

Leisure informal learning in educational programmes¹

Introduction

We understand leisure as an integral part of an individual's experience and a fundamental human right. Free time is an aspect of human development, predominated by freedom of choice and expression and the freedom to carry out non-utilitarian tasks.

Today, education systems must adapt to the changes that these new times are generating. These changes include a higher life expectancy, and greater personal development through leisure. The family and the environment are also increasingly attuned with the educational situation, enabling educational systems to become more flexible.

Enjoying leisure implies satisfaction with oneself, keeping one's mind active and enjoyment, all of which lead to an enhanced quality of life and greater personal autonomy.

Leisure experiences

Leisure and personal development imply, a priori, freedom and equal opportunities, and the possibility for personal enrichment. Leisure may be defined as time for oneself, time that each person uses effectively and in a rewarding way.

Having opportunities for leisure is a fundamental human right that enhances quality of life as, among other things, it helps to improve personal autonomy in various facets of daily life (physical, functional, cognitive, emotional, social, etc.). Recreational activities are also a way of improving community inclusion in a pleasant way, thereby benefiting their opportunities in other areas.

Leisure can raise quality of life by increasing the degree of satisfaction that a person obtains from the lifestyle imposed by the society in which he or she lives. It is also related to the concept of well being. The potential availability of free time today is now considered as another variable with which to measure quality of life (Setién, 2000).

The main dimensions of leisure are recreational, environmental, creative, festive and supportive. Creative leisure includes the arts, adventure sports, new sports, hobbies; recreational leisure activities encompass walking, taking part in sports, etc. Culture, tourism, sport and recreation can be considered as areas of leisure.

An optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) is when a person perceives that he or she wants to and must do something that he or she is capable of doing. The interest of the leisure experience does not lie so much in the type of activity, but rather in the challenges it presents the person and the enjoyment obtained from achieving them.

The impact of leisure as a satisfactory experience goes beyond the personal and the individual to community and social levels. Leisure experiences as generators of experiences that tend to be repeated and improve the satisfaction they provide are sources of individual and social human development.

Worldwide, the proportion of elderly people is growing faster than any other age group. Life expectancy is increasing, and in Spain currently stands at about 80 years, and as a consequence the Spanish population as a whole is ageing. This ageing of the population can be considered as a major challenge involving greater social and economic demands.

The development of educational programmes that enhance the quality of life of the elderly in all its dimensions is one of the basic objectives in which public administrations, universities and research centres, and all civil society institutions, should collaborate in a coordinated manner.

We must work towards a flexible and adaptable university, where new ICTs are institutionalised in the process of teaching and dissemination of knowledge, with a new type of student and where new functions are developed for the university.

¹ Mónica Sales Giner. Universitat Jaume I. Spain

Universities must engage as educational institutions and ensure access to knowledge for society as a whole.

The education of the elderly, from the university perspective, must be seen as a new response from these universities to the new challenges and social demands, to the existence of a new social group and to the possibility of lifelong learning.

University education programmes for the elderly could be included within what Stebbins (2004) has termed 'serious leisure', since these programmes include the six features highlighted below:

- Need to remain active;
- Find an occupation based on effort;
- Significant personal effort based on the knowledge, training and/or skills acquired;
- Lasting benefits: regeneration or renewal of self, improved self-image, social integration;
- The single ethos that grows around itself, a central component of an extraordinary social world in which participants can nourish their leisure and free time interests;
- Tendency to identify with the activities chosen.

The programme of the Senior Citizens University of Castellón in Spain offers a range of studies for students over 55 years. The Senior Citizens University, responding to the demand of a growing segment of the population, has offered these courses since the 1998-1999 academic year, aimed at people who, for various reasons, could not go to university when they were younger, or who want to return to study and reconnect with university academic activities. The aim is to promote personal development skills and values from the perspective of lifelong learning.

The Senior Citizens University's programme consists of core credits and credits corresponding to language, technological and analytical skills, equivalent to learning new technologies and English. This academic programme also includes extracurricular activities, which take place outside the university context but are attached to it. These activities fall outside the curriculum but can potentially complement every person's general education, and include activities such as a hiking club, a drama group and a choir.

In addition, the students' education programme also offers socio-cultural activities that broaden students' education outside the classroom, such as visits to museums or cities of cultural interest, etc. These activities should be understood as outdoor classes, where art or history are taught through observation, without books. They also provide a magnificent opportunity to learn about our immediate historical and artistic heritage, to study it in greater depth and to develop subjects previously studied and explored in class.

"Walking is the best recipe to reach old age" Monica Rerelu.

Hiking could be encouraged by interest in health training activities and by maintaining a healthier quality of life.

It aims to improve student's physical capacities and cognitive functioning. Similarly, hiking involves aerobic training to improve the executive function and the speed with which information is processed. In addition this group activity helps to improve social relations and the enjoyment they can bring.

The drama group allows participants to recover sensory and perceptive capacities, exercise their memories, recover physical contact with their peers, revalue creativity, improve precision, restart their cognitive system, foster the group experience and solidarity, and build new links and re-establish lost ones.

It aims to improve quality of life through involvement in stimulating, creative and highly significant activities.

By conceiving of theatre as play, among the elderly it fulfils a social and cultural function by allowing them to experience the pleasure of sharing a common activity, and satisfying the ideals of expression and socialisation. It also gives them the pleasure of physical and mental well-being. Socio-cultural re-vitalisation emerges as a way of organising free time, as well as constituting a means for personal and group emancipation through culture. Socio-cultural

animation and leisure education are not exactly the same thing, but the former gives rise to situations of educational leisure, as well as offering possibilities for participation, permanent learning and cultural creation.

Conclusions

The present and the future of our society is characterised by a growing proportion of elderly citizens, and the increase of the number of people over the age of 65 years arouses concerns about their quality of life and the need to strengthen informal and community support structures.

A set of educational activities should be carried out that are designed to promote cognitive and relational sustenance and stimulation that favour constructive ageing.

Culture is an attitude, a process that has to be experienced from inside; a process that gradually culminates in a more active, creative and autonomous life.

In the area of seniors' education, teaching and culture form an indivisible whole. The aim and horizon of this whole is to favour personal and group identity.

In the area of leisure education as an important element of personal development, there is a persistent trend to consider leisure as a consumer activity, and any educational endeavour must be aware of this.

Leisure is based on principles of self-determination, of participation in social and cultural change, and the collective maturity of local communities.

The main aims of seniors' education involve shaping personal development that includes assimilating today's culture and taking advantage of leisure opportunities to achieve a higher quality of life.

Source

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