

# Motivation for Pursuing Further Education amongst Adult Learners

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## Abstract

The present paper is based on a study aimed at understanding the motivation and experiences of senior citizen learners in pursuing Diploma in Gerontology at Centre for Lifelong Learning, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. The issue of what motivates older adults to participate in educational activities is important specially from the perspective of Active Ageing. Six out of the total thirteen senior citizen learners were selected and interviewed in depth. Qualitative methodology, including content analysis was used to explore older persons' backgrounds and experiences, and to gain an understanding of their involvement in the learning activities while pursuing Diploma in Gerontology. Their motivation, experiences, challenges, and benefits of engagement in lifelong learning are discussed. One of the major findings of the study is that, despite the course being described as rigorous and demanding in terms of hard work, the learners are found to have perceived a positive impact on their social, psychological and even physical wellbeing. The most preferred teaching method among senior citizen learners are group activities, discussion and assignment-based projects over written examinations. The study recommends more awareness and publicity of such educational programmes among the elderly and courses more elder-friendly so that they may become an integral component in active ageing.

Keywords: active ageing, andragogy, gerontology, motivation.

## Resumen

El presente artículo se basa en un estudio cuyo objeto es comprender la motivación y las experiencias de personas de la tercera edad a la hora de obtener el Diploma en Gerontología otorgado por el Centro para el Aprendizaje Permanente, del Instituto Tata de Ciencias Sociales, en Bombay (la India). La cuestión de lo que motiva a los adultos de mayor edad a participar en actividades educativas es importante, especialmente desde la perspectiva del envejecimiento activo. Se seleccionaron seis de un total de trece alumnos pertenecientes a la tercera edad, a quienes se entrevistó en profundidad. Se empleó una metodología cualitativa, que incluye el análisis de contenido, para explorar las experiencias y los antecedentes de las personas de la tercera edad y llegar a obtener un conocimiento sobre su participación en las actividades de aprendizaje mientras cursan el Diploma en Gerontología. Se analizan su motivación, sus experiencias, sus retos y sus beneficios al participar en el aprendizaje permanente. Una de las principales conclusiones del estudio es que, a pesar de que el curso se describe como riguroso y exigente en cuanto al esfuerzo que requiere, se comprueba que los alumnos han percibido un impacto positivo sobre su bienestar social, psicológico e incluso físico. Los métodos de enseñanza favoritos entre los adultos de la tercera edad son las actividades de grupo, el debate y los proyectos basados en las tareas docentes, antes que los exámenes escritos. El estudio recomienda mayor divulgación y publicidad de tales programas educativos entre la tercera edad, y conseguir que los cursos sean más adecuados para las personas mayores, de forma que puedan convertirse en un componente integral del envejecimiento activo.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento activo, andragogía, gerontología, motivación.

## Introduction

Population ageing has implications for social, political and economic aspects of care giving, health services and social security measures and overall wellbeing of the elderly. In a society where life expectancy is continually rising, lifelong learning is not just a slogan but a way of life (Chang & Lin, 2011). While the motivation of adult learners in lifelong education has been thoroughly studied (Kwong *et al.*, 2006), specially in the western world, not as much has been explored for older adults specifically. The relevance of lifelong education is no longer in debate; however, whether its primary goal should be economic or social continues to be a subject for debate.

The Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL), Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai, India, conducted a study aiming to understand the motivation, the perception, and the expectations among senior citizen learners for pursuing further education. Previous studies indicate that continuing education can buffer mental and physical wellbeing. Therefore, CLL was interested in understanding the educational experiences of its Diploma students who are older than 60 years old and its impact on their life and wellbeing.

The Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) was established on February 15, 2006, with the objective of providing training for adult learners in the areas of expertise in the Institute. The CLL was earlier known as the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, which was established in 1981. It caters to two kinds of adult learners: (a) Professional groups being trained for their continuing education and (b) the general population from diverse backgrounds who are outside the formal education system. While the Centre focuses on developing manpower for the social sector, it concurrently provides for continuous education of the educated as well as the marginalised and for the enhancement of adult life and culture, which puts it into the realm of Lifelong Learning in the genuine sense of the term.

## 1. Need For The Study

Every year, the CLL, TISS receives senior citizen learners in its Diploma programmes in addition to younger adults. Over the years, it has been observed that senior citizens (60+) prefer to pursue the Diploma in Gerontology more than the other diploma programmes. Since the inception of the Diploma in Gerontology in 2007, there have been thirteen senior citizen learners (60+) out of a total of 62. This course provides opportunities to adult students to extend or continue their education in order to adapt themselves to the changing conditions. In order to improve the existing course and to develop and to recommend new ones, there is a need to develop an understanding of the needs and requirements of older persons, understand what motivates them to pursue higher education and under what circumstances they are actually able to do it. There remains relatively little research on older adults who participate in educational activities and less evidence on the benefits of learning activities. A ten-country survey of European countries (BeLL Project 2014) concluded that studying improves quality of life and learners with lower qualifications such as school-level or less reported highest gains in self-esteem and feelings of self-worth than those with higher education (cited in Rustomfram, 2014). Therefore, it would be interesting to understand the motivation of older adult learners. Participation is one of the pillars of Active Ageing. Efforts to encourage participation normally begin with the removal of barriers and provision of opportunities (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2008). This article explores and aims to contribute to the knowledge of senior citizen learners by understanding their motivation and educational experience. It includes their perception regarding the challenges faced, as well as the benefits derived.

## 2. Methodology

The research design is exploratory in nature. Qualitative methodology, including content analy-

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\* Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> International conference on Elderly and New Technologies, 13-15<sup>th</sup> May, 2015 Senior Citizens University, Castellon, Spain.

sis has been used to explore senior citizens' backgrounds and educational experiences, and to gain an understanding of their involvement in the learning activities while pursuing Diploma in Gerontology. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for data collection. This tool encouraged narration of experience and allowed for further probing questions while conducting the interview.

The study is conducted in Mumbai. Out of total 13 senior citizen students (12 men and 1 woman), 6 students were purposively selected and approached for their consent. The purposive sampling is based on year of study, age, gender and educational qualification of the six selected learners. The only female senior citizen learner who ever attended the course was included. Starting with an in-depth understanding of one case, the analysis of the cases was done simultaneously and the findings of one case directed the further data collection process. The interviews were conducted over a period of two months, commencing in late 2014. Interviews generally lasted for

approximately 120 minutes. The saturation of data was assumed when sufficient information about the objectives of the research were attained.

#### *Ethical consideration*

Written consent from the participants to take part in the research has reassured them that this is an academic research and that the information shared will be confidential. Participants consent was sought for recording the interview.

#### *Sampling Method*

The sampling technique employed in the study is purposive sampling. Table 1 describes the age-wise distribution of the senior citizen learners from 2007-2008 to 2014-15. (8 batches)

*Table 1*

S.no	Age group	Total number of students	Number of female students	Number of male students	Selected participants
1	60-65	7	1	6	1F+2M
2	66-70	Nil	-	-	-
3	71-75	2	Nil	2	1M
4	76-80	4	Nil	4	2M
	Total	13	1	12	1F & 5M= 6

*F-Female M-Male.*

*Table 2. below gives the profile of the participants who were finally interviewed for the study*

S.No.	Name of the learners*	Age**	Gender	Education	Batch
	Mr. Udhav	62	M	B.A	2009
	Mr. Jayaprakash	78	M	B.Sc	2010
	Ms. Lila	63	F	B.A	2012
	Mr. Anishankar	65	M	LMM	2012
	Mr. Mukesh	80	M	M.A	2012
	Mr. Suresh	74	M	PH.D	2013

*\* Names have been changed. \*\*Age at the time of admission.*

### 3. Discussion

While the diploma in Gerontology also admits learners with a qualification of Standard XII (A level), it was found that all senior citizen learners who applied were graduates and above. All were physically mobile except for a degree of reduced speed in walking and climbing. Gender appeared to be a restricting factor as only one female senior citizen learner was found among all 62 students across eight years. Household responsibilities along with other characteristics like lower literacy level, financial dependency and other cultural hindrances may reduce educational opportunities for older women in India.

The discussion in this study is constructed along the themes of 'Self' and self-growth, learning preferences, gender differences, challenges encountered and overall impact on physical, cognitive, social and psychological wellbeing.

#### 3.1.A. 'Self' and self-growth

Participants offered several interrelated reasons for participating in the learning activity. The main objective for joining the course appeared to be to engage in productive activity so as to improve their wellbeing. Other stated motivators were: to make appropriate use of the leisure time after formal retirement from work; to expand the horizon of knowledge to lead a meaningful life; and to involve themselves in volunteer activity in order to engage with the welfare of senior citizens.

In general, to acquire a certificate was not the main goal, but rather to make the most productive use of this learning opportunity along with building the knowledge base and skills to be able to deal with ageing issues themselves and others. To pursue further education to them meant that they could be independent and ultimately improve their quality of life. Suresh stated that quality of life is very important. Therefore, he had to do something about it. He had already completed his Diploma in Counselling and after a year's break, he was pursuing the Diploma in Gerontology.

Udhav reported that he was inspired to study because of a book he came across.

The book named «How to Make the Rest of your Days as Best of your Days» had a great influence

on my life. I set a goal for myself that I would make the best use of my time and resources, and also aim to do some good for society.

It was revealed from the interviews that engagement through lifelong learning enhanced their social, psychological and physical activities contributing to their wellbeing. However, unlike what Sloane-Seale and Kops (2008) reported in their study, socializing was not the primary objective for the participants to join the course.

#### 3.1.B. Why choose Gerontology as a subject?

Participants reported that they were keen to understand life processes and ageing so that they could improve their own life situation as well as understand what others experienced. The motivation was to gain a systematic comprehensive knowledge of ageing issues, whether social, physical, psychological, civic or political with the objective of applying it to themselves as well as to others. Some of the participants derived motivation from seeing elderly people around them. Lila narrated that she wanted to help her mother who was living alone. Her sister had suffered from Parkinson and was no longer there. Incidents like losing dear ones or encountering age-related problems encouraged them to learn Gerontology. Four participants were already engaged in social activities working for the welfare of society and specially of the elderly population. Considering the trend of population ageing and the neglect of elderly population, they realized that this area required attention. Studying Gerontology was a need as well as an interest.

#### 3.1.C. The «Other» options

Participants reported that they planned to use the course to pick up new skills for self-development. It emerged that prior to this, they had undertaken courses and planned to do more in the future, too. Mukesh took admission for the Diploma in Counselling after completing the Diploma in Gerontology. Suresh had already completed the Diploma in Counselling before joining Gerontology. Anishankar is a practicing advocate. Before joining the Diploma in Gerontology, he had done a certificate programme

in Securities Law and wanted to study cyber laws in the future. Jayaprakash had also an M.A. in Naturopathy. Lila had done a Diploma in Tourism five years before joining Gerontology.

Such short-term and part-time courses added to their qualifications and improved their opportunities. The benefits were manifold. They could earn a living; they could spend their time meaningfully; strengthen the social support network and improve their wellbeing by staying active and healthy.

### 3.1.D. *Elderly for the elderly*

Participants were reportedly willing to work for the welfare of the elderly in society, which was their main interest in pursuing the Diploma. Two expressed a desire to open their own retirement home for elderly people in need. Mukesh wanted to educate people on ageing issues through his writing. They wanted to apply the knowledge gained through Gerontology by helping themselves and elderly people. Jayaprakash was already associated with a senior citizen foundation. He was helping the organization in managing an online website. As a lawyer, Anishankar observed the increasing number of cases related to elder abuse and started taking up such cases. He was hopeful that the proper understanding of ageing issues would help him to deal with such cases efficiently. Lila wanted to learn about diseases, like Parkinson, which may come with ageing. They all had a desire to work for the betterment of the elderly and wanted to be efficient and knowledgeable when reaching out.

### 3.1.E. *Consciousness regarding personal and professional growth*

Participants perceived the gains in personal and professional growth and narrated them. The student-friendly teaching model gave them an opportunity to improve social and interpersonal skills. They made presentations, worked on projects and assignments and wrote examinations. Initially, they faced problems in matching up with younger batch mates, but they gradually gained pace. For a few participants, it took the first fifteen weeks to gain confidence. Standing and speaking in front of others

was no more a difficulty for them. They had gained verbal fluency by the end of the course. During the interview Lila was amused by remembering her struggle with English at the start. In order to cope with the pace of the course, Udhav spent hours in the library and made the best use of resources. Two of the participants stood first in class and won the gold medal.

## 3.2. *Learning preferences*

Sustaining learner motivation is also about how a learner wants to learn (Boulton-Lewis & Tam, 2008). Andragogy as a science and an art of adult learning points out that adult learners should be involved in all stages of learning, including the identification of their learning needs, and the planning of how those needs are met. In this study, two themes with regard to learning preferences that emerged can be stated as «preferences in modes» of teaching and «preferences in modes of assessment».

### 3.2.A. *Preferences in modes of teaching*

The most preferred teaching method among senior citizen learners was group activities and group discussion. It gave them an opportunity to interact and know each other. They bonded through working on common tasks or presentations. Each contributed as per their expertise and comfort.

I wasn't comfortable speaking in front of the class but through such group exercises, I got confidence; I learnt by seeing others and became able to give presentations fluently by the beginning of the second semester, said Jaiprakash.

Participants reported that the lectures delivered in the Diploma in Gerontology were very informative and taught interestingly. They also appreciated the invited guest faculty. Both the young-old (60-70) and the middle-old (70-80) expressed that they preferred the more interactive mode of teaching. They preferred discussion and debate based sessions. This also gave them the opportunity to contribute to the class by sharing their own life experience. They came to feel that they could acquire their own space in the class process.

Another distinct feature of the Diploma in Gerontology is the Field practicum, which the participants reported to have enjoyed. The primary goal of field experience is to provide the student with the opportunity to engage actively in professional tasks that complement and reinforce classroom learning. This is learning by doing. Two of the participants placed within the low income group expressed that they had entered a world which they had never known about.

### 3.2.B. *Preferences in modes of assessment*

The various modes of assessment encountered by the learners were written exams, group and individual assignments, presentations, class participation, etc. No single preferred mode of assessment among senior citizen learners was stated, but the group assignment mode was preferred. Writing exams was comparatively difficult for many of the participants. Memorizing concepts and reproducing them in a limited time created stress and discomfort. Only one of them proudly reported that he accepted it as a challenge. The other five felt examination was not the best method to assess the learner.

### 3.3. *Gender differences*

There are entrenched economic, social and cultural determinants influencing life experiences of older women (Frederika, speech "Population Found", New Delhi, 30.10.2012). The fact that there is only one female participant in the study reflects the gendered scenario. Domestic tasks and the care giving role of women often limit workforce participation, as well as mobility outside the domestic sphere. Opportunities for education are often denied due to social and cultural mind sets. Overwork and nutritional neglect contribute to poor health in old age. Lila felt that she was fortunate that she could take time out and attend the diploma. She said that her husband's support was important for her. However, her struggle didn't end with taking admission in the course. She shared that she could not focus on the course as she would have liked to because of domestic responsibilities.

Gender remained an impediment for her even after the completion of the course. She wanted to work with an NGO but had to limit her choices in that organisations should be close to her home, and

she could not be out of the house for a full working day. She states;

I did it, but not doing it now.

She means that she actively completed the course but is not able to take it any further. However, she continues to struggle within these conditions. She recently wrote an article on the issues of the elderly for a magazine addressed to old people which received much appreciation.

### 3.4. *Challenges encountered*

All the participants found the course hectic, difficult and demanding. Suresh said he felt he had never worked so hard in his entire life. In particular, seven hours of study on Saturday was tiring for them. For those who stayed at a long distance from the Institute and had to travel for an hour or more, it was a further challenge.

Sitting for long periods and the lack of hearing were two health-related difficulties for senior citizen learners. Jayaprakash and Suresh both had a hearing problem because of which they could not always follow the class discussion properly. They used to sit in the front row so that they could hear the teacher clearly. Those learners who had lost the habit of writing quickly found writing examinations and assignments a challenge. Understanding technical and scientific terms, collecting reading material and becoming accustomed to reading in the library were other challenges. Only two out of the six were technology-friendly, therefore, getting help from the Internet was not easy for them. Presentation skills and English speaking skills were also a challenge for some of them.

Financial affordability also posed a challenge. In this study, all the participants were financially sound. Even so, Lila narrated that she wanted to study for the Diploma in Counselling but as the fees were higher, she took admission in the Diploma in Gerontology, which was comparatively cheaper. The elderly from a lower socio-economic background may not be able to pursue the course even if they want to.

Another challenge for three of the six senior citizen learners was to gain the support of family members to pursue the Diploma.

Even friends had to be convinced about the benefits of participating in educational activities. They questioned the utility of the course and saw it as a

waste of time. After successful completion of the course, friends and relatives questioned the learners as to whether they would make some productive use of this course or not. To avoid this kind of pressure, some learners decided not to inform those family members and friends who they thought would be insensitive to them.

### 3.5. Overall experience of the course

This section highlights the experiences of senior citizen learners with regard to their experiences as students; getting along with other class fellows; building a social support system; helping each other, attending classes, and experiencing fun and challenges while learning. Interestingly, participants of the study reported that they didn't make any particular friends but preferred to be with everyone. Being a senior, they received special attention and support from others. Mukesh described it as:

Being a senior in the class was mostly an advantage for me. Young fellows were very considerate, they used to help me out in each and every task and respected me. It was 80 to 22 in our batch.

All the senior citizen learners reported that they maintained full attendance throughout the course. They reported themselves as being sincere and punctual. They stated that they were not given any concession because of their age. However, they didn't take a competitive position. Learning and understanding the subject was their goal. They all stated that they had some inhibitions at the start, but they managed to overcome them with each other's help.

### 3.6. Impact on wellbeing

#### 3.6.A. Physical & psychological wellbeing

The participation in the course, as well as the information gained through the subjects, motivated the learners to remain active. They reported to have become more conscious of their own health and became regular with fitness exercises. They felt mentally stronger and derived ideas to remain engaged in social welfare activities. Mukesh expressed it this way:

I strongly feel I need to do the best I can do, people must remain active. I am keeping myself active as much as possible.

After completing the course, he brought out a booklet in English on the need to study Gerontology and had it printed, too.

#### 3.6.B. Cognitive wellbeing

Learning stimulates the cognitive process and reduces the risk of memory loss. Middle-old participants (70-80 years old) shared their challenges when trying to remember. Suresh informed that after completing the Diploma, he was able to learn and grasp ideas faster. However, he states that he has had to put much effort in it.

#### 3.6.C. Social wellbeing

The participants of the study shared that their social wellbeing has improved after this course. Their status among their family, peers and society has also improved. They have received appreciation from family and other people for making this voluntary effort at their age. This has provided them with the motivation to pursue their interests further. They now look for more such opportunities.

People look at me with more respect after this course, I get special consideration. I feel that life was not interesting before this course. I used to just keep sitting with my friends in the senior citizen association discussing political stories. Now I can speak about other things. Said Jayaprakash.

During the course of the programme, students learnt from each other and built friendships. They have remained in touch with their batch mates and do find opportunities to get together.

## 4. Conclusions

Educational experience derived from studying the Diploma in Gerontology indicated that it was a tool for senior citizen learners to increase participation

and quality of life of older persons, which is a requisite for active ageing. Participation in civic life has been stated as the third pillar of Active Ageing, the other two being health and social security (WHO, 2002). In this study, making productive use of time in the years after 60 was a primary motive to join the course. Socialising was an outcome of joining and not the reason to enrol.

As in the BeLL Project (2014), this study also demonstrates that one educational experience can become a motivator to continue to other courses. Four participants in the study had done other courses before enrolling, and those who had not, went on to join programmes. While the economic benefits were not perceived as significant, they gained self-esteem, saw themselves as being recognised in society and made improvements in their own lifestyle. They perceived an increased sense of self-worth and individual capacity.

The consciousness which participants shared in the study with regard to their self-growth and personal development included growth in communication (verbal fluency and speaking in the English language), as well as class presentation skills. Communication skills which had been acquired earlier and which could be enhanced in senior years refer not only to instrumental capacities (e. g. making presentations or speaking in English) but they are the vehicle for being able to participate in social and civic life.

A further enhanced communication skill also impels capacity of seniors to define their own needs and to ensure that their aspirations and rights are realised in society (Niederfranke, 1992).

The finding that seniors in the study preferred group methods in teaching and assignment relates to their comfort in being able to bring their life experience into the classroom. Senior citizen learners showed openness to new learning methods as well as the use of technology, e. g. use of LCD projectors for presentations. Chown (1961) cited in McClusky (1965) found that rigidity, which is considered to be a part of behaviour amongst seniors, has actually more to do with the nature of the task and is more significantly associated with low intelligence rather than with age. Botwinick and Brinley (1962) cited in McClusky (1965) concluded that older people give optimum performance if a task is clear and time is allowed for monitoring and correcting potential errors. 'Self-pacing' may contribute to this process,

at least it improves performance (McClusky, 1965). Several participants referred to being comfortable in a learning process where they could control the pace of their learning instead of being driven for long hours or through didactic teaching methods.

The study had only one female participant and amply demonstrated the personal, family-related and cultural issues which prevented her from giving her best. Apart from working to reduce or eliminate these obvious hurdles resulting in denial of educational opportunities for older women, Niederfranke points out that, life expectancy of women being higher than that of men, education programmes for this group of seniors will have to receive urgent and immediate attention (1992).

Despite the fact that the participants in the study came from a relatively better socio-economic profile, at least half of them spoke about having to stretch financially. If this was a challenge for them, it goes without saying that seniors from low socio-economic backgrounds would find it much more difficult to access educational opportunities. Unless they have their own income, families in general may not find it worth 'investing' in their quality of life. Even if they have family resources, elderly women would face this situation with greater intensity. Finding support from families has been stated as significant by all the participants. Niederfranke points out that the encouragement of self-reliance and maturity into old age has to be considered an essential part of educating (1992). While the culture in India encourages that seniors be supported and respected for their experience and wisdom, in practice, this occurs only when seniors stay within the confines of their conventional role and often not even then.

Increased social, psychological, cognitive and physical wellbeing was narrated as a tangible gain by all the participants over the year-long educational programme. Participants stated that their life experiences had been valued by their classmates. They felt they had contributed in equal measure through their own strengths. This experience constitutes an important part of the educational experience for the elderly. In gerontological literature, experience is also conceptualised as knowledge referring to wisdom or just as wisdom (Smith *et al.*, 1988, cited in Niederfranke, 1992). It is expected that this will contribute to their capacity to make decisions and to use these for specific tasks and situations in life, particularly in senior years where changes in life and

the need to give up certain roles and to take on new roles characterises life and the acquisition of status in one's old age. Capacity to face critical life events (retirement, loss of spouse, «empty nest» situation, redefining relationships with children and/or ageing parents, etc.) in a constructive way with strengthened individual capacity will be integral to a successful educational experience.

Lifelong education and learning strategies are fundamental for elderly people to meet the demands of age. A system of education which will study their needs, provide the elements which motivate them to pursue educational experience and is sensitive to the needs of elderly women as well as of those from low income groups is an imperative need. In view

of the demographic, social, economic and technological changes, universities may do well to focus upon the motivations which are thought to influence the participation of senior citizen learners in educational programmes and courses of study. To become genuinely responsive to the needs and interests of the elderly, universities would do well to understand the kinds of adult learners it attracts and attempts to serve (Morstain and Smart, 1977). Too often, educational programmes are developed and offered by universities on their understanding of what is best to offer and how it is best to offer it. However, the interests of learners would be better served if institutions examined the needs and motivations of the potential learners.

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