

1 Then, And Now

These are early thoughts about ReLearn, a research project that I have started work on since deciding in October not to re-register at London Institute of Education for 2011/12. I'm presently doing the research independently, but also exploring opportunities that could link it to MPhil/PhD. ReLearn, a study of "*retirement learning*", aims to build on both personal and academic interests. I'm in my 65th year and, after a 5-year period combining part-time work with study, I am now fully retired. I enjoy study, and the research process itself, and devote a lot of time to both.

The ILT In FE topic I worked on 2007-2011 through IoE (Gray, 2011) centred on issues drawn from my mainstream career, or from my post-retirement work for Microsoft. The topic was an obvious choice in 2007 and researching it taught me a lot: now, having left the IoE, I'm taking the opportunity to move in a new direction which better suits my 2012+ needs and priorities.

By focussing on issues that matter to me personally, now and into the future, ReLearn will encourage me to look forward rather than back, and to explore themes and use methods that I can sustain, whether my research becomes part of a formal MPhil/PhD undertaking or not.

2 The Research

The seeds of ReLearn were sown in my mind by Facer's (2011) observation that today's "*ageing populations and beanpole families*" lead to a need for rebalancing of "*working, learning and caring*" elements in the experiences of retired people, as a consequence of the "*potential implications of population ageing and a new uncertainty about the security of the intergenerational contract*".

Such uncertainty about the situation of retired people seems to be growing – prompted by the arrival of the post-war baby boomers at "normal" retirement age, and highlighted by recent debate about youth unemployment, student fees, pensions, social care and the NHS.

The Learning Lives "*Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course*" research programme (TLRP, 2008) brought together a picture of "*what learning means and does in the lives of adults*".

The Leeds University team involved in the programme looked at "*people's experiences of retirement and the centrality of learning to them*", seeing an understanding of the "*Learning As Acquisition Or As Becoming*" dichotomy (Hodkinson *et al*, 2008, p.177) as necessary to make sense of learning's role in a changing Third Age context.

Within the wide range of interest prompted above, I'm in no rush to prematurely narrow research options. I don't presently have specific research questions, and they might get in the way just now. I know that the central focus of the research will be the *experience of/attitudes to/involvement in formal/informal learning of people in my own age group* and I expect that focussed lines of enquiry will emerge from exploratory fieldwork.

Exploratory fieldwork will consist of in-depth and open-ended interviews with an opportunity sample of around 10 narrators. To identify this sample I plan to use personal contacts (and hope to get help from networks like the local University of the Third Age), whilst well aware of the potentially flawed validity of generalisation from such a sample (Brown and Dowling, 1998, p.30).

The research approach could be characterised as a "*quasi grounded theory*" [GT] approach (Grbich, 2007, p.20), adopting the "*constant comparison*" principle central to GT (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) but avoiding the methodological purity sometimes associated with it, and whilst remaining alert to prevent the GT label becoming camouflage for sloppy methods (Suddaby, 2006).

As an important part of my own search for Third age "*meaning*" (Weiss and Bass, 2002), ReLearn's primary purpose is personal as I, like all my contemporaries, look back on my professional career (Vaillant, 2007).

However, at this time of societal soul-searching about the implications of our "*greying population*", it may well have broader relevance (van der Veen, 2010), especially given the reported lack of research in the area (Chatzitheochari and Arber, 2011).

3 Methods

In-depth interviews (Yow, 2005) and document analysis (McCulloch, 2004; Rapley, 2007) are expected to be the primary data gathering tools for the ReLearn study. The bulk of ReLearn data will be textual, derived from documents of various kinds or from transcripts of recorded interviews. Such data will be amenable to qualitative data analysis using NVivo (Bazeley, 2007) both to manage the transcription of recorded interviews *and* to code and analyse content. Transcriptions will be carried out personally, recognising the inherent complexity of the transcription process (as analysed by Bucholtz, 1999). Data analysis will initially help to identify emerging research questions, and later help build theory and perhaps offer generalisations based on the data.

Given the in-depth interview approach and the character of the ReLearn cohort, ethical and legal aspects of ReLearn will need careful consideration. Independent research would be done along OHS guidelines (Oral History Society, 2011) but, in the event of linkage to an MPhil/PhD programme, there may be need to adjust methods to comply with applicable university codes. Essentially pragmatic, I'm quite happy to use survey methods too, should they become useful.

4 Readings

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