Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins

Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 35 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 37 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig, 2005); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and *Social Entrepreneurship for Dummies* (Wiley, 2010, with M. Durieux). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as President of the *Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones* (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

Website (personal):
 WWW.ucalgary.ca/~stebbins
Website (perspective):
 WWW.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure

Self-Directed Learning as a Foundation for Complex Leisure

Roberson (2005, p. 205) notes the crucial differences between adult education and self-directed learning and then links the second to serious leisure. Drawing on an earlier conceptualization by Lambdin (1997), he says that 'self-directed learning is intentional and self-planned learning where the individual is clearly in control of this process'. Such learning may be formal (here it would be synonymous with adult education), but most often, it is informal. An important condition is agency, that the learner controls the start, direction, and termination of the learning experience. Both adult education and self-directed learning are types of 'lifelong learning'. The latter is a broader idea than the first two, summarized by Selman and colleagues (1998, p. 21) as learning done throughout a person's lifetime, 'from the cradle to the grave'.

Roberson (2005) found that his sample of rural, elderly Americans (in the State of Georgia) took their learning seriously, as they pursued amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer roles. At the same time the respondents also said they 'enjoyed' or had 'fun' in these learning experiences. Roberson said they were "playful" when involved in them. In fact, his findings would seem to lend some empirical weight to the importance of the serious leisure reward of self-gratification, where participants find a combination of superficial enjoyment and deep self-fulfillment.

Jones and Symon (2001), in writing about governmental policy in Britain, indicate that adult education and self-directed learning offer serious learning-oriented resources for six special groups: the unemployed, unwaged (volunteers), elderly, women, 'portfolio workers' (hold many different jobs over a lifetime), and people with disabilities. Moreover, serious leisure offers an involving, fulfilling career to these groups that some members of them once had and other members of them never had in work. Contemporary governmental policy, the authors say, tends to overlook the existence of serious leisure and its implications for quality of life and well-being.

These authors have identified the pivotal place of serious leisure in self-directed learning (SDL). Still, there is more that must be said about this process, were we are to apply it to the many areas of human life where it might operate. One, how does SDL vary across the serious leisure perspective, including project-based leisure? Two, how does SDL vary across the life course and how does it relate to lifelong learning? Three, what role does SDL play in the wider society?

SDL in the Serious Leisure Perspective

The serious leisure perspective (SLP) can be described, in simplest terms, as the theoretic framework that synthesizes three main forms of leisure showing, at once, their distinctive features, similarities, and interrelationships (the SLP is discussed in detail in Stebbins, 2007). The three forms are the amateur, hobbyist, and career volunteer pursuits, which are briefly defined as follows (discussed in detail in Stebbins, 2007):

- **Serious leisure:** systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.
- **Casual leisure:** immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.

- **Project-based leisure:** short-term, reasonably complicated, one-off or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, or time free of disagreeable obligation.

Note that, recently, serious leisure and devotee work has been placed under the new heading of 'serious pursuits', as its two main types (Stebbins, 2012). 'Devotee work' may be conceived of as pleasant obligation, in that the people who perform it, though they must make a living from their work, do so by carrying out a highly, intrinsically appealing, set of activities. Work of this nature is, at bottom, essentially leisure.

Of the many types of hobbyists those going in for the liberal arts are particularly germane to this article. They are enamored of the systematic acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. Many of them accomplish this by reading voraciously in a field of art, sport, cuisine, language, culture, history, science, philosophy, politics, or literature (Stebbins, 1994). But some of them go beyond this to expand their knowledge still further through cultural tourism, documentary videos, television programs, and similar resources. Although the matter has yet to be studied through research, it is theoretically possible to separate buffs from consumers in the liberal arts hobbies of sport, cuisine, and the fine and entertainment arts. Some people — call them *consumers* — more or less uncritically consume restaurant fare, sports events, or displays of art (concerts, shows, exhibitions) as pure entertainment and sensory stimulation (casual leisure), whereas others — call them *buffs* — participate in these same situations as more or less knowledgeable experts, as serious leisure (for more on this distinction, see Stebbins 2002, chap. 5). The ever rarer Renaissance man of our day may also be classified here, even though such people avoid specializing in one field of learning to acquire, instead, a somewhat more superficial knowledge of a variety of fields. Being broadly well-read is a liberal arts hobby of its own.

For many participants in serious leisure, their SDL can be explained, in part, using Houle's (1961) distinction between learning-oriented and goal-oriented motives for pursuing adult education, in general. That is, the liberal arts hobbies are the only form of serious leisure where SDL is an end in itself. By contrast, amateurs, volunteers, and other hobbyists learn as a means to particular leisure ends, such as producing art, playing sport, collecting objects, or helping others. Sometimes both types of participant enroll in the adult-education same course, a pattern that appears to be especially common in science. Thus, some students in an adult education course in astronomy may be liberal arts hobbyists, while others are there to learn about the heavens as background for their amateur research. Or the liberal arts hobbyist in, say, French cuisine reads to improve his cultural understanding of this culinary practice, whereas the cooking (making and tinkering) hobbyist in this area reads to improve her capacity to prepare better gourmet meals.

There are times when people read as a means to accomplishing a leisure project. Examples abound, as in a leisure-oriented, do-it-self enthusiast who reads a book on remodeling kitchens, a genealogist who studies the historical literature about the parental old country, and a speaker at a school reunion who, unaccustomed to talking before an audience, examines an article on public speaking. These examples suggest that SDL in service of projects is largely, if not entirely, of the goal-oriented variety. Indeed, the limited temporal scope of the typical leisure project seems to preclude learning-oriented SDL, which is by dint of being a hobby a long-term undertaking.

More broadly, however, both types of motive, considered together, constitute an indispensable orientation toward complex leisure, especially the serious variety. Such leisure requires, among other things, that participants learn about the activity, in general, and its core activities, in particular. Thus, learning from one or more sources is unavoidable if a person wants to seriously play the cello, make a quilt or volunteer to mentor adolescents. All learning here is SDL, in that the participant decides when and where to seek the information and instruction needed to engage effectively in the activity.

SDL across the Life Course

Unlike career, linked as it is to particular roles and activities, life course is much broader, covering numerous roles and activities as they evolve, inter-weave, and are assumed or abandoned across the lifetime of a person (modified from Bush and Simmons, 1981, pp. 155-157). Furthermore, life course, when viewed sociologically, centers on age-graded roles and generational effects. Thus it has a historical dimension as well as links to social structure based on the status associated with each role and activity. For instance, Fisher, Day, and Collier (1998) observe that old age is uniquely characterized by 'generativity', which includes taking on the responsibility of caring for others as effected through such roles as parent, spouse, friend, and grandparent. When not perceived as personal unpleasant obligation, such care may lead to fulfillment in a leisure role. Of all the age periods composing the life course, the third age, or that period of life between age 50 and 75 (also known as the age of the 'young-old' or 'active retirement'), offers the richest opportunity for finding fulfillment (Laslett, 1994). Brooks (2007) and Wuthnow (2007), by contrast, discuss the still, little-understood "odyssey years," or that period after adolescence and before full adulthood (roughly ages 18-35) during which people in this category commonly exist in a state of uncertainty with respect to marriage, work, education, family, and quite possibly, even leisure.

The broadest observation to be made here is that especially goal-oriented SDL will vary across the life course, primarily because the pursuit of leisure interests tends to change over the years. Such conditions as variations in family composition, work demands, bodily strength and energy, and financial resources help account for this change. In fact, these conditions and others, including declining enthusiasm for an activity, may even lead some participants to abandon it altogether (Stebbins, 2008).

Nevertheless, the liberal arts hobbies, being learning-oriented, lasting passions, are generally more enduring activities over the life course than the goal-oriented activities. Yet, even here, an ardent reader of, say, the history of World War II might decide enough is enough and switch to an in-depth examination of the history of Germany. A strong point about SDL, brought out by studying its role in the life course, is the flexibility it gives leisure participants as they turn to their own agency in shaping their personal development. For in SDL we may, at least in principle, take a formal adult education course, pick up a book or magazine, attend a lecture, watch a video, travel somewhere, and on and on, all as part of an individualized plan for leisure-based learning.

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SDL in Society

Self-directed learning is a main vehicle by which personal agency is manifested in pursuing the various leisure activities. In engaging in SDL people have maximum freedom, albeit within the usual constraints thrown up by culture, history, and social structure, to inform themselves as they wish. By definition such learning obviates the necessity of reporting to someone, for it is the individual who decides where and how the desired information will be acquired.

As such, SDL helps open the door to the possibility of deviant leisure. It is by way of this process that people discover where their chosen form of deviance or its resources are available for their consumption and use. Examples include gaining information about where a city's strip clubs are located, where clandestine poker games are regularly held (assuming they are illegal), and where and how to buy marijuana on the street. People leaning toward anarchism or deviant fundamentalist religion wanting contact with kindred spirits must engage in some discrete inquiring to find them. This, too, is SDL.

In the past the resources for such learning were typically personal observation and word of mouth and, more formally for some deviance, books, magazines, pamphlets, and the like. Today, these sources are augmented if not supplanted by the Internet. Indeed, the Internet, because of its vast content and obvious convenience has become arguably the richest repository of all for the kinds of information sought in SDL.

From what has just been said it can be hypothesized that SDL is fundamental to much of ideational social change. Thus self-directed learning is occurring when people choose to read, listen, or watch a political, religious or other message designed to persuade its audience to think or act differently from the norm. To the extent that they accept what they have learned here, they become part of the proposed change. Of course, if the message consumed amounts to brain-washing, it cannot be qualified as SDL, since the self has failed in this instance to direct the learning process.

Social change in consumer habits often seems to rest on SDL, as buyers inform themselves of the strengths and weaknesses of particular products. Some of this kind of change roots in experience with a product, however; it is adopted because it works well or rejected for the opposite reason. Here there is learning, to be sure, but it is of the inductive variety. By contrast, SDL is fundamentally deductive; information is acquired from existing sources and, where necessary, applied to certain problems.

Conclusion

Self-directed learning is itself a leisure activity, defined as a type of pursuit, wherein participants in it mentally or physically (often both) think or do something, motivated by the hope of achieving a desired end (Stebbins, 2009). Except for the liberal arts hobbies, it is not however a core activity, or the distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve the outcome or product that the participant seeks. That is, cross-country skiers are inclined to read about how to improve their performance on skis or how to wax them — two SDL activities — but their core activity is actually going skiing. Note, too, that participants will not find flow in their SDL bearing on complex leisure pursuits (Stebbins, 2012), which is true even of the liberal arts hobbyists, but they will find it fulfilling. It is also an indispensable activity in their drive to enhance their careers there.

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Bob Stebbins
University of Calgary
stebbins@ucalgary.ca
Website (personal): http://soci.ucalgary.ca/ profiles/robert-stebbins
Website (Perspective): www.seriousleisure.net