

Research on the Implication of Elderly Education From the Perspective of Active Aging

FAN Zhenghui^{[a],*}

^[a]Community College of Taizhou Radio and Television University, Zhejiang, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

With economic development and social progress, more and more countries in the world have stepped into an aging society. The concept of active aging has also been recognized by the governments of many countries. China is also facing the problem of population aging. There have been great developments in elderly education in China in the past few decades. However, there is still an imbalance between the society’s increasing demand for elderly education and the supply side of elderly education. The traditional model of elderly education cannot meet the requirements of the development of the new era. It is necessary to learn from the feasible practices of other countries, and combine the possibilities brought by the rapid development of information technology in the new era, to innovate the education for the elderly for the aim of achieving the life-long growth of individual lives, and the realization of sustainable development of society.

Key words: Active aging; Elderly education; Limitation; Innovation

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INTRODUCTION

China has entered a society with an aging population in 1999, and the proportion of the elderly population is still increasing year by year. According to statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics, at the end of 2019, the number of elderly people over 60 in China was 253.88 million, accounting for 18.1% of the total population; among them, there were 176.03 million people aged 65 and over, accounting for 12.6% of the total population. Due to the development of modern economy and society, the family structure has undergone great changes. The traditional family model of several generations living together is no longer common. The nuclear family model is more and more common. Under this family model, the number of empty-nest elderly people are increasing quickly, this has become a social problem that cannot be ignored. According to the introduction of the first National Intelligent Elderly Care Strategy Seminar held in 2012, the proportion of empty-nest elderly in China is already very large. By 2050, the elderly living alone and empty-nest elderly in China will account for more than 54%. A survey shows that the proportion of empty-nest elderly people with psychological problems is as high as 60%. With the development of China’s economy, the material life of the elderly has been greatly improved, but the spiritual life is still relatively scarce. Education of the elderly has received more and more attention from governments at all levels in recent years, for example, in 2016, the “Opinions of the Ministry of Education and Other Nine Departments on Further Promoting the Development of Community Education” proposed to “vigorously develop elderly education and regard elderly education as the key tasks of community education.” However, the elderly who can participate in elderly education still account for only a small part of the elderly population. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education in 2017, there are only more than 7 million elderly people studying in institutions such as senior universities. Actively responding to the

challenges brought about by the aging of the population is an important mission of education for the elderly. Under the background that the concept of active aging has been widely accepted by countries all over the world, innovating the paradigm of education for the elderly has positive practical significance.

1. THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVE AGING

Due to better medical and health care conditions in modern society, declining infant mortality rates, healthier foods, and a reduction in heavy manual labor, life expectancy worldwide is increasing, resulting in a higher proportion of the elderly people in the population. With the development of society and economy, compared with previous generations, today's elderly people are better educated, wealthier economically, and have better health conditions. "Old" no longer means "poor and weak". Volunteer work, lifelong learning, study tours, and participation in sports can make old age life rich and colorful. The World Health Organization first put forward the concept of active aging, advocating for the elderly to better participate in social life. Active aging includes health, participation and protection, the core of which is participation. Active aging is a positive social construction that enables the elderly to maintain good health, value, and dignity, and to participate in society with a positive attitude, thereby continuing to contribute to society. Governments all over the world advocate active aging, because active aging advocates an active lifestyle that can promote the health of the elderly, thereby reducing the tax burden on the government caused by aging and frailty. Yang Yifan (2019) proposes a positive aging innovation path to improve the social pension system, to develop education for the elderly, and to cultivate the positive qualities of the elderly. The elderly can still play an active role in the economic field. Promoting the development of the silver economy is a realistic way to deal with the reduction of the population labor dividend. The participation of the elderly in reemployment not only contributes to the improvement of economic conditions, but also enables the elderly to maintain their enthusiasm for life, thereby improving the quality of life. Elderly people with mental health can live more actively, so there is a strong correlation between mental health and active aging. Many elderly people have the desire to continue learning. Learning can help them develop a more positive attitude and participate more in social life. The realization of active aging requires the active role of education for the elderly to be brought into play.

2. THE POSITIVE ROLE OF EDLERLY EDUCATION

On November 3, 2015, UNESCO held its 38th conference and released the "Education 2030 Framework for Action",

proposing that the mission of education is inclusiveness, fairness and lifelong learning for all. Elderly education should also be aimed at achieving this mission. Education is one of the important values in life, represents the beauty in life, and is a right that should benefit everyone. Nowadays, most people still have good physical and mental health at retirement age, so they can actively participate in various social activities. However, to maintain this good state for as long as possible, an active lifestyle is required. Elderly education not only represents a positive way of aging, but also one of the means to find a way of life, life value, and learning opportunities. In the past 50 years, people's widespread attention to lifelong education has undoubtedly led to the expansion of learning opportunities for the elderly. The positive impact of learning on the elderly has also been reflected in many studies.

2.1 Learning Helps to Delay the Aging Process

In the context of the ever-increasing population aging, how to delay the aging process and how to help individuals maintain physical functions and productivity for a longer period of time have far-reaching significance for the development of personal life and the sustainable development of society. Aging is caused by a variety of factors such as heredity, experience, external environment and internal environment, and is characterized by the decline or loss of physical and mental abilities. Compared with physiological age, aging is more related to physical function status. The state of individual physical functions is closely related to a person's health literacy. The psychological changes caused by aging are one of the most important factors among all factors. With age, learning ability will decline to a certain extent, but in many cases, the magnitude of this decline is not obvious. Not all aspects decline during the aging process. For example, although muscle strength, vitality, and reaction speed will decrease with age, skills tend to increase over time and long-term practice. If one keeps his mind active through the training of intelligence and creative imagination, he may achieve outstanding results even in his seventies or eighties (Donahue, 1955). Learning can improve the health of the elderly and slow down the process of aging. Learning can also help the elderly to take on other important roles, such as serving as community volunteers, helping their children take care of their offspring, and acting as caregivers for other elderly people. The social life of the elderly who actively participate in learning is more active because they devote more time and energy to community affairs. Studies have shown that persisting in learning can maintain learning ability, and people who have been actively learning throughout their lives have little loss in learning ability in old age. As we age, the decline in intelligence is more likely to be caused by too little use of the brain rather than too much use. Only by maintaining activity and alertness can the brain function

well. Maintaining the habit of learning can enable the elderly to adapt to changes in social life and achieve harmony with the environment.

2.2 Elderly Education Helps Reduce the Feeling of Alienation Among the Elderly

The population growth and the alienation of urban life make individuals more responsible for finding meaning for them. With the increase of geographic and social mobility, the randomness of interaction between people increases, long-term contacts and personal feedback decrease, which makes it more likely to lead to psychological isolation. The temporal and emotional separation of the elderly from their family and friends and the emptiness after retiring from work may lead to the elderly feeling psychologically alienated. Most elderly people are not incapacitated, nor have they left society because of retirement, but if society does not provide them with other development possibilities, it is difficult for them to remain active and socially involved, and they may become more and more separated from society. They may become weaker due to lack of activity. Elderly education creates opportunities for the elderly to form learning groups, meet new friends, and increase social participation, thereby reducing the feeling of alienation among the elderly.

2.3 Elderly Education Is the Need for Continuous Growth

If you divide your life into three stages, the first stage is focused on learning, the second stage is focused on work, and the third age after retirement is the prime time for individuals to continue to develop and live an active life. People need to continue to accept challenges, this is a continuous learning process. Constantly learning new and different skills and knowledge is the need for personal growth for life. Accepting challenges, making continuous progress, and gaining a sense of accomplishment, these needs and desires that were originally met at work often need to be met by other activities after retirement. Society has the responsibility to provide people of all ages with opportunities to develop their full potential in order to maintain their dignity and realize their self-worth. Through participation in education, the elderly can re-inspire their interest in life, and it is possible to transform it into a contribution to the well-being of others.

3. LIMITATIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL MODEL FOR THE ELDERLY

3.1 The Capacity of Traditional Elderly Education Is Limited

In China's earliest elderly education colleges, the majority of the students are retired cadres. In fact, almost all senior colleges are currently located in cities, and most senior

citizens living in towns and rural areas find it difficult to attend elderly education. In recent years, the Open University for the Elderly, established on the basis of the Radio and Television University, provides more learning opportunities for the elderly people. However, due to the limitations of school venues and teachers, the elderly education provided still cannot meet the needs of the growing number of elderly people.

3.2 The Content of the Courses Is Relatively Simple

The content of traditional education courses for the elderly is relatively simple, mainly for entertainment. Due to the different life experiences and backgrounds of the elderly, their interest in learning and learning methods are broader and more diverse than those of the younger generation. No single model can satisfy the diverse interests, the different requirements, and learning approaches of the elderly. With the improvement of the education level of retirees and the improvement of economic conditions, the demand for education for the elderly has increased, and has become increasingly diversified. With the popularization of higher education, the educational level of people entering the elderly stage is getting higher and higher, and they have higher expectations for elderly education, and the curriculum of elderly education needs to be adjusted according to the education level of the elderly. Due to the limitations of numbers of teachers and venues available for elderly education, it is difficult for the elderly education institutions to meet the learning needs of the elderly with different levels of education.

3.3 The Collective Teaching Model Is Difficult to Meet Individual Needs

Although the elderly people have basically maintained the ability to learn, as they grow older, their learning speed will slow down. Adult learners can be expected to obtain good learning results, but as they grow older, it may take longer to achieve the same learning results. Older people suffer more frustration when they fail to succeed than younger people. When teaching in a face-to-face class, it is difficult for the teacher to take care of the level and progress of each student, and it is not uncommon for the students with weak receptive ability to feel frustrated. For some elderly people, because they need to do housework and take care of the babies for their children, although they want to go to senior college to study, they may not be able to spare a fixed time. Therefore, the traditional old-age education model lacks the flexibility of time arrangement and cannot meet the individualized learning needs of students.

4. INNOVATE THE ELDERLY EDUCATION

In the context of the ever-increasing degree of population aging, it has positive practical significance to explore

new ways of education for the elderly that meets the development requirements of the new era from the perspective of active aging. In order to innovate the elderly education, it is necessary to look at the elderly education from a new perspective, and the elderly education should be studied under the background of active aging. This requires that the elderly education be raised to the height of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning includes all forms of learning, including formal school learning, learning in non-formal training institutions and learning in informal settings. "Learning" is the process of constructive transformation of information and experience into knowledge, insights and skills. Elderly education is not only a question of how to help the elderly use their leisure time meaningfully. Elderly education involves knowledge of physiology, psychology, and sociology, and is actually a comprehensive education framework involving many disciplines. Its basic goal is to promote the happiness of the elderly through an environment that is conducive to the creative use of the leisure time, talents and abilities of the elderly, to promote satisfactory interpersonal relationships, and help them learn to assume new roles that are valuable and meaningful to both individuals and communities. Other goals include promoting the development of good healthy habits and encouraging older people to participate in voluntary services, stimulating people's continued interest in self-education, and participating in various group activities and recreational activities. Usually, people's fear of aging, rather than the aging process itself, leads to psychological aging. Therefore, an important aspect of elderly education is life education, which will help the elderly calmly accept the challenges of old age. In view of the imbalance between the current supply side of education for the elderly and the society's demand for education for the elderly, it is necessary to establish a self-help atmosphere for the education of the elderly, which requires people to change their views on learning for the elderly. The expansion of learning opportunities for the elderly is not because the elderly people have been marginalized and should be compensated, but because the society requires a new learning paradigm as a whole. In this case, it is necessary to reconstruct the education paradigm for the elderly.

4.1 Learn From the UK's Third-Age Universities to From a Self-Help Model for Elderly Education

Peter Laslett described the latest demographic and sociological changes in the book "A New Map of Life" (1996) with regard to the emergence of the new "third age". Laslett pointed out that until the 20th century, most adults were in the "second age" while working and caring for their families, and then usually had to rely on others for a short period of time, became debilitated, and eventually died. In the 20th century, with the implementation of mandatory retirement, the provision of state-sponsored pensions, and the increased life expectancy due to better

health care conditions, the demographic structure has undergone major changes, and people in industrialized countries have begun to experience the "third age", this is a healthy, positive, self-fulfilling life stage after the second age (independence, maturity and responsibility) of life, and before the final stage of dependence on others, aging and death (Laslett, 1996). One of the UK's largest learning institutions for seniors in the third age is the Third Age University (U3A), which was established in 1981 to provide general education services for seniors. The third-age university provides non-professional education for general and special interests for the elderly. In many countries and regions, it has more than 20 years of experience in running schools (Schuller & Bostyn, 1992). The main goal of the third-age university is to enable the elderly to adapt to physical, psychological, and social changes and obtain sustainable development; adapt to changes in life, such as changes brought about by new technologies; strengthen intergenerational dialogue and communication.

U3A in the United Kingdom adopts a bottom-up elderly education model, which encourages senior students to make their own learning agreements and recommend members to guide the learning of the study group. In essence, U3A is a self-help organization. The education programs are drawn up by the elderly themselves, and they actively participate in the design and planning of the activities. U3A has clearly deviated from the school education tradition. Every U3A is a member of the alliance, and they have the right to make their own decisions (Formosa, 2010). Most U3As are initiated by local senior citizens and are characterized by self-sufficiency and self-direction. The reason why U3A has successfully developed the third-age customer base is that it reduces many barriers that previously prevented older learners from participating in elderly education. U3A has no awards, no exams, and no admission requirements, only the excitement and vitality of ideas shared between participants. In terms of themes and activities, U3A in the UK is a "buffet model". In the buffet, customers can choose what they want to eat and only pay for what they eat. Since there is no fixed menu, customers can only choose the food they like. U3A is based on topics, which means that members can choose the courses they want to study. U3A provides a relatively large range of subjects, ranging from humanities (such as philosophy, psychology, literature, etc.) to various hobby training based on personal interests or craft-based activities.

As for the relationship between teachers and students, U3A reflects the interchangeability of the roles of teachers and students. If the roles are interchangeable, the concept of teachers and students will be more similar to mentors and participants. In the teacher-centered teaching method, the learner is subordinate, and the teacher stipulates what to learn, when and how to learn; while in adult education, learners tend to be independent, and the students' learning

is mainly self-directed, while the teachers encourage and cultivate students' autonomous learning ability (Jarvis, 1985, p.67). Most students of U3A have professional backgrounds and their education level is relatively high. In most cases, the leader of the study group is a retired scholar, teacher or professional. U3A students can share their knowledge and skills as a mentor or group leader at one time, and at another time as a student in another class. In the UK, self-help movements such as U3A provide a popular opportunity for people to meet like-minded people, make friends, and reduce loneliness in the long run. In the UK, where the proportion of people living alone is very high, the social function of U3A is obviously very important. Education for the elderly should form a social atmosphere in which the elderly can help themselves to receive education and achieve learning. The successful operation of U3A shows that the elderly people have great potential to share their knowledge and organize learning. With the increase in the number of educated people among the elderly, it is of great practical significance to promote this self-help elderly education model in China.

4.2 Develop Online Virtual Education

U3A in the United Kingdom is trying to expand its virtual learning program through the use of the Internet. This reflects changes in society and changes in the learning needs of participants. The third-age virtual university provides a new alternative to traditional classroom teaching for the elderly. It is based on new communication technologies and the use of the Internet, combining elements of distance education and e-learning. (Van de Vord, 2010, pp.170-175) Virtual education has virtual characteristics: multimedia courses only exist in electronic form, and may never actually take place in real classrooms, and it is impossible to carry out in this form. Multimedia courses contain videos from real lectures, but their main value lies in the ability to present special videos taken outdoors or in the laboratory, including details observed with a microscope or telescope, drawn diagrams, scientific pictures, computer animations, etc. Virtual education mainly provides learning opportunities for students who cannot participate in traditional classroom teaching due to various reasons. The content of the multimedia lectures, as well as the generated tests, outlines, questions raised by teachers, discussion forums or further learning materials are displayed on the virtual education portal. Registered students can access the virtual education materials on the portal at any time. Learners can watch the whole lecture content or part of the lecture content repeatedly according to their needs; there is no restriction on location, time or learning background. After completing the generated test, students will immediately get feedback on their understanding and mastery of the learning content. During the test, students can return to the lecture at any time to study and test at their own pace without any time limit or pressure. Learners can ask

questions within a period of time after the course content is launched. Compared with the question-and-answer session immediately after the traditional classroom, the time for thinking is prolonged and students can have time to think fully. As far as traditional classroom teaching is concerned, students can only master the classroom content through notes and on-site memory. The classroom content cannot be listened to repeatedly. Even if there are printed learning materials, it cannot completely replace the teacher's lecture. Compared with traditional classroom teaching, the main teaching advantage of the virtual education method is that the content of the class can be played repeatedly and the learning progress can be controlled freely.

The main contribution of the third-age virtual university lies in its unconditional accessibility, that is, places that cannot achieve traditional face-to-face teaching in the third-age university due to lack of teachers or inconvenient time or transportation for the elderly can also provide education opportunities for the seniors. The rapid development of information and communication technology enables as many elderly people as possible to receive education, thereby providing equal learning opportunities for the elderly regardless of where they live. Offline courses provided by educational institutions are restricted by the school venue and teachers. However, if online synchronous teaching is adopted, the ideal state of unlimited number of people learning at the same time can be achieved. Online learning enables learners to watch the same content repeatedly and the schedule is more flexible, therefore even students who learn more slowly can make the same progress through more practice. Of course, in the development of online education, it is far from enough to simply use video and other methods to present teaching content instead of face-to-face lectures in traditional teaching, or use online learning materials to replace paper-based textbooks. This process requires major changes to regular teaching procedures, which may be the most difficult task. When designing online education content, new learning materials should be introduced in the most logical order, and they should be related to the knowledge already mastered, and the learning content should be modularized. Shorter learning units are more suitable to the elderly, for the sense of control and the joy of success are very important. The online learning platform can provide immediate feedback and grades based on learning performance, which is a positive incentive for learners and is conducive to increasing learning motivation. With the emergence of mobile learning, especially the popularization of smart phones, mobile APP learning software makes learning more convenient. By encouraging college students and other volunteers to go to old people's homes to popularize the knowledge of the use of new media, the negative impact of digital divide will be reduced.

4.3 Broaden the Source of Teachers for Elderly Education

After years of study and work, senior students have a variety of talents, and these talents provide rich resources for elderly education. In order to identify and utilize these resources, the organizers and managers of elderly education should familiarize themselves with each senior student as soon as possible, understand each student's background, interests, needs and abilities, so as to maximize the use of each student's talents to provide richer educational resources for other senior students. The network platform can be used to establish a resource database of elderly education teachers to realize resource sharing and joint construction.

4.4 Elderly Education Should Aim at the Sustainable Development of Life

If the elderly's greatest interest before retirement is work-oriented, then they are likely to gain the greatest sense of value at work, and may need to continue to do part-time or less demanding jobs after retirement, and they may also need some kind of retraining to start a new career. For other people, although work has always been the focus of life before retirement, in fact, work is the main means for him to obtain financial income in order to provide protection for engaging in activities he likes. For these people, the focus of elderly education is the cultivation of personal interest and the stimulation of potential. However, promoting the life-long growth and sustainable development of all the elderly should be the ultimate goal of education for the elderly. Successful aging depends largely on the maintenance of autonomy and independence of the elderly. Therefore, learning programs designed for the elderly must be based on autonomy and meet their needs to feel needed, useful, and respected. Elderly education should help the elderly become people who can continue to contribute to society, enjoy the respect they deserve, and maintain their sense of value. For people who have been living an active life, doing nothing may be the most unhappy way of life. Continuing to engage in creative work and entertainment may be a better choice. Whether elderly people live with their adult children or live alone, children can help them feel needed and useful by involving them in family affairs. By participating in elderly education to learn some knowledge of pre-school education, the elderly people can better guide their grandchildren's learning and play an important role in intergenerational education; By learning gardening knowledge, the elderly can learn to grow some vegetables or cultivate flowers; by learning cooking skills, the elderly can make delicious foods for their family. Those activities can make the elderly feel useful in the family circle. The elderly need to participate in community life, they need companionship, spiritual beliefs and a sense of contribution to social well-being. Elderly education should also keep pace with the times, offering courses to

help the elderly use smartphones to establish a community learning circle through WeChat groups, so that the elderly can better participate in community life. All these will help the elderly continue to actively participate in social activities and achieve active aging.

4.5 Elderly Education Promotes the Sense of Accomplishment for the Elderly

Through training for the elderly, new career opportunities are provided, especially for the low-income elderly, which can increase their income, improve their lives, and enable them to continue to contribute to community services. Continuing to contribute to society through part-time paid work will improve the self-image of the elderly and enhance their sense of self-worth. Among the retirees, the educated and skilled seniors represent a huge talent pool and are a strong backing for the development of the silver age economy.

Senior universities can also serve as an interface between the supply and demand of various social services. For example, organizing elderly volunteers to provide reading services for children, take care of hospitalized patients, and help their offspring to take care of young children. Senior universities can find volunteers for various organizations, or develop volunteer projects with interested seniors to create opportunities for those who want to stay active. In this way, not only can the elderly maintain self-confidence and satisfaction, but the new concept of continuing to work after retirement is also conducive to the sustainable development of an aging society. The German "Senior Expert Service" (SES) project aims to help people learn to help themselves. It sends retired managers, foremen, technicians or craftsmen to more than 100 countries to provide their professional experience and expertise, offering technical or management assistance to companies in third world countries and emerging economies, for example, helping to increase the beer output of a brewery in Sichuan, China, helping to establish a local printing plant in Jordan, training carpenters in Venezuela, and so on. For many senior experts, the real reward they get is the feeling of being needed and the satisfaction of being able to pass on their life and work experience. Moreover, for many people, by working locally, they can better understand the culture and customs of the country. (Metzler, 2020)

4.6 The Content and Form of Education for the Elderly Should Be Diversified

The content of education for the elderly should be extensive, diverse and different. It can provide long-term course content for advanced learners, short-term courses that focus on the use of new technologies, language courses that focus on communication and dialogue, health literacy courses that are conducive to physical and mental health, courses that develop independent learning strategies, and so on. Understanding the learning culture from the perspective of the elderly in the third age group

will facilitate the development of different education models to meet the diversified interests of the elderly in learning. For example, the desire of the elderly to travel is increasing. The elderly travel market is growing, partly because the elderly people are healthier and wealthier than before, and partly because the number of elderly people is increasing. Moreover, travel has increasingly become a lifestyle. There is a huge market and potential in the study tour for the elderly. Study tour can broaden old people's horizons. For the elderly, getting to know others is equally important. Organizing study tours for grandparents and grandchildren is also a good opportunity for intergeneration education. In a learning society, learning opportunities are magnified, and education can happen even if there is no teaching behavior. Learners should be given the opportunity to choose so that they can learn at their convenience and at their own pace. Lifelong education should include new ways of thinking that are different from traditional school education backgrounds. It is not only an extension of the educational model from children to adults, but also a reimagining of educational concepts. Therefore, when discussing education for the elderly, we should study learning from a broader perspective: including formal learning and informal learning, instrumental learning and expressive learning, general education and vocational education, academic learning and social learning. Narrowing the digital divide and eliminating age restrictions in existing education programs is a prerequisite for fair access to lifelong learning for the elderly. Only by innovating senior education, advancing with the times, encouraging all senior citizens to participate in learning in different learning locations and in many different ways, and permeating learning into all areas of life, can education actively promote the continuous growth of individuals and the harmonious development of society.

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