

Ageing and Learning ICT Skills: Implications for social care

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Abstract: This paper explores the narratives of older women engaged in learning at an Age UK Community Centre, in England in 2014. The participants of this small pilot study were primarily learning ICT (Information and Communications Technology) skills. This study contextualises lifelong learning by acknowledging that learning is a need of older adults in the context of the personalisation agenda, the Care Act 2014, and human rights. We analyse the data by drawing on two broad understandings of the different motives for learning: instrumental and expressive (Londoner, 1978). This provides a useful framework to explore the social and cultural influences behind motivations to learn. The study suggests that the two categories of learning motives overlap, yet the rationales given by older adults depicted how learning was not conceived solely as the acquisition of formal knowledge; instead, it was essentially driven by a socially enacted process. We conclude by emphasising how learning is an indispensable aspect of social care. We suggest that a re-conceptualisation of 'care' and 'need' may be required during assessment practices when working with older adults', as motives for learning here were grounded in social participation and the search for a sense of meaning and purpose towards their identity in older age.

Keywords: Older adults, Identity, Narrative, Lifelong Learning, Personalisation.

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Introduction

The concept of lifelong learning is not a new phenomenon. It is essential for all people to have the opportunity to learn new knowledge and acquire new skills throughout their life course. A more recent aspect of lifelong learning is linked to developing skills and understanding around Information and Communications Technology (ICT). These skills are now of fundamental importance to many people's lives, and are essential to many peoples' employment and social practices. It is essential that older people are not excluded from these contemporary modes of communication and interaction. This paper presents the findings of a small qualitative study in which older women discuss their experiences of participating in ICT learning at an Age Concern Community Centre in North West England. The findings reveal how participants engaged in this learning for instrumental, expressive and interpersonal purposes. Furthermore the study highlights the importance of social care practitioners and educators recognising older peoples' ICT learning and skills as 'needs' in the context of personalisation and from a human rights perspective.

Lifelong learning and older adults: The context

In the UK, Japan and other European countries national and regional governments and the third sector have played a role in encouraging programmes of lifelong learning for older adults (Tam, 2011). In the US, the rise of older learning programs in the Third and Fourth age was a grassroots phenomenon nurtured only by a small group of people (Manheimer, 2007). The 'Third Age' covers the post-employment period of 65 to 80 years (Smith, 2002), whilst the 'Fourth Age' includes the last years of adulthood, from 80-85 years and over (Blanchard-Fields and Kalinauskas, 2009). The extensive literature on the concept of lifelong learning in relation to older people in particular (see Ardel, 2000; Jarvis, 2001; Rowe and Kahn, 1998; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1996; Withnall, 2006), denotes how it can be viewed as a value laden concept which is culturally and socially bound and determined as will be seen when applying our methodology (Tuijnmann and Bostrom, 2002). We identify later life lifelong learning in our paper as any participation in learning, whether formal or informal and which takes place during the third and fourth ages. We draw on Londoner's (1978) two categories of motives for the older adult's participation in lifelong learning: instrumental and expressive. Instrumental motives have extrinsic, in 'order to achieve', elements and include mastering new skills such as playing an instrument, learning a new language or computer software application (Manheimer, 2007). Expressive motives are seen as intrinsic and immediate, such as finding a voice through poetry, art or music and they often include a deepening sense of meaning for the individual. Much debated,

Londoner's simple categorisation has not yet been superseded (Glendenning, 2000; Londoner, 1990). Havighurst (1964, 1976) was the first U.S. researcher to suggest that instrumental and expressive aspects of education are important dichotomies to consider by planners of older adult programs (Hiemstra, 1982). Meanwhile, Londoner (1971, 1978) argued that the two domains are important for needs assessment activities (Hiemstra, 1982).

A number of studies have explored the instrumental and expressive continuum (see Havighurst, 1975; Hiemstra and Brown 1979, Whatley, 1974; Goodrow 1975). These studies have shown a clear preference by older adults for engaging in learning instrumental activities (see Hiemstra, 1973). Here, we view learning technology as aligned to instrumental learning, and consider the acquisition of these skills as necessary throughout life in the context of IT technologies and applications relating to tablets, computers and mobile phones. This brings with it the need for education and training in order to assist older adults to understand how to use and engage with this technology (Huber and Watson, 2014). A later study conducted by Heinz et al. (2013) found that older adults were enthusiastic about learning new forms of technology and it had helped older adults to maintain aspects of their independence and quality of life. We can also conclude from this literature at least, that the establishment of appropriate learning relationships plays a large role in determining personal success, which is in turn associated with the quality of life of older adults in the Third and Fourth Ages (Heinz et al., 2013).

We conducted our pilot study with the backdrop of the personalisation agenda and Care Act 2014. This policy and legislation provides the platform for social workers to identify learning needs, without which the older adults' need for education can often be overlooked. Indeed, it is as much a human right as it is a need. Care management practices with older adults during the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 era had become increasingly perceived by practitioners as 'deskilling' and bureaucratic (see Roscoe and Pithouse, 2016), with pressure on practitioners to focus solely on addressing the personal care needs of older adults. Personalisation objectives under the Care Act 2014, allow for more holistic and creative assessment practices to determine the outcomes each individual wants to achieve, which includes consideration of their educational needs and wishes (Department of Health, 2016). However the ongoing severe budgetary constraints affecting adult social care, is perpetuating crisis management and rationing approaches in social work practice (Gardner, 2014). Notwithstanding these wider fiscal challenges, we take this opportunity to remind practitioners and commissioners that, a recent report prepared for the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, building on the existing 'Principles for Older Persons' adopted in 1991, called for lifelong learning to be endorsed by the international community as a key social integration tool for older persons (Kornfeld-Matte, 2016). This report explicitly recognised that learning and training should include courses which promote the use of information technology by older persons and their participation in online communities, as well

as online platforms to train them to become entrepreneurs or virtual academies.

Providing older adults with opportunities to engage in education and learning should be considered as equally important as attending to one's personal care, if that is what the individual determines. This may be through supporting them to access free universal services provided in community settings directly, or through the provision of a personal budget which individuals can use to access ICT courses and support. It is to a community setting that we now turn; the context of the research study.

Methodology

Context: Age UK Community Centre, North West England

This pilot study consisted of an all-white female group ($n=10$) of older adults aged between 65 and 82 years, learning to use computers, and was conducted in partnership with an Age Concern Community Centre in North West England. It was undertaken by the lead author. The Centre provides IT skills tutoring as well as providing a home service for older adults who wish to use internet facilities: such as e-mail, Skype, i-Pad, and Windows 8.

Participants for the study were invited to contribute to the study following the information being shared about the research at the Community Centre. The research asked participants why learning ICT skills was important to them. Participation was entirely voluntary. Whilst this pilot study was not intended to be all female and men did attend the Centre, only women came forward to be interviewed. Ethical guidelines provided by the British Sociological Association (2002) were observed, and the research was approved by a University's Research Ethics Committee. Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed fully, and the re-reading of transcripts and data was analysed manually.

Whilst active ageing can be viewed as a multidimensional construct (Boulton-Lewis and Tam, 2012), we draw on the socio-cultural perspective which sees learning as constructivist, as this study was interested in exploring the meaning that the participants gave to their endeavour to learn (Barton, Appleby, Hodge, Tusting, and Ivanic, 2006). The study focused on the way participants interpreted and narrated their learning, its connection to their lives and how this conveyed aspects of their identity construction. Narratives enable social researchers to contextualise storytelling as an essential means of human sense making (Squire, 2008; 2013). When the women in this study storied their learning journey it also conveyed implicitly how they had constructed their identity (Roscoe and Madoc-Jones, 2009; Roscoe,

Carson, and Madoc-Jones, 2011). Identity here can be understood as a generic process of being and becoming within inter-relationships and interdependencies with others (Jenkins, 1996). The self has different social identities that originate from both our self-concept and from interaction, whereby the person perceives themselves to be part of a particular social group (Hogg and Vaughan, 2002). Fairclough (2003) uses the term ‘social processes of identification’ to explain this further. In essence, this means that our identity is the continual construction of social and personal identities which are drawn from a variety of discourses (Roscoe et al., 2011). Discourses can be understood here as a set of ideas that exist in linguistic forms – for example, sexism as a discourse arises from the use of words and ideas associated with those words (Roscoe and Madoc-Jones, 2009). This paper explores how the self was conveyed in the narrative and its associated discourses by using the two categories of learning we have identified thus far. Here we contextualise these narratives within the social, political and cultural contexts in which the participants find themselves (Lave, 1996; Taylor, Evans, and Abasi, 2006).

Data presentation and discussion

We identified four recurring themes from the interviews:

- ‘Moving with the times’,
- ‘Application of new skills’,
- ‘Catalysts for Growth’, and
- ‘Life Changes’.

Respondent identifiers (for example, Interview 1, 2, 3) are used to maintain confidentiality in this paper, but the age of participants is outlined, given the context of the study.

Theme 1: Moving with the times (instrumental and motives)

Whilst the main motives for learning ICT skills at the Age UK Centre were primarily interpreted in our study as ‘instrumental’ in origin, these motives did overlap at times. Instrumental education is education for a goal that lies outside and beyond the act of learning. In this form, education is an instrument for changing the learner’s life or circumstances (Hiemstra, 1982). The rationales given for the motives in this study also conveyed something about how the participants had internalised their sense of ‘self’ within their cultural and technological surroundings. The following

accounts illustrate this point succinctly:

The reason I came to the Centre, I felt like I was getting left being left behind, like you know every time someone rang you know they asked would I e-mail them back, I can't do that or couldn't do that and that [was] when I started to learn, when I came here. (Interview 2, 68)

I feel as if I'm living in the present, you know what I mean? I'm not lagging behind. (Interview 8, 73)

Cultural metaphors like 'technophobia' or 'lagging behind' signified how these older women had constructed their knowledge and skills about computers in comparison to others. In doing so, they highlighted their motives for learning as the need to 'keep up' whilst 'living in the present'. Metaphors like these can signify a particular type of thinking that underlies statements about a person's social world (Semino, 2008). This showed how the women had begun to navigate around what was, for them, a new technological territory. They also act as important signifiers for the kind of conceptual system used to justify their actions. This is because in this study, we consider that communication and action are intrinsically linked (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Their practice, motivations and actions signified 'joining in' with the wider socialisation and practises of 'the globalisation of social life' (Kumar, 1995). In the management of becoming technically 'able', the older adult identity here was inevitably shaped by institutions of modernity (Giddens, 2004). Here a variety of stereotypes and myths about older adults are dispelled and these instrumental learning activities were utilised by the women with the end goal of effective mastery of technology.

In seeking alternative constructions of identity in older age and what this meant for each individual, the participants presented their narrative of age in a reflexive and organised endeavour. In essence, their sense of self was built around a coherent, yet continuously revised part of a biographical narrative (Giddens, 2004).

there's an element of loss [when you retire], isn't there? Because the things that you did on a day-to-day that you took for granted are suddenly taken away from us" (Interview 8, 73)

The above accounts, whilst illustrating a sense of loss and lack of social engagement, inevitably led to a reflective conversation that involved a continual adjustment of a personal and social identity during times of uncertainty. Our social and personal identities are neither guaranteed nor ever confirmed and completed (Archer, 2000), but are constantly established through social processes of performance and membership. Here, some aspects of expressive motives for learning

overlap these educational experiences based on the premise that these activities increased the enjoyment of life and served to expand horizons and provided fairly immediate gratification (Havighurst 1976). In essence, this 'moving with the times' and the women's motives for learning replaced any notions of rigidity of narratives or discourses associated with traditional life cycles and old age (Phillipson, 1998). During their 'storied self' they had evidently embraced an endless revision to their concept of age. This meaning-making process inevitably involved another layer of learning as it is based on learning about the 'self' (Hafford-Letchfield and Lavender, 2015).

Theme 2: Application of new skills (instrumental motives)

Researchers have evidenced older adults' preference for instrumental learning; the participants in this study shared how they had transferred the ICT skills they had learned at the Centre to other areas of their lives (Goodrow, 1974; Whately, 1974). They were using them instrumentally in their own lives to access information. Consequently the use of ICT or a wish to have one-to-one IT skills training at a service user's home, care home or community centre might appear to social care professionals to be a less essential need to consider when undertaking a needs assessment. The older women in our study demonstrated how they considered it to be a vital need nonetheless in order to engage in everyday activities.

I book my holidays on it and do my banking on it and this morning I've downloaded my gas bill. (Interview 1, 71)

Microsoft Word and sorting things out and doing a calendar and making plans. Also I was checking on the news and railway times. (Interview 8, 73)

Dichotomizing educational motivation in social work practice into either/or categories has some drawbacks as noted by DeCrow (1974). They cannot always be separated easily and can equally be treated as two entirely different categories that are not aligned to a continuum (Lertz and Charner, 1998). Notwithstanding this, as fairly broad categories the two sets of motives do enable social workers to begin to distinguish among certain types of learning activities by using the instrumental and expressive categories to ascertain learning needs during assessment practices. Thus as practitioners we should ask more fundamental questions during our assessments when considering what 'support' older adults may require. This might not always take the form of purchasing services. The physical and personal care needs of older adults are not a justification for ignoring more creative and technological needs and alternative forms of intervention. Moreover, even more practical needs that may be

identified in a care and support plan can relate to new learning. For example, two participants who may otherwise have required support in managing their finances or accessing information noted how their use of technology had promoted their independence. Technology could also provide opportunities for enterprise too, with the data illuminating more creative and innovative ways to use technology:

I learnt to do online shopping... I used to play one supermarket off against another, because if I didn't go to Tesco for so long they sent me vouchers saying we missed you. Then it would be the same with Sainsbury's, I'd get vouchers from them. Then of course John Lewis and Waitrose were enticing me, so I used to - it gave me something to get my brain round really, I suppose, because he was so poorly. (Interview 1- 70)

Me, I looked at all things like exotic holidays, beautiful property, buying and selling online. I'm not so very good at selling things. (Interview 2-68)

The skills the women had learned in this community centre had become a vital means to manage their own 'wellbeing' during difficult times. The value of emphasising the human rights of older adults to access learning opportunities under the Care Act 2014 might be a way in which to overcome institutional barriers and ageist practices, because practitioners can be preoccupied with risk and rationing as opposed to concepts associated with lifelong learning (Glendenning, 2000). Moreover, institutional and attitudinal stereotyping can heighten the risk of practitioners continuing to prioritise service-led approaches to meeting the needs of older adults experiencing frailty in the Fourth Age.

The further reduction in the availability of statutory and third sector support for older adults can result in the erosion of the ambitious objectives set out in personalisation (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2014). Equally, this can leave older adults with insufficient funds in their personal budget allocations to purchase adequate care and support to address their needs and this can manifest itself as a practice culture which encapsulates 'a narrow and impoverished perception of need in old age' (Lloyd, 2014, p.62). Indeed, it has been noted by Glendenning et al. (2008, in Netten et al., 2012, p.1570) that older adults have, as a result, tended 'to make less use of innovative approaches to support'. The critical practitioner is encouraged to identify institutional barriers as noted by Glasby and Littlechild (2009), which serve to undermine personal budgets being used to address people's social and learning needs. Indeed, service users can have their own concerns; that is they may fear being judged for spending public monies on social activities that may be considered by some as 'non essentials' (Beresford, 2014).

Theme 3: Catalysts for growth (Expressive Motives).

The expressive motives for engaging in ICT learning can also be identified in the accounts below. Expressive education is education for a goal that lies within the act of learning, or is so closely related to it that the act of learning appears to be the goal (Havighurst, 1975). Expressive motives can be centred on enjoyment or self-fulfilment (Londoner, 1978). The following accounts illustrate a deeper construction the women had applied to learning at the Centre:

They [ICT classes] give you an interest. They give you a challenge, let's put it that way. I think with the computer classes, they give you an interest. (Interview 6, 74)

I want to expand [and gain] knowledge and keep going if you know what I mean. (Interview 1, 70)

I think it is partly about having some sort of structure and something to look forward to and it is that connection with people ... you know the routine of work when you are younger...that sort of structure and purpose and that sort of helps in a way. (Interview 5, 69)

Learning can help people to develop skills and confidence, facilitating proactive strategies for coping with life changes following on from retirement (Boulton-Lewis and Tam, 2006). As practitioners, we can identify how using technology is not only an instrumental activity, but is also a valuable tool for promoting social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development. This overlapping category of learning with others adds another expressive dimension to the women's motives for learning in the study. This was demonstrated by the participants, who justified and explained the rewards and sense of meaning that learning was giving to their lives,

It makes me feel a lot better because I can do something now that I couldn't do before. I like to learn things. I don't like to just sit back and - you've got to keep your brain going... brain ticking over (Interview 1, 70).

Other women added,

It stretches my mind (Interview 5, 69)

I was able to gather all of the information that I would normally be looking [for] in the library and things (Interview 3, 82)

Whilst each individual brings with them different instrumental and expressive motives for learning, there was one common theme throughout this study: the need for social participation (interpersonal motives). Whilst funding cuts in adult

social care, particularly over the past few years, is arguably severely restricting the ability for older adults to participate in what they consider as meaningful, in today's technological revolution older adults should have an equal right and opportunities for education and learning skills in order to participate in culture, education, art or travel. These new technologies are increasingly becoming essential ingredients in daily activity across the lifecourse for achieving social participation and integration in a variety of social contexts (Agudo, Pascual, and Fombona, 2012; Hersh 2014; Pavon, 2000).

Theme 4: Life changes

The participants in this study describe learning as 'life changing' in its impacts, enabling them to use their knowledge and skills on a day to day basis, (as well as teaching others as a result of acquiring their new skills.) Motivations for older adults' participation in educational activities can be based on interpersonal, expressive and instrumental motives. Any motivation is sensitive to context, and each context was different for each individual. However, in listening to the narrative we assume that when any story is told it becomes part of the social actor's consciousness resulting in transformative properties in the re-construction of self (Roscoe et al, 2013; Squire, 2013). Thus participants may have internalised their social identity initially in the context of 'being left behind', but inevitably it resulted in a shift in how they actually managed and constructed their own personal and social identities. Subsequently, their construction of technology changed as well as their identity positioning within the narrative. The use of technology resulted in the women describing its use as of vital importance:

It's a lifeline really. I really would be lost without it. (Interview 1, 70)

The use of the word 'lifeline' denoted what level of cognitive and emotional investment had been placed on the use of technology from the learning activity,

If something goes wrong with my computer, I feel as though I've lost an arm and a hand. (Interview 1, 70)

These metaphors signified how the participants had comfortably adjusted to and integrated into the fast pace of technology. It had become a part of their everyday lives:

I would be absolutely lost without it now, I use it a lot for finding out things, shopping, weather, buying things, look up a lot of information on health, yes I look up a lot of information" (Interview 8, 73)

The accounts above signified a move towards the further deinstitutionalisation of the stereotypes associated with the life course and how these ideas have become unstable in society (Gullimard, 1989). The women's schedules in this study were packed with social and learning activities. This is in keeping with the norms of the Third Age and a period in life often associated with many positive aspects to ageing in terms of relative good health and social engagement (Smith, 2002). It was clear that the majority of the research participants who were within this age range generally had good health. Moreover, while the financial circumstances of each individual were not a question for this research, most of the participants had previously held careers in retail, teaching and nursing. Thus the limitations of this study must be acknowledged in that older adults' opportunities to access education are also dependent upon social class, with class based inequality remaining a significant dimension of social ageing (Formosa and Higgs, 2013; Tuckett, 2007).

In relation to the use of technology a 'digital divide' does exist on account of individuals' financial resources, educational experiences, as well as age. Studies have found more frequent online internet searches being undertaken by younger, more affluent and better educated cohorts (Baker, Wagner, Singer, and Bundorf, 2003; Ybarra and Suman, 2008, in Li, 2015). Whilst the attachment to people as 'a social class' has become weaker (Formosa and Higgs, 2013), it is clear that good health and physical mobility are contributing factors to successfully accessing and engaging in learning in the community. Not all of these women had significant health and social care needs, but we make the point that it is important for practitioners not to overlook older adults who do have higher levels of need in the Fourth Age. The use of technology and associated skills can feed into the drive of national organisations such as Carers UK (2012) to promote the use of telehealth, telecare, and care related apps by adults with care and support needs and their carers. Enabling people to access information, advice and online peer networks of support via forums, chatrooms or Skype, can help to reduce isolation and promote social participation and alternative forms of interaction as can be seen below:

I found it so good for my local friends that use the computer. Some you can email and they only look at the computer - they say we only do it on a Saturday; I look at mine every day. But then you get to know the ones who'll answer straightaway, so you keep a good dialogue going, or you make arrangements to meet up, all sorts of things. Of course my friend, she books holidays and things. What else is there I wanted to say about email? Actually it's a very good way of communicating, isn't it? (Interview 6, 74)

And more specifically in relation to finding a new departure in life,

I kept in touch with so many people by email and that snowballed, because my friend and I, after we'd both had these bereavements, we went abroad. We made friends,

we didn't intend to make friends but you just do and we were all swapping email addresses. Then we'd get lovely cards and messages from people all over the world. (Interview 3, 82)

I'm tending to use it more[skype] instead of texts on my mobile because I've got a - I mean, I just have a pay as you go and I have to pay so it's free, I suppose emails are free. (Interview 8, 73)

The use of Skype and other software as a popular way in which to keep in touch with family and friends was a recurring theme in this research, showing the interpersonal/intrapersonal dimension of learning ICT skills. As practitioners and educationalists, we might need to remind those who fund, commission and provide social care services that without this access to educational opportunities, we are unconsciously socially excluding and marginalising our older generation. The idea that older adults are a marginalised group is not new, but marginality and social exclusion can be experienced differently in a technologically focused society because we communicate and socially interact in different ways.

Conclusion

Whilst a fragmented sense of self may have been the driver and motive for learning for the women in this study, they proactively sought to be part of a wider and globalised collective identity of being technically literate and 'living in the present'. In the exploration of the use of metaphors and words contained within the overall narrative presented, we have sought to explore the meaning that the participants placed on learning ICT in their later life and expanded our analysis to the wider cultural, political and social context of older adults' needs and social identity. This paper has emphasised that learning is a human right for older adults as well as providing opportunities for social participation and interaction, whether in their home or community. Against the backdrop of the personalisation agenda and the Care Act 2014, in revisiting the instrumental–expressive continuum, we have shown what meaning-making takes place when people over retirement age engage in learning ICT skills in their later lives. We acknowledge that during this stage of life we are likely to be able to devote more time to learning activities and so advocate a re-conceptualisation of need in social care that covers a broader spectrum outside of medical and personal care, including access to universal services such as education, transport, and leisure. In resisting institutional and cultural barriers, alongside the stereotypes associated with discourses of older age, Glendenning's (2000) important support of Malcolm Knowles' 'andragogy' (Knowles, 1984) is part of a wider call to educators and their social care partners to create new discourses about education

for older adults. Thus the expressive and instrumental motives for learning provide fertile ideas for the assessment of need of older adults. Whilst the motives for engagement in older adult learning programs can be varied, a hallmark of all of them in this study was that (even if this includes online interaction) learning ICT skills provided the individual with opportunities to widen their social circles and establish new relationships. This highlighted how creating wider social networks through learning opportunities was a key interpersonal/intrapersonal motive for participants here, showing how meaningful interactions and connections between individuals matter and need to be given due consideration in keeping with person-centred and strengths-based approaches to social work practice.

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