

TEACHING OLDER WORKERS: PRINCIPLES DISTILLED FROM A RECENT STUDY CONDUCTED IN SINGAPORE

Dr Helen Ko, Executive Director

Beyond Age

helenko@beyondage.com.sg

www.beyondage.com.sg

AIMS OF STUDY & CURRENT PRESENTATION

- **Study aim: to generate substantive theory on how effective instructors ‘deal with’ the teaching of lower-wage, lower-skilled older workers in the Workplace Literacy (WPL) Programme in Singapore. It investigated what symbolic meanings effective instructors held and shared in ‘dealing with’ their situation, how and why these meanings existed and if they changed over time and how such meanings were translated into actions and interactions with their learners. This ‘understanding’ was then used to generate theory about process.**
- **Aim of current presentation: present the practice principles distilled from this study**

METHODOLOGY

- **Qualitative study conceptualised within the interpretivist paradigm, adopting symbolic interactionism as its theoretical framework.**
- **Data were collected by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations.**
- **As a constructivist grounded theory strategy was applied, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, incorporating open coding, focussed coding, memo-writing and member checking.**

SAMPLE & SAMPLING STRATEGY

- **Nine 'effective' instructors teaching the Programme, were selected as participants. Eight were tracked through the entire 90 hours Programme (over 15 weeks through three interviews and two observation episodes).**
- **As the focus was on lower-wage, lower-skilled older workers, classes which were included in the study comprised a majority (over 50%) of older workers (aged 45 and above), and a majority of lower-wage and lower-skilled group in each class.**
- **Maximum variation sampling was applied: instructors drawn from different genders and ages, possessed wide variations in qualifications and number of years of teaching experience. Classes were conducted at different times of the day, on weekdays and weekends.**

Interviews and Observations Schedule for Each Instructor

Week Number

Programme begins

Programme ends



1st Interview

1st Observation

2nd Interview

2nd Observation

3rd Interview

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES (1)

- **Respect:** demonstrating *respect* notwithstanding older workers' physical and psychological decrements and social circumstances. This is particularly pertinent given Singapore's Asian cultural traditions and values.
- **Review:** taking into account age-associated changes in memory, they should frequently *review* with learners the lessons taught.
- **Reciprocity:** instructors should recognise older learners as repositories of experiences and knowledge, and applying the principle of *reciprocity*, be prepared and be willing to learn from them.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES (2)

- **Relevance:** to engage and sustain older learners' interest, the course content should be *relevant* to their real life situations and have practical applications. Moreover, relevant training methods which resonate with learners should be employed.
- **Regulate:** considering age-associated decline in information processing ability, it is important for instructors to judiciously *regulate* their instructional speed, the amount and level of complexity of the content to be taught during each instructional episode, to ensure comprehension and facilitate goal attainment by learners.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES (3)

- **Resource:** whilst cognisant of learners' personal limitations and/or constraints, instructors should focus on learners' reservoir of experiences and capabilities, and leverage learners as a *resource*, for more efficacious class management, as well as to facilitate peer teaching and support.
- **Re-examine:** trainers ought to critically *re-examine* their underlying perceptions and beliefs about older persons, and discard those unsupported by research evidence and/or which could hinder their efficacies when teaching them.

LIMITATIONS & DELIMITATIONS (1)

- 1. The theory generated is a substantive theory, in that it describes and explains how effective instructors 'deal with' older learners in the specific context of the 90-hour WPL Programme in Singapore. It is not known if the generated theory is a productive theory, that is, whether it would enable the learners to get a job (if they are unemployed) or if they would get a better job, if they were already employed.**
- 2. The type of learners delimits the study, such that the findings may not be applicable to classes comprising older workers who do not fit the 'lower-wage and lower-skilled' profile, or of classes comprising a majority of older males or other races (non-Chinese).**

LIMITATIONS & DELIMITATIONS (2)

3. The classification of older workers in this study spanned a very wide age-band, from 45 to over 80 years old. Research has shown that due to their life experiences, backgrounds, interests and approaches to learning, older adults are a diverse and heterogeneous group.

4. A lack of consensus on the operational definitions of 'effectiveness'. The two CET Centres which participated in the project and other stakeholders, such as policy-makers, funders and the Institute for Adult Learning (tasked to professionalise the course instructors and developers of the WPL Programme), applied different indicators for 'effectiveness'. However, the selection criteria for 'effectiveness', particularly the very comprehensive set of seven indicators applied by the CET Centre where the eight participant instructors were tracked through the entire WPL Programme, appear sufficiently robust for the purpose of the present study.

LIMITATIONS & DELIMITATIONS (3)

5. Adhering to a constructivist credo, the theory generated represents one view, the current researcher's view in this study. It is by no means the only view and the only theory that could be generated. However, for this study, the current researcher focussed on the processes which have theoretical significance, wider applications and generality, and may be transferable and applicable to other contexts.