

## **Critical geragogy: A framework for facilitating older learners in community music**

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The principal aim of this paper is to address the question of whether and how professional practice within an informal teaching and learning context (music) may be understood through a critical-geragogy lens. Secondly, we consider whether critical geragogy has relevance to and potential applications for enhancing practice among facilitators of older learners in community contexts. Geragogy refers to the management of teaching and learning for older adults and has become a well-known term applied to teaching and learning in later life. Critical geragogy retains the focus on older adults, but challenges the beliefs, practices, and structures related to ageing, supports older learners in overcoming alienation and developing a sense of powerful agency, and offers resources for purposeful collective action. In this paper we analyse the narratives of 13 facilitators of musical activities for older people, interpreting their reflections on practice within a critical-geragogy framework. The interviews, focusing on good practice in facilitating older learners, were carried out as part of the second phase of the Music for Life Project, funded by the UK Research Councils. A thematic analysis was undertaken, using a framework that was structured around person-centred, fellow-centred, and matter-centred goals. The interviews revealed that musical groups provided informal learning contexts where facilitators aspired to empower their participants through developing a positive interpersonal climate, valuing participation, using the participants' prior experiences as a resource, and guiding their groups towards creative expression as well as progression.

**Keywords:** critical geragogy; ageing; music; facilitator; older learners

### **Introduction**

The principles and practices of facilitating learning among older adults remains a relatively under-researched, yet highly significant, area of educational enquiry (Formosa, 2002). Lifelong learning has been advocated as a means for empowering individuals, supporting independence, developing skills and competency, and contributing to sustained personal fulfilment and wellbeing (Dench and Regan, 2000; Glendenning and Battersby, 1990; Withnall, 2010). Indeed, continued engagement in learning among older people has been found to be one significant route through which mental capital comprising cognitive and emotional resources may be unlocked and sustained, protecting against cognitive decline, depression, and anxiety among our ageing population (GOScience, 2008). However, older adults have been, to a large extent, marginalized in theoretical frameworks and empirical investigations concerned with lifelong learning (Findsen and Formosa, 2011).

In music this omission is particularly salient. While there is extensive published research concerned with pedagogical practices that support musical development among young people, senior adults remain an under-researched population in this regard (Gembris, 2008; Prickett, 2003). A growing body of evidence makes strong links between engagement in music-making,

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enhanced wellbeing, and active ageing. However, relatively little previous research has been directly concerned with the learning and teaching contexts or processes that underpin these positive outcomes. This may be because in music, as in other educational domains, there is a predominant myth that older people cannot learn new things (Stuart-Hamilton, 2006). There is now substantial evidence that this is not so, and that older people 'can and do have the ability to continue learning well into extreme old age' (Findsen and Formosa, 2011: 75). Indeed, with sufficient opportunity for practice, motivation, and time, learners in a number of domains have been found to achieve equivalent outcomes to their younger peers (Charness, 1992). In music, it has been claimed that all humans have a musical reserve capacity – an underused part of fundamental human musicality – that can be activated and developed at any stage in the lifecourse (Gembris, 2012), with older music learners developing compensatory strategies to mitigate physical or cognitive constraints (Coffman and Levy, 1997; Gembris, 2008). In other words, older adults *can* and *do* progress as musicians, particularly when supported by expert facilitators.

Yet it is not the case that any educational opportunity for older people, in music or other domains, is 'good' per se (Formosa, 2002). Rather, the value of engagement in later-life learning is related to opportunities for self-directed and self-regulated learning, collaborative dialogue and reflection, and for real and sustained development of knowledge, skills, and wisdom. These ideas form a cornerstone of the framework for critical geragogy, whereby teaching and learning for older people is seen as a context for transformation, emancipation, and empowerment (Formosa, 2002, 2011).

In this paper we analyse the narratives of facilitators of musical activities for older people, interpreting their perspectives on their practice within a critical-geragogy framework. The interviews, focusing on good practice in facilitating older learners, were carried out as part of the second phase of the Music for Life Project, funded by the UK Research Councils.

The first phase of the Music for Life Project had explored the social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of participation in music among older people (Creech, Hallam, Varvarigou *et al.*, 2013; Hallam *et al.*, 2014). In accordance with the general literature concerned with teaching older learners, the Music for Life Project found that facilitators played a key role in fostering effective outcomes for participants. The interpersonal qualities, teaching strategies, skills and knowledge of the facilitator were perceived as more important, in some cases, than the content or activities. Effective facilitators rejected a deficit model of ageing and supported participants in working towards musical goals and engaging with creative, enriching musical experiences. Observations of musical groups supported the view that the benefits of participation in music were optimal when facilitators applied differentiation strategies, acknowledged participants' prior experiences, established mutually respectful relationships with participants, had credibility as musicians, were highly organized, and made extensive use of specific, constructive feedback (Hallam *et al.*, 2011). Yet, while facilitators reported consistently high levels of professional satisfaction, they also highlighted specific challenges relating to differentiation, choosing relevant content, responding and adapting to age-related cognitive and physical changes, and creating social environments that were conducive for effective learning and participation.

The second, follow-on phase of the Music for Life Project thus focused on professional development for facilitators of older learners in music. As part of this project, a series of observations and interviews with facilitators was carried out. In this paper we offer an interpretation of these facilitator reflections on their practice. Our aims are: 1) to consider whether and how professional practice within an informal teaching and learning context (music) may be understood through the critical geragogy lens; and 2) to consider whether critical geragogy has relevance to and potential applications for enhancing practice among facilitators of older learners in community contexts.

## Critical geragogy: A theoretical framework

Geragogy refers to the management of teaching and learning for older adults and has become a well-known term applied to teaching and learning in later life (Formosa, 2012). The term 'geragogy', which has been used interchangeably with 'educational gerontology' (Maderer and Skiba, 2006), was coined by Lebel (1978) who advocated for the need for an educational theory that focused on the needs of older adults. In the same year, Hartford (1978) theorized geragogy as teaching and learning for the elderly that fostered self-actualization, social relationships, wellbeing, and talent-development. Others (e.g. John 1983, 1988) developed the notion of geragogy, specifying teaching strategies and particular learning tasks that were deemed to stimulate older adults. This top-down, teacher-centred approach has been critiqued on the grounds that it treated older adults as a homogenous group, reinforcing a deficit view of older people as dependent and decrepit (Findsen and Formosa, 2011).

In repost, Battersby (1987) called for a radical perspective, whereby older-adult learning should empower older people to challenge the oppressive and discriminatory conditions of old age. Critical geragogy emerged, seeking to unsettle assumptions of older learners' dependence and to promote the idea that later-life learning can act as a vehicle for effecting social change (Formosa, 2012). Influenced by critical theory, a critical-geragogy framework for later-life learning involves challenging beliefs, practices and structures related to ageing, and supports older learners in overcoming alienation and in learning 'to develop the sense of powerful agency – of possessing the desire, resources, and capacity to come together with others in purposeful collective action' (Brookfield, 2005: 49). In contrast to the deficit paradigm of old age, critical geragogy celebrates the diversity to be found among older people and highlights the view of later life as a period of profound creativity, where older people may use creative outlets for reflection on their own unique stories and for personal healing and problem-solving (Hickson and Housley, 1997).

From a critical geragogy perspective, later-life learning offers the possibility of leading older people to greater personal control and autonomy (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990). In accordance with this view, older learners are supported in pursuing goals that, according to Maderer and Skiba (2006) may be categorized as person-centred (the development or conservation of mental and physical competence, life satisfaction, independent involvement in meaningful activity); fellow-centred (social responsibility, engagement, and attentiveness); and matter-centred (confronting new challenges in personally meaningful domains). These ideals are supported in learning contexts where, instead of using condescending practices, the teacher's role is to collaborate with learners in fostering a sense of community and social inclusion (Wlodkowski, 2008). Teaching and learning, from this perspective, involves dialogue, negotiation, reflection, and promotion of ownership of the learning experience among the older learners (Formosa, 2002).

Of course, the meaning, function, form, and structure of learning are likely to differ across contexts and life stages. While there are several theoretical interpretations of the value of later-life learning (Withnall, 2010), it is clear that older people themselves are a heterogeneous group with diverse and complex orientations to learning, expectations, social and individual capital as well as constraints.

Withnall (2010) has warned that one cannot assume that older learners are motivated by an emancipatory agenda and that critical geragogy may itself impose an ideological constraint, or, as Brookfield (2005: 354) says, 'a pedagogy of ethical coercion'. Withnall echoes the view of Spigner-Littles and Anderson (1999) who suggested that some older learners may initially seek directive teaching where this aligns strongly with their prior experiences and values in education. Formosa (2012) explores this issue in his account of applying critical pedagogy in the context of an older-adult community-learning programme, focusing on creating age-friendly communities. Although

the nine elder participants in the programme engaged actively in debate, peer learning and collaborative exploration of salient issues, Formosa concluded that ‘critical geragogy’s promise to lead older adults from reflection to action seems more problematic and difficult to achieve in practice’ (2012: 36), attributing this at least in part to the participants’ preconceptions of themselves as older people.

Nevertheless, Withnall (2010: 35) implies that facilitators of later-life learning may promote a form of critical pedagogy at an individual level, through being aware of the educator–learner balance of power and implementing pedagogic strategies that recognize and increase resources among older learners. Such resources, for example, could include ‘experience, knowledge, skills, self-confidence and a sense of solidarity’. In a similar vein, Findsen and Formosa (2011: 101) add that educators, in developing clear objectives and strategies for engaging and empowering older learners, ‘need to suspend their assumptions about older learners, test their own prejudices, and learn to be more self-critical’. Thus, whether the purpose of education for older people is focused on the wider benefits to be derived from active participation in learning or alternatively on the moral imperative to provide transformative and empowering learning for all, critical geragogy may provide facilitators of older learners with a framework that supports creative and innovative practice with older learners.

### **The role of the facilitator: A critical approach to later-life learning**

To teach within a critical geragogy framework involves transformative intent, articulated, for example, as a deliberate attempt to develop a learning context that is democratic, inclusive, compassionate, and conducive to creative expression (Brookfield, 2005). Such an approach requires a reflective, pragmatic, and flexible response to the diversity to be found among later-life learners. A ‘critical pragmatism’ as advocated by Brookfield (2005: 360) will involve context-dependent pedagogical orientations that focus on collaboration and creative practice as well as allowing space for self-directed learning and reflection on accumulated experience of life.

Research concerned with teaching older learners in a variety of domains (Duay and Bryan, 2008; Hickson and Housley, 1997; Villar *et al.*, 2010) suggests that learning in later life may be experienced as being considerably different from earlier on in the life course, with differences attributed to changes in physical and cognitive functioning, accumulated life experiences, and changes in motivations underpinning engagement in learning. In particular, older adults may bring well-established expectations of the facilitator as an ‘authoritarian and omnipotent teacher’ (Formosa, 2012: 50), while seeing their own role as being passive and conformist.

Thus, Findsen and Formosa (2011) advocate that facilitators of older learners adopt a range of strategies with the objective of fostering autonomy and self-regulated learning. These strategies include establishing a culture of inclusion characterized by respectful interpersonal relationships, encouraging personal goal-setting, drawing on the prior life experience of the learners, and encouraging learners to engage in questioning, dialogue and self-assessment.

In this vein, Withnall and Percy (1994) suggest that the role of facilitators is to discover what participants wish to achieve and to consider how to provide an enabling physical and psychosocial environment that meets these goals. This view is in line with the World Health Organisation’s framework for active ageing (WHO, 2002: 36), where it is stipulated that ‘enabling processes restore function and expand the participation of older people’. An enabling environment needs to be one where participants have the means to take responsibility for their learning, bring their own insights, and contribute to developing individual and collaborative goals. Withnall (2010) suggests that barriers to participation for older learners can be psychosocial factors such as fear of failure, reluctance to engage with unfamiliar tasks, and perceptions of procedures as being

very complex. In this vein, it is crucial that an atmosphere of respect and trust is established, characterized by ‘listening, love and tolerance’ (Formosa, 2011).

Formosa (2011) warns that an enabling approach does not necessarily take the form of a non-directive dialogue of equals. Within a democratic approach, for example, the responsive leader acts as a facilitator who aims to enable participants to discover the content and processes for themselves. Although this is to some extent learner-centred, the leader selects the material and constructs activities in order to maximize positive learning outcomes. This style of leader typically makes extensive use of ‘scaffolding’ (Creech, Varvarigou *et al.*, 2014), whereby participants are supported in appropriate ways to achieve challenging yet attainable goals. Thus, this approach requires the leader to take into account the needs of the learners when choosing or creating the material and activities. Within this approach skills are developed as the learner is engaged with increasingly more active challenges.

A collaborative approach, corresponding more closely to the principles of critical pedagogy, may be described as learner-centred, with the support of autonomous, self-directed learning as a core principle (Heron, 1999). In this approach, facilitators and participants focus their energies on discovering new material together. Egalitarian relationships are encouraged. Participants may thus feel more able to contribute their own ideas and sometimes will take on leadership roles within the group. The group may become a learning community, characterized by collective exploration. The life experience and insights that all adult participants bring to the group are acknowledged and valued.

### **Critical pedagogy: Implications for facilitators of older music learners**

As noted above, there is little existing research specifically concerned with how musicians might most effectively facilitate musical activities for older learners. Nevertheless, a growing body of compelling evidence demonstrates the potential for musical development in later life (Gembris, 2012) as well as demonstrating the wider benefits of music for later-life learners with regard to social, emotional, physical, and cognitive wellbeing (Creech, Hallam *et al.*, 2014; Creech, Hallam, McQueen *et al.*, 2013). In particular, Creech, Hallam, Varvarigou *et al.* (2013) proposed a conceptual framework, demonstrating how later-life music-makers benefitted with regard to enhanced autonomy and control over their lives, a greater sense of social affirmation in being valued by others, and a renewed sense of purpose and confidence in meeting new challenges. It is clear that the issue of how to maximize these benefits of musical opportunities for older people is critical.

### **Method**

During 2011–12 the Music for Life Project team, in consultation with providers of music education opportunities for older adults, developed a series of professional development resources for music facilitators. As part of this process, video examples of good practice were created, with the aim of providing examples of facilitation strategies and approaches that supported older people in participatory, learner-centred, creative activities. The videos were produced in collaboration with a number of case-study partners from around the UK. These partners included:

- the ‘Silver Programme’ at the Sage, Gateshead – involves 1,000 people aged 50+ in an eclectic spread of music activities, including singing and instrumental groups and diverse musical genres

- the Music Department of the Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES) – courses in a range of musical genres are offered, catering for older learners at all levels of expertise and specializing in singing, playing instruments, sound engineering, and using sequencers, music theory, and composing
- the East London Late Starters Orchestra – a string orchestra programme that provides tuition for adult starters and run according to the philosophy that music is within everyone’s ability; members are aged from about 30 to over 70
- Elders’ Voice – a voluntary organization working with older people in the London Borough of Brent, offering a range of activities including singing, with the aim of improving the quality of life of older people within the Brent community
- Open Age – a charity offering weekly activities, including music, for retired people across Kensington, Chelsea, and Westminster, with the aim of supporting older people in maintaining their physical and mental fitness
- Silver Sounds – a community samba band for people aged 50+, formed in 2001 by the Brighton and Hove Coalition of Older People, aiming to challenge stereotypes about what older people can do
- Joined Up Singing ‘Singing for Fun’ – an open-access singing group for over 50s, learning music by ear and focusing on unaccompanied harmony songs, including world music.

### *Sample*

Thirteen separate groups/lessons were observed and filmed. These included:

- rock choir (1)
- musical theatre choir (1)
- world music singing group (1)
- multi-genre choirs (3)
- samba band (1)
- rock band (1)
- solo singing group (1)
- one-to-one ukulele lesson (1)
- keyboard class (1)
- cello ensemble (1)
- string orchestra (1).

Participants in the sessions were older people aged between 50 and 92, participating in groups that ranged in size from the individual lesson and small-singing groups of ten, to large choirs with over 100 participants. The facilitators included six males and seven females. All were highly experienced musicians who had been facilitating groups of older learners for a minimum of five years. Two of the facilitators had Qualified Teacher Status. The others had qualifications as Community Music Leaders.

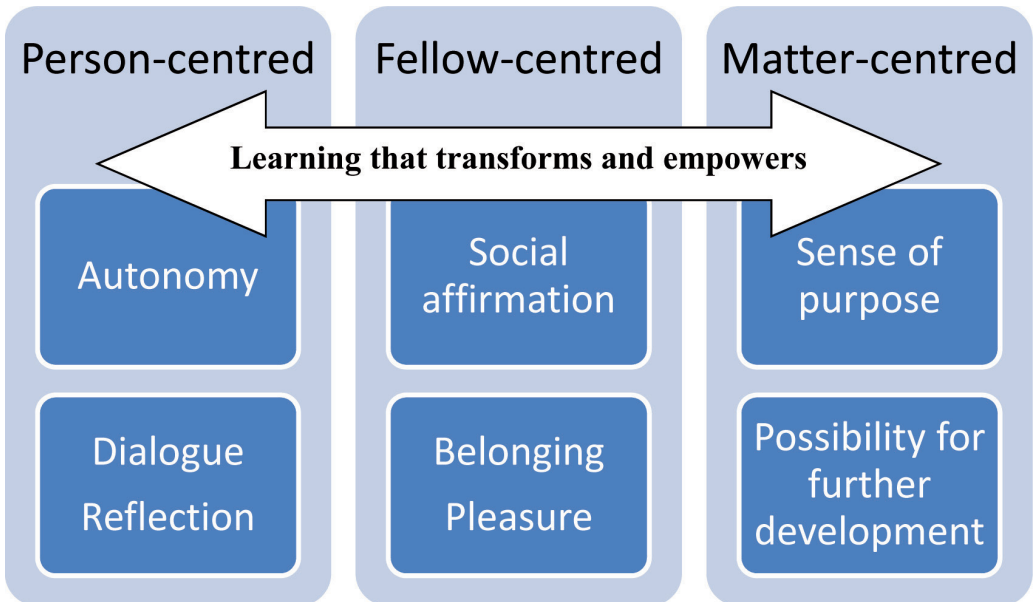
### *Procedures*

Music sessions lasting between 45 minutes and one hour were observed and filmed by one researcher. Following the observed music sessions, the facilitators took part in reflective interviews, focusing on their practice. With the facilitators’ permission, extracts from these interviews were subsequently incorporated into the video resources that were made publicly available. In accordance with Battersby (1993), who suggested that educators can be helped to

develop narratives about their own practice through reflection on what they do, why they do those things and how they might do things differently, the facilitators were asked to describe the session that had just taken place and to reflect upon their values that underpinned their practice, as well as considering how their practice could be enriched. The interviews, which lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, were recorded and later transcribed.

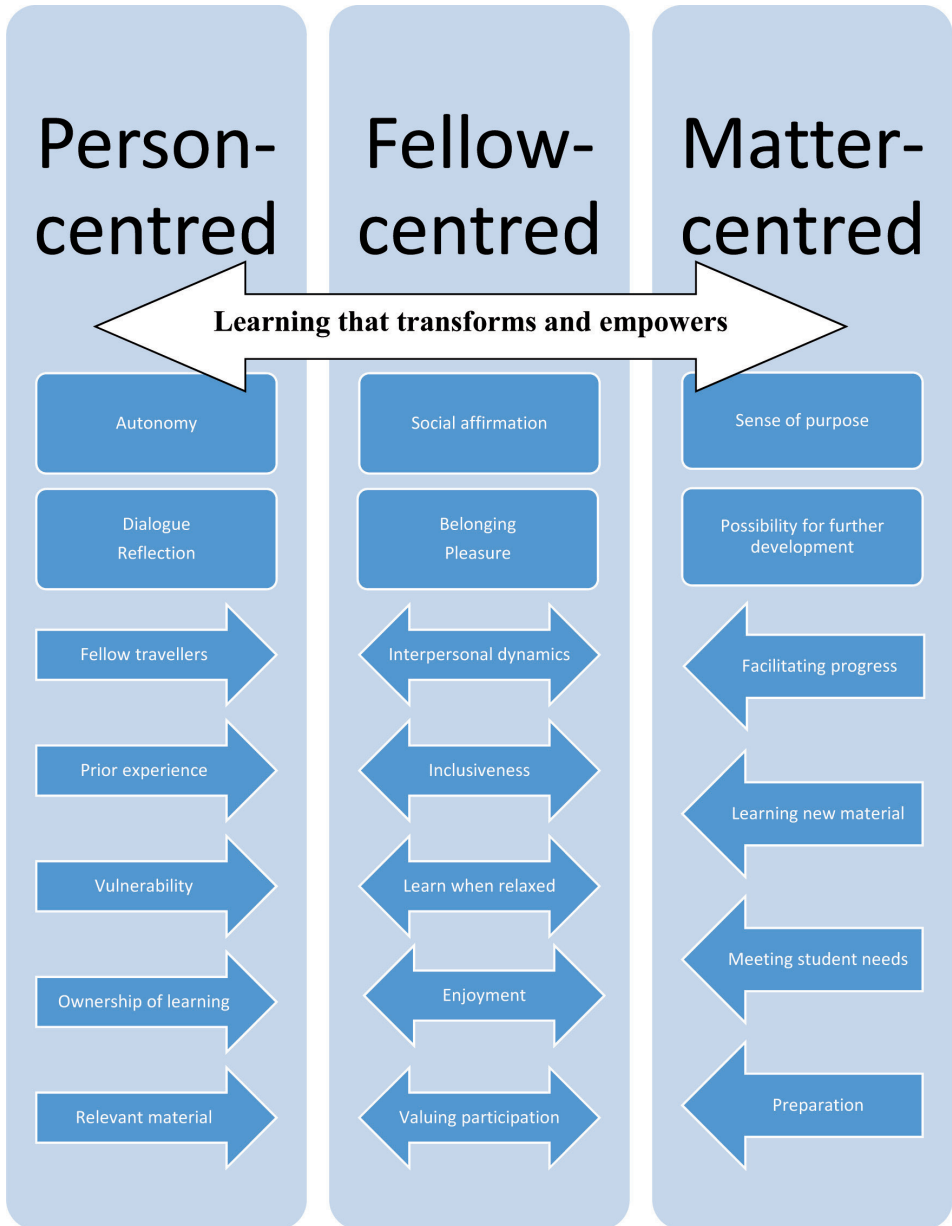
### Analysis

We adopted a hybrid approach to analysis of the interview data, incorporating elements of a deductive theory-driven approach alongside an inductive data-driven approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Although it was developed in a different context of institutional care for older people, the framework proposed by Maderer and Skiba (2006), which focuses on person-centred, fellow-centred and matter-centred goals, to some extent mirrors the dimensions of control/autonomy, social affirmation, and sense of purpose that had been identified as positive and significant benefits of engagement with musical learning in later life (Figure 1). Thus, before analysing the data we established a coding structure that modelled the principles of Maderer and Skiba's 'integrative geragogy', mapping these against the dimensions of personal and social quality of life that had been conceptualized as the social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of engagement in music for older learners (Creech, Hallam, Varvarigou *et al.*, 2013). As our aim was to consider whether and how professional practice within an informal teaching and learning context (music) may be understood through the critical-geragogy lens, it must be acknowledged that the theoretical perspective of critical geragogy was modelled in such a way as to frame our reading of the text. As Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) point out, 'researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum'.



**Figure 1:** A theoretical framework for critical geragogy

The interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, a qualitative software analysis tool. While the text was coded in an inductive manner with themes grounded in the data, the identification of themes was guided, firstly, by their salience with regards to the theoretical framework and, secondly, by their predominance in the text. Themes in the data were identified at a semantic level, reflecting the explicit, surface meaning of the text (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes were then organized and theorized in such a way as to demonstrate patterns in the semantic content and to understand these patterns in relation to the critical geragogy theoretical framework (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Themes organized in relation to the theoretical framework



As demonstrated in Figure 2, the data revealed several themes that could be interpreted as being illustrative of a critical geragogy perspective among the facilitators.

### *Person-centred goals*

A number of themes underpinned the idea that facilitators considered their role to be concerned with supporting independent engagement in meaningful learning that involved dialogue and reflection. To this end, four facilitators highlighted that learning activities and materials needed to be salient for their participants, with a connection to prior experiences. In two cases, facilitators were highly cognizant of the particular vulnerabilities of some older learners, responding by taking the participant's perspective and providing empathetic support. Five facilitators described their facilitator–participant dynamic as one of a 'fellow traveller' (Jones, 2005), whereby learning and discovering material was collaborative and reciprocal (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Supporting person-centred goals

Theme	Coded text segments (no.)	Interviews where coded (no.)	Sample quotation
Fellow travellers	8	5	We're enjoying the journey together, because for me I've been playing for years, but the horizon's always somewhere over there, and I'm loving the journey, and I'm learning from the people that come here, as well, because what they bring to this is really to be celebrated – fantastic.
Groups take ownership of their learning	6	4	I'm up for sharing what I do, so they can then be independent of me ... the whole band has united more, when I'm not there, leading ... everybody goes, 'Whoah!' and puts more energy into it, so that's good.
Making the material relevant	8	4	One of the things that we've done ... is to take an existing song and put the group's own lyrics into it. And that's for various reasons. Partly, it's validating for the group.
Knowing about students' prior experiences	4	3	You must keep up to date with their stories – it might take a long time, but it's very rewarding.
Vulnerability of older learners	4	2	The most important thing is to really appreciate their vulnerability, because often they've had very professional lives but it's a long time since perhaps they have learnt something new, and they're used to being good at what they do, and they come in here, and suddenly, they feel vulnerable ... What I try to do is to think about things that make <i>me</i> feel vulnerable.

*Fellow-centred goals*

Facilitators promoted a sense of fellowship with their music-makers, using strategies such as valuing participation, fostering positive interpersonal relationships, pacing the activities in such a way as to be inclusive of all, enjoyable and relaxing. In particular, great emphasis was put upon the importance of ensuring that each individual member felt valued as well as supported. Three facilitators specifically mentioned strategies for ensuring that their sessions were inclusive, addressing a range of musical as well as social or emotional needs. Learning was thought by eight facilitators to be most effectively supported with activities that were enjoyable, while seven facilitators described the importance of a relaxed atmosphere where participants could experiment with their new musical skills (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Supporting fellow-centred goals

Theme	Coded text segments (no.)	Interviews where coded (no.)	Sample quotation
Valuing student participation	14	7	I do think it is important to acknowledge the work that people have done during the session, and to make them feel valued and visible.
Interpersonal dynamics	14	11	Everybody in that group has to believe that you're there for them. It's no good just thinking they're part of the group, they'll be fine – you have to have that contact with people.
Inclusiveness	6	3	It's very important to me, as a tutor, that no one ever feels left out or left behind, so pacing is really important, so the people that are perhaps more musically experienced don't get bored, but also people that are trying it out and are quite new to it don't feel so challenged that they feel uncomfortable.
People learn when they are relaxed	8	7	My philosophy is that the best environment for people to learn is in one that is relaxed, that people feel that they can play, and then they can laugh. Within that, that's a really good place where people can learn.
Enjoyment is the goal	10	8	I think making sure it's fun is really, really important. I'm a great believer in fun. I don't see any reason why things can't be fun ... It's like, 'This is not fun – why would I want to do it?' So, working out how to make it fun for you, how to make it fun for them, is important.

*Matter-centred goals*

Facilitators spoke about how they could support their participants in progressing and meeting new challenges. Ten facilitators referred to their commitment to meeting the needs of their participants, for example responding to feedback and requests from group members. Seven facilitators spoke about the importance of setting challenges and supporting progression with

appropriate, constructive feedback. Preparation, particularly with a focus on knowing about the group participants, was described as key to good practice by three facilitators (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Supporting matter-centred goals

Theme	Coded text segments (no.)	Interviews where coded (no.)	Sample quotation
Facilitating progress	10	7	In order to keep standards high and to give people that sense of improvement, and to have goals, learning goals of some sort, even if it's a very, very informal class, it's not enough just to say 'well done, that was great'. It's really important that the students understand what they did well and what they could still do to improve.
Learning new material	4	3	But at the same time, doing some songs from more challenging genres that they don't know so well. And they're always happy to try something new out.
Meeting student needs	16	10	I like to have as much feedback from groups as possible. I'll take notes from the group at the end and the beginning of each term, to see what they thought, how it could go better and, like I say, it's definitely down to them. If they want to do something then there's no question, that's what we'll do.
Good teaching starts with preparation	4	3	It's all about good teaching practice, which starts with preparation, so preferably before the students even set foot in your classroom you need to know about them.

## Discussion

The first objective of this paper was to consider whether and how professional practice within an informal music teaching-and-learning context may be understood through the critical geragogy lens. The accounts of practice from 13 facilitators of later-life group music-making suggested that music functioned as a medium through which facilitators promoted personal autonomy and a sense of personal value among participants. In addition, facilitators tailored their approach so as to promote fellowship, a sense of purpose, and recognition of the importance of progression.

The facilitators' accounts demonstrated some evidence of the three pillars of a framework proposed by Maderer and Skiba (2006), developed in the context of institutional care for older people and comprising person-centred, fellow-centred, and matter-centred goals. Groups were person-centred in the sense that facilitators promoted independent engagement in meaningful musical activities and aimed to foster competence as well as a strong sense of satisfaction among the older people. A fellow-centred discourse was evidenced by the facilitators' commitment to promoting participation, structuring inclusive activities, and investing in attentive and responsive interpersonal interactions with group members. Finally, a matter-centred orientation was evidenced by the willingness among facilitators to encourage participants to confront new challenges, as well as by their recognition that those challenges needed to be personally meaningful and enjoyable.

The evidence would thus suggest that critical geragogy may have relevance with regard to enhancing practice among facilitators of older learners in community contexts such as informal music-making. However, notwithstanding Brookfield's (2005) caveat that critical pedagogy in practice must be pragmatic and responsive to the diverse needs of adults, it is vital that facilitators establish a toolbox, or 'pedagogical repertoire', that will support the application of these aspirations and principles in practice. The facilitators' accounts provide some clues as to key strategies that could potentially support later-life learners in using their musical activities as a vehicle for challenging age-related stereotypes and engaging in truly creative and empowering practice.

First, a focus on developing a trusting interpersonal climate was found to be crucial. Facilitators took time to establish rapport with each individual, valuing participation and providing a structure that enabled contributions from all. In a similar vein, facilitators aimed to sustain a focus on relaxation and fun, creating a learning environment where exploration and collaborative 'play' were possible.

Second, facilitators valued participants' prior experiences, aiming to use these as a resource. Participants could guide facilitators towards selection of repertoire that could engage individuals with reminiscence and making sense of their lives. Through music, individual, creative voices could be heard. Equally, facilitators could guide groups in taking ownership of their music-making, maximizing the collective skills and knowledge.

Third, facilitators recognized the sustained importance of progression and took responsibility for guiding participants in setting learning goals. There was no sense, among this group of facilitators, that age should deny individuals the right to be supported in developing new skills, in aspiring to high standards in their music-making, or in being recognized as capable of creative practice.

### **Implications**

By definition, any attempt to draw up a list of recommendations for facilitating groups of older people in music or any other discipline runs the risk of disregarding the learner voice that must lie at the heart of a critical geragogy, subscribing to the myth that all older learners are the same (Findsen, 2005) and reinforcing a view of active ageing that potentially excludes the 'oldest old' (defined loosely as aged over 80 and characterized by frailty) in what has been termed the Fourth Age (Laslett, 1989). Indeed, Withnall and Percy (1994) caution that any prescriptive statements about older learners risk underestimating the rich diversity to be found among our older population. However, our research suggests that a critical-geragogy framework may have particular applications in music, providing key messages that support facilitators in developing musical activities that foster the positive benefits of music and learning (Creech, Hallam, McQueen *et al.*, 2013).

For example, in accordance with critical-geragogy principles, the use of musical repertoire that is well-known and meaningful in relation to participants' autobiographical experiences may engage participants in person-centred and fellow-centred goals. Such material also offers the potential to make explicit the relevance of new skills and activities and will serve as a 'common ground' from where facilitators might explore matter-centred goals (Maderer and Skiba, 2006). Meaningful activities are broadening and gratifying experiences where participants continue to feel that they matter to others (Weiss and Bass, 2002). As such, meaningful musical activities may be structured in accordance with critical geragogy, fostering a sense of personal value, belongingness and purpose (Creech, Hallam *et al.*, 2014).

Furthermore, autonomy among older learners may be enhanced when facilitators support participants in taking control of their own learning, for example setting goals, developing self-regulation strategies, and having a voice with regard to structural aspects of the learning (location, timing) as well as the content (Spigner-Littles and Anderson, 1999; Withnall, 2010). In music this may require creative and innovative approaches that might include incorporating group review of their music-making, collaborative goal-setting and peer learning, developing non-linear activities that accommodate learners who drop in and out, and developing practice strategies that compensate for some age-related constraints (Gembris, 2008). Finally, participation in music offers an opportunity for older people to continue as creative individuals through later life. Thus, music facilitators have the opportunity to support expressive activities that in turn have been shown to contribute to a renewed orientation to creative endeavours and a sense of competence, purpose, and personal growth among older people (Fisher and Specht, 1999; Hickson and Housley, 1997).

Our research focused on the specific context of music which, arguably, lends itself well to learning experiences as creative, meaningful, reflective, collaborative, and purposeful. However, it is entirely possible that these principles may be applied in other discipline areas and diverse contexts. For example, as Withnall (2010) has advocated, in any domain educators have the scope to be critically reflective, suspending preconceptions about older learners and facilitating learning in such a way as to celebrate the experience that older participants bring, yet also building new skills, enhancing self-confidence, and fostering a sense of solidarity. We would argue that in any domain it is at this educator–learner level that a critical geragogy has its foundation.

### **Limitations**

As the interviews were intended for use as publicly available professional development resources, the facilitators may have been constrained in the accounts of their practice. Furthermore, as this paper focuses on the facilitator accounts, we cannot claim that the espoused values were applied in practice. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the potential for a critical-geragogy framework to enhance facilitation of informal learning in community contexts, further research needs to privilege the voice of the older learners themselves. In particular, such research could address the question of how a critical geragogy might mitigate the condition of frailty in older age, for example involving later-life learners who are constrained by the ‘gritty realities’ of old age (Formosa, 2011: 327) such as stroke, dementia, Parkinson’s disease, hearing loss, or mobility issues.

### **Summary**

Within a social context where the fastest-growing age cohort is the over-85s, there is a burgeoning interest in the potential for learning to support active ageing. A critical geragogy perspective recognizes the potential for later-life learning to be transformative and empowering, particularly when teaching and learning contexts privilege the voice of the older learner and involve collaboration, dialogue, self-directed activities, and reflection.

Little, if any, research has focused specifically on how facilitators of informal, community-based activities such as music might support creative and transformative learning among older people. In this paper, adopting a critical-geragogy lens, we have proposed several key messages for musicians who work with older adults. First, the notion that older people are all the same and that they are decrepit and dependent consumers needs to be dispelled. Second, facilitators need to develop a wide repertoire of enabling strategies that meet the diverse needs of their

participants. Finally, it is incumbent upon facilitators to support older people in their personal investment in activities that are creative and meaningful, where each individual makes a valued contribution and also progresses towards personal and collective goals.

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