

온라인대학 노인학습자들의 삶의 경험

Lived Experience of Older Learners in an Online University

이은주

서울사이버대학교 인간복지학부

Eunjoon Lee(violete66@naver.com)

요약

이 연구의 목적은 정규학위 과정의 온라인대학에 다니는 노인학습자들의 삶의 경험을 묘사하고 이해하는 것으로 질적 연구방법론을 적용하여 노인학습자들이 대학에서의 학업에 대해 해석하고 의미하는 바를 고찰하였다. 자료는 사이버대학에 입학하여 학업을 수행하고 있는 서울과 수도권 지역에 거주하는 10명의 노인들과의 심층면접을 통해 수집되었다. 사이버대학에서의 노인학습자들의 학업경험에 대한 분석 결과 과거의 자아, 관행 깨뜨리기, 새롭게 도전하기, 자기실현을 얻기, 새로운 정체성으로 통합됨, 미래지향적 자아라는 6개의 중심주제가 파악되었다. 결론적으로 참여자들은 온라인대학에서의 학업의 경험을 통해 과거지향적인 자아감에서 더욱 긍정적이고 미래지향적인 자아감으로 변화한 것으로 나타났다.

■ 중심어 : 평생교육 | 노인학습자 | 온라인 학습 | 온라인대학 |

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe and understand the lived experiences of older learners in formal education offered in an online university. Applying qualitative research methods, this paper attempts to explore the interpretation and meanings of their college studying. Ten participants in this study were selected from older students aged over 60 who had studied or were studying in a cyber university and lived in Seoul and its metropolitan area for more readily accessible and available for in-depth interviews. After the final analysis of learning experiences of older adults in an online university, six main themes were identified: self in the past, breaking from the convention, struggling with the new challenges, attaining self-actualization, integrating a new identity, future-oriented self. Finally it appears that learning experiences of the learners enabled the participants to replace their past-oriented sense of self with a more positive, future-oriented version.

■ keyword : Lifelong Education | Older Learner | Online Learning | Online University |

I. Introduction

Social policy to date has been primarily concerned with the basic maintenance needs for the elderly:

income, housing, health, transportation, legal and other basic services. More honestly, most Korean elderly without sufficient pensions have not been adequately protected in terms of the basic

접수번호 : #100504-001

접수일자 : 2010년 05월 04일

심사완료일 : 2010년 08월 23일

교신처자 : 이은주, e-mail : violete66@naver.com

maintenance needs. Before online-based universities were established in the early 2000s, older learners in formal education have been very little recognized in Korean society. At the same time, research on later-life learning in formal education internationally has been very limited due to the reason that the elderly have not participated in formal education very often. By and large, current educational offerings for older people appear to be predominately recreational, and reproductive in outcome, if not in intent; such programs reflect, rather than challenge, the status quo [1]. The authors also add that they actually re-enforce the current stereotypes about older people, despite the fact that many older people continue to confound the stereotype of the retired or disengaged old person by living active and forceful lives [1].

Previous studies on adult learning have predominately excluded older adults as learners and focused instead on elderly learners in informal or quasi-formal education. For this reason, we have not discovered much about what experiences the elders in formal education have, what meanings they give to their learning experiences, or what differences between the older adults in informal and formal education. Often the concepts of lifelong learning and adult education are associated with "productive activities," aiming, for example, to ensure a skilled, better, and longer working life for older people and, in general, to raise their employment levels. In fact, data on participation are often available only for people aged less than 65 [2].

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to describe and understand the lived experiences of older learners in formal education offered in an online university. Applying qualitative research methods focusing on a phenomenological approach, this paper attempts to explore the interpretation and meanings of their college studying. The main research questions

are as follows:

What is the nature of the learning experience of later-life college students?

What interpretations do later-life college students place on their learning experience?

II. Literature Review

Adult education has become one of the most important areas in today's information era in the advanced industrialized countries. People return to school for the purpose of keeping their jobs and upgrading their skills. A 1994 survey of adult learning, for example, found that 90% of Americans aged 64 and younger who engaged in adult education did so for career or job-related purposes [3]. The most striking increase in adult education participation rates occurred among the nontraditional student population [3]. Furthermore, six major reasons for this increased participation are: the changing age structure of society, the increasing educational levels of aging cohorts, the rapidity of social change, the expanding role of women, changes in career patterns and changed attitudes toward education [4].

Their proportion in the general population has increased and they tend to remain healthier than previous older generations. An upward shift in the age distribution accounts for much of the change [5]. The baby boom cohort was more highly educated than preceding cohorts, and education level is positively related to participation in adult education. Furthermore, changes in jobs and the development of new technology have stimulated more interest in lifelong. In response to changing demography, social and economic conditions, institutions of higher education are in the process of opening their doors to a broader sector of students [6]. Influenced by

prevailing ideals of social inclusion, universities seek to widen the participation of groups who have been traditionally under-represented on college campuses.

The opportunity to participate in adult learning is unbalanced between other social strata related to gender, race, and income [7]. In addition to these influences on differential participation rates, previous research has shown that older adults are not as likely as younger people to engage in organized forms of adult education [7]. Hamil-Luker and Uhlenberg reported that while an increasing proportion of older people participated in educational activities during the 1990s, older adults continue to be less likely than younger ones to participate in education and training provided by businesses and schools [8]. Also the former is more likely to engage in educational activities provided by community organizations than in credential programs or job related training. They added that the priority of informal over formal education in later life is in keeping with the cultural expectation that older adults pursue leisure activities.

Androgogy, the theory of adult learning, follows two concepts: first, the need to know, which posits that adults need to understand what benefits they will gain by learning something new (i.e. enhanced quality of life); second, the learner's self-concept, whereby adults have been to be seen and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. The motivation to learn can be divided into expressive motivation and instructional motivations. Expressive motivation is related to personal satisfaction or social networking building, while instrumental motivation refers to motives related to career advancement or skill-building. Previous studies conducted in western countries have shown that 64% of older learners in the United Kingdom participate in later life learning because of expressive motivation [9]. This pattern was also observed in the US during the 1970s and

1980s, but in the 1990s a shift took place and older adults were found to be motivated by instrumental reasons as well as expressive [10].

A number of researchers have examined the role of education in the lives of older persons. It is believed that lifelong learning can promote positive outcomes for older persons' health and wellbeing [11]. Numerous authors have cited needs that education can meet for the elderly [12]: self-discovery and new learning [13]; help in coping with changes in later life [14]; vocational advantages [15]; and allowing elders to continue to contribute [16]. The research on Elder hostel in the US explored that retirement does not have to mean withdrawal, and one's later years are an opportunity to enjoy new experiences [17]. Gardner and Helmes [18] suggested that the possession of goals, and elderly people's belief in their continuing ability to achieve those goals, might be the more important determinants of their well-being. Moreover they surmise that increased education of older adults may in turn lead to improved life satisfaction and well-being, although the relationship may be mediated by changes within people that are related to self-efficacy [19]. Additionally, older adults show a marked preference for self-directed, independent educational activities and informal learning programs at senior citizen residences or centers over the more formal programs offered at institutions of higher education [20].

These growing research interests in the education of older adults, discussions regarding lifelong learning have too often in the past excluded older adults [21]. Despite the existence of widespread discourse in relation to lifelong learning this discourse is "beginning to be controlled by the discourse about work"[22]. At the same, older adults' learning was ignored not only in non-formal and self-help situations [23], but also in formal education. The

exclusion of certain groups (such as older adult learners) from the learning discourse and the lack of voice given to them indicates that it is important for the voices of later-life learners to be heard their stories to be told in an authentic, qualitative manner [24].

III. Methodology

This paper attempts to understand the meaning of college education experienced by older adults in an online university, based on a qualitative approach focusing on a phenomenological method. The advantages of using a qualitative approach is that the data collected are rich, contextual and detailed, enabling a more holistic analysis and explanation [25]. The objective of this type of research is to understand the concept of human experiences [26]. The aim is to grasp how we come to interpret our own and others' action as meaningful and to "reconstruct the genesis of the objective meanings of action in the intersubjective communication of individuals in the social life-world" [27]. The idea of obtaining the daily experience of people is compatible with Heidegger's philosophy, which emphasizes that the understanding and interpretation of people's experiences are possible through their language, history, and cultural factors [28]. The phenomenological research based on Heidegger's beliefs is known as hermeneutic or interpretive research. The objective of this type of research is to understand the concept of human experiences . Influenced by the work of Alfred Schutz, phenomenological analysis is principally concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world (the life world) is constituted. The aim is to grasp how we come to interpret our own and others'

action as meaningful and to "reconstruct the genesis of the objective meanings of action in the intersubjective communication of individuals in the social life-world." Two conceptual tools often used on that reconstruction are indexicality and reflexivity. The former signifies that the meanings of a word or utterance are dependent on its context of use. The latter directs our attention to the fact that utterances are not just about something but are also doing something; an utterance is in part constitutive of a speech act. These two notions are part of the means whereby phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists come to understand how social reality, everyday life, is constituted in conversation and interaction. Walter adds that in hermeneutic research, researcher is an active participant in the process of interpretation rather than a passive receiver of information. Hermeneutic phenomenologists interpret human experiences not only from the viewpoints of individuals under study, but also from social and historical effects. The idea of obtaining the daily experience of people is compatible with Heidegger's philosophy, which emphasizes that the understanding and interpretation of people's experiences are possible through their language, history, and cultural factors .

A critical survey of the various viewpoints on qualitative research suggests that despite its shortcomings, this method is the best choice to be used in this research. It helps the researcher explore the meanings of individual experiences and describe their everyday lived experiences.

1. Participants

Participants in this study were selected from older students aged over 60 who have studied or are studying in an online university. There were 55 older students aged over 60 in the university. The cyber

university was founded in 2001 and provides students with formal college degrees accredited by the Ministry of Education and Technology. The number of older entrants started from only 4 in 2001 and increased to 28 in 2008. The total number of older students aged over 60 from 2001 to 2009 is 130.

Fifty five older students are currently in the bachelor program in the cyber university. Among them, thirty-five students are male and twenty students are female. Thirty students are aged between 60 and 64, while fifteen students are aged over 65 including three older students aged over 70. The majors of older adults tend to concentrate on several study areas such as elderly welfare (14), social welfare (12), real estate (10), counseling psychology (7), management of welfare agencies (5), family counseling (2), management (2), and military and police counseling (1). It seems that the elderly prefer studying in the areas which are strongly related to their everyday life.

The participants who were selected lived in Seoul and its metropolitan area. These students were more readily accessible and available for interviews. Their majors were considered in order to conduct interviews with students from a variety of study areas. At first the researcher directly contacted them by telephone, and then asked for their participation in this study. In this process, since some older adults did not want to participate in the study, the researcher asked faculty members in each department to recommend prospective participants. After receiving the recommendation list from them, the researcher recruited the participants. Finally the researcher contacted the participants and explained the objectives of the study. At the time of initial contact, the participants were told that the interviews would be treated confidentially. Interviews were conducted in Korean and were recorded on audio cassettes with

the consent of participants. When tape-recording was agreed upon, participants were assured that only the interviewer would listen to the material in order to make the participants feel secure and willing to talk about their thoughts. Those who agreed to participate in the study were introduced to the researchers who discussed the study, its scope, and its objectives with them at length. Participants' questions were answered such that they felt comfortable about their involvement in the study. Participant could refuse to answer particular questions if they so wished.

Ten older students were interviewed and pseudonyms used to protect the identity of learners. The participants were aged from 60 to 70 and all but a participant(nun) were married at the time of the interview. By gender, seven participants were male and three of them were female. By major, there were four real estate majors, three social welfare majors, two elderly welfare majors, and one psychology majors. Those who had jobs ran their offices and shops, while two of them were a church minister and a nun, and one of them returned his construction company as a part-time technology advisor after retirement. By education, there were three high school graduates, three college dropped out, one college graduate, and one graduate school graduate.

2. Data Collection

The data collection took place in Jun and July 2009 when the participants had just finished their spring semester so that they could remember their college studying vividly. Face to face semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were conducted in a private room on a college campus or in public restaurants at a distance from other customers. Interviews began with open-ended questions about what it means to study in an online university. Participants were asked, "How has the college entrance affected their life?"

"What have been the reactions of those around you when they noticed your studying in an online university?" "Please explain your experiences of online studying."

The participants were interviewed once and called if the researcher had questions or unclear responses. Each interview lasted 1 to 1.5 hours and was recorded and subsequently transcribed. This involved the researcher becoming highly familiarized with the material collected.

One of limitation of the study is the fact that the interviewer was a member of the instructors in the online university and was known to some of the participants. Responses might therefore have been influenced by the relationship between instructor and student. However, since interview questions were focused largely on the experiences of and meanings of their college studies, this factor could be minimized.

3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Creswell [38]. The specific steps in data analysis are as follows:

- 1) The researcher first reads all descriptions in their entirety.
- 2) The researcher then extracts significant statements from each description.
- 3) These statements are formulated into meanings, and these meanings are clustered into themes.
- 4) The researcher integrates these themes into a narrative description.

The researcher first read the set of transcribed interviews as a whole. She then carefully reviewed the interviews and focused her attention on specific statements related to the phenomenon of interest. Each time the participants indicated a new idea on the meaning of college studying, a note was made. This is referred to as "establishing meaning units". After recoding these statements, they were converted into

themes and subsequently grouped into similar themes. The researcher mainly coded the transcript into meaning units and later showed them to a colleague who also has a long experience in online teaching. Any disagreements on the coding schemes were resolved through discussion.

In order to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher critically analyzed the assumptions regarding the phenomenon under study. This is done before the interviews were conducted in order to become aware of the researcher's pre-knowledge. The researcher reflected on her thoughts on the topic and also discussed with other colleagues who had taught the same university for a long time. The researcher also asked two faculty members for coding a part of transcripts of the in-depth interviews and checked if any discrepancies happened. Some of inconsistencies between each coder's coding results were resolved through a long conversation. Then they discussed the main themes and categories derived the data. The researcher also talked with part of interviewees about unclear responses and expressions to clarify and shared the analysis results with them.

IV. Findings

During the final analysis of learning experiences of older adults in an online university, six main themes were identified: (a) self in the past, (b) breaking from the convention - college entrance, (c) struggling with the new challenges - adaptation to the college, (d) obtaining self-actualization, (e) integrating a new identity, and (f) future-oriented self: strengthening future plans and dreams. The statements of the participants reflected the dynamic and evolving process of meaning about college studying.

1. Self in the Past – Boring Later Life

Many of the participants considered their current lives and themselves inferior to those in the past before entering college. Their lives in the present are unproductive while those in the past were very productive. For them, being productive is one of the very important factors, which makes life living worth. Also the present for them means that they are cut off or loosened from the ties with main stream society, while being involved mainly in informal groups such as family, relatives, and older friends who are in similar situations to theirs. This theme includes two sub-categories: comparing the present with the past, and a lifelong regret for learning.

The life-world interpretation provided by the participants had an effect on their decision to go to college. Two participants who are a minister of religion and a nun did not express these feelings because they fully engaged themselves in their jobs and still kept their original position in their religious organizations.

1.1 Comparing the Present with the Past

The participants who had retired from their lifelong

jobs stated that soon after their retirement, they had spent time to doing things they could not do during their working years. However, enjoying hobbies such as traveling, playing golf, climbing, watching sports and having time with their friends did not last as long as they expected. Sooner or later, they started feeling being bored, dull, unpleasant, and gloomy because of the realization that there was no work to do. Those who kept their jobs came to feel relegated to a position at the fringes and anxious about being behind.

Dull Life-world

The participants reported that they had much time, no work to do, nowhere to go, and felt bored and dull due to their repetitive daily lives.

It's boring and killing time. All day I had been watching sports on TV because of no work to do. (Hyun)

No job, much time, and thinking only about drinking... but I could not call my friends to drink. None of them were interested in coming out. (Moon)

Meaningless Life-world

Their dull everyday lives made them feel incapable

Table 1. Main Themes and Meanings

Main themes	Meanings
Self in the past -Boring later life	a. Comparing the present with the past Dull life-world, meaningless life-world, being extra b. A lifelong regret
Breaking from the convention -College entrance	a. Reconnecting with society, c. Solving a lifelong regret, b. Searching for work to do d. Preparing for the future
Struggling with the new challenges -Adaptation to College	a. Busy and tough life-world, c. Burden of engagement b. Self-disappointment
Attaining self-actualization	a. Self-mastering, c. Positive reactions from others b. Emotional satisfaction,
Integrating a new identity	a. Attitudes of lifelong learning, c. Regaining vitality, e. Capable and confident aging b. Open mind, d. Extending perspectives
Future-oriented self	a. Strengthening plans and dreams

and aimless. Habitual things did not provide them with self-fulfillment and life satisfaction for a longer time. Enjoying unproductive activities was neither exciting nor meaningful.

Enjoying life is fun, but always doing so is not fun. I love excising, but playing golf everyday is boring. Golf was exciting when I was working and did not have much time to do it. It is impossible to go climbing every day. I felt old and needed to have a stimulus. (Hyun)

Being Extra

Many of the participants said they felt like they were “extra,” and were always trying to read others’ minds. Some of them believed that they had not been treated well by people around them, had lost families’ trust and encouragement, and had communication problems with younger customers in their store.

I became aware of difficulty in eating meals three times all day at home. I am not happy to eat meals three times at home, even on the weekend. I don’t expect that meals are served. I get some food out of the refrigerator and warm over it. (Hyun)

1.2 A Lifelong Regret

Though [29] identifies four socio-cultural determinants that may influence older adult participation in learning. He asserts that people are influenced by previous learning experiences, family and friends, community and societal imperatives, an idiosyncratic psychological characteristics. The older adults in this study also expressed their deep regret for not entering college or for leaving college without a degree. All the participants except one missed their opportunities to go to college mainly because of economic factors. Even though their families were not destitute and were even above average, they could not finish their college due to many reasons such as living in the countryside, having many siblings, and being a woman. In their youth, usually first sons were

supported to go to college, while women were rarely educated. In addition, people in their 60s have lived through a period of rapid economic development and worked some of the longest hours in the world. Seven participants out of ten gave up their college studies due to an imbalance between their job and household obligations.

I took college entrance examinations three times, but could not pass. Instead of going to college, I went into military service. After the service, I passed in the examination to become an officer in the public prosecutor’s office, and then reentered a college. In college I could not take even one course due to my family’s various strains. I probably had a strong desire for studying from childhood. (Cheong)

I dropped out of college. Later I worked for a bank and re-entered an evening college. I could not finish my course. It was impossible to study while working at that time. (Lee)

2. Breaking from the Convention –College Entrance

The participants who realized that they needed to change their way of living decided to break from their ordinary life and to enter an online university. Online universities attracted them for several reasons. Online unopen entrance, the ability to study in any place, and the nature of self-directed learning. The college entrance for them meant a connecting tie with the main steam, exploring what to do, satisfying their lifelong learning aspiration, and preparing for the future.

2.1 Reconnecting with Society

Retiring is being forced to cut the tie with mainstream society. After retirement, the social relationships of the participants had been restricted to family members and older friends. These relationships only did not give them a sense of mainstream

membership. While they had been socially disconnected or informally connected after their retirement, they gained opportunities to extend them to formal and unfamiliar groups. Although many participants did not go to student gatherings, they have already known that they can be able to engage in them if they want. At the same time, the tie with their university itself provided them with the meaning of connection with society.

I thought that I needed to have a tie and continue to have it forever. I participated in all student gatherings. Since I met students working in similar fields and having similar interests to mine, I did not have any trouble in getting together with younger students. Some of them called me to ask for my legal advice regarding their concerns. I loved helping them with these things. (Cheong)

2.2 Searching for Work to Do

Before entering college, participants felt like they had no work to do and strongly wanted to work find some. They wanted just to have some mental activity and stimuli. Also they wanted to use their time more effectively by concentrating on something that was meaningful for their lives.

Our everyday life is always same; it's repetitive. I need to learn new things and escape from the convention. (Cheong)

2.3 Solving a Lifelong Regret

All of the participants, except one college graduate, reported their desire for finishing their college graduation. That was their unfulfilled, lifelong duty which must be performed someday. Since college education is highly valued in Korean society, many people tend to sense an obligation to finish. In their younger years, participants who were breadwinners or main caregivers devoted themselves to their families. Now it was a time to live for themselves.

I always had a lifelong regret over not going to

college. I have eight siblings. To go to college I had to leave for Seoul, where I did not have a part-time job and I did not have enough money for tuition. (Moon)

2.4 Preparing for the Future

Some of the participants wanted to get certificates and a degree, and others felt the urge to acquire new knowledge for the sake of keeping their current jobs. Still others reported the importance of responding to a rapidly changing society. College entrance means going to the future, rather than looking back their past lives. Koh replied that she needed a license in social work to qualify for work in her nursing home.

The religious order financially supports its members who want to get certificates or a college degree. The organization recommends cyber universities or one-year educational programs for nuns. (Koh)

3. Struggling with the New Challenges – Adaptation to College

Studying at the college level challenged them to expend great effort and exercise a high degree of patience. They expressed difficulties, being busy, tight schedules, self-disappointment, unexpected bad grades, and burden on getting together with younger students. Only one participant who runs his own legal office and therefore has plenty of time and money did not report these challenges. And two participants actively engaged in student gatherings and were not afraid of getting together with younger students. In addition, all of the participants were capable of using computer and the internet as an information seeking, but some of them told that they had a lot of difficulties in taking an introductory computer course required by their university.

3.1 Busy and Tough Life-world

When the participants started their college studies

they felt very busy with no time to enjoy life, the tension of tests, and many other difficulties. At the same time, they did not expect that studying in an online university would be such a tough thing because such universities are quite open to anybody with a high school diploma. However, the degree provided by online universities is exactly the same thing with that from traditional universities, and their academic programs and regulations are tightly controlled by the Ministry of Education and Technology.

I had tight schedules and studied both day and night. I honestly thought it would be a piece of cake and common things I had already known. But it was beyond my expectation. I had to read all the announcements and posting daily. Since I took five courses in a semester, I had to get in the classroom everyday. And during weekends I needed to make up parts of lectures that I had missed during week days. I actually studied very hard day and night. (Hyun)

3.2 Self-disappointment

Despite the firm decision to undertake college studies, the participants experienced self-disappointment about their ability of understanding and memorizing and about their physical capabilities. They reported receiving bad grades, although they tried their best and worked very hard. Hyun said that he should have read his lecture notes three times to prepare for a test.

I could not get good grades. I thought that I correctly marked twenty five questions out of thirty, but my expectation was not realized. I only read the lecture notes twice, though I should have read them three times. (Hyun)

With this self-disappointment, some participants had complaints about difficult examinations and the possibility of missing homework or online discussions. Since Kho missed her 10 point online

discussion for a course, she could not get the level of grade that she expected to have for her graduation within 4 years with having double majors. Lim said that she has often been bored in listening to lectures taught by instructors who detached themselves from their original lecture notes and presented too many examples and explanations. A part of the reason of this problem may result from the limitation of on-line lectures which tend to deliver information one-sidedly. Despite of these complaints, most of participants tended to attribute their difficulties in studying in an online university to their own limited capacity, rather than to the instructor or university itself.

3.3 Burden of Engagement

It was surprising that most of the participants did not engage in student gatherings. This fact indicates that there are some communication problems between generations in Korean society. One possible reason might be the deeply rooted norm of respect for the elderly, which could be inharmonious with modern liberalism. In Korea, building friend-relationships between younger and older individuals is neither normal nor well accepted by both generations. Eight participants expressed the burden of engaging in gatherings and being together with younger students. Some of them reported their strong interests in participating in the meetings, but did not have enough time to attend. Others disliked making younger students uncomfortable. Cho did not go to student gatherings because he felt ashamed to study in his old age.

I don't go to gatherings, even though they call me often to ask for my participation in the meetings. I can get together with people in their forties to fifties, but cannot with those in their twenties and thirties. (Moon)

4. Attaining Self-Actualization

Through enduring early challenges, the participants had gradually adapted to the new environment which included both college life and studying online. After one or two semesters, they had acquired all the complex techniques for attending classes and online lectures, participating in blackboard discussions, writing and submitting papers, and taking examinations, etc. In the process of self-actualization, they expressed self-mastering, emotional satisfaction, and positive reactions from others.

4.1 Self-Mastering

After a certain period of time, the participants acquired their own mastery of effective study habits. They reported various ways to study such as visiting the school website and each classroom daily; checking new announcements, recording lectures, printing out lecture notes and reviewing them in their spare time, studying at night for effective concentration, making summaries of course contents, as well as thorough preparation of desktop, laptop, speaker, printer, MP3 players, and textbooks.

I always take a memo in a notebook whenever I attend online lectures. That is more effective than just seeing and listening. (Cheong)

4.2 Emotional Satisfaction

Participants' comments illustrated emotional satisfaction from the college experience including self-fulfillment, excitement, the blessings of learning, paying off a lifelong debt and feelings of gratitude.

I've never regreted studying in this college. I was lucky and deeply grateful. This is a time to invest in myself and a time of being secure. It is very interesting. (Koh)

In addition, for older persons, going to a cyber university means that they are capable of both

utilizing a computer and college studies. Not all the adults can study in an online-university even with an open entrance policy if they cannot know how to use computers and the internet. This fact might give them higher level of self-confidence and satisfaction.

4.3 Positive Reactions from Others

After studying, the participants perceived positive reactions from people around them concerning their college studies. All of them reflected respect and trust from children and grandchildren, support from spouses, and envy and praise from friends.

It seems that they respect me. Since I am not studying to get certificates and a job, my children and wife look at me differently. It appears that my wife feels good about me. (Cheong)

5. Integrating a New Identity

After obtaining self-actualization, participants' sense of identity started to change for the better. The new identity included common factors such as the attitude of lifelong learning, an open mind, feeling younger, extending perspectives, and attaining a capable and confident self.

5.1 Attitudes of Lifelong Learning

Many participants thought that learning is about living. This existential meaning includes continuous and enjoyable learning which is different from practical and short-term learning for the purpose of procuring a degree or certificate. Those who feel this way are not sensitive to their grades and immediate outcomes.

Something I learned is helpful for doing my work. It seems I have to learn regardless of exam outcomes. Learning is left in my heart. (Koh)

5.2 Open Mindedness

Studying in old age resulted in a renewal of

open-mindedness, which led in turn to recognition of human imperfection, engagement with social gatherings, trying to establish social ties, and seeing positive aspects of others.

I want to live without revealing others' shortcomings. I want to find good points in them and help them develop positive attributes. (Cheong)

5.3 Regaining Vitality

They came to forget their actual age, while regaining youthfulness and vitality. Hyun often studied until four to five o'clock in the morning. It reminded him of his college years.

It seems like I returned to the time when I was younger. It is probably vitality. Nobody in my age group goes to college to learn more. Others look at me better; they ask me, "How can you find the courage to do that?" I said to them, "Come on, you can do it too. Cyber university is worth trying". (Hyun)

5.4 Extending Perspectives

The participants found that their perspectives were changed and extended. While they had previously considered mainly themselves and their informal groups, after studying they came to care about others, community and the society as a whole. Lim said that her perspective on the society changed dramatically.

It changed my mind and attitudes. That indicated the direction that I should go. I realize now that I can achieve my dreams only if I study for a lifetime. (Lim)

5.5 Capable and Confident Aging

The participants finally acquired capable and confident selves who lead others and are not afraid of the emergence of an information-oriented society. Kim reported her increased confidence based on knowledge, and Cho expressed his satisfaction about delivering reliable information to his customers receiving their trust.

6. Future-Oriented Self: Strengthening Plans and Dreams

All of the participants who studied in the online university reported that they have been inspired to develop plans and dreams such as writing a book, opening welfare institutions, professional volunteering, reentering the labor market, and going to graduate school. None of the participants felt that life was essentially over or that life's purpose had been lost.

I feel that learning is worth investing in. I learned from really intelligent coworkers who are masters in their fields, so I will impart my knowledge and skills to younger generations and write a really good book. Now I am confident that I can teach them more effectively. (Choi)

7. Total Interpretation

The six themes emerged from the interpretation of transcripts are summarized as follow:

Self in the past: Before entering the university, their selves were mainly related to the past when they were actively involved in productive activities. The present life they identified was dull and meaningless. Their lifelong regret for missing an opportunity to go to college strongly affected the decision to reenter college.

Breaking from the convention: Their college entrance meant a) reconnecting with society, b) searching for meaningful work to do, c) resolving a lifelong regret, and d) preparing for the future. Unlike other older people, they attempted to break from a life that had come to be perceived as meaningless and take up the challenge of building a new life.

Struggling with the new challenges: After entering an online university, the participants were confronted with new challenges such as busy and tough life-world, self-disappointment, and the burden of

engagement. College studying in old age was not an easy job. This fact caused them physical and mental stresses. To adapt to this new environment, they need to overcome these problems. Most older learners had a trouble in participating in student meetings and gatherings. This problem is not easy to solve give the nature of the online learning environment which allows students to remain isolated.

Attaining self-actualization: Through overcoming the challenges, the participants gradually acquired self-mastering of how to study, emotional satisfaction, and positive reactions from others. The participants developed their own methods of studying effectively and handling student duties. Furthermore, they perceived themselves positively as a result of good reactions from others to their learning. Some of them never expected positive reactions from others and were therefore pleasantly surprised when ever they occurred.

Integrating a new identity: After obtaining self-actualization, participants' identity started to change for the better. The new identity included characteristics such as an attitude of lifelong learning, open-mindedness, regaining vitality, expanding perspectives, and capable and confident aging. Most of them thought that learning is about living, thus it makes people capable, confident, and younger.

Future-oriented self: Finally it appears that their learning experiences enabled the participants to replace their past-oriented sense of self with a more positive, future-oriented version. This change emerged from their tough but fruitful learning process, and tended to inspire concrete future plans and dreams.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the lived experiences of older learners who study in an online university, based on the interpretation of their narratives. This phenomenological investigation revealed the meaning of college studying from the perspective of ten older learners in an online university. After the analysis of the statements offered by the participants, six main themes were drawn: self in the past, breaking from the convention, struggling with the new challenges, attaining self-actualization, integrating a new identity, and future-oriented self.

The older learners in this study had lived in the age of poverty and deficiency and spent their lives as productive workers in the labor market during the time of rapid economic development. They found life's meaning not from enjoying recreation and leisure time but from their productive work in the labor market, and shared the spirit of the times based on diligence and sincerity. They also had worked very hard, respected their parents, taken care of their siblings as older brothers and big sisters, and of their children as mother and father, and sacrificed themselves for family members for their entire life. Due to the reason, the meaning of existence for them is strongly related to something "productive". Being productive provides them with not only the means of material and life, but also the spiritual meaning. Their lived experience during the times of economic drives in Korea made them stick to the meaning of production in their spirit. Even before retirement, they started to consider and prepare their productive life after retirement. They had attempted to achieve certificates, and to go to evening college during their employment. Comparing to other people, they tended to work longer due to the knowledges and skills developed during their employment. However, the skill and knowledge learned in the past became outdated shortly in the rapidly changing time, and the

gap between their skill and younger workers' started to increase more and more. Younger generations very little express respect and values to older generations, and focus more on equality and flexibility of thoughts. Most of participants told that they attempted to enjoy life through recreation and hobbies, but did not achieve full of satisfaction from those activities, so far as their perception of being "productive" does not change. What they wanted was not enjoying but working; that is, they wanted to get self-actualization and a life worth living from productive working. The society, however, does not respond their productive needs and is pushing out even younger people in the labor market.

Entering the online university became a proper means to recover crashed respect from families and younger people around them, and to pursue productive work after their college studying. Online college studying also became an opportunity to solve their life-long regrets towards getting a college degree, and important ways to go back to a productive field and find their meaning of life through hard-working and self-development. However, unlike their expectation, online studying was not easy to do due to the difficulties of online learning, such as the computer-related and non-face to face learning. Other challenges included making relationship with a variety of age groups in student gatherings. Some of them avoided meeting with other students and felt difficult to communicate with and be socialized with them. From a variety of difficulties and challenges they faced in the online university, they finally got through many of the difficulties and achieved self-confidence and self-actualization. Although the college studying is not productive work in the labor market, it could motivate and stimulate their challenges that ultimately could transform them from a past-oriented self to a future-oriented self. The

main theme of older learners' experiences in this study is the transformation from the past-oriented self to future-oriented self, and the meaning involved in the older learners' thoughts in their life is "being productive". This meaning of being productive derives from the discourse of economic development centered on Korean society from their childhood to working ages.

Since previous studies have given very little attention to older learners in online universities, it is impossible to compare the research findings to those from other studies. However, the findings in this study are largely similar to previous studies on older learners. Russell [31] pointed out that learning for later-life computer learners is about the search for the authentic self and the integrity of the self and the search for the meaning in life, the ontological. The main theme of this study is also related to the change in and integration of self image and to questions of the meaning of their life. As Russell [32] adds, the later-life learners did not give in to the notion of inevitable decline in later-life, and they rejected the notion that there comes a time to withdraw from society. According to Jarvis [33], learning would be an obvious and potentially popular growth choice for older adults. It could even be argued that in the Third Age there is more time to pursue learning for growth, existential outcomes, and self-actualization.

One of the findings in this study is a shift "from past-oriented self to future-oriented self." Maintaining a sense of self was very important to the older adults. They want continuity, inclusion, integrity in their relation with main stream society and prefer autonomy to depend the. Hori [34] reported the uniqueness of the learning needs of the elderly as needs for ties (i. e., ties to the future, to the past, to the people, to the society, etc.). This is related to the finding that participants in this study want to

have ties with the society and the future. These ties are related to their instrumental learning needs influenced by their consideration of lives after retirement as being dull and meaningless. According to Hori and Fujiwara [35], analysis of the relationship revealed that the elderly who have a serious activity limitations have an orientation toward “instrumental and social-external” learning, and the elderly who have moderate activity limitations have an orientation toward “instrumental and social-external” learning, and communicative-internal.” Londoner [36] said that “the elderly tend to have instrumental needs for survival.” In this respect, participants in this study might feel anxiety about their future and as a result, they need to survive in a rapidly changing society.

Williams and Montepare [37] pointed out that the major educational needs of the elderly were in the realms of leisure and personal development. This was somewhat different from the finding in this study that the participants wanted to break from the convention which regards elderly persons as unproductive entities, even though personal development is one of the main motivations to pursue college studies. At the same time, the difference between older learners in informal education and those in formal education should be considered. All the participants in this study tended to work very hard and live intensely during their younger years and tried to continue the same way in their later life. There is a possibility that those who succeeded in their working life and had a lot of rewards resulted from their own endeavors could be more satisfied with studies in formal education which is considered to be more demanding than those in informal education. In formal education, they have to compete with younger to be and will get more sense of achievement if they win in the competition. In this respect, older learners in this study wanted not to remain behind, and more than

that, they wanted to be treated equally with the younger generation working productively in the labor market by showing their ability to compete with them. For these older learners, participating in informal classes for the elderly and getting together with other older adults mean not achieving something meaningful but just waiting and preparing for their last time.

Furthermore, cultural perspectives regarding higher education would vary from one country to the other. The participants in this study started their college studies because of a lifelong desire for college graduation, which is highly valued in Korean society.

Understanding and identifying their orientation towards ‘production’ is essential not only in dealing with and helping older students pursuing a college degree but also in developing services and programs for older adults in the aging society. The implication of this study is that older adults are not satisfied with programs based on hobbies and recreation for a long period of time. They might feel comfortable when they have more or less connections to the labor market. When the activities involving the concept of production existed in their subconsciousness are supported and provided, their needs will be met and transformed to social contribution. Older adults want to be seen not as unproductive and consuming beings, but as main agents of economic activity. Their college studying includes their message to the society that they are productive enough to work, and to challenge the social demands as a main actor of the society. Understanding this meaning of production included in older’s existence raises questions about developing a variety of policies for older population. At the same time, it is important to provide various dimensions of student assistances including tutors not too young to intimidate older learners and intensified interactions between the instructor and the students in online

universities.

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저 자 소 개

이 은 주(Eunjoo Lee)

정회원



- 1990년 2월 : 성심여대 경영학과(경영학사)
 - 1999년 8월 : University of Texas at Austin 사회학과 사회학 석사
 - 2002년 8월 : University of Texas at Austin 사회학과 사회학 박사
 - 2003년 2월 ~ 현재 : 서울사이버대학교 부교수
- <관심분야> : 빈곤정책, 주거복지정책, 온라인학습, 질적연구방법론