Learning across the lifespan: Lifelong learning in Neighbourhood Houses in Australia

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Neighbourhood Houses in Australia are spaces of education and learning that cater to and work with adult learners across a lifespan. They are known as fourth sector education providers in the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector. With a history spanning nearly 45 years, Neighbourhood Houses provide vital education opportunities for adult learners. The research is set against the backdrop of the current project of lifelong learning, which has dominated adult education discourses for more than 30 years. Neighbourhood Houses are learning organisations and sites of social inclusion that embody adult learning practices. This empirical research of learners' experiences in Neighbourhood Houses reveals the complex and varying reasons for participating in ACE that are beyond the realms of formal adult education and include reasons such as decreasing social isolation, fostering friendships and new networks, increased wellbeing, raising income capacity and further learning to improve employment prospects. In doing this, we provide three case studies

from the larger data sample of this study to give insight into the complexity of adult education and learners' experiences that occur in this dynamic space of learning. The outcomes for participants vary but include greater mastery of English language, improved foundational literacy, numeracy and computer skills, increased understanding of civics and citizenship and Australian history culture and society, while reconstructing previously held negative views of themselves as learners.

Introduction

Neighbourhood Houses opened in Victoria in the 1970s to provide spaces for accessible adult education and to alleviate women's social isolation (Foley, 1993). They are generally small–medium sized organizations, community-managed, not-for-profit education sites offering formal and informal adult education programs in local and supportive environments (Rooney, 2011). They integrate adult education and community development approaches highlighting multi-layered connections between learning, social engagement and personal and social change (Kimberley, 1998). There are more than 400 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, 207 receive funding to deliver pre-accredited preparatory adult education programs, and 55 are registered training organisations delivering nationally recognised qualifications (NHVIC, 2016).

Neighbourhood Houses have played an increasingly important role in transition education since they were established. They feature small classes, a welcoming and flexible learning environment, community support and networking opportunities. The houses deliver education programs to a broad range of participants such as: 'second-chance' learners who may have had previously unsuccessful experiences in formal education institutions; 'new directions' learners who are looking to develop new skills or improve existing skill sets; and later life learners who are attending the houses to learn a new skill, craft and to socialise with others (Ollis, Starr, Ryan, Angwin & Harrison, 2016). The programs are inclusive of people typically under-represented in formal educational settings: the socially, economically, culturally marginalised and those living with a disability (Ollis et al, 2016; Thompson 2015; Townsend, 2009).

Neighbourhood Houses are well positioned to meet rising expectations

about learning across the lifespan for diverse communities, catering for participants of a range of ages, life experiences, ability groups and backgrounds, and reflect significant population changes. With the increasing ageing of populations, and the interest in healthy ageing, there is a growing interest in lifelong learning. Approximately 80% of Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria provide programs determined by older adults (NHVic 2017). The age-range of participants in Neighbourhood Houses is broad, with those in the 55–64 and 65–79 age-groups occurring at higher levels than the population. Learners from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds comprise 42% of pre-accredited learners in language programs, employment training programs and foundation courses (Deloitte, 2017). Approximately 74% of participants in Neighbourhood Houses are women (Savage & Perry, 2014).

Adult learning typically includes formal and informal learning based on holistic and lifelong approaches encompassing the whole lifespan to empower and support individual participants and local communities (Golding, Kimberley, Foley & Brown, 2008; Humpage, 2005; Ife, 2016; Kenny, 2006; Rooney, 2011; Thompson, 2015; Townsend, 2009). Formal learning in Neighbourhood Houses supports the national agendas on skills and workforce development in response to changes in industrial, demographic and technological circumstances (Bowman & McKenna, 2016; SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013), while building the knowledge, understanding, skills and values essential for an educated and just society. Neighbourhood Houses are part of the Adult Community Education (ACE) system sometimes defined as the fourth sector of education in Australia. Federal and State Governments acknowledge its contribution and provision of educational opportunities for second-chance learners (Karmel & Woods, 2008). The Statement on ACE by the Ministerial Council for Vocational Education and Training (2008) recognised that the ACE sector is an important provider of pathways into further education and training for disadvantaged learners. In this education space, the focus is on pre-accredited training, general education skills such as literacy and numeracy, recreational, leisure and arts-based programs. A study by Deloitte Access Economics (2017) on outcomes for learners in pre-accredited courses in Victoria found that significant numbers of learners undertake further education, transition to accredited training, and achieve an accredited qualification

(p. 2). As mentioned previously, some houses are registered training organisations providing accredited training in fields such as community services and welfare work, aged care, hospitality, childcare, youth and disability services.

This article analyses the role of Neighbourhood Houses in terms of learning across the lifespan, referred to most recently as 'lifelong learning'. Specifically, we focus on the case studies of three learners and their motivations and aspirations regarding their education. We outline the learners' motivations for attending the Neighbourhood Houses, the education programs the learners are engaged in and the outcomes associated with this learning in terms of further study, work, social inclusion and wellbeing. Lifelong learning is discussed in more detail below, along with a description of this case study research.

Lifelong learning

There is much debate about lifelong learning – its meaning, its purpose, how it has become common discourse in adult education and continuing education, and how it has impacted notions of education and learning more broadly (Biesta, 2013; Edwards & Usher 2001). Most developed countries have some form of lifelong learning policy that positions learning beyond the traditional years of early childhood, primary and secondary education to learning which embraces and encourages its citizens to continue to learn both formally and informally across a lifetime. In 1996, the OECD education ministers declared 'lifelong learning for all' a policy priority (Watson, 2004), emphasising lifelong learning as 'human capital' in order to secure greater productivity and economic growth (Biesta, 2013, p. 65). In addition, the Delors report for UNESCO, *Learning: The treasure within*, recognised the importance of lifelong learning and its impact on social cohesion in an era of rapid social, economic and political change (Watson, 2004). UNESCO believes education transforms lives and is central to its mission to eradicate poverty, drive sustainable development and build peace (UNESCO, 2018). UNESCO's sustainable development goal, has seven outcome targets, three of which resonate with, and are relevant to, this research.

They are:

- 4.3 Equal access to technical and vocational education and higher education

- 4.4 Relevant skills for decent work

- 4.5 Gender equality and inclusion

While lifelong learning is not a new concept, it has been co-opted by neoliberal, global and market-driven agendas focussing on international economic competitiveness, with Biesta (2013) claiming that the lifelong learning promise of the Delores report has been subsumed by economistic and neoliberal agendas related to the development of human capital, competitiveness and economic growth. In such a context, lifelong learning and learning generally becomes a commodity, and a means by which individuals, communities and nations adapt and respond to the rapid social, economic and technological changes of the twenty-first century (Edwards & Usher 2001). As Illeris (2007) claims:

> *Apart from the individual level, learning has also been grounded to a wide extent on a social and societal level reaching right from the nature of individual learning situation to comprehensive reforms and structures of societal learning-related to demands and services. (p.2)*

The discourses of lifelong education and lifelong learning are often used interchangeably, with limited differentiation between the two to uncover the changes that learners make in terms of knowledge, aspirations, skills and attitudes, across a learner's life span (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Edwards and Usher (2007, p. 2) describe learning as a 'socio-culturally embedded set of practices' with lifelong learning being relational, embedded in and generated by social engagement and interaction. It involves 'active knowledge formation' rather than passive acquisition of knowledge and can occur in a multiplicity of settings, sites, spaces and activities representing a lack of boundaries or borders (Edwards & Usher, 2001).

Zhao and Biesta (2012) identify key concepts within the current scope of lifelong learning: 'relationships', 'identity, and the self' (p. 333), and argue that these have gained greater relevance as a reaction to a dynamic global, social and economic climate and policy initiatives

designed to drive and compel flexible responses to 'socioeconomic' and 'sociocultural' change. Edwards (1997) and Edwards, Nicoll & Lee (2002) refer to the imposition of forms of learning to allow people to maintain 'flexible identity' and 'flexible subjectivity' (p. 333). Edwards and Usher (2001), however, caution against 'universal and totalizing' (p. 285) descriptions of lifelong learning that limit its potential and the possible outcomes of its endeavours and activities. This is especially important for second chance learners' positional and transformative motivations and outcomes. An aside, and a potentially significant aside, is the omission of gender in the literature and discourse of lifelong learning (Rogers, 2006). This is perhaps a surprising realisation and one that is not so much deliberate as unconscious. One argument for this omission is a consequence of individualism (neoliberalism and managerialism), which avoids constructs of gender, with its focus on 'Rational Economic Man' (*sic*) or REM (see, for example, Butler, 1983). Rogers (2006) argues that gender is significant in reconfiguring identity. Another argument might also be a belief that gender issues have been repaired and therefore indicative of a broader trend.

Illeris (2007) claims there are three dimensions to any form of learning – the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions. For us, the notion of adult education represents participation in learning, social engagement in society and community, engendering independent thought and self-efficacy. This is confirmed in the data from our research which affirms the holistic and embodied dimensions to adult learning in Neighbourhood Houses. Jarvis presents us with a holistic and embodied view of learning:

> *[t]he combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing or more experienced person (Jarvis, 2010 p. 39).*

In Neighbourhood Houses adult learning programs focus on building knowledge, skills and abilities through formal classroom learning, such as preaccredited and accredited courses and training; through *informal*

learning programs including personal interest learning and incidental learning, which is embedded in the everyday social interaction with other learners, teachers and staff thereby capturing all three learning dimensions.

Lifelong learning policy in Australia has had a fraught history and limited success. While it has been adopted in policy discourses by some organisations (organisational learning) and spheres of local government, it is presently not enshrined in government policy. Currently, Adult Learning Australia (ALA), the national peak body for adult learning in Australia has called for 2018 to be recognised as the year of lifelong learning (ALA, 2018). ALA is advocating for lifelong learning to be enshrined in Australian education policy, ensuring that education and learning are recognised across all four sectors of education, from early childhood, primary and secondary schooling, further education and learning in later life. This will prepare the Australian workforce well for the advances and changes in technology and for the skills and knowledge(s) needed for Australia to be flexible and nimble in a rapidly changing global world of work. However, Watson (2004) notes three areas of education policy that currently impact on and impede policy progress of lifelong learning: the dominance of the formal education sectors; Commonwealth and State financial relations and managerialism, and education performance measurement.

Research methodology and methods

This qualitative research examining the learning experiences of adult learners in education programs in Neighbourhood Houses was conducted in two phases during 2015 and 2016. The research was initially developed following a request from the Barwon Network of Neighbourhood Centres in response to significant economic and employment restructuring in the Greater Geelong region. The first phase was conducted in collaboration with Neighbourhood House networks in the Barwon and, later, the South West regions of Victoria. The second phase, conducted with several networks across Victoria, was in collaboration with Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. The broad aim of the research centred on second chance learners and their transitions to employment and higher education such as TAFE and university.

Research aim

The research aimed to investigate social, education and employment outcomes for adult learners who participate in formal and informal education programs in Neighbourhood Houses.

Research questions

1. Who are the participants in the Neighbourhood House education programs?

2. What are their motivations for participation in education?

3. Have the adult education programs provided a pathway for learners to further higher education and training?

4. How do the education and recreation programs assist to alleviate learners' social isolation, and contribute to their health and wellbeing?

5. How has participation in the formal and informal education programs, contributed to a change in identity formation of these adult learners and their self-identification as successful learners?

6. In what ways have the education and social programs contributed to adult learners' options for seeking new employment?

During the data collection in the first phase of the research, we identified a group of older adult learners, who were participating in the houses for a range of reasons. We refer to them as 'later life learners'. The second phase of the research in 2016 focussed on data collection across the entire state of Victoria and included both groups of learners (second chance and later life). It also included interviews with a cohort of coordinators (managers) of Neighbourhood Houses.

Case study research

This qualitative research focusses on the learning and education experiences of adult learners in Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria (Stake, 2006). The methodology of case study is used to provide in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences of learning in Neighbourhood Houses. Case study research is heuristic, it provides rich descriptions of their learning experiences. This is important because

some of the participants in Neighbourhood Houses have had complex experiences of education and we wanted to present their stories in a way that was sensitive and able to provide a nuanced understanding of this complexity of these experiences (Merriam, 1998). Those interviewed for this research participated in an in-depth interview, participants were given their transcriptions to check, adapt and change if necessary. The in-depth interviews provided the data used for the case studies.

Poetic representation of case study data

We draw on the literary device of poetry to work in conjunction with the case studies. Informed by the epistemology of phenomenology, we layer the experiences of the people we interviewed, their lives, expressions, learning experiences, desires, ambitions, meaning, truth(s) to text. What follows is a rich expression of the case data in the form of poems. We draw on Laurel Richardson's (1993) work in this area. She asserts:

> *Poetic representations are a preferable way to tell some sociological ways of knowing. Interactionists theorise that a person's thoughts are always in deferral when they are speaking. Nothing is simply present or absent but ideas in transformation; 'facts are interpretations after the fact'. Self-knowledge is reflexive knowledge poetic representations reveal the process of self-construction, deferrals and transformation, the reflexive basis of self-knowledge, the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken as a meaningful whole. (1993, p. 704)*

The presentation of the stories as case studies and in poetry follows Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture methodology where she encourages researchers to use both science and art to capture the complexities and subtleties in human life (Ryan, 2016). Using case studies and poetry in this article we begin to understand the human experience of learners, their motivations, desires and their agentic reasons for being there.

Data sample and participant selection

The research project received ethics approval from Deakin University, Faculty of Arts & Education. Participants from across Victoria were accessed through our research partners – the Barwon Network of Neighbourhood Houses, the South West Network of Neighbourhood

Houses and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. The research was promoted in the network's newsletters and other advertising material. 'Purposive sampling' was also used to select participants, on the basis of recommendations from Neighbourhood House coordinators to ensure a broad representation of prior experiences (Merriam, 1998).

A total of 87 semi-structured interviews were conducted with learners and managers (Stake, 2006).

- Phase 1 – 42 interviews with learners in Neighbourhood Houses in the Barwon and South-West regions of Victoria

- Phase 2 – 45 interviews with learners and nine interviews with Neighbourhood House managers across Victoria.

The research participants were given their interview transcriptions to review, adapt and change, if necessary. All participants were given a pseudonym in order to maintain their confidentiality, and other identifying information has been changed. The transcripts were analysed using category construction, which involves the construction of categories of data focussed on interpreting recurring patterns or themes (Merriam, 1998). A software program (NVIVO) was used to 'chunk' the data, so that common themes or patterns were exposed.

Case studies of learners in Neighbourhood Houses

This paper presents three case studies with data presented as poetry, but we also draw generally on the broad themes that are central to the findings in this research. These include the habitus of Neighbourhood Houses and the educative and learner practices within the houses; the relationships that are formed between learners, learners and tutors, and learners and Neighbourhood House staff; adult learning reconstructing previous negative education and learning experiences for second chance learners; and the social, informal and incidental learning in Neighbourhood Houses.

The participants chosen for this article are Peter, Lesley and Sally (pseudonyms), all with different motivations, learning needs and outcomes. Their stories reveal a diversity of lived and learning experiences which are indicative of the range to be found in the data. Peter was a second chance learner and he came to study to further his employment prospects. Lesley came to the Neighbourhood House in

response to a recommendation from her job services provider. Sally was a later life learner who came to learn English.

Lesley: Becoming a confident and social learner

Lesley came to the Neighbourhood House to undertake voluntary work to satisfy New Start requirements (New Start is an Australian Government income support payment made to people who are unemployed and looking for work). Her earlier learning experiences were not successful – she explained she was too easily distracted and lacked concentration. Lesley left school after completing Year 8 and worked in various jobs before her two daughters were born.

> *I completed Year 8.*
>
> *When younger, before kids – retail, milk bars and take-away food.*
>
> *I didn't really last too long because*
>
> *I didn't know what I was doing*
>
> *I didn't exactly get the experience that I needed,*
>
> *not the experience that I have now.*

At the Neighbourhood House, Lesley volunteered in the community café and has undertaken several accredited units in hospitality, tailored to her role in the café. Along with learning the basic skills required for working in the café, such as food handling and coffee making, she has learned to undertake daily cash balances and meal preparation, which has allowed her to take on greater responsibility. As well as the enjoyment she experienced learning new skills, her daughters appreciated and took great delight in her newly acquired cooking skills.

> *I've learnt a lot*
>
> *since I've been here*
>
> *such as working with customers.*
>
> *I wasn't much of a cook when I started.*

Now I do desserts

I do lots of different meals, things that I never thought I would be doing.

I've learnt how to make the coffees.

My main purpose was to get the experience

so I could get out and get a job.

But it's helped me at home.

Now I could virtually cook anything.

It's a big achievement.

I've got Certificates for Food Handling and Coffee Making.

It sort of entails the money handling of the café –

food prep, cleaning the coffee machine,

packing that up.

Over time, Lesley has become a confident and successful learner. Along with completing units in hospitality, she has enrolled in an accredited General Education for Adults program at TAFE where she is learning computing and mathematics. She has advanced to Level 2 mathematics and is studying Level 1 computing. She had no previous experience using a computer. She did not know how to turn on a computer and she could not have previously contemplated learning about computers. Lesley was keen, however, to return to paid employment, and thought that having left school at Year 8 it was important to gain further skills to help her find and secure paid work.

I'm doing a course at TAFE.

It's just the adult education

computers and maths.

I'm nearly finished doing the maths,

I'm doing well in the computers as well.

With maths, I didn't know anything

Now I have the confidence to sit there and concentrate and block things out when I

need to.

I'm a lot more focussed.

Things would distract me very easily

now I can actually be here and concentrate on what I'm actually doing ...

I've got the confidence and everything else to do that

which I find good because beforehand

I was a scared little chicken.

Lesley enjoyed the opportunity provided at the Neighbourhood House to work with others, and to form friendships, and she became more confident socialising and talking to others. In the community café, she has learned how to work as part of a team, which she had not been familiar with in her past working experiences, and she has enjoyed the support the volunteers offer one another.

I'd never worked with others,

so coming here and working with other people

helps you be a part of a group

instead of just being a single person.

Being a part of a group is a bonus,

you form friendships.

I think it's the fact of helping everyone out

and finding out new things as a team.

Positivity of others,

they encourage you to do

different things I would never have done

at the start.

Lesley's ability to comfortably interact and communicate with others has resulted in her feeling much happier, and it was a significant change in her life. As a shy young girl, and as an adult, she found socialising with others or participating in activities difficult to do. She attributes her increased confidence and ability to be more outgoing to the positive and supportive environment of the Neighbourhood House where she was encouraged to try new things.

I've been here for about four and a half years

I'm a totally different person.

I had no confidence at all when I started

now I've learnt and grown.

Before I started here I was like a scared little kid,

I wouldn't speak to anybody, wouldn't involve myself in activities

 or things like that.

I was so shy and withdrawn,

since I've been here I'm more outgoing,

once you get me talking

I won't shush.

It's just been a big confidence booster here

it shows at home as well,

I'm a lot happier.

Lesley was interviewed on her last day of volunteering in the community café. The skills and confidence she has gained at the Neighbourhood House resulted in her feeling that she was work-ready.

I'm hoping after I finish this course I'm ready for the workforce.

I'm actually ready now

the sooner I get a job the better.

The same as what I'm doing now – café work.

I think there might be one more course to do

the RSA [responsible serving of alcohol]

a lot of coffee shops involve themselves now with alcohol.

Peter: Learning new skills for employment

Peter is 22 years of age and moved to the Greater Geelong area two years ago. He completed school at the end of Year 11 and for the next three years worked in retail, reception and bar-tending. He had no formal qualifications in hospitality or retail but learned skills on the job. When he moved to the area he left his work and enrolled with Centrelink. In order to receive benefits, he was required to attend the Neighbourhood House, which he really liked, and he enrolled in a Certificate III in Aged Care. During this time, he volunteered in administration and followed up with a further qualification that included an internship. When the course finished he successfully applied for a 12-month traineeship in a local health service and is now studying Certificate III in Business. He enjoyed learning at the Neighbourhood House and made good

friends with other students. Studying has taught him that you need to work hard to get where you want to be, and that it is important to give people chances. For the future he would like to help people, possibly in community services or youth justice.

> *I did all the way up to Year 11 and decided to move.*
>
> *I'd just finished a job.*
>
> *I was a bit lost and that led to some depression.*
>
>
> *I did admin and reception work before*
>
> *when I did it*
>
> *I was never qualified.*
>
> *I worked for nine months on a reception desk*
>
> *had to learn everything on the job.*
>
> *I was always just getting by.*
>
> *I wasn't challenging myself.*

In reflecting on his experience of learning at the Neighbourhood House and undertaking an internship, Peter said:

> *This is the first time I've never found my own job*
>
> *this is the first time I've been helped with a job.*
>
>
> *I found that I got along with everybody quite well*
>
> *I thought 'Oh well they've got this course coming up I think I'll check it out,*
>
> *I'll just see what it is it can't be too bad.'*

I did that and I really liked the place

and the Home and Community Care Course I did.

While I was doing that I volunteered for a few months.

Within the first week of being at the Neighbourhood House, Peter realised how supportive everyone was of each other: having group discussions, being asked if anyone was struggling and needing help. He commented on the significance of the friendships they formed and the inspiration they gained from hearing the successes of past graduates. Peter commented on the impact of the journey and stories of ex-students who would come and share what they were doing now. He described them as 'pretty special heart-warming stories'.

I'm really horrible at maths.

I'm improving

but there was a girl in there

really good at maths

she used to help me a lot.

We catch up once a month because

we all became very good friends.

We had fun all the time

we were always laughing.

He admits that he was never good with books. He describes himself as 'better at hands-on' and learning best when shown or given examples and then trying it himself.

I learnt that things take time,

you've got to work hard to get to where you want to be.

Peter has been working in a local health service.

> *Working in a setting like this*
>
> *I'm challenged every day.*
>
> *I do all sorts of stuff.*
>
> *I've been here for four months now*
>
> *my role just keeps developing.*
>
> *I'm taking on new things,*
>
> *leaving no things behind.*

> *I want to help people.*
>
> *I'm doing Administration at the moment.*
>
> *In years to come*
>
> *I'd like to be in Community Services or Youth Justice.*

It is interesting to note that while Peter expresses doubt about studies at university, he does not discount it as a future option.

> *University has always scared me.*
>
> *I never thought that I was good enough for university.*
>
> *If I can finish this,*
>
> *because I'm working full time   .... doing a Certificate III in Business,*
>
> *it's really in-depth,*
>
> *requires a lot of work.*
>
> *I think that I could raise the bar a little bit and try something else,*

maybe not university straight away but

something a bit more higher level.

Sally: Learning English as a Second Language

Sally and her husband have been living in the local area for 32 years now. She describes having a 'basic education' before coming to live in Australia. Her highest level of education was Year 12. Following school, she learned commercial cooking up to level 2 and then she found work. Sally came to learn English at the Neighbourhood House.

I came here to learn English

a second language for me,

English class level 4 and

computer class – to communicate in the social life.

My husband's the same,

he comes here too

to learn a second language.

Her husband attends the Neighbourhood House for the same reason as Sally because, as she explains:

Our English level is not very high,

it's just basic level

so we can communicate in English.

Sally has been coming to the Neighbourhood House for some years now, however, she struggles to remember exactly how many years.

Quite a few

'cause I learn at my own pace -

it's not easy to learn.

It is not easy for Sally and her husband. When they go home after being at the Neighbourhood House they 'have other work to do'. Learning English has been the primary motivation for them coming to the Neighbourhood House. Friendships and acceptance underlie their continuing engagement with the Neighbourhood House.

I'm really happy

I've made friends from different countries

Their culture –

makes diversity

We teach each other about culture and food –

give us fruit and sometimes …

each one brings a plate of food.

We share with each other.

Friendships, relationships and classes.

Sally acknowledges that her 'English and vocabulary are improving'. In part, this improvement has been supported by activities in the classes where the learners read newspapers, listen to the news and discuss the news. She now has a heightened awareness and understanding of Australian society.

I read the paper

I listen to the news

I know a little bit more.

I understand more about Australian culture,

history and society

Sally says she likes learning 'very much' and is appreciative of what the Neighbourhood House offers her. She also expressed gratitude for being in Australia and having opportunities to participate in classes to learn English. She makes particular reference to reading the newspaper and discussing the news with fellow class mates and how this has helped her to learn more about particular social issues and topics.

> *In class,*
>
> *conversations about the news –*
>
> *quite interesting.*
>
>
>
> *Talk about news and social events.*
>
> *Talk about homelessness.*
>
> *Read newspapers and research things on computer.*

The added layer of learning to use technology (i.e. computer and search engines) to research topics and issues such as homelessness and significant social events has enabled Sally to develop a deeper understanding of Australian society and culture. For Sally, 'everything is interesting', however, she admits to finding tests 'very difficult'.

> *I have difficulty listening sometimes*
>
> *I'm not sure exactly what the word is.*
>
> *I have difficulty learning language*
>
> *because of the hearing – the accent*
>
> *and things like that.*

The computer was initially challenging for her to learn, however, she is embracing and using technology at the Neighbourhood House and at home.

The computer –

at the beginning – very hard for me.

Even today

I know a little bit,

not really much,

not everything,

just something basic.

At home I have a Notebook

I don't touch it much when I go home

I'm busy with other things,

but I like to use the iPad – for watching videos.

Sally has had quite a few jobs in catering, for example, working in a dining room and helping in a kitchen. Currently she has a part-time job as a traffic flagger. While Sally admitted earlier to finding it difficult to learn a language and needing to learn at her own pace, she remains motivated to continue to learn English and computers and is open to other learning as opportunities arise in the Neighbourhood House.

I want to keep learning computers and English or

maybe something else.

Discussion

Neighbourhood house habitus

This research has uncovered the importance of Neighbourhood Houses as a welcoming social space of education and lifelong learning for adults, across various age groups – young, middle aged and older learners –

and in different stages of life transition such as times of reskilling and retraining for future work, returning to learn after raising children and learning to further develop English language skills. The case studies of Lesley, Peter and Sally exemplify the role of Neighbourhood Houses in providing a social learning environment that welcomes a diversity of people across a lifespan. To understand Neighbourhood Houses as spaces of adult education we need look to the learner, teacher and worker practices within houses themselves (Bourdieu, 1990). We have argued previously that it is the habitus in the practices, the dispositions and habits of the teachers, staff, volunteers and learners themselves that create an environment of inclusive pedagogy and practice (Ollis, Ryan, Starr & Harrison, 2018 in press). We have also argued the inclusive practices of Neighbourhood Houses relate to their history and connection to feminism and the women's movement. Many Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria were established to provide social and learning opportunities for women at home with young children (Lonsdale, 1993). Their initial inception was a welcoming space for women of diverse backgrounds, class, sexuality, culture and ability to learn, socialise and feel included (West, 1995).

The social space of Neighbourhood Houses is relaxing and informal. Classes are delivered using adult learning principles by drawing on the existing knowledge of learners, maintaining small class sizes and focussing on group work. Constructivist epistemology, scaffolding tasks are central to learner engagement. The pedagogy focusses on adult learners as sites and creators of knowledge, drawing on their past experiences and the existing knowledge that students bring into the classroom (Ollis, Ryan, Starr & Harrison, 2017). Education programs are frequently learner and community directed, there is an emphasis on facilitation rather than teaching, learners are able to co-construct curriculum and have input into learning programs that are run within the houses. The programs often reflect changing education needs in local communities with classes tailored and catering to skill-gaps in local workforces and at times focussed on retraining workers who have been made redundant in declining industries such as manufacturing. Neighbourhood Houses are democratic spaces of learning in the true Deweyan sense, where education and learning are linked to the needs of the local community and where curriculum and course content are enabled and enacted frequently by the learners themselves (Dewey,

1938). Freire (1998) argues the teaching space is a space that should be constantly read and rewritten by a mutual and ongoing dialogue between the teacher and student:

> *After all, our teaching space is a text that has to be constantly read, interpreted, written, and rewritten. In this sense, the more solidarity there is between teacher and student in the way this space is mutually used, the more possibilities for democratic learning will be opened up ... (p. 89)*

Similarly, Crossan and Gallacher (2009) argue that to understand adult learning in community-based learning centres, we need to know the context of the relationships that are formed between learners themselves and between the learners and staff. They argue a key feature of the learning cultures within these spaces is the relationships between the students and staff, which are relaxed, informal and highly regarded by students.

Social and incidental learning

Neighbourhood Houses have a kitchen and informal social spaces for learners to gather and socialise over a cup of tea or coffee. This generates a social space where friendships are formed, networks are established, knowledge is passed on through informal discussion and problem solving occurs through socialisation with others (Beckett & Hager, 2002). Informal learning also occurs through the activity of volunteers in Neighbourhood Houses. Volunteers participate in a range of different activities in the houses, assisting with the administrative work of the houses, being involved in the governance of the houses through to involvement on committees of management. Much of what we learn is informal, incidental and social (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). We learn through observing the practices of others, but we also learn through dialogue with others. We learn how to problem-solve in conversation with others, how to complete a task by observing the practice of others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sally learned a great deal from her new class friends about culture, language differences and food. Peter learned how supportive his class colleagues were and this encouraged him to learn. He learned maths by observing and being assisted by a member of his class who had advanced skills in numeracy. Lesley established new friendships and gained confidence in her abilities. Each one learned about their class colleagues' lives, struggles and past education

experiences, both positive and negative. They heard about successful education experiences of other learners in the classes – what they had achieved, what they had aspired to do. This was encouraging and built an understanding of their own capacity to be successful learners.

Second chance learners

Both Lesley and Peter are second chance learners. They are learners who have not completed secondary school and who have had negative experiences of previous learning. As a result, they were not confident of their ability to learn. Many of the learners in this larger study are what we have identified as second chance learners. They come to the houses with complex social histories and they have usually not completed secondary school for a variety of reasons – they have had complex family lives, health issues, negative labour market experiences, learning difficulties, lacked family support and some were disengaged from, and struggled with, formal schooling. These learners are sometimes described as vulnerable learners, or disengaged learners, but they have also been described as hard-to-reach learners (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010). For these learners, reconstructing previously held negative experiences of formal education and learning is important. Social learning in the Neighbourhood House environment with others who have struggled in formal education settings, such as school, coupled with the emphasis on learner inclusion and using inclusive critical teacher pedagogies, assists learners to move beyond these negative past experiences and enabling them to recognise themselves as successful learners. We claim all adult learning is a project of identity formation. We learn to become a doctor, a teacher, a carpenter and an identity is formed around this particular occupation (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant & Yates, 2003). For second chance learners, their initial belief and identity as unsuccessful learners needs to be disrupted and reconstructed to reflect capable and successful learners.

The majority of participants in this research had negative experiences as learners, they struggled with their own identity of having not finished schooling, or feeling disengaged with education and schooling (Ollis, Ryan, Starr & Harrison, 2017). From a UK perspective, Crossan and Gallacher (2009) define the 'permeable boundaries' of learners and staff, in community based spaces of adult education, where, for a variety of reasons, relationships and learning combine together to build a

relationship of care and understanding of learners' lives. In Australian Neighbourhood Houses the philosophy underpinning the practices within the house is community development, community development aims to work with individuals and communities to empower the most vulnerable. It is here the Neighbourhood Houses disrupt the rigid linearity of the epistemology of 'learning progression' at the heart of neoliberal education policies and practices that assess and sort individuals according to their ages, performance and ability (Duckworth & Smith, 2017). However, important to this research is what Crossan and Gallacher (2009) describe as the horizontal relationships between learners and tutors where a 'learning relationship' exists as individuals learn through and from others and when … 'a human relationship has an impact on learners' fundamental dispositions to learning' (Mayers & Crossan, 2007 cited in Crossan & Gallacher, 2009, p.134). Hence at the heart of this education work are the relationships with learners and tutors, but importantly the relationships with learners and centre staff, many of whom have also been adult learners and volunteers in Neighbourhood Houses. What our research has affirmed, and what is fundamental to all adult learning but especially important in these community-based learning environments, is the primary importance of building relationships with learners.

Conclusion

Neighbourhood Houses are busy spaces, providing numerous learning programs ranging from informal, non-accredited courses to more formal, accredited learning pathways – Certificates and Diploma courses – accommodating the needs of many and diverse individuals. This is reflected in the literature that describes numerous and non-linear transitions and pathway programs in Neighbourhood Houses that enable participants to engage in a range of activities before deciding what they want or need. They represent a place and space for engagement, activity, interaction and the building of social capital. In terms of lifelong learning in Neighbourhood Houses , we return to Edwards and Usher's (2007) proposition of lifelong learning being a socio-culturally embedded set of practices generated by activity and social engagement. The case studies outlined in this research have shown this to be the case and is in line with their claims that active knowledge formation occurs in a multiplicity of settings, sites and spaces

of activity. Neighbourhood Houses exemplify these forms of lifelong learning, learning for anyone at any stage across a lifespan, learning that is incidental, informal and socially embedded in the activities and involvement of learners, volunteers and workers. Learning socially through observation of successful learning journeys and practices are embedded in Neighbourhood Houses that are welcoming and inclusive of anyone who wants to learn or volunteer. They are particularly inclusive spaces for second chance learners who begin a journey of discovery learning from the moment they enter the houses.

Some of the outcomes for learners are important and lifechanging. Lesley volunteered in the community café and has undertaken several accredited units in hospitality. She has since transitioned to TAFE (vocational education college) and believes she is now ready to enter the paid workforce. Peter studied two certificate level courses, one in aged care and another in business administration. He has since gained work through a traineeship at a local health provider. Sally's later life learning in English and English language has enabled critical engagement with social issues, other cultures and engaged with ideas of civics and citizenship.

In the practices in Neighbouhood Houses we see remnants of the Delores report's purpose and intensions regarding the capacity for lifelong learning to impact on wellbeing and social cohesion of communities – not explicitly expressed as such, however, embedded in the habitus and practices of Neighbourhood Houses. The growing confidence about continued learning and future work prospects are evidenced in the case studies of Lesley, Peter and Sally. They are demonstrations of UNESCO's goals in action, highlighting the potential of education to transform learners lives through adult education within supportive and transformative social networks, towards decent work and more fulfilling lives.

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