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Older women as lifelong learners

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Introduction

This chapter examines the experiences of older women aged 60–85 who were participants in a collaborative research project called ‘Stories of Ageing’. This three-year longitudinal study was designed to counter the invisibility of older women and the purveying of ageist images about growing older. Using principles based on Haug’s (1987) memory work and Walkerdine’s (Lucey et al. 1996) video diary methodologies, forty women explored their own life stories by engaging in critical processes of writing, filming, talking and performance. The processes of producing visual and verbal texts had powerful effects on these older learners and challenged the idea that creativity and cognitive ability necessarily decline with age or that ageing itself is necessarily a ‘problem’. The project was successful both in documenting change in the lives of older women, and in developing a pedagogic model of lifelong learning which produced change.

The ‘Stories of Ageing’ project presents a number of challenges to current conceptions of lifelong learning. In recent years there has been a proliferation of excellent learning spaces for older women and men sponsored by bodies such as the Council of Adult Education, the University of the Third Age and a variety of community-based groups committed to agendas of positive ageing. Typically, however, these spaces are described as Third Age education, for the young-old, or Fourth Age education – for the old-old. They are not included as part of the larger project of lifelong learning.

This is a curious phenomenon, given the OECD definition of lifelong learning as creating a society of individuals who are motivated to continue learning throughout their lives, both formally and informally (OECD 1996). In practice, however, ‘throughout their lives’ appears to mean ‘working lives’. There may well be an urgent need to promote the widest possible participation in education and training for all age groups, as Morris (2001) and others argue. But individuals who are post-work, or in the 60–85 demographic of the women in our study, are presently excluded from the vision of lifelong learning.

This exclusion is evident in the language of educational policy-makers, such
as Australian David Kemp, when he was Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

There is little doubt that the nations which will succeed in the 21st century will be knowledge societies – societies rich in human capital, effective in their capacity to utilise and deploy their human resources productively and successful in the creation and commercialisation of new knowledge. In such a world there will need to be greater opportunities than ever before for lifelong learning and for preparation not just for the first job but for succeeding jobs.

(Kemp 1999)

It is also evident in the 1998 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey, which concluded that Australian participation in lifelong learning was high, with 72.4 per cent of the population between 15 and 64 years taking part (Watson 1999). Amazingly, however, those in the over-64 years category were not ‘counted’ in the survey, presumably because they were too old for lifelong learning. In many university lifelong learning policies, we find a similar focus on participation in education and training for work, on upgrading professional skills and qualifications. The goal is to create a disposition to learning in younger students which continues post-university, rather than develop multi-age learning communities that genuinely span the lifecourse.

A focus on employability, jobs and working lives is perhaps not surprising in light of rapid economic changes and increased levels of global competition. Yet an economic or narrow developmental approach to lifelong learning creates a number of significant exclusions. It is at odds with more inclusive goals, such as widening participation to groups of people previously excluded from taking up learning opportunities due to social, economic or geographical constraints (NIACE 2004). And it excludes learners who are post-work.

So to be provocative I’d ask: Do we see the post-work years as the end of productive learning and contributing? Is there an age when we think intellectual capacity ceases? And how old do we think the lifelong learner can be? As old as 60 or 70? What about age 80? Or 90? To explore such questions, I examine the vigorous, intellectual work accomplished by one community of older Australian women. I argue that we need to design new spaces of lifelong learning that foster growth and change, rather than ‘keeping mum busy’; and that older women need to be taken seriously as learners and positioned as producers of knowledge.

My aim in this chapter is to use the ‘Stories of Ageing’ project to rethink what it means to learn until the end of our lives. I analyse both the pedagogy of the writing, video and performance workshops and the stories produced by the women to illustrate how the process of text production fostered a remaking and rewriting of self. Excerpts from a final group interview are selected to highlight how the women’s participation over three years in challenging
narrative communities affected their lives outside the workshops. I conclude
by reflecting on the potential of such work for recasting lifelong learning as
cross generational learning with wide social and cultural, as well as personal
benefits.

The research project

The ‘Stories of Ageing’ project was designed to examine ageing as change,
rather than decline or deterioration. Arber and Ginn (1995) argue that while
gender and ageing are inextricably intertwined in social life and personal biog-
raphy, they have not been integrated in sociological theory and have rarely been
researched in terms of their intersections. Further, there have been few adequate
paradigms for integrating research on the biological dimensions of life with the
social and cultural features (Turner 1984).

Our study of older women called on more coherent approaches to ageing
which have begun to develop in recent years. These include the recent pre-
occupation in social gerontology with positive ageing and the deconstruction
of negative images of ageing. We have drawn on lifecourse perspectives
developed in the sociology of ageing, in particular what Bury (1995) refers to as
dynamic approaches (e.g. Arber and Evandrou 1993). And we share postmodern
views of ageing (e. g. Featherstone et al. 1991) and feminist poststructuralist
perspectives on ageism and ageing (Laws 1995; Ray 1996).

Our research design was innovative in at least three ways:

• its focus on women, because they not only live longer than men, but have been
  marginalised in mainstream research, with men being the normative standard;
• its longitudinal, three-year design which anticipated growth and change in the
  lives of older women. While it is common to examine change in the lives of
  young people, so entrenched is the cultural expectation that age is about
  decline or death, that longitudinal studies of the social and cultural aspects of
  ageing are rare;
• its critical and interdisciplinary focus on cultural stories and representation.
  These provide different lenses on ageing outside a biomedical focus.

Our focus on women’s own stories and visual representations of themselves was
pivotal. We believed these could effect change in both theoretical representa-
tions of ageing and in the lived realities of ageing women. For us, the relation
between lived and imagined stories is significant. The stories we tell provide the
frameworks through which we act (Lyotard 1984). Stories are interpretive
resources for dealing with the everyday world and for taking ourselves up
within the cultural story lines available to us (Gilbert 1993; Davies 1994). Such
notions allow us to theorise the ageing woman as positioned within the cate-
gories our available cultural narratives have provided (Kamler and Feldman
1995). But we also see her as capable of taking up discourses through which
she is shaped and through which she may reshape herself. This is the case whether the story she produces is a verbal text, like those produced in the writing workshops, or a performance of everyday life, like those filmed in the video workshops of this project.

For three years we worked with forty women, aged 60–85, living in their communities to produce stories that captured the complexity and diversity of growing older. The women brought a mix of personal and professional histories and came from a range of heritages, including Eastern European, Anglo-Celtic, Philippina and Vietnamese. We took the women seriously as learners and offered them the opportunity to learn new skills — in writing and video production and later in theatre performance. They, in turn, offered their stories and insights so that we, as younger researchers could gain more complex understandings of ageing from their filming and writing. From the outset, this was a cross-generational learning exchange; older women from the community and younger researchers from the university working together, using our different knowledges and experience to produce new understandings of ageing together.

**Workshops spaces for lifelong learning**

We constructed the ‘Stories of Ageing’ workshops as sites of pedagogy and data production. The challenge of the project was to create a pedagogic space that would allow women to rewrite the narrow range of cultural narratives that define ageing as loss and deterioration. We regarded the forty older women participants as collaborative partners in the investigation, rather than research subjects and developed strategies to position them as knowledgeable text producers.

In the writing workshops we used principles based on Frigga Haug’s (1987) memory work to develop a pedagogy which was collective and deconstructive. Stories were drafted, revised and developed as part of the group process. Typically, we met weekly for two hours with two groups of ten to twelve women over an eight-week period each year of the project. Each week the women wrote at home on a topic we designated. They brought their texts to the workshop to read aloud to one another for comment and critique. These texts always promoted much discussion and raucous laughter. At the end of each workshop we set a topic for the following week, usually emerging from our discussion.

While some of the women had previously attended creative writing workshops, our approach was different in its critical orientation. We shared a political agenda with the women — to rewrite negative and diminishing narratives of ageing. Together we were committed to developing richer and more complex perspectives about what it means to grow older. We encouraged the women to attend to the detail of what appeared to them at first to be boring. We gave them tools to ask critical questions about the writing and treat it as clay (Kamler
2001b). They wrote and rewrote, they looked at what they had not said as well as what they had. They developed other endings, other ways of thinking about their experience as older women in ordinary spaces (Kamler 1999).

In the video workshops, we developed a similar pedagogy of writing, discussion and critique to help women produce video diaries of their lives. We used the video diary methodology developed by Valerie Walkerdine and her colleagues (Lucey et al. 1996) to access the stories of young working-class women. Their agenda too had been feminist and they used video on the assumption it was a technology which would somehow access reality more directly and in less mediated ways than language and writing. This was an assumption we modified as we came to realise that video images were no less mediated by our influence in the workshops than the written stories.

In the first year of the study we worked with a group of predominantly Anglo-Australian women; in the second year, we worked with the Australian-Vietnamese Womens’ Welfare Association in Melbourne to form a second video workshop of Vietnamese women using an interpreter. As none of the researchers spoke Vietnamese and the Vietnamese women speak little English, we needed to negotiate complex processes of translation and interpretation and effect cross-cultural dialogue without a common language (Kamler and Threadgold 2003). We offered the women camera skills and engaged in critical analyses of visual and televisual images. The women made videos in their own homes and communities and we viewed, discussed and edited these in the workshops. Learning techniques of story-boarding, narrative and editing extended the women’s technical expertise. These new skills gave them technological credibility with their grandchildren and made them more critical viewers of visual representations of older women.

In the third year of the project women from the writing and video workshops came together to produce and perform a multimedia performance script ‘We’re Not Nice Little Old Ladies’ (Stories of Ageing Project 1999). This was an exciting collaboration between the research team and a local Melbourne Council to commemorate the 1999 International Year of Older Persons. The Glen Eira City Council donated a theatre space and the services of a professional writer and director to convert the women’s research stories into a public performance. Importantly, the idea for the performance came from the older women, not the research team. As the women came to believe in the collective power of their stories to teach others, they asked for more direct involvement in moving their stories from our workshops into the community at large.

What eventuated was a seven-stage, twelve-month project plan, including script development and theatre skills, culminating in two public performances by the women in November 1999 and the publication of a script. The director used a team of theatre artists to take workshops and involve the women throughout the decision-making process to develop a wide range of skills and sense of ownership. The women were guided through an exploration of staging ideas, the use of props, movement, vocal work, sound effects and visual images.
They made decisions on publication format and artwork, marketing and publicity. They were directly involved in all aspects of backstage, stage and front-of-house management.

This was intensive, demanding work. The older women’s creativity, energy and good humour over the three years were inspiring to younger researchers trying to re-imagine the later years of our own lives. Their critical writing and video work and extraordinary stamina in the rehearsal and performance process provide a significant challenge to notions of lifelong learning that exclude older learners. In the process of making these texts, the women began to create other positions outside stereotypes of ageing. Making stories became a powerful way to reflect on the past but also to create new understandings of ageing and themselves.

**Home sweet home**

Over the three years of the project the women produced a rich array of cultural products in the form of video diaries, written stories, interviews and a theatrical, multimedia performance script. Collectively their stories capture the diversity of growing older. They tell of older women’s sexuality, courtship and solitude. They explore relationships with family and friends, experiences of migration and homebuilding and death. They deal with negotiating the challenges of daily life as the women actively confront the emotional and physical changes that accompany ageing.

Some of their richest stories focus on the ordinary topic of ‘home’. Home is typically thought to be one of the boundaries that constrains an older woman’s life and keeps her isolated and lonely. Home is also the space where women labour to look after others and nurture them. The women, however, told other stories about what it means to make a home at the end of one’s life. Unsentimental stories of being contented and alone, of being alone and part of a community, of growth and change. Phillipa writes about the anticipation and pleasures of the garden she has created:

I came here in 1975 and it was the planting and laying out of the garden that first endeared me to unit living and on my own for the first time in my life. Come and we’ll walk around the garden.

These pots of primula and polyanthus add colour and a welcome at the front door. Things are starting to bloom, the wattles, westringia and correa. This green flowering correa picks up the light of the night sky and becomes as fairy lights. The casuarina and kangaroo paw give much pleasure still, they being the first planting all those years ago. This fairly dense planting remains a joy as well as providing privacy from an overlooking unit. There are five units with each owner responsible for their own garden.

This plot was a herb garden until the heat and dry of last summer dried
all the plants. I now have it filled with bulbs, freesia and daffodil. Since the rain, the herbs are breaking through, which the bulbs will cope with.

This picket fence and gate I recently had built so as to close off my back garden, now awaits a coat of paint. Through the gate we come across my latest endeavour – three metres of a new brick path which extends an existing path to the new fence. With family all interstate no-one has yet said what a fine job I did. Yes, it does look professional and I know they will say the same. It was the sweeping of the sand to fill between the pavers that gave the right finish...

Enjoying a cup of coffee while standing at the kitchen window, I see a stream of light and colour across the grasses of the closing day, the bird sounds echo in the distance.

The pleasure of Phillipa’s text lies in its invitation to the reader to enter a space we rarely see. It is a space Phillipa has made for herself, a riot of colour, scent and sound, pleasuring all of the bodily senses. This is a place where she is quite literally ‘at home’, where the older woman asserts her right to make her freedom. It is a place where things dry up and die and struggle to live again.

This is the first place Phillipa ever lived alone and she lives in peace, fully connected to the world around her. Her writing brings a different understanding into existence. Ageing need not bring loss of sensual pleasure. Ageing bodies remain active and fulfilled – planting, laying out a garden, making a path – inviting to others. The rhythms of Phillipa’s prose hold the traces of her body at work, labouring to produce growth and change, pausing in a quiet moment to enjoy a stream of light at day’s end.

Other women in the workshops constructed lively images of living alone. Some worried over the challenges of leaving the family home for a seniors’ community, others over the pain of moving house so frequently or of their children behaving badly. Rich images from the video diaries show Vietnamese women meditating in serene, early morning domestic spaces; praying in temples with their communities; exercising with diligence and humour; singing while chopping vegetables, creating rhythms of food preparation and giving to community and family. A scene from the performance script ‘We’re not Nice Little Old Ladies’ creates a collage of verbal and performed images about home at the end of one’s life.

Dramatis personae: Four women between the ages of 70 and 85
Scene: Melbourne, Australia

[Two women are sitting centre-stage with a tea pot, two cups and a cake plate on the table before them. One woman is standing stage-left placing flowers into a vase. Another woman is sitting at a desk stage-right with a photo album and a pack of cards.]

Table woman: Home now is my garden and my bed. It’s the place where I
properly belong and where I find rest, refuge and satisfaction. When I’ve been out all day and am ‘fair done-in’ I can’t wait to get home, go inside, lock the door, ignore the winks of the telephone machine, pour myself a drink and flop into a chair from which I survey my back garden.

Desk woman: We started to think about moving to a unit or village but I loved my little home. We had built it straight after World War II – in a paddock – with no road, electricity, gas or sewerage. How could I leave this home? Every corner had history, every shrub and tree planted and nurtured. How could I leave all this?

Table woman: I just think I will live a little longer here... and enjoy tomorrow’s walk up the hill as the sun sets, and the wonderful golden light with the clouds in the still cold evenings – and the deep blue of the mountains. Yes, I will stay a little longer.

Desk woman: I’m having pangs about moving away. I know it’s something I need to do, and part of me looks forward to the new challenge. But another part of me cries out – this is not the same as any other of many previous departures.

Flower woman: Although some of us have trouble adjusting to old age on our own after our partner has died, many women find – maybe unexpectedly – that this is a truly liberating time. No longer does one have to tidy away things that might offend the partner; or have meals at regular specified times; or sleep at night or shut all the windows – or open them. One can feel free to just sit if one feels so inclined. One can choose for one’s self.

(Kamler 2001a: 232)

The audience of grandchildren, sons and daughters, friends, university professors and members of the community who watched the older women perform their stories and ageing bodies under the spotlight were mesmerised. This was a rare cultural space where older women became authorised teachers. They quietly insisted that their younger audience think past the stereotypes of ageing and imagine what it might mean to make a home at the end of our lives.

Collectively, their stories refuse ‘home sweet home’ images of stability. They represent ‘making home’ as a lifelong process of change, of remaking and rebuilding after divorce or the death of a child or spouse; after war, or marriage, or migration to Australia; or ill health. Such stories have a great deal to teach a culture obsessed with youth and fearful of ageing. They pose important challenges to a public policy tradition which tends to regard older women as a homogeneous group and imagine them as passive recipients of government services, while older women construct themselves as lively contributors to their communities.

Ageing as change

The ‘Stories of Ageing’ project was successful in developing a pedagogic model of lifelong learning that documented and produced change in the older
women’s lives. Meeting together in the workshops the women found a community of survivors, a space of friendship and laughter and a place to be taken seriously as learners. But the narrative work also had significant material effects on the older women’s sense of well-being and survival. Through the process of physically remaking stories of ageing in film, writing and performance, many women began to rewrite themselves as well as their texts.

This is evident in the final group interview evaluation of the project, where the women reflected on the changes they experienced. Here Connie, the writer and producer of a highly polished video diary titled ‘Step by Step’, reflects on her renewed confidence and pleasure in learning to control the technologies of ‘young people’.

**CONNIE THE SKITE**

*Muriel:* Did it change you in any way, Connie

*Connie:* Yes, I’m a skite now.

*All:* [laughter]

*Jo:* Is that what your family call you?

*Connie:* No, not really. But it used to be I didn’t want to tell anybody I was making a video because you know what most people are like your own age. They just look at you to think ‘What on earth is she up to?’ Especially the video because that seems to be for young people, doesn’t it? Getting around with cameras and everything and tripods and all this sort of thing. But anyway, now I don’t mind telling them and they seen me on TV the other night and they got a different view of me and I’ve got a different view of them, too.

*All:* [laughter and commentary]

*Connie:* Yeah, but I do a bit of public speaking and it has given me more confidence, you know, sort of thing. That’s what I’ve found about it and I just loved every minute of it. And as for that performance and everything, how it all come together was just marvellous. It just seemed to be bits and pieces and this and that and then all of a sudden we’ve got a lovely book, a book launch, a beautiful show everyone is raving about it and it’s on television. What a time we’ve had!

Beryl was a participant in the writing workshops. Like Connie, she speaks of validation and an enhanced sense of agency from her participation in the project. But most unexpectedly, her engagement in textual production also helped her find the courage to put herself back in the workplace arena she still longed for.

**BERYL GOES BACK TO WORK**

*Beryl:* I cheated coming here because I came late, you were supposed to be 70 and I was 65.

*All:* [laughter] Wooooooooo . . .
Beryl: I did the writing and I didn’t want to do the performance and I didn’t. All my life I have conformed. And if anyone said jump, all I ever said was ‘How high?’ And since I’ve been coming here I don’t want to. But when I came I was 65, and I was sick, really sick. And I was telling everybody I was like an 85 year old. Until I came here and I saw some 85 year olds and I reviewed that to 105. And then walking through the city one day, I don’t know if it was the topic of the week or what, but I was walking and all the workers were out at their lunch hour and I had this overwhelming grief. ‘I want to go back to work. I want to be part of all that.’ And I have.

Barbara: So what did you do? How did you do it?
Beryl: With a lot of encouragement from Pat I went to an employment thing and found a young woman who said, ‘You’re only 66.’ And I think with all the writing we did about me, I was able to write away letters and tell people how good I was, with this young woman pushing me from behind. And I got a job and it’s just what I want. I mean it’s only two afternoons a week, it’s not a big deal, but to me it is. And it was that day that I walked through the streets coming here. I’m a staff support person and counsellor at Mobil House. And I’m back in the big corporate world you know and I don’t have enough clothes to wear, but I couldn’t have done it without all this. First, all the discipline of focusing on a subject and then being listened to and validated which was so powerful.

The workshops were clearly a significant learning space for Connie, Beryl, and other older women in the project, but two features stand out in relation to rethinking the project of lifelong learning. The first is that we regarded ageing as a process of change, rather than decline. The second is that we designed the pedagogic spaces of the workshops to position the women as knowledgeable producers of text and foster their intellectual growth. We treated older participants as both teachers and learners. We provided opportunities for reciprocal mentoring and recycling what they learned back into their communities. The older women learned new skills and technologies from younger people, but these were mobilised to produce new understandings of their own. The younger generation, in turn, became their audience – their students – challenged by what these older women had to say.

Our work was small scale – forty women over three years – but it is suggestive of an approach to lifelong learning that is less ageist and more gender-inclusive than current conceptions. Such an approach emphasises teaching and learning across generations, rather than updating skills for the workforce. It positions older learners as knowledge producers, not simply consumers. It invites older people to make new knowledge, rather than just keep up to date with the latest ideas and trends of younger people. It seriously addresses the question: How do we use the knowledge accumulated over a lifetime in ways that benefit not only the learner – the older person – but the society in which they have lived during their lifetime? If we could imagine this kind of learning
opportunity on a larger scale, then perhaps we'd all look forward to growing older ourselves.

Note

1 The 'Stories of Ageing' project was made possible by a three-year Australian Research Council Grant (1997–1999) entitled *Stories of Ageing: A Longitudinal Study of Women's Self-representation*. The chief investigators were Barbara Kamler (Deakin University), Terry Threadgold (Monash University, now relocated at Cardiff University), and Susan Feldman (Melbourne University, now relocated at Victoria University).