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Older Adults' Participation in Continuing Education

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Introduction

We are an aging population. According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2006), we can expect older adults to outnumber children within the next ten years and account for approximately 25 percent of the population by 2031. The fact that our population is aging will have implications on society, corporate organizations, educational institutions, health care, and the economy. There is concern about rising health costs, increased demand for community services, and skill shortages as the baby boomers start to retire. With increased life spans and an aging population, it will become increasingly important, for older adults to maintain their health, wellness, abilities and quality of life. Continued education can play a vital role in that process as it is “essentially an affirmative enterprise likely to lead to something better in the lives of those participating” (McClusky, 1973 as cited in Fisher & Wolf, 1998, p. 85).

Brain researchers Greenough and Kandel of the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives (2011), report that through learning, brain function can not only be maintained, it can be stimulated to form new neural connections. Many other benefits of learning exists for older adults, such as, improvements in health, immunity, self esteem, self confidence, coping skills, memory function, critical thinking, self-maintenance, independence, happiness, and social connectedness have been noted by researchers (Brady, 2005; CARP, 2010; Fisher, 1998; Hammond, 2004; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008; McClusky, 1973; Moody, 1987/88; Picton & Yuen, 1997/1998; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010; Turcotte & Schellenberg, 2007).

The need to maintain health and abilities as we age, is heightened by the fact that many more adults are working well beyond the so called “retirement years”. For some this is a matter of choice, due to non-monetary benefits such as making a contribution, feeling valuable, utilizing

skills, pursuing interests or dormant passions. These are the fortunate ones, given that Watt and Gagnon in a report to the Conference Board of Canada (2005) predict, massive labor shortages, as the large cohort of baby boomers start to retire and there are fewer people to replace them. In essence, employers will need to tap into the talent pool of older workers.

For many older adults, however, postponing retirement and continuing to work, is a matter of economic necessity. Many are caught in the situation of having to work for survival, while lacking up to date skills to find sustainable employment in today's high tech, rapidly changing, global economy. "With dual realities of increased longevity and growing financial uncertainty, many older adults urgently need educational options to foster both social and economic mobility" (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008, p.13). Whether deciding to work for economic necessity or to pursue dormant career interests through encore careers, education will be needed for retooling and keeping up to date with increasing technology and skill requirements.

Problem / Gap

Despite the many needs and benefits of lifelong learning for older adults, their participation in educational pursuits is low compared to their younger counterparts. "...The promise of a better life inherent in education for older adults is clearly not being materialized in over three-quarters of the population" (Fisher & Wolf, 1998, p. 86). The Canadian Council on Learning (2006) has reported that the number of older adults participating in education is increasing but needs to improve. Statistics Canada (2008) reported that people become less engaged in learning-- especially career related learning--as they age. Growth in educational programs geared towards older learners and some increases in the numbers of older learners

participating in education, leads to the impression that things are better than they are. For instance, “the growth of the Elderhostel program leads to the perception that a large number of older adults are currently participating in educational programs. However, this perception does not reflect reality” (Peterson & Masunaga, 1998, p. 56). These findings are in line with (Fisher, 1998; Kopka & Peng, 1993) who have noted a decline in participation in educational opportunities as adults' age. The low participation rates are perplexing, given that Statistics Canada (2008) has revealed that approximately one third of adults have unmet training needs or wants.

The question is, with the growing number of older adults and the benefits derived from continuing their education, along with the large number of unmet training needs and wants, why aren't we seeing a greater number of older adults continuing their education? This is an important problem that warrants investigation to determine what is at the core. This will require finding out more about older adults' educational interests, needs, goals and preferences as well as barriers to continuing their education.

Purpose of the Study

I conducted a qualitative methods study to gain an understanding of what attracts older adults to continue their education and what hinders them. In this study, older adult refers to individuals between the ages of 50 and 75 and education refers to formal and non-formal opportunities. This research study answered the following two questions: 1) What attracts older adults to continue their education? 2) What hinders older adults from continuing their education?

Research Study Needed

In reviewing the literature, there was a great deal of evidence to suggest that this study was needed in order to have a better understanding of older adults' educational needs and wants, as well as obstacles to participation (Blacklock, 1985; Brady & Fowler, 1988; Cloug, 1992; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008; Lam & Brady, 2005; Picton & Yuen, 1997/98; Sloane-Seal & Kops, 2010). "In planning for educational programs for today and tomorrow, it's necessary to understand real needs and potential obstacles in relation to learning endeavors" (Blacklock, 1985 p. 1). This is further supported by the suggestion by the Canadian Council on Learning (2006), that there needs to be more research on learning needs and factors that hinder older adults in their educational participation.

In reviewing the literature pertaining to older adult educational participation, more studies have been conducted, ten, twenty or more years ago, compared to the number that has been conducted recently. This is another indicator that current research is needed. Today's older adult is far different from the older adult ten and twenty years ago. The context in which these older adults view continuing their education has also changed. Today's older adult lives in a global society that requires a higher level of skill and technological knowledge to be able to function day to day. People are living longer, considering encore careers and many are facing economic uncertainty. The older adult population is "a very fast moving target, with changing behavioral and lifestyle patterns" (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008, p. 6).

Another reason that this study was needed is that it reflects what is happening locally. In order to more fully serve older adults in our community, we need to learn more about their

needs, goals, and preferences and examine if these are being met. We need to understand barriers or obstacles that local older adults experience that detract from continuing their education.

Statistics Canada (2008) has found that as a nation, Canadians have unmet training needs and wants. One place to start is by examining the local situation. What are their needs, interests and wants? Are they being met? If not, why not? What hinders them from participating in education that meets their needs? Research is needed in local communities as "...while the aging demographic is a national issue, its effect is localized – and so must be the solutions" (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008, p. 4).

Who Benefits

A local study to explore what attracts and what hinders older adults' in continuing their education, might be of benefit to postsecondary institutions, community based educational providers, program developers, educators, community based organizations, senior centers, older adults, and those providing services to older adults. Lakin, Mullane & Robinson (2008) have indicated that post secondary institutions need to have an understanding of how older adults view themselves and what calls them to learn. Blacklock (1985) and Picton & Yuen (1998) have indicated that there needs to be an understanding of the needs of older adults' in order to develop educational programs to meet them. Educators may benefit, by gaining a better understanding of their older adult learners so that they can more fully engage them.

Information from this study might be of value to a wide variety of educational and community providers in developing programs that are relevant and meaningful to older adults. It

may also assist in developing outreach material that speaks to what the older learner wants, needs, and how they view themselves and educational opportunities. This may result in a greater opportunity to meet older adults' educational needs, address barriers and connect with them in order to enhance participation. The educational providers may have an opportunity to benefit from increased understanding and hopefully, future gains in older adult participation. Older adults may gain, if the information is utilized to better meet their needs and address barriers, so that they may participate in educational opportunities and reap the benefits of doing so.

Methods

In order to design, deliver, and promote educational opportunities that are of interest to older adults we need to gain an understanding of their needs, interests, and preferences. We also need to understand what barriers hinder them from continuing their education. Essentially, we need to know - what attracts and what hinders older adults in participating in continued education? This study was conducted in pursuit of the answers to these questions.

A qualitative research method using a cross-sectional survey design (Creswell, 2012), was utilized consisting of telephone and face-to-face, open ended interviews. According to Creswell (1998), a qualitative method lends itself well to questions that begin with "what". It allowed participants to share their practices, interests, needs and barriers in a way that was not hindered or filtered in any way. This presented the opportunity for themes to emerge that enhanced the understanding of the older adult as an educational participant. A qualitative method was well suited to this study as it "indicates the intent to explore or understand the central phenomenon with specific individuals at a certain research site" (Creswell, 2012, p. 131).

Participants were interviewed at one point in time as, “as a cross-sectional study can examine current attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or practices” (Creswell, 2012, p. 377).

Participants

Participants for the study were identified using purposeful sampling from the Rockway Senior Centre using a homogeneous sampling technique (Creswell, 2012). The homogenous group that this study explored was older adults, between the ages of 50 and 75. Until study participants were interviewed, it was unknown if they were participants of educational activities or not. As such, I also planned and utilized a snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2012), so that I would have representation from both those who participated in educational activities and those who did not.

Contrary to what was expected it was difficult to recruit respondents who did not participate and it was easy to recruit those who did. Even utilizing the snowball technique where names of likely non-participants of educational activities were provided, it turned out that they were participants. Unfortunately, I was not able to connect with three of the individuals whose names and contact information had been provided to me, despite several attempts.

Ten older adults were interviewed, consisting of nine who had participated in educational activities in the past year, and one who had not participated. They range from 50 to 75 years of age. Of the nine participating respondents, three are retired, one is retired and now takes part time contract work a couple of times per year, one has her own business and four work full time. Of the four working full time, two are considering retirement within the next four years and two do not know when they will retire. The one respondent who did not participate in educational activities had retired, obtained additional training, and has since changed her career twice.

Site Selection

Participants were recruited from the Rockway Senior Centre. This site was selected as a good location to identify participants who could provide insights on older adults' participation and non-participation in educational opportunities. The centre has been offering programs and services for older adults (over fifty) since 1975, in education, art, fitness, health, and general interest. Although, there are three community centers in the area providing programs for older adults, Rockway was selected as it is exclusively for older adults. Rockway is a busy centre, where older adults meet for social engagement, educational and leisure activities, as well as meals in the dining room.

Permission

In a face-to-face meeting with the Peer Coordinator of the Rockway Senior Centre, I provided a description of the study and my intent. I was then given verbal permission to recruit participants. As my study would not be published, I did not need to obtain permission from the CSU Institutional Review Board.

Recruitment Method

In order to recruit participants from the Rockway Centre, I attended the centre and recruited study participants by approaching them and verbally discussing the study and distributing a sign-up sheet (Appendix A), and an outline of what the study is all about (Appendix B). As mentioned previously, additional participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2012) to ensure that I sampled both educational participants and non-participants.

Data Collection

Face-to-face and telephone interviews using open ended questions were selected due to the immediacy of responses and the benefits of engaging participants, such as being able to probe, without leading. The one-to-one interviews also had the benefit of establishing rapport and comfort level. It allowed unconstrained responses where themes emerged and additional participants were recruited by referral.

I conducted interviews on an individual basis and sought permission to audio record the session, to which seven agreed, in addition to taking written notes and recording responses. There was a separate interview guide for participants (Appendix C) and non-participants (Appendix D) with interview questions adapted from (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008). For the three participants who declined taping, I relied exclusively on interview notes. Participants were provided with an informed consent form (Appendix E) before starting.

Data Analysis

After each interview, I took time to complete my field notes and reflect on the interview. Analysis began immediately after each interview by reviewing field notes. After an interview was completed, I personally transcribed the audio recordings and field notes, and wrote notes in the 2 inch margins on both sides of the transcription document as recommended by (Creswell, 2012). In the margins, I recorded notes on responses that were very interesting, potential quotes to use, and initial thoughts on meaning.

After all the interviews were completed, I reviewed the transcriptions several times again and coded the responses according to common words and phrases that I then wrote in the margins. I printed each interview transcription so that I could use colored highlighters to identify

common words. I used different colored highlighters to separate my questions and probes from the responses of participants. As I reviewed the common words, I started to recognize and record common themes that emerged. As indicated in (Creswell, 2012), I was able to segment text and utilize both in vivo codes and lean coding. I continued coding each segment corresponding to each interview question, discarding redundant codes. I then reduced the codes to four to six broader themes that answered each interview question. These were reviewed again to develop even broader themes that answered the two research questions posed earlier in this study. What attracts and what hinders older adults in participating in continued educational activities?

I reviewed the findings documented in literature and compared that to my findings in order to examine whether they offered support or contradiction. In order to determine the accuracy of my findings, I asked participants to review my findings in a verbal or written format.

Findings

Participants interviewed were positive about participating in educational activities and were able to easily identify the benefits of doing so. It was also interesting that many respondents indicated that they would like to attend more than they actually do, which is in line with Statistics Canada (2008) findings that Canadians have unmet training needs and wants.

Type of Educational Activities Participated In

The most common type of educational activity engaged in, is career development. This includes for current work, as well as potential work. Potential work interests were mentioned not only by those who are currently working but also by those who have retired and are considering new career pursuits. This reflects the new reality of “working after retirement, and continuing to

work without retirement...Surveys conducted in recent years consistently show that a majority of people in the baby boomer generation and others in their 60s plan to keep on working beyond normal retirement age” (Kidahashi & Manheimer, 2009, p. 2).

This new concept of retirement was mentioned by many of the participants of this study. This includes, Sarah who at age 65, was “given the boot” due to mandatory retirement. She then trained on her own for a new career in financial services, which she worked at for nine years. Today at age 75, she works full time as a caregiver. When asked when she intends to retire, she responds “never, the day that I retire is the day that I stop breathing.”

The second most common type of educational activity participated in, were those related to health which includes physical and cognitive. The fact that over half of the respondents participate in programs related to maintaining health is a reflection of what is happening with older adults today, especially the baby boomers. “This group was generally willing to do something to make a difference in their health status – provided they could make the time for it” (Null, 2003, p.7).

Expressive art classes, such as writing, art and music, were the next most engaged in, educational activity. According to Lori, “I have wanted to learn to play guitar since I was a kid and my dream as a kid, was to sing. I wanted to be a folk singer. I am exploring my childhood dreams, my creative side.” The last two educational opportunities participated in were in the area of general interest and spiritual interest.

Types of Educational Activities Desired

General interest, followed equally by expressive arts and health and fitness, were the types of educational activities that respondents would like see more of and participate in. More

participants indicated they would like to see more general interest courses available than the number who actually participated in them. The high desire for general interest courses compared to the lower participation rate, may provide clues about the Statistics Canada (2008) study indicating unmet training needs.

The high desire for general interest and expressive educational activities can be summed up well by Jen who states, "I am not looking to be better paid, as I was in the workforce but more allowing myself to experience the 'educational pleasures' as I call them...so what takes over then, is the natural pursuits of your interests."

The last area cited as desired but not available is fast track career and interest options. For instance, Bob would like to take courses in architecture and masonry but does not want to take a full program with all of the courses and pre-requisites. Jen would like to consider new career options but does not want to take a full degree program and feels that colleges and universities need to give the experience of the mature student more credit. "...They may knock off a course or two, but in reality they need to knock off more, especially if they have been trained in the field and now they are just going after the certification."

Why they Participate

Older adults participate in educational activities for a number of reasons including the pure joy of learning. Participants indicated that the number one reason that they participated was for enjoyment, followed by the opportunity for social connection, skills acquisition and personal growth. These findings indicating enjoyment as an important reason to participate, is in line with other studies (Briefing Sheet, 2005; Lamb & Brady, 2005; Lamdin & Fugate, 1997). The love of learning is very evident when interviewing participants. For instance, Wendy states "I am done

with taking something that I think that I should take. I am done with that. It is what do I want to take? It is for my own cerebral enjoyment.”

Social connection was the second most common reason for participating in education. For some, such as Jen, it was the opportunity to make friends. For others such as Brenda and Bob, it was the motivating aspect of being in a group. Bob has enjoyed the learning and motivating aspect of his running group. Participants attend a mini lecture and then they run together. He states that “When I was younger, I would run as an escape and I didn’t want people with me. Now, I need people to keep me motivated and getting out there.” Barb states that, “I particularly enjoy learning in the group context...because it is very interactional, we are all very involved. You learn a lot more because you are getting many different perspectives.”

It was very interesting to hear respondents indicating that skills acquisition and growth were major reasons to participate, as it contradicts a former decline and disengagement model of people as they advance in age. This reflects a view of the transitions associated with aging in a positive and growth oriented perspective. The growth reason for participating has been found in other studies (Martin, 2003; Metlife Foundation & Civic Ventures, 2005).

Perceived Benefits of Participation

Respondents mentioned a variety of benefits in participating in educational activities. The majority of respondents cited health benefits, including intellectual, physical and emotional. This is as expected, given the concerns about the need to preserve health and the benefits of education in doing so (CARP, 2010). Bob indicated that educational activity, “Keeps your mental capacities going. It staves off depression and keeps my memory active.”

After health, social connectedness was mentioned as one of the major sought after benefits of educational participation. This is in line with much of the literature on older adult educational participation (McClusky, 1973; Morstein & Smart, 1974; Picton & Yuen, 1998; Bynum & Seaman, 1993). In fact, “older adults who have an underlying need for social contact, may enroll in learning activities mainly for social satisfaction” (Picton & Yuen, 1998). For some respondents, the social connectedness is an opportunity to make new friends. For others, it is an opportunity to hear other perspectives and learn from a group. For Brenda, she enjoys having a group to keep her on track, stating, “I need the direction and motivation by a group of people who are interested in the same thing.”

The next two benefits most commonly cited, are similar to why they participate, gaining new skills and personal growth and development. Wendy tells us the benefits are “For your own growth, meeting new people, making friendships, exploring new areas that you have not been involved in and expanding your horizons.”

How They Find Out About Educational Activities

The most common way that people find out about educational activities is by word of mouth. This is from friends, family members, and people who are in their current learning groups. The next most common method is through internet search. As Barb states, “If there is something that I am interested in, I seek it out on the internet.” This is followed closely by guides such as the Leisure Guide as well as the Program and Activities Guide. The last method is via advertising and solicitation on the radio, internet or flyers.

Barriers that Hinder Participation

Obstacles mentioned by participants fall under five main barriers to participating in educational activities: scheduling, lack of time, cost, location and lack of information. In regards to schedule, there were a number of factors that were of concern, from time of the day, long commitments, and length of classes. There were many comments about courses for older adults being predominantly held in the morning. Respondents indicated two concerns with this. First many people are working during the day. The other concern is that classes seem to be competing for the same morning time slots and want a long commitment. Linda says that "I don't mind making the commitment, but if you are locked in, you are prevented from doing other things that you might want to do." Scheduling of activities has been a major obstacle to 75-year-old Sarah, who works full time during the day and has not been participating in educational activities. She states that:

I get so frustrated when I read the Activities Guide, and I see things of interest and they are all held during the day. There seems to be an assumption that if you are over 65 or even now over 50, as the centers include them now, that you are available during the day. I am like Andy Rooney, I am going to work until the day that I drop dead.

Whether working or retired, participating or not, lack of time was mentioned as a major obstacle to participating in educational opportunities. Other studies have indicated that lack of time, is an obstacle to participation (AARP, 2000; Atkinson, 1989; Cross, 1980).

Cost, including transportation costs and course fees, were mentioned as a deterrent by many of the participants. As Bob put it, "Seniors always measure off value for money." Time and money are obstacles that are found in other studies. According to CARP, "research has found that situational barriers, such as lack of time, money, and accessible transportation can be

a hindrance” CARP, 2011, p. 1).

Location is another barrier indicated by respondents however, it is in relation to concerns about the cost of gas, accommodation, or taking too much time to travel. Lack of information is the last commonly indicated barrier. Brenda has indicated that she often finds out about educational opportunities after they have happened. Bob finds it very difficult to navigate through the websites of educational institutions and community centers and that it is hard to find information.

How to Increase Participation

The most common theme, indicated by respondents to increase participation is to ask older adults, what they need and then provide it. The comments of the respondents are summed up well by Linda, who states, “There is not enough asking people, what do you want, how do you want it, when do you want it...people are just saying that this is what we offer.” The respondents were very vocal about wanting to be surveyed about what they want and need and having it provided. For instance, Brenda almost echoed the sentiment of Linda in her comments about the need for educational providers to approach older adults to find out, “What are they interested in learning? At what pace are they interested in learning it? What is convenient for them? What are their fears and desires, their strengths and weaknesses, what they want and don't want?”

The second most common suggestion to increase participation is to allow participants to take just the courses that they want and need. For instance, as indicated earlier, they want options to fast track into new careers by only taking what is essential to get them there. Others want to

take interest courses such as masonry, architecture and art history, without having to take courses in a full program. This desire to fast track and only take what they need, has been found in other studies (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2007; Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008; Zemke & Zemke, 1995).

Both participants of educational activities and the non-participant have indicated that advertising is needed in order for participation to increase. Although most of the respondents feel comfortable searching for courses on the internet, they will often miss courses, or find out about them after they have occurred.

The last suggestions to improve participation by respondents were to offer more variety and options in terms of offerings and time slots. They also want to have an application piece that they can then go out and use. They do not want a talking head telling them what to do, but rather, they want to actually have hands on activities that they can then go home and incorporate into their lives. For example, there were a number of suggestions such as in gardening from seeds, having the participants' plant the seeds in pots. For a Chinese cooking class, take people on a field trip to China town to buy ingredients. Have a bird watching class and then take everyone out to look for the birds. Bob had a number of suggestions,

Why not have the Spanish teacher combine with the chef people, so there is cross over. The teacher speaks to you in Spanish and you learn how to prepare a salad in Spanish. Project planning, have a project to plan making a bird house.

How Educational Experiences Can Be Improved

The participants of this study had a great deal to say about how to improve their educational experiences. Eight of the nine participants indicated that there needs to be good facilitators who are trained in how to facilitate and how to teach older adults as well as how to

encourage interaction. As Jen put it, "Having a good teacher, I think is really important and one that understands the mature student, not too 'teachy'... you know, I'm the teacher, you're the student, kind of learning, rather it could be a collaboration." The collaboration and interaction piece was mentioned by most of the participants. They want a facilitator who knows their subject and they want someone who can get everyone talking about their experiences. As Ron states, "It is important for a facilitator to ask people to engage. To make participants feel comfortable. The facilitator sets the tone for that."

This desire for a good facilitator is an expectation not just for paid facilitators but also for peer volunteer educators. As Bob put it, "If they are going to run courses, like a retirement course, they need to train their volunteers to be instructors and understand instruction as opposed to just telling their war stories."

The next most common suggestion for improvement is to shorten courses and have a more flexible schedule. They want courses that are shorter in duration with more breaks and shorter in length of commitment. A common complaint was that it is difficult to sit too long and take in too much information. Ron suggests, "Break it up into smaller modules. More breaks to walk away, stretch, and reflect."

The last areas for improvement have been discussed earlier in these findings. These include the need to have more variety of interesting options to choose from and more application activities within the courses themselves. Linda says, "I guess the word behind this is variety and to be able to make choices. I want something interesting, not just something you throw at the old folks."

What Educational Providers Need to Know

Some of the areas that participants have stated educational providers need to know to meet their educational needs and interests, have already been mentioned. These include the need for shorter courses with more breaks and classes that meet their needs. They also have indicated that educational providers need to know and value the older adult learner. Linda summed up the comments of some of the respondents very well in her statement below:

I think that there is a huge need on the part of seniors that they need to feel validated. That they are still vital. They have something to contribute and are still a part of the world. I think it takes the leader to be able to say, that you have more life experience than I and your input will be invaluable and to be encouraged to share. I think that atrophy of the mind, comes from thinking that you have no more value.

In line with Linda's comments about knowing and valuing the older learner, are two more themes that educational providers need to know. First is that courses need to be relevant and applicable to their world. The other is that they need repetition. There were a number of comments regarding the need to have repetition in order to take in information. Barb states, "It might take me awhile to get from point A to point B, but I will get there. It may take me a bit longer than a younger person. Be repetitive by putting something out there in many different ways."

Discussion

Although this local study was small, it provided a great deal of information that answered the two research questions: What attracts older adults to continue their education and what hinders them?

What Attracts Participation

The older adults in this study are attracted to the perceived benefits of education. These include: to develop their own growth, social connection with others, gaining skills, maintaining intellectual, emotional and physical health, as well as pure enjoyment. A major factor that attracts them to participate is having options. They want options in being able to select from a variety of interesting and relevant course offerings as well as a flexible schedule to choose from. The need for a variety of options has been found in other studies (Clough, 1992; Eisen, 1998; Harper Apt & Hiemstra, 1980).

An attractor and a benefit of participation for respondents, is the opportunity for social connectedness and learning from others in a group. As such, they expect facilitators to be knowledgeable and utilize adult learning principles where the experiences of the group are encouraged and utilized. They are turned off by the “teachy” facilitator who does not encourage interaction, activity, application and the sharing of experiences in a collaborative approach.

What Hinders Participation

What hinders participation is a lack of what attracts them to participate, such as having options. For instance, not having enough options in terms of course offerings and time slots to select from hinders their participation. Most respondents indicated that they would like to be surveyed about their needs and interests so that they may have more courses offered for general interest, expressive desires, health and fitness and fast track career options. They indicated that they would participate more if they had more alternatives on when to take courses. Many are not able to participate in courses of interest, as they conflict with their work schedule or other

courses that they are taking at the same time. They are also hindered by rigid schedules requiring long commitments or participation in a long program in order to take the courses that they want or need. They are more attracted to short courses of interest where they may easily join in without being locked in.

The older adults in this study want value for cost. They have a limited amount of time to take courses as well as a limited amount of dollars to spend on them. If they do not perceive enough value and relevance, they will not participate. This is also supported in other studies (Brady & Fowler, 1988; Ostiguy, Hopp & MacNeil, 1997/1998; Picton & Yuen, 1998; Zemke & Zemke, 1995).

A major barrier is that often older adults can't find courses or find out about them too late. Most of the respondents find out about educational opportunities through word of mouth and taking the initiative to research course offerings through the internet and activities guides. Difficulties in finding information or a lack of information is a barrier for many of the respondents who feel that there needs to be more advertising. Lack of information and outreach has been cited as a barrier in other studies (Lakin, Mullane & Porter, 2007; Lakin, Mullane & Porter, 2007; Ostiguy, Hopp & MacNeil, 1998).

Recommendations for Educational Providers

In interviewing older adults, it was clear that they would like to participate more than they are. In order to increase the participation of older adults in educational opportunities and to remove the barriers, educational providers should consider the following recommendations:

- 1) Conduct surveys of older adults to determine what their educational interests and needs are as well as how they want courses delivered.
- 2) Provide a wide variety of courses to meet assessed needs and interests.
- 3) Offer short courses, with adequate breaks and alternative time slots from a menu of options rather than a full program of study.
- 4) Provide greater credit for experience and fast track older learners into new career paths
- 5) Engage in active outreach such as advertising, user friendly websites and guides as well as public information sessions.
- 6) Train facilitators (paid and volunteer) on adult learning methods and engaging facilitation.
- 7) Provide relevant, hands on, application activities.
- 8) Encourage and schedule time for social interaction and sharing of experiences.
- 9) Design curriculum with the needs of the older learner taken into consideration such as using repetition, application activities, group discussion, stretch breaks, as well as providing a comfortable and safe environment.

Limitations of the Study

There were a number of limitations to consider in conducting this study. The first is the recruitment method. Recruiting was done at the Rockway Senior Centre, using a sign-up sheet. After candidates were contacted and interviewed, they were asked to recommend additional participants for the study. Unfortunately this method resulted in inadequate representation of older adults who do not participate in educational activities. Perhaps two sign-up sheets, one indicating for older adults who have not participated in educational activities (along with what educational activities mean) and one for participants would be helpful. This would provide the researcher with advance knowledge of who participates and who does not and increases the chance of more equal representation than the snowball method.

In future research, I would recruit participants from other locations such as libraries and Knights of Columbus, in order to potentially reach more non-participants. Rockway is a busy and well established center offering a wide variety of educational and leisure opportunities. As such, there may be less likelihood of finding non-participants.

This study had open ended interview questions, which provided a good amount of initial data. I feel however, that a more detailed picture of needs and interests could be gathered by combining this with a survey after the interviews. For example, many respondents indicated that they wanted shorter courses, however, what exactly do they mean by shorter? How many hours, days, and weeks are they interested in?

The respondents have been taking courses related to career development and some have indicated the need to have fast track options. Further interview questions and survey questions could examine, career interests and what is needed.

The last limitation is that the study is very small and includes participants from only one center. More participants from more locations, may reveal more information, especially from non-participants regarding what attracts and what hinders older adults in continuing their education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although this small study provided a great deal of information, it generated more questions that need to be answered through research. This study suggests that respondents want more options for general interest, expressive needs, health and career interests, but what exactly? They want more flexible scheduling, but what works for them? Respondents indicated that there should be more credit given for experience and fast track options through courses for interest and

career needs, but what are those interests and needs? Are educational institutions willing and able to accommodate these needs? There needs to be more advertising and outreach, but what method would reach them best? Where do we find non-participants? Additional research through focus groups, interviews and surveys need to be conducted in order to answer these questions.

It is apparent from this study that older adults want and need to participate in educational opportunities. The challenge is having enough relevant, applicable and interesting options offered at a variety of times to meet diverse needs. As the number of older learners continues to rise and their needs for additional educational options increases, the need for research will become more imperative in order to attract older learners and remove barriers to participation.

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Want to keep your brain sharp?

Exercise it - by learning!

There are many benefits to lifelong learning – improved memory, better health, keeping your brain sharp.

Despite the many benefits, many older adults do not participate in educational opportunities. We want to know what your needs are.

Have your voice heard!

What do you want to learn? How do you want to learn it? What stops you?

I am an older student working on a master’s degree in Adult Education.

I will be conducting interviews to understand: What attracts you to learning activities? What keeps you away?

I invite you to participate by writing your name and contact information below. I will contact you to arrange at time that is convenient for you.

Thank you for your participation and I look forward to our talk!

Name	Phone Number	Email Address
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____

Study of Older Adults Participation in Continuing Their Education

We are an aging population. “By 2031, senior citizens will make up 23-25% of Canada’s population...and will outnumber children in approximately ten years” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, p. 2).

With dual realities of increased longevity and growing financial uncertainty, many older adults urgently need educational options to foster both social and economic mobility” (Lakin & Mullane, 2008, p. 13). There are many reasons for older adults to continue their education. “Besides the more obvious benefits of learning, including expanding your knowledge, communication, self-confidence, and critical thinking skills, studies show that learning in later life offers a wide range of health benefits... improved memory function, boosted immune systems and reduced levels of anxiety and isolation” (Benedict, 2011).

Despite the many benefits of lifelong learning and the large percentage of older adults, statistically, their participation in educational pursuits is low compared to their younger counterparts. “Although seniors are participating in lifelong learning in growing numbers, there still remains room for growth” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, p. 6).

We need to learn more about what attracts older adults to continue their education and what hinders them. “Current research within the area of seniors and learning is relatively limited. In particular, more research is needed on the factors that hinder learning in older adults, as well as on the specific learning needs and capabilities of seniors (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, p. 8).

Research Topic – Older Adults’ participation in continuing their education

Research Problem – With the growing number of older adults and the benefits derived from continuing their education, why aren’t we seeing greater numbers of older adults continuing their education?

Purpose Statement – To understand what attracts older adults to continue their education and what hinders them.

To provide your input so that we may learn more about meeting your learning needs, please write your name and contact information on the sign-up sheet or contact Carol for further information at:

519-699-5755 or email c_donlon@hotmail.com

Interview Protocol - Participant

Project: Study of Older Adults' Participation in Continued Education

Date of Interview:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Project Description:

Participating in educational opportunities provides many benefits to older adults. Despite this, many older adults are not participating and taking advantage of these opportunities. I will be conducting individual interviews with adults over age fifty, who attend the Rockway Centre. The purpose of these interviews is to gain an understanding of what attracts older adults to participate in educational opportunities and what hinders them from doing so.

I will be asking questions regarding educational needs, interests and reasons to participate, as well as obstacles to participation. Interviews are confidential and are used to gain experience in conducting research as well as gaining a better understanding of older adults' educational participation. The interviews take approximately thirty minutes to complete. Thank you so much for your participation in this study. (Please see attached consent form).

Questions:

- 1) What types of educational activities have you participated in during the last year?
- 2) Why do you participate in educational activities?
- 3) How did you hear about these educational activities?
- 4) What other educational activities would you like to see available or participate in?
- 5) What benefits do you gain/experience in participating in educational activities?

Interview Protocol – Non-Participant

Project: Study of Older Adults' Participation in Continued Education

Date of Interview:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Project Description:

Participating in educational opportunities provides many benefits to older adults. Despite this, many older adults are not participating and taking advantage of these opportunities. I will be conducting individual interviews with adults over age fifty, who attend the Rockway Centre. The purpose of these interviews is to gain an understanding of what attracts older adults to participate in educational opportunities and what hinders them from doing so.

I will be asking questions regarding educational needs, interests and reasons to participate, as well as obstacles to participation. Interviews are confidential and are used to gain experience in conducting research as well as gaining a better understanding of older adults' educational participation. The interviews take approximately thirty minutes to complete. Thank you so much for your participation in this study. (Please see attached consent form).

Questions:

- 1) What types of educational activities are you aware of in the community?

- 2) How have you heard about educational activities?

- 3) What benefits do you think people can receive in participating in educational activities?

- 4) What educational activities would you like to see or participate in?

Study of Older Adult Participation in Continuing Education

Participating in educational opportunities provides many benefits to older adults. Despite this, many older adults are not participating and taking advantage of these opportunities. I will be conducting individual interviews with adults over age fifty, who attend the Rockway Centre. The purpose of these interviews is to gain an understanding of what attracts older adults to participate in educational opportunities and what hinders them from doing so.

Responses from these interviews will be confidential and used to provide the Interviewer with research experience, while enhancing the understanding of older adults' educational participation. Your personal information and responses will not be shared. Information from the interviews will be compiled and analyzed to explore themes that may emerge regarding what attracts older adults to participate in continuing their education as well as what hinders them.

Your participation is greatly appreciated! Please acknowledge your willingness to participate in this interview by signing this consent form in the space provided below.

Thank you for your participation and assistance in enhancing my knowledge and experience in researching older adults' educational participation.

_____ Signature of Interviewee	_____ Date
_____ Written Name of Interviewee	_____ Age (voluntary)
_____ Years retired	_____ Years to retirement
_____ Phone	_____ E-mail