

Recognizing Diversity in Lifelong Learning

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Have you been attracted by the colorful advertisement featuring National Silver Academy (NSA) on the newspaper recently? The big caption of 1000 highlighting the more than 1000 learning opportunities now available at NSA reminds us that these learning opportunities, from upskilling to new passions, are available at post-secondary education institutions and community-based organizations islandwide. NSA courses are catered especially to those over age 50 who will enjoy subsidized course fees and they may further tap on Skills future credit. An initiative under the Action Plan for Successful Aging, the setting up of the National Silver Academy since 2016 has seen a flourishing of learning opportunities for persons over age 50 in Singapore. It was reported that in the eight month period since it was launched in May 2016, it had already attracted more than 5,000 sign-ups for classes at the academy.

In 2012, commissioned by Council for Third Age, Fei Yue community services conducted a qualitative study of lifelong learning among older adults to understand the perceptions, motivations, barriers and impact of lifelong learning on older adults in Singapore. Together with Emily Lim and Sophie Tan, we recently used data from this study to publish an article in the journal "Social Science and Medicine".

2012 is a significant year for Singapore's demography, where the first cohort of baby boomers (born between 1947-1964) turned 65. The 64 older adults between age 50 and 64 interviewed at that time must have been encouraged to see a rapid expansion of lifelong learning opportunities for older adults in such a short span made available from NSA as well as Skills future initiative. Although the lifelong learning landscape has greatly expanded since, we thought it would still be interesting and relevant to revisit the data to learn more about how older adults define and perceive lifelong learning as we seek to develop the culture of lifelong learning further.

Lifelong learning are generally categorized into three categories. First, formal learning is structural learning that usually involves an instructor that occurs in education institutions that give out certifications at the end. The second, non-formal learning comprises of attending classes that focus on skill improvements that take place out of education institutions. Finally, informal learning, which can be referred to as self-learning or self-directed learning through the contexts of daily living. In the study, we classified the participants into learner and non-learners, where learners are regarded as those who have taken formal or non-formal learning courses in the past five years.

In this discussion, we focus especially on exploring how they define and perceive lifelong learning. The term "lifelong learning" proves a familiar term to the learners, and majority of them defined it as the process of continuous learning into old age. Among the non-learners, though, some had never heard of lifelong learning or had very vague notions of its definitions. For example, a 54 year old Male non-learner through that it was about finding work and aired frustration about few suitable jobs available for people at his age.

In fact, as expected, whether for learners or non-learners, it is common to associate lifelong learning with finding a job and maintaining work employability. Some perceived it as formal structured learning required in the industry to meet requirements and changing demands in their jobs. With increasing

emphasis on skills upgrading as promoted by the SkillsFuture Council, we can expect lifelong learning in the form of re-training at work to become a norm among the working population in Singapore. However, the narrow definition of lifelong learning with employability and economic benefits by some may demotivate them from further engagement with formal learning when work-related incentive is no longer apparent. There is thus also concerns that an emphasis on learning for work upgrading only may lead to social inequalities as groups of older adults with specific characteristics, such as low socioeconomic status, will face further disadvantages in opportunities to engage in productive activities.

Besides an emphasis on lifelong learning for work employment, the respondents also gave broader meanings to lifelong learning beyond work. Especially among the respondents who were retirees, non-working learners and non-learners, they also regarded lifelong learning as significant in building their capacity to “keep up” and not “be eliminated” in their roles in the family and in the community. For example, one Chinese female learner spoke about the need to continue to learn, “If we don’t continue to learn, we will fall behind, we’ll also experience a generation gap with our children and grandchildren.” In our fast pace society, lifelong learning seems increasingly pertinent for one to remain relevant in society.

In the study, although we refer to the respondents as non-learner when one did not participate in courses for the past five years, it was apparent that together with the learners, non-learners continue to learn through self-learning, or self-directed learning. Learning on their own came through different avenues, such as by watching television programs, reading books and newspapers to improve their skills and knowledge while keeping themselves relevant. Browsing the internet for information is also perceived as one form of self learning. In fact, self-learning can be regarded as the most frequently used form of adult learning, and an effective avenue for older adults to stay productive in the context of daily lives. The surfacing of the importance of self-learning among the respondents in this study brings to fore our own biases on defining learning only as structured learning when differentiating learners from non-learners. It also reflects the society’s over-emphasis on formal learning for employment, often failing to recognize that other forms of learning – albeit without the recognized certification -- may be equally, or perhaps more effective.

From the study, we realize the need for more recognition on informal learning alongside the emphasis on structured learning. It is encouraging to see the availability of e-micro learning on NSA website now, with bite-sized videos on a variety of topics from IT, finance, caregiving and other life skills. The same web section also introduced selected online courses that may be free.

Given the emphasis on learning for employability, more importantly, there is a need to effect a paradigm shift towards an employment system that also places recognition on informal learning and work experiences, especially in cases where formal structured certification may be hard to obtain. In this regard, let me share the real life case of an experienced caregiver that I deeply respect. Thirteen years ago when her mother was diagnosed with dementia, she could not find useful information around and began to read profusely as well as to obtain information from online sources to equip herself as a caregiver. Today, she has accumulated a wealth of knowledge on caring for someone with dementia, but laments that without formal education certification, it is hard for her knowledge and skills accumulated through experience and informal learning to be recognized.

Compared with 2012, it is doubtless that the recent push on lifelong learning has brought increasing awareness on the availability and benefits of lifelong learning among older adults. As we work towards shaping a positive lifelong learning culture, moving forward, we should garner for more recognition and acceptance by enterprises of the diverse ways of learning as a form of recognition in employment.

