

A NEW USE OF EDUCATION IN PROGRAMING FOR THE AGED

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DURING recent years, the helping professions have come to see old age not only as a period of decline in which the best defense is to hold on to the pursuits of the middle years, but as a period in which there can be continued development as well.¹ "Adulthood is a developmental period in almost as complete a sense as childhood and adolescence."² Old age is part of this period and, in our society, one of the striking characteristics that differentiates it from the other years of adulthood is abundant leisure, primarily because of early retirement, increasing longevity, and loss of meaningful roles in the family and the community.

Many programs have been initiated to engage the older adult in activities that will help him find new uses for his energies and abilities. Adult education is one such program. Its goals and its methods, however, have been geared primarily to the interests and needs of the younger and middle-aged adult. While it has been established for some time that continued use of mental abilities retards decline, it has also been

assumed that the aged person has little remaining capacity for intellectual learning. As tests of learning ability have been devised which more accurately measure ability to learn in old age, studies have shown that if there is decline in ability, "this decline is in speed, not capacity."³ A beginning has been made to explore more carefully the conditions under which learning can continue into the later years.

The aged are not alike. They bring into this period the sum total of their life experiences. Those who value education are often motivated to pursue it further in old age, as a means of self-fulfillment and as an opportunity to fulfill their obligations as informed and responsible citizens. At present, in our country those over 65 years of age comprise almost 10 percent of the population and 16 percent of those of voting age.⁴ In fact, considering the growing complexity of today's world, education of one type or another must continue throughout a person's lifetime. This is equally as true of handicapped old people and those who are residents in homes for the aged as it is of able old people who live in the community.

¹ Allen Pincus, "Toward a Developmental View of Aging for Social Work," *Social Work*, Vol. XII, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 33-41.

² Robert Havighurst, and Betty Orr, "Adult Education and Adult Needs," *Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults*, Chicago, 1956, p. 1.

³ Irvine L. H. Kerrison, "Motivation—The Teaching and Learning of Adults," *Assessors Journal*, December, 1965, p. 6.

⁴ *Public Policy Bulletin*, National Council on the Aging, Vol. I, No. 3, June, 1967, p. 3.

Existing adult education programs and leisure-time activities have been heavily weighted toward skills and crafts, rather than "teaching in the realms of ideas and values."⁵ These, however, are exactly the areas in which the aging person is often more interested. Also, as more people who have enjoyed educational opportunities in earlier years grow old, they will look for programs of intellectual stimulation. Even where such programs exist in the community, the aged, for reasons inherent in their personal situations, are often unable to make use of them. This is especially true for the very old and the partially incapacitated who live either in homes for the aged or in the community with the help of special agency services. Providing for their continuing intellectual needs and continued understanding of the environment can be one of the goals of a social agency.

It is on these premises that the authors are developing a program which, for the past five years, has provided continuing education through specially planned courses for agency-sponsored groups of the aged.

The Structure of the Program

Courses have been provided in a family agency, in community centers, and several homes for the aged. The authors are the program leaders. The group members range in age from the early seventies into the late eighties. A few are in their sixties. Some have a limited educational background, many have a high school education, but only very few have gone beyond that. Some are physically handicapped. However, all are intellectually interested.

⁵ John W. Johnstone, "Volunteers for Learning—A Study of the Educational Pursuits of American Adults," *Report No. 89*, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, February, 1963, p. 47.

Registration for the course is kept to between 15 and 20. This number allows for individual stimulation and participation while insuring that in case of absences enough members are present at all times for a good discussion.

The groups choose their own topics for study. Membership is voluntary and, where agency policy permits, a small fee is charged. Because the course demands intellectual effort of its members, it has special status in the agency program and the members feel that a fee is justified. The possibility of choosing a topic and paying a fee strengthens the motivation for continued participation.

Each course consists of a planning session, conducted by the program leaders, and four to six study sessions of one hour each. It has been found that for people of this age group, most of whom have had little experience of study in depth, interest in one topic cannot be sustained for a longer course. The sessions take place at two week intervals to allow the members to use and share the reading material.

The study sessions are given by instructors whom the program leaders enlist from the faculties of local universities and high schools, and by other specialists.

The instructors conduct the sessions in seminar fashion, involving as many of the group as possible. They provide outlines and bibliographies at least two weeks in advance of each session. The reading materials are paperbacks, magazine articles, and, for the visually handicapped, Talking Books. Audio-visual aids, films, slides, art objects and tapes are also used. For a group which studied the development of the new African nations, examples of both ancient and contemporary African art were lent by a museum. For another group which studied "Israel in a Middle-Eastern Setting" the instructor

showed slides which she had taken in Islamic countries to illustrate the position of women in these societies.

Some agencies provide the reading material to each group member. In other groups, particularly in residential settings, the class members find ways to share the materials. There, group members assume individual tasks, acting as librarians, distributing study materials, and reading to the visually handicapped. Volunteer readers are also enlisted.

Program Leader—Agency Staff Cooperation

Before starting to work with the group, the program leaders meet with agency staff for mutual orientation and exploration of goals. At the end of the program, and after an evaluation with the group, they meet again to evaluate the experience in the light of those goals.

Agencies have been imaginative in recruiting members, not only for the intellectual stimulation the course will provide, but also to meet specific individual needs. A casework agency uses the study group as a first group experience for clients for whom other kinds of group experiences are threatening. The study groups have become a new program for this agency and, in conjunction with other services, help clients overcome isolation and modify loneliness. The agency uses the group as a casework tool especially suited to older people who have lost roles as parents and wage earners and do not know what other roles are available to them. In this sense, the educational program becomes a stepping stone for reintegration into the community and for learning what the community has to offer them at this stage of their lives. Mrs. P., one of the clients of a casework agency, was an emotionally and financially deprived person. She had grown up in orphanages and found it very difficult to get along

with her family. She tried to dominate her children even after they left the home and married. Now she lives alone, but she wants to be the center of attraction. She has limited education but wants to be an intellectual leader. Her caseworker felt that Mrs. P. needed to control her acting-out behavior. She directed her to a painting class and the study group. Mrs. P. has received casework treatment and, for a limited time, group therapy. The caseworker who was also the group therapist, discontinued her attendance in the therapy group because of her acting-out and provocative behavior. However, Mrs. P. gained considerable satisfaction from the study group which she was attending, with very few absences, for over two years. She has also become involved in painting. Her caseworker feels that Mrs. P. has made her greatest gains through these two activities. At this time, the study group is the only service she receives from the agency.

Another agency uses the study courses in several of its residential settings as a special recreational program for intellectually interested residents. They respond eagerly to the demands that this program makes on them. Most read the assigned material and, in the sessions, all try to think through and answer the questions the instructor poses during the presentation.

Staff members plan an important role in recruiting members for whom the study group will be a helpful experience. The program leaders supply the staff with material describing the first or planning session and explaining the idea of free choice of topics. When the staff presents this to the prospective members, some will immediately volunteer to participate. Others who seem less motivated, but who have the intellectual capacity to profit from the experience, are encouraged to make a try. Mr. C., a man in his eighties, and of real

intellectual accomplishments, lives in one of the agency's residences. He feels himself superior to the other residents and holds himself aloof from most of the activities. The sensitive group worker urged him to attend a planning session where he continued his usual behavior of downgrading everybody's contribution saying, "These people do not understand a thing about the topics they are suggesting." The program leaders urged him to come and see for himself what the group was capable of. He did so and has become a faithful and enthusiastic member. While the program leaders and instructors must still handle his tendency to dominate the sessions, he makes excellent and thoughtful contributions. Experience has shown, however, that this program is not suitable for people from backgrounds where no importance has been attached to learning.

It is important that a staff member be present at all sessions to facilitate carry-over, as the program leaders and instructors have no contact with the group members outside of the sessions. Much happens during the course which can help the agency in its work with clients, members or residents. At the final session of a course for a home care group during which the topic for study had been, "The Negro's Struggle for Equality," the staff member present used the opportunity to acquaint the group with a new agency policy, saying: "In the future, when you enter the home, you may find yourself sharing your room with a Negro." The group was able to explore this idea further and, after some discussion, accepted it. In another instance, a group in a home for victims of Nazi oppression had studied the federal, state and local election issues feeling they lacked the needed background to vote. In consequence, the director of the home, who had been present at the sessions, asked the League of Women Voters to explain

to the group and to practice with them the actual voting procedures so that the residents cast their votes correctly and with understanding of the issues.

The kind of meeting room and seating arrangements are important also. As these are not lecture courses, sitting around a table with the instructor facilitates active participation. Sometimes, a member prefers to sit off by himself at first and, after a while, moves to a seat at the table. Mr. M., who is a stroke victim and the client of a case-work agency, lives alone and has difficulties in using his hands. He came to the planning session, unshaven and disheveled. The room that had been assigned that day was rather small and everyone tried to crowd around the table except Mr. M. who sat silently outside the open door in the hallway. Later in the course, when a larger room became available, he still sat away from the table for several sessions. Recently, he has taken a seat next to the instructor, is less disheveled, and has begun to add his comments which are quite to the point.

The Planning Session

During the first meeting, which is a planning session, the group chooses the subject of study for the course. There are no ready-made programs or lists of topics. The leaders encourage the group members to talk about their individual interests or to pose questions for which they seek an answer. This freedom in suggesting topics guarantees a high degree of motivation for continued participation. Finally, the group is helped to arrive at a decision on a topic which may be a combination of several suggestions.

When a group meets for their first planning session, there are always some who doubt their ability to learn. This concern becomes an early point of discussion. The following situation devel-

oped at the first planning session of a group of about 35 people at a center for the aged. One of the leaders explained the purpose of the meeting, to select a topic for study. The first reaction was, "At my age, I don't care about learning; all I care about is to get lower carefare, lower rents and Medicare." To which another group member responded: "If that is all you care about, you are already half dead." The leaders explained that, while the group could study any subject, question or issue they chose, this was not an action group. It was a study group. One of the men then told of his being a member of an organization which was meeting with the Governor on these issues. As the group and the leaders continued to discuss possible topics of interest, one woman suddenly burst out excitedly, "Now I understand what you mean. You want to give us something for our souls. I'm for it." Then came responses like, "Our government is doing so much for other countries, what are they doing for us?" One wanted to learn "something about music," another "about literature," a third "What is there about this new play, 'The Deputy'?" It became clear that many were concerned about the problem of responsibility, that of government toward people, and that of man toward man. With the leaders' help, they formulated the following topics for the study series:

1. Our Government's Foreign Responsibilities:

This was taught by a doctoral candidate in history who had taught for two years in Uganda under the Agency for International Development (AID). He was able to make our government's foreign program come alive for the group through his own experience.

2. Our Government's Domestic Responsibilities:

This was taught by a high school social studies teacher who helped the group understand the genesis of present day social legislation.

3. Music and Ideas:

This was taught by a doctoral candidate in musicology who used as illustrations classical as well as folk music and freedom songs of the present. She successfully encouraged this ethnically diverse group to make contributions from the music and songs of their homelands.

4. "The Deputy":

This session was taught by a social worker whose training was also in history and philosophy. It was a valuable shared experience for the group whose members differed both in ethnic origin and religion.

A group which plans for the first time finds agreement difficult. Two and sometimes more topics are chosen as the planning session above illustrates. As the group gains more experience in the process of planning and study, they reach the point where they can agree on one topic and explore it in depth. In two homes for the aged, where the groups have studied for several years, they now prepare a list of suggestions in advance of the planning session and in the discussion come quickly and easily to a decision.

In a home for the aged, a group of 14 residents whose ages ranged from the late seventies to early eighties, met with the leaders to plan their second study course. After a short review of the last year's course during which they had studied the history of the Negro's struggle for civil rights, one of the members who had come to this country during the Hitler era, said, "We are called American citizens, but we really have very little knowledge about this country and its history." Another wondered what differentiated the various sections of the country. Another wanted to know what influence the individual citizen had on the government and what were his rights. Still another raised the question whether the newly developing countries in Africa had constitutions similar to that of the United States.

From this exchange grew a course called, "The Making of an American," a survey of the historical development of the citizen's part in government through a study of the Bill of Rights. The last session dealt with the parallels between America's development as a nation and that of the newly developing nations in Africa.

The course was taught by a Ph.D. in political science, an instructor at a local college. The session on Africa was taught by a faculty member of a university center for African studies who also served as consultant to governments of African states.

A small group of eight in a casework agency chose to study the Theater of the Absurd and contemporary art. They felt that modern drama and modern art were all nonsense and incomprehensible. After the sessions, which were taught by two instructors from local colleges and included a visit to a museum of modern art, one of the participants said, "I don't like modern art any better, but now I know why," whereas another went to the public library several times to listen to recordings of contemporary plays.

At their planning session, a group of about twenty in a home for the aged were concerned with questions of an ethical and religious nature, such as "self-immolation," "What is a 'holy' person?," "Since when does the idea of one God exist?," "Where did the Ethical Culture movement come from?" This resulted in a course on comparative religions.

Selection and Orientation of Instructors

There is a month's interval between the planning session and the first study session during which the leaders select and orient the instructors. Many educators have not had the experience of teaching old people and are concerned about it. In most instances, the instruc-

tor must change and adapt his teaching to an age group so new to him. However, from the beginning of the project, the actual experience has been one of mutual satisfaction and enjoyment for both the instructors and the members of the group.

The leaders meet with each instructor to discuss the topic for study, the content and climate of the planning session, the background of the group members and the way in which the instructor will present his material. The most successful approach has been found to be a dialogue between instructor and students. The instructor lectures for about seven minutes at a time and then poses searching and pertinent questions challenging the individual's ability to think. There is a vast difference in the kind of thinking stimulated by this kind of questioning from the usual ending of a fifty minute lecture with "Now do you have any questions?" to which, more often than not, the answer is silence.

It has also been found that, while all contributions from members are to be respected and encouraged, if the comments are obviously inappropriate, it is not necessary to be overly protective. In spite of their age, the members responded to challenge and did not feel threatened by the instructors' high expectations.

As they teach these groups, the younger instructors often find their own image of old age changing. They are impressed with the continued and growing intellectual ability of the aged members and they realize that life experience can overcome a lack of formal education. The older person has often actively participated in historical events the instructor knows only from his studies, and this adds another facet to his knowledge. As the aged person reminisces in the context of the course, it is not aimless rambling but a positive contribution to

the understanding of the material under discussion.⁶

The aged, in turn, find that they can communicate with youth. This mutual respect and appreciation add another dimension to the experience as a gratifying relationship develops between the younger instructors and this much older generation.

During a course in a home for the aged on the history of immigrant groups in America, the young instructor encouraged the group members to speak from their own experiences. Many of them had been immigrants themselves. At the end of the session, the instructor remarked to the leaders that, while this had been her special field of study, it had never come alive to her as it had that day. Another instructor, in discussing a novel about the beginning of the labor movement, found that one of the group members had been an early union organizer and that another "still felt the policeman's club heavy on my back." At the end of the course, he urged that the home form a writing workshop to preserve memories of such interest and value.

The Study Sessions

As participation in the study sessions is voluntary, those members who have no interest in the topic chosen can drop out after the planning session. In practice, this has rarely happened. Freedom of choice and the opportunity to try out intellectual capacities in a congenial setting are strong motivations for continued learning and participation.

One of the leaders is present at each session. They are the link between the

group and the agency, and the instructor. During the study sessions, they focus on group process. They help to keep the discussion relevant, watch for gestures and other non-verbal contributions, and encourage the timid. They work for a feeling of ease, self-confidence and assertion, which often results in increased gain from the experience. In a residence for the aged, the participants in a course on modern architecture with special emphasis on buildings in their city, were stimulated to ask staff to arrange visits to these buildings.

One of the goals of the program is to stimulate continuing growth. The program leaders are concerned that the sessions not become repetitious or static. They constantly watch for situations which require a fresh approach or offer a new challenge. Such opportunities may present themselves during a session and are used in the framework of the courses.

A casework agency found that in providing the required books to every member they were not fostering individual initiative. Instead of learning greater independence, the group members relied on the agency. Some did not even bother to read and just collected the books. As the program leaders explored with the group the possibility of obtaining the material by themselves, where to buy it, or how to borrow from a public library, it became obvious that many did not know how to use the facilities of a library. In consequence, the program leaders arranged for the next planning session to be held at a public library in cooperation with the library staff not only to learn how to borrow books, but also to help the group members get acquainted with all the other services that a public library offers to the community.

The members are often pleasantly surprised by the ease with which they grasp

⁶ See also A. W. McMahon & P. J. Rhudick, "Reminiscing in the Aged: An Adaptional Response," in Sidney Levin and Ralph Kahana, eds., *Psychodynamic Studies on Aging: Creativity, Reminiscing and Dying*. New York: International Publishers, New York, 1967 pp. 64-78.

new ideas and experience a real sense of accomplishment. This is ego-strengthening for the aged who have learned the bitter lesson that too often their thoughts and opinions are not valued. One member reported how impressed her children were to see her able to discuss issues she had studied in a course.

But the surprise is not only on the part of the aged. At times, it is the staff member present who sees the agency's clients in a new light as topics are chosen and studied which indicate interests and abilities not previously evident, or when great effort is put forth which is not shown in other activities and relationships.

A group of eighteen men and women were meeting in a residence which is part of a large and diversified institution caring for the aged. Some of the group live in the residence, others live in their own homes with help from the agency. Their ages range from the early seventies to the late eighties. Most came to this country during the Hitler era; some came during the early part of the century from Eastern Europe; a few were American born.

The topic chosen for study was the Old Testament and Jewish cultural influences on the development of America, with emphasis on individual Jewish personalities. The instructor whose special field is Jewish history, teaches at one of the local universities.

In this session, the group discussed the contribution of Judge Brandeis to American social, political and economic thought, based on a biography of Brandeis which the group had read. The instructor gave a short review of his life and then asked: "Why did Brandeis decide to study law?" Some of the answers were, "He believed in truth and justice," "He believed in the citizen's rights against the government," "He wanted to improve the status of the

working people, especially that of women workers."

The instructor agreed and continued: "He was a Democrat, and do you think his being a Jew influenced his choice?" Some of the responses were: "He identified with the Prophets who took the side of the downtrodden," "He always was on the side of the oppressed." While one member said that Jews are the ones who have the most sense of justice, another reported: "Don't you think other religions make people conscious of justice?" Another said, "Everyone who is decent would feel that way."

The instructor, recognizing the involvement and the intellectual effort the group was making, continued to pose challenging questions: "Why did he later become such an ardent Zionist, and what is Zionism?" Also, "Are Zionism and Americanism contradictory?" The answers came fast: "He wanted to help oppressed Jews everywhere, and the pogroms that went on in Russia at that time affected him deeply." "Everything that Brandeis did grew out of his feeling for all humanity." "Zionism has nothing to do with religion, it has to do with the creation of Israel as a nation." Finally, one of the group said, "If Irishmen can be good Americans, why not Jews?"

A feeling of purpose pervades the sessions and a real quest for knowledge is evident. In the intense concentration, the groups forget about time, and it is often difficult to hold to the one hour schedule. After the experience of one course, the members lose any initial shyness or fear of showing ignorance. There are arguments and differences of opinion, but they do not deteriorate into squabbles. Because their views are respected by program leaders and instructors, the group members learn to listen with respect to each other. One agency director characterized the ses-

sions as having "a climate of honesty, dignity, and self-respect."

Summary

Old age, like all other life periods, is developmental and new tasks can be mastered. In our times and society, continuing education throughout life is not only a constructive way to cope with ample leisure time, but answers a real need for the community-conscious citizen helping him to continued understanding of the environment. To provide for these needs is a valid concern for agencies who care for the incapacitated aged.

In the foregoing, a program has been described which creates an educational experience for the steadily growing group of intellectually interested aged in centers, homes for the aged, and case-work agencies.

Motivation for participation and learning is maintained by free choice of study topics, by voluntary participation, and by the payment of a fee. Instructors must be expert in the assigned topic

and must be oriented to techniques and methods found successful in teaching groups of old people. Educational and social work components are combined and staff participation assures carry-over into the other phases of agency work. The attitude an agency has toward the status of its aged clients and its expectations for them very often become the attitude and the expectations the aged develop toward themselves.

Continued mental alertness is fostered as well as the creation of new and status-giving interests at a life period which is otherwise characterized by the loss of work and parental roles, and by an abundance of unoccupied time. In the program it has been found that, given an appropriate setting, old people can work with abstract ideas and master intellectual tasks as well as younger students; thus dispelling the negative image of old age. Finally, realization of their own latent abilities and the gratification that comes from successful communication with the younger generation are ego-strengthening.