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Case Studies

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About volume 5 number 3

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This issue 5:3 of the IJEA is the last one in its current format. As Keith Percy outlined in the previous issue (5:2), the *Association for Education and Ageing* (AEA) has, since its establishment in 1985, nearly always published a journal as part of its remit. Titles changed over the years, and in 2003 the journal was suspended. In 2010 it was resurrected, on the initiative of AEA Trustees and with the practical help and encouragement of John Benyon of Leicester University. It took on its current title *International Journal of Education and Ageing.* Throughout this period, Keith was involved as Editor-in-chief, initially with Franz Kolland, University of Vienna, and Jim Soulsby for AEA, and more recently he was its sole editor. During all this time, the Journal has published articles, case studies, international updates and book reviews from 20 different countries throughout the world, with contributions from established leading scholars as well as newcomers.

This last issue is no exception. It has contributions from many well-known scholars and some who have entered the field more recently, and in addition we include two case studies, which highlight examples of innovative practices in different parts of the world. The majority of the articles in this issue reflect on the development and achievements of educational gerontology, and Chris Phillipson offers his comments on these in the Guest Editorial that follows. It seems apt to focus the main bulk of this issue on such reflections, and on the implications for the future of educational gerontology. This would perhaps, as implied by Keith Percy himself (IJEA 5:2, p.6), be the time to take stock, not only of the state of educational gerontology, but also of the Journal, its format and contents. We have been delighted with the interest generated by our call for papers earlier in the year and so a different kind of journal or publication may well emerge, depending on developments within the AEA.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed to the Journal over the years, both authors and reviewers. Last, but not least, we owe our thanks to Keith himself for his enduring dedication to this journal and the meticulous work he put into it. It was clear to us that Keith was not well for quite a long time, and unable to complete Volume 5. Sadly, he died in March 2023. His contributions to the field in educational gerontology have been immense. A full obituary can be found via AEA's web site or directly at https://portal.lancaster.ac.uk/intranet/news/article/professor-emeritus-keith-percy-bsc-soc-ma-phd.

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Guest editorial:

Educational gerontology: achievements and challenges and an agenda for the future

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Introduction

This final edition of the *International Journal of Education and Ageing* (IJEA) brings together a variety of papers which provide an excellent illustration of the range of intellectual interests and sources upon which educational gerontology has been built. This much was clear from foundational contributions such as *Educational Gerontology: International Perspectives* (edited by Frank Glendenning, 1985), and *Ageing, Education and Society: Readings in Educational Gerontology* (edited by Frank Glendenning and Keith Percy, 1990). Both these volumes addressed the transformational potential of demographic change, anchored around issues of lifelong learning, preparation for longevity, and the changes needed for educational institutions themselves. This issue of IJEA carries the work forward, reminding us both of the various debates which have characterised the field, as well as challenges for the future.

This brief overview of the papers highlights a number of themes which are addressed by the contributors, noting similarities and contrasts across the different arguments. Formosa, Hachem, and Withnall, in various ways, point to the diverse sources supporting older adult learning, including University of the Third Age, Elderhostel (now Road Scholar), and independent institutes of lifelong learning. In the UK, we might also emphasise the crucial role of university departments of adult and continuing education, both in supporting and developing the case for educational gerontology (Glendenning's work at Keele University, and Percy at Lancaster University, are obvious examples), and providing a home for some of the initial research in areas such as pre-retirement education, strategies for promoting learning in later life, and developing international collaborations.

Of course, much has changed since the early research and publications in educational gerontology, as developed from the late 1970s. Here, the papers highlight various changes which raise challenges for how educational gerontology might develop in the future, including: an increasingly diverse older adult population (e.g., in lifestyles, income, health and educational backgrounds), the continued decline in participation in learning in mid-life, and entrenched inequalities in engagement in learning.

One aspect in relation to the last of these, highlighted in all of the papers, concerns issues about the role of digital technology in reinforcing educational inequalities. Bohrn, Rohnor & Gallistl, in a quantitative survey of older adults, confirmed the extent to which lower socio-economic status appeared to be related to lower levels of digital competencies, and they raise the important question of what can be done to make digital learning in later life accessible to a wider range of social groups. The paper by O'Connor, De Lappe & Vseteckova confirms the potential of online learning, in their example through a series of interactive webinars around the topic of healthy ageing. Their paper demonstrates the importance of creating educational programmes through collaborative, co-produced ventures, bringing together researchers, older people, health and social care professionals, third sector organisations, and other groups. Collaborative work of this kind will almost certainly be the way forward, given financial and work pressures on organisations, in a context of continuing economic and social austerity.

What pointers do the papers provide both for the future of educational gerontology, and attempts to expand the participation of older people in the process of learning? The following issues are given some prominence across the papers, and set an important agenda for future research and policy development. First, an argument developed by Hachem concerns how, in the context of late modernity, educational gerontology can play a role in redefining the nature of later life, liberating people from 'the normativity of preassigned identities and communities'. This ambition is echoed by Formosa who takes the view that 'older adult learning should take advantage of the fact that for many older adults, later life represents a "liberation" phase as they experiment, innovate and skirt around social conventions to explore new paths to creativity'. One might further add, in the spirit of a critical educational gerontology, that the task must also be to unlock the deep-rooted barriers to learning, both those which have accumulated through the life course, as well as those which reflect contemporary pressures such as the depletion of learning resources, the closure of libraries, and the continuing neglect of older adult learning in universities and colleges.

Second, as Samanta reminds us, there is a major task ahead in re-shaping a gerontological curriculum independent of biomedical models which emphasise dependency, frailty and decline. Writing from the perspective of the Global South in general and India in particular, she links this to promoting a shift from 'Eurocentric' approaches, placing future work within the context of decolonization. This she argues will require basing gerontological work around local voices and local sources of knowledge which can: 'challenge the complex caste-class nexus in generating inclusive gerontological traditions'.

Third, as the papers emphasise, many groups remain socially excluded from the facilities which do encourage learning in later life. Withnall points to the challenge posed by the displacement of older adults through civil wars, with climate change and other man-made disasters extending the vulnerability of different groups. More generally, it is clear that many older adults – for example from minority ethnic communities, those in neighbourhoods experiencing high levels of deprivation, or those in residential care – remain poorly-served by organisations concerned with older learners, creating an urgent need to expand both the range of opportunities and types of approaches used to reach out to different groups of older people.

Finally, a major concern identified by Formosa, but implicit in many of the papers, is the failure of older adult learning to register as a priority area in public policy. Certainly, it does occasionally surface in debates around the implications of a likely shortage of workers, and the need to ensure people maintain/learn new skills in the context of a longer working life. But the statistics at least for the UK (see the annual *Adult Participation in Learning Survey, 2021*) confirm the rapid decline in education and training which sets in from the mid-40s onwards. This highlights the need for stronger voices to press the case for older adult learning – in employment, in volunteering, in leisure-related areas, and in the education system itself.

In short, as the various papers in this final issue of IJEA confirm, provision to expand learning in later life will require a robust institutional framework, to respond to the needs of a large and increasingly diverse older population. The contributors underline the need for developments such as: new educational initiatives targeting different groups of older people; research examining how to increase the take-up of online learning; developing outreach work in special settings such as residential and nursing homes; re-visiting the benefits of pre-retirement education; re-engaging universities and colleges in older adult learning; and widening the range of stakeholders committed to the challenge of later life learning.

This final issue of IJEA is a reminder both of the impressive history of work in educational gerontology to date, as well as the important tasks ahead. The contributors have pointed us towards the various issues which face researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and older people themselves, in addressing what should be a core component of work to realise the potential of longer but still unequal lives.

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Respice, prospice: personal reflections on four decades of exploring learning in later life

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Abstract

In my 80th year and having been involved with research on later life learning – what was originally styled 'education of the elderly' – since 1980, I reflect here on my personal, professional and academic experience as I have grown older myself. I trace the origins of my interest in later life learning, including my involvement with the Association for Education and Ageing, from its origins in the United Kingdom (UK) in the early 1980s through my own research and that of significant others to current recognition of the 'longevity effect' and the growth of a scholarly worldwide literature. Finally, I comment on two particular challenges for later life learning – older refugees and the need to face up to the inevitability of death.

Introduction: in the beginning

With my 80th birthday looming and having been involved in the academic study of both learning in later life and, to a lesser extent, aspects of social gerontology for well over 40 years, I reflect here on my personal, professional and academic experience as I have grown older myself. When I returned to full time employment in 1979 after a short break to start a family, it was as a researcher at the National Institute of Adult Education (then known as NIAE but later NIACE) in the United Kingdom (UK). I worked initially with two colleagues on a Department of Education and Science (DES) funded three-year project, completing literature reviews in 12 different areas of adult education. The second of these was *The Education of the Elderly* for which I took lead responsibility. This was an unusual topic at the time but there was apparently some initial recognition within the DES that the UK population was ageing and that adult education professionals had hitherto given little thought as to whether and how this demographic might be provided for. It was hoped that a review of research might provide a basis on which to devise appropriate formal provision in future. Sadly, this has never really happened in the UK in spite of some

positive rhetoric and sterling efforts by various groups and organisations to draw attention to the proven benefits.

At that time, I was in my mid-30s and had rarely had any personal contact with older people, Accordingly, I was intrigued by the idea that 'the elderly' might have educational aspirations in retirement, then defined in the UK as the age of entry into the state pension scheme which was, at that time, 65 for men and 60 for women. What was surprising was the general lack of any relevant research other than the small amount which emanated from the United States (USA) and which was largely concerned with the development of the comparatively new Institutes of Learning in Retirement or with small-scale local initiatives. I did investigate the innovative French model of the University of the Third Age (U3A) begun in Toulouse in 1972 but otherwise, research was scarce and language barriers prevented further exploration of any other possible European initiatives at that time.

This exercise enabled me to connect with a small number of other people, both academics and practitioners who were also working on exploring aspects of education and older people, notably at Keele University in the UK and at the Beth Johnson Foundation, a local charity working to ensure a better later life for everyone. I attended a series of residential meetings at Keele one of which focused on the dissemination of findings from an innovative research project on pre-retirement education (Phillipson & Strang,1983). Other seminars were organised by Frank Glendenning and led to the formation in 1985 of the Association for Educational Gerontology (which later became the Association for Education and Ageing known as AEA) and the publication of its first academic *Journal of Educational Gerontology.* This was succeeded by *Education and Ageing* until 2002 and then resurrected as *International Journal of Education and Ageing* in 2010.

Moving on: an academic life

I retained close links with AEA and was privileged to act as its Chair from 1999 to 2005. These links prevailed through subsequent career moves through the UK higher education sector (plus time spent as a Visiting Lecturer at Charles Sturt University in Albury, Australia in 1998). My final move was to the brand new Medical School at Warwick University in 2000, from where I formally retired in 2009.

It quickly became apparent that wider connections and co-operative working with others was required if those of us involved in exploring aspects of educational gerontology were to develop new lines of inquiry. I was able to attend a range of large international conferences on ageing that attracted a variety of academics and practitioners from a diversity of health and social care fields and voluntary organisations. It was greatly enhanced by the launch in 2009 of the network *Education and Learning of Older Adults* (ELOA), part of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) which has provided a catalyst for disseminating the results of relevant high quality research in Europe and sometimes beyond.

As I grew older, I had more time to become involved with a range of international multidisciplinary research projects such as WORKTOW (Working life changes and Training of older workers), funded for three years under the European Union Framework IV Programme for Research and Development. Led by colleagues in Scandinavia, it was one of the first research programmes concerned with the training of older workers (Tikkanen et al., 2002). I also learnt, during several visits, of the dire situation of many older people and their health and literacy learning needs in post-apartheid South Africa in the wake of the AIDS crisis; and attendance at an International Federation on Ageing (IFA) conference in Mar del Plata, Argentina in 2000 revealed the surprising amount and nature of later life learning taking place in South America, even though language barriers once again prevented gaining any detailed grasp of policies and programmes there.

This period also coincided with becoming a carer for a relative who eventually moved into a care home at the age of 90, having experienced increasingly challenging health issues. She remained there until her death at the age of 97 during which time I was motivated to investigate the possibilities of learning for older people in residential care (Withnall, 2012). This is an aspect of later life learning that still remains relatively unexplored, although Formosa (2023) has recently focused on learning for people living with dementia. It also led me to reconsider the widely accepted division of later life into the Third and Fourth Ages, an issue to which I will return later.

Following retirement, an Honorary post in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at Warwick University (and also in the former Institute of Lifelong Learning at Leicester University, 2009-2011) has enabled me to forge more new connections with others in Europe, as well as in Asia and Australasia. Recognition that I am an older adult myself has hopefully given me a better understanding of how it feels to be an older learner.

Theoretical perspectives

Apart from initial attempts, mainly by Glendenning, to delineate the scope of educational gerontology and to distinguish it from gerontological education (Glendenning, 1985), there have been varying efforts over the years to develop theory in educational gerontology. Kern (2018) examined nine different models of what he calls 'older adult education' which he identified from seven different countries and three continents, but pointed out that the absence of shared paradigms made it too difficult to compare results from the research he uncovered, and that progression was impossible unless a more solid base of academic knowledge could be made available.

Perhaps the most influential of these attempts was early work by Glendenning and Battersby (1990) in which they argued for a critically informed approach to later life education derived from the work of the Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, a leading proponent of critical pedagogy. At the same time, their approach was disputed by Percy (1990) who explored a more humanistic liberal line of

thinking in respect of appropriate goals for older people's education. However, re-examining the work of these early theorists, Hachem (2020) has argued that these statements were too narrowly located and are, in any case, now dated in view of the growth of opportunities for older people to learn across the world in tandem with an expanding international research field. In spite of these reservations, Hachem and Westberg (2022) have recently returned to an exploration of critical educational gerontology's stated aim to emancipate older learners from oppression. Working with a group of Lebanese learners from a U3A group they recommend a rethink of critical educational gerontology's logic of emancipation since their findings dispute the original view that older people's ability to engage reflexively in social change is hampered by a kind of naïve consciousness about their position in society.

During the 1990s, I was increasingly troubled by the fact that much of the emerging research, including that to which I had previously contributed myself (Withnall and Percy, 1994) was concerned with the *education* of older adults rather than focusing on their *learning*. Accordingly, in a major research project financed as part of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded *Growing Older* Research Programme (1999-2004), I focused almost exclusively on the lifetime learning experiences of groups of older people currently involved in learning in different settings. Use was made of focus groups, questionnaires and interviews conducted by a trained team of older people themselves. The findings of the project revealed the myriad of influences on the propensity to learn (or not) and the outcomes for people in later life, noting how varied were their experiences of engagement with learning across the life course in a constantly changing external context. I argued for a new paradigm - what I termed longlife learning - that would move away from popular but varying concepts of lifelong learning towards 'a more inclusive society where all forms of learning are valued, older people are held in higher esteem for the visible contribution they make to society and learning for everyone is truly acknowledged as a desirable process relevant to the reality of long life'(Withnall, 2010, p.127).

Since then, in many countries across the world it has become necessary for people to remain for much longer in the labour market. In the USA, Weise (2021) has argued that worker education is due for a complete overhaul and must adapt to meet the needs of a new generation of workers whose lifespan may exceed 100 years. In addition, she fears that some of the new jobs that will become available are in danger of being 'stultifying, dead-end jobs' (p. 193) unless we can design and build a new eco-system for longlife learning now. Certainly, we know that the adoption of new forms of technology such as big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning will be key drivers of business transformation in the immediate future (World Economic Forum, 2023). However, in the UK, it appears that there has been growing economic inactivity at least among 50 to 64 year olds since before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (ONS, A05, 14 March 2023), the biggest rise in G7 countries. There are conflicting views about the reasons for this but a UK government review of workforce participation is currently underway (Rankl, 2023).

Later life learning and the impact of Covid-19

There is a plethora of learning opportunities for older people that now exist all over the world as detailed in a snapshot of provision in 42 countries by Findsen and Formosa (2016). Some examples include different models of U3A, Men's Sheds, intergenerational work, Age Friendly Universities, Learning Cities, Road Scholar, online educational opportunities such as GetSetUp in the USA together with traditional community courses and classes and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs, 2021) available to all ages. U3A in particular is one of the most exciting developments for older people to have emerged in the last 50 years even though it has been subject to some criticism. For example, Formosa (2019) believes that it now needs to make itself more relevant to new generations of older people especially in relation to social class, gender, ethnicity and disability. In addition, Men's Sheds which originated in Australia and which offer community spaces for men (of all ages but generally retired) to meet, chat, share skills and enjoy practical activities have generated an extensive literature, especially with regard to the improvement of participants' mental health, wellbeing and social isolation (see Foettinger et al., 2022).

Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic first identified in 2020 brought a halt to these activities in the many countries of the world which imposed one or more lockdowns on their populations. Since older people were considered most at risk from the virus and were generally advised to stay at home as far as possible, they were considered to be in danger of social isolation in many countries plus facing high levels of anxiety, fear and depression in spite of the eventual availability of effective vaccinations. Since it is acknowledged that learning can help to create a sense of wellbeing among other benefits, it was not surprising that a variety of educational providers of both formal and informal learning opportunities extended their use of the internet to reach more older people.

Particularly notable were efforts by U3A in some countries to teach older people how to communicate online using conferencing tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Other organisations offered online exercise programmes and advice to older people about how to stay physically and mentally fit during lockdown. However, although many older people are nowadays computer literate, it is believed that Covid-19 served to widen the so-called digital divide especially among those aged 50-70 in the UK as research from the Centre for Ageing Better (2021) demonstrated. The Centre has noted that digital inclusion involves more than simply getting online; it includes building skills and confidence. Accordingly, the Centre has published a number of recommendations as to how older people can be better supported to become confident computer users (Centre for Ageing Better, op.cit.) but it is likely to be a long and complex process since older people can face a multifaceted range of barriers. Meanwhile, the number of online courses available to all adults all over the world continues to multiply particularly as some governments restrict funding for traditional adult education classes in favour of work related training.

During the early days of the pandemic HelpAge International drew particular attention to older people living in humanitarian crisis and conflict settings or in danger of

violence, abuse and neglect. They stressed the need for public health emergency responses and recovery measures that pay attention to older people's rights, voices and dignity noting that Covid-19 has exposed some deep-rooted ageism in many societies (HelpAge International, 2021). It is to this issue that I will now turn.

Ageism

In the UK, age is one of nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 unless age discrimination can be 'objectively justified'. However, it is probably true to claim that ageism, originally described by Butler (1969) is still one of the last prejudices and constitutes a global challenge in that it can lead to poorer health, social isolation and be costly to different economies (WHO, 2021). In the UK, a study found that ageism is still rife and that negative attitudes towards age are frequently formed in childhood. In particular, growing older was most often most negatively viewed in respect of memory loss, appearance and participation in activities (Royal Society of Health, 2018). It seems that there is still a strong belief in the old adage 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks' in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary.

Morrow-Howell et al. (2023) have pointed out, controversially, that gerontologists are themselves a result of our ageist culture and that they can both perpetuate ageism and suffer from internalised ageism themselves. This might also be true of older people as many of us have grown older not fully acknowledging the physical and mental changes our bodies and minds may naturally undergo. We may not even recognise ageist language in, for example, newspaper reports, in social media, even in birthday cards. The cosmetic industry's obsession with 'anti-ageing' products also reflects our fear of growing older, seen as a period of physical decline which must be avoided at all costs, especially by older women. Is it therefore any wonder that many older people convince themselves that they are 'too old' to take on any new challenges including learning something new?

So great is the perceived extent of the problem that the WHO has published a Global Report on Ageism (2021) presenting a framework for ways to take action and to counter it. Morrow-Howell et al. (2023) offer a range of suggestions for confronting ageism in academic circles. However, it is notable that it is a range of older feminist writers, mainly in the USA, who are leading the fight against ageism in general, especially Applewhite (2019), a major figure in the campaign. Most recently, Gendron has actually questioned many anti-ageist strategies, since she believes that they are ageist in themselves in that they actually deny age. She would prefer reclaiming being old as 'the manifestation of a long life instead of a dreaded state that we fear' (Gendron, 2022, p.164).

Personally, I have come to dislike the use of the terms Third and Fourth Age in that they appear divisive and inappropriate in the age of longevity. For a start, there seems to be little agreement as to what the terms mean. Do they refer to different age cohorts or to statuses? Higgs & Gilleard (2014) remark on ideas of the Third Age as a socially desirable time of active opportunity whilst the Fourth Age is a state

of being seen as frail and dependent. Kydd et al. (2018) argue that it is fear of the unknown, of dependency, loss of agency and of death that have created a kind of ageism in how the Fourth Age is viewed. I would argue that we need to regard ageing as a continuum in which different challenges arise at different points but that appropriate adjustments would allow people to continue to learn, albeit in different ways, throughout their lives however long they may be.

Looking to the future

Brains and bodies

Indeed, there is a great deal about learning in later life that needs further investigation. I have recently begun to explore further some of the recent literature of neuroscience that deals specifically with the impact of longevity on older bodies and brains and how we might revitalise the brain in later life. The work of Levitin (2020), a Canadian neuroscientist, is particularly relevant here since he advocates experiential learning, engaging in meaningful work and participating in new activities as well as undertaking regular exercise even though we may be slower in adjusting to new demands as other senses wear out. However, we know that the rate at which cognitive abilities and other senses decline can be highly variable.

There is also plenty to learn through advice for older people from the medical profession regarding how to stay physically healthy in later life in an age of longevity, mainly again through exercise and making changes to diet. Recent work by Attia ((2023) has received considerable media publicity in this respect. However, apart from the danger that much of the available advice can be contradictory, there is the possibility that ageism, once again, lurks in some of the medical literature. For example, Hyman (2023), a popular best-selling American author with a plethora of publications claims to reveal 'secrets' that can keep us 'young forever' by engaging with the programme he suggests. Obviously, there is still a great deal to uncover about the impact of ageing on our bodies and brains, our ability to critically examine the evidence and how new discoveries can be translated into teaching and learning strategies not just in later life but throughout the life course.

Emerging challenge; two examples

I have become more aware of additional challenges that are facing those of us specifically interested in later life learning, two of which I will address here. Firstly, continuing conflict, notably in Ukraine but also in many other parts of the world, has led to the further displacement of many older people who have entered other countries as refugees. The United Nations Refugee Agency ((UNHCR) provides comprehensive advice about issues that need to be addressed in resettling refugees and this includes language learning as well as strategies to address employment and training for those older people who still wish to work (UNHCR, no date). However, although we need much more research into the kind of learning undertaken by older refugees, Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway (2007) have pointed out the central ethical challenges that are involved in undertaking research

with refugees in general. They argue that researchers should try to design and conduct research projects that result in reciprocal benefits for refugee participants and/or their communities, an aim I believe should be fundamental to all research with older people.

Secondly, those of us approaching our ninth decade and beyond cannot escape the fact that we will not live for ever and that death is a real possibility. Although it is a difficult topic to embrace, there is a pressing need to put our affairs in order and to learn as much as we can concerning such important topics as end-of-life treatment preferences. Haywood et al., (2022) show how they developed a theoretically based workshop to increase knowledge and bring about behaviour change in relation to Advance Care Planning. Participants' knowledge and behaviour were found to have significantly improved three months after the conclusion of the workshop. However, a gentler approach to facing up to death has been popularised through the work of Magnusson (2017), herself an octogenarian, who has taught her readers worldwide about 'döstädning' or 'death cleaning,' a Swedish trend in which older people learn to methodically set their affairs in order to make their later years stress free and more enjoyable.

Concluding remarks

In reflecting on my own ageing, I have found that some of the inevitable slowing down and health problems that later life often brings is counter-balanced by other freedoms. I am grateful for the opportunities that exploring later life learning has afforded me, the colleagues who have helped me to understand what ageing means in different cultures and who have willingly exchanged ideas and research findings about aspects of learning (and education) as we grow older. It is exciting that opportunities to learn in later life have multiplied all over the world and that an impressive international research literature has emerged. However, as new issues constantly come to the fore, we need more intergenerational exchange so that succeeding generations can truly understand what later life is like; and how they can improve their own ageing and that of their contemporaries through continuing to learn.

We are on the cusp of exciting new technological developments in learning and teaching; older people must not be left behind.

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Five decades of older adult learning: achievements and challenges

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Abstract

The field of older adult learning has developed in unprecedented and unparalleled ways in the past five decades. From a specialised niche on the interface between adult education and gerontology, older adult learning has entrenched itself in mainstream academia and public policy, so that educational programmes for older adults represent a truly forceful global movement. Studies have focused on the positive impact of learning initiatives on the quality of life and wellbeing of older persons, as well as bringing a lens to the political issues in terms of social class, gendered, ethnicity, third ageist, and Western biases. This paper charts the achievements of older adult learning, most especially its potential to bequeath participants with four types of benefits: namely, cognitive functioning, emotional and psychological support, social capital and inclusion, and empowerment. The contemporary challenges faced by the field are also addressed and these range from the continuing absence of older adult learning in public policy, the invisibility of older learners in higher education for older persons, the age-related digital divide that acts as a barrier to the engagement of older adults in informal learning, and an absence of debate on the quality of instruction of older persons.

Introduction

In one of the earliest treatises on older adult learning, *Facilitating Education for Older Learners*, Peterson (1983, p. 306) concluded that the "the future, then, is bright". It is fair to surmise that not even Peterson himself could have anticipated the interest in that interface between education and learning and ageing, older persons and later life. Following the 1980s and 1990s, during which the study of older adult learning thrived in adult and continuing education university departments, the post-Millennium years saw the field embedding itself in mainstream educational and

ageing studies. Based on the assumption that older adults can learn and can be taught, different rationales for later life learning emerged which can be described as liberal-humanist, critical and experiential (Findsen and Formosa, 2011, p. 98).

Contemporary research in older adult learning has followed three pathways. First, cross-sectional studies focused on the beneficial impacts of learning initiatives on the quality of life and wellbeing of older persons. Second, empirical data charted the potential of such programmes to augment participants' levels of social and psychological capital, irrespective of whether learners lived in the community or in residential long-term facilities (Formosa, 2021a, 2021b). Third, critical research brought the lens on the political issues concerning the educational movement for older persons in terms of social class, gender, ethnicity and Western biases, by highlighting how older adult learning has failed in acting as a catalyst for social empowerment and change in later life (Formosa, 2021a, 2021b).

The issue of ageism featured more prominently in critical research. Studies have found older learners to be implicitly influenced by ageist stereotypes that exist in society (van Kampen et al., 2023), though later-life learning was also manipulated as a protective environment by learners to shield themselves from ageist labels so predominant in the contemporary social fabric (Roberts, 2021) and as a vehicle to construct counter-narratives that mitigate experiences of age prejudice on personal, social, or cultural levels (Romaioli & Contarello, 2021).

The emergence and development of older adult learning

Peterson (1985) and Glendenning (1985) trace the growth of older adult learning primarily in the adult education movement of the United States and also in the emergence of the pre-retirement education movement, as well as the outreach work of academics in adult education university departments with issues concerning later life (e.g. Jones, 1976; Walker, 1976). Furthermore, there was unprecedented thought and activity within the concept of lifelong education from the late 1950s to the early 1970s in Britain. As this section testifies, the emergence and growth of older adult learning neither arose spontaneously nor as a coincidence but was a labour-intensive, difficult-to-establish movement, as many founding organisations discovered to their cost (Midwinter, 2004).

In the United States, older adult learning can be traced to the inauguration of the Institute for Retired Professionals as the first lifelong learning programme targeting *exclusively* older persons (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). This Institute was established in 1962 by a group of 152 retired New York City schoolteachers in Greenwich village and later renamed as 'Institutes for Learning in Retirement'. Such Institutes have operated uninterruptedly for the past half-century, and although there is no single model of operation, they all share the feature of being hosted by a college or university with a similar culture and sense of mission. The subsequent decade witnessed other organisations replicating the Institute for Retired Professionals model. Whilst 1972 witnessed the launch of a lifelong learning programme for older persons in the faith-based, volunteer-run, Shepherds Centers, in 1976 the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning was established to provide retirees with daytime, non-credit, college-level

courses in a variety of academic subjects. Elderhostel, renamed Road Scholar in 2011, was founded in 1975 to organise week-long courses of instruction and discussion in colleges and universities (Road Scholar, n.d.). Another key institution in delivering late-life learning is the Bernard Osher Foundation, founded in 1977, which presently consists of a consortium of some 400 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes that provide non-credit educational programmes to adults aged 50 years or older (National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, n.d.). In 1977, Harvard University founded the Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement (n.d.), whose size - since the early 2010s - was maintained at a steady annual number of around 550 members.

In Europe, older adult learning is mostly centred around the Universities of the Third Age (U3A) and University Programmes for Older People (UPOP). The first U3A was founded in 1973 in France and can be loosely defined as "socio-cultural centres where senior citizens may acquire new knowledge of significant issues, or validate the knowledge which they already possess, in an agreeable milieu and in accordance with easy and acceptable methods, with the objective of preserving their vitality and participating in the life of the community" (Midwinter, 1984, p.18). Whilst the first U3A followed a Francophone model by being part of traditional universities, subsequent centres adopted a British way of operating by being completely independent, autonomous and operating in communities (Formosa, 2014). UPOPs refer to the tendency of European universities, mostly in Spain and Germany, to offer degree programmes exclusively to older persons as part of the national strategic development plan for addressing challenges of population ageing. Another popular learning movement which targets older men is Men's Sheds. Originating in Australia, it has been defined as:

> *… any community-based, non-profit, non-commercial organisation that is accessible to all men, and whose primary activity is the provision of a safe and friendly environment where men are able to work on projects at their own pace in their own time in the company of other men.*

> Australian Men's Sheds Association,

> cited in Golding, 2015, p.10

In recent years, Women's Sheds were founded in Australia, United Kingdom, Ireland and New Zealand to create an alternative learning community for ageing women, and also collaborate locally with Men's Sheds (Golding, Carragher & Foley, 2021). The Elder Academy, founded in Hong Kong in 2007, is another noteworthy organisation, whereby the emphasis is on both intra- and inter-generational learning, as older persons are given the opportunity to interact and work with younger peers (Tam, 2019). The 2000s also witnessed the emergence of learning programmes for older persons in the fourth age as educational gerontologists attempted to include homebound older persons and peers living in residential long-term care facilities in lifelong learning programmes.

Accomplishments and benefits

One key achievement gained by the older adult learning movement was promoting the notion that the human right to education is lifelong and should not be considered obsolete on entering older adulthood. Whilst until the 1990s, lifelong education was relatively restricted to the interests and needs of young and middle-aged adults, the establishment and success of late-life learning programmes demonstrated that lifelong learning had direct implications for the quality of life and wellbeing of older persons. As a result, that interface between lifelong learning on one hand, and ageing, later life and older persons on the other, became increasingly present in international policy plans and national strategies on ageing (United Nations, 2015; World Health Organization, 2020).

Survey research on the participation rates of older persons in learning activities found late-life learning to be an increasingly thriving enterprise. Data from the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (SHARE) give an indication of the extent to which ageing workers and persons participate in lifelong learning as it includes the proportion of individuals aged 50 years and above who had attended an educational or training course in the preceding twelve months for a selected number of European countries (Ogg, 2021). A comparison of data from 2010/2011 (Wave 4) and 2017 (Wave 2017) found that in all countries and at both points in time, less than half of persons aged 50-plus had attended an educational or training course, ranging from extremely low rates in Italy (less than 7%) to almost one half of workers in Sweden (at Wave 7) (Ogg, 2021). Focusing specifically on the United Kingdom, the *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2022* (Hall, Jones & Evans, 2022) found that as in previous and other international surveys, participation in learning decreases with age. Whilst seventeen to nineteen-year-olds are the most likely to participate in learning, with a rate of 80 per cent, the participation rate drops to 26 per cent of adults aged 55-64, and just under one fifth of adults aged 65 and over.

This pull factor of older adult learning is certainly plausible considering that a review of studies focusing on the key determinants enabling older persons to experience productive, successful, and active ageing found that 'learning in later life' always comes up as a vital decisive factor (Formosa, 2021b). Indeed, various cross-sectional studies have outlined how late-life learning brings about a range of psycho-social benefits for participants, highlighting a strong association between participation in learning and improved levels of self-assurance, self-satisfaction, self-esteem and sense of coherence on one hand, and a decline of depressive and anxiety symptoms on the other (Kalenda, & Kočvarová, 2022; Noble et al., 2021). Most specifically, older adult learning has been found to bequeath participants with several kinds of benefits; namely, cognitive functioning, emotional support and social inclusion, (de Lima Flauzino et al., 2022); and empowerment (Hafford-Letchfield, 2016). Whilst remaining active in later life could assist in maintaining cognitive health status, even protecting against cognitive decline, upholding educational access may serve to bolster cognitive health given the neuroplasticity of the ageing brain and the benefits of ongoing stimulation and cognitive exercise.

At the same time, late-life learning has the potential to assist older persons to adjust to the changes brought by the midlife-to-ageing transition (such as decreasing physical strength, labour market exit, reduced income, and widowhood, amongst others) by enabling optimal levels of life enjoyment, locus of control, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-satisfaction and coping strategies. Learning in later life has also been commended for helping to resolve the tensions arising from the push towards the productive use of one's free time, and the pull of 'liberation' or 'well-earned rest' of retirement, by facilitating economic and volunteering activities in old age, and thus, leading to more productive later lives. Although during the late 1980s and 1990s critical educational gerontology attributed much potential to older adult learning for bringing about higher levels of social transformation amongst participants, empirical research continues to find evidence of this objective rather elusive (Formosa & Galea, 2020).

Older adult learning enables older women to embrace a 'new lease of life' - detached either from previous familial responsibilities or from occupational accountabilities - characterised by higher levels of psychological and social capital (Formosa, 2021c). However, research on e-learning programmes produced mixed results. On one hand, e-learning provides a new platform to educate older people on critical issues such as medical information, healthy lifestyles and caregiving that are necessary for them to achieve active ageing (Bai, He & Kohlbacher, 2020). On the other hand, both "age-related changes and cohort effects were found to be the internal barriers for the adoption of e-learning" and "equipment problems, lack of time, and the availability of alternatives" had key negative effects on the up-take of e-learning by older persons (Bai et al., 2020, p. 291). Last but certainly not least, fourth age learning was found to bestow older persons living in residential long-term care facilities with various benefits by promoting participation, advocacy and relationship-based care, as well as enabling them to retain adequate levels of independence and autonomy when faced with increasing risks of institutionalisation (Formosa, 2021d).

Challenges and issues

The absence of older adult learning in public policy

Despite the popularity of older adult learning "it barely flickers on most policy radar screens" (Istance, 2020, p. 299). Indeed, when education and learning for older persons are contemplated within policy discussions, such considerations generally reflect the widespread prioritisation of neo-liberal and economic rationales; notably, recommendations concerning the needs and skills of ageing workers to remain employable. This was flagged up by Formosa (2012) in his critique of European Union policies on lifelong learning which posited two objectives for lifelong learning as far as older adults are concerned: first, "a need for up-skilling and increasing lifelong learning opportunities for older workers", and secondly, "an expansion of learning provision for retired people … including for instance increasing participation of mature students in higher education" (European Commission, 2006, pp.8-9). Unfortunately, things had not changed much fifteen years on, as stated by the

European Commission in a recent European Union Green Paper on Ageing:

> *There is a large potential for developing the skills of older people, as well as to improve how they are validated and how career guidance is made available.* **Adult education and training** *helps to improve employability in a changing world of work as evolving skills needs in particular due to green and digital transitions bring potential for new jobs.*
>
> *European Commission, 2021, p. 5 - bold in original*

Although this discourse gives credence to the idea that older adults can be productive, hence mitigating against the stereotype of older adult as 'greedy geezers', it continues to give weight to the sphere of paid employment whilst remaining detached from the wide range of possible productive lifestyles such as volunteering and informal care.

Formal learning: Higher education for older persons

The avoidance and de-emphasising of the association of older learners with older earners does not mean that the engagement of older workers and persons in the labour market is irrelevant. The rising levels of life expectancies have stretched the financial sustainability and spending power of public pension schemes so that more citizens are exploring the possibility of working longer and, where present, beyond mandatory retirement age but with more flexible schedules and duties (Ogg, 2021). However, this is only possible if governments and employers organise vocational learning that enable seniors to adjust to their extended careers and new employment schedules and duties. The diversity of the 50-plus age group means that such a cohort contains a mixture of overlapping 'learning generations' and includes different employment-related rationales underlying their desire to learn. These include maintaining employability, developing qualifications to access better or more appropriate work, assisting more frequent and complex life transitions such as changing jobs and moving home, supporting people to find meaning and purpose in post-employment life, transferring skills, knowledge and experience between generations, and enabling people to maintain rewarding social and intellectual lives.

Informal learning: Overcoming the age digital divide

Informal learning always had a strong presence in the lives of older persons, as retirement from work coupled with children leaving the family home provided them with opportunities to engage in a vast range of leisure, culture and travel activities. Resources for such activities typically range from print (such as books, journals, magazines and newspapers) to significant others (for example, family members, peers and teachers) and to electronic devices (such as television, compact discs and DVDs). Since the 2000s, the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to stimulate informal and self-directed learning reached unprecedented and unparalleled levels. This occurred because ICT provides older

adults with their preferred learning environment; namely, self-paced settings rather than structured and formal curricular circumstances (Jin, Kim & Baumgartner, 2019). Nevertheless, despite some increase in the levels of digital competency amongst adults aged 65-plus, older adults remain on the negative side of the digital divide. In the European Union, for example, in 2019 only 20% aged 75-plus engage in internet activities compared to 98% of those between the ages of 16 and 29 (United Nations, 2021). However, digital inclusion is not just about being online, it is also about using the internet skillfully and with confidence. Not only do older people lack such expertise and self-assurance, but they are also characterised by a lack of awareness among older adults of the support available. This is an ongoing challenge in digital exclusion and one that exacerbates digital poverty in later life. The disadvantages experienced by older persons due to their higher-than-average levels of digital exclusion were laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic as personal lives and public services transitioned from in-person meetings to virtual platforms via mobiles and laptops.

Social exclusion

Whilst many research studies have identified older adults as a group at risk of social exclusion, this arises as a dynamic process whereby people can even experience different forms of exclusion at different points of the life course (Walsh et al., 2021). Such dynamism also means that different groups of older persons have diverse levels and volumes of social, economic, cultural and physical capital with which to mitigate against social exclusion in later life. Research in educational gerontology has consistently shown how women and older persons from ethnic minorities, working-class backgrounds and with physical and/or cognitive disabilities experience much social exclusion in older adult learning. For instance, a consistent criticism levelled at U3As is that of elitism, as both survey and ethnographic data uncover a compounding class divide amongst groups of members. Although institutions offering learning programmes targeting older persons offer no hindrances to admission, membership bodies tend to be overwhelmingly middle-class. Indeed, whilst middle-class elders enrolling in learning activities anticipate going back to an arena in which they feel confident and assured of a positive outcome, working-class peers are apprehensive in joining such organisations due to their unhappy memories of their educational experience. Moreover, U3As tend to be characterised by a 'masculinist' discourse where, despite forming approximately 80% of the student body, women are silenced and made passive as male learners tend to dominate the discussion (Formosa 2005). Some older women learners also reported how they had to overcome their husbands' misgivings in their efforts to join a U3A (Sagebiel, 2006) and being consistently stereotypically pigeonholed as grandmothers (Wiliñska, 2016).

Another predicament is that U3As rarely include ethnic minorities in their membership bodies, even in multi-cultural cities such as Sydney and Auckland (Findsen & Formosa, 2016). In this respect, Ratana-Ubol and Richards' (2016) study of the U3A movement in Thailand demonstrated that by focusing on returning to learning, as U3As do, the movement overlooks the fact that many older persons outside the

Global North (to which one may add the ethnic minorities in high income cities) may never have attended any formal education when younger, and thus may be more interested in basic literacy provision rather than what is generally offered. Similarly, older persons living with physical and/or cognitive disabilities also tend to be surprisingly absent in late-life learning (Formosa, 2022). Indeed, older adult learning tends to exclude older persons living with dementia (PLWD), as there are "few, if any, studies exploring how people living with dementia assert themselves as active and engaged learners" (Ingebrand, Samuelsson & Hydén, 2021, p. 48). Learning for PLWD has been occupied with containment, rather than expansion, and preoccupied with familiar and past abilities rather than enabling novel proficiencies (Quinn & Blandon, 2017). Moreover, most initiatives were embedded in a 'caring' agenda as facilitators experimented with the potential of learning as a therapeutic undertaking that manages negative behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia such as agitation, depression and wandering (Formosa & Galea, 2020).

Quality of teaching and learning: The promise of geragogy

The extent that teaching and learning in later life requires a distinctive geragogical theory of teaching and learning, as separate from pedagogical and andragogical principles for children and adults respectively, is still a bone of contention. Whilst some argue that "learning for and by older adults is not so distinctive as to warrant a separate theory of teaching and learning" (Tam, 2014, p. 818), the consensus amongst educational gerontologists is that working with learners in later life as *older* requires a special approach to the conceptualisation, planning and implementation of older adult learning and, therefore, requires a *divergent* theoretical and methodological approach vis-à-vis younger and adult persons. However, it is unfortunate to note a comparative lack of academic interest in the ways that teaching and learning occur in later life. Despite some notable exceptions, such as Maderer and Skiba's (2006a, 2006b) work on 'integrative geragogy', and more recently, Quinn and Blandon's (2017, 2020) application of post-humanist theory to fourth age learning, the quality of learning, instruction and curricula targeting of older adults leaves a lot to be desired.

First, more efforts are required to empower older learners who are able to take control and direct learning, continue learning after the termination of programmes, and know how to put into practice the learning they have undertaken. Second, top-down approaches to educational instruction are also to be avoided. Facilitators should enable older learners to foster the control that they may be consciously or unconsciously lacking by advising on the choice of teaching methods and resources. Finally, the relevance of taught content warrants careful attention since it tends to influence the extent that older persons are attracted to and benefit from the learning experience. Most specifically, there is a real urgency to include non-liberal and health related areas of learning such as financial literacy and, especially, scientific courses that introduce learners to environmental, botanical, and zoological studies that are generally of interest to older men who comprise only around 20% of older learning participants. Since the correlation between later life and illiteracy is well-known, literacy courses for older persons are also highly warranted.

Conclusion

Older adult learning is certainly at a crossroad. Although much has been achieved in the past five decades, it is certainly not a time to rest on one's laurels as the field is facing a number of challenges due to contemporary shifts in the social fabric. One key shift is certainly an emerging schism between past and incoming cohorts of older persons, so that there is an urgent need for older adult learning to remain relevant and attuned to the life-world of contemporary third and fourth agers (Higgs & Gilleard, 2022). One must not fall into the trap of overlooking how incoming older cohorts are characterised by a diverse generational habitus when compared to earlier groups in times when visionaries launched a range of late-life learning programmes. The extent to which older adult learning must undergo an inclusive and extensive renewal process becomes even more evident when one considers the vast range of older adult lifestyles in late modern societies. The fact that a record number of older persons are choosing to remain in the workforce for much longer than previously demands more extensive investment in formal and vocational education for ageing persons. Moreover, older adult learning should take advantage of the fact that for many older adults, later life represents a 'liberation' phase, as they experiment, innovate and skirt around social conventions to explore new paths to creativity. Consequently, older adult learning should offer them the chance to know themselves more fully, as who they really are, in the light of the horizon of finitude.

Looking forward, one must admit that such goals are not straightforward but are hampered by two elephants in the room. First, older adults are intrinsically different from younger peers, as "years are not empty containers", and are thus marked by "all those years they have lived, the things they have learned, the selves they have evolved from and the selves they are becoming" (Andrews, 1999, p. 309). A common characteristic of persons in their later years constitutes the increased possibility of health weaknesses (Formosa, 2022). And second, older adult learning is exceptional in that its participants experience a unique type of discrimination - namely ageism. Ageism is alone in that it is not experienced throughout life, such as sexism and racism, but only after particular birthdays and/or when displaying signs of 'being old'. As a result, older persons themselves can hold ageist attitudes and assumptions toward themselves and same-aged peers even if they know far better than others how these stereotypes distort and demean them (Formosa, 2021e). Following Fragoso and Fonseca (2022), there is an urgent need for older adult learning to dismantle structural and subjective ageism via improving the mutual knowledge between generations, combatting myths and prejudice, and deconstructing age-based stereotypes.

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Keywords

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Depolarising and restating the principles of educational gerontology: a late modern rationale

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Abstract

Today, it is no longer sensible to envisage older learners as complacent, naïve, oppressed and oblivious of their oppression, that their motivation to learn is precisely either a natural desire or the fruit of their non-conscious involvement in class struggles, or their emancipation requires a teacher-liberator. It is even less so to exonerate older adult education from its empowering and emancipating mission. These contentions and others polarise what came to be known as a humanist-critical philosophical debate embedded in three notorious statements of educational gerontology principles, offering one-sided explanations of educational and social realities from the sole vantage point of agency or structure. Partaking in this unfinished debate, this paper aims to depolarise it and devise a fourth statement of educational gerontology principles based on Anthony Giddens's critical social theory, thus serving educational gerontology with an alternative, dualistic take on agency and structure. Giddens's work inspires a timely late modern rationale for answering central questions in the teaching and learning of older people, including older learners' profiles, motivation to learn, the educational goal and outcomes of their learning, and the role of their teachers

Introduction

This paper restates the principles of educational gerontology. It proposes a late modern rationale for tackling central questions in the teaching and learning of older people: *When* do older individuals start learning? Those who do that, *who* are they? *Where* do they pursue learning? For *what* reasons should they learn? *Why* do they want to learn? Finally, *how* do they benefit, and *how* should their teachers enact their role?

Intending to depolarise it, this paper partakes in the divisive debate manifesting itself in three previous educational gerontology statements, one humanist and two critical. Thus, it begins by analysing initial and consensual answers to central educational questions, followed by a summary of the debate of opposites embedded in the three statements released subsequently, leading up to a much-needed restatement of the principles of educational gerontology. This fourth statement mobilises Anthony Giddens's (1984; 1990; 1991) critical social theory and its late modern application for its ability to overcome agency-structure dualisms in explaining social and educational realities.

Initial answers to central questions

This section summarises initial answers to central questions (when, who, where, what, why, and how) on educating older people to highlight their consensual nature. Having founded and named the field of educational gerontology, Harold McClusky baptised the first doctoral programme in older adult education at the University of Michigan in the United States of America, and Peterson (1976) bestowed his vision on the nascent field in the first-ever issue of the journal *Educational Gerontology*. Subsequent oeuvres in psychogerontology (see Agruso, 1978) were tell-tale of the newly proven educability of healthy older people contingent on non-age-related variables. They prompted calls on educational programme designers and teachers to cater to older learners' environmental contexts, not *a priori* their mere age.

To satisfy the educational demands of older people, programmes have pondered two ways of making sense of them as diverse individuals or as a homogeneous group. According to Walker (1990), educational provisions for older people must strike a balance, arguing that these two views are not mutually exclusive. As educable as older people are, the timing and reasons for their learning were also studied by Havighurst (1972; 1976) and Houle (1974), who suggested that education should accompany retirement plans and help older people adapt to role changes and health deterioration. Havighurst separated educational demands and their satisfaction into expressive and instrumental needs (see also McClusky, 1982; Peterson, 1981) but did not frame them as opposites.

Educational goals and the teachers' role in engaging older people, too, received early attention, not least in the distinguished works of Harry Moody. For Moody (1978), the goal of self-actualisation is undergirded by the political participation of older people and the mutation (raising) of their consciousness, especially noticeable when they emerge as different kinds of people "with new and enlarged sense of values and deepened understanding of who they are" (p. 15). To this end, Moody (1976) assigned a challenging role to teachers as providers of profound educational experiences that touch on the humanities and social sciences, including philosophy, religion, literature and psychology, to an audience of older people who bring a lifetime of experience to the classroom. As a result, education not only accompanies their disengagement but leads them to 'resynthesise' themselves outside expected social roles and norms, growing armed with unique and rich perspectives on the life cycle (Shea, 1995). According to Shea, this resynthesis is based on a life course of events

supplemented by readiness for continuous development that may nurture wisdom, psychological growth, identity integration and maturity. Thus, the self-actualisation of older people is sewed together with their socio-political participation, flirting with consciousness-raising as an educational goal and citing self-actualisation as a potential praxis.

The above account of initial answers to central educational questions reflects harmonious rather than divisive formulations. These formulations have become divisive through the advent of the humanist-critical debate embedded in three statements of principles of educational gerontology, summarised below.

Polarised statements of principles

A humanist and two critical statements of principles largely dominate the debate. The first posits that late-life learning is a natural process contributing to older people's self-actualisation. The critical statements consider older adult education as a collective emancipating endeavour and a tool for social change; anything short of that is rejected. The competing statements devise principles, i.e., epistemologically aligned answers to central questions about the teaching and learning of older people, condensed below.

Why we need educational gerontology: A statement of first principles

Critical social gerontology emerged in the early 1980s and remains the oldest ageing rationale to engage critically with "apocalyptic constructions of ageing" (Doheny & Jones, 2021, p. 2325). Its expansion kindled the development of the first statement of critical educational gerontology (CEG), in line with a general shift towards sociological theories in adult education and the popularisation of Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy. CEG's ethos centres on mobilising adult education to fight social inequality, oppression, sexism, ageism and racism and solicited prompt favourable engagement and resistance.

Frank Glendenning and David Battersby (1990) co-authored CEG's first statement of principles (see also Battersby & Glendenning, 1992). They addressed the when, who, where, what, why, and how of older adult education and maintained it for decades. The duo rejected a functionalist approach to educating older people, which views them as a social problem. Instead, they argued for a political *economy* rationale for educational gerontology, which problematises society's treatment of older people. Thus, CEG should transform society and engage with empowerment, emancipation, and transformation against social and hegemonic control. In the first statement, Battersby and Glendenning (1992) perceive older people as oppressed, complacent and unaware of their oppression; they are said to endure class-based inequalities. Thus, their teachers must strive to liberate them by mobilising Freire's critical pedagogy and applying his praxis of critical reflection and action towards the social empowerment and emancipation of older people. Boosting this first statement, Findsen (2002; 2007) promoted Freirean pedagogy and further elevated its position within CEG.

The future of educational gerontology: A second statement of first principles

The second statement of educational gerontology, written by Percy (1990), responded to the first critical statement with a humanist vision of older adult education. Percy (1990) drew on Malcolm Knowles' andragogy and Abraham Maslow's self-actualisation to argue that the aims of educational gerontology

> *are not a transmogrification into critical educational gerontology but falling back into line with the humanistic, liberal intrinsic purposes of all educational processes'* (p. 238).

As such, education for older people should be no different than for any age group since learning is an intrinsic quest. Anchored in positive psychology, this second statement objected to the critical assertions that all older people are powerless and lack freedom and that education must aim for their empowerment and emancipation. Most importantly, Percy (1990) raised serious concerns over the role of teachers as liberators since it presupposes that their worldview is more accurate than that of their students.

Critical educational gerontology: A third statement of first principles

Three decades after the first statement, Formosa (2011a) released his third statement of CEG principles. He reminded his readers that a critical agenda for later life learning is ever relevant and suggested that even the most inner drives of humans under capitalism are only culturally embedded forms of domination serving the status quo. However, Formosa added that CEG has to become more modern, since Marxism "has gone out of fashion" (p. 324), and human agency's record levels have led to the fading of some social inequalities under neo-liberalism. Adhering to Bourdieusian notions of power as differences in capital through which social inequalities manifest themselves, Formosa (2011a) (re)coupled CEG to the Freirean pedagogical tradition as a countermeasure to persisting inequalities. He argued for a transformative rationale which uncovers and mitigates social injustice and (re)affirmed the need for teachers as liberators. In this case, teachers are knowledgeable and capable of raising the consciousness of their students by resorting to listening, love, and tolerance and fostering solidarity and Freirean dialogue in their classrooms.

Why is a fourth statement imperative?

Several reasons justify a fourth statement of educational gerontology principles. First, the current debate replicates tensions in general educational research, described by Nesbit (1998) as competing explanations of social realities that rely heavily on either agency or social structures. The first explanation stresses voluntary actions and the latter type searches for the origins of behaviours in covert structural forces and public policies. Meanwhile, addressing increasingly complex educational gerontology begs for a different theoretical anchoring.

Second, continued engagement with CEG cast doubts on the relevance of grand narratives to times characterised by risk and rapid societal changes. Applying the concept of longlife learning, Withnall (2010; 2012) argued that learning is essentially individual, and its experience is highly interpretive since older people's willingness and abilities to learn are ambiguously affected by previous learning experiences. As such, her take invites education that enhances personal development and touches upon social justice goals since it may simultaneously benefit older individuals and societies, and considers the everchanging external environments in postmodernity. Seeing its continued relevance (Withnall, 2022), longlife learning leaves room for highlighting older learners' reflexivity.

Last, older learners' reflexivity is overlooked in the logic of emancipation promulgated in the third critical statement, which has recently been scrutinised (see Hachem & Westberg, 2023). Even Formosa (2011b) himself contemplated breaking with the Freirean logic of emancipation and argued

> *CEG must accept that social empowerment in later life is also possible through educational activities promoting autonomy and self-actualisation, both of which can influence individuals to improve their social and personal well-being* (p. 85).

Meanwhile, Formosa's postmodern appraisal was not an actual restatement of CEG and, to date, remains overshadowed by his weighty third statement.

The reasons above have set the scene for the restating the principles of educational gerontology. Hence, it is proposed that a fourth statement adopts Anthony Giddens's (1984; 1990; 1991) structuration theory and its late modern application, which allows agency and structure to enter a recursive relationship in which social structures are the outcomes of individual actions and, simultaneously, the media where such actions are enacted. This theoretical move conceives of action as neither wholly and historically predetermined nor entirely rational and conscious, to date, missing in educational gerontology.

Educational gerontology: A fourth and late modern statement

Older adult education can no longer run on grand narratives split across two levels of reality. One, ensuing from a humanistic statement, celebrates the agency of older individuals in what seems to be a social vacuum (see Formosa, 2011a). At the same time, another reality reflects structural victimisation, as if older people are docile bodies subjected to external events, which they are incapable of fathoming and addressing independently of a liberator (Hachem, 2023a). This fourth statement of principles, outlined in Table 1, depolarises the debate and provides a dualistic rationale on agency and structure in answering the when, who, where, what, why, and how of the teaching and learning of older adults in the following principles.

Table 1

A comparative table showing the main features of the statements of educational gerontology principles

Feature	A statement of first principles	A second statement of first principles	A third statement of first principles	A fourth and late modern statement
Academic worldview	Critical social theory (Marxism) and critical pedagogy (Paolo Freire)	Positive psychology and andragogy (Abraham Maslow and Malcolm Knowles)	Critical social theory (Pierre Bourdieu) and critical pedagogy (Paolo Freire)	Critical social theory (Anthony Giddens) and identity-based transformative learning (Knud Illeris)
Older learners	Are powerless, oppressed and naïve	Have more leisure time and fewer responsibilities	Are oppressed and possess differential power levels	Are heterogeneous and have complex identities, and unprecedented levels of agency
Motives for learning	Class struggles and false consciousness	Natural intrinsic needs	Class struggles and habitus	Reflexivity, which may draw on habit
Educational goal	Empowerment and emancipation	Self-actualisation	Empowerment and emancipation	Self-actualisation and emancipation (life politics)
Teacher's role	Liberator	Facilitator/ orchestrator	Educator/leader	Non-coercive and reflexive facilitator of knowledge

Principle 1: Older learners are reflexive individuals

Instead of perceiving older learners as an oppressed group or as individuals with more leisure time on their hands, as the previous statements do, a fourth statement emphasises their heterogeneity and reflexivity. Adults over 45 experience

physiological and mental changes as they encounter the 'life turn', which is "a mental phenomenon concerning the perception and acknowledgement that the remaining lifetime is not unlimited" (Illeris, 2014, p. 90). Many factors engender it, including personal and social events and crises, not restricted to health events, divorce, the death of a loved one, retirement, civil unrest, pandemics and global threats. In late modernity, characterised by risk and the detraditionalisation of society (Giddens, 1991), older people must navigate different retirement pathways, including refraining from it. Their reflexivity on modern social life is fuelled by

> *the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character* (Giddens, 1991, p. 38).

The more detraditionalised the ageing process, the more reflexive older people may become (one event feeding the other).

Having been through decades of life experience, (older) people may be 'expert sociologists' (Giddens, 1984, p. 26) and may discursively and reflexively justify their actions. Knitting in their living rooms around their grandchildren, watching television all day, or playing Bingo are no longer their only retirement scenarios, to the extent that the cessation of work and retirement are currently questioned. Older people can liberate themselves from the normativity of preassigned identities as they reflexively make identity-defining (also identity-inspired) choices. Learning, for whatever reason, is naturally one of these choices and is intimately connected to older individuals' identities (see Illeris, 2014), habits and consumption patterns.

This reasoning leads to the belief that older people in industrialised societies and possibly elsewhere may no longer be perceived as oppressed, complacent and naïve. On the contrary, they respond to personal and social crises by displaying incredible courage and knowledgeability about their social realities, including ways to address them (Hachem & Westberg, 2023; Kulmus, 2021). Moreover, older learners engage in political action via small interest- or identity-based groups and drive social action, perhaps as Walker (1990) and Formosa (2011b) have imagined. However, they may also decide to resign into strategic idling to avoid anxieties and constraints accompanying political activism or for lack of interest. Finally, even beyond the life turn, older people in their fourth age remain educable and perceive themselves as engaged agents in learning processes (Ingebrand, Samuelsson & Hydén, 2021).

Principle 2: All reasons for learning are equal under the sun

Myriads of explanations for why older people continue learning exist. Parting with the previous statements' overvaluing of intrinsic motives and expressive learning rationales, the fourth statement implies that functional and intrinsic motives are not mutually exclusive. Reasons for action exist in different forms and are primarily unconscious, but they become more conscious when routines – created reflexively on a practical consciousness level – are compromised. In this case, motives transform into consciously experienced pangs or promptings (Giddens, 1990)

mobilised to restore ontological security, which is threatened upon the emergence of a life event, akin to the life turn. Thus, reflexivity and knowledgeability (Giddens, 1990) are at the heart of older people's decision to learn and persist, whether functional or expressive. Although learners' habitus affects their readiness for starting their studies, history alone fails to explain why older people with a non-academic background decide to study or those who interrupt their studies do so despite its supposed relevance to their class habitus (Hachem, 2023b). As such, a so-called non-conscious class struggle, which professedly evades older learners' awareness, forms an unintended consequence (Giddens, 1984) of the action of learning in older age rather than a mere motivational reason, the deconstruction of which is nevertheless a must.

Older people learn in different contexts: formal, informal and non-formal. For example, social movement learning in older age illustrates the attractiveness of informal learning and social activism to older people, especially women, who, as one in a group, realise glimpses of desirable futures for them (Giddens, 1991). An example of this is the Australian Raging Grannies (2023), who engage in identity-based activist and transformative learning. Additionally, older people attend non-formal educational activities at universities for the third age and other lifelong learning institutes, continuously appealing to a clientele of like-minded learners seeking self-actualisation. More recently, formal education for older people started gaining ground via age-friendly universities (see O'Kelly, 2022) that aim to mainstream older learners with traditional students and (re)skill them to counter dire labour shortages, strengthening silver economies; a welcome event, not least since on average only 24% of adults aged 55-65 participate in job-related training in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (OECD, 2023).

All reasons for learning are equal under the sun as long as they satisfy older learners' reflexive project of themselves. As such, even intrinsic values of learning, such as gaining new insights and widening perspectives, reflectivity, enrichment, meaningfulness, enjoyment, peacefulness, existential awareness, and a sense of community (Schoultz, Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2022) are not jaded by functional goals for learning the likes of socialising and making friends, reskilling and career shifts, and political action.

Principle 3: Life politics, a pathway for self-actualisation and emancipation

The three statements cleave to self-actualisation or empowerment and emancipation as a goal for older adult education. Thus, the fourth statement dissolves this division and combines both goals via Giddens's concept of 'life politics'. Life politics deliberately avoids the dualism between the humanist goal of self-actualisation and the critical goal of emancipation, which initially were fused (see Moody, 1978). Life politics

> *concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies* (Giddens, 1991, p. 214).

On the one hand, the personal and global are interconnected; on the other hand, life politics extends beyond the disputed logic of emancipatory politics.

Traditional emancipation may lose its orientation, replicating a hegemony it supposedly aims to destroy. Giddens (1990; 1991) regretted that emancipatory politics work best when emancipation builds on divisions between human beings (including teachers and learners), as it aims to eliminate exploitation, inequality, and oppression based on these divisions. He argued that it moves 'away from' not 'towards' (1991, p. 213); consequently, its ethos of 'freedom from' instead of 'freedom to' others individuals (1990, p. 156). For example, framing ageism as oppression is based on but also reinforces generational divisions on the premise that older people are victims of the youth instead of conceiving it as a relationship between actors, which requires constant and active dialogue. Henceforth, with Giddens' sociology in mind, redefining important but divisive concepts for educational gerontology, including emancipation, consciousness-raising, and oppression, becomes possible. As such, emancipation would rather mean freedom *towards* and would be attached to a notion of critical consciousness as one's active awareness of one's agency and role in creating social practices and maintaining (dis)empowering relationships, for example, (self)ageism.

Life politics are political decisions allowed by freedom of choice and generative power, which may lead to morally justifiable pathways promoting self-actualisation in a context of global interconnectedness (Giddens, 1991). Political choices are influenced by self-identity, which in late modernity is reflexively constituted. Consequently, it is reasonable to cross-fertilise educational gerontology with identity-based transformative learning theory and practice (Hachem, 2022; Illeris, 2014), not only encouraging self- and social questioning but also promoting the development of ethics concerning how older people should live in a post-traditional order and against the backdrop of risk and uncertainty.

Principle 4: Teachers' role as reflexive knowledge facilitators

Teachers as revolutionary leaders in late modernity and post-truth contexts risk reinforcing teachers canonising themselves as individuals of superior intelligence to that of learners; hence, reflexivity on their part is an asset. In this fourth statement, the role of competent and knowledgeable teachers reaches beyond facilitating objective information to older learners. It, likewise, avoids convincing them that their perception of reality is false but seeks ways in which knowledge production and acquisition is healthily and reflexively unpacked. A reflexive teacher helps learners realise they can always 'act otherwise.' This teacher is cognisant that power and action are bound through the dialectic of control, whereby social systems embed relations of autonomy and dependence between actors in social interactions (Giddens, 1984). For example, the dialectic of control illuminates the possibility that "freedom from oppression – whether from work, government, debt, or the responsibilities of the household – may be rather more available to the older retired population than to most working age people" (Higgs & Gilleard, 2022, p. 5). As such, Giddens's plea for a notion of liberation away from 'master and slave dialectics' is sound, not least

since the Freirean logic of emancipation may offhandedly eternalise unsolvable divisions between intelligent teachers and less critical older students (Hachem & Westberg, 2023; Percy, 1990), whereas such divisions were initially meant to be abandoned.

Older learners may enjoy much generative wisdom (Shea, 1995). It can be argued that this wisdom, coupled with an awareness of constraints, stops them from 'liberating' themselves (a la Freire) despite having the necessary knowledge (or critical reflection) ideally conditioning this liberation (Hachem & Westberg, 2023). Instead, teachers should emphasise the 'structurationist' nature of human action, i.e., that social practices are but the product of and the medium for agency (Giddens, 1984), and that is where learners may be enticed to induce change starting within the classroom setting if and when they desire it. For example, teachers can invite learners to question themselves and the social realities wilfully, examine their identity reflexively, their life course as finished and unfinished events (see Moody, 1978), and, most importantly, ponder and deconstruct unintended latent consequences of their actions via horizontal dialogue. Teachers simultaneously approach their role in education as being for enjoyment, critical inquiry, and resocialisation (Schoultz, 2023) since one and all are essential educational functions.

Conclusion

Since Havighurst's (1976) claim that education in older age is a phase of adjustment and, three decades following the first statement of principles, we live in times where it is safe to say the future is 'older.' By 2050, the world population is expected to reach 2.1 billion 60+ individuals (WHO, 2022), while the European Union expects 30% of its population to be 65+ (Eurostat, 2020). A demographic rationale will continue serving the expansion of educational gerontology. However, apart from demographic projections favouring older people, this future, which already unfolds today, forewarns of global risks that funnel down into drastic changes in older people's intimate lives. These are being galvanised by, among others, pandemics, climate events, wars and nuclear threats, food shortages and pervasive social injustice. Here lies the relevance of educational gerontology to individuals and societies. Current labour and skills shortages (OECD, 2023) call for measures towards reframing retirement, improving the age-friendliness of work and learning environments, and, most importantly, reskilling older people — tasks worthy of extensive efforts by policymakers, educational providers and practitioners, employers as well as older learners.

This paper proposes a fourth statement of educational gerontology principles and draws the contours of a late modern philosophy of learning, which mobilises Giddens's social theory to depolarise the current debate. First, it emphasises the heterogeneity and reflexivity of older people. Second, it attributes equal value to the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of learning as long as they serve the meaning that older learners themselves attribute to their education. Third, it promotes life politics combining self-actualisation and emancipation, and last, it calls on teachers to be reflexive practitioners who engage in self- and social questioning alongside their

students via a genuine dialogue of equals. This statement is particularly germane when later-life learning involves negotiating and reconquering positions alongside younger generations in labour markets and classrooms. Older people are de facto partners in transforming their world into a sustainable and age-friendly one for their sake and that of the coming generations.

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Keywords

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Cumulative (dis)advantage in digital spaces – the (re-)production of social inequalities through digital learning in later life

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Abstract

As digitalisation continues to spread, there is an increasing need for older adults to engage in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and consequently, educational gerontology has extensively studied practices of, and barriers to, digital learning in later life (Lin & Chuang, 2019). While the digital learning practices of older adults and how they can be supported have been dissected and explored in large parts of the literature, this article makes a novel contribution by critically addressing the social inequalities that shape older adults' access to, motivation for and outcomes of digital learning. Drawing on the concept of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (Dannefer, 2003; Crystal & Shea, 1990), this paper asks how existing inequalities shape older adults' access to digital learning and their related outcomes.

The paper presents results from a recent research project which explored older adults' digital skills and digital learning practices in Austria. Based on data from a quantitative, representative survey with 814 older adults (65-95 years) in Austria, we shed light on the diverse ways older adults learn with and about digital technologies and question how access to and the outcomes of digital learning practices in later life (re)produce the social inequalities that shape age and ageing. The results of four regression models show that educational inequalities, in particular, shape participation in and the outcomes of digital learning in later life. Respondents with lower levels of formal education, lower income and higher age were more likely to use their social networks for digital learning and were less likely to participate in non-formal learning programmes. This points to emerging patterns of cumulative disadvantage in later-life digital learning, as marginalised in later life, because marginalised groups show both a) restricted access to digital learning in later life and b) overall lower digital skills than the average older population.

Introduction

Digital technologies pervade all aspects of people´s lives, including those of older adults. While access to the Internet through information and communication technologies (ICTs) has become available nearly across the globe, the gap between the numbers of older and younger users has not yet been closed (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Seifert & Rössel, 2019; Marimuthu et al., 2022). Despite a significant increase in the use of digital devices in older age groups overall, an age-specific digital divide can still be identified in most European countries. In Austria, where the present study is set, older people generally reported fewer digital skills than younger people, and also often made less use of the Internet (Statistics Austria, 2021).

Additionally, research has also found that there are many differences within older age groups when it comes to the use of and skills for digital technologies (Reisdorf & Groselj, 2017; Wenz & Keusch, 2022; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). Studies show that the use of ICTs varies according to socio-economic differences, such as age, gender, income or education. For example, men and people with higher levels of income and education use the Internet more frequently than women and people with lower levels (Huxhold, Hees & Webster, 2020; Johansson, Gulliksen & Gustavsson, 2021; Kemp et al., 2021; Kolland *et al*., 2022; Zilian & Zilian, 2020).

Therefore, it can be identified as a challenge for educational gerontology to reach precisely the groups who are most prone to experience digital exclusion. Dating back to the 1970s, multiple studies demonstrated that learning in later life tends to reach those groups of older adults who had already profited from continuous learning over the life course (Bracker & Faulstich, 2014; Kosyakova & Bills, 2021). Such 'double selectivity' implies that further training is mainly achieved by part of the population and especially the already privileged (Bracker & Faulstich op.cit.). Building on this insight, many researchers argue that cultural and socio-economic backgrounds affect access to and the use of digital technologies, which reinforces social inequalities and enlarges the gap between the less and the more advantaged members of society (Elena-Bucea et al., 2021; Ragnedda, 2020; Haight, Quan-Haase & Corbett, 2014; van Dijk, 2012).

This article aims to problematise these mechanisms of social inequalities between older adults in the context of digital learning practices. Using data from a representative survey of 814 digital technology-using older adults (aged 65+) in Austria, which focused on digital practices, skills and learning strategies, we want to shed light on how socio-economic circumstances shape access to and the outcomes of digital learning in later life. We therefore pose the following questions: How do existing digital inequalities affect the opportunities of older individuals to participate in digital learning activities? How do they shape the outcomes of digital learning in later life?

The paper is structured as follows: We first present our conceptual framework to explore these issues before describing the data, variables and methods of data analysis. The section regarding the results of our empirical analysis illustrates the

cumulative socio-economic effects of digital learning activities on digital inequalities. This paper concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Cumulative (dis)advantage and digital learning in later life

To explain the empirical evidence on the manifold ways socio-economic positions shape living situations and learning practices in later life, researchers in social gerontology have introduced the concept of cumulative advantage/disadvantage CAD; (Dannefer, 2003), which highlights how socio-economic advantages and disadvantages change and accumulate over the life course. Focusing on processes of the cumulation of socio-economic advantages or disadvantages, these theories highlight the

> *systemic tendency for the interindividual divergence in a given characteristic (e.g., money, health or status) with the passage of time* (Dannefer, 2003, p.327)*,*

arguing that over the course of one's life, the socio-economic differences within a cohort tend to widen and accumulate. Key to this theory is the idea that

> *the advantage of one individual or group over another grows (i.e. accumulates) over time, which is often taken to mean that the inequality of this advantage grows over time.* (DiPrete & Eirich 2006, p.272)

The starting point of such CAD theories is the notion of socially structured pathways across the life course, in which disadvantages or privileges experienced early in life are carried forward into middle and later life. This does not mean, however, that time or biological changes alone are responsible for this exacerbation of social inequalities. The mechanism that secures the accumulation of disadvantage or privilege is found in the institutionalised life course, which continuously perpetuates inequalities throughout the life course (O'Rand,1996).

> *Thus, the inequality of aged populations is not an instantaneous phenomenon, nor is it the simple averaged culmination of life decisions made by individuals living in identical social circumstances over time; rather, inequality is a product (interaction) of institutional arrangements and aggregated individual actions over time* (O'Rand 1996, p.232).

How do these processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage shape (digital) learning in later life? First, they may shape the ways in which individuals (from diverse social positions) have *access* to learning opportunities in later life. Numerous studies have highlighted that older adults with higher educational backgrounds, as well as higher social status, are more likely to participate in later-life learning (Bracker & Faulstich, 2014; Kosyakova & Bills, 2021). Focusing on the processes of cumulative advantage across the life course, studies have shown that educational privilege grows over one's life, and even across different generations, as (a) participation in education during the work life, (b) education in childhood and youth and (c) parents' educational achievement together significantly determine older individuals' opportunities to participate in later-life learning (Gallistl et al., 2018). Second,

cumulative advantage and disadvantage may also shape the *outcomes* of learning in later life. It has been shown that older adults from lower social-status groups may feel out of place in educational activities, as they are unsure how to behave in educational settings or have had negative experiences of such settings over the course of their lives, highlighting how existing social and cultural capital shapes the outcomes of learning in later life (Goulding, 2013).

The main argument we put forward in this article therefore concerns this *double notion of CAD in digital learning in later life*: We argue that socio-economic disadvantage shapes both access to, and the outcomes of, digital learning in later life. We test this hypothesis and discuss its implications in the following empirical sections:

- H_1 : Socio-economic disadvantage over the life course significantly influences participation in digital learning practices in later life.

- H_2 : Socio-economic disadvantage over the life course significantly affects the skills that are acquired through digital learning in later life.

Material and methods

This article aims to show the ways in which social inequalities shape older adults' opportunities to participate in digital learning activities. Following the hypothesis that social inequalities form older adults' access to, motivation for, and outcomes of digital learning (Bracker & Faulstich, 2014; Dannefer, 2003), we draw on data from a quantitative, representative survey based on computer-assisted telephone interviewing and supported by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection.

The data were collected between November and December 2021 and the random sample of 814 older adults (65-95 years) in Austria was drawn in advance according to the age target group in proportion to size (Table I) and (adjusting for over-sampling of formally higher-educated individuals) weighted by age, sex, education, size of household, size of the place of residence and federal state to fit official census statistics. A response rate of 51 percent was achieved. The average interview duration was 22 minutes, and the questionnaire was cognitively pretested via telephone with ten people between the ages of 60 and 87. Based on the pretests, some question wordings were slightly adjusted to meet the special criteria of the setting. A quarter of the 814 respondents were digital non-users, meaning that they had never used any of the listed ICTs. In the questionnaire, the usage of digital technology acted as filter question as it was assumed that non-users are unable to answer questions about how they learned to use digital technology. Therefore, non-users are excluded from this particular analysis.

Table I: Sample characteristics

Variables	Level	n	%
Overall		814	100
Gender	Male	361	44
	Female	453	56
Age group	65-69	230	28
	70-79	375	46
	80+	209	26
Level of formal education	Max. compulsory schooling (ISCED 0-2)	232	29
	Apprenticeship / secondary school (ISCED 3)	442	54
	Matura (Austrian higher school certificate) (ISCED 4)	77	10
	Higher level of formal education (Higher than ISCED 4)	63	8
Household members	1	276	34
	2	422	52
	3 or more	116	14
Community size	Up to 2,000	149	18
	2,001 to 5,000	218	27
	5,001 to 50,000	230	28
	Over 50,000	216	26
Income	Income (hardly) suffices	202	25
	Neither nor	262	33
	Income suffices (easily)	342	42
Subjective health	Very positive	213	26
	Positive	374	46
	Moderate to negative	223	28

We measured social inequality via socio-economic status (age, gender, education and income). The respondents' age was queried in years, with the youngest respondents being 65 years old (age of retirement in Austria), and education was queried and classified according to International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) – 11 levels. The data concerning household income were collected by how well the respondents could make ends meet. Questions about the ways of learning were based on the Adult Education Survey (Eurostat, 2011). The respondents provided information on how they had acquired their knowledge of ICTs (i.e. by teaching themselves using manuals, with the help of friends or family members or attending group courses etc.) and subsequently classified in terms of autonomous, social and non-formal learning.

The levels of digital skill were operationalised based on the frequency of use, subjective assessment of knowledge, activities on the Internet, security measures implemented and problem-solving practices (Eurostat, 2016; Janneck, Vincent-Höper & Othersen, 2012; Seifert, Perrig-Chiello & Martin, 2020; Seifert, Ackermann & Schelling, 2020). The operationalisation of each item is shown in Table II (Kolland et al., 2022). To achieve an overall scale of digital skill, these variables were combined to form a digital gradient, which, based on the answers to all questions, captures the older respondents' digital practices. A factor analysis (66.4% variance explained, one-factor solution: lowest loading 0.652, highest loading 0.917, Cronbach's alpha 0.898) was carried out to develop this indicator for digital practice (for the factor to start at zero, two was added to each value). A higher value indicates that the individual participated in many different practices over various questions. The variables considered in the factor analysis are shown in Table II.

Table II: Dimensions of digital skills (Kolland et al. 2022)

Variable	Operationalisation & scale	Instrument used
Sex	Which sex do you identify with? (male, female)	Eurostat (2016)
Age	May I ask how old you are in years?	Eurostat (2016)
Education	What is your highest level of completed school education? (ISCED-11 levels)	Eurostat (2016)
Income	Please think of your total household income, i.e. all sources of income and people who contribute. How difficult or easy is it for your household to make ends meet? (very difficult, fairly difficult, neither, fairly easy, very easy)	
Ways of learning	Which of the following options best describes how you acquired your current knowledge of digital devices? (yes / no)	Eurostat (2016), modified
	- I taught myself from manuals or magazines	
	- I taught myself using online learning materials (e.g., instructional videos or guides)	
	- I acquired it as part of my job	
	- I specifically acquired to use it with family members	
	- I specifically acquired to use it with friends and acquaintances	
	- I was trained at a school or university	
	- I attended a group course or seminar	
	- I took private lessons	
	- I attended an online course	
	- Don't know, no answer	

Frequency of use	I would ask you to start by telling me how often you use the following media and devices. Do you use … daily, at least once a week, at least once a month, less often, never?	Seifert, Perrig-Chiello and Martin (2020), adapted & modified
	- Internet	
	- Computers / laptops	
	- Tablet	
	- Smartphone	
	- Vacuum cleaning robot / lawn robot	
	- Navigation system	
	- Language assistants	
	- Fitness bracelet for recording values such as pulse or blood pressure	
	- Smart TV with Internet access	
	- Smartwatch	
Subjective assessment of knowledge	How would you rate your knowledge and skills in relation to...? I would ask you to answer this on a scale from 1 = very good to 5 = very bad. (Same ICTs as Frequency of use)	Seifert, Perrig-Chiello and Martin (2020), adapted & modified
Activities on the Internet	Which of the following have you done before? (yes / no)	Eurostat (2016), modified
	- Used a search engine (e.g., Google, Yahoo, Bing) to find information on the Internet	
	- Targeted input from a website	
	- Opened / read emails	
	- Sent emails with attached files (documents, images, etc.)	
	- Called via Internet / Skype	
	- Wrote messages in chat rooms, newsgroups or an online discussion forum (e.g., Facebook)	
	- Uploaded texts, photos, films or music to websites (e.g., Facebook)	
	- Created my own photo albums or music lists	
	- Played games (e.g., on mobile phone or computer)	
	- Adjusted the security settings of the Internet browser	
	- Created an internet page (website)	

	What do you do to protect yourself online? (yes / no)	DIVSI (2014), modified
Security measures implemented	- Nothing - nothing can happen	
	- Nothing - my relatives take care of that, if at all	
	- I don't give out any personal information.	
	- I discuss the issue with other people before visiting a new site	
	- I intentionally give false information	
	- I have a virus scanner	
	- I use strong passwords	
	- I don't download files	
	- I change my passwords frequently	
	- Don't know, no answer	
Problem-solving measures	Whom do you contact if you have problems with digital devices? (yes / no)	Seifert, Ackermann and Schelling (2020), modified
	- I keep trying until it works	
	- I look them up in a manual or a magazine	
	- I look for a solution on the internet	
	- I ask family members	
	- I ask friends and acquaintances	
	- I go to the store where I bought the device (e.g., A1 store)	
	- I hire a specialist from a technology company	
	- Others, namely...	

Applying three binary logistic regression models, we first wanted to explain the extent to which the ways of learning are dependent on the socioeconomic status (age, gender, education, income) obtained over the course of life. Following the argument that the digital divide is less age-related than a generational phenomenon (Sackmann & Winkler, 2013; Friemel, 2014), we divided the sample into the third (65-79 years) and fourth age (80+ years). Another logistic regression model aimed to explain the influence of the way of learning along with socioeconomic status on digital skills. It is important to note that the causality of the learning effects cannot be tested in this sample, for example, whether older adults, who have learned autonomously or non-formally, achieve a higher level of digital skills or whether those with higher levels of digital skills continue to learn autonomously or non-formally.

The regression model expresses the effects of the independent variables as odds ratios describing the factor by which the relative chance of the dependent variable

changes if the independent variable increases by one unit. The prerequisite is that all other variables remain constant (Backhaus et al., 2018). The quantitative data were evaluated with IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) and the binary logistic regression models are significant, have a high model quality, and an adequate model fit.

Results

The following results are structured in three steps: first, we show how the respondents in our sample acquired digital skills. Second, we analyse these learning modes with regard to their socio-economic differences. Finally, we test the influence of the learning forms on the levels of digital skills using a linear regression model.

First, learning through social networks *(social learning)* was the most common way older adults reported to have acquired digital skills (81%). Most of the older respondents developed their digital skills by asking their relatives (72%) or friends for help (40%). *Autonomous learning* (the respondents acquired their knowledge about ICTs by themselves, i.e. via manuals or magazines) was reported by 32 per cent of the respondents. Finally, 26 per cent acquired their digital skills in *non-formal courses*. Most of them went to group courses of organisations (22%), while online courses (5%) or private lessons (3%) were the exception. Figure 1 shows age differences regarding the methods of digital learning: Autonomous and non-formal learning were more common in younger age groups (65-79 years), but there were no age differences regarding social learning.

Figure I: Frequencies of digital learning by age groups (n=625)
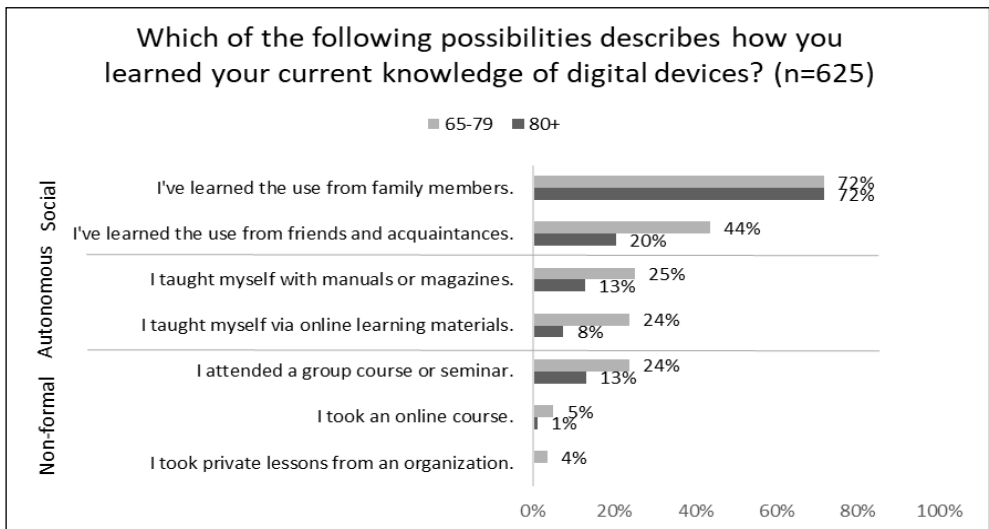
Although the three paths of learning are not exclusive, i.e. individuals could report more than one way of learning, there were no significant correlations between the three ways found. The only exception is a negative correlation between social and non-formal learning, meaning that older adults who learned through their social

networks were less likely to attend digital skills course (Phi = -0.254, p<0.001). This may be because the three ways of learning require different resources on the part of older adults and therefore address different groups.

Table III shows three binary logistic regressions separately for each of the learning ways. Respondents who reported autonomous learning were more likely younger, male and people with higher educational levels. Respondents who reported social learning were more likely female and people who had more problems making ends meet financially. Finally, respondents who reported non-formal learning were more likely younger, female and people with higher levels of education and fewer problems making ends meet. This shows that especially non-formal learning is connected to educational and financial barriers, while social learning has a low threshold. Although autonomous learning is not connected to extensive costs, the data indicate that being able to acquire digital skills autonomously requires a higher educational background.

Table III: Three binary logistic regressions (Dependent variables: (1) autonomous learning (2) social learning (3) non-formal learning)

	Autonomous Learning (0 = no aut. learning)			Social Learning (0=no social learning)			Non-formal Learning (0=no non-formal learning)		
	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p
Age (1=80+)	0,309	0,337	**0,000**	0,880	0,291	**0,661**	0,339	0,331	**0,001**
Sex (1=female)	0,497	0,187	**0,000**	1,949	0,222	**0,003**	1,504	0,198	**0,039**
Formal education (Refgr.: higher education (ISCED-11=4+))									
- Lower education (ISCED-11= 0-2)	0,131	0,380	**0,000**	2,132	0,394	0,055	0,411	0,341	**0,009**
- Moderate education (ISCED-11= 3)	0,411	0,219	**0,000**	1,687	0,243	**0,031**	0,521	0,223	**0,004**
Making ends meet (Refgr.: (very) well)									
- (Very) difficult	1,618	0,267	0,072	3,199	0,353	**0,001**	0,221	0,341	**0,001**
-neither nor	1,598	0,209	**0,025**	3,173	0,263	**0,000**	0,474	0,215	**0,001**

n = 662 (*Autonomous:* Nagelkerke r^2 = 0,171, p<0,001, Correctly predicted: B0=67% B1=70%/*Social:* Nagelkerke r^2 = 0,127, p<0,001, Correctly predicted: B0=81% B1=81%/ *Non-formal:* Nagelkerke r^2 = 0,140, p<0,001, Correctly predicted: B0=73% B1=72%)

In the fourth regression model, we explored these three learning paths with regards to their outcomes, measured by a digital gradient based on the answers to all questions, which describes the levels of digital skills the older adults currently held. Here, the data highlight that the learning paths that were characterised by the highest socio-economic barriers (autonomous and non-formal learning) were also those by which the best outcomes in terms of skills could be achieved by the individuals. Social learning had fewer barriers, yet the respondents who reported social learning also yielded the lowest outcomes in terms of skills. Table IV shows a linear regression model with the level of digital skills as dependent variable. In general, older adults beyond the age of 80 years, people with lower school education and who had more problems making ends meet financially showed lower levels of digital skills. Looking at the learning ways, the data suggest that non-formal learning is connected to higher digital skills with an effect of 0.358 and autonomous learning has an even higher effect with 0.699.

Table IV: Linear regression (Dependent variable: Extent of digital practice; 0-5 level of digital competences)

	b	SE	p
Age (1=80+)	-0,614	0,089	**0,000**
Sex (1=female)	-0,117	0,064	0,066
Formal education			
(Refgr.: higher education (ISCED-11=4+))			
- Lower education (ISCED-11= 0-2)	-0,562	0,107	**0,000**
- Moderate education (ISCED-11= 3)	-0,220	0,077	**0,004**
Making ends meet (Refgr.: (very) well)			
- (Very) difficult	-0,568	0,088	**0,000**
-neither nor	-0,110	0,072	0,128
Autonomous Learning (Yes=1)	0,699	0,069	**0,000**
Social Learning (Yes=1)	0,089	0,083	0,281
Non-formal Learning (Yes=1)	0,358	0,074	**0,000**

n=577. r^2=0,424, korr. r^2= 0,415. p<0,001. Durbin Watson=1,993. Normal distribution, Homoscedasticity, no multicollinearity

Discussion

Drawing on data from a representative survey with 814 older adults (65-95 years) in Austria, the aim of this study was to test how existing digital inequalities shape the opportunities of older individuals to participate in digital learning activities and the outcomes of digital learning in later life. Using three binary logistic regression models, we tested the first hypothesis, H_1 according to which socio-economic disadvantage over the life course significantly influences participation in digital learning practices in later life. The data showed respondents who reported non-formal ways of learning to more likely be younger, people with higher levels of education and fewer problems making ends meet. This is in line with the current literature (Bracker & Faulstich, 2014; Kosyakova & Bills, 2021). In comparison, those who learned socially were more likely female and people who had more problems making ends meet. This supports the hypothesis of double selectivity in later life (Bracker & Faulstich op.cit.; Kosyakova & Bills op.cit.), as learning in a non-formal setting is connected to educational and financial barriers and therefore mainly achieved by the already privileged.

Further, the data showed that socio-economic disadvantages over the life course significantly influence digital skills (H_2). On the one hand, and as reported in the literature, the data suggested that older adults over the age of 80 years and people with a lower socioeconomic status reported lower levels of digital skills (Huxhold et al., 2020, Johansson, Gulliksen & Gustavsson 2021; Kemp et al., 2021; Zilian & Zilian, 2020). On the other hand, we can further see the effect of double selectivity in later life, because respondents who learned autonomously or non-formally did not only dispose of more educational and financial resources, but also reported higher digital skills. Access to digital learning is therefore socially unequally distributed, which is connected to lower levels of digital skills, thus reinforcing social inequalities in later life.

This study has limitations that have to be kept in mind when interpreting its results. One important limitation lies in the cross-sectional nature of the study design. This means that the causality of the learning effects could not be tested in this sample, and we cannot tell whether older adults, who learned autonomously or non-formally, achieve higher levels of digital skill or whether those with higher-level digital skills continue to learn autonomously or non-formally. However, the data showed that social learning has no effect on the levels of digital skill. Social learning is a strategy that can reach older adults of lower educational and income backgrounds, as well as very old adults who are a group at risk of digital exclusion. Another limitation is that the results are limited to the cultural space and the specific senior education sector in Austria.

Further research is needed to explain the causality between ways of learning and levels of digital skill. It is also important to understand why, and which barriers keep older people with lower educational and income levels from taking part in non-formal learning activities. This then leads us to the question of what can be done to

make digital learning in later life accessible to more people. From our perspective, it is important to implement low-threshold learning opportunities to reach people with lower levels of education and income as well as very old adults. One way to achieve this goal could be to train family members to become digital multipliers, which would increase the levels of digital skill among those who are not easily reached with non-formal learning opportunities and therefore may be able to break down some socio-economic barriers to learning in later life.

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The Association for
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Bridging the ivory tower gap: translating evidence-based research on healthier ageing for public audiences using the Five Pillars for Ageing Well educational model

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Abstract

The academic language of evidence-based research on ageing well can feel distant from the lived experiences of older people contending with cost-of-living challenges or caring responsibilities. An 'Ivory Tower' gap acts as a barrier to educating older people about lifestyle changes that promote healthier ageing. Since 2019, the Ageing Well Public Talk Series (AWPTS) team at The Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom (UK) has pioneered a collaborative, co-produced approach to addressing this gap. Structured around the Five Pillars for Ageing Well (nutrition, hydration, physical activity, social and cognitive stimulation), AWPTS is an evidence-based educational model which translates current research from the field of ageing into 'bite-sized' information easily manageable by its target audiences. Over the past three years, an ongoing series of public talks based around the Five Pillars were delivered by the AWPTS team in the UK and worldwide. The AWPTS along with a portfolio of free resources (podcasts, short films, short accessible articles, short online OpenLearn courses and other resources) were accessed by over 80,000 people globally. The AWPTS team built a network of stakeholder health and voluntary organisations and members of the public across the UK. This paper describes how this public health educational intervention continues to develop and evolve post Covid-19. Through feedback and reflection, we outline the impact of the AWPTS on individuals and communities who have engaged with the Five Pillars learning model, and how this model can be expanded to promote sustained behaviour change around healthier ageing at a societal level.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), 16 million people (24%) of a total population of 67 million are currently over the age of 60 years, rising to an estimated 19.8 million (28%) by 2030. Advances in medicine and better public health measures have contributed to the overall increase in life expectancy and a decrease in mortality globally (Salomon et al., 2012). This has resulted in a shift of perspective which now regards older people as an asset for their families, the wider community and society as a whole (Foster & Walker, 2015; WHO, 2015, 2017, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) has embraced this positive concept of ageing, defining active ageing as "the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (WHO, 2002, p12; Hijas-Goméz et al., 2020). Building on the United Nations' Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (Siderenko & Walker, 2004) and the WHO Global Strategy and Action Plan (2017), the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared 2021–2030 the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (Decade of healthy ageing, 2023). The WHO leads the implementation of the Decade bringing together governments, international agencies, academics, the media, health professionals and the private sector in a period of 'concerted, catalytic and collaborative action to foster longer and healthier lives'. The Decade aims to improve the lives of older people, their families and communities by reducing health inequalities, planning to accomplish this through collective action by stakeholders in four key areas: first, by tackling how societies across the globe think, feel and act towards age and ageism; second, by developing communities in ways that nurture and promote the abilities of older people; third, by working to deliver person-centred integrated care and primary health services that are responsive to older people; and last, by providing older people who need it with access to quality long-term care. The Decade emphasises that older people, services and society need to be educated about the self-management of ageing through public-facing learning that promotes healthier lifestyles (Decade of healthy ageing, op.cit.).

While advances in life expectancy have added years, older people worldwide have mixed experiences of living the second half of their lives. Older people who spend their additional years in good health, remain independent, and continue to participate in their community and contribute to family life, depend on ongoing healthy ageing. Current evidence suggests that, while "good health adds life to years" (WHO, 2012), the impact for older people and society of poor health is far reaching and negative. Research worldwide in the epigenetics of ageing, and into environmental and lifestyle factors which accelerate ageing at a genetic level, suggests that a lack of good nutrition, hydration, physical activity, social and cognitive stimulation (Five Pillars) cause people, with or without underlying chronic conditions, to age faster. However, many diseases associated with ageing faster are preventable or reversible (Pagiatakis et al, 2021; WHO, 2020; Frankel et al, 1991).

It is an important global societal challenge to develop proactively collaborative approaches between allies in health, voluntary sector (NGOs) and academia in order to increase opportunities for everyone to live longer, healthier lives. Cherbuin et al.

(2021) assert that by extending collaboration outside the bounds of academia and fostering partnerships between older people, the community-based organisations who work with and for them, researchers and policymakers, research findings may be translated to the real world more effectively. To this end, a team of researchers from The Open University (OU), partnered with health and social care services as well as members of the public over the age of 50 from across the UK to co-design, co-produce and co-deliver a series of free public talks for older people. People over the age of 50 were chosen as a target audience because this is the age in the UK when chronic conditions associated with lifestyle factors that accelerate ageing become noticeable for many (Centre for Ageing Better, 2022).

This paper presents the evolution of the AWPTS from its inception in 2019. We discuss how the talks enshrine the principles of collaboration, co-delivery and co-production to promote healthier ageing in older life. The AWPTS, structured around the Five Pillars, offers a public health educational intervention model that promotes healthier ageing in alignment with the Decade. We reflect on how a participatory approach to organising, co-designing, co-producing and co-delivering the talks in collaboration with a community of invested stakeholders and individuals was achieved. This illustrates how the existing 'Ivory Tower' gap' may be addressed, by considering the complex and intersectional nature of health inequalities, which is informed by current gerontological education and health literacy knowledge. We draw on feedback received and our own reflections when discussing the benefits of the AWPTS for public audience members, healthcare professionals and partner organisations and also how the lessons learned link to future directions for the AWPTS.

Underpinning this public health educational intervention model is a learning approach for older people that translates evidence-informed research on healthier ageing into 'bite-sized' chunks/units of information to promote self-management of health and wellbeing in older age. Through the Five Pillars model, the AWPTS makes learning accessible by tackling language and encouraging peer support to make knowledge exchange feel relevant, fun, and easier to retain for longer and transfer in older people's daily lives (Bates, 2019). The AWPTS approach to learning addresses the gap between research on healthier ageing and those most in need of the evidence-based knowledge and increased understanding of the healthier lifestyles it promotes.

The evolution and reach of the AWPTS at the Open University (OU)

The OU is the UK's largest university whose distance learning courses are available worldwide. The OU has a reputation for public facing knowledge exchange and learning that is often freely accessible to all. 'OpenLearn', a free learning resources website from the OU, has had 105 million visits since its launch in 2006 (Open Learn, 2023). The AWPTS began in September 2019 as a series of face-to-face talks at the OU campus in Milton Keynes. Talks were delivered by OU researchers with invited specialists on differing aspects of healthier ageing in older life (see *Table 1*). The collaboration grew into a number of local partnerships in Milton Keynes and

Buckinghamshire in the UK with one English General Practitioner (GP) practice, the University of the Third Age, Age UK Milton Keynes, Carers MK, Healthwatch MK and others. Simultaneously, the AWPTS grew a national and an international audience through, for example, online talks to Chinese Hospitals via a partnership with Cambridge Medical Academy & UKeMED.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, delivery of the AWPTS was moved to online monthly webinars, each lasting between 60-90 minutes. These interactive sessions typically involved speakers including academics, health and social care staff, and older people with lived experience perspectives. During each talk the presenters/facilitators use one or two blocks of ten minutes of gentle stretching, and a range of cognitive exercises involving 'hands-on examples' of physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing. These exercises promote experiential and social learning in a relaxed peer setting (Pappas et al., 2019; Golinowska et al., 2016). Talks are advertised in advance through the extensive network of contributors from voluntary and public organisations partnering with the OU, within the OU on a dedicated AWPT Website, and more widely within the OU community as well as across social media. The content of each talk is recorded with captions and an accessible document is created, supporting attendees with visual impairments. Talks are then available to watch asynchronously at a time to suit audience members. This means that older people with caring responsibilities, or the carers of an older person, can benefit from the knowledge and experiences of others and gain evidence-informed advice and information. All AWPTS sessions are available and hosted on the Open University's Stadium platform, meaning audiences from anywhere can revisit them at any time. This supports wider sharing by 'word of mouth' where people who know about the AWPTS share the information and recordings more widely to their families and friends across the UK. The talks are now shared and accessed worldwide.

Table I, below, lists the topics discussed in the AWPTS latest session – 2022/2023. Although the numbers attending an online talk on the day may sometimes be modest, the numbers accessing the talks (and the portfolio of accompanying materials) asynchronously are substantially more. More than 80,000 individuals have engaged with AWPTS sessions and the accompanying educational resources since 2019.

Table I. Topics built around the Five Pillars for Ageing Well

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Ageing Well Public Talks Series 2022/2023

- Tackling ageism and how we might need to go about that. The changing attitudes to what people want from this stage of life/retirement/extended working/bridge work/volunteering

- Exploring common age-related conditions such as osteoporosis and frailty, menopause, andropause and how hormonal changes associated with ageing may affect us.

- Taking some of the control over our dying and what are the ways we can co-create our care plans.

- Age related and non-age-related memory loss and how to boost our memory. Including how important it is for our health and wellbeing to spend time outdoors and how using mindfulness and present moment awareness of nature can help to preserve and maintain a sense of self and well-being in older age.

- Nutrition and Hydration in older age including the self-management of Type 2 diabetes

- Relationships, intimacy and ageing

- The importance of sleep

- How health inequalities impact on our ability to make the right lifestyle choices and what we can do to change that.

- Issues around equality, diversity, and inclusion in access to provision and care in health services while ageing including access to and provision of palliative care.

- Exercise to build a strong and resilient musculoskeletal system in older years while still having fun.

- Ageing, later life and caring in the LGBTQ communities.

Collaboration, co-delivery, and co-production

The AWPTS establishes Participatory Public Engagement as a main vehicle for its co-design/co-production/co-delivery approach where OU researchers, older people, caregivers, health professionals, third sector, private sector organisations and people with lived experience of ageing at different stages work together collaboratively on the project (Vseteckova, 2020). All the contributors work towards a common goal of sharing research and/or lived experiences around the concept of ageing well. The AWPTS approach echoes the principles of collaborative co-production (Staniszewska, et al., 2022) where everyone involved is respected and equally valued, because this is now known to be of great benefit in research. Relinquishing professional power and co-designing/co-producing resources with diverse participants, supporting where needed but facilitating the public's shaping of the direction and agenda of the AWPTS to their needs, increases engagement and wider sharing of knowledge and creates positive interactions and positive feedback. For example, the OU provides annual media workshops for all

presenters/facilitators on AWPTS, helping everyone to become comfortable when being on camera and sharing their thoughts, experiences and expertise. Crucially, the AWPTS team is continually widening networks of participants, facilitators, professionals, practitioners, and other stakeholders, while also adapting the talks in response to the growing and ever more diverse audiences. A wide range of freely available resources have been co-produced by the AWPTS team working with other stakeholders (AWPTS, 2023).

Reflecting on the ethos of co-production adopted by the AWPTS, the academic lead commented:

> *By inviting individuals, wider public (communities) and stakeholders to co-design, shape and co-produce the AWPT Series and outputs that are easily and freely accessible we're contributing to public education by offering a genuine opportunity to share their opinion and have 'their say' in co-designing and co-producing materials, on how it works for them and what could work better in the true spirit of co-production and participatory agendas.*

> JV – OU Academic Lead for AWPTS and Take Five to Age Well Pledge

A member of the AWPTS team at the OU noted:

> *As academics we know many people are living longer lives and the disparity between those who age well with less years of ill-health compared to those who age badly is increasing …that there is an ageing health inequality gap. We know there is evidence-based research grounded in epigenetics to assist people with ageing well, but that research is often inaccessible to precisely those ageing populations who need to understand it most…in order to bridge the ageing health gap, the Ivory Tower gap must also be bridged.*

> JDL – OU Research Associate and AWPTS co-presenter

Evaluatory feedback from key stakeholders on the AWPTS

Evaluatory feedback has been collected on the AWPTS since 2019. In keeping with the core values of the programme, individual older people who have taken part in the project also provided feedback through interview. The collaborative and co-produced format of blending lived experiences of older people, combined with academic research expertise and third sector knowledge, enabled the organic development of a significant online community of interest. Feedback on the impact of the AWPTS at a community-wide level was gained from stakeholders from various voluntary, and public and private sector organisations, concerning their inputs to individual talks and as partners in the project more broadly.

Evaluatory feedback was collected in several ways, namely: through interviews from five older people who regularly attend the AWPTS; by online polls completed by online attendees at AWPTS sessions; from comments left by those accessing the talks asynchronously (using a rating scale and a comment box); and printed

surveys completed by session attendees who were unable to complete online polls.

Co-design and co-production through feedback

The feedback from older people attending AWPTS sessions or viewing the recording sessions typically included comments on the benefits of the Five Pillars approach for them, but also how they cascade those benefits to their family and friends, creating a community of interest. As the testimonial of one regular AWPTS session attendee noted:

> *I was attending the AWPT Series since they started at The OU (2019), when I realised how helpful and well-presented these are I brought also my wife… through AWPT Series I was able to understand why some changes happen as we age and why working around the Five Pillars for Ageing Well is a great, efficient and easy way to do something about my health and health and lifestyle choices every day. Thanks to the talks I have been making healthier, better lifestyle choices and was able to support my family and friends to make theirs through sharing the Five Pillars for Ageing Well with them.*

> Older person with lived experience of a long-term health condition

Attendees unanimously valued the collaborative co-produced format of AWPTS sessions, which fostered discussion and information sharing, and lent itself to creating a community of interest:

> *I thought it was an interesting and informative session with time for discussion.*

> Survey respondent - xxx244

Attendees appreciated the translation of evidence-based research on epigenetics and ageing into manageable language, framed by the Five Pillars:

> *Thank you very much for this beautiful overview of the most important topics of ageing.. I appreciate it very much.*

> Survey respondent – xxx441

As an evolving community of interest engaged in collaborative co-production, attendees at AWPTS sessions or those who view the recorded sessions often offered critical feedback on future topics to be developed, or the limitations of current sessions. This was actively encouraged and acted upon. A comment by a survey respondent resulted in the addition of a talk around building physical strength, improving posture, and how to incorporate exercise into daily life while having reduced or limited mobility:

> *I think the talks represent the different aspects of ageing and ageing well. An exercise session, covering exercises that can be done at home may be of benefit.*

> Survey respondent – xxx103

AWPTS sessions include an adapted exercise or other interactive session with practical tips on how to improve our physical or mental and emotional wellbeing. In these sessions attendees join the presenters in situ in completing exercises or meditations, sitting at their computers while the presenter talks them through it. Interactive sessions are designed in a way that can be achieved by all attendees. This iterative process of feedback and learning generated by a community of interest, commending benefits while highlighting areas for improvement, has informed the organic development of the AWPTS sessions.

Positive feedback has also been received from a range of partner organisations who have participated in the AWPTS as illustrated by the following quotes from healthcare practitioners involved in co-production and co-presentation of sessions. They highlight the impact of the AWPTS on their professional practice, in developing their skills and increasing their knowledge and ability to engage with communities of older people in the self-management of their health.

> *the talks have changed the way I work as a nurse with the ageing populations, the talks and materials equipped me with the right language and positive approach modelled by the Five Pillars for Ageing Well to engage the communities I support in discussing their health and wellbeing while they are ageing*

GP Practice Nurse in Scotland

> *it is amazing to see and be able to use and share with the Parish Nursing Ministries UK community of parish nurses, patients, and informal carers the wealth of material co-produced within the AWPT Series, written in public facing way, the parish nurses have also appreciated participating in the AWPT Series.*

Director of Nursing Parish Nursing Ministries UK

As an expanding community of interest engaged with accessible public facing knowledge and learning ageing well, *Table II* summarises the outcomes of the AWPTS co-produced by the AWPTS team with other stakeholders:

Table II. Summary of outcomes for the Ageing Well Public Talks Series 2019 – present mapped to the evidence base

Academic research base	Public engagement	Outcomes and impact
Epigenetics	Embedding self-management and empowering audiences to become partners in their health care.	OU initiated co-creation of communities of practice through co-design, co-production, and co-delivery of The AWPTS, by inviting the public and practitioners and stakeholders to shape the direction of the AWPT Series, individual talks and co-facilitating the delivery.
Health Literacy	Accessible language and interactions based on the principles of Health Equity.	Engaged and learning that enhances healthier lifestyle choices and better physical and mental health and wellbeing outcomes.
Lay Epidemiology	Older people can effectively self-manage providing they understand the reasons for self-management and understand how this can be easily/accessibly done – Five Pillars – applied to their individual situation.	Confirmation from the members of public including people with lived experience, professionals, stakeholders and health commissioners who engaged with the AWPTS that self-management is the way to go in the current climate – with all the financial, governmental spending agendas.
Learning Theories	Adding gently educational aspect as all talks have accessible 'takeaway learning outcomes'. Well captured 'bite-size' pieces of information that do not overload the audiences allowing transfer to long-term memory and use in daily tasks. Making sure the learning and resulting actions are available to all, regardless of age, sexual orientation, economic or social situation.	The AWPTS format is designed to promote learning for older people in a collaborative relaxed setting. The format encourages transformative learning through new knowledge on ageing applied to life experiences, social learning from peers, and experiential learning through modelled examples of the Five Pillars in actions older people can try and then apply to their own life circumstances. The 'bite-size' pieces of information which are repeated throughout sessions build on older people's experiences of ageing so that they can construct a new understanding of healthier ageing that feels relevant to their life circumstances. This relevance is underpinned by trust. The trust the AWPTS has built with its developing community of interest for evidence-informed learning on healthier ageing, and the reputational trust the OU has for public facing knowledge exchange and learning. A key element of AWPTS learning is that it is equitable and inclusive, where diverse older people are given ownership to solicit feedback and give feedback on sessions.

As members of the community of interest, the AWPTS team have learned through iterative feedback how the talks have impacted on ageing individuals (micro-level), and with communities such as clinicians, practitioners supporting ageing-well populations in their professional roles (meso-level) who have engaged with AWPTS sessions. Going forward, we are keen to effectively engage stakeholders and policy makers across the UK (macro-level) with the Five Pillars to induce sustained behavioural change that supports healthier ageing. To this effect, we co-designed a UK wide initiative titled Take Five to Age Well Four Nations Pledge.

A member of the research team noted:

> *Research in epigenetics tells us that there are steps we can all take to prevent or modify some diseases commonly found in older age. We now know that public engagement in health education messages relies on both health literacy and 'lay epidemiology' or the processes through which health risks are understood and interpreted by laypeople. The AWPTS helps to remove the barriers to public health information which can cause the public to disbelieve or fail to act on public health messages.*

<div align="right">GOC – Research Assistant AWPTS and Independent Researcher</div>

Limitations

The AWPTS continues to be developed and delivered via the Open University. However, its beginnings were affected by the impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic and it then developed organically in response to the unprecedented shift in educational and public health delivery. So, one of the limitations encountered was the necessity to move to online delivery which initially presented a challenge. However, this enabled the project to focus on developing online delivery and accessible content, which became one of its strengths. Through online delivery the programme gained audiences, in the UK and globally; thus the reach of the AWPTS widened more quickly than initially expected.

A further limitation was that, although the AWPTS evaluations capture information through regularly inviting attendees to feedback (showing for example that people gained new knowledge about ageing and age-related changes, felt more confident in taking care of their health and wellbeing, and would hydrate more) the structure of current feedback does not allow for more detailed information on mechanisms around changing behaviours. At present, we don't understand how people create new and healthier habits (behaviours) and what helps or hinders sustaining their new habits. For this reason, we have constructed the Take Five to Age Well Four Nations Pledge (see below) to provide a deeper understanding about mechanisms supporting behavioural change and the role of the Five Pillars.

Future directions

Through evaluating the AWPTS we have learnt important lessons about engagement, the need for interventions to be as tailored as possible and the importance of bite-size, accessible learning. Building on the success of AWPTS, we propose a new initiative that implements the model of 'Five Pillars for Ageing Well' to engage UK-wide communities and individuals with their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Take Five to Age Well – Four Nations Pledge is designed to empower people towards achieving effective, long-term self-management by becoming partners in getting and staying healthy, and reducing health inequalities by introducing 'bite-size' actions that are available to all. The team consisting of academics and non-academics (health and social care organisations, charities, third sector partners) received funding from all four UK nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) to develop this initiative.

The initiative, the first of its kind to our knowledge, will invite people to join a community from each of the four nations, making small daily changes for better ageing structured around the Five Pillars for Ageing Well (Nutrition, Hydration, Physical Social and Cognitive Stimulation). Take Five to Age Well is a UK-wide campaign, aimed at people 50+ years as an intervention pre-frailty. It is designed to empower individuals to take control of their health and wellbeing and drive a national conversation about ageing well behaviours and ageist attitudes. Take Five to Age Well (the Pledge) is in line with NHS anticipatory care policies as well as ageing well and behavioural change research, and corresponds with the United Nations' Decade of Healthy Ageing, which sets a plan for action to support individuals with living longer, healthier lives and follows the concept of intrinsic capacity (IC), introduced by WHO by offering provision to support and promote healthy ageing. Take Five to Age Well aims to build a UK-wide community that encourages people to commit to one or more ageing well behaviour for 30 days. Individuals commit to daily habits over a month that will impact their ageing outcomes. Our ambition is to establish Take Five to Age Well as an annual event similar to other successful pledges such as Dry January and Stoptober (recent initiatives to reduce alcohol intake).

With an increasingly ageing population and demands on health and social care services already high, ageing well needs to be a priority for all. Project staff believe we should be aiming for future generations to enjoy longer lives, access, and feel empowered to make choices that boost their health and well-being. Our actions to pledge fall under the Five Pillars for Ageing Well and there are several options to choose from, recognising no two adults are the same (Take Five, 2023). Pledges are a rediscovered form of public health intervention which can increase self-awareness of behaviours and habits, establish clear goals and improve adherence (Koessler, 2022). These can be easily followed without additional cost or need for special equipment, thereby encouraging the promotion of healthier ageing for those with or without chronic conditions and across diverse communities.

The Pledge builds on the AWPTS and its model of Five Pillars for Ageing Well by empowering older people to achieve effective, long-term self-management of their health thus becoming partners in achieving and/or staying healthy. The Take Five to

Age Well Pledge will primarily be accessed online via the nQuire digital platform - a Community and Citizen Science tool developed by the OU and the BBC (nQuire, 2023). As part of this initiative, a pilot with a small group of participants to pledge offline will allow researchers to understand the mechanisms needed to support older people whose digital skills or access to computers and internet is limited (Carney et al., 2022; Mubarak et al., 2022; Van Dijk, 2020).

Conclusions and implications for the field

Many of the changes we experience as we age cannot be avoided. However, some diseases that cause suffering and disability are preventable or ameliorated with changes to lifestyles and behaviours across the lifespan. The AWPTS addresses a need for public-facing accessible knowledge exchange and learning to support ageing populations with leading healthier, independent, longer-with-better-quality and more productive lives. This is especially important in the current climate where populations are ageing and service cuts across health and social care sectors are multiplying, such that improved self-management of populations could be an efficient way forward. Feedback shows that AWPTS improves health and quality of life outcomes at population level, especially for those who do not actively seek to improve their health.

We have outlined future ambitions in terms of AWPTS and Take Five to Age Well initiatives to contribute to a healthier and happier society. Through these programmes we support inclusive and equitable health and wellbeing choices being accessible and available to all regardless of their life situation. AWPTS and Take Five to Age Well contribute to the efforts worldwide to prevent and delay the steep decline (physical and cognitive) and loss of independence often associated with ageing. Firmly aligned with the goals and principles of the UN Decade and strongly endorsed by diverse stakeholders, what began as a small scale, localised series of talks has evolved into a public health initiative that is regularly reaching tens of thousands of people. Accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, the programmes developed over a relatively short amount of time. Their participatory approach, co-design and co-productions with ageing populations, community groups and public/private partnerships in parallel with sharing of the co-produced knowledge are at the core of both AWPTS and Take Five to Age Well.

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Key Words

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The promise of cultural context in gerontological education: some reflections on decolonising the field

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Abstract

Recently, the plea to decolonise the university (or curriculum) has been an organising theme for conferences, special issues of journals and talk series in the academy. Although energetic discussions around the role of the academy in postcolonial societies is gaining currency, gerontology's reluctance to engage critically with the emancipatory politics of decolonisation is surprising. In fact, a quick search on gerontology-related journals reveals that while scholars do assert the significance of adopting a cultural frame to appreciate local particularities and meaning-makings, an attempt to decentre the pedagogical tradition remains stifled. For example, the precarious positionalities and histories of sexual, racial and caste minorities remain outside mainstream gerontological education even in postcolonial societies. India is no exception. Indian gerontological tradition, while empirically robust, remains ahistorical and theoretically mute especially in challenging the 'certainties of Eurocentric models'. In this piece, I build on critical gerontology and scholarship on decolonisation to show (1) how the gerontological research and teaching in India are afflicted with the (neoliberal) obligation to amass and 'measure' gerontological 'variables' at large, (2) how can we rethink gerontological education that is free of co-optation (either by the 'global' higher education economy or prevailing 'local' powers) and instead reimagine the field as an intellectual practice that is historically and culturally rooted. Overall, the attempt will be to show the transformative promise of context-informed gerontology in recognising the socio-political nature of education interventions.

Population ageing and the 'problem' of gerontology education in India

India's demographic story has been an intriguing one not just for its sheer size but also because of its unconventional trajectory. In fact, the current year is momentous in demographic memory since India with its 1.4 billion people (and counting)

surpassed mainland China as the world's most populous country (Hertog, Gerland & Wilmoth, 2023). It may seem surprising that after India's independence in 1947, India's population was only 68 percent of that of China. According to 2015 estimates, while China's population grew by 7 million people every year, India increased by about 16 million per year (James & Goli, 2016). While media and academia have been inundated by jubilant possibilities of reaping a 'demographic dividend' (a brief demographic window with a large share of working age population and hence the promise of economic growth), the demographic blind spot of a rapidly growing older population remained out of sight. With a population of over 100 million (Census 2011), India is home to the second largest number of older adults (those 60 & above) in the world. Despite this demographic bulge, authors have noted a chronic unpreparedness in social and economic policies to address the emerging health and social security concerns of older Indians. The reverberations of this formative neglect are found in the intellectual trajectory of gerontology in India. Cultural anthropologist, Lawrence Cohen (2000) in his seminal monograph, *No Ageing in India: Alzheimer's, the Bad Family and Other Modern Things* note how the early scholarship on older people was articulated in the language of an imminent danger, a demonstration of old age being a 'problem'. The impending 'grey wave' measured through parameters such as dependency ratios signalled a gerontic dystopia where older people are denied any agency or personhood. This demographic anxiety was further reified through the moral imageries of modernity-westernisation and industrialisation.

Subsequently, post-independence Indian literature on old age is 'built around a narrative of the inevitable decline of the joint family (*commonly perceived as the central caregiving unit*) …status and health of old people are consequently declining; solutions must be looked for from highly developed technologies of Western gerontology and geriatrics' (Cohen 1995, p. 316). It is worth noting that Cohen's astute observation of the West's split role in this narrative – as the source of both the problem and its solution – governed the later development of the gerontological field in India. As such, gerontology in India continues to remain predominantly positivist with frameworks and epistemes, although useful, drawn largely from the Western (American) gerontological tradition. It might not be hyperbolic to note that postcolonial gerontological knowledge suffered an epistemological subordination.

I contend that there is a need to shift this empirical governmentality (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991) and Orientalist freezing of South Asia/India in ageing scholarship to generate critical local epistemes. While anthropology has attempted to engage with the cross-class, cross-cultural particularities of growing old among middle-class Indians (see for example, Lamb, 2020; Samanta, 2018; Ahlin, 2020), most gerontological scholarship has continued to examine older lives through the lens of a 'problem'- of dependence, illness and senility. The policy relevance of this line of inquiry notwithstanding, the singular emphasis on understanding later life through data-driven exercises have stifled the growth of theory development.

Elsewhere, I discuss the dangers of ahistorical and atheoretical scholarship constraining the cumulative knowledge building of ageing studies in postcolonial India (see Samanta, 2016). Not surprisingly, gerontological education mirrors this intellectual neglect.

In an authoritative account of the status of gerontological education in India, Panruti and colleagues (2015) note that ageing as a field is taught and researched only at a handful of institutions. As such, research output falls into a few major categories including medical, biological, psychological/behavioural and the social investigations of ageing. As noted earlier, the research trajectory remains governed by a moral panic of disease, debility and economic deprivation. For example, the social and behavioural strands of Indian gerontology are heavily weighted towards using Western frames and methods to examine social determinants of health (Muhammad, Srivastava, & Sekher, 2022; Williams, Norström & Ng, 2017; Bora & Saikia, 2015; Srivastava & Mohanty, 2012). Specifically, measuring nutritional status of older persons, or anthropometric parameters and psychological morbidity through standardised scales, have been part of the research body. The problem with this quantification of gerontology implies that cultural processes, beliefs, social norms and heterogenous experiences of later life get muted under the behemoth burden of data. Still more problematic is the methodological standardisation - an uncritical import of assumptions and methodologies from the Euro-American tradition (Alvares, 2011; Gopal, 2021). For instance, Alvares (2011) laments that although the critique of Eurocentrism in the social sciences is well accepted, little has been done in non-European/American institutions to develop their contextually relevant distinct set of assumptions that are outside the 'Western' University. The author sharply notes that while intellectual dependence came as a natural corollary of colonial rule, the continued obeisance to western academic circles in terms of objectives, frames and methods, points to the impossibility of cash-strapped Indian Universities to engage in original, alternative formulations. This applies to most intellectual fields in India, including gerontology. Thiong'o (1981) puts it trenchantly in arguing: 'It is the final triumph of a system of domination, when the dominated start singing its virtues' (p. 20). As such, this sustained decontextualisation and depoliticisation of frameworks, methods, and analyses not only lead to a cultural incognita of sorts but they also skew gerontological pedagogy in India.

Enter Critical Gerontology

The handful of studies that have attempted to map the gerontological education terrain in India, note the paucity of pedagogical developments in this field. For example, Pati et al. (2016) report a total of 20 programmes that are currently focused on geriatric health and care. The authors further note that despite a burgeoning population of older adults, geriatric medicine in India is not a recognised medical specialty (unlike countries like Israel, UK, Japan and the United States) with the

bulk of care resting with primary care physicians, who have limited or no training in geriatrics. Other than these institutional challenges, the pedagogy remains aloof from evolving into a culturally-informed field, as envisaged by critical gerontology. Critical gerontology (an intellectual tradition that emerged from the political movements of the Frankfurt School, (Habermas, 1988; Achenbaum, 1997) privileges the plural constructions of being. Baars (1991) summarises the analytic role of critical gerontology succinctly. They write '..it includes in its critical analyses normative questions, material interests, the functioning of gerontology itself and other factors that are regarded by the mainstream as only of 'contextual' importance' (p. 220). In fact, the salience of 'contextualisation' as an analytic method has been repeatedly emphasised in understanding and appreciating how cultural and historical factors pattern analytic constructs. In this connection, Luborsky & Sankar's (1993) 'extended' critical gerontological framework is noteworthy. They argue the extended critical gerontology framework engages in two modes of analyses: one that examines the cultural contexts of the conduct of contemporary gerontology, and the other which examines the nature of *contextualisation itself*. This dialectical approach holds the promise of generating a transformative educational practice that recognises the political nature of education.

Formosa's (2005) persuasive piece on forging a dialogue between critical educational gerontology and feminism is particularly fruitful in revisiting the significance of a context-informed education. Inspired by the Marxist phenomenological writings of Freire (1985) that theorise education as a route to cultural freedom from the state of oppression, Formosa emphasises a movement away from a problem-solving, functionalist approach to political commitment. This plea is significant, since one of the defining characteristics of gerontological research and training in India is its obsession of measurement and prediction. Hence, the political role of education and a counter-hegemonic subversive potential remain unactualised. In line with Formosa's invocation of a productive dialogue between feminism and critical gerontology, I urge for the adoption of a critical, culturally informed gerontology in both research and classroom education. In fact, such an approach will bring into sharp relief the inadequacy of positivist frameworks and standardised, Eurocentric methodologies.

It may be worthwhile to restate anthropologists Mines & Lamb's (2010) persuasive invocation to resist the Eurocentric universality of culture in understanding the everyday lives of people. They write 'Culture is not a frozen set of rules that people merely enact. Nor do all peoples in a culture abide by the same cultural principles or concepts: the activity of people is heterogeneous, contentious, emotionally charged, and often surprising…in other words, culture *is* as culture *does*' (p.4). Paying critical attention to culture will offer insights into habituated modes of gerontological thought and a subsequent reimagination of the foundational theories and methods that currently dominate the field.

Producing a de-centred, culturally inspired critical gerontology: Some reflections

Despite the longstanding critique of gerontology as being propelled by the biomedical model where definitions of age remained subservient to the modernist constructions of chronology (see for example, Twigg & Martin's (2015) authoritative introduction to 'cultural gerontology') or where behavioural changes are being attributed to disease stages thereby legitimising medical control (see Lyman's (1989) excellent critique of dementia), Indian classroom education happens largely through the medical gaze. Leading programmes in gerontology are mostly offered as medical diplomas in geriatrics with little or almost no attention given to the social factors involved in perceiving and experiencing old age. For example, the Public Health Foundation of India, a nodal site for education and training in health, offers an integrated geriatric course that includes topics of symptoms, palliative care and caregiver burden assessments. Similarly, the only course on older persons at the Indian Institute of Skill Development Training is called 'Geriatric Care' and involves themes that are heavily weighted towards nursing, infection control and measurement of vital parameters (Public Health Foundation of India, 2021). In higher education settings, the situation is no different. For instance, the well-recognised graduate (diploma) programme offered by Delhi University on 'Health and Social Gerontology' largely cover issues of rehabilitation, family therapy, clinical gerontology (e.g. chronic morbidities and neurological disorders) and health promotion behaviours (University of Delhi, 2023). Overall, this brief review of programmes show that the understanding of older lives is perceived in the language of dependence, senility and affliction that necessitate measurement and control.

A troubled history

How do we go from here? Recent writings on reclaiming the post-reform, neoliberal University in the Global South have enriched this anticolonial discourse. For instance, Gopal's (2021) sharp critique of the emboldened hegemonic tradition of the 'Western' University offers useful ways to unsettle and redress the neglect of 'culture'; she writes, 'posing the right questions for each context is itself part of the work of intellectual decolonisation' (p. 883). The author's conceptual privileging of the term 'anticolonialism' or the 'anticolonial University' instead of decolonisation, is an intriguing one. As opposed to contradicting colonialism, she notes 'anticolonial practice invokes a critical and radical spirit of enquiry and action rather than a singular state to be feasibly arrived at within the modest, and inevitably compromised, parameters of the university' (p. 889). This invocation finds resonance with Sivaramakrishnan (2018), who maps the intellectual history of academic gerontology as the field travels from the Global North to the Global South. In this ambitious project, Sivaramakrishnan shows the troubled birthing of gerontology through the biomedical enterprise and then being perceived as

a 'problem' by regional experts (mostly demographers), or as the author puts it, "..a moral parable of development and its discontents" (p. 125) wherein the ageing populations are victims of disease, poverty and socio-economic changes. Sivaramakrishnan contends that the 'problem' narrative survived an epistemic shift and achieved global status as we moved from late colonialism to postcolonialism, with gerontological knowledge making inroads into the international organisations such as the United Nations. This temporal charting of the evolution of gerontological knowledge systems is significant in understanding the contemporary obsession with ageing being a 'burden' in the developing world. Crucially, these intellectual representations reverberate a romanticised past with traditional joint (or, extended) families being instrumental for security and survival of older persons. The debate on the potential withering of the joint family systems in Asia notwithstanding (Allendorf, 2013), both in India and China, older people were, and are, carers for and contributors to their families and communities (Silverstein & Cong, 2013; Xu & Chi, 2015). Again, aggressive fertility policies (e.g. the 'one-child' policy in China) and enactments of socio-legal frameworks (e.g. *Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007* - the statutory bill on adult children to support their elderly parents in India) are illustrative of the cultural forces and social scripts governing local responses. Hence, one can argue that the universalising tendencies of global ageing establishment did suffer a rupture through these *provincialised* responses.

Postcolonial theorists, particularly with their focus on Subaltern Studies, offer helpful insights. In this connection Chibber (2013) sets the provenance in envisioning how a postcolonial framework in reconstructing gerontology would look. This may allow for a postcolonial theorising that emphasises the distinctiveness of non-Western societies and the compulsory Eurocentrism of social theory and empirical research. In a provocative critique that brings Subalternists' claims under scrutiny, Chibber argues that in reality the nature of bourgeois power relations are not fundamentally different between the East and the West, hence the theories generated by the European experiences need not be forcefully jettisoned but simply modified. As such, Chibber is of opinion that a (Marxist) theoretical reconstruction to accommodate the variations and anomalies of the non-western societies could prove valuable in explaining the empirical differences in the nature of (capitalist) development. By extension, one could argue that a postcolonial gerontology would benefit from such an approach to understand social change under neoliberalism. This would mean that gerontological pedagogy needs to be receptive to the larger debates on decolonizing higher education and its many contradictions (an aspect that I address in the next section).

Finally, it might be worth noting that while there is no denying that the field of gerontology carried the weight of a Eurocentric approach, it is important to acknowledge that the decolonisation discourse itself is not just about the binaries of the Global South versus Global North or between the high-income countries and low-income countries (see Contractor & Dasgupta, 2022). This intellectual blind

spot, that neglects the axes of power sustaining local hierarchies (e.g., the caste system in India that predates colonialism), posits an incomplete and partial history. Although the focus of the authors is in the decolonisation politics in global health, their timely intervention is relevant for an understanding of cognate fields. Specifically, they argue that in-country power hierarchies or the caste-led feudal structures continue to play a role in sustaining political colonialism. Indian higher education institutions are known to be casteist and intellectually biased (Subramanian, 2019; Pathania & Tierney, 2018) where elite, upper-caste researchers studying 'marginal' populations carry their own biases while producing knowledge. Hence, the struggle for decolonisation as a route to emancipatory politics needs to be wary of the co-optation of an anti-imperialist approach. These structural dichotomies have been noted earlier by postcolonial scholars such as the noted historian Guha (1982), who asserted a difference between an elite political sphere governed by bourgeois norms and a subaltern political sphere with its local norms and political idioms.

Given this intellectual and social context, how does Indian gerontological scholarship (and pedagogical traditions) benefit from recognising the local intersectionalities, if we were to reimagine the gerontological project?

What next for gerontological education?

In a scathing commentary on the state of anthropology-sociology in the Global South (with a particular focus on India), anthropologist Baviskar (2023) draws on radical imaginations of sociology teaching in India. Baviskar mentions how collaborative pedagogical practices, wherein first-generation students are invited to record and write about their own social context and connecting that lived experience with theory, can turn the standard educational curriculum on its head. In similar lines, gerontology education could engage students from diverse backgrounds through oral histories, caring practices, diaries/memoirs (in different languages) to bring alive the complex entanglements of age, memory and context. This could also potentially question the Eurocentric certainty (without jettisoning the theoretical canon completely) of what constitutes 'knowledge' and changing the terms of power in higher education spaces.

Crucially, while the unequal epistemic order of the South-North divide has been under scrutiny, the potential of South-South dialogues (or lack thereof) in shaping decolonial future have suffered an intellectual blind spot. Feminist sociologist Roy (2023) in a penetrative critique of the failures of South-South collaboration joins the plea by other postcolonial thinkers who propose to 'move from a position of a critique of Western theory to that of one which composes and assembles new theory from different sources and different histories' (Menon, 2020, p.2: cited in Roy, 2023). Moving past this terrain of what Roy (2023) calls 'dissonant intimacies' in South-South collaboration, it is important that our pedagogy reflects this tension. Or in other words, a mere absence of Western institutions or theories does not make

for a decolonized pedagogy for gerontology or any other discipline. Perhaps, it is in these failures (of collaboration, dialogue and exchange), that the promise and the limits of a postcolonial pedagogy can be imagined.

In closing, I find Alvares's (2011) warning of staying away from an 'alternative discourse' useful. The author argues that an 'alternative' would lead one to assume the continued provenance of a 'mainstream' (in this case, Euro-American) discourse. Instead, Alvares calls for a plural discourse - not derivative, not alternative. Translating this idea into gerontological pedagogy would involve a deeper and critical engagement with diverse and contextually informed research methodologies rather than wholesale reliance on American academic traditions. It would also involve a confident exploration of indigenous knowledge systems and discursive strategies that challenge the status quo. A mere tinkering of the gerontological curricula would not be sufficient; instead, a critical relinking of Global South perspectives with those that are developed in the industrialised West is necessary. Additionally, it may also involve encouraging students on gerontology courses to develop their disruptive voices and question some of the long unchallenged biomedical models that govern the study of ageing. An enduring anticolonial 'movement' that pushes these boundaries will require an annihilation of existing social order with which knowledge is so intimately tied. Local voices, local epistemes need to challenge the complex caste-class nexus in generating inclusive gerontological traditions. Although, as Ray & Fine (1999), caution, by doing these, we risk censure. There is no doubt that the road to emancipatory knowledge is bound to be uncertain, sluggish and lonely. But Ray & Fine's provocative yet hopeful reminder is hard to ignore: 'there is great power and potential in working from the margins, including the margins of academe' (p. 182). These interventions, if possible, can bring about a consciousness-raising, innovative and empowered knowledge that can upend the gerontological trajectory for years to come. After all, what is education anyway if it does not evoke a critical consciousness or a necessary transgression and social action?

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Case Studies:

Older people, learning and community

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Introduction

Is longevity a blessing or a curse? This central question posed in The 100 Year Life (Grattan & Scott 2016) is particularly pertinent for those growing up in a low-skills, low-wage economy with limited stimulus from their work, and no access to anything but the most basic training. Little headroom may be found outside work for anything apart from economic survival and family problem-solving. It is epitomised by the brother of a local activist in Leicester Ageing Together (LAT) who, when invited to come down to the community centre for a Leicester City Football Club memorabilia session the following morning at 9.30am, replied that he and his wife couldn't come: "we don't get up before 11 because if we do, the day is too long."

Leicester Ageing Together was a partnership comprising 17 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and formed specifically to address and prevent loneliness and social isolation among those aged 50+. The National Lottery (UK) as funder believed that complex social issues might best be addressed by such partnerships, each partner bringing unique strengths to the table. LAT chose to work in five wards of the city whose residents mirrored the Centenary Commission's (2019) finding of a proportion of 37% of adults who had not engaged with any formal learning since leaving school. We also wanted to engage with the inner lives of older people to see if self-reflection and exploring how they see their world might give them the choice of thinking differently about themselves. While the main benefit of learning in the third age was likely to be strengthening social connections and maintaining mental agility, we wanted to increase its role in helping older people handle the changes involved in ageing. These were seen as mainly learning to cope with loss: of family and friends through bereavement; of the statuses and structures provided by work; of physical and mental faculties through illness; of independence and sometimes change of home when moving into residential care.

Case Study, The Workers' Educational Association (WEA): education without walls

The WEA is the leading adult learning NGO in the UK. The main focus of the Leicester branch of the WEA as a LAT partner was through a tailored and co-produced traditional programme of classes. 'Reach' was a salient characteristic. Across their contribution, the Leicester WEA reached 889 learners of whom 89% said they had never before been involved with the WEA. A major factor in this reach was that, of LAT's 17 partners, five were deeply embedded in Leicester's South Asian and African-Caribbean communities. The WEA led the way among other service delivery partners in making good contact with these community organisations and arranging for classes on a range of user-identified topics. Several of these, including poetry, cookery and in some communities, genealogy, led to progression routes and to self-sustaining groups.

More significant in the way that LAT evolved was the WEA's free-floating role. The flexibility enabled by the Lottery funding allowed the WEA's project officer to be involved in three particular developments.

First, the development of the Thurncourt Pop-In Café on a former social housing estate hosting no voluntary sector organisations, no library, no leisure centre, no community faith organisations. It had two community centres which had rooms to let but no developmental presence. The neighbourhood had recently experienced racist disturbances fomented by the English Defence League (a neo-fascist group).

The WEA's Project Officer discussed the idea of a pop-up café with other LAT partners. In May 2015 it opened its doors weekly on Thursday mornings. Numbers initially were very low and over that summer rose to the mid-teens. With hindsight, this provided for mutual understanding to grow, relationships to be built and positive norms to be developed. In due course the café created a place of safety for many with previous engagement with the mental health system but also others from the estate who simply relished a regular structure, a positive and personal welcome, and a stimulating offer. This featured plenty of activity including armchair exercise, aromatherapy, drumming, and occasional participant-given talks – the first by a white resident fascinated by family links to Antigua – all in the same large room which allowed some to participate fully while others read the newspapers or socialised on the margins. Early on there was a memorable exchange between LAT partners. The Pakistani Youth and Community Association brought a group over to Thurncourt to run a session on Street Food. A few weeks later the café crowd went over to inner city Highfields to run a session on 'afternoon tea and cake': fun and interesting in itself but particularly remarkable because of Thurncourt's recent history.

In the autumn numbers grew rapidly. By Christmas there was a regular group of 35 and the café had to move to the larger community centre. Occasionally there were 60+ participants. Networks and friendships survived the lockdown and numbers have re-established themselves in 2023. The café is now self-sufficient, run by a volunteer from the early days with substantial participant help and sponsored by the local Co-operative Society supermarket.

Second, the development of the LAT Mental Wellbeing Curriculum. This drew heavily on the recently published National Health Service's 5 Steps to Wellbeing (NHS, 2015) but integrated thinking from other sources (Robertson 2014, King 2016) to emphasise what we were finding to be particularly significant: the importance of the inner life of older people, their sense of self and their thought processes, in addressing and preventing loneliness and social isolation. The curriculum was countercultural in a sector dominated by 'care' but it underpinned our concern to naturalise discussion about mental wellbeing and people's inner lives across LAT communities. In both white and ethnic minority communities, mental ill-health was associated with shame, taboo, fear or criminality. Co-working with an ally in the local mental health trust, we first piloted an introductory session based on: What makes for you having a good day? What makes for you having a bad day? What are your strategies for turning a bad day into a good day? With the help of one of her tutors, the Project Officer rolled this out in several LAT communities and followed it up with in-house classes – Coping with Loss and Communicate with Confidence.

Third, we ran a range of 'autobiographical projects' or Life Review. The core principle was that showing interest and giving undivided attention while participants review their lives can release willingness and ability to reflect, strengthening the sense of self from the inside out. The person reviewing is in charge of the agenda. Barbara Haight (2007) had produced The Structured Handbook of Life Review based on her work with residents of care homes. We adapted it to work with individuals in the community who wanted to work one-to-one on reviewing their lives in 60 minute sessions weekly over six-eight weeks, the Biographer producing an approximate transcript after each session and feeding back to the Reviewer for checking. Themes included: my family of origin; the family I co-created; branching points in my life; friendships; interests; things I'm most proud of; where I go from here. In the eight pilot Life Reviews, seemingly as a result of the attention and interest given by the Biographer over a sustained period of time, by the final session Reviewers had often become very clear of what they wanted to achieve in the next phase of their lives. Other similar pilots included a group-based Guided Autobiography (Birren, 2001), particularly with the Gujarati-speaking community. The WEA ran a Make an Exhibition of Yourself course (with our national partner 64 Million Artists), and we have recently piloted an individual life review (Haight & Haight, 2007) in a South Asian care home.

So the WEA's success came down to building on the importance of 'association' in the lives of older people and having the flexibility to go where older people were. Making open provision but being proactive in encouraging the participation of usually marginalised groups was also important. Another factor was meeting older people's need for structure and having something to look forward to. This helped to encourage co-creation and exploring with sensitivity the inner lives of older people. Bringing learning into care settings through social pedagogical approaches enabled 'where education and care meet'.

Case Study, The Belgrave Zoomers: building a learning community online

The second case study is the work of a member of LAT's 'community connector' team. This Community Connector spent the first 18 months of her part-time role fearing - as many community development workers do – that she was not being very productive. But 'being around', being and getting informed, being friendly, available, building relationships, understanding the resources in the area and developing relationships with community organisations, built a strong foundation. Her connections resulted in, among others, the development of the Belgrave Ladies Wellness Group run by a volunteer team with a regular attendance of 80+, an Action for Happiness (A4H)-based support group, and a course run for older South Asian women on anxiety and depression by the local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies organisation.

Then lockdown struck, severely limiting community connection. 'Somebody somewhere's son' was working on Zoom. The A4H support group somehow managed to have a Zoom meeting themselves, found it so reassuring in the early panic of lockdown and started experimenting. Through a mixture of WhatsApp and phone contacts the existing groups were helped on to Zoom and then activity seemed to mushroom. At the core was a weekly Chit Chat group. This started as a social group for reassurance and connection and maintained these functions as it developed first as an information point – health professionals queued up to speak with participants – and then as an occasional focus for environmental and domestic violence campaigns as the group regularly had 80 attendees. In February 2021 after 11 months of Leicester's extended lockdown the Zoom programme had 4400 log-ins to 17 groups.

The characteristics of this Zoom community included: the sense of identity and belonging; an inclusive approach to problem-solving not only to curriculum development and the training of those completely new to Zoom and using a variety of devices, but also to engaging both with socially marginalised groups and those with limited confidence or access to technology. There was progression of several from camera and mike off, to camera-off, mike-on, to lurking on the edges, to playing a full part in groups, to, on occasion even co-facilitating sessions. It demonstrated the ability to normalise learning despite the participants not only being South Asian elders, not traditionally easy to engage in 'learning', but also doing it by Zoom.

Learning from LAT

There are, perhaps, four main lessons from LAT's experience of working with older, non-traditional learners, both as described here but also in other aspects of the partnership.

> There is in many a thirst for engagement in developmental activity, for pursuing their inherent human propensity for 'learning' – though they don't often use that term.

The value of taking 'learning opportunities' to where older people feel comfortable, developing partnerships with community groups which facilitate places of association.

The value of a 'curriculum' wider than the norm, which encompasses mental wellbeing, strengthening the sense of self, reclaiming a social role in their community.

The potential of 'learning intermediaries' (Schuller and Watson 2010). In pursuit of helping (older) people reclaim their self-concept as curious, creative learners in a sustainable way, might there be value in engaging with intermediaries such as social workers, health professionals, probation officers, care workers, community connectors, social prescribers, taxi drivers and hairdressers? They could explore how their day-to-day interactions might be enhanced by viewing their public as human beings with strengths, a commitment to their own flourishing and an innate propensity for learning?

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'Conversation- making': an East Asian perspective on older adults learning

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Introduction

Conversational learning can be said to have started with Socrates (470-399 BC) when he mentored intellectuals by questioning them to think in order to arrive at answers. He said: 'I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think'. The East takes the opposite approach, as Confucius (551-479 BC) would give several answers, which might seem confusing, to any question, and students had to figure out the answers based on their moral standards and behaviour. Thus, both West and East have different approaches to conversational learning based on their differing philosophies and social-cultural backgrounds.

Everyone enjoys conversations which can contribute knowledge, experience and opinions to later life learning, and particularly to informal learning processes. Conversationalists appreciate having an element of choice in the learning process, where they do not want to be patronised (Gibbs, Sani & Thompson, 2007). An analogy of later life learning is the Chinese saying '活到老, 学到老' ('Live until you are old, study until you are old') giving importance to learning throughout life. Learning and conversations are viewed as a holistic process of seeking objectives to generate wealth and overcome challenges. This case study illustrates a conversational approach to later life learning in Singapore.

West and East perspectives of learning

Pask's Conversation Theory (1976) proposes two distinct learning styles 'holist learning strategies' and 'serialist learning strategies' which analysed conversations as both teaching and learning activities. His algorithm method formalised conversational concepts of agreement, understanding and consciousness (mindset) as the first cybernetics approach to analysing conversations. Today's artificial intelligence (AI) claims to be able to identify learners' emotions, and may thus reveal information about learning styles.

In Kolb's Learning Cycle conversational learning experiences are reflected, concepts activated, and new experiences implemented leading to concrete experience. It has

two parts: the first is that learning follows a four-stage cycle (Concrete experience, Reflective observation, Abstract conceptualisation, and Active experimentation) to transform experiences into knowledge. The second part focused on learning styles to acquire knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In the same manner, conversation-making or conversational learning go through the same process of applying abstract concepts to new situations, and allowing new learning to be added on and experienced. Knowles's andragogy (Knowles, 1984) is built on characteristics of adult learners which indicate learning styles. His 'Five Assumptions of Adult Learners' is predicted as a cycle of 'Self-Concept, Adult Learner Experience, Readiness to Learn, Orientation of Learning, and Motivation to Learn' to understand adult, including older, learners.

The East has a different five-stage cycle of learning based on elemental energy flow first conceptualised in the Ba-Zi model ('Eight Characters'; Tang dynasty 618–907 A.D.). Though rarely mentioned nor widely documented, Ba-Zi energy flow is unconsciously applied in most learning situations. This can be seen when Asian adults (mostly in their 80s-100s) consulted the Chinese (Farmers') Almanac (Windridge, 2002) for guidance on daily activities according to seasonal flows and the personal Ba-Zi Chart of dominant elemental energy. Based on the Ba-Zi theory, a Wuxing ('Five Stars') Learning Cycle is envisaged with five stages of conversation: resources, learner, output, knowledge and authority linked cyclically (Kuan, 2021); see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Wuxing Learning Cycle
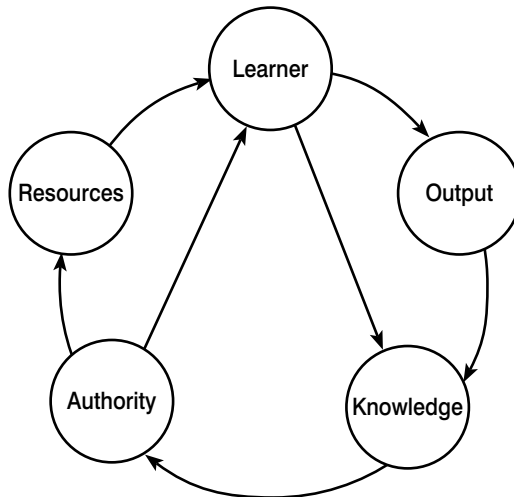
The learning situation starts with intention in the learner's mind. Learners will look for resources to start conversations and gain benefits (information, experiences, friendships, relationships). When more outputs or benefits are amassed, it becomes knowledge or wealth (tangibles and intangibles). To assist learning, there is an

authority which represents the rules and regulations in the learning process to guide productive conversations or produce new resources. A good example is weaving baskets where a mentor is sourced to teach. As knowledge is gained with guidance, new resources (better materials) are sought to produce better quality baskets. When the Wuxing Learning Cycle is deciphered with personal Ba-Zi Charts, it can reveal learning styles (Kuan, 2021). The Eastern learning style is to capitalise on available resources to create new knowledge continuously.

Case study of SMS (Seniors-Meet-Seniors) conversation platform

Members (ages 50 – 90 years old) of University of the 3rd Age, Singapore (a non-profit NGO) have a Seniors-Meet-Seniors 2023 (SMS) conversation platform for regular conversations, meeting physically and online since 2017. No Socratic questioning method of learning is needed since there are no teachers or students, only friends learning and sharing life experiences, perspectives, and feelings about lifestyles and their comments on national policies in communities. SMS conversations are guided by rules of discussion to allow safe and productive conversations with no adverse comments on race, religion and cultures, and agreeing to disagree constructively. Essentially, it requires appreciative listening, respecting views and having fun in the process.

Different conversational topics were facilitated by members and sometimes by youths. During discussions where several views were shared, members would accept or reject views based on their own cultural-religion beliefs. Topics on reminiscences and telling stories of life experiences were engaging. In one session, a member sourced information and prepared questions for discussions on 'family love'. Members learnt that parents love their children equally, but differently, just like one's fingers' lengths. And, when children complained about their birth, parents would reply that 'parents do not choose you; the soul chooses who is to be born'. Members agreed that children below five years old tend to idolise their parents, and teaching them to be good people is important. Otherwise, these grown-up children may demonise their parents in later life. These insights become new knowledge that can be used to manage difficult children. When conversations flow didactically to life issues, co-produced wisdom like 'older adults do not treat food as medicines, then medicines will be food for them later', and that 'older adults live until ready to expire'.

During COVID-19 lockdowns, Project Buddy (2020) was launched for older adults and volunteers to share conversations online and/or by phone. In this instance, older adults' preferences for languages, races and genders were matched with volunteers' biodata to ensure safe conversations. During lockdowns older adults had a higher tendency to loneliness and depression and needed friendly contacts to maintain social and mental health balances.

Over the years, members had shared topics including Ba-Zi theory, COVID-19, families, friendships, health, public policies, reminiscences, retirements, parenthood for personal developmental growth and spiritual yearnings.

SMS conversations are presently held in libraries, museums and shopping malls.

Members find it meaningful to step out of their houses to visit these public places which bring back memories. Held twice, occasionally thrice per month, it is open to all. It benefits jobless older adults, those who have never been to libraries and museums, the socially shy, and those who have low competency in spoken English to attend. There are benefits of self-reflection when listening and learning from others. Some members used the SMS platform to launch their training courses; however, there should be no multi-level marketing. SMS conversations promote intergenerational learning where students showcase their schools' projects with older adults. Friendly conversations create community networks for bonding and for getting updated on the latest government policies. SMS's conversation style had impressed some visiting Thai professors who suggested using it for their retiring and retired professors to share knowledge with members of their universities of the third age (U3As).

Conversation-making as later-life learning

The last 10 years have seen the growth of conversational learning, from Gurteen Knowledge Cafes (Gurteen, nd), developmental exchanges in autobiographical writings (Thornton, Collins, Birren & Svensson, 2011), to national conversations in countries. Conversations are well established in universities of the third age (U3As) which are the largest in the world (Katz, 2019, p. vii). Reminiscence stories, knowledge café-type conversations and community activities are some approaches to making friends with similar interests.

Confucius (Lao Tzu) once said 'Those who know, do not speak. Those who speak, do not know'. He was then talking about wisdom, truths and productive conversations. Such a mindset may explain why older East Asians generally do not share their thinking, and would rather remain calm and observe the flow of events, remain detached, and not participate in conversations unless asked to. Today, such a behavioural mindset is unsuitable as older adults need social relationships with friends and family, and to learn something new every day to feel alive.

Later life learning is today's search for life-deep meaning for social-emotional and physical connections. While artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have enabled connectivity, they also created fears or technophobia in older adults. It began when computer-savvy young people were impatient to teach IoT (Internet of Things) as older adults are seen to be slower cognitively and physically. But older adults are self-directed learners and many can log into Zoom meetings. Still, they find themselves losing respect for their knowledge and experiences as computers can collect and store personal information, regardless of whether they are accurate or not. The future of AI is creating communication with human-like machines where machines can communicate like humans (but without feelings). The antidote is actual human conversations where bodily nuances can be seen. There is a natural flow pattern of relationships with each other and learning together harmoniously. It follows the Wuxing Learning Cycle (Kuan, 2021,) which transforms five elemental energies (representing different emotions) into conversations. It is a self-help attitude of taking responsibility for one's learning.

Conclusions

West and East have different approaches to learning, but their ideals of older adults having conversations and feeling respected for their views are the same. Conversation-making is a part of later life learning as older adults learn to stay connected through the use of IoT (Internet-of-Things) to be part of a community of friends. Generative AI tools (like ChatGPT) are evolving to become AI-powered conversation partners to perform traditional conversations done by humans. Older adults need active engagement in their personal lives and the community as they share life stories through conversations. The SMS Conversation platform allows different ethnic groups to share views on social and personal issues. We believe that in Singapore's context, safe and productive conversations do strengthen the development of multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious understanding by building trust and respect.

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