The benefits of giving: a study of learning in the fourth age and the role of volunteer learning mentors

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Promoting Learning in the Fourth Age

The value of learning in later life?

- Terminology used (education/learning and formal/informal/nonformal learning)

- Later-life learning agenda; collaborating with other disciplines engaged in older people's issues

- Challenges in linking to concept of wellbeing and quality of life and gathering supporting evidence

- The interface between scientific research, policy and education practice, key points from the literature and pedagogies advocated

- LLL in later life involves attention to both *activity* and *process* to be effective

Prof. Know Why

Psychologically predisposed older people find it difficult to take to new gadgets readily.
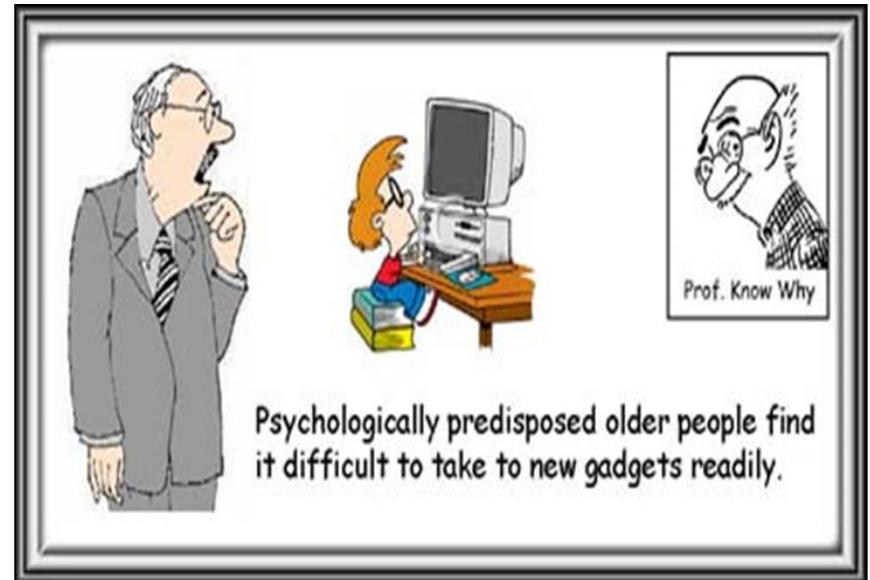
Independent Evaluation of L4A

What/How

- Funded by Silver Dreams
- November 2012 – April 2013
- In 3 care homes and domiciliary pilot settings
- Interviewed:

14 older people in care homes

10 in domiciliary

14 Learning Mentors – Volunteers

7 Care Home Staff including managers

6 L4A staff plus 4 Trustees

External voices including CQC, Care Commissioners, Educational Commissioners and 'Film Project' members

Complimented by desk top research

Aims

- How L4As interventions contributes to the health, wellbeing and process of ageing well.
- 2.   What conditions in participating care settings help and hinder any learning and development activity?
- 3.   What systems and processes (including governance) of L4A as an organisation work well and what needs modification, in terms of supporting most effectively the learning of older people in care settings?

Nature and degree of benefit for Older People

Benefit to residents:

- …learning new things (eg painting)
- …keeping the body active (eg the knitting group): learning for health
- …learning about what's going on in the world (eg discussion of news): learning for personal capability
- …keeping the mind active (eg exploring 'Tess of the d'Urbevilles')
- …stimulating affective learning, the process not the outcome (arts-based learning)
- …reflecting on a life well spent (through films, biography, stories)

and those receiving domiciliary services:

- …helping people to maintain their independence (eg social contact with other people)
- …skills and knowledge for survival (eg online shopping): learning for digital inclusion
- …is in tune with personalised and person centred support – led by individual/group
- …learning to understand other people (age/youth; ethnicity) to understand others
- …learning about self, how to connect and contribute and feel productive

"I look forward all week to her coming. Life here is unstimulating...I call her 'my sanity'; it saves me from being down in the dumps a lot or thinking am I going to get like everybody else. I'm very, very fortunate that I've got V."

(*Older person in care home*)

"If I get the hang of it, anyone else can then learn from me.....It's enjoyment, knowledge, I think it's more than passing the time, yes it's not just about passing the time" (*person learning to use an i-pad*).

"I'm convinced that if I can master this, it will give me a boost, a boost I need to get better again......I've got in my head the idea, if I attack something like this, and if you are successful in doing it, it will encourage other people in doing things. If you can get people to have a go where they don't think they can do it..." (*Older person with life-threatening illness*)

Nature and degree of benefit for Learning Mentors

Learning mentors are different from care staff , they…
- …are flexible (in cost and time)
- …provide direct tuition
- …listen and spend time
- …are young (which challenges stereotypes)
- …provide informal advice and support
- …can offer learning about new things
- …keep the mind active
- …offer reciprocity and generativity
- …offer advocacy and independence from day to day staff (and have 'independent authority')

Florence is 89 and losing her sight. Frustrated by this she thought L4A would offer a chance for stimulating conversation. She is not local but came to Leicester to look after her mother and remained in the area. A strong teaching career in higher education had left her with a love of working with young people. With almost no other family and her friends limited to ex colleagues and a church group, the care home seemed ideal as it provided activities. Shocked at the level of care other residents required, Florence realised that she missed intellectual conversation about culture and the social and political world which she had been used to. Florence received befriending help from a retired nurse, who gave her regular company and trips out, and she took part in group activities led by the enthusiastic young woman in charge of 'activities'. Something was missing in her life, though, and talking it over with the L4A staff she realised it was the company of young people engaged in learning, particularly young people from other cultures and countries.

 L4A found Florence a learning mentor who was a shy Korean student, 'Annie', who was studying international development at the university. The student was missing her family and she needed to improve her English. When they first met Florence realised how shy Annie was so immediately adopted her old teaching style, asking many questions about Annie herself and her country, her family and her studies. Annie blossomed in the relationship and began bringing Japanese artefacts for Florence to feel, telling her about her homesickness and her studies. Florence describes their relationship as very special and uplifting. 'I look forward to Annie's visits all week' she says. Annie has never missed a session in a year of visits and although both know the sessions will end, Annie is delighted to have found someone she can talk to 'like my grandmother, who I miss'. Each is learning about the other, their work, their world and their everyday activities.

Some surprising findings in relation to L4A's volunteer learning mentors?

It works best when organisations

- ...supports relationship between motivation and satisfaction (and altruism as a form of reciprocity)
- ...supports employability and life choices
- ...supports social kinship and reciprocity
- ...encourages mutual/co-learning
- ...there is support to improve quality of work
- ...recognises dual aims: to benefit client/mentor
- ...boosts 'critical reflection' on each session
- ...enhances meetings and exchange between mentors
- ...recognises the importance of youth and age meeting
- ....can offer substitute or compensation for other absent relationships (particularly for overseas students).

I think it's really important to think about the intrinsic value of volunteering and how that might be meaningful or...even in a small way life-changing for the volunteer as much as for … the other learner, the resident. So in my case we're both learners and we both probably learn as much from each other as… yes I'm in there to facilitate learning but it's an even more an egalitarian relationship because I am learning as well. (*Learning Mentor, 60*)

The optimum conditions in participating care settings which help and those which hinder learning and development activity.

Conundrum:
- Understanding/conceptualising 'learning' is problematic (for mentors), but key for everyone else

What helps:
- individual sessions (ie 'time for me')
- having a clear purpose(s) (eg 'to improve my drawing')
- **co-production** (eg 'to improve our drawing')
- coaching or skills acquisition (eg 'to learn to shop online')
- good use of equipment and materials (eg i-pad)
- Feeling valued and welcomed in the care setting (the informal relationships formed and free access).

Optimum conditions which help and hinder learning and development activity 2

What **hinders**:

- unexpected health issues of resident or absence of mentor
- lack of follow-through (and if mentor absent)
- lack of clear purpose or shape to the session
- irregular or infrequent interventions
- poor quality interventions
- lack of commitment to learning by care organisation
- infuriating or inadequate equipment
- compliance regime from CQC (external motivator not there)

The benefits of giving !!

- Learning between generations ('generativity'), seen as stimulating and successful by older people.

- Some OP appreciated the informal advice and support offered by learning mentors.

- 'Learning' as a purpose trumps 'befriending'

- The important dimension of reciprocity and form of kinship

- Learning mentors have 'independent authority' which merits discussing with mentors as part of their day to day contact.

- For learning mentors still studying, unexpected benefits included change to their future career intentions, life choices and courses, and employability benefits.

- Mentors learned a great deal and said so, co-learning and mutual benefit.

- Relationship between motives and satisfaction

Some concluding remarks

- Our reluctance to make altruism explicit and valued – deal with this in a supportive way

- Team around the older person, building capacity and skills in a co-productive way and encourage leadership in volunteers

- Significance of networking, building alliances and promoting critical reflection

- Value the impact of those on the receiving end on volunteers, embrace mutual or co-learning

Freire

- It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.

Generative Themes

- According to Paulo Freire, an epoch "is characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving towards their fulfilment". The concrete representation of these constitute the themes of the epoch. For example, we may say that in our society some of these themes would include the power of bureaucratic control or the social exclusion of the elderly and disabled. In social analysis these themes may be discovered in a concrete representation in which the opposite theme is also revealed (i.e., each theme interacts with its opposite).

- Easter Experience

- Paulo Freire says that "those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow for ambivalent behaviour… Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were."

- Dialogue