

LIFELONG LEARNERS: ESSENTIAL CONTRIBUTORS TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION LIVING AND LEARNING COMMUNITY

Kelly McKENNA, Colorado State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

This project is an exploratory study of lifelong learners and their contribution within a diverse learning community engaged in experiential learning while sailing around the world. This higher education organization consists of a unique learning environment in which a diverse student population comprised of students of all ages, from across the globe, live and learn alongside faculty, staff, and administration. This shipboard community is engaged in a joint enterprise designed to integrate education with exposure to a variety of cultures, people, and experiences. One subset of the academic community includes lifelong learners; these individuals bring generational diversity and professional expertise to the learning community, including the other students, “ship kids” and undergraduates, on board the voyage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A community of learners requires that a group of students be “engaged in intellectual interaction.” (Cross 1998, p. 4). These three elements (i.e. engagement, intellectuality, and interaction) can be mapped into the three key elements of a community of inquiry – social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). At this high functioning level of community, students not only feel welcome, comfortable, and connected, but they engage each other in rigorous discourse and dialogue; they are motivated and encouraged through professional guidance; and they build camaraderie through participation in casual, or non-formal, social interactions (Brown, 2001).

Adult learners are required to balance a variety of roles: student, family member, and employee, making student not their primary appointment (Flannery & Apps, 1987). Yet, participation by adults in formal higher education continues to escalate (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). They come to this educational environment with diverse and disproportionate prior experience (Long, 2004) and participate throughout their adult lives.

METHODS

Participants and Setting

This study was conducted on a ship that acts as a floating university campus. It was a semester long voyage where college students participated in classes from professors in a variety of disciplines. During the semester, the ship docked in ten countries where the voyagers participated in experiential learning classes and field programs similar to excursions. Also studying on the ship are “ship kids”, children of the faculty and staff, and lifelong learners. Having this multigenerational learning community creates a support system for all participants and promotes learning through collaboration and the exchange of ideas, experiences, and

expertise. The lifelong learners are an essential element to the classes they audit (they do not receive college credit) and to this community. The organization stipulates that Lifelong Learners are 30+ years old, unless they are lifelong learning children accompanied by their parents, adult lifelong learners. The Spring 2019 lifelong learner population included adult learners from 34-78. Sixteen lifelong learners were registered for the semester long voyage, as well as an additional nine spotlight voyagers, these were lifelong learners who participated in a portion of the voyage - typically five-six weeks long. Fourteen lifelong learners and two spotlight voyagers participated in the study. Of the 16 lifelong learner participants, half were repeaters and had participated in previous voyages, although some of these were participants on brief voyages for special occasions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Lifelong learners were surveyed regarding their expectations for the voyage and at the end of the voyage regarding their experiences on the voyage. In addition to the surveys, informal conversational interviews took place throughout the voyage. The study was exploratory and the focus of the study was concerning the living learning community and the lifelong learners' role in this community.

Analysis of the data was initiated through the process of rudimentary analysis in order to record ideas as the data was collected and then progressed into the analysis phase of the research process (Merriam, 1998). A systematic coding process then began on the surveys completed by participants and the conversational interviews the lifelong learners participated in. This collection of data was all coded for the emergence of themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A qualitative analysis of the data collected produced the emergence of five themes, including 1. A focus on the significance of the students, 2. A common goal among the community of learners, 3. Extended family priority, 4. Multigenerational learning benefits, and 5. Experiential learning beyond the classroom. Participants in the study consistently discussed the significant role the college students played in their experiences on the voyage being a positive one: "I like the community, especially students." One participant, Nelle, was a repeat voyager and had previously participated in voyages with and without college students and commented that she would not participate in voyages without the college students as the experiences were not as fulfilling. Other repeat voyagers commented on their continued relationships with students from voyages years earlier. These students became friends with their entire family. One family of lifelong learners even had a student from an earlier voyage join them as a lifelong learner for this voyage. Several repeat lifelong learners mentioned that the students were the reason they were interested in participating again. Although repeat voyagers appeared to be familiar with the intense relationships they would build with the college students, first time voyagers did not comment on this expectation in their initial surveys, and it was clear in the end of voyage surveys that they were surprised by these relationships: "I was surprised how much the students desired to connect with me and how I enjoyed that connection" (Robyn). Often the relationships with students was listed as the "most memorable aspect" of the experience. Multiple lifelong learners commented on their relationships with students being more important than the relationships they had with other lifelong learners. One participant, Nelle stated, "I am equally, if not more, engaged with the students than with the other lifelong learners."

Lifelong learners participate in the voyage for a variety of reasons. For some, they are now retired so have the time and financial means to travel and like the educational component of this particular trip. For others, they participated in the program as college students and enjoy reliving the experience. However, the learning aspect associated with this program is definitely a draw. The idea of a common goal among the community of learners was a theme that emerged during the data analysis phase. The initial survey included questions regarding expectations for the voyage, including what they “expect to learn from this experience” and “expectations regarding the shipboard community”. The narratives often included the idea of communal and individual learning experiences and growth. Carrie’s expectations included becoming “a cohesive entity & grow together by sharing our cultural experiences & opinions.” She also offered advice regarding this common goal for the voyage stating, “students are experiencing everything for the first time and it would be good for LLL’s to be on a 1st time journey as a community.” This idea of a common goal of learning was considered in Jerry’s discussion of the learning community being a, “group of people connected by an interest in learning. It may encompass people interested in different subjects but requires the general mindset that there is something still to be learned.”

The lifelong learners coordinate the Extended Family Program onboard the ship. The program assigns college students to a “parent”. This parent may be a lifelong learner or lifelong learner family or a staff or faculty member and their family. The program acts as a support system for the college students as they have very limited access to their families at home. Family formations are intentional, attempting to pair students with parents and siblings they are not already connected with. For example, a faculty member is not assigned any of their students. The lifelong learners coordinate family dinners and events (i.e. Extended Family Feud). Families are also encouraged to facilitate their own gatherings as well, such as game nights, meals, movies etc. The program is optional, but during this particular voyage, the students overwhelmingly participated, compelling most adults (lifelong learners, faculty, staff, and administrators) to take on a family of six-eight students. It appears the majority of lifelong learners participated in this program and had very positive experiences as they repeatedly referenced their extended families and the various experiences they had together including knitting, travel, walks, fancy dinners, etc. In fact, the extended family was the impetus for one lifelong learner to return and sail again: “I loved the energy of the students on board and the LLL Extended Family Program. I wanted to experience these things again that so enriched my life” (Carrie). Nelle too thoroughly enjoyed the Extended Family Program referring to it in the end of voyage survey as the most memorable experience: “my extended family and the meals, craft projects, conversations and sharing between and amongst all 7 of us. Love having a family and those relationships.”

The extended family is just one reminder of the multigenerational learning experiences that happen on board the voyage. The benefit of this multigenerational learning community was the fourth theme to emerge during analysis of the lifelong learners’ surveys and interviews. One faculty member had four-year-old twins sailing with her and the oldest lifelong learner to participate in this study was 78. So, between the “ship kids” and the Lifelong Learners, this floating campus is definitely a multigenerational learning community. It is as common to witness college students tutoring the “ship kids” as it is for the college students to engage a lifelong learner in discussions about how they choose a career or how best to start a business. Every individual has an expertise that can be contributed to the community. Sally summed it up nicely in the following quote: “a group of people learning, teaching, experiencing together. All ages is a bonus.” Moreover, individuals from each of the various groups (“ship kids”, college students, faculty, staff, administrators, and lifelong learners) learn together both on and off the ship. Each of the aforementioned groups can participate in classes, lecture series, evening seminars, and

field programs, although the learning experiences may differ and/or what is experienced depends on the individual. "There are many, many learning opportunities with the program. Perhaps I did not take advantage of as many as I might have, but because of my age (70 y.o.) and my situation, I am content to experience some issues vicariously through students. This program makes that possible." (Sally).

An experience that extends beyond the traditional classroom to include experiential learning both on the ship and in port was the final theme to emerge. Lifelong learners have the opportunity to audit the various classes offered for the college students. These classes include a range of subjects (business, psychology, oceanography, education, writing, etc.) and are all classes offered at and approved by the partner university (a Research One institution). In addition, they have the opportunity to participate in or lead any number of other learning experiences the voyage offers such as the evening seminars each night that may focus on one of the port countries, personal improvement, environmental responsibilities, or numerous other areas of interest. There are also the various clubs that organize on board and educate other participants in their area of interest (religious organizations, news clubs, card game groups, exercise classes, etc.), and the community building events that take place on the ship such as the Sea Olympics (a comical Olympics with events such as Cheeto beards and Frozen t-shirt thawing) or Neptune Day (a maritime ritual when crossing the equator). Carrie highlighted this notion: "the learning community encompasses so much more than the traditional classroom setting ... the shipboard community is the key to advanced learning." Finally, experiential learning happens in port. The semester-long voyage visited ten countries. Voyagers are free to spend their time in port in any way they choose. However, there are organized field programs, similar to excursions, that the organization offers. Like all the learning experiences on the voyage, it is common to find participants from "ship kids" to lifelong learners on these field programs and participating in "independent travel" together. This time in country is an important aspect of the experiential learning opportunity provided on the voyage as classes are designed to integrate the various port countries into the class content. Although the organized programs require less personal planning and preparation than independent travel, due to the nature of visiting foreign countries and developing nations the time in port can be challenging. "I enjoyed the contrast between the comfort of the ship & discomfort of radically different shore time" (Robyn).

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study researched lifelong learners, and in particular one participant group of a semester-long educational voyage and their function in the shipboard community. This research was completed through a series of surveys with open-ended questions and conversational interviews with the researcher, a faculty member on the voyage. Analysis of the data highlighted the emergence of five themes: student impact, communal purpose, extended family, and multigenerational and experiential learning. Although other participant groups were not formally studied as an element of this project, it is clear from informal interactions that the lifelong learners are significantly valued by all community members and are an integral component of the shipboard community. This unique experience creates a multigenerational learning community designed to educate outside of the traditional classroom, and the lifelong learners are a significant educational resource contributing their wealth of knowledge and experience for the other voyage participants while also continuing their own lifelong learning.

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