

Leisure activities as a source of informal learning for older people: The role of community-based organisations

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The significance of findings from a qualitative Tasmanian study, which investigated the part played by informal learning in positive ageing, is highlighted by the increasing proportion of the Australian population in the 'Third Age' cohort of active, independent people aged 65 years and over. Semi-structured interviews, conducted by a researcher of a similar age, allowed respondents to speak freely about their perceived needs and expectations for a satisfying lifestyle, in the context of their membership of community-based organisations. Findings revealed the benefits that older people perceive they derive from participation in the 'leisure activities' available through these organisations, and the informal learning which they enjoy. The study found that learning taking place is appropriate to the phase in life which is characterised by loss of paid employment and of relationships, and that this learning plays an important role in helping older people stay positive, and maintain independence and social engagement.

Introduction and conceptual issues

There is an increasing literature on the part played by social engagement in the maintenance of good health among older people (Litwin 2006, Luszcz & Giles 2002), but there is very little written about the contribution made by educational engagement and informal learning to the health and well-being of older people. The research discussed in this paper focused on people in the 'Third Age' (Laslett 1991), that is, the cohort aged 65 and over, mostly no longer in the paid workforce but still leading active independent lives, as compared with the 'Fourth Age' (frail, dependent). The study investigated the under-researched topic of the benefits older people felt they derived from participation in leisure activities on offer within a range of community-based organisations, of which learning is an important component (MacKean 2010). We argue that these community groups, especially those run by older people for their peers, are an effective means of delivering new opportunities for informal learning. Significant well-being effects associated with social engagement, coping with loss and hope for the future are also demonstrated (MacKean 2009). It is perhaps not surprising that educational engagement should be beneficial to the well-being of older people, since a number of recent research studies have shown the health benefits of educational engagement and educational mobility for both children and adults (Hammond 2002, Gall, Abbott-Chapman, Patton, Dwyer & Venn 2010).

While the health and well-being of older people, like people of all ages, are influenced by their socio-economic status and education level, older people born during and since the 1940s in general enjoy greater life expectancy, rising standards of living, better health and longer periods of active life after 'retirement' than their forbears. Laslett (1991) has suggested this represents the emergence of a new generational category, named the Third Age, which transcends social class, with shared cultural and life-style characteristics (Gilleard &

Higgs 2005). Third Agers are typically physically and socially active. In 2010 the majority of the 13.3% of Australians aged 65 years and over were living independently in couples or alone, and an increasing number were still in the labour force—24% aged 65–69 and 4.5% aged 70 and over (ABS 2010).

Participation in mental, physical and social activities has been shown in many research studies (Menec 2003, Nimrod 2007) to assist in helping older people maintain their well-being, independence and social engagement, and can act as a significant compensating capability for objective factors such as declining health (Fernandez-Ballesteros, Zamarron & Ruiz 2001). The research to be discussed reveals that leisure activities in community-based groups provide explicit or implicit learning opportunities, not just of specific skills but of attitudes and strategies that are conducive to perceived well-being. These include a sense of belonging and acceptance, the growth of hope and confidence, and the recognition that others share similar problems. Such groups resemble communities of practice more than formal education, since the benefits of belonging include peer recognition and sharing of knowledge and skills, using and expanding skills and expertise, greater confidence in tackling problems, and the enjoyment of being with like-minded people (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). Community and place-making activities and events, as expressions of social capital, have been revealed as sources of informal and incidental learning for actively participating adult learners (de Carteret 2008).

However, official statistics are remarkably silent on the educational participation of those aged 65 and over. Australian Bureau of Statistics on adult learning, for example, recognise community-based organisations as one of the mediums for informal learning (ABS 2006–7: table 10), which is defined as the ‘unstructured, non-institutionalised learning activities that are related to work, family, community or leisure’ (p. 3). The statistics also show that

informal learning is by far the most popular form of adult learning, with almost three quarters (74%) of Australians between the ages of 25 and 64 taking part in some form. Regrettably, these ABS figures include no statistics for the learning of those aged 65 and over.

The reader might be tempted to speculate whether these statistics reflect the sort of negative social construct within a welfare discourse prevalent in the population (Biggs 2001) which views older people as largely dependent and a cost to the social, health and welfare fabric of society.

There are, however, other ABS statistics which do acknowledge older people's learning activities. The General Social Survey gives figures on community participation by age, up to '85 years or over' (ABS 2006: table 29) which appear to contradict the previous classification. The list of *Types of groups* in which individuals participated in the last 12 months makes a distinction between *Education and training* and *Adult education, other recreation or special interest group*. As might be expected, participation in formal education declines in middle adulthood (55–64) when people are reaching or have reached retirement age and do not see the need to increase their educational qualifications for purposes of employment. In the case of *Adult education, other recreation or special interest group*, participation increases in middle adulthood and continues into the later age groups. It is particularly significant that participation in the 75–84 years age cohort is above the average across all age groups (13.2%, compared with 12.9%). Golding, Brown and Foley (2009) argue that, despite the generally lower status accorded to informal learning, it deserves wider recognition and research because of its breadth and importance for adult learners, gained through 'families, workplaces and leisure activities' (p. 41), and the appeal of its informality in organisation and delivery.

Lifespan development theory (Baltes & Baltes 1990) reveals that people have the capacity to learn, adapt, develop, make choices and

remain in control of their lives into old age. This is supported by recent research into neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to change its structure under stimulus (Doidge 2010). In each life phase, people need to learn what is appropriate for successful management of the challenges of that phase, in order to develop coping skills, a sense of self-efficacy and personal continuity (Withnall 2006). Older people need constant stimulus, motivation and opportunity to learn if they are to maintain and develop their cognitive capacity. They prefer to learn what they find meaningful, drawing on the resources they already have, and taking responsibility for their own learning,—if they are allowed to do so (MacKean 2002, Illeris 2006). Jarvis (2004: 71) uses the term ‘disjuncture’ to describe the motivating force for learning at a time when previous knowledge and life skills are inadequate to cope with new situations. Opportunities for informal learning can help ease the transition from the Second Age of ‘learning for a living’ to the Third Age of ‘learning for living’ (Martin 2000: 4).

An inevitable risk in growing older is the narrowing of choices, through personal or societal restrictions such as retirement from paid work, which usually means a reduction in income and consequent restrictions on activities and lifestyle. The range of leisure activities offered by community-based organisations provides and expands choice—not simply about which group or groups to join, but the level of commitment to each group. Moreover, learning in these groups is in the hands of the learners rather than dictated by formal constraints of curriculum, pedagogy and credentials, and as such reflects a more equal power structure than is usually the case in formal learning institutions (Golding et al.: 52). Leisure activities pursued within community-based groups provide opportunities for informal learning which ‘may not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills’ (Longworth 2003: 45). This is ‘learning by participation’ or ‘experiential learning’, where new knowledge is acquired through a process of becoming a member of a peer community, so that learning is viewed as a

process of becoming part of a greater whole (Sfard 2008). Within the digital age of borderless global communication younger people, like older people, are finding that ‘to anchor identity and seek pleasure through interpersonal interaction with local peers in leisure activities has become of increasing rather than diminishing importance’ (Abbott-Chapman & Robertson 2009: 247), and that ‘what constitutes “leisure” must also be re-thought’ (p. 243). This process of learning exchange characterises new and creative learning which needs to take place among all members of the ‘knowledge economy’, whatever their age. Creative learning distinguishes between ‘performance goals’ and ‘learning goals’, the former focused upon ‘winning positive judgment of your competence and avoiding negative ones’, the latter upon ‘a desire to develop new skills, master new tasks or understand new things’ (McWilliam 2008: 119).

Methodology and research methods

Qualitative research methodology was used to investigate older people’s participation in, and reflections upon, community-based organisations of which they were members. One of the main aims was to give older people a voice on their experience of ‘social engagement’ experienced through their community group membership, and the meaning and benefits to them of the activities offered by these organisations. This shaped the research approach and methods used (Charmaz 2006: 15). A conceptual and theoretical framework derived from grounded theory was adopted, in order to explore participants’ own reflections on their community group membership using interpretive inquiry. Respect for the research participants was demonstrated ‘by making concerted efforts to learn about their views and actions and to try to understand their lives from their perspectives’ (Charmaz 2006: 19).

The research was conducted by means of in-depth, semi-structured interviews of a sample of community group members, researcher observation of group activities and reflection on research notes—to

achieve triangulation (Cresswell 2008: 266). A purposeful sample of seven community-based organisations in Tasmania, Australia, was chosen as the sites from which interview participants were recruited. Maximal variation sampling was used (Cresswell 2008:214) in the selection of the community organisations to take account of different sizes, different activities, different neighbourhoods, socio-economic status of members and a range of management structures. From these seven community organizations, a sample of 25 interview respondents was recruited: 14 women and 11 men aged 65 or over, physically and socially active, independent and living in their own home (that is, Third Agers). The interviews, which were held in the meeting place of the group or in individuals' homes, lasted at least an hour and some went on for two or more hours. The interviewer was of a similar age as themselves and this encouraged the development of trust and shared understandings with interviewees. Participants welcomed the opportunity to share their views with someone of their own age who understood their situation.

Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Data were coded and analysed in four stages: initial open coding, focused coding, axial coding into categories and category clusters, and selective coding of the emerging themes and core categories (Strauss & Corbin 1998, Charmaz 2006).

The privacy and confidentiality of the respondents was respected at all times. Respondents are anonymous, and are not identifiable in either the analysis or reporting of findings. Approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network.

Limitations of the study

The research sample was small and selection was purposive, the study was confined to the state of Tasmania, and socio-economic status, ethnicity and language of respondents were not investigated. Therefore, findings are suggestive rather than conclusive, with

further research needed to investigate whether the findings are more generally applicable to other populations of older people. In addition, findings reflect the views of current members of community groups rather than non-members or lapsed members. Therefore, it is recognised that further research is needed to compare older people's learning experiences within community organisations with those of older people who are not attracted to community organisation membership. The research towards a doctoral degree arising from this study will investigate these issues among a more broadly based sample of older people, with implications for older people's perceived health and well-being. A comparison will also be made of older people's views with those of policy-makers and practitioners delivering community-based services.

Summary findings

Individuals and their activities

The 25 interviewees were asked about the total number of groups of which they were members, and all community leisure activities in which they were involved. Findings show that they were members of 65 groups (including the ones from which they were recruited) in categories based on ABS (2006) community participation (see Table 1) and that they engaged in a surprising number of 106 leisure activities, not all of them in organised groups. Women generally belonged to more groups than men. Group memberships declined with age for both men and women. Individual membership varied from 9 activities to 1, depending on the state of health of the person or a partner, and family commitments such as caring for a partner or grandchildren. Time spent per week on particular activities varied; one man, who listed only two group memberships, stated that he spent at least 20 hours a week on his hobby of woodcarving at home, in addition to the one morning a week he spent in the woodcarving class. Three volunteers who worked a five-day week at the community shed mentioned only one other activity each.

Table 1: Total group memberships categorised by adapted ABS categories (Community groups from which interviewees were recruited in bold)

Sport/physical recreation	Handcrafts	Hobbies/interests	Organised learning	Seniors	Volunteering
Croquet club	Time Out	Photography Association	OPEN	Senior Citizens	Tas Tech
Bowls club	Hands On	Camera Club	Online Centre	Wellbeing Club	Community Care group
Golf club	N House craft group	Literary society	U3A	Pensioners Club	Church Care group
Living Longer Living Stronger	Bellerive Craft Group	Historical Association	School for Seniors	Retired Persons Association	Meals on Wheels
YMCA gym	Trefoil Guild	Penguin Club	Probus	Neighbourhood House group	Knit for Charity
Square dancing	Spinning Group	Friends of Museum	Adult Ed	Veterans Centre	Elder Care group
Line dancing	Woodcraft Guild	Rhododendron Club	Computer class	RSL	Red Cross shop
Tai Chi		Bonsai Club		Legacy	City Library

Sport/physical recreation	Handcrafts	Hobbies/ interests	Organised learning	Seniors	Volunteering
Eastern Shore Ramblers		Mini Locomotive Club			Community shed
Heart walk		Bridge Club			Children's shed
Wellbeing walk		Guitar group			
Tennis		Country music			
Walk groups		Singing group			
Swimming		Lapidary Club			
Health Club		Recorder group			
		Book discussion			
		Mah Jong			
		Cards (friends)			
15	7	18	7	8	10
23.0%	10.7%	27.6%	10.7%	12.3%	15.4%

The groups were located in a variety of areas, from Hobart's most affluent suburb, to an isolated, low socio-economic area (originally a Housing Commission site), to a semi-rural settlement. The Tasmanian Social Inclusion Unit has estimated there are over 5,000 community organisations serving the half million people of Tasmania (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2007). This probably does not include the many groups meeting under the auspices of the Community Houses or Third Sector organizations—churches, charities and welfare organisations. It would certainly exclude the many informal groups of friends meeting for a common purpose, such as crafts, bushwalking, book discussion and other interests. It is likely that at least half the groups in Table 1 would not feature in the Social Inclusion Unit count.

Informal learning through leisure activities

Interview questions about expectations and satisfactions of belonging to a community group did not specifically use the word 'learning', so as not to lead interviewees' responses. Nevertheless, spontaneous comments about learning new things emerged throughout. Findings showed that many respondents perceived 'learning' as one of the satisfactions they gained from their participation in activities and their membership of groups, and it became clear that 'learning' was one of the factors common to all the groups. In addition to specific skills learned, other learning experiences emerged, such as how to tackle a new project and gain confidence: *'I do love a challenge'* (F, 65–74); and sampling new activities and a variety of experiences: *'Learning about different things'* (M, 75+) and *'You learn something from every little thing'* (F, 65–74). A particular satisfaction was the chance to learn from others and share one's own knowledge and skills often gained and developed over a life-time. This aspect characterises the 'horizontal' peer group learning which may be described as a community of practice, where participation 'is both a kind of action and a form of belonging' (Wenger 1998: 4). Typical comments on

mentoring and sharing were: *'It's guidance, and seeing what the other people do'* (F, 65–74) and *'Talking with a couple of others, how they do it, what to do, that sort of thing'* (M, 75+).

Another advantage of learning gained through community-based groups is the freedom of choice it offers; this emerged as a strong incentive to participate, and a striking difference from formal education. Freedom of choice and independence can become restricted in older age, with the onset of chronic health conditions and often a reduction in income. Empowerment—the ability to make informed choices, exercise influence and make contributions—can be greatly diminished, as increasingly decisions about one's life are in the hands of others, whether professionals or younger family members. Membership of a community-based group, particularly one run by and for older people, is one area where freedom of choice is still a possibility even in old age, offering opportunities to do things for which there had never before been time, or to enjoy activities that are already a source of pleasure (Erikson 1986): *'It's a lot of fun—if you don't enjoy something, don't do it'* (M, 75+). Since participation in a group is voluntary, as is the extent of one's commitment, there is a choice not just whether to join but whether to continue: *'I don't go just for the sake of it, I choose things I like'* (F, 75+) and *'You do what you want to do, that's it—things I'm doing, it's really enjoyable'* (M, 75+). Unlike the set curriculum of formal education, community-based learning is in the hands of the learners. In the craft group, *'Whatever we wanted to do, we did'* (F, 75+). So the activities on offer must be sufficiently enjoyable and stimulating to overcome the disincentives of poor health, lack of money to spare and transport difficulties.

In community-based groups, particularly those run by older people for their peers, the emphasis is on learning as participation rather than as acquisition (Sfard 2008). The sharing of knowledge and skills among equals is in marked contrast to the hierarchical structure

of formal education and of much informal education. None of the interviewees were enrolled in formal higher education, and vocational training was no longer relevant to their lives. But interviewees who had had experience of adult education classes compared the approach of paid tutors, whose job was to bring all students up to the same standard of a set curriculum, and the volunteer tutors of their own age, in their chosen community-based groups, whose attitude was described as: *'Flexibility', 'Friendly, nothing is too much trouble' and 'Helping people at their own levels rather than a set class'* (M, 75+). The non-competitive atmosphere of a community group, where there was no compulsion to succeed, 'come top' or earn a certificate, was appreciated by older people who were looking for support and understanding: *'We're a very caring group. Because you know a lot of us in turn have something wrong with us, and we allow for that'* (F, 75+). Several expressed their appreciation that: *'It wouldn't matter if you didn't do any work, you could go there to have a chat'* (M, 65–74).

Community groups run by older people for their peers

Groups run by older age peer groups are important because self-help groups understand and cater for the individual needs of their members. They understand the challenges older people face but also their need for independence and self-determination. In this they have an advantage over programs run by outsiders, however well-meaning, in which the potential for stereotyping may lead to a deficit construct of older people as a 'vulnerable' group which results from a 'welfare' discourse rather than one of human rights (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope 1998). By contrast, several groups encouraged self-efficacy and resilience by catering for the varying physical and mental capacities of their members, without making a judgment on these capacities. For example, a croquet club had different types of membership, including an older people's group and a social membership for those unable to play at all. A computer group

had purchased special easy-to-handle ‘mice’ and large keyboards for learners with physical disabilities such as arthritis. The collaboration and inclusion in the peer group encouraged participants to take up challenges that stimulated and maintained their belief in their own self-efficacy, while the supportive atmosphere encouraged them to experience ‘the dignity of risk’ (Friedan 1993: 499). There was freedom to make mistakes without feeling foolish: *‘I’m not very good at painting but I love it’* (F, 75+). As an eighty year old said of learning to use a computer: *‘I thought, well, I got to learn to do things, and the way to learn them is to do ‘em-ok, I made **loads** and **loads** of mistakes... you learn the hard way, but I had **fun**’* (M, 75+). Learning provided a positive future-oriented outlook of personal continuity rather than a negative ‘end of life’ focus: *‘If you think you’ve learned everything, there’s not much point in going on’* (M, 75+) and *‘You’ve still got to feel that there’s something to look forward to’* (F, 65–74).

The friendly encouraging atmosphere in the peer group helped participants to gain confidence in their capacity to learn, by listening and working alongside others, learning from mistakes, sharing their own skills and learning from others. Learners were also teachers—in a small craft group, it was taken for granted that each member had something to contribute: *‘We each teach ... there’s one there today. She’s showing us how to cover a box, cutting out and covering it’* (F, 75+). The opportunities to take on leadership roles in the group, whether through helping to organise the ongoing activities, overseeing the club accounts or sharing skills with others, emerged as a particularly significant characteristic of the groups run by older people for their peers. In mixed-age organisations, there are fewer opportunities for older people to act as organisers or leaders, and indeed a risk that due to their age they might be relegated to more passive positions. The chance to go on being useful contributed greatly to participants’ feelings of self-worth. A participant leading and mentoring others in a seniors’ community group said: *‘I feel I’m*

putting a bit back ... I do as much as I can. There's lots of things you can't do, lots of things in the garden I can't do—so I enjoy it' (M, 75+).

Table 2 shows that, of the 65 groups to which interviewees belonged, 54 (83%) were run by the members. Of the 27 groups that catered wholly or primarily for older people, a very high proportion (25, 92%) were run by the members; the exceptions were two physical activities run by qualified professionals. As communities of practice, community-based groups represent 'a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment' (Wenger et al. 2002: 34) rather than the hierarchical, teacher-led structure of formal education.

Table 2: Who runs the groups of which respondents were members?

Category	Number	Percentage
Run wholly by members	12	40.0
By members, sponsored or auspiced	28	43.0
By Government Department	3	4.6
Business: paid tutor/organiser	8	12.4
Totals	65	100

The categories in Table 2 are not totally clear cut, as older people's self-run groups often receive assistance from other bodies such as a church, local council, community house or service organisation in the form of infrastructure support: provision of a meeting place at a non-commercial rent, administrative help, use of equipment such as a phone, computer, photocopier, tea and coffee making facilities. These groups are generally affordable by those on limited incomes because they are run by members volunteering their services rather than by paid staff. A self-run learning organisation such as University of the

Third Age (U3A) offers a choice of up to 900 hours of classes for an annual subscription of around \$45, compared with a typical cost of an adult education class of around \$90–\$100 (concession rate) for 20 hours' tuition.

The opportunity provided by peer-run groups for social engagement and learning to cope with the process of ageing was also very important: *'I've made friends I wouldn't have made otherwise'* (F, 65–74). This was especially important for the 13 of the 25 interviewees who lived alone: *'I suppose I joined to fill a vacuum when my wife died'* (M, 75+). The friendliness and support in the group were seen as *'a tremendous help after [husband] died, they're so nice there'* (F, 65–74). Social engagement was seen as a key to improved well-being, at a time of life when personal loss or diminishment and societal attitudes can affect quality of life. It became clear that in particular the peer group offered its members many different opportunities to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose by using their knowledge, skills and energy in a situation of reciprocal support. Analysis revealed that the positive use of learning played a large part in participants' self-assessed well-being, by helping them to use a lifetime's knowledge and skills to cope with transitions, and to learn strategies for successful adaptation to the new life phase.

Vaillant (2002: 224) gives four basic activities that make retirement rewarding, the first being that people should replace their work-mates with another social network—joining a community-based group is a popular alternative. Vaillant's other recommendations are: learn how to play, which 'permits a person to maintain self-esteem while giving up self-importance'; creativity, which 'requires protected time'; and lifelong learning, because 'the challenge in retirement is to combine the fruits of maturity with the recovery of childlike wonder'. Membership of a community-based group should and can provide all four.

Conclusions and discussion of findings

The research showed that older people's motivations for participation in a community-based group were a blend in varying degrees of three main goals: to take part in their choice of activity, to enjoy the company of others, and to experience the feelings of well-being that come from satisfaction and self-fulfilment. These motivations were found in every individual interviewed, even though the groups from which they were recruited had been chosen deliberately for maximum variation. Participation in a community-based group was found to have a manifest function, pursuit of an activity of one's choice in congenial company, and a latent function of maintaining and improving quality of life by minimising the impact of loss and transition. It became clear that groups run by older people for their peers were particularly effective in providing the satisfactions that older people were seeking.

Part of that latent function is that 'leisure activities' offered by community-based groups have an important informal and often incidental learning component, at a time when life transitions make learning especially empowering (Hammond 2002). Parallels with communities of practice are apparent through the voluntary coming together for a common learning purpose, the opportunity to use and share one's skills and experience, the mutual assistance and support, the building of self-efficacy and resilience, and the horizontal power structures holding groups together. These resemblances are in sharp contrast to the hierarchical structure, imposition of externally set standards and emphasis on competition and attainment that characterise formal education and training.

Reference was made above to Golding's argument (2009) that the breadth and importance of informal learning for adults deserves wider recognition and research. The dismissal of older people's leisure-time education as mere 'hobby-type' has been condemned

by lifelong learning advocate Peter Jarvis (2004: 32). Jarvis sees the provision of this kind of education as 'of great importance, since it provides opportunity for life-enrichment ... helps them use their leisure time in a creative manner'. He concludes that its provision will become more important 'since more people are living longer and hence have more actual time in their lives to learn things ... the elderly have as much right as anyone else to enjoy the fruits of learning'.

The importance of helping older people to maintain their health and well-being and to remain independent has not yet received sufficient recognition and support, even though 'preventive health' is a national priority. The increasing number of older people is a concern to governments and other authorities because of the threat of greater calls on an already over-burdened health system. The literature discussed reveals that participation in mental, physical and social activities has a positive effect on older people's health and well-being, and on their sense of self-efficacy and resilience. The research findings discussed confirm the learning component in older people's 'leisure activities'. These findings suggest that such activities can provide opportunities to learn and practise skills and strategies appropriate to each person's time of life, in a form they enjoy and at a cost they can afford, through the many different community-based, peer-run organisations. Empowering older people to help themselves and to remain engaged can help to combat negative social constructs of ageing at a time when demographic change will make continued participation in the paid and voluntary workforce a social and economic necessity. Authorities' recognition of the value of community-based organisations as informal learning hubs, and increased provision of infrastructure to support their activities, would assist in maintaining a healthy society in which citizens of all ages are engaged.

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