings individual benefits to those who participate in courses, and that these flow on to benefits for a nation’s economy and the overall welfare of its society.

Summary and conclusions

Although the findings of this study need to be interpreted with caution because of the small number of people participating in it, the similarity of their backgrounds and ages and the fact that they were engaged in a course directly related to adult learning, these findings are similar to those in the literature reviewed. For the study participants, the inducements to take up adult learning opportunities related to various personal benefits, including personal growth and satisfaction, as well as to the acquisition of skills and knowledge needed to keep up with rapid changes in the world of work.

The strong, emotive words that nearly all the participants used in their comments as to why they were engaging in lifelong learning and the expectations of how they felt this learning could improve their lives and that of society were a particular feature of the findings. The comments relating to benefits for society in particular suggest an area that educators and
governments might give greater consideration to when encouraging people to pursue lifelong learning. Various adult learning initiatives in different countries identified by Dewar (2004) tend to focus on personal benefits as motivators, but benefits for society may be just as cogent a motivator for many people.

Should the findings of this study be replicated with larger groups of participants drawn from a wider range of ages and social, cultural, educational and employment backgrounds, then this information too could be used to highlight that lifelong learning benefits everyone, at both the personal level and at the level of society as a whole. However, redoing the study with larger groups would probably require some form of pre-coding likely answers for ease of analysis and comparison against the demographic data, while still providing an opportunity for the rich, personal, honest and thoughtful responses. This approach would make it easier to see how many people and which groups give each type of response. Future research also could involve the same questionnaire and background form being given to different groups of adults and young adults either engaged in or not engaged in learning. Differences in responses between the groups might help identify barriers to participation in lifelong learning.

This study also suggests another important motivator that could perhaps be given consideration in adult education marketing campaigns - that lifelong learning empowers people. This is because, as Field (2000) points out, it gives people the confidence and skills to adjust to the changes that rapid development within society can bring to their personal and working lives.

Finally, the list of hobbies and interests the participants considered ongoing learning suggests that adult learning need not be seen as taking place just in formal learning institutions. For many adults, such learning may seem less onerous and threatening than formal assessed learning. It could be emphasised in lifelong learning campaigns. Enhancing such learning as lifelong may make the concept of lifelong learning more widely known and attractive to people, so making them more amenable to engaging in such learning, both formal and informal.

References


