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Wider Benefits of Adult Learning

Authors

Richard Desjardins

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Abstract

This entry discusses the measurement of the social outcomes of learning. It extends the discussion beyond employment and labour market outcomes to consider the impact of adult learning on social domains, with particular focus on health and civic engagement. It emphasises the distinction between public and private, and monetary and non-monetary benefits. It reviews methodological issues on measuring outcomes, and identifies a number of channels through which adult learning has its effects.

Keywords

Adult learning; adult education; benefits; social outcomes; health; civic participation; measurement of learning

Suggestions for cross-reference (if they exist)

See italicized text that is underlined in main text

Introduction

This entry focuses on the wider benefits of adult learning, covering a mix of personal and social (external) effects. The emphasis is on the effects of adult learning on health and civic engagement. Less attention has been given to this area than to the economic benefits of adult learning (see *the economic benefits of adult learning or similar*), although there is a growing body of research in this area. Some reference is made to the human and personal development aspects of adult learning as these can also be considered wider benefits but see *adult learning and human development or similar* for more complete treatment of this topic – here the emphasis is on the social outcomes rather than personal development per se.

Defining the wider benefits

A basic issue is the question of what changes are affected by learning interventions. The changes are not limited to the individual. Adult learners can in turn initiate changes in the wider sense, by affecting the home/family, work and community contexts that they engage in. There is a deeply rooted belief that adult learning has the potential to create personal, economic and social value. This value can accrue to a variety of actors: to the learner, to other private interests such as a current or future employer, and/or to society at large. In short, individuals, employers and governments invest in adult learning with an expectation that there are benefits of different kinds to be realized.

Benefits can be categorized in a number of ways: cognitive or affective; psychological or behavioural; job- or leisure-related; expected or unexpected. The notion of wider benefits usually refers to a mix of *external*, *public* and *non-monetary* benefits. The term social benefits is often used to refer to a similar range of effects (Behrman and Stacey, 1997; McMahon, 1999; Wolf and Haveman, 2001; Psacharopoulos, 2006), although it does not include private non-monetary benefits as in the notion of wider benefits as used by some authors (eg, Schuller et al., 2001; 2004).

Benefits that do not necessarily accrue to individuals (or other private interests such as firms) making the decisions to invest are referred to as *external*. They are external because they are not taken into account when deciding to invest, even if they might be expected. The presence of external benefits provides justification for public policies that foster adult learning (Desjardins et al., 2006). Otherwise there may be under-investment from the standpoint of public policy. External effects are commonly associated with *public* or *societal* effects because they tend to be nonexclusive (Lucas, 1988).

The notion of wider benefits can also encompass *non-monetary* benefits which occur at both the private or public levels. Private individual level non-monetary benefits are valued by the individuals who take up the adult learning but these are not directly exchangeable on markets and hence have no direct monetary value. Examples include the entertainment or consumption value of learning, health and life satisfaction, improved family life. In contrast, public benefits are those benefits to members of society other than the learners themselves. Non-monetary examples of public benefits include crime reduction, trust, social cohesion, political stability and a well functioning democracy. Table 1 highlights examples of each private-public and monetary-non-monetary combinations. Public monetary examples include reduced health and social transfer costs. These various benefits are not independent of each other (McMahon, 1999). For example, a private monetary return can in turn lead to the private non-monetary return of improved individuals and family health — which in turn can lead to the public monetary return of reduced public expenditures on health care.

Table 1. Possible economic and social outcomes of learning

	(A) Private	(B) Public
(1) Monetary	Earnings, income, wealth Productivity	Tax revenues Social transfer costs Health care costs
(2) Non-monetary	Health status Life satisfaction	Social cohesion Trust Well-functioning democracy Political stability

Source: OECD (2007).

Different types and purposes of adult learning

The incentive to invest (time, effort, money and other resources) varies among the different actors depending on the type of value and who it is that benefits; in principle this has implications for who should (and does) pay (Becker, 1964). It also has implications for the demand structure of different types of adult learning interventions. The majority of adults participate in adult learning for job-related reasons (OECD, 2003). Nonetheless, participation for personal and social-related reasons

also plays an important role, and depending on the country these can form a substantial component of overall participation rates in adult learning (Desjardins et al., 2006).

The reasons for participating have an impact on the nature and supply of learning interventions, including the form and content, and this in turn has implications for the potential wider benefits. But specific evidence on the effects of different stages and types of schooling, or different curricula and pedagogical approaches is sparse. Most studies focus on the number of years of schooling or highest level of educational attainment, primarily because these data are relatively cheap to collect and hence readily available in social surveys. Few studies focus on adult learning and what it is about these learning experiences that matter for wider benefits. In essence, much of the discussion of the benefits of learning at various levels has viewed education as a black box. Findings suggest that adult learning has positive effects on a wide spectrum of health and social outcomes and that these depend on individual life histories, social context and the type of learning experience (eg, academic, vocational, leisure – see Feinstein et al 2003).

Channels through which adult learning can affect outcomes

Effects on economic positions and resources

Adult learning can improve employability and income, which is a key pathway to realizing a range of other benefits. Adults with a record of adult education and training are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to experience wage growth (OECD, 2005: 35). This can translate into improved personal satisfaction and autonomy; personal health and security; and quality of child rearing. It can generate resources (time, money) for engaging in social, civic and political activities, which in turn are key elements for democratic processes; solidarity and social cohesion; human rights and peace; equity, equality and the absence of discrimination; and ecological sustainability – all important dimensions of a well functioning society (Gilomen, 2003). Further, it can reduce inclinations toward criminal and anti-social behaviour by meeting basic needs of subsistence and improving chances for a successful life (Feinstein, 2002). The instrumental effect of education on income and wealth therefore feeds through into intrinsic benefits such as better health.

Effects on the self

Learning can develop skill and cognition and can modify the traits and behaviour patterns of adults (OECD, 2007). Educational experiences can also serve an enlightenment function (Lauglo and Øia, 2006). They can promote tolerance of and respect for other groups (Turner, 1991), and in turn social cohesion. Many learning experiences make people aware of others around them and the complex processes involved in society (Pring, 1999), creating an interest to take part in the processes of social change. This also promotes an awareness of the value of investing in the future as well as an awareness of risks by providing an insight into the trade-offs among costs and benefits occurring at different points in time, which in turn influences a range of choices and behaviours, for example regarding healthy lifestyles (Feinstein et al., 2006). It can also develop psycho-social capabilities such as resilience that help to cope with adversity (Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Resilience has been empirically linked to a set of internal attributes (i.e., autonomy, problem solving skills, a sense of purpose and future, and social competence), all of which are plausibly affected by continued learning (Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999). Effects on other psychological characteristics include self efficacy (the belief that the self can influence the world around them) and external efficacy (the belief and trust that others will respond to one's own actions).

In summary, learning experiences can lead to wider benefits by directly: shaping what people know; developing competencies, which help people use their knowledge to yield benefits for themselves

and society; and cultivating values, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations that foster the potential for generating wider benefits. There is also a potential for negative effects, particularly where access to learning opportunities is unequal and where provision is injurious to self-concepts, learning and development.

Effects on social position

The channels described above share the assumption that education affects outcomes by directly changing the self. A distinctly different mechanism suggests that education's impact is indirect, and operates by changing the position of the individual in the hierarchy of social relations (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978; Campbell, 2006; OECD, 2007). The main premise is that the relative position of individuals in a social hierarchy is largely a function of access to learning opportunities, and education's primary effect derives from its ability to locate people in this hierarchy. This can be called the positional or relative effect. For example, Campbell (2006) finds that certain social outcomes fit this model best, namely participating in politics: belonging to a party, or seeking to influence politics via lobbying. His findings imply that an across the board increase in adult learning participation preserving overall inequality may do little to increase political participation. Or education may help people to better health by enabling them to secure access to health treatment ahead of those below them in the pecking order.

Thus learning may benefit individuals by increasing (or preserving) their social status. However the benefit to the wider community may be nil or even negative, so that the benefits to some are achieved at the expense of others. This is far from hypothetical: to the extent that education accentuates rather than mitigates inequality, its overall net impact on health and other outcomes may well be negative.

Effects via context

Adult learning can also have an impact on the role of contexts. *Contexts* refer to family, work or community settings, where individuals have varying but always limited or bounded agency. Adult learning may influence the structural conditions of choice and opportunity as well as the distribution of resources (especially through collective agency). It therefore enables people, to some extent, to choose and shape the contexts within which they live and work, and the peers they associate with. Peer effects are potentially extremely strong, to positive and negative ends.

Effects on health

Recent studies highlight the significance of the relationship between education and health outcomes (OECD, 2007; Feinstein et al., 2006). Typically, health professionals have interpreted the association more narrowly as a marker of socio-economic status. Findings now indicate that there are sizeable differences in health for those with different levels of education and that these are partly due to the effects of education and not solely to differences that precede or explain education, such as socio-economic status. For example, Ross and Mirowsky's (1999) findings suggest that education has health effects at all levels of income. Using rigorous methods, Spasojevic (2003) suggests that the effect of education on health is at least as great as the effect of income. An extensive review of the evidence on the direct effects of education concluded that independent of economic position, those with more years of schooling are substantially associated with better health, well-being and health behaviours (see Feinstein et al., 2006). In some cases, the evidence is particularly robust and suggests causality.

By combining findings from the National Child Development Study in the UK with a series of insights from biographical case studies collected by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Feinstein et al. (2003) (also see Bynner and Hammond, 2004; Feinstein and Hammond, 2004; Bynner 2001) provide a rare analysis of the extent and nature of the wider benefits of adult learning. They find that adults who took at least one course between the age of 33 and 42 are more likely to have given up smoking, increased their level of exercise, and increased their life satisfaction. According to the authors, such improvements can in turn lead to economic return, by reducing pressure on health services, and thus offer a return to the taxpayer and the economy more generally.

All types of courses were linked to an increase in exercise, but the marginal effects were larger for academic and leisure related courses than vocationally oriented courses. Further, leisure courses appear to have a more important effect among adults who did not complete secondary schooling qualifications. One possible rationale for this latter observation is that the path to an increased sense of self-value and empowerment (psychological attributes that help people lead healthier lives) via learning, depends partly on previous learning experiences. Many adults who have not completed secondary schooling will have experienced academic difficulties and even failure; therefore, for some adults, an alternate sequencing of different types of learning may be necessary to build up a positive attitude toward learning and to avoid negative overall effects to psychological well being. The biographical data, complemented with statistical results, strongly suggests that adult learning features as an important element in positive cycles of development and progression, and that there are cumulative effects associated with learning that occur in reinforcing sequences.

In a separate study using the British Household Panel Survey, Sabates and Feinstein (2006) estimate the effects of adult learning on the take-up of preventative health services. Using a model to predict changes in the levels of uptake of screening, they simulate the impact of whether 100,000 women were enrolled in adult learning on cervical cancer prevention. Adult learning is associated with a 2.2 percentage point increase in the probability of utilising screening. Using statistics on the smear tests analysed in 2002 in the United Kingdom and the claim by health officials that cervical screening can prevent 80 to 90 percent of cancer cases in women who attend regularly, the authors estimate that about 116 to 134 cervical cancers would be prevented for every 100,000 women in adult learning.

Effects on civic and social engagement

Adult learning can be instrumental for many in providing aptitudes that are useful for civic living and contribution. Svensson (1996:62) found that the majority of participants in study circles (a form of adult popular education in Sweden) believe that they develop useful knowledge from participating. Civic skills acquired through non-political channels, including on the job and in voluntary associations, are an important predictor of whether someone is politically engaged (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; SOU, 1996:47). Having skills motivates people by instilling a sense of agency – skills make people feel like they have something to offer in the civic and social realm. Further, adult learning that takes place in the civic realm has been linked as an important contributor to the sustenance of democracy (Larsson, 1999).

The same study that was introduced above, Feinstein et al. (2003), also explored the effect of adult learning on a range of civic and social outcomes. They found that adult learning has a pervasive impact on social and political attitudes, especially among adults who participate in courses that are academically oriented. The suggestion is that these types of courses are most suited for ‘opening

minds and challenging previously held beliefs'. Effect sizes of academically oriented adult learning on racism and political cynicism are on the order of about -.07 to -.10 and -.03 to -.065, respectively (Preston and Feinstein, 2004, p. 25). Some respondents to the biographical field work indicated that learning experiences led to a greater understanding of people from different backgrounds. Even though social and political attitudes are thought to be fairly stable by mid-adulthood, adult learning was found to have normatively beneficial effects on most of the attitudes considered on a magnitude of up to 5 percentage points, representing up to a 34% change from the baseline level predicted for those who did not participate. Overall, their findings link adult learning to increased racial tolerance, a reduction in political cynicism, a higher inclination toward democratic attitudes, and a higher level of political interest.

Bynner and Hammond (2004) report findings which suggest that participation in adult education courses is linked to higher levels of civic and political participation, including increased membership in groups and voter participation. Those who participate in one or two courses are about 34% more likely to become a member of an association and 13% more likely to begin voting compared to all those who abstained in the previous election. In contrast to its effects on attitudes, it is leisure oriented courses that have the most significant impact on civic and social participation, especially among adults who have not completed secondary schooling. From the biographical accounts, it is those adults who are most initially isolated and lacking confidence that ascribed significant changes in their social activity to adult learning participation. In Sweden, Svensson (1996) found that at least 33% indicate that their motive for participating in study circles was to meet others.

Despite the link to increased social activity, less has been said about the effects of adult learning on the intents and purposes, or other qualitative aspects of different groups or networks (Emler and Frazer, 1999). Using the same biographical data from the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Preston (2004) demonstrates that learning experiences may not only lead to an expansion of social networks, but can also cause their relocation and dissolution, albeit in such a way as to maintain improvements in well being. He linked adult learning to increases in self confidence and self worth, which helps to motivate individuals in removing themselves from unhealthy or even dangerous relationships.

Conclusions

The impacts of learning extend beyond those measured by increased productivity in the production of goods and services exchanged on markets. Learning in adulthood is linked to diverse items such as reductions of criminal activity, increases in social cohesion, changes in income distribution, savings in welfare and medical costs, and voter participation. Strong theoretical expectations about the wider benefits of adult learning exist, and although less abundant and generally less rigorous than the evidence on the impact of initial education (compulsory and post compulsory schooling), there is some empirical research to support these expectations.

The measurement of non-economic outcomes is attaining greater significance in many OECD countries. This trend brings with it a range of difficult methodological issues, notably in establishing robust techniques for assessing causality. A key issue is how far adult education is brought into this debate. Quantitative data on adult learning are universally weaker than that on initial schooling, and effects are therefore harder to measure using conventional approaches. Yet extending the rationale for public and private investment in education to cover outcomes such as improved health and stronger civic democracies is a challenge which has much to offer.

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Biography

Richard Desjardins is Associate Professor in the Economics of Education at the Danish University of Education, Denmark. He holds a doctoral degree in International and Comparative Education from the International Institute of Education at Stockholm University, Sweden. He is author of *Learning for Well Being: Studies using the International Adult Literacy Survey*, and co-author of *Unequal Chances to Participate in Adult Learning* and *Understanding the Social Outcomes of Learning*.

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