

Ransackers Association

“Serious study” in later life: what are the implications for quality of life, personal wellbeing, and effective citizenship?

End of project report to BSG Averil Osborn fund

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1. Introduction

This project aimed to explore the meanings, social value and impact of serious study in later life by drawing upon the experiential expertise of older learners.

Ransackers Association was formed from alumni of courses for older people which ran between 2004 and 2013, at UK Further Education colleges. These enabled several hundred people aged 55 and over, with no previous experience of higher education, to undertake one term residential courses with core curriculum on study skills & IT, supported by tutors to research and write up a project of the students own choosing. We describe this as ‘an educational adventure’ of ‘serious study’. The Ransackers Association carried out some initial research in 2015 into the experiences of people who took part in these courses, gathering some understanding of learners’ motivation and what they thought they gained from it. We requested the support of the Averil Osborn fund to enable us to continue this investigation of the *value, meaning and impact* of serious study in later life from the older learners perspective by drawing upon the experience of both Ransackers alumni and older learners who had undertaken ‘serious study’ in other ways.

2. Background

The benefits of life-long learning for older people are well-established in the literature (Patterson et al, 2015). Yet the value of life-long learning is generally less apparent to those with least personal experience of formal education (NIACE, 2015) – arguably those who might benefit most from opportunities for supported serious study. Recent enquiries have shown that older learners are significantly disadvantaged in accessing higher education in the UK (NIACE, 2009; Universities UK, 2010), and formal opportunities for adult learning have declined and are poorly coordinated. Since the withdrawal of funding for the Ransacker courses, we have been unable to identify comparable opportunities for older learners.

3. Aims of the project

Building on our 2015 study of Ransackers’ experiences of being involved in the residential courses, we wanted to further explore the experience of ‘serious study’ in later life in a wider context, drawing in a wider group of older learners to explore their motivations and what they felt they had gained from undertaking their learning.

The research aims can be summarised as to:

- explore the meanings, social value and impact of serious study in later life
- consider the implications of undertaking ‘serious study’ in later life – for quality of life, personal wellbeing, and effective citizenship.
- extend RA’s research and development capabilities by involving members directly in carrying out a second study.

4. Methodology

We used a qualitative, participative methodology based on one-to-one peer interviews between older learners, supported by a series of workshops attended by the interviewers ('co-researchers', since they have also undertaken analysis and dissemination) and three supporting academics. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

The project started March 1st 2016, with recruitment of 6 co-researchers by asking for volunteers among the community of Ransackers alumni and their associates. Co-researchers committed to interviewing 2-3 people who had undertaken some form of 'serious study in later life. This team of 6 had a role in shaping the project, the interview schedule, and they carried out the interviews, and worked with the academics on the analysis tasks. Some of the interviewees would be other Ransackers alumni, but co-researchers were encouraged to approach other people who had undertaken some other kind of study which could be legitimately described as "serious" – for example a degree or other formal course, or intensive language learning. The co-researchers would be involved in formulating and using a common schedule of questions, but with some flexibility to allow for follow-up questions. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were shared as printouts and or emails files before and at workshops to the team of co-researchers and supporting academics.

Four research workshops were held during the project: London, 14/04/16; Oxford 22/07/16; London 27/10/16; Oxford 20/01/17. The first workshop included the 'basics' of the research process, including ethics, confidentiality, consent and safety; using audio recording equipment; practice in asking questions; collectively deciding on the question schedules. It also included a discussion on what we meant by "serious study" in terms of the type of interviewees we would seek out. We included people who had done Ransackers courses, people who had started degrees, and people who had taken several courses of study ranging from A levels onwards. The second workshop reflected on the interview process and what might be done better – for example by using additional probes, and looking at some of the data that had been produced to understand what some of the emerging themes might be. The third workshop comprised a collective analysis of emerging themes from a small sample of the transcripts. The fourth workshop continued the collective analysis process, re-examined what we meant by, and had learned about "serious study" as undertaken by these older learners, and began to consider the findings from the research.

In between these workshops, various shorter planning and reflection meetings were held in London, which helped the planning of the 4 workshops, budget monitoring, and finding a venue for and planning the end of project event.

An end of project event was held in London, 20/02/17 to which BSG members were invited. At this event we described the background to the research and the processes we had used, reflected on the experience of doing the research, discussed some of the findings, again debated what we thought 'serious study' really meant, and thought about what the findings might mean for later life learning, and for the future of the Ransackers Association within a fundamentally changed funding and policy environment, and we proposed some pointers to RAs next strategy for funding and progress.

5. Analysis

We carried out thematic and narrative analyses individually and in small groups, mainly looking at selected transcripts looking for emerging themes and stories. We found that it was sometimes difficult to make direct comparisons across all the interviews, because there was variation in the style of interviews and the depth of probing, so that some of the narratives were much longer and more detailed than others. However because we had all used the same basic schedule in the main key information was available to us. In workshops we looked in detail at more transcripts and discussed what we considered to be key narratives of the experience of serious study in later life, and emerging themes.

6. Key findings

The project team is still exploring the implications of the emerging findings for further publications and as the basis for a better informed consideration of future strategy for the Ransackers Association. We have agreed on some key themes emerging from the research thus far.

These include:

Gender, family, network – both men and women describe anger about their earlier learning experiences which included: how girls were viewed and women's experience of education and expectations; the influence of younger family members (especially adult children in supporting the idea of returning to learn); how men and women make connections, including the social side of learning (in groups, as opposed to learning alone).

Overcoming barriers - Several narratives describe people identifying disadvantage from their original class background. This was often compounded with experiences of the consequences of taking and passing or failing the 11+ exam, and the practical and emotional consequences of this. This finding adds to our earlier work, concentrating on Ransackers alumni, who tended to be older and with other stories of exclusion from post-16 education (e.g. family insistence rather than 11+). These discussions were also sometimes bound in with emotions about the past and biographical perspectives on their learning experiences.

The impact of timing – There are numerous references to mid-life opportunities, which suggest that while it is 'never too late' to learn, some suggest that it can sometimes be too late to undertake 'serious' study. There are some interesting comments from those who like to do courses or go to events but no longer want to undertake serious study. There is a contrast between some people who feel they retain their mental powers in later life, and others who feel that their ability to learn is fading, or that their desire to do so is waning. In workshops we also reflected on continuous 'learning experiences, and on repetition and return to topics or styles of learning.

Gauging the impact of learning: this addresses the issues of whether serious study in later life can help make a life transition or even life transformations possible? Many of the narratives described how learning had a role in helping the individual to 'move on' or change direction. Indeed some of the older learners described the opportunity finally to undertake serious study ('never in my wildest dreams') as pivotal to their sense of self and what they could be and do.

Making a difference – this theme stems from an interest in whether "serious study" might have wider social impact. Some interviewees reported considerable impact; for example those who made a big life change through study in their fifties/while still at work and

subsequently changed track. Most interviewees described some sense of personal achievement and self-confidence from their experience of study. The findings are less compelling about the impact that people went on to have in their communities ('effective citizenship'), with a few notable exceptions where people took on new roles as leaders and mentors.

7. Limitations of the study

Doing this research project was a learning experience in itself for all those involved. The volunteers to become co-researchers were willing to put in the time and effort to be involved, from creating the questionnaire and finding and interviewing other older learners, to taking part in the workshops and analysis sessions. In retrospect it might have been better to hold a second, more detailed, training session (possibly one-to-one) on interviewing technique before co-researchers embarked on the interviews, to get more consistency in interviewing. We were somewhat constrained by the availability of the support academics (taking part around their day jobs) and timetabling generally. Further, co-researchers were recruiting their own interviewees as the most time-effective way of carrying out the research. This did mean that the group of interviewees we reached were random if not randomized, but the result was some interesting narratives.

We identified a further research topic to be explored on the perception of serious study in later life : is it primarily of benefit to the individual, or is there wider social impact including family (ie grandchildren and their education) and the community.?

8. Conclusions

We set off with some strong sense of the beneficial effects of learning in later life, and older people's appetite for it. This study highlights how understanding this needs to become more nuanced. The research has also encouraged those involved to probe further into what is meant by "serious study": what counts as 'serious'; does the study have to be serious to be beneficial; does it matter whether or not it is 'transformative'?

In many ways the research itself can be claimed as an instance of serious study. It has certainly meant the acquisition of research skills around interviewing and theme analysis. The process of involving co-researchers who are themselves older learners highlights how consistent and careful consideration is required to maximize their potential input.

With hindsight the academic team could have made more explicit emphasis about the expectations and realities of the co-researcher role. Nevertheless, the research has shown how it is possible to usefully involve novice older researchers in a study of later life learning.

9. Budget notes

Category	Cost	Budget	Overspend / (Underspend)
Workshops	£1,122.75	£1,195.25	£(72.50)
Project Dissemination Event	£601.88	£444.75	£157.13
Digital Recorders	£238.21	£240.00	£(1.79)
Transcribing	£670.00	£360.00	£310.00
Conference Presentation	£110.00	£200.00	£(90.00)
Newsletter / Flyer	£199.00	£550.00	£(351.00)
Other	£21.34	£0.00	£21.34
TOTAL	£2,963.18	£2,990.00	£(26.82)

In the main, the funds were used as requested in the bid for funding. However because some room hire costs came out less than estimated, we were able to run a 4th workshop, which was much needed for involving the full team in analysis and discussion about emerging trends from the data. We saved money on printing, as email was mostly used for publicity and communications during the project. The savings on printing and room hire meant we were able to budget more into transcribing, which had become very necessary for all the interview data, so that we had a full set of printed transcripts for all co researchers to use both in preparation for workshops and at workshops. Under the original printing budget we had intended a supplement to the RA newsletter, based on this report and the initial thoughts emerging from the early drafts of the academic report. This has been quoted for by printers, and is under preparation.

10. Dissemination plans

An article has been written for the Association for Education and Ageing (AEA) newsletter, and for Barnet Seniors summer newsletter. This one-page digest can be versioned for other seniors newsletters and other later life education organizations. A newsletter supplement is in preparation.

We were invited by Green Seniors to give a presentation at the Green Party European Conference, Liverpool, and gave out one –page digests. A presentation is being given at BSG Annual Conference Swansea on July 7th, and we have booked an Ageing Bites session to film a discussion around topics raised by this research project.

In collaboration with the supporting academics, there will be further analysis of the data, and work has already started on writing up our findings more fully for both an academic audience (a journal article), and a version edited for older peoples groups and the general public (newsletter; 'findings' document).