What Lifelong Learning Means to a Malaysian Senior Citizen

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand what pursuing a law degree means to a Malaysian senior citizen. Data comprise the reflections chronicled by the female participant. A linguistic analysis was applied to detect the major issues. Four themes of Learning, Health, Family and Personal affairs were identified. Findings suggest that the participant finds lifelong learning a rewarding experience and this is influenced by her self-confidence and family support. However, age had affected her overall health. This indirectly distressed her learning capacity. The findings can be used to make lifelong learning a more user-friendly one for the aging community.

Keywords: lifelong learning, senior citizen, health, challenges
Introduction

Lifelong learning is a concept that has existed in primitive times. People of early civilisations view learning as a way of life due to the necessity to live. Today, learning is viewed as a process to acquire knowledge which can be used for the betterment of one’s life. Presently, the concept of lifelong learning (LLL) has gained new outlook. It has become a fashionable term as it embarks on a new era through the reintroduction of global conferences such as the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) held in 1997 and the Dakar World Education Forum (WEF) organised in 2000.

Lifelong learning is not an end product. It is a continuum of learning but different scholars perceive the term differently. Nonetheless, it has been declared by the Faure Report (1972) as key to the new millennium. The report claims that as man struggle to adapt to the evolving needs of the labour market worldwide, LLL will be a necessary and crucial tool. Man must modify themselves to meet the shape and context of this changing world brought about by political, economical, sociocultural and technological advances. World citizens must find new skills and acquire new knowledge in order to make themselves useful. Otherwise, they may lose out to the more resourceful others.

Taking education as one aspect of LLL, the Chinese, historically, believed that one’s success in education can empower one to change one’s destiny for the better. Although still viewed as an important aspect of life, education in today’s world, is not a promise but an opportunity. Education does not guarantee prosperity or a great future but it is a passport that an individual can use to find the opportunity to make his/her future one that is not poverty-ridden. Like other countries in the world such as India, China, South Africa, Afghanistan, and so on, Malaysia also aspires for its people to become better educated. Literacy is highly rated in this
One way the country attempts to achieve this aspiration is by creating avenues for adults who had missed their chances when they were younger, to participate in LLL. Consequently, many Malaysian universities began offering higher qualifications such as certificate courses, diploma courses, bachelors programs, masters programs and doctoral programs to qualified working adults nation-wide. Community colleges, in line with the nations’ vision, offer vocational courses such as automobile, farming, small-cottage industries as well as entrepreneurship courses. This move has enabled many working adults to enrol in such courses and programmes. Although educationists strive hard to make these educational choices more inviting to working and senior adults, little literature has been written about their personal experiences which when better understood, can enable educationists to design courses with better and more attractive features that are likely to attract senior adult learners. This will make the endeavour of pursuing lifelong learning a more fruitful and enlightening one for adult learners who will ultimately contribute to active citizenship.

**Aim**

This paper addresses the issue of lifelong learning. It aims to understand what lifelong learning means to a fifty-five year old Malaysian working woman who is pursuing a law degree in a local university. This paper attempts to detect the major issues she experienced in her pursuit of lifelong learning so that the findings can be shared and the issues resolved for the aging community.
Methodology
The data sourced for this paper comprise narratives provided by the participant in her reflections which were chronicled during the course of her learning pursuit. Data were written in English and a linguistic analysis was applied. Focus was given to the words commonly used and the contents were thematically categorised. Four main themes were identified: a) Learning, b) Health, c) Family and d) Personal Affairs. The narratives were then grouped as rewarding (√) or challenging (X) and the contents discussed.

Reflections
Reflections are narratives that individuals make in their respective journals after an event has occurred. This activity of writing down one’s feelings can occur immediately, in a few hours or days after the event. Reflections are generally practised as one of life’s good habit. It is a way of bringing the day to a close as one reflects on one’s actions. One spends some time writing out the day’s happening in order to understand one’s feeling or behaviour. Reflections are also techniques used for further improvement as is practised in action research. Similar to diaries, reflections are written based on one’s experiences and perceptions of particular happenings. No two persons write in the exact same way although their feelings may be the same but reflections captured in writings are generally personal, making it authentic. However, it is subjective and such contents are less valued by scientists who want subject matters to be systematically conducted, coded and validated. Scientists expect data to be widely applicable so that they can be generalised to a certain population but the reality of life and living is that all of us are unique and different from each other so our feelings and actions can never be generalised.
Anthropologists and sociologists are well known for using reflections as a process of collecting data. Scientists like Charles Darwin in 1862 used it to take notes and make observations of his son’s language development. Linguists like Leopold (1938-1945) used it to note the language development of his daughters.

As a process of collecting data, the use of reflections as a method of collecting data, has been endorsed by other scholars (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Swindell & Watson, 2006) because reflections are generated from the meaning-making of the writer. Such input, inevitably, is dependent on the environment and so reflections can be the window for social scientists to better view and understand the lifestyle of a particular community.

The concept of Lifelong Learning in the new millennium

The Chinese has a philosophy, *Huo Dao Lao, Xue Dao Lao* which views lifelong learning as a continuous activity no matter what one’s age is. As one progresses in life, one is expected to acquire new knowledge or skill; this process of leaning is a sign of growing and moving forward. A practice of the Chinese civilisation dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Song Dynasty (960-1279) and Qing dynasty (1644-1912), lifelong learning (LLL) was a concept advocated by teachers and philosophers such as Confucius, Mengzi, and various other teachers. Today, the concept sits at the tip of the tongue of most Chinese parents while disciplining their children. Perhaps it was the extreme poverty and the widespread practice of corruption prevalent in China then that made the Chinese believed that education can help to break the poverty cycle.

An old concept revived and disseminated by the UNESCO who took it to various educational institutions around the world because of the need to educate global citizens in third world countries especially, LLL is here to stay. Literacy, as one aspect of LLL, is an important
vision of the world because it is believed that education enables nations to withstand the pressure of globalization. It is also believed that LLL needs to happen in order that global citizens can accommodate to the rapid technological changes happening worldwide. If global changes are not addressed accordingly, people all over the world may suffer as this can impact world productivity and employability (Abdul Shukor Ruslan, 2005), thus LLL is linked to the concept of active citizenship and economic development.

The pattern of lifelong learning works differently depending on age. The National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) says that between the ages of 6–24, learning normally takes place in educational institutions ranging from primary to secondary and tertiary levels. The objective of learning at this stage is to develop learners in a holistic manner physically, intellectually, socially, emotionally and mentally. Between the ages of 25–60, learning tends to fall under the informal learning context where the use of instructional media is derived from the need that is developed at the workplace or by the profession/occupation requirement. This can be due to colleagues’ influence, travelling or exposure to the mass media. Learning at this stage, is induced via the accessibility of general information provided by technology, one’s environment or even nature. Unlike young learners, adult learners learn from their experiences and problem solving instances. From these learning experiences, they learn to continuously develop their intellect, capability and integrity. The Act also says that learning for elderly learners tends to involve participation in community organizations, clubs and associations. Learning for the elderly, at this point in time, makes their lives more meaningful for themselves. This kind of learning may also provide benefits to society as a whole. Such an aspect of positive benefits experienced by elderly citizens involved in LLL has been verified by David and Kuang (2012) who looked at elderly retirees in Malaysia and Singapore.
There is no definitive meaning for lifelong learning (LLL) and some scholars (see Billet, 2010) distinguish lifelong learning from lifelong education. However, Barber (1998, p. 6) considers higher education studies as a part of lifelong learning, defining it as ‘the continuous acquisition of skills and knowledge through both formal and non-formal learning opportunities’.

Cobb (2009) defined LLL by narrowing ‘learning’ as a process in life where transformation takes place and where a change in behaviour and attitude is brought about by the experience of new knowledge and skills. Adding that learning is associated with formal classes and courses probably because most people associate paper qualifications with learning too, Cobb (ibid.) mentioned that better paper qualifications can bring about better lifestyles afforded by higher and better work remunerations. Nonetheless, Cobb (ibid.) stated that learning is not just about the culmination of an end product like a certificate, diploma or degree. He believed that learning also requires some kind of activity from the person who wants to learn. This learning is reflected in self-practice in preparation for the future or even purposeful interaction with others, hence, learning was also perceived as an unconscious effort (Cobb, ibid.)

Cecchini (2003) summarised LLL as all forms of learning activities which are undertaken by the respective individuals throughout his/her life with the aim of improving certain knowledge, skills and competences. He claimed that such intention to develop is within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective.

**Women and Lifelong learning**

Women a few centuries ago were deprived of learning, unlike their male counterparts. This is probably because the world was patriarchal as more men seemed to rule nations and served as community leaders. Today, things have changed although many women in countries such as
Afghanistan are still deprived of education. This practice indicates that education for some female members of the world community may still be a struggle and a challenge.

Studies have been conducted to understand women in lifelong learning. Bencsik and Ildiko-Marosi (2009) focused on female workers who had continued their learning and who had found employment within three years after learning. They also looked at the benefits women gained from lifelong learning. Their study looked at the kinds of training that were needed and whether or not the moves of these female workers in their jobs were appreciated by their employers. Their findings indicated that older women who had lost their jobs before were more concerned about developing their soft skills. They also found that dependability, independence and adaptiveness to the situation were important if the women wanted to retain their jobs. The study further disclosed that the employers preferred to invest in professional development for their female staff instead of focusing on motivation for their employees through trainings. This implied that the female workers were expected to make contributions to their workplace through the development they had acquired through further learning. How inspired were these women in the work they did was not an issue to their bosses.

Bedmar and Leon (2012) focused on lifelong learning of the Gypsy women in Spain. Their study found that lifelong learning of the Gypsy women was meant to provide assistance and support (socio educational or compensatory projects) and it was aimed at complementing the work of the teachers who were training the women in everything related to Gypsy culture. However, their results showed that there was still some biasness in the way the Gypsy women were viewed. This suggests that despite training and the opportunity offered to the women to learn to enable change to take place, the stereotyping of the Gypsy women could not be erased.
Dorsett, Sze, and Weale (2010) examined the effect of lifelong learning on women’s employment and wages in the United Kingdom. All data were drawn from the British Household Panel Survey. Their findings indicated that upgraded qualifications in the women’s educational status had a clear effect on their earnings. Lifelong learning for the women in stable employment appeared to provide a one-off boost for wage growth. This implies that women pursue lifelong learning for economic gains which indirectly, could also change their lives.

In their study of working adults, Deggs and Machtmes (2012) wanted to see what role LLL has on the working adults’ future and to see how they planned for their LLL activities. Three themes emerged from the interviews they had with the participants and they were: a) job-specific independent and self-directed learning plans, b) career development independent and self-directed learning plans, and c) plans for personal growth and development. The results of their study indicated that working adults were more autonomous in their learning as they used independent learning and self-directed learning strategies to “ realize and become the possible self that they had envisioned” (Deggs and Machtmes, 2012, p. 25).

**Struggles of Malaysian women**

Women and their roles in society have been studied (Fukumaru, 2000; Kim, 1995; Kim & Hurh, 1988; Marica, Borhanuddin & Abdullah, 2009). Local researchers, Marica et al (2009) looked at gender roles in Malaysian families where the women were working somewhere. Their findings indicated that Malaysian working women thought that their lives were more lopsided than the men’s. This perception was derived from several observations: women carried a full-time job and they helped to bring in a second income for the family; women had more household responsibilities such as preparing meals, doing laundry, caring for the children and their
education, women also had to balance the family’s finances and budgeting; they had to do shopping and marketing for home groceries; they were generally the ones to take care of garbage as well as various duties including taking care of their elderly relatives (parents, in-laws). More than half of the respondents claimed that all these responsibilities have reduced their personal time (me-time) for themselves.

Other aspects of Malaysian women and their struggles were addressed by Masami Mustaza (The New Straits Times, July 2011). She reported that Malaysian women were the 16th most stressed women in the fast-lane adding that Malaysian women juggled their lives with hardship. Although these women struggled to move up their career ladder like men do, their moves were often restrained by their family roles as a mother, wife, and daughter. These women also claimed that their husbands, on the other hand, maintained only one role, which was as the bread winner.

The multitasking effects of Malaysian women were likewise highlighted (see Wong Bee Lee in Masami Mustaza, July 2011). As working women, they were also performing tasks which wives, mothers and daughters do. This was interpreted as carrying longer working hours than their European and Australian counterparts (Wong Bee Lee in Masami Mustaza, July 2011). Malaysian working women apparently apply for leave not to go on vacations, but to care for their families and aged parents. They try to balance their career with their home/family responsibilities. All these multitasking roles added to their stress. However, this report cited in Masami Mustaza (July, 2011) did not mention if the women were of a senior age and if they were simultaneously pursuing LLL.
Lifelong learning and senior citizens

Different age group learners carry different characteristics and educationists are able to distinguish young learners from adult learners (Cercone, 2008; Kuhne, 2000). Ten characteristics were identified by Kuhne (2000) as follows:

1. Adults take more control over their learning
2. Adults draw upon their personal experiences for learning
3. Adults are more motivated in learning situations
4. Adults are more practical
5. Adults do not take on learner roles seriously
6. Adults fit their learning into their margins – by setting priorities
7. Adults may feel inadequate in their learning
8. Adults are more resistant to change
9. Adults are more diverse so they use their experiences in their applications of learning
10. Adults have to compensate learning with aging

Lamb and Brady (2005) attempted to understand the experiences of older learners in one lifelong learning institute and its impact on their sense of wellbeing. Their study aimed to look at the various factors that could have prompted the elders into participating in LLL. Their study was able to verify the assumption that older learners who continued long-term participation in an older adult education program did so because they experienced significant rewards that were consistent with their perceived needs. The researchers concluded that older adult participation in LLL was totally voluntary and was seldom motivated by career or pecuniary interests. This implied that older learners do it for individual and personal gains.
A similar finding (see Fisher, 1979) was reported in another study looking at elders in lifelong learning. Fisher’s (1979) study found that elder participants involved in lifelong learning were mainly white females, and they had income and educational attainment that is higher than the non-participants. The same finding was confirmed by others (Fugate & Lamdin, 1997; Manheimer & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995; Martin, 2003).

Looking at elderly learners and focussing especially on women learners, Hiemstra (1993) concluded that women learners were not the same as men. They were also different from their younger counterparts unlike as suggested by other researchers (see Brockett, 1982; Erstrin, 1985; Hiemstra, 1975 and Hiemstra 1982) in earlier studies. Hiemstra (1993) also said that women 55 years and above tended to have the following traits:

- They engage in more learning activities, are more self-directed, and appear to have greater life satisfaction.
- They are more likely to study personal or self-fulfillment type topics.
- They are more likely to express a preference for future learning activities that are expressive (delayed gratification) rather than instrumental (immediate gratification) in nature.
- Situational (arising from one's situation in life) and dispositional (self-perceptions) barriers to learning are more likely to be expressed than are institutional ones (institutional practices and procedures).
- They are more likely to use reading and travel as educational resources.
- They seem more reflective in their thinking.
- They seem less critical (both in the sense of being discerning or being judgmental) in their thinking.
They seem able to pull from what Hiemstra (1993) calls their "inner resources" to overcome obstacles to learning.

They generally appear to have a greater margin of power over load in overcoming obstacles until permanent health decline sets in.

They appear less self-directed but this apparently can be overcome with appropriate training and experience.

In brief, Hiemstra (1993) was suggesting that these adult learners cannot be seen as homogenous learners. He proposed that they be viewed as individual learners because each possesses a multi-dimensional characteristic. Suggesting that elderly learners are different in their needs and abilities, Hiemstra's (1993) proposition helps to validate the significance of this paper.

**Data analysis**

This section provides the input extracted from the senior female citizen’s reflections. The four main issues were categorised according to importance within table 1 and the narrations are then placed respectively under each heading. Those that were considered to be positive and deemed as rewarding was marked (✓) while those which were considered as negative and challenging were marked as (X).

**Table 1: Issues in Lifelong Learning**

Overall, data indicate that the major issue experienced by the participant relates to Health although in the Learning category, her challenges were examination preparation, assignments and making schedules to meet lecturers and classmates for discussion. In the sphere involving family and personal affairs, the senior learner had no issues.
Learning

Under this heading, data seem to suggest that the senior citizen’s experience of LLL was one that included both positive and negative comments. On a positive note, the senior learner had no issue with class attendance. This indicates a positive attitude towards participating as a learner. Further, the senior learner also had no issue in purchasing references as she was empowered by her own financial ability as a working woman. However, she had negative reflections, thus challenges, in doing assignments, meeting deadlines and her worst phobia was examinations which was very much affected by her waning capacity to remember ‘cases’ and this had been caused by her advancing age. Additionally, the senior learner had an aversion for making schedules to meet lecturers and classmates for discussions. It was described as a waste of time, possibly because of her impatience or her own lack of understanding of the subject discussed. It could also be due to her personal learning style. It also appeared as if she had some issues with her ego when she described herself as ‘being seen as a greenhorn’ by her lecturers. This suggests that the senior citizen perceived her lecturers negatively. Perhaps, as a senior learner, she felt that she could contribute with her work experiences which could enrich the learning process but her lecturer had not noticed this as an advantage.

Health

This column had the most negative or challenging comments because she had to experience many setbacks. Data imply that the senior learner was aware of her advancing age and her full time job. From the data, it seemed obvious that the senior citizen was going through many internal and physical changes. These had affected her memory, vision, and physical movements.
Learning became a challenge because her movements were affected by the pains she was experiencing. As she struggled to complete assignments and prepare for examinations, her deteriorating vision and memory had also impacted her learning. Indirectly, these negative impacts of her health made learning seemed more challenging. It was further noted that transport to and fro her learning environment was not an issue but her waning physical nimbleness was affecting her movement to and from the location. She also noted how her weight became an issue as she was constantly working on the computer, possibly completing her assignments.

Family

Family commitment, family support and family bonding were no issues to this senior learner. She had all the support of her husband and children, and this strengthened her focus on LLL which also made the process a rewarding one. It was also her self-confidence and ability to put focus on her work that prevented her from having issues in this aspect.

Personal Affairs

Likewise, money was not a problem for this senior learner. She had a job which supported her need. Moreover, she made no complaint with sleep, rest and privacy. In fact, as a senior citizen she felt empowered to do as she pleased because she had the confidence, her family support especially her husband and all these made her life easier. In another sense, the fact that she had grown-up children who were independent and supported her dream made her life a lot easier. In this regard, she was happy.
Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to understand what lifelong learning means to a female senior citizen who was pursuing a law degree in a public university. The contents indicate that as a whole lifelong learning (LLL) was not an issue, in fact a rewarding experience, for the senior citizen because she could handle many of the matters which LLL involved. This comprises attendance, assignments, examinations, discussion or study groups and transportation to attend classes. This indicates her commitment to LLL.

The findings of this paper also confirm what most studies looking at older learners say, that older learners are self-directed and they do it for their personal gains and needs. However, as this paper has highlighted, the aging factor had affected her vision, memory and it also to some extent, hindered her physical movements as pain became inevitable. Her condition was further compounded by the occasional headaches and pains she gets during the course of reading and working on the computer. From her narratives, it was quite obvious that age had affected her learning capacity in a negative way.

In looking at her financial means of purchasing references for learning which can be expensive burden for many undergraduates, the senior citizen also had no issue. However, she had a phobia for examinations because she could not remember what she had learnt and this diminishing capacity of elderly learners have been highlighted by Hiemstra (1993). The senior citizen faced many physical hindrances as she suffered aches and pains in her limbs and this inevitably affected her management with her assignments and her movements with the physical learning environment involving high level buildings and steps. This implies that the location of
her learning environment may not have been as elderly-friendly as it should be for aging citizens. Matters such as high steps, narrow corridors, hard seats or harsh lighting in classrooms were all part of her issues with pain and movement.

What was interesting to note was that the senior citizen did not have any family issues. It was clear that she was very much in control of her life. She had the support of her family comprising her husband and children who all supported her in her pursuit. This made it very convenient for her to pursue her LLL. Where others may have issues with ‘me-time’, the senior citizen was completely happy because she was able to balance her own time. Much of these findings seem to coincide with what Hiemstra (1993) say of adult learners past 55 years of age.

Overall, this paper has highlighted some of the issues a 55 year old woman experienced in pursuing lifelong learning. Although one may say that the contents are rather subjective and simplistic as it was derived from one individual’s perspective, it is a fact that these are real experiences (see Hiemstra, 1993; Kuhne, 2000 and Cercone, 2008). The experiences provided by this senior citizen will be of benefit to others too. Learners are not homogenous, each has a different dimension in life but the experiences of this senior citizen seem to be one that could be experienced by other global citizens as it involved age.

For future research, it would be a good idea to do a comparison via reflections or interviews of other senior citizens. The findings of this paper can be compared with the input of another senior learner from another cultural background to see if there are similarities in issues brought up. Such a pursuit may open up the leeway for social scientists to consider with depth how senior and elderly learners cope with their experiences in LLL. These issues if common, can be globally addressed within the aging community to show the younger generation that learning never stops.
In conclusion, it can be said that LLL can be a fulfilling experience for anyone because it not only expands one’s viewpoints in life, it also provides new knowledge which can be used to improve one’s interaction with others. Also, if one can discount the financial expenses faced, it can be said that the mere act of pursuing LLL can be an experience of achievement and enjoyment, particularly when the experience is reflected through the benefit one gains whether in monetary terms or not. Nonetheless, the reality of life is that LLL as a pursuit can be difficult as it requires determination and discipline. Young (July, 2007) provides 15 pointers to help propel people towards lifelong learning and they are:

1) always have a book, 2) keep a “To-Learn” list, 3) mingle with more intellectual people, 4) seek guided thinking, 5) put learning into practice, 6) teach others, 7) clean you own input from time to time to be updated, 8 ) learn in groups, 9) unlearn assumptions, 10) find jobs that encourage learning, 11) start a project, 12) follow your intuition, 13) put the first fifteen minutes of the day into good use for learning, 14) enjoy the rewards and 15) make learning a priority.
References


