

Practice of Adult Education – Older Adults, Tourism, and Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present a program of learning for older adults in a national park. Because of the growing trend of tourism among retirees this learning during leisure is gaining prominence. The paper brings together the concepts of aging, self-directed learning, and tourism and leisure. In addition this paper presents a democratic method for planning an event as well as a special emphasis on senior learners.

## Adult Education Practice – Older Adults, Tourism, and Learning

### Yellowstone National Park: The Oldest and Best - Land of Change

After several explorers wandered into a pristine and unique area in the Rocky Mountains, they suggested that the government attempt to preserve this land.

Yellowstone National Park (YNP) was created in 1872, a large area set aside for the enjoyment of the people. An original American idea, this concept of a national park was somewhat slow to gain acceptance, yet eventually spread across the country and the globe. Yellowstone is famous for its thermal features and concentration of wildlife. This oldest, yet best National Park contains 10,000 thermal features, 40,000 elk, also a substantial presence of coyote, bison, moose, bear, and recently re-introduced wolf, as well as a variety of lakes, rivers, and waterfalls (Haines, 1977). This wilderness is also a land in constant change and adaptation, similarly we can make parallels to aging – that old is good, and to survive we have to change (Rubenstein, 1987).

The purpose of this one-week seminar is to promote an atmosphere of learning among older adults. Programs for adults of retirement age are increasing across the globe (University Continuing Education Associates, 1998), this is an attempt to address these programs from the perspective of adult education. This institute offers more than relaxation in YNP; this is an experience to improve the lives of the participants and society (Houle, 1961). Similar to Houle's (1984) inclusion of Florence as center of learning in Europe, Yellowstone has the potential to emulate this atmosphere with its museums, libraries, visitor centers, and naturalist programs. Learning potentially occurs in the context of a wilderness, where modernization is held at bay; one can relax and focus on personal issues (Delle Fave & Massimini, 1988; Leopold, 1970; Mannell, 1993;

Tinsley & Tinsley, 2000). Perhaps this institute can model education proposed by Danish educator and religious leader, N. F. S. Grundtvig. Similarly, this American folk school will utilize self-directed learning, experiential learning, and social discourse (Manniche, 1952, 1969).

### *Program*

Research indicates that SDL can increase one's life satisfaction (Brockett, 1987; Sears, 1989). This mixture of wilderness, leisure, and education has the potential for a rewarding program (Leopold, 1970), in the words of Goodale and Godbey (1988), "Leisure is the gradual process of gaining freedom and finding meaning through self-understanding and improvement. It is the processes of moving from being, essentially, directed by others, to becoming self-directed." (p. 254).

### *Program Planning.*

There are a variety of components that comprise the dynamics of a program, especially that of planning. In order to provide an effective seminar the practitioner will incorporate the planning perspective that is based on an atmosphere of flexibility, interaction, and growth (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Forester, 1989). The following have been invited to the planning table for input. Former participants (through mailed evaluation), future participants (through their suggestions by mail), the facilitators (through e-mail and a conference call), the person in charge, a ranger from the National Park Service, the chairman of the Yellowstone Institute, a school student that has participated in the past, and one of the support staff at the Institute will be invited to make suggestions.

The participants will be included in the beginning stages of the institute through two letters of correspondence. The following letter will be sent to each participant two months before the week in Yellowstone.

Dear People: We are excited about your decision to return to Yellowstone National Park and to enroll at the Yellowstone Institute. The week is titled “Yellowstone: The Oldest and Best, A place of change.” We admit that we don’t know all there is to know about Yellowstone, and need your help! Based on previous experience and other resources (such as the local library) would you write a two-page summary of what you have learned about Yellowstone? Would you also include some project, or interest you may have in the daily operation of the ecosystem of the park? We will ask you to send this to us with the next letter. For assistance you can reach us by email: [lamarrun@rivervalley.com](mailto:lamarrun@rivervalley.com) or you can call 1-INSTITUTE.

The staff of Yellowstone Institute

One month before participants arrive, we will ask for their input into the week, we recognize they have skill and experience that are important to include in this planning (Knowles, 1970, 1985).

Name:

What do you hope to get out of this week?

Can you make some suggestions for the week?

What did you learn from your review of Yellowstone and written summary?

Do you have any special needs to be taken into consideration? (Diet, transportation, access, etc.)

Please enclose your two-page summary of what is important to you about Yellowstone. Each participant that so desires, will be involved in a volunteer position in the Yellowstone Ecosystem, would you indicate a possible suggestion reflecting your interest in the Park. For example, several current needs are: helping to count the newborn buffalo and elk, helping with a traffic solution in Old Faithful area, timing of thermal features in Norris Basin, trail repair near Electric Peak.

The Staff of Yellowstone Institute

*Curricula.*

Workshop: Yellowstone: The Oldest, The Best – Land of Change

Facilitators: Donny Roberson (leader); Small Group Leaders: Brad Courtenay, Sharan Merriam, Bernie Moore, John Schell, and Tom Valentine. (The 30 guests will be divided among the facilitators for small groups over lunch and dinner).

**Monday:**

10 – 12- Orientation and review of week with facilitators.

12 pm – Arrive, introductions, lunch.

1pm - Settle in rooms and fill out learning contracts with small group.

2 – 4pm – Orientation around the park, at each major spot we will cover the schedule and answer questions with stops in Mammoth Hot Spring, Old Faithful, Lake, and Canyon.

During orientation participants will find out service area, facilitators and small group, as well as the school group for mentoring.

4 – 6 pm - Seminars on aging at Mammoth Hot Springs. Gerontology faculty from Montana State University will lead discussions. The topics will be the following:

1). Using the Internet – The Way to Your Grandkids Heart and Mind, 2). Packing for the Last Trip – New Ideas on Death and Dying, 3). Don't Travel Alone - Living with Loneliness and Depression, 4). Simple Ways to Renew Your Body - Nutrition and its Benefits, 5). Blood, Sweat, and Tears - Exercise and Stretching, and 6). Backyard Vacations - How to Enrich Leisure Time. These topics are based on needs and current interest in older adults as listed in "Age Wave Report" (Dychtwald, 1999). Each discussion will last 45 minutes and then repeated.

6 – 8 pm - Dinner with small group.

8 – 9:30 pm - Campfire and stories.

11pm – 6 am - Lights out/quiet.

**Tuesday and Thursday schedule:**

7 am - Morning walk followed by stretching.

8 – 9 am - Breakfast alone with journal.

9 am – 12pm - Service to YNP followed by personal learning project in the park.

12 – 1pm - Lunch with group and nutrition expert.

2 – 4 pm - Personal learning contract on aging.

4 – 6 pm - Walk with a child.

6 – 8 pm – Dinner followed by campfire and personal stories. (Evaluate the schedule, what do you like, what would you change?).

**Wednesday:** Day of Leisure. Aging seminars from Monday will be repeated at 6 – 8 pm, followed by local specialty - Montana Huckleberry Dessert. For anyone interested, special walking tour of the Stars of Yellowstone will be conducted from 9 – 10 pm, dress warm.

**Thursday:** same as Tuesday, except dinner will be an “awards banquet”, with each participant sharing what they have learned this week. This will be open to visitors in the area.

**Friday:**

7 am - Morning walk with stretching.

8 – 9 am - Breakfast alone with journal.

10 – 11am - Closure for the week. Each person will share two positive and two negative experiences about the week.

12 pm - Bus departs for airport in Bozeman, Montana. Sack lunch will be on the bus.

*Learning Contract.*

Learner: Course: Instructor: What are you going to learn? How are you going to learn it? Target date for completion. How are you going to know that you learned it? How will others know that you have learned it? Self-Directed Learning Web Cite - retrieved October, 2001 <http://home.twcny.rr.com/Hiemstra/contractl.html>

*Journal.*

First Day: Write a brief history of your life, please turn in if you would like. You can create this however you wish; we recommend three topics, 1). Write out each year, 2). Where you lived and what you did, and 3). What was significant for you?

Second day: Referring to previous day, write out 1). Highpoints of your life, 2). Low points of your life, and 3). Plans for the next 10 years.

Third day: 1).How do I feel about death? 2). How do I think I will die? 3). Is there anything positive I can do about this? 4). Write out a remembrance/funeral service. How do I want to be remembered, and 5). Is there something I need to change about my life?

Fourth Day: Write out what you have learned this week, can you envision any changes you will make as a result of this week?

*Checklist for Facilitators.*

1). Does each participant have a learning contract with YNP? 2). Does each participant have a personal learning contract on aging? 3). Have I met with each participant to get to know them? 4). Do I reflect the insight and principles of SDL and andragogy? 5). Does each participant understand the schedule? 6). Am I enjoying the week, what am I learning, how am I growing?

*Evaluation.*

During the week, an official written evaluation will occur Tuesday night, in order to gain specific input about the week and to make any necessary changes.

Within one week of the institute, the following evaluation will be mailed to each participant. What did you learn during your time in YNP? How are you different because of this time? How would you change the schedule? What have you done in your community as a result of this?

Second evaluation is six months later and will be mailed to each participant. What stands out to you from the week in YNP? Do you think you are different because of this week? If you were returning, as an alumni, what changes would you suggest?

*Self-Directed Learning Theory and Application*

The preceding curricula are based on the concept and theory of self-directed learning (SDL). SDL is an evolving term used when an individual has taken control of their learning. This may involve the following: 1). Learning as a way of life, not just in the classroom (Lindeman, 1961), 2). Utilizing the internal motivation of each learner,

such as goal, activity, or learning oriented (Houle, 1961), 3). Highly deliberate efforts to learn (Tough, 1971), 4). A strong sense of self (Knowles, 1985), 5). Promotion of critical reflection, (Brookfield, 1985), and 6). The potential to influence one's world (Candy, 1991). SDL is intentional learning with the individual in control; this may include non-intended learning such as travel, situations in daily life, and even accidents. Retrieved from website, October, 2001, <http://www.uni-bamberg.de/ppp/andragogik/andragogy/>

Knowles' (1970, 1985, 1998) pivotal work on adult education, called andragogy, is also labeled the art and science of helping adults learn. Knowles basis this perspective for adults on the concept of SDL. The institution and especially the facilitators will model the five perspectives of andragogy. First, the learner is self-directed. This is evident by the personal choice of the adults to attend the seminar, as well as the learning contracts. Second, there is a realization that the participant has arrived as an expert in many areas. We will utilize their experience in group discussion, encouraging participants to share their advice and opinion, and by their input into the program. Third, adults are ready to learn, this is often based on some change in their life (Lamdin, 1997). Because this program is geared around older adults who want to explore topics of late life adjustment, it will be assumed they are ready to learn in this area. Fourth, these adults are not participating for extra knowledge; this week is centered in their life experience. They are older and want to learn about late life adjustment. Fifth, we can assume these adults are motivated to learn. This also gives participants the freedom to choose their own schedule, if they choose a completely different activity we will encourage their freedom of choice and attend to the issues they are motivated to learn (Rogers, 1969, 1994).

Knowles (1970, 1985) expresses the importance of several elements in any program that is engendering adult education, especially that of SDL. The timeless flexibility of Knowles' ideas is evident in the newer trends such as geragogy (John, 1988), students of the third age (Fischer, Blazey, & Lipman, 1992), self-university (Hayes, 1989), and gerotranscendence (Erikson, 1997).

These seven components of andragogy are setting the right climate, involving learners in mutual planning, having learners diagnose their own needs (felt and ascribed), formulating learning objectives, and in evaluating the program. These elements can be divided into two areas: the environment of the program and the personal learning contract (Knowles, 1970, 1985). The environment is comprised of the physical aspects of the institute as well as psychological environment. Chairs, beds, food, lighting, sound, decor, temperature, etc. should all be considered as integral in setting the physical climate. Perhaps, more important is the psychological environment. An atmosphere of mutual respect, collaborative effort, trust, supportiveness, openness and authenticity, and a climate of pleasure will be encouraged. The personal learning contract contains two areas, one in service to YNP, and the other for personal learning about a topic on aging. This will be an opportunity for SDL concerning an area of personal interest.

#### *Rationale - Adult Development*

The rationale for this curricula, in addition to the concepts of SDL, is also based on the theories of adult development especially concepts of late life adjustment (Feldman, 2000). According to adult development theory, older adults have specific needs. These are the following, 1). To come to terms with the physical changes in one's body, and the reality of eventual death (Erikson, 1950; Fisher, 1993; Havighurst, 1972; Peck, 1956), 2).

To leave something behind for the next generation, or generativity (Erikson, 1950, 1986), 3). To sense a general well being about one's life, or ego integrity (Erikson, 1950, 1986), and 4). To learn how to adapt to the variety of changes in aging (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Iso-Ahola, Jackson, & Dunn, 1994; Kleiber, 1999; McGuire, 1985).

The philosophy of this program is an integrative perspective, believing that there are many issues that come together to result in a positive learning experience (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). An integrative perspective will incorporate all aspects of one's life – physical, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual. For example, developing one's physical health is important topic for older adults, especially that of physical exercise and nutrition (Elaine Cress, personal communication, March 30, 1999; Gary & Vellas, 1996; Guigoz, Vellas, & Garry, 1996). We will pool their wisdom, and bring in a nutrition expert during two of the lunches. Every morning after a brisk walk in the Lamar Valley, there will be stretching for twenty minutes, an exercise physiologist will lead this time. The first morning led by an instructor, then participants will organize the walks.

A bookstore in the learning center will be stocked with a variety of resources on aging, especially dealing with important topics of late life development. These books will cover some of the difficult topics of aging and coincide with the lectures. Ageism is not only an external issue, this subtle form of discrimination can be internal by the denial of our own age and death. This literature will be an attempt to help participants negotiate some of the uncomfortable and negative aspects of aging, such as death, elder abuse, finances, loneliness, and depression. It is hoped that the use of these resources will encourage an atmosphere of praxis, an interaction of reflection and action, not just in

journaling, but in one's personal learning project, as well as the interaction with other participants (Brookfield, 1985; Grabinski, 1998; Mezirow, 1991).

Generativity (Erikson, 1950) will be encouraged by having the participants to leave a legacy in Yellowstone. Each person or couple can adopt a specified service area from the National Park Service. This activity will be determined before, as a result of reading, previous experience in the park, and their learning report and will be temporarily set up with the NPS. In addition, generativity (Kleiber & Ray, 1993) will be further augmented by participation with schoolchildren from the local school in Gardner, Montana. These schoolchildren, whose parents have approved this activity, will be mentored by the participants and accompany them on two afternoon hikes.

Ego integrity (Erikson, 1950) will be encouraged by time alone and journaling. Each participant will be asked to write his or her life history in broad categories, these will be collected and a consensual adult development theory will be discussed. This will be a personal time of reflection on the various aspects of one's life. Nightly campfires and "coffee in the rocking chairs" will be a special time for oral history. Each night the participants will be encouraged to tell one story from their life, with the stipulation that the story is true, it involves them, and will last five minutes. The other participants will listen and have two minutes for questions. Kleiber (1999) discusses the power of reminiscing and of retelling life history as powerful agency for building one's self esteem.

Mental stimulation will occur by specific learning about a topic they have identified; participants will decide their own learning project in two areas. One area will involve the concept of aging, the other will tie into their service project with the

Yellowstone ecosystem. The last night of the week, they will have the opportunity to present their findings in the visitor center at Mammoth Hot Springs. Each of the findings will be based around the theme of the week, YNP – Oldest and Best, Land of Change. The participants will be encouraged to present this in their community when they return, at a library, church, or civic organization.

Facilitators will be looking for teachable moments (Havighurst, 1972), especially as the participants encounter unforeseen difficulties or involuntary disengagement (Kleiber, 1999). We can assume that SDL is occurring, because this is the natural way for adults to learn (Knowles, 1985). SDL will be encouraged because it is positively related to life satisfaction (Brockett, 1985), it empowers the learner (Lamdin, 1997), yet allows for the differences of each older person (Knowles, 1985). The facilitators will avoid stereotypes of older adults and recognize that each participant is unique. Practitioners will meet briefly each morning to discuss the week and any unique situation; in addition, facilitators are encouraged to be fully integrated with the schedule and to be personally open for learning (Schon, 1986).

It is important to consider the uniqueness of older adults. Facilitators should be familiar with actual topics of gerontology, rather than stereotypes or myths about aging. One of the myths is that intelligence decreases with age. Research indicates that fluid intelligence may decrease, but crystallized intelligence stays the same, and may even increase (Quadagno, 1999; Smith & Earles, 1996). However, when coupled with motivation of the learner, overall learning may increase for the healthy older adult (Barber & Kozoll, 1994). In addition, facilitators should be aware that older adults are comfortable asking questions as well as speaking out in class (Beatty & Wolf, 1996).

Older adults often have insight into the subtle issues of a topic, they may challenge and even correct the presenter. Presenters should be prepared for insightful questions realizing many older adults have become dialectical in their thinking (Kleiber, 1999). This is exciting student oriented centered education that should be encouraged.

Because of years of experience, older adults have confidence in a variety of areas. For example, many of them know about their field of work, parenting, relationships, government, or various hobbies. However, living in a society that prizes youth, older adults are often the victims of a gradual marginalization. This ageism may put some adults for the first time in the throes of rejection. This may be confounded by the surprise at the degenerative changes in one's body. Self image of older adults is often is repair, because of changes in physical body and fear of competition. In addition, many older adults have encountered a great deal of loss, and many are still struggling in the throes of this emotional disability (Wilhite, Sheldon, Jekubovich-Fenton, 1994). This may result in the older adult appearing cautious or a lack of interest, yet many of these factors can contribute to low self-esteem or a diminished confidence (Fisher, 1993; Kegan, 1994; Kleiber, 1999; Snider & Ceridwyn, 1986). The learning contract, oral history, exercise, and mentoring are specific activities to foster self-esteem.

Another interesting issue of older adults is that of friendships. Even though older adults are overtly interested in their children and grandchildren, many have grandchildren who are also adults. The ensuing problems of modernization especially that of separation in society (De Grazia, 1962) coupled with the continual loss of significant people, there is a need for older adults to establish friendships. One of the benefits of this week will be its social implications (Adams, 1993).

Concerning the physical dimension, many adults over 65 years of age will have decreased vision and hearing. Larger print, brighter lighting, decreasing background noise, speaking directly, and repeating can help. Other suggestions include limiting meetings to 45 minutes with extended breaks (Barber & Kozoll, 1994). McDaniel (1984) recommends the older participant to take notes, not only does this increase learning, but also is an effective skill for remembering.

#### *Specific Activities to empower older adults*

The essential element of empowerment involves enabling another person. Similar to Roger's (1969) necessary and sufficient conditions for change, when someone feels heard, believed in, and accepted, this contributes to the enabling dynamic of personal empowerment. This program is designed to empower the older adult through positive relationships with others and by allowing them control over their schedule. All activities are optional and one day is completely free for their own choice. However, similar to a skillful instructor correcting a pupil, experts can offer empowering suggestions for the older adult (Brookfield, 1985). For example, someone may not feel like walking and stretching for one hour in the morning, yet, research has shown the positive impact of walking, exercise, nutrition, and stretching especially for older adults (Elaine Cress, personal communication, March 30, 1999; Haskell, 1994, 1995). Eventually, one will feel empowered as strength and endurance increases.

In this rapidly changing world, there is a need to continue to learn or one can easily fall behind. However, learning can go beyond daily projects of arts and crafts to personal change, social justice, as well as challenging the status quo for a better world (Candy, 1991). Rather than waiting for traditional educational models to meet personal

needs, this kinetic learning will enable older adults to meet challenges through personally designed learning projects (Cusak, 1995; Field, 2000; Foley, 2001; Hiemstra, 1998; Lamdin, 1997; Mason, 1974; Withnall, 2000). Learning about difficult topics of aging is also empowering. Although someone may not want to think about his or her demise, yet learning about this difficult topic can move the older adult from despair to wisdom (Erikson, 1997). During the week, each participant will be asked to design a personal learning contract based on personal needs of aging, and the difficult topics of aging.

Fostering creativity can also encourage empowerment. Creativity can be stimulated by positive attitude, having fun games or brainteasers, exercise, and by encouraging risk taking (Beatty & Wolf, 1994; Romaniuk, 1986). Creativity will be enhanced by an atmosphere of positive attitude, nightly brain-teaser games about YNP, and risk taking during hikes.

Perhaps some of these activities will empower the older adult by providing an opportunity for change (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow discusses the role of transformation in adult development and self-directed learning. Change may extend beyond the situation of one's development; SDL can provide the tools needed to foster this change (Kleiber, 1999; Lamdin, 1997; Tennant, 1993; Tennant & Pogson, 1995).

### *Summary*

Rather than idle vacation time in Yellowstone, the heart of this program of adult education is to place personal and social reform at the very core of this practice (Candy, 1991; hooks, 1995). As a result of this week, these adults will be empowered through the specific lessons learned. Rather than encouraging the continual domestication and oppression of older adults, it is hoped as a result of this time, the participants can help to

liberate and effect radical change on the older adults in their community (Friere, 1970).

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