

Learning in later life: Characteristics, exemplars, benefits & issues

Professor Brian Findsen
Faculty of Education
University of Waikato
bfindsen@waikato.ac.nz

Structure of presentation

1. **Characteristics & concepts** related to learning in later life
- 2.. **Exemplars** of older adult education: Malaysia; New Zealand (Indigenous Maori; Age Concern); Taiwan; Australia/NZ (Men's sheds)
3. **Benefits** of learning (in later life)
4. **Issues** concerning learning in later life

Understanding learning in later life

Questions:

How are learning and education related conceptually?

Who are older adults?

What are the purposes of later life learning (e.g. expressive and instrumental)?

What themes are significant in later life learning?

What are the respective roles of governments, the market and civil society?

What are the implications from greater diversity of older people?

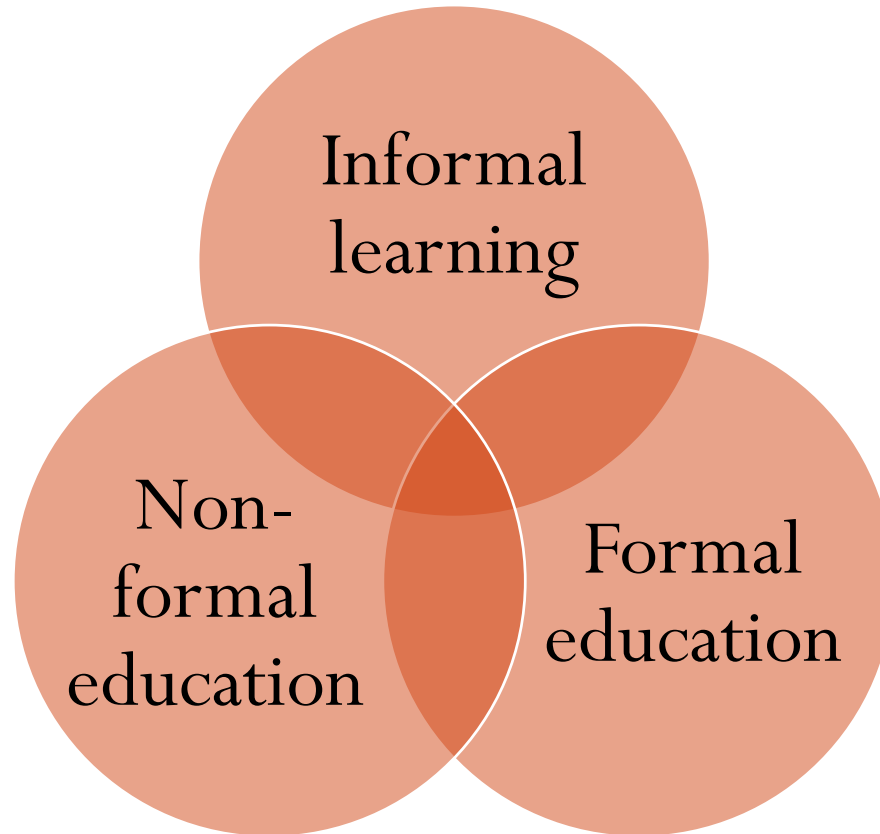
What are some powerful myths concerning older learners?

What is learning?

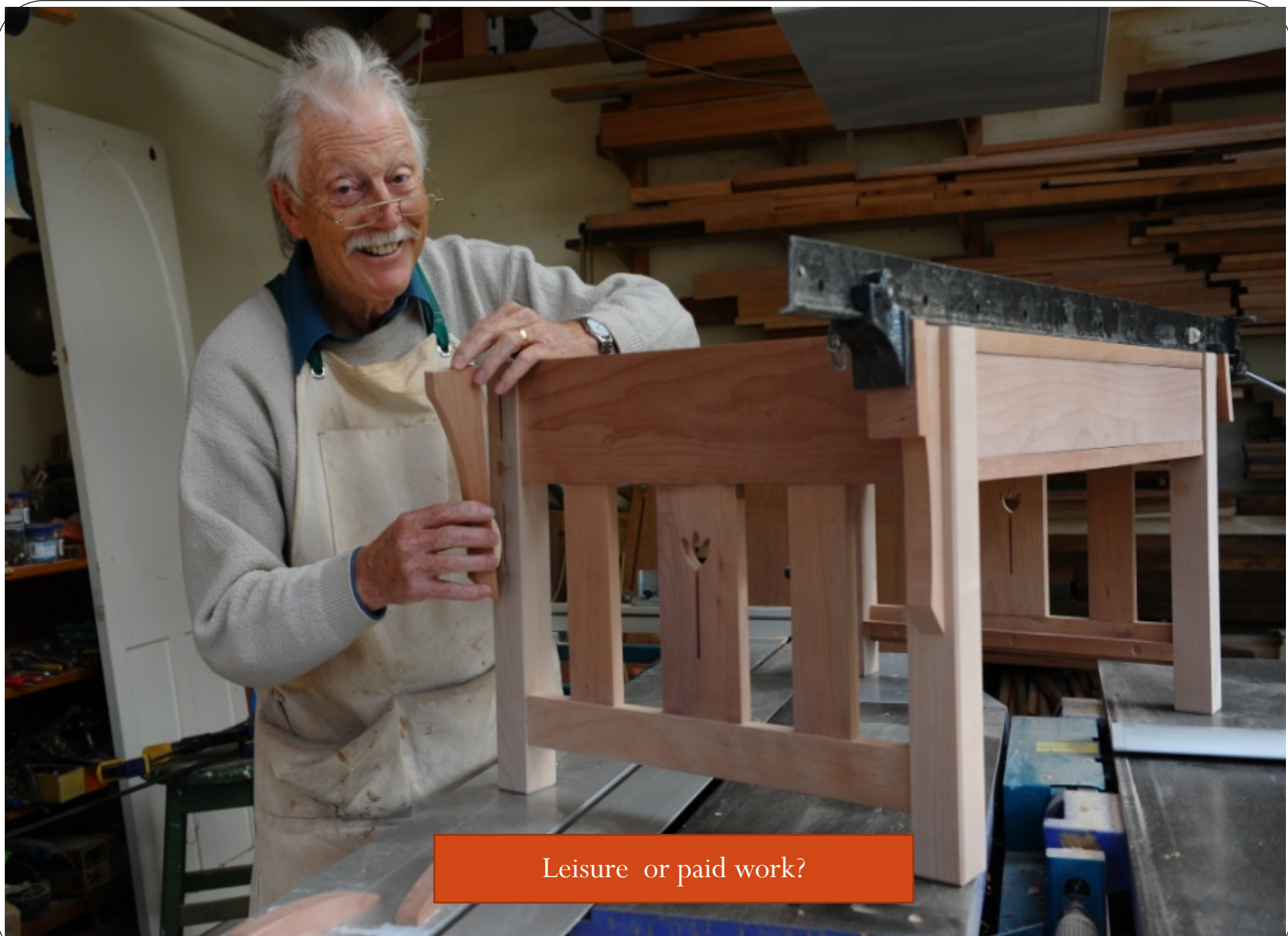
- Individualistic; all-pervasive

What is education?

- Systematic organised learning; more formal structures; policy development



Modes/Contexts of Learning



Leisure or paid work?

Concepts related to ageing & learning

- **Older adults: who are they?**

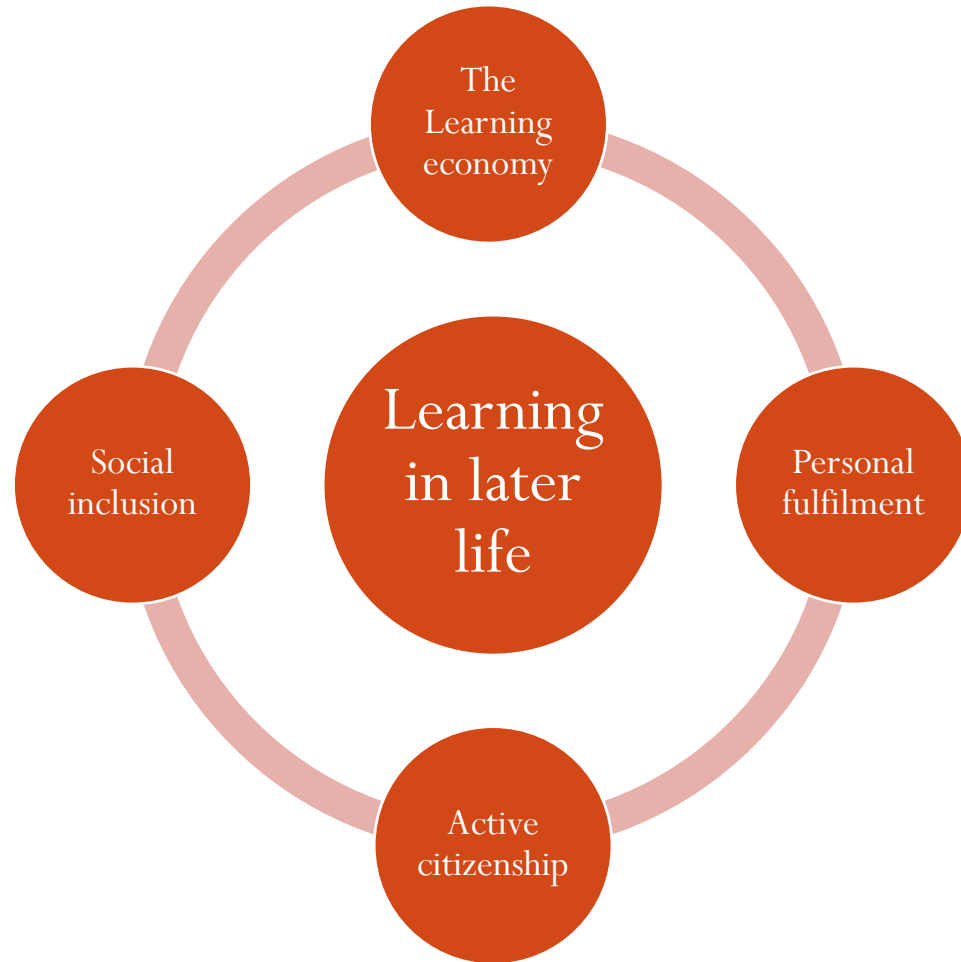
Variations within & across nations; culturally specific; definition determined by government policy?

Traditional working age: 50-64

Reality: 50+ (no upper limit)

- Laslett's notion of **the third age**: connected with post-work; romanticised?
- Learning in later life is **diverse**: ageing is physiological; socially constructed; culturally-defined; involves cognitive, emotional, social aspects
- **Myths of ageing**: homogeneity; decrepitude; dependence; consumer (vs producer)

Learning in later life themes



Learning in later life: main strands

As espoused in **international policy** documents:

1. **Enhancing the learning economy**: producing knowledgeable, skilled & adaptable older workers in a changing global labour market; many nations focus on youth-centric policies, including New Zealand
2. **Personal fulfilment**: achievement of personal growth for individuals; the reflexive person is one who is resilient & resourceful; learning for its own sake is still valued
3. **Active citizenship**: the idea of an active citizen engaged in communities; committed to a civil society; extensive volunteering; consolidation of social capital
4. **Social inclusion**: to include people irrespective of gender, social class, race/ethnicity, age; relates to widening participation in (higher) education initiatives across nations.

Reference: Findsen & Formosa, 2011.

Role of the state

Analysis
of older
adult
learning/
education

Civil
society

The
market

What is educational gerontology? (Peterson, 1976; 1980)

Education for older adults

Public education about ageing

Education for (para)
professionals

AGING AND SOCIAL CHANGE

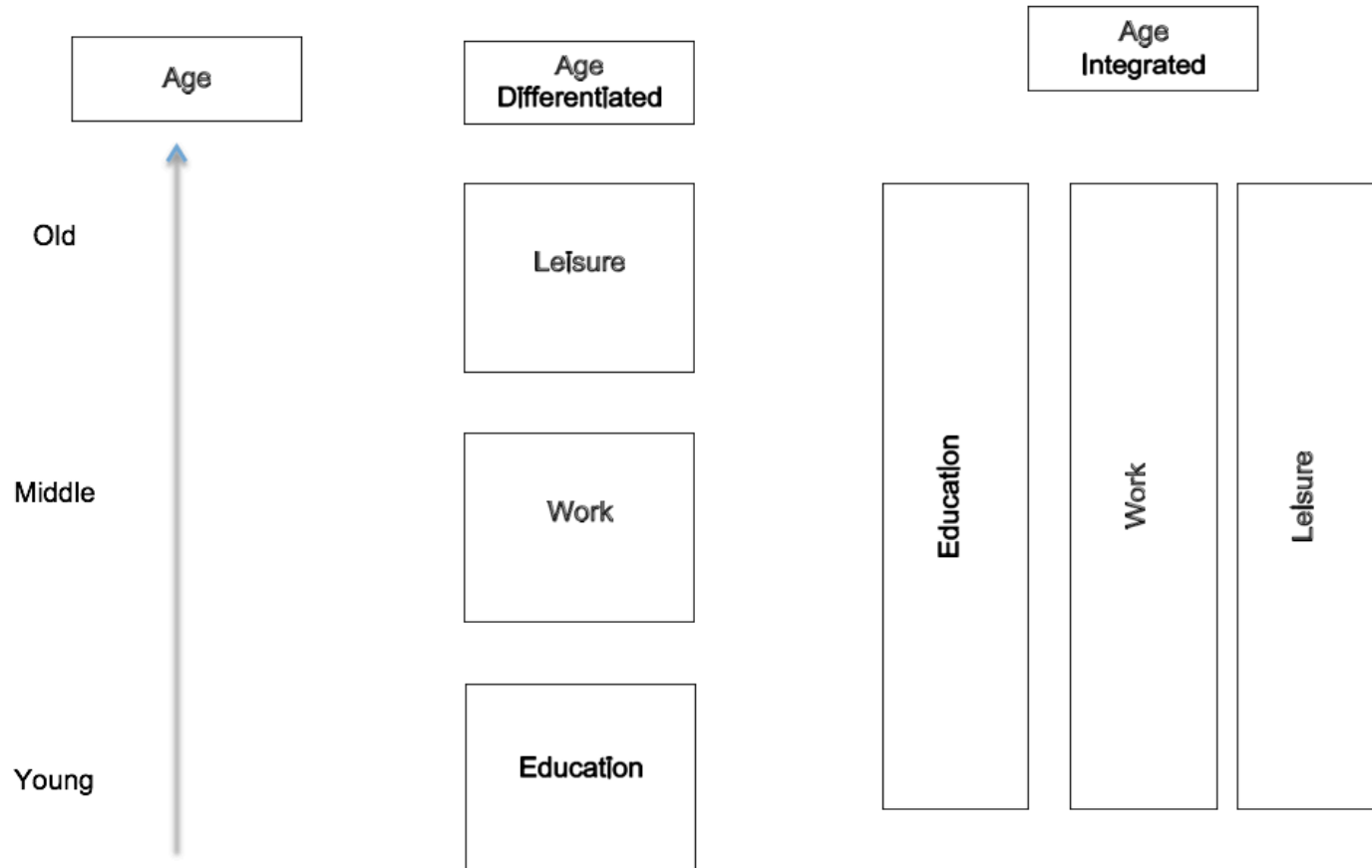


Figure 4.1: Ideal Types of Social Structures. *Source:* Riley, M., & Riley M.

Trends in later life learning

- Patterns of earlier life learning (e.g. access/participation to education) are usually repeated in later life
- Motivation is aligned to: cognitive interest; social relationships; social welfare; escape/stimulation. Less linked to professional advancement; external expectations.
- Participation needs to be analysed in accord with age cohort; gender; ethnicity; geographical location; social class; religious beliefs; (dis)ability.
- The historical/cultural dynamics of a society are very important as enhancers or inhibitors of learning opportunities
- The range of providers/agencies is increasing – some have older people as central; others as peripheral to their mission.

Trends in later life learning (cont.)

- Inter-generational learning/education is becoming more popular.
- More older learners move from “digital immigrants” to fuller competencies
- Discrimination in the workplace remains – a learning society needs people of all ages to be productive.
- Older people’s access to education in formal settings (e.g. universities) is scant
- In most countries, government policy on “ageing” and “lifelong learning” need co-ordinating.
- Data collection on lives of older people needs improvement.

Exemplars of older adult learning/education

These examples are illustrative of “good practice” in particular contexts

What is “effective learning” in one location may not be in another

The exemplars have been chosen from diverse national contexts.

MALAYSIA



Malaysian U3A movement

- Malaysia signatory to Madrid International Plan of Action for Older Persons (MIPAA)
- Past history in Malaysia of emphasis on employability & skill development (vs personal growth & active citizenship)
- Traditionally, a welfare-oriented approach taken to old(er) age & ageing
- Inaugural U3A programme established in 2008 by the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)
- Setting up of Association for Lifelong Learning of Older Persons U3A Kuala Lumpur & Selangor
- Financially supported by the Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development
- Policy connections to “active” and “productive” ageing

Characteristics of the U3A

- Open to all citizens age 55 or over
- No entrance exam
- Low membership fees (RM25) per year
- Most members are women (65%); Malay (56%)
- Broad curriculum: health & fitness; nutrition; languages; gardening; culture; music; handicrafts
- Usually use University facilities
- Institute of Gerontology (UPM) provides assistance (e.g. venues; instructors; equipment)

Source: Ibrahim Hamid, Chai ST & Siti Farra ZA, Institute of Gerontology, Universiti Putra Malaysia



NEW ZEALAND



Rauawaawa Kaumātua Trust

Hamilton, New Zealand

- Present Trust established in 1997
- Primary focus is kaumātua (Māori seniors): to enhance their quality of life
- Uses holistic approach: services in health, social, educational & financial areas. Learning is part of overall package.
- Trust works collaboratively with multiple partners
- Relationship with Centre for Continuing Education, the University of Waikato began in 2005
- Principles upheld from tikanga Māori & Te Tiriti:

Partnership: shared decision-making

Participation: Trust's commitment to work with other providers

Protection: Abiding by Māori cultural values

Kaupapa Māori principles

As identified by Graham & Linda Smith (Māori academics), the following principles are crucial in Māori-controlled programmes:

- Tino rangatiratanga (**relative autonomy**)
- Taonga tuku iho (**cultural aspirations**)
- Ako Māori (**culturally preferred pedagogy**)
- Kia piki ake i nga raruraru o te kainga (mediation of **socio-economic & home difficulties**)
- Whanau (**extended family**)

NB Kaupapa = collective vision/philosophy

These principles are evident in the Trust's programme

Programmes offered by the Trust

- Rorohiko (computer literacy)
- He oranga kai (healthy nutrition)
- Korowai (feather cloak making)
- Kaihoko putiputi (floral art)
- Waiata (songs)
- Harakeke (flax weaving)
- Mahi raranga (weaving)
- Houtu-mauea (gym)
- Te reo (Māori language)
- Mirimiri (massage)
- Taonga making (jewellery making)



Inter-generational learning (Māori context)

What's distinctive?

- A rare instance of a focus on *kaumātua* rather than *rangatahi* (youth)
- Operates in broader dynamics of Māori self-determination
- Pedagogy and curriculum reflects Māori aspirations
- Engenders leadership among older Māori
- Learning context is conducive to *iwi kaupapa*
- Holistic stance towards well-being
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBhh24yz_30
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZOGIlpHing>

Age Concern Hamilton (ACH)

- ACH part of large network of Age Concern providers nationally (n=34)
- Kaupapa of the agency is to enhance the quality of life (well-being) of elders
- Education is a subsidiary function; not readily identified as an education provider
- Funded mainly by local & national level grants – Elder abuse & neglect response; health promotion. Also fundraising; membership fees
- Main services: Visiting & shopping; elder abuse prevention; supportive service (preventing social isolation); health promotion; lifelong learning programme; information, advisory, advocacy, referral service

ACH: Education & Training

In support of all other services & facilities

Extensive relationships with other stakeholders (e.g City Council; Police; Hospital Board)

- Lifelong learning series: “Don’t wait ‘til you’re 80, matey”
- Training of volunteers
- Radio programme
- Promoting health seminars (e.g. Eat Well, Be Well)
- Wonder and Wisdom: Inter-generational programme
- Falls prevention workshops (Steady as you Go)
- Special public seminars – e.g. Housing situation for older people in Hamilton; financial capability

World Elder Abuse Awareness day



IDOP Chinese Senior Group



TAIWAN



Taiwan & older adult learning

- Rapidly aging population – in 1993, 7% at 65 +; projected 14% by 2017.
- Recent serious development of educational gerontology in Taiwan, particularly at National Chung Cheng University, Chai-Yi.
- Society has moved from agrarian past to urban/industrial present
- Policy support: *Toward the aged society* (Ministry of Education, 2006)
- First University for Older Adults (Chang Ching Shyue Yuan) established in 1992 (Kaohsiung city)
- By 2006, 265 CCSYs (mainly lecture based & leisure-oriented)

Learning Resource Centers for Active Elderly (LRCAE)

- Derived from the 2006 white paper; driven by the Ministry of Education
- Multiple education settings; combined with existing units (e.g. senior centers; non-profit organizations; schools; community development associations)
- Strong emphasis on inter-generational programmes
- Madou LRCAE programme via opera and dance
- “Turkey Grandma” – script based on real life story of older woman (a little girl helps family to breed turkeys in agricultural society)
- Script acted out by LRCAE members in schools; teaches about elders in former times (akin to street theatre)



Note. "Turkey Grandma". The story and picture adapted from Madou LRCAE website (Madou LRCAE, 2013).

Australia: Birthplace of men's sheds



Men's Shed Movement

- Initiated in Australia through work of Barry Golding, Victoria
- He helped to establish men's sheds locally & internationally
- Primary objective: to enhance learning & well-being of older men
- Sheds are a site of informal and non-formal learning for men, mainly of whom are retired, un/under-employed.
- Places where collective learning takes precedence, commonly on joint projects
- Activities reflect needs of local communities & expertise of members
- Sheds studied from viewpoint of benefits of learning to health & well-being

Men's shed in Hamilton, New Zealand

- Shed opened on 19 March, 2008 spear-headed by Dr Neil Bruce, community organiser
- Opportunity for retired men to share their lifelong skills
- Programmes have included classes for home school students (focus on basic construction skills); course for new migrants (men & women) to help develop confidence in language
- Separate groups for more specific needs at different times of the week
- New members: “Bring a positive outlook and a willingness to be part of a group of friendly people” (website)
- Issues: space; health & safety; funding; building membership

2014 conference attendees – Photo by Derrick Catley, Taupo



Hamilton men's shed, NZ



Hamilton Men's Shed Workshop



Benefits of learning: general considerations

- **Motivation** impacts on learning (e.g. employment-related; developing social relationships)
- It is difficult to identify **cause & effect relationships** between learning/education & outcomes (e.g. health)
- Starting point for individuals **on the lifecourse** is different; hence, the **effects** of learning are often different (e.g. participation in a seminar)
- Benefits may be short-term or long-lasting – **sustainability** is important in judging worth of a benefit
- **Dialectic**: education may encourage transitions (e.g. change of career); transitions may encourage further learning/education.

Benefits of learning: Multiple levels

- Benefits may be at **multiple levels** and simultaneous:

Individual: improved literacy

Group: better family communication

Organizational: better efficiency & effectiveness through organizational development (OD)

Cities: development of a knowledgeable citizenry via a learning city

Cultures: enhancement of aspirations, norms, behaviours (e.g. Maori self-determination)

Societies: a more democratic approach through a learning society

Governmental: development of informed policy (e.g. active ageing; later life learning)

Potential **benefits** in accord with learning in later life themes

- **Economic:** vocational (re)training; increased employability; job enhancement; encore careers; more older people in the workforce (by choice); worker education and/or professional development
- **Personal:** active engagement in life (“active ageing”); increased well-being; intellectual stimulation; cognitive sustainability (off-setting dementia?)
- **Active citizenship:** better informed citizens; quality social interactions; community development; collaborative social action; democratic engagement; older adults contributing to society (e.g. volunteering in voluntary organizations)
- **Social inclusion:** increased life-chances for marginalized (e.g. widening participation in higher education); social equity programmes (e.g. gender; ethnicity)

Men's shed movement: Benefits of learning

- Learning of new skills and knowledge
- Development of vocational capabilities
- Increased employability
- Enhanced confidence
- Better communication skills
- Training in varied areas (e.g. running meetings)
- Informal dialogue on common issues (e.g. health)
- Development of new friendships (social capital)
- Enhanced engagement in society

In short, both **expressive** and **instrumental** benefits –see work of Barry Golding (Australia)

Later life learning: Considerations for Governments/Societies

- Different forms/levels of **public policy** need to be carefully aligned –

Learning in later life (international; national; regional; local)

Ageing (macro to micro levels) – need to examine underlying rhetoric (e.g. “active”; “successful”; “productive”)

Links between later life learning and ageing policies need improvement

- Whose **responsibility** is later life education? The respective roles of government, local councils, adult education providers, individuals need to be debated.
- The links (dialectic) between **education and health** (well-being) in later life are highly significant

Later life learning: Considerations for Governments/societies (cont.)

- How should later life education be connected to **higher education**? (See Peterson's three priorities). In continuing education? In on-going professional development? In formal (credentialed) education?
- What kinds of learning/education occurs in the **workplace**? How do older workers ensure they have equal opportunity? What are the implications for employers?
- What is the current and future state of **inter-generational** learning/education? What are its purposes?
- What is the extent of **volunteerism** in later life? How does volunteerism contribute to older adults' well-being?
- Research *with* or *on* older adults – what are the **ethical dimensions**? Is there a need for a code of practice?

References & reading

- Boulton-Lewis, G. & Tam, M. (eds) (2012). *Active ageing, active learning: Issues and challenges*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Findsen, B. (2019). (Ed.) *Fresh perspectives on older adult education*. London: Routledge.
- Findsen, B. (2006). *Learning later*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing.
- Findsen, B. & Formosa, M. (2011). *Lifelong learning in later life: A handbook on older adult learning*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Findsen, B. & Formosa, M. (eds) (2016). *International perspectives on older adult education: Research, policies and practice*. Springer International Publishing Switzerland.
- Findsen, B. & McCullough, S. (2008). *Older adults' engagement with further and higher education in the West of Scotland: Tracking educational journeys*. Final report. Glasgow: Department of Adult & Continuing Education, University of Glasgow & the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum.
- Golding, B. (2015). *The men's shed movement: The company of men*. Champaign Illinois: Common Ground
- Golding, B., Brown, M., Foley, A., Harvey, J. & Gleeson, J. (2007). *Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Jarvis, P. (2001). *Learning in later life: An introduction for educators and carers*. London: Kogan Page.
- Peterson, D.A. (1980). Who are the educational gerontologists? *Educational Gerontology*, 5, 65-77.
- Riley, M. & Riley, M. (1994). Structural lag: past and present. In Riley, M.W., Kahn, R.L. & Foner, A. (eds.) *Age and structural lag*. New York: Wiley, 15-36.
- Withnall, A. (2010). *Improving learning in later life*. London: Routledge.

Thank you!

- Thanks to the University of Glasgow for your invitation to contribute.

- Future communication:

bfindsen@waikato.ac.nz