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Recommended Citation

Findsen, Brian Dr. (2005). "Social Institutions as Sites of Learning for Older Adults: Opportunities and Constraints," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/roundtables/13>

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Social Institutions as Sites of Learning for Older Adults: Opportunities and Constraints

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the environments of social institutions in which seniors do most of their learning - the family, the church, the workplace, the community, the media. Older adults are portrayed as active contributors where learning is usually less intentional, non-hierarchical and associated with daily living.*

In the area of older adults' learning there is increasing recognition that much of it is related to day-to-day life away from formal educational institutions (Jarvis, 2001). The reality is that many seniors engage in non-formal learning through numerous social agencies and undertake informal learning incidentally in their lives. Learning is closely aligned to older adults' coping, expressive, contributive and influence needs, as defined by pioneer educational gerontologist, McClusky (1974). In what Laslett (1989) has dubbed "the third age", the age of supposed greater freedom for exercising creativity and expressiveness, learning occurs in a social context to fulfil particular objectives of the individual and/or society.

Much of the literature in educational gerontology has unfortunately focussed on the limitations of older adulthood, emphasising physiological decline and locating older adults in a deficit model of dependence and decrepitude. While this view of older adulthood has limited validity, the untold story is that the vast majority of older adults live fairly autonomous lives where learning plays a key role in successful aging.

In this paper I focus on the environments of social institutions in which seniors (arbitrarily defined as 55 years and older) do most of their learning. From a sociological framework, social institutions are those sites in people's daily lives where certain "functions" (Blackledge & Hunt, 1985) are performed for the individual and for society. The focus is on those institutions where older adults are portrayed as active contributors to society and where learning intersects with the socialising function of the institution. To this point, few studies have examined empirically the patterns of older adults' learning and they tend to under-estimate the importance of social institutions as sources for learning, especially in the contributive and influence needs domains (Findsen, 2002). In these two arenas, seniors as volunteers in non-governmental organisations and as political advocates for social change challenge the orthodoxy that older adults are recipients of welfare and consumers of the public purse.

The family, the church, the workplace, the community and the media provide places where seniors conduct considerable informal learning (i.e. learning which is less intentional, non-hierarchical and associated with daily living). Social institutions provide people with opportunities to engage in social behaviours in each of the realms of education, work and leisure. They are sites of learning in which informal learning is ascendant and formal and non-formal learning less prominent. In each case, older adults have differential opportunities and constraints associated with their relative status and access to power (Phillipson, 1998). In this conceptual framework, I examine each of these social institutions as triggers for older adults' learning and evaluate the quality of the learning for both individuals and society (Findsen, 2005).

As a case in point, the workplace can be interpreted as a social institution which continues to exert considerable sway in the lives of older citizens. The exigencies of economic survival and the reconfiguration of the workforce have influenced patterns of paid work for seniors, not all of whom can “retire” on superannuation or governmental/employer benefits. Many are part of an “underclass” in society as a result of poor health, inferior initial education and inconsistent work opportunities in the labor market (Thomson, 1999). The distinction between “worker” and “non-worker” is no longer as explicit as in the past. Many older adults take whatever casual work they can get to supplement a family’s income. Often older adults face discrimination in the workplace and are less likely than younger workers to receive further training and professional development (Bytheway, 1995). More liberally-minded employers capitalize on the considerable past experience of older workers, using them as mentors and coaches in the workplace.

Hence, in both the paid and unpaid arenas, in workplaces and social agencies, older adults engage in meaningful activity, sustaining social relationships, contributing to their own and communities’ economies, and at times exerting influence in public affairs (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997). The potential for significant learning in these sites of social institutions is not trivial – in other areas of the family (especially through intergenerational learning), the church and the media, older adults also continue to exercise their roles as lifelong learners. Their contribution to society is frequently invisible or undervalued, often carried out in less than favourable conditions but ultimately vital for a democratic, learning society.

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