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Journal article

**Ageing, loss, and learning : Hong Kong and Australian seniors**  
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# AGEING, LOSS AND LEARNING: HONG KONG AND AUSTRALIAN SENIORS

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**Abstract** The discussion of loss and its relationship to learning in this paper is based on the analysis of interview data from 39 older adults in Hong Kong and 40 in Australia. The focus of the research was on ageing and learning. The phenomenon of life changes, specifically losses, and their relationship to learning was frequently mentioned and this theme is described here. Three different kinds of loss were identified in the data as motivators for organized or non-organized learning or for negatively affecting learning. These included loss of aspects of health, of job or of partner. The results are potentially useful to policy makers and learning providers, to encourage older adults to engage in learning as one way of coping with loss.

Research has shown that learning is essential to healthy and active ageing and has effects on enjoyment of life, confidence, self-concept, self-satisfaction, health and ability to cope (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). In a recent report on ageing and health the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2015) stated that;

The abilities to learn, grow and make decisions include efforts to continue to learn and apply knowledge, engage in problem solving, continue personal development, and be able to make choices. Continuing to learn enables older people to have the knowledge and skills to manage their health, to keep abreast of developments in information and technology, to participate (for example, by working or volunteering), to adjust to ageing (for example, to retirement, widowhood or becoming a caregiver), to maintain their identity and to keep interested in life (98). Continued personal growth – mental, physical, social and

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emotional – is important for enabling older people to do what they value, and the ability to make decisions is key to older people’s sense of control (99) (WHO, 2015, p 174).

Learning has been seen to be a response to the context of one’s life (Knowles, 1984; Lamdin, 1997; Tennant & Pogson, 1995), and significant life changes can trigger learning (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Hodkinson, 2010). Older adults in particular are likely to experience life changes which lead to loss. Such losses can be social (i.e. loss of a job or partner) or physical (i.e. loss of aspects of health) (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). Other forms of loss can include loss of respect and loss of one’s acquaintances (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Bee & Bjorklund, 2004). Such events can ‘encourage or provoke the learner to begin or continue to pursue an activity of learning’ (Roberson & Merriam, 2005, p 14). Indeed loss can be a catalyst through creating more time for individuals, which can open up opportunities for learning (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). For some, it may also mean they have more control over how to spend and enjoy their time.

A search of the recent literature shows that there has been little research specifically on how learning in later life may be related to life changes such as loss. There is some research in specific areas of loss. Retirement itself has been described as being an ongoing process and learning has been proposed as integral to those transitions through which older people go before, during and after leaving paid work. Hodkinson (2010) found that the learning is often informal and tacit, in anticipation, preparation and reaction to change. Osborne (2012) suggested that the psychological challenge of retirement is the loss of work/life structure and the task of building a retirement/life structure to replace it. Kubicek et al. (2010) also noted the possibility of retirement as a loss and Sargent et al. (2011) stated that retirement might lead to loss of purpose.

There is a small amount of relevant literature in the loss of health and learning and a great deal of experiential wisdom. Stroke victims often need to learn to walk and talk again. Sufferers of other disease need to learn about diet and drugs. Benbow (2009) proposed that mental health issues can promote learning. Learning may be the primary goal in an academic (i.e. formal or scholarly) sense, as in the case of the woman with recurrent depression following retirement who undertook a degree in Egyptology (personal communication), in the sense of developing new interests (for example, the man with recurrent depression in later life who enrolled on a computer course and the woman in her 80s who took up classes in life drawing (personal communications), and in developing existing skills (for example, the man who had enjoyed attending a gym over many

years who was supported to continue despite developing progressive dementia (personal communication) (Benbow, 2009).

Some research shows that loss can be a positive motivator to spur on further learning (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). However loss may not directly affect learning, but rather may affect the motivation to learn and levels of optimism and hopefulness, which could have an indirect impact on engaging in learning.

In our research of the views of older adults in Hong Kong and Australia on ageing and learning, the effect of loss was frequently mentioned. Whilst this was not the primary focus of the research the frequent referral to loss as a reason, or not, for learning suggested that this theme should be explored further. Therefore the aim of this analysis of the data was to describe how loss affected learning in organized and non organized learners in both countries. The objectives of the analysis were to;

- Identify the kinds of loss experienced by Hong Kong and Australian seniors
- Determine whether loss was related to learning
- Examine the implication for helping seniors deal with loss through learning.

## **METHOD**

This analysis of the theme of life changes and loss is from the data from a large project investigating learning issues for older adults in Australia and Hong Kong. This paper reports on the discussion of loss in the qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with Australian and Hong Kong participants. The issues that were discussed in the interviews are described below. Phenomenology was used to guide the interviews and analysis (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) as a means of exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of samples of older people. The focus of phenomenologic inquiry is what people experience in regard to some phenomenon and how they interpret those experiences. Phenomenological research attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation (or phenomenon). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted from March to July 2014 in Australia and between January and May 2014 in Hong Kong.

### *Participants*

Utilising a purposive sampling strategy, 28 participants (aged 55 years and older) were identified from 400 respondents in Australia to the Learning and Ageing Survey developed for the quantitative part of the research. Another 12 interviewees were individually recruited to bring the number to 40. Twenty each of organized and non-organized learners were selected. In selecting participants, consideration was given to age, gender, location, financial status, prior education, and engagement in learning.

For the Hong Kong study, the qualitative data were obtained by way of in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 18 elders who had participated in organized learning during the past six months and 21 elders who had not.

Tables 1 and 2 provide summaries of the composition of Australian and Hong Kong samples.

Table 1. Composition of sample in Australia

	Organized learning (formal and non- formal)	Non organized learning (informal)	Total
Ages 55-59	0	3	3
60-64	6	0	6
65-69	7	7	14
70-74	2	10	12
75+	2	3	5
Gender			
Male	9	9	18
Female	11	11	22
Education: Primary	0	2	2
Education: Secondary	3	6	9
Education: Technical	4	4	8
Education: University	13	8	21

Table 2. Composition of sample in Hong Kong.

Total Interviewees	39
Learner group	18
Non-learner group	21

Female	19
Male	20
Age1 (55-59)	0
Age2 (60-64)	12
Age3 (65-69)	5
Age4 (70-74)	6
Age5 (75 and above)	16
Education: No formal education	2
Education: Primary	12
Education: Secondary	20
Education: Technical institute	1
Education: University	4

### *Procedure*

Ethical clearance was sought and granted by the University Human Research Ethics Committees and written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview (lasting approximately 45 minutes) over the telephone or Skype for the Australian study, while face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the Hong Kong counterparts. Interviews were structured to explore issues of most importance to participants. Seven issues using open ended questions and prompts, when required, were used to explore: a) active aging and learning, b) involvement/experience with continuing learning, c) the value of learning, d) reasons for (or not) to engage in learning, e) interests, facilitators and how they wanted to learn and f) barriers and facilitators to learning (see appendix A for examples of questions). There were no specific questions regarding loss. The issue arose in the interviews and discussion.

### *Analysis*

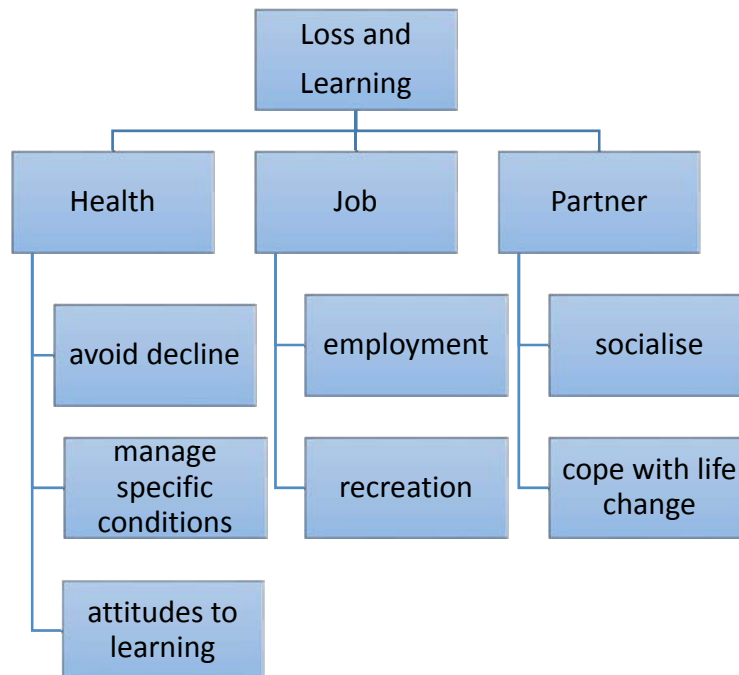
The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The Hong Kong interviews were translated to English. The data were then subject to manual thematic analysis conducted to identify key categories, themes and patterns (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). A constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to determine issues that were critical to elderly learning. Each interview was read by every member of the research team, and the Research Assistant as a

preliminary analysis. The final set of issues was determined after discussion and negotiation by the team to achieve inter-rater reliability. Hence thematic analysis followed three iterative steps: 1) transcripts were read and re-read to identify the overarching themes; 2) manual coding was used to identify common and contrasting concepts and significant experiences, phrases, expressions, or words were identified; and 3) themes were identified, reviewed by the authors to reach majority agreement, categorized and named in order to understand the perspectives of older learners. This coding process was repeated until the point of data saturation. The illustrative quotes were then allocated to issues and sub issues in word documents. For this paper the focus of the analysis was specifically on loss and learning.

## FINDINGS

Three main kinds of life changes, entailing loss were identified in the data as motivators or as having a negative effect on both organized or non-organized learning. These included loss of aspects of health, of job, or of partner. These losses and reasons for leaning are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Kinds of loss and learning



## Loss of health

A few participants mentioned learning in order to avoid degeneration or decline with age. Some described learning as a result of loss of aspects of health, such as memory, poor vision or diabetes. Others chose to learn more about health to manage conditions they had been diagnosed with, whilst some felt their health negatively affected their attitudes and ability to learn.

### *Learning in order to avoid degeneration*

Hong Kong participants in particular were concerned about learning to avoid decline and degeneration with age by keeping their brains and memories active. This was also a finding for Hong Kong. Participants described in Boulton-Lewis et al (2016). They made statements as follows.

Why do I learn so many things? I want to use my brain and activate it so that it won't degenerate so quickly... but I think it's good that I have interest and energy to learn things and try my best to activate my brain to slow down its degeneration. (HK/L15/F/A3/E3)<sup>2</sup>

[I do something almost every day, guitar on Mondays, choir on Tuesdays, harmonica on Wednesdays because] if you don't learn, your brain will degenerate more quickly and the memory will get worse more quickly. (HK/L15/F/A3/E3)

I don't want myself to deteriorate. I have to learn something to make myself become energetic (HK/10/F/A4/E2)

... learning is "better for [our] brain" [she had started learning singing as] we hope through our learning here, like singing, I need to remember the lyrics, so as to slow down the pace of degeneration. The teacher said I will not degenerate so quickly as I remember the lyrics". She and her husband regularly go to nursing homes to "sing for the elderly" so that they "can stay young". (HK/L13/F/A2/E4)

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<sup>2</sup> The Hong Kong codes can be interpreted as follows;

HK = Hong Kong, L1, NL1 = non-learner, M=male, F=female, A1 = age group 1 (55-59), A2 = age group 2 (60-54), A3 = age group 3 (65-69), A4 = age group 4 (70-74), A5 = age group 5 (75 and above), E1-5 where 1= no formal education, 2= primary, 3=secondary, 4= technical institute, 5=university.



Similarly, an Australian participant who had a history of dementia in their family was “really vigilant with keeping busy” (38, OL, M, 61) to avoid the disease.<sup>3</sup>

### *Memory loss*

Memory loss featured significantly amongst participants’ responses, in both the learning and non-learning group. Many shared the view that “the worst thing of being old is having poor memory”. Again these responses came from Hong Kong participants. They included adjustments for poor memory as follows;

“When I have class, I take notes or else I will forget easily” (HK/L3/M/A4/E2) and ‘if you know you have poor memory, you have to write things down. You can recall your memory by rereading them’. Despite poor memory and being unable to ‘remember much’, one participant liked “participating [in] group learning ... when you learn more, you get to know yourself more” (HK/L9/M/A5/E2).

There were some who found poor memory made it more difficult to learn. One participant with poor memory felt frustrated ‘as I always forget things’ and ‘I am unhappy these days that I got sick’ and so ‘I seldom learn’ (HK/NL5/F/A5/E3). She mentioned trying to learn independently:

I do value learning a lot ... I pay attention to the things related to health. I learn about Chinese medicine for my own sake...I kept many newspaper clippings, however I don’t know how to arrange them, its chaos now. I learnt a lot of knowledge but I don’t know how to express (HK/NL5/F/A5/E3).

Another participant, who had wanted to learn how to use WhatsApp, to share photos with her family, became ‘more confused after learning it, I couldn’t sleep as I always thought of it. I couldn’t remember what I had learnt during the lesson’ and felt more comfortable learning independently (HK/L1/F/A4/E3).

One participant felt that poor memory meant that the teacher:...needs to do more repetition. More tolerance, sometimes we have bad memory and we ask many times. The teacher may have to be tolerant. I have slower reaction and learning progress.

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<sup>3</sup> The Australian coding can be interpreted as follows; interviewee number, organized or non organized learner (OL/NOL), male or female, age.

However she believed it was important to “put effort in it, until we learn it” and she also taught cooking classes occasionally despite poor sight (HK/L8/F/A5/E2).

For another, poor memory prevented him from reading more books:

I don't have the memory to read more books. Maybe I will forget right after I finish reading.

For example, sometimes I look in the dictionary for a word and all of a sudden, I forget what I am looking for. I still can't remember the next day (HK/NL14/M/A5/E3).

Consequently, he became selective in what he learnt, choosing to focus on learning about medicine and hygiene as “others are useless. For example, literature is useless for you now. Learning those at this age is useless ... a waste of my time” (HK/NL14/M/A5/E3).

#### *Loss of health and attitudes towards learning*

Loss of health for some participants meant they were directly motivated to learn about their conditions, as was the case for one Australian man who said his wife was keen to learn ‘all she can about arthritis’ to manage her condition (9OL, M, 75+). Another said ‘I have diabetes and a few illnesses which ... me off. My Doctor said lose weight or lose your kidney, so now I walk 8 k a day, I have learned to watch what I eat and I work in the garden.’ (11OL, M, 65-69).

For others loss of health negatively affected learning and for some learning became difficult. There were others who persisted despite age related difficulties although health problems limited the courses they could enroll in.

For three participants in the non-organized learning group in Hong Kong, decline in health negatively affected their learning; ‘I don't have the mind and spirit to learn’ and ‘to be frank, there is nothing to learn for elderly at this age’ (HK/NI7/F/A4/E3). Although this same participant did still want to learn to speak English, ‘my eyes are not as good as before’. For the second participant, deteriorating health meant ‘there is nothing that I can learn, elderly are close to death’ (HK/NL9/M/A4/E1).

Other Hong Kong participants with health problems also said it negatively affected their learning. One who had knee problems, high cholesterol and poor vision mentioned that her health often prevented her from participating in learning activities (HK/NL20/F/A5/E3). She was

still interested in learning however, particularly English, but was concerned that she 'could not catch up' with others and problems with her leg meant that coordination while learning tai chi was difficult.

Consequently, she was engaged in independent learning through newspapers and books at home, as she believed that learning and becoming more well educated meant more respect. Another felt that 'if the health condition is bad, it's nearly impossible to learn' (HK/L6/F/A2/E3).

Loss of aspects of health had similar effects on some Australian participants. Losing eyesight also prevented some from learning. General loss of health for some Australian participants meant they felt 'so isolated in their own homes ... life can become difficult and exhausting' (7OL, F, 70-74) which prevents engaging in learning.

Loss of health also influenced what courses participants felt they could enroll in. For example, one person in Hong Kong wanted to learn about home maintenance but 'I don't have the energy to do that... you need much energy to pick up an electric drill' (HK/L4/F/A2/E3). The health of her family members (husband with colorectal cancer and a 26 year old son with muscular dystrophy) also prevented her from enrolling in more courses, but she still felt that learning 'can help balance your life'. Similarly, another felt that 'we need to choose according to our energy so we are now learning things that don't require much movement' (HK/L12/M/A4).

Some believed that despite problems you need to keep on learning. One Hong Kong participant had poor vision and a broken leg from a traffic accident. She had enjoyed engaging in a drawing class and tai chi but had had to stop both due to her leg. Nevertheless, she believed that 'the most important thing is that you are interested' in a particular course, and still derived a sense of accomplishment from learning and finishing a painting, despite it being difficult (HK/L13/F/A2/E4). Another described a lot of pain in his legs but felt that 'it's never too old to learn' and 'I love to learn but sometimes, because of my health issue, I cannot go' (HK/NL16/F/A5/E1).

He wanted to 'learn everything' but 'recently, my body is failing so I spend less time learning.' And another said 'if my leg doesn't hurt, I would have much better motivation to learn' (HK/N117/F/A3/E3). Nevertheless 'sometimes I will still go to learn new things and use the computers to surf the internet or do other things, just to keep myself updated...I need to learn.'

This same participant remarked ‘don’t always underestimate yourself and think you cannot achieve anything...I will keep learning and learn as much as I can’. She had also lost her husband two decades ago, and felt that with learning it was important not to compare with others. Despite not being able to always hear properly, she said ‘you need to face the obstacles’ when learning but ‘just hold the belief that you need to learn.’ One with a cardiac pacemaker and leg problems, also stated that ‘if we have the opportunities to learn, it’s good. It’s never too old to learn’ (HK/NL16/F/A5/E1). This was reflected by another participant who wanted to learn as much as possible, and was particularly motivated to learn about health and nutrition. She also taught at various community centers and talking to other elders about their ‘life experiences’ was a form of informal learning for her, because ‘in the meantime of us teaching something, we learn something’ (HK/L14/F/A2/E4).

In summary Hong Kong participants in particular were interested in learning as a preventative to maintain their health and thought processes. Some discussed the problem of memory loss and the adjustments they made in order to keep learning. Some expressed frustration or difficulties in learning caused by this loss. And finally some were directly motivated by a health problem to learn how to manage or ameliorate it. These problems either interfered with learning or prompted people to persist regardless. Health loss also determined the kind of courses in which they could enrol.

### **Loss of job**

The loss of a job for many participants in the organized learning groups had spurred them on to learn. Learning for some Hong Kong participants included training as a masseuse, being a voluntary lecturer and learning about technology. For one participant in Hong Kong the change to retirement meant that;

...the first three months after my retirement, I stared at the walls every day because I used to be so busy working and now I had nothing to do...at least I will live for another 20 years. I can’t spend the rest of life like this. So I started to go out and see what’s going on. I came to the elderly center and see what’s there for me to learn. I found out there are so many things for me to learn so I start learning (HK/L15/F/A3/E3).

Having more time after retirement meant that some were driven to learn to in order have something to do and avoid staying at home all day. One Australian participant undertook a real estate certificate just for something to do. Finding a way to occupy time also motivated two other Australian participants to learn;

In 2008 I left the workforce and did palliative care for a friend with a terminal illness. I was no longer employable. If you drop out of the workforce, it's over. It's very difficult to get back in. That's why I went back to Uni. It wasn't because I wanted to particularly learn something, I just needed something to do. (3OL, F, 55-59).

After I retired I went back and did a year of Spanish. I then went and did a real estate certificate just for something to do. I was actually due to go back and do law but my daughter refused to go to university if I went back again. She couldn't stand the thought of her father being at university the same time that she was. So that kind of ended that! But because I was lecturing and involved with setting up training for organisations until I basically retired, that was at 58. I shifted up to the Gold Coast and I reorganised my life around sport (9OL, M, 70-74),

One participant in Hong Kong said we 'should do more activities to make our lives more meaningful. For example, we can learn something' (HK/L4/F/A2/E3). For some the freedom after the loss of a job meant they could spend time learning about what they were interested in.

This was reflected by other participants, who had the 'time to learn things that I like now because I have retired ... more time to focus on learning what I like'. This sense of enjoyment was also shown by an Australian participant;

I'd been retired about 12 months and about 4 or 5 years ago I did a 12 month course to teach English to non-English speaking people. And I thoroughly enjoyed it. It's something that I think I could be of use. (18OL, F, 65-69)

A Hong Kong participant who had found retired life difficult at first and had rejoined the workforce temporarily, found that when she finally retired, learning helped her to 'keep young mentally' and she liked socializing with others to learn as 'the more people you keep in touch

with, the more information you can get' (HK/L19/F/A2/E2). This informal learning was also reflected by another participant, who through talking to others of the same age who had also;

...finished their tasks of raising kids and taking care of family ... we can chat together.

Sometimes we learn a lot from chatting. Sometimes they share their own experiences and then you will learn something (HK/L13/F/A2/E4).

Learning after the loss of a job also brought new streams of income for one individual who had taken a massage course and subsequently was employed as a part-time masseuse. One Australian participant was engaging in learning to undertake a new job:

I was working for the University of Queensland, I'd been there for about 35 years and had been made redundant and decided that to keep active so I enrolled with QUT with the new Centre for Philanthropy. So I did a certificate in philanthropy and non-profit studies and then I did the graduate diploma. [Now] I'm what you call partly retired, probably because I would have kept working because I would have found a job. I work as a records and archivist. So that keeps me going one or two days a week (10,OL, M, 65-69).

However, for two Australian participants, loss of their job meant they had to learn again in order to find employment:

In 2011 I applied for 40 jobs and only got one response. I couldn't get a job so I joined the SES one week before the floods hit. I sat 16 courses and passed them all (both field and classroom based). I did a first aid and Traffic Management Course. I did an Emergency Management Centre Course.... I had to learn because I couldn't get a job. (5OL, F, 65-69).

I'm currently doing Cert 3 in Childcare and dislike it, not enjoying it at all. I'm having to do it for employment but would not do it if I had a choice. I've never been a person who enjoys studying and find it difficult. (37OL, F, 62)

In the non-organized learning group, one retired respondent in Hong Kong felt that;

Learning will make you see your future. If you don't learn, you will just stay where you are. At the same time of learning, you can also broaden your life, your horizon and your mind (HK/NL10/M/A2/E3).

He had subsequently become a voluntary lecturer at the Elderly Academy in Hong Kong during his retirement. This positive attitude was echoed by an Australian participant who was leaving work in order to be a mentor.

One Hong Kong participant who had retired had taken up singing and dancing. He argued that ...if I can have a chance to learn more, I will. My wife supports me as well. She asked me if we can still go to HKIEd to attend some course ... if you want to learn, it's never too late to learn (HK/NL11/M/A5/E3).

And for another, retirement meant he wanted to learn more about technology changes and had enrolled in a course about iPads, stating 'I am not saying I want to be very up-to-date but at least not to be outdated' (HK/L2/F/A2/EF).

The loss of a job whether voluntary or not caused some people to engage in learning. This occurred for various reasons: boredom, a need to do something, because of new freedom, to make their lives more meaningful, for enjoyment, to socialize, to work voluntarily, to rejoin the workforce, to have an income. These reasons could broadly be categorized as learning for pleasure or for a purpose as proposed by Boulton-Lewis & Buys (2015).

### **Loss of partner**

The loss of a partner caused some people to join learning groups to socialize, and to engage in community activities such as committee work, for continuing employment, to be with a new partner, and to keep up with current affairs and finances.

One participant in the non-organized learning group in Hong Kong who had lost his partner was motivated to be more active in the elderly center, although predominantly to socialize. He was keen to start dancing classes although the center did not currently offer the type he wanted. Nevertheless, he believed 'if you are interested, you have to take the initiative to learn, regardless if you could master the new skills' (HK/N12/M/A5/E2).

Six people in the Australian sample described the loss of a partner as a reason for new learning. Loss motivated one to engage in committee work, others to gain employment, or to manage independently.

I lost my wife four and half years ago and I've got fairly heavily involved in a few things like I'm a treasurer for three and auditor for two others which keeps the old brain going and its getting me out amongst people with good common interests (7NOL, M, 75+).

Another two were motivated by loss to learn for continued employment:

I did nursing as a career and at age 42 my husband died, which threw a spanner in the works! I went into childcare so that I could work better hours to raise the kids. Then suddenly there were lots of changes in childcare. Even though I was a nurse, then I needed to do an associate dip in childcare. Then I had to do more study, then I got a job as a childcare nurse, and then the rules for that changed. (4NOL, F, 64-69).

I think that it is all a part of life. It is a nice time of life, but I am widowed and miss my husband... unfortunately I have made bad financial decisions and I still work... I work in aged care and I am 70 and looking after people younger than me. They have given up on living. It is really sad... I have to do recurrent training every 3 months. (39OL, F, 70)

For another participant, loss of her partner meant she had to learn things independently to manage:

I have a new partner in my life but I have been on my own a long time and it frightens me to be old and alone. I've had to learn new things and I just work through them on my own, I'm not frightened to do that because I've not been out of the workforce so long that I can't just tackle something. (NOL3, F, 65- 69)

Lastly, for another Australian participant, loss of her husband had motivated her to learn to be aware of current events:

There is sadness to being widowed that you don't have your husband with you when you should be enjoying your twilight years. [I learn] to be aware of the world around me and myself. I keep up to date on world events because it is important to be engaged and have an opinion. I walk every day and took up tai chi to keep my health up. (28NOL, F, 73)

And another felt learning necessary to manage finances:



Years without working and no trust in financial planners and the death of my husband, has led to a fear of the extraneous that is the basic costs that we have no control over. How do you deal with spiralling costs when you are a self-funded retiree earning 3 -4% interest on earnings and the pension is even more of a drain on taxpayers. (28NOL, F, 73)

The loss of a partner was also a stimulus for some in both countries to learn. This was more the case in the Australian sample. The learning was undertaken to socialize in committee work and community affairs, to find a new partner, for further employment or for management of their finances, or to manage independently.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this analysis of life changes entailing loss, and its effects, was to examine the views of older adults in Hong Kong and Australia on these might affect learning. The data from interviewees were categorized according to three different types of loss; health, job and partner. For many older adults in both Hong Kong and Australia, loss was a catalyst for engaging in learning. The type of learning that many undertook was directly related to their loss, for instance learning more about their health and conditions they had been diagnosed with. Similarly job loss meant some started learning in order to find employment or undertake voluntary work. For some, loss (particularly of job or partner) had created extra time in their lives, which was filled by learning. Some responded that they were learning in order to have something to do and make their lives meaningful, as proposed by Leung, Lui and Chi (2006). This is in line with previous research (Roberson & Merriam, 2005), where loss instigated learning and filled the void left by a loss (Scala, 1996). The choices of learning activities were many and varied.

However for some interviewees, loss was also a barrier to learning, particularly loss of vision and memory, which many felt impaired their learning. This is in line with previous research where health can negatively impact learning (Scala, 1996; Tam et al, 2016). For others, it was not the loss per se that influenced whether they learned or not, but rather their outlook on life and learning, in spite of losses they encountered. Holding views that learning was essential to prevent degeneration, keep active and enrich their lives meant interviewees were more likely to engage in learning. Conversely, respondents who reported feeling it was too late to learn reported limited

learning. Thus, whilst loss can directly stimulate the desire to learn, it is also dependent upon individual motivation levels.

This analysis has a limitation in that the effect of loss on learning was not directly explored. Rather the notion of the effect of life changes and their effects on learning arose spontaneously in discussion of aging and engagement or not in learning. Because there is little recent literature in the area of loss of various kinds and its relationship to learning it is suggested that more research be undertaken to address the question directly.

## **Conclusion**

If learning is essential to healthy and active ageing and has effects on enjoyment of life, confidence, self-concept, self-satisfaction, health and ability to cope (Boulton-Lewis, 2010) then we should be mindful of life changes and situations that might motivate learning. In some older people, as indicated in our samples, a life changing loss can lead to learning. However in others the experience of loss might be capitalized on as a motivator to encourage new learning which could have some beneficial effects.

We propose that these findings are of use to senior groups and learning providers. It also suggests that if possible in preparation for retirement the possibilities of learning should be explored. That loss does trigger learning spontaneously in some older adults suggests that a life changing loss might be used sensitively to encourage others to engage in formal and informal learning for practical reasons, occupying their time, personal wellbeing and as a means of finding purpose and meaning in life. Furthermore older adults who may be hesitant to participate in learning, could be encouraged to regard loss as a positive motivator. Given the increased likelihood of older adults experiencing loss, it is therefore essential that we recognize the impact of such events by creating more opportunities, such as learning, for older adults to improve their wellbeing (McMinn, 2009). Specifically, social and physical losses as described by Roberson and Merriam (2005) or the three major kinds of loss, and proposed in this paper: health, job or partner may lead to learning.

There has been little specific research into how losses generally in later life may relate to learning. This current discussion therefore aims to fill this gap in the literature and shed light

upon how some elders view loss and learning in both Hong Kong and Australia. More research is needed to examine other factors that may affect the relationship between loss and learning, such as general motivation to learn. Doing so will further increase the ability of policy makers, counsellors and learning providers to meet the learning needs of older adults and increase the chances that ageing is a positive and enriching experience.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Issues for interviews**

The suggested interview questions were designed to obtain qualitative data to provide in-depth information about the conceptualizations of learning and the engagement of senior adults as they experience it from their own perspectives. The issues to be discussed in an open ended way included:

How do you feel about getting older?

How would you describe the ideal way of life for you as you get older?

Tell me what you think about active ageing.

What do you think about learning as you get older?

If you value/do not value continued learning explain why.

Describe your involvement/experience with continuing learning.

Why do you engage/not engage in learning?

Describe your interests

How you want to learn?

What helps your learning?

What stops you from learning?

Do you think you are in control of your life? Explain

How do you feel about change?

Towards the end of the interview ask a summative question: "Can you please describe for me what you think learning means for you as you get older?"

**Probe questions as follows;**

Explain

Tell me more

Why do you think about that?

And so you believe that...