

# DOES AGE MATTER? INFORMAL LEARNING PRACTICES OF YOUNGER AND OLDER ADULTS

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## Abstract

*Conventional wisdom in adult education suggests that processes of life cycle change make for differences in the learning experiences of younger and older adults. Popular demographers argue that generational differences exist between those born in different historical periods. Outside the realm of higher education, there are relatively few empirical studies of the learning practices of adults of differing ages. In this article we present the results of qualitative interviews undertaken with 134 readers of self-help books. Half of these readers were 30 years of age or younger. We found modest age differences in learners' engagement with self-help reading. Relatively older readers were more likely to define explicit learning goals, engage deeply in the learning process, experience linear learning pathways, and express disagreement with authors. We conclude that the modest nature of age differences found supports a maturational or life cycle interpretation rather than a generational interpretation and that learning processes are more similar than different among people of various ages.*

## Résumé

*La tradition dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes suggère qu'il y a des différences dans les expériences d'apprentissage des adultes jeunes et âgés, dues aux processus de changement du cycle de vie. Les démographes populaires prétendent que les différences entre les générations existent entre ceux qui sont nés à différentes périodes historiques. En dehors du domaine de l'enseignement supérieur, il existe relativement peu d'études empiriques des pratiques d'apprentissage des adultes d'âges différents. Dans cet article nous présentons les résultats d'entrevues qualitatives réalisées avec 134 lecteurs de livres d'auto-guérison. La moitié de ces lecteurs étaient âgés de 30 ans ou moins. Nous avons trouvé peu de corrélations entre la différence d'âge des apprenants et leur engagement quant à la lecture. Cependant, les lecteurs relativement plus âgés étaient plus susceptibles de définir explicitement leurs objectifs*

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*d'apprentissage, de s'engager résolument dans leurs processus d'apprentissage, d'avoir une expérience d'apprentissage linéaire, et d'exprimer leur désaccord avec les auteurs. Nous en concluons que le peu de corrélations entre la différence d'âge et le rapport à l'apprentissage favorise une interprétation de cycle de vie plutôt qu'une interprétation de rupture générationnelle, et que les processus d'apprentissage apparaissent comme relativement similaires malgré la différence d'âge.*

### Introduction

Scholars and practitioners of adult and continuing education frequently claim that the age of learners has an important impact on those learners' engagement with, and outcomes from, educational activities. Knowles (1980) argued for a differentiation between pedagogy and andragogy, based on the assumption that since adults were different from children, the methods and practices that would effectively promote learning among adults would be different from those that would be effective in work with children. Within the broad category of "adult learners," claims about the distinctiveness of learners of different ages are commonly made. In recent years, two streams of thought have been prominent in this regard.

First, numerous authors have argued that institutions of post-secondary education need to make special accommodations to enable the participation and success of mature adult learners. Useful insights have been made about the distinctive experiences of mature adults as learners in post-secondary institutions (Kasworm, 2010; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Stone, 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Swain & Hammond, 2011), about the barriers and challenges faced by such learners (Burton, Lloyd, & Griffiths, 2011; Thompson & Devlin, 1992; Yum, Kember, & Siaw, 2005), and about institutional practices required to enable mature adults to thrive (Keast, 2000; Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001). Joseph (1996) argued:

In order to be effective facilitators of adult learning, educators need to keep in mind the vast diversity of a mature student population. Culture, socio-economic status, extensive life experience, and even the physiological process of aging itself can combine to define the unique strategies required to facilitate learning for adults. (p. 8)

In short, the literature concerning mature adult learners in post-secondary institutions claims that relatively older students have distinctive characteristics and needs.

Second, the notion of "generation" is sometimes invoked to describe putatively fundamental differences between learners born in different time periods. Based on a study of graduate students described as belonging to three different generations (baby boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y/Millennials), Holyoke and Larson (2009) claimed that the learning experiences of students varied according to generation, along with their readiness to learn, their orientation to learning, and their motivation to learn. Bullen, Morgan, and Qayyam (2011) summarized how the younger generation has been seen as different:

Futurists and commentators argue that because the members of [Generation Y] have been immersed in a networked world of digital

technology, they behave differently, have different social characteristics, different ways of using and making sense of information, different ways of learning, and different expectations about life and learning. (p. 2)

Most of these distinctions surround the claim that, as “digital natives,” members of this newer generation have a different way of thinking due to the profusion and significance of technology in their lives. Prensky (2001) argued that “today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (p. 1). Other studies have argued against the importance of generational differences (Becker, 2009; Bennett & Maton, 2010; Bullen, Morgan, & Qayyam, 2011; Field, 2013; Kliegel & Altgassen, 2006; Sanchez, Salinas, Contreras, & Meyer, 2011; Stapleton, Wen, Starrett, & Kilburn, 2007), claiming that differential access to technology, interpersonal diversity, and lifelong maturation account for the apparent differences between the so-called generations. Giancola (2006) argued that “the generational approach may be more popular culture than social science” (p. 33).

Studies such as those cited above have made numerous claims about the characteristics of adult learners of various ages, but we know little about the actual learning practices of relatively younger and relatively older adults. In this article we bridge this gap by presenting the results of empirical research undertaken with adults engaged in informal learning through the reading of self-help books relating to career success, interpersonal relationships, and health and well-being. Self-help literature has become an important domain of adult learning in many countries. Thousands of books have been written with the explicit pedagogical intent of helping readers change or improve some element of their personal or professional lives, and millions of readers have turned to self-help literature for guidance. In recent publications we have argued that self-help reading is an important and under-researched domain of informal adult learning (McLean, 2013, in press; McLean & Vermeulen, in press).

Adult educators have long recognized that much learning takes place outside formal institutions. Concepts such as self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1984, 1993; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1967) and public pedagogy (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011; Wright & Sandlin, 2009a) draw attention to ways in which adults access resources from popular culture and learn without the involvement of educational institutions. The *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010) includes chapters on television, cinema, museums, video games, social media, blogs, festivals, performance art, graffiti, hip-hop music, parades, and knitting clubs. Scholars of adult education have produced notable studies of learning through activities including reading popular fiction (Jarvis, 1999, 2012), shopping (Jubas, 2011; Sandlin, 2010), and watching television (Jarvis, 2005; Jubas & Knutson, 2012; Wright, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009b). Concepts such as public pedagogy and self-directed learning provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding the learning and change experienced by self-help readers. Within this theoretical framework, our current article addresses a fundamentally empirical question: Do practices and experiences of informal learning differ between relatively older and relatively younger adults?

Our study of self-help readers provides a privileged opportunity to explore the informal learning practices of relatively older and relatively younger adults. Of the 134

participants in our study, exactly half were born in 1982 or later, meaning that at the time of our interviews, half of our participants were 30 years of age or younger. Neither age nor generational differences were mentioned in our recruitment processes or interview protocols, and therefore participants' responses could in no way be considered to have been shaped by our interest in exploring the different learning practices of relatively younger and relatively older adults. The next section of this article provides a brief explanation of the methods we used to explore the informal learning practices of readers of self-help books and through which we gained insight into the degree to which age matters in understanding and supporting adults' learning.

### **Research Methods and Participants**

In 2012 we conducted interviews with 134 adults who had read a self-help book in the areas of career success, interpersonal relationships, or health and well-being over the course of the previous year. Interviewees were recruited primarily through online advertisements placed in the "books" sections of Kijiji websites for Calgary, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Winnipeg. Most participants were Canadian, although 14 were American and three were British. We did not engage in systematic or random sampling procedures. Therefore, our interviewees do not represent the full range of readers of self-help books. Among other things, it is unlikely that readers who had minimal levels of engagement with reading a self-help book would have responded to our recruitment efforts. Further, readers without Internet access or without an ongoing interest in reading would not have become aware of our study.

Qualitative interviews were conducted via online chat software, telephone calls, and the exchange of e-mail messages. The interviews were organized in five main sections: motivation, learning goals, learning strategies, learning outcomes, and impact. Questions were open-ended, encouraging participants to share their experience of self-help reading in their own words and with minimal direction. Interviews were transcribed verbatim or cut and pasted from chat software or e-mail messages. Participants who completed interviews received a \$25 honorarium and are identified in this article by pseudonyms assigned by our research team.

Of the 134 participants, two-thirds were women. Each interview focused on the experience of reading one specific self-help book. Of our 134 participants, 66 (49%) read books relating primarily to health and well-being, 35 (26%) read books dealing with interpersonal relationships, and 33 (25%) read books relating to career and financial success. There were distinct gender differences in the readership of different types of books. Women were more likely to read books pertaining to health and well-being (54%) and relationships (29%) as opposed to those relating to careers (17%). In contrast, men were more likely to read books pertaining to careers (40%) and health (40%) as opposed to those relating to relationships (20%). The women had slightly higher rates of post-secondary education: 67% of the women and 53% of the men had completed at least an undergraduate degree or post-secondary diploma. The mean age of participants was 34 years for women and 30 years for men.

Since our focus in this article is on the different learning practices of younger and older adults, Tables 1 through 3 display key socio-demographic differences between members of our sample who were younger and older than 30 years at the time of our interviews.

**Table 1:** *Participants by Age and Gender*

|        | 30 years of age or younger | Older than 30 years of age | Total       |
|--------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Female | 41<br>61%                  | 48<br>72%                  | 89<br>66%   |
| Male   | 26<br>39%                  | 19<br>28%                  | 45<br>34%   |
| Total  | 67<br>100%                 | 67<br>100%                 | 134<br>100% |

**Table 2:** *Participants by Age and Employment Status*

|            | 30 years of age or younger | Older than 30 years of age | Total       |
|------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Employed   | 35<br>52%                  | 49<br>73%                  | 84<br>63%   |
| Unemployed | 8<br>12%                   | 5<br>7%                    | 13<br>19%   |
| Student    | 20<br>30%                  | 2<br>3%                    | 22<br>16%   |
| Homemaker  | 4<br>6%                    | 11<br>16%                  | 15<br>11%   |
| Total      | 67<br>100%                 | 67<br>100%                 | 134<br>100% |

From these tables we note that self-help readers older than 30 years of age were somewhat more likely to be women, to have completed a post-graduate degree, and to be employed in wage labour or work as homemakers. The relatively younger readers were disproportionately more likely to be post-secondary students or unemployed. Despite such differences, the socio-demographic characteristics of the two halves of our research sample are relatively similar, enabling us to make meaningful comparisons of the learning practices of those who are relatively younger and those who are relatively older. Of course, our findings may understate age differences to some extent, as we simply divided our sample in half, and we would not expect substantial differences between learners of 29 years of age and learners of 31 years of age. The mean age of the younger half of readers in our study was 25, while the mean age of the older half of readers was 41.

**Table 3:** *Participants by Age and Highest Level of Formal Educational Attainment*

|  | 30 years of age or younger | Older than 30 years of age | Total       |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Completed post-graduate degree             | 5<br>7%                    | 16<br>24%                  | 21<br>16%   |
| Some post-graduate education               | 7<br>10%                   | 7<br>10%                   | 14<br>10%   |
| Completed post-secondary degree or diploma | 25<br>37%                  | 24<br>36%                  | 49<br>37%   |
| Some post-secondary                        | 21<br>31%                  | 11<br>16%                  | 32<br>24%   |
| Completed secondary school                 | 7<br>10%                   | 7<br>10%                   | 14<br>10%   |
| Some secondary school                      | 2<br>3%                    | 2<br>3%                    | 4<br>3%     |
| Total                                      | 67<br>100%                 | 67<br>100%                 | 134<br>100% |

### Findings

We found both similarities and differences between the learning practices of self-help readers who were 30 years of age and younger and those who were older than 30. In most ways, the older and younger readers were actually quite similar. However, we found modest differences in terms of learning goals, levels of learner engagement, pathways of learning, and the degree to which readers contested the claims of self-help authors. The subsequent sections explore each of these differences in turn.

#### *Learning Goals*

Our study was restricted to people who had recently read a self-help book in the areas of career success, interpersonal relationships, or health and well-being. As Table 4 illustrates, among readers of these kinds of books, there were only modest differences between the types of learning goals defined by the relatively younger and older participants.

In our analysis, two differences in the types of learning goals stood out to be meaningful. First, older readers were more likely to define physical health-related goals, while younger readers were more likely to define emotional or mental health-related goals. Gina, a 33-year-old writer, read Timothy Ferriss’s best-selling book *The 4-Hour Body* with the goal of finding some interesting workout tips that she could use. She explained her goal for reading the book and what she wanted to gain from it: “Motivation, in a word; the book not only provided tips on a variety of topics, but specifically mentioned using techniques to help get motivated.”

Nina, a 48-year-old woman working in the health industry, said that she was already committed to a raw vegan diet before she read Daniel Amen’s book *Use Your Brain to Change Your Age*. Her reading goal focused on learning more about health education,

**Table 4:** *Participants by Age and Learning Goals*

| Type of goal                | 30 years of age or younger | Older than 30 years of age | Total       |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Physical health             | 5<br>7%                    | 13<br>19%                  | 18<br>13%   |
| Emotional or mental health  | 23<br>34%                  | 19<br>28%                  | 42<br>31%   |
| Career or financial success | 14<br>21%                  | 12<br>18%                  | 26<br>19%   |
| Intimate relationships      | 8<br>12%                   | 8<br>12%                   | 16<br>12%   |
| Other relationships         | 10<br>15%                  | 13<br>19%                  | 23<br>17%   |
| No goal                     | 7<br>10%                   | 2<br>3%                    | 9<br>7%     |
| Total                       | 67<br>100%                 | 67<br>100%                 | 134<br>100% |

broadening her horizons, and potentially acquiring more information to help her continue with her dietary plan. Likewise, Giles, a 52-year-old father, said that he enjoyed researching health and nutrition. His goal for reading *The China Study* by T. Colin Campbell and Thomas M. Campbell was to continue to expand his understanding of physical health and nutrition:

I am always interested in learning anything about health and nutrition. Here in North America, we lead the world in the occurrences of diseases of affluence (heart attack, stroke, diabetes, and cancer). I ask myself, why? This is the reason I continue to educate myself and read books like this.

Relatively younger readers were more likely to identify learning goals relating to emotional or mental health. Orla, an 18-year-old student, discussed her experience of being sexually molested when she was younger. She explained that she read *Five Simple Steps to Emotional Healing: The Last Self-Help Book You Will Ever Need* by Gloria Arenson with the goal of learning how to overcome this stressful experience and be able to be comfortable in an intimate relationship. Gwen, a 27-year-old participant, had a mental health goal: "I was hoping to find some ways of maintaining happiness and motivation in my work. I had been drifting towards depression at the time." On a similar note, Cole, a 20-year-old administrative assistant, also reported depression as a motivator for reading. His goal was

how to not be so damn gloomy all the time. With every obstacle or roadblock I encounter in my life, I shut down. I would rather avoid struggle than encounter it, and it showed. I was working bad jobs, didn't have healthy relationships, felt tired all the time. I knew it wasn't healthy.

Both older and younger readers were more likely to focus their learning goals on emotional health issues than physical health. The age difference we have reported is simply one of proportion: relatively more older readers focused on physical health and relatively more younger readers focused on emotional or mental health. Rather than reflect some inherent generational difference, this finding likely reflects the physical realities of human bodies in the aging process.

In terms of the learning goals that guided participants' self-help reading, another notable difference between relatively younger and older readers was that readers aged 30 or younger were three times more likely to express not having a goal at all. Louis (24 years old) said, "I didn't really expect anything, just that it was the recommended reading material for my work." Elodie (20 years old) read the book because her boyfriend had read it and recommended it. She shared her account of the absence of learning goals at the outset of her reading:

When I first started reading the book, I didn't think I would learn anything. I thought it was just going to be something to make the time pass so I didn't really have any goals for myself. My boyfriend did say that it will make me realize lots of things about myself and my personality so I wanted to see exactly what those things were.

Miranda, a 28-year-old accountant, read a self-help book on the recommendation from a good friend. She was looking for some improvements in her life but did not have any specific learning goals. She explained that she was "looking to see what all the hype was about surrounding this book [*The Slight Edge* by Jeff Olson]."

In summary, relatively older and younger readers tended to have similar learning goals in their approach to self-help reading. Similar proportions of both groups defined goals pertaining to career or financial success and interpersonal relationships. Older readers were more likely to discuss physical health goals, and younger readers were more likely to describe emotional or mental health goals. The most substantial and interesting difference among our two groups of readers was the tendency for younger readers to engage in self-help reading without a well-defined learning goal. This difference could be due to a maturation process (with older readers having become more systematic or self-directed learners over time), or it could be due to generational differences (with younger readers having had different school or leisure-time experiences that led them to undertake spare-time activities in a less purposeful manner). In either case, the greater likelihood of younger readers to not have explicit learning goals is reflected in those readers' lower levels of engagement with their reading.

### ***Learner Engagement***

We found modest differences in the level of engagement of relatively younger and older readers of self-help books. One indicator of engagement was the completion of the book discussed as the focus of our interview. We found that 97% of the older readers completed the entire book, while 81% of the younger readers had done so. In addition to being more likely to finish their reading of a self-help book, older readers used more intensive strategies to engage with the content of the book. Among older readers, 42%



read their self-help book more than once, and 15% engaged in subsequent, post-reading activities such as finding supplementary information online or reading another book by the same author. Among younger readers, just 18% and 9%, respectively, engaged in these two learning strategies. Younger and older readers were almost equally likely to talk with family members or friends about their self-help reading (about 42% did so) and keep a learning journal or undertake written activities as suggested by the authors (about 32% did so). Younger readers (49%) were slightly more likely than older readers (42%) to take notes or highlight passages in the text.

Overall, there were only modest differences in the extent to which younger and older readers engaged with the content of the self-help books they read. Older readers, on average, appeared to have engaged with their books at a slightly deeper level—being more likely to complete their reading and to either re-read the book or undertake additional and related learning activities. This age difference in patterns of learner engagement foreshadows differences we found in learning processes and outcomes between relatively younger and older readers.

### *Learning Pathways*

To describe the informal learning process associated with self-help reading, we developed a three-step model for identifying different learning trajectories. We coded the following steps that our participants could have engaged in: defining clear learning goals; identifying salient learning outcomes; and taking specific action in response to learning. As would be expected, there was attrition in the learning process at each of these steps: 93% of our participants were able to define specific learning goals that they claimed to possess at the outset of their reading; 83% indicated that they learned something of significance and identified opportunities to apply such learning to health, relationship, or career issues in their lives; and 61% were able to describe fairly concrete actions they had undertaken in response to learning from their reading.

Based on the responses of our participants to questions about each of these three steps in the learning process, we constructed three basic pathways to summarize their experiences. First, the “linear” learning pathway describes those readers who had one or more clearly defined learning goals, learned something relevant during their reading, and took concrete action in their lives as a result of reading. In total, 79 participants (59%) had relatively linear learning pathways. Second, the “incomplete” learning pathway describes those readers who had one or more clearly defined learning goals, may have identified opportunities to apply lessons learned from reading to their lives, but did not take specific and concrete action based on their reading. In total, 34 participants (25%) had purposeful but incomplete learning pathways. Third, the “incidental” learning pathway describes those readers who either had no clear learning goal at the outset of their reading or whose learning goals and eventual actions were not clearly linked with learning outcomes from the book they had read. A total of 21 participants (16%) had incidental learning pathways.

There were some interesting differences in the learning pathways experienced by the younger and older participants in our research. As Table 5 indicates, participants

**Table 5:** Participants by Age and Learning Pathway

|            | 30 years of age or younger | Older than 30 years of age | Total       |
|------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Linear     | 35<br>52%                  | 44<br>66%                  | 79<br>59%   |
| Incomplete | 19<br>28%                  | 15<br>22%                  | 34<br>25%   |
| Incidental | 13<br>19%                  | 8<br>12%                   | 21<br>16%   |
| Total      | 67<br>100%                 | 67<br>100%                 | 134<br>100% |

over 30 years of age were more likely to have linear learning pathways, while younger participants were more likely to have incomplete or incidental pathways.

An example of a linear learning pathway can be seen in Susan's interview. As part of the relatively older age group, Susan (40 years old) spoke about her reflections on reading *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health* by Andrew Weil. As the first part of the pathway, she explained her goals: "I wanted to set realistic goals on how to improve my health" and "I wanted to learn to teach myself how to live a healthier lifestyle without having to become too extreme." Secondly, Susan summarized her key learning from the book: "Relax, eat natural unprocessed foods and walk. Consume more fish, eat less refined grains. Try vegetables from regions of the world that you may have never tried." Thirdly, she described the following concrete actions she undertook as a result of reading:

I have not followed everything in the book to a "T" but I have changed my lifestyle significantly for the better. I changed the way I took some vitamins and I added some vitamins to my diet. I also omitted a few foods from my life altogether and made an effort to eat more fruits and vegetables. I also made time to enjoy life. This book helped me realize that I don't take the time to just enjoy things.

Another example of a linear pathway among older readers was Nicole, a 47-year-old flight attendant who read *Will I Ever Be Good Enough? Healing the Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers* by Karyl McBride. Nicole stated a goal: "I think if anything was a goal, it was to find a way to free myself of feeling guilty about how I often feel about my mom, to validate how I feel, and to forgive the things about her that make me crazy." She identified what she had learned from her reading:

First, she will not change. Second, it's okay not to like that part of her; it doesn't mean I love her less as my mother, it just means that I recognize she is not perfect, as we all want to think our mothers are. Third, how her actions had an effect on me when I didn't necessarily realize it.

And lastly, Nicole recounted how she made changes in her life as a result of her reading:

It has changed the way I have conversations with my mom ... I realize that she is not interested in hearing about my family or my life, and it is all about her, so instead of putting up with that I cut it off. That's a huge accomplishment ... I will carry lessons from the book with me for life, as I never want my kids to perceive me the way I view her. Something as minor as how I listen to them. I am aware of making sure they get my undivided attention so they know I am interested in listening and hearing what they have to say.

A majority of both younger and older readers had linear learning pathways. However, the experience of defining a clear learning goal, learning something from self-help reading related to that goal, and taking action on such learning was shared by two-thirds of older readers and just over one-half of younger readers.

Relatively younger readers were more likely to have incomplete learning pathways. Elle, a 23-year-old undergraduate student, read the popular book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne and described her (unfulfilled) learning goal: "When I started reading it, I was hoping to learn a 'secret master key' to solving all of life's problems. Because that's what the book advertised. But then I was disappointed after I finished reading it." Elle said that she had enjoyed the writing style of the book and recounted, "I didn't learn anything new, per se, from the book. However, the book encouraged my existing belief that a positive attitude can change many things in life." Ironically, Elle recounted a story about how she tried to adopt advice from the book to "visualize" her goal of receiving a promotion at work, and instead ended up being laid off from her job a few weeks later. Elle's conclusion was that rather than following advice from *The Secret*, "it was hard work and determination that paid off to find work again."

The third pathway, the incidental trajectory, was found to be over 50% more common within the relatively younger group. An example of this type of learning pathway was provided by Delilah, a 24-year-old woman who described reading *Fish! A Proven Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* by Stephen Lunden, Harry Paul, and John Christensen. Delilah expressed that she did not have any clear learning goals before reading the book: "I don't think there was anything I was hoping to learn." However, congruent with the incidental learning pathway, Delilah claimed to experience both learning and change as a result of her reading:

I learned that life is all about what you make of it and to make the best out of any situation. The book was about finding fun in the workplace and helping you enjoy your job. I definitely put the positive thinking into practice and I became more productive. I tried to think of ways to make the monotonous tasks more enjoyable and went into work every day with more positive thinking. The book made me realize that the negativity I was feeling was personal, so once I realized that it could always be worse it was easy to put the positive thoughts into practice.

It is important to keep in mind that age differences in the learning pathways were relative, not absolute. A slight majority of younger readers were found to have linear learning pathways and significant numbers of older readers had incomplete and incidental pathways.

The greater proportion of younger readers having incomplete or incidental experiences of learning is consistent with maturation or life course interpretations of age differences and with generational interpretations. It may be that age and experience gave more of the older readers in our study the dispositions and skills characteristic of linear learners. It may also be that socio-cultural changes over time gave more of the younger readers the dispositions and skills of incidental or incomplete learners. In either case, our findings with regard to learning pathways support conventional interpretations of the learning styles and experiences of relatively younger and older readers.

### *Contestation of Claims*

Children are presumed to differ from adults in the degree to which they accept what they are told by educators or other figures of authority. We questioned: Are there differences in the extent to which adults of varying ages accept or contest the claims of educators or authors? To explore the degree to which learners disagreed with the claims made by authors of self-help books, we asked: “Were there things about this book that you did not like, or about which you disagreed? If so, please share.” As Table 6 shows, older readers were considerably more likely to express a disagreement than were younger readers.

**Table 6:** *Participants by Age and Rates of Disagreement with Self-help Authors*

|                 | <b>30 years of age or younger</b> | <b>Older than 30 years of age</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| Disagreement    | 5<br>7%                           | 13<br>19%                         | 18<br>13%    |
| No disagreement | 62<br>93%                         | 54<br>81%                         | 116<br>87%   |
| Total           | 67<br>100%                        | 67<br>100%                        | 134<br>100%  |

After making distinctions between participants’ expressions of disagreement as opposed to merely a dislike, we found that the relatively older group of self-help readers was more likely to challenge something the author had said. We coded dislikes in statements such as an objection to the writing style, dissatisfaction with the lack of examples provided, and feeling that the writing was too repetitious, moralistic, or didactic. We coded disagreements when readers actually contested a claim, concept, or method that an author suggested. The following examples highlight disagreements that the group over age 30 had with what they read:

I wasn’t very happy with the fact that he said that we should all follow his way or we will never be healthy. That is just not true. (Susan, 40)

The diet itself is difficult to follow (eating strictly protein for the first phase of 10 days or so, then alternating protein days with protein and vegetable days). I understand the concept and how it works, but question how healthy it is. (Janna, 34)

One thing I didn't agree with was that it talked badly about nihilism as if it is incompatible with resiliency. (Owen, 31)

I saw the value of focusing on strengths, but I thought it was impractical and unrealistic to believe that we shouldn't focus any energy on one's weaknesses. (Evan, 37)

On one hand, the book was really informative because it told me a lot about sleep and how to teach my baby to sleep. On the other hand, I felt some of the things they said in the book were ridiculous and way too rigid. (Anita, 33)

One of the points I disagreed with was that we are to consider all of our losses throughout all of our life to understand why we are reacting now to this loss. (Alyssa, 54)

Relatively older readers were nearly three times more likely than younger readers to express disagreement with self-help authors. This seems to be less likely the result of a generational tendency toward compliance among younger readers than the result of relatively older readers having a stronger base of experience and self-confidence to identify and express disagreement with authority figures such as self-help authors.

### **Conclusions**

In our interviews with 134 adults about their experience of informal learning through self-help reading, we found more similarities than differences between those readers who were 30 years of age and younger and those who were older than 30. Members of the two age categories had relatively similar learning goals, tended to complete the reading of their self-help book and engage in learning strategies beyond simply reading the text, experienced primarily linear learning pathways, and expressed relatively little disagreement with the authors of self-help books. There were some age differences. Relatively older readers were more likely to define explicit learning goals, engage deeply in the learning process, experience linear learning pathways, and express disagreement with authors.

We cannot authoritatively judge the two predominant interpretations of age differences in learning. It is plausible that maturation and life cycle changes explain the age differences we found, with older adults simply having had more time and experience to become purposive, deeply engaged, linear, and self-confident learners. It is also plausible that certain changes in patterns of experience between those born before and after 1982 explain the greater likelihood of younger readers to undertake reading without an explicit goal, to not finish reading a self-help book, to experience incomplete or incidental learning pathways, and to avoid expressing disagreement with authors. Overall, we argue that the relatively modest differences found in most aspects of learners' engagement with and outcomes from self-help reading support the maturational approach rather than the generational approach in explaining age differences.

Does age matter? We would say that it does, but not in a highly significant way when it comes to adults' informal learning through popular culture. Younger adults were more similar than different from older adults, and there was substantial variability within

each age category. It is likely that age differences would be more pronounced in institutional settings, where constraints related to logistical matters and interpersonal dynamics between students and instructors of various ages may be experienced differently by relatively younger and older students. However, when it comes to actual learning practices, there may be fewer differences between younger and older adults than is sometimes implied by those who adopt the popular demographic categories of Generation X, Y, and so forth. We found modest age differences in engagement with and outcomes from learning rather than any massive disjuncture between the generations.

This article has provided an interesting empirical portrait of adults engaged in informal learning projects and an important reminder to adult educators that learning processes are more similar than different among people of various ages. We have enriched the scholarly understanding of the concepts of self-directed learning and public pedagogy by providing empirical evidence that both relatively older and relatively younger adults engage in similar processes to access resources from popular culture and learn without the involvement of educational institutions.

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