This is the published version (version of record) of:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30007988

Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2007, ETIC Prague
TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE: OLDER ADULTS IN A COMMUNITY SETTING

Peter J Smith (pjbs@deakin.edu.au)  
Deakin University, Australia

Karin Barty (kbarty@deakin.edu.au)  
Deakin University, Australia

Elizabeth Stacey (estacey@deakin.edu.au)  
Deakin University, Australia

Abstract: This research was designed to assess whether the older adult learning in IT environments and online represents a different pedagogy from that of younger learners, as has been suggested by some authors in the literature. The study was conducted in a community learning and employment centre in an Australian rural town, and involved interviews with six teachers of older adults, and nine older learners. The results did not support the need for a particular pedagogy for older learners, instead supporting an approach to teaching that was based around teachers identifying learner characteristics and needs and responding to them as individuals. This finding has been interpreted in the context of already published iterative and interactive teaching models, and has considerable implications for the effective teaching and learning of older adults. Those implications are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Older learners, community learning, online, collaborative learning.
1. INTRODUCTION
There is strong recognition at political and government levels that older adults in Australia need to be engaged meaningfully in social, cultural and economic life. Previous research indicates that involvement in education, training, and in social networking are major contributors to the psychological well being of older adults, and contribute also to the health of the communities within which they live.

Statistics available in Australia indicate that the participation by older adults (60 years and over) is increasing in the Adult, Community and Further Education sector (ACFE, 2002, p.8) and in the Vocational Education and Training sector (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2003). The University of the Third Age provides yet another avenue of participation for currently around 30,000 members nation-wide, with the U3A Online initiative providing electronic learning capacity. In the UK, Fisher (2004) reports that the participation in LearnDirect online courses by older adults has been ‘overwhelming’ and that older age groups represent a considerable percentage of students. Also in the UK Carlton and Soulsby (1999) have provided statistical data to support the need for concentrated response on the learning needs of older people, and the potential for learning through technologically mediated forms of delivery.

Each of Findsen (2003), Earle (1992) and Earle and Earle (1996) have shown that a major issue for older adults was involvement in education; but that educational structures and provisions do not serve older adults well. Supporting the argument that older adults seek out and engage with mental activity was the finding that the most preferred activity was reading/study or attending classes. There is also argument that the need for engagement in mental activity among older people increases as a function of levels of prior education (Anstey, 1999). As the educational levels of older Australians increases, so too does their need for engagement in mental activity in older age. Findsen (2003) has emphasised this likelihood that the ‘baby boomers’ will demand higher degrees of participation in learning activities, and draws on Sheey (1995) to argue that this cohort is forging new directions for what older people may be capable of, and wish to participate in. A further driver for change here is the emergence of the knowledge society and the increasing numbers of older adults who will have been members of that knowledge society in their working life, who will wish to continue to be involved in a post-work period, and who will wish to pursue their learning online (Fisher, 2004; SeniorNet Survey, 2002).

A number of researchers and writers have addressed the issues involved in engaging older adults in continued learning. There are different views on whether or not older adults have any special or unique pedagogical needs or characteristics. For example, Mayhorn, Stronge, McLaughlin and Rogers (2004) provided a set of recommendations for effective computer training with older adults, while a major study conducted by Gelade, Catts and Gerber (2003) also noted special characteristics and argued for what they termed ‘an older learner pedagogy’ (p. 148). On the other hand, Jarvis (2001) argued that older adults do not need to be taught by different teaching methods from younger ones (p. 57), a view also held by others (e.g., Kliegel and Altgassen, 2006). Comparisons between these studies is not straightforward since there were differences between the sample characteristics, in terms of the ages of participants, their health, and whether or not they were working or had retired.

At the same time, it is argued here that to a large degree whether or not there is a need for a special and separate ‘older adult pedagogy’ may be more to do with conceptualisation of the problem than with real differences in view. The work of Smith and Dalton (2005) and Smith (2006), in their
large scale national project with learners of all ages in the vocational sector, resulted in the finding that a pedagogy defined as a static clutch of activities and processes applied to any identifiable group of learners is more a place to start teaching than to finish it. Their research indicated that, while experienced teachers commenced teaching each new group (either face to face or online) with certain expectations of the group, these expectations became quickly modified through an iterative process that interacted with each individual learner, such that the teacher in a small group responded predominantly to the needs of individuals rather than to a particular pedagogical model. What became important here was access to a range of teaching and learning strategies that could be applied differentially with individual learners.

In the study reported here our interest was to test whether or not there is an identifiable ‘older age pedagogy’ (Gelade et al, 2003) that is useful as part of the set of strategies required to provide effective IT training and online learning; or whether teachers adjust their teaching to older adults in an iterative way as shown by Smith and Dalton (2005) and Smith (2006), such that they identify strategies as learners need them and invoke them accordingly.

The research was undertaken in a community learning and employment centre in a rural Australian town as part of a broader set of investigations. The learning centre had recognised a need to engage older people in that environment in continued lifelong learning and was developing strategies to attract and service older adults both in face to face programs and in online learning. Our general interest was in the strategies to develop an online learning service with a specific focus on identifying whether staff and learners had an insight into any special pedagogical needs or characteristics. If there are special pedagogical considerations, as some have suggested in the literature, there would be a consequent need for adjustments to be made to online and face to face learning programs to accommodate those needs, and there would also be a need for professional development for teaching staff.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

A community learning centre in a Central Victorian town of 8,500 inhabitants was selected as a research site as there had been considerable activity there in the previous year to develop online learning. Participants in the study were teachers and learners in face to face information technology classes. Some were from groups for ‘nervous beginners’, some from groups especially formed for women, and some from classes of over 45s offered specifically to enable older people to improve their skills for employment. Nine older learners, aged between 60 and 75, were interviewed.

Also interviewed were three current and three former teachers/tutors at the community learning centre. Most had taught multi-aged groups, but several had substantial experience in teaching groups of older folk. Their ability to facilitate classes with learners aged 60 or more had contributed to a steady stream of enrolments from that age group.

Most interviews were conducted with individuals but at times through participant preference people were interviewed in pairs or a small group of three. The interviews, while based on set questions (shown in italics in the Results section below), were only semi-structured to enable research participants to develop their own narratives, if they wished. About ten hours of audio-taped data were obtained. Transcriptions were analysed, firstly according to themes from the interview questions and secondly, by drawing up matrices of key points from both learner and tutor interviews. Further analysis of the matrices took place to create lists of how tutors approached their work with older learners and to identify principles of good practice.
3. RESULTS

3.1. Data from the tutors

The data set from tutors was examined first. Tutors had been asked to compare older learners with ‘mainstream’ adult learners, to indicate whether older learners had special needs, and to say whether they had particular strategies to assist older learners. The key question, among others, was “Have your teaching techniques undergone change to accommodate older learners?” The pattern of answers was particularly interesting, with a clear and consistent view expressed, and very little variance in range of information. It was immediately noticeable that participants questioned the differentiation of older learners from other learners. The following interview extract illustrates the point:

*When you take older learners into an online environment, is there any difficulty?*

There are varied responses. Some have had good computer skills but others needed a lot of reminding about what to do.

*It was an individual thing?*

It’s certainly individual. I couldn’t say that they stood out as having particular characteristics in relation to other students. Sometimes they say they are slow to learn but your view might be that they are no different to the others.

*Have you noticed people struggling in any way?*

They are no different from people in their 30s or 40s. Each person struggles, for a time, to make progress. I recall seeing a man of 30 trembling, so it’s not an age related response. It’s a matter of overcoming barriers, across the board, and not an age factor. (Tutor 1)

Not only was there a question over differentiation between older learners and those who are under 60, there seemed to be a clear denial by the tutors in the study that such differentiation ought to take place:

*Are your practices at all different when you have older learners in a class?*

I don’t believe so. I still prefer to look at everyone as an individual and everyone has different strengths and weaknesses and I try to draw on those. The important thing for me is the individual and age … there are just barriers to learning at all age levels. It’s a matter of breaking down the barriers, or working around the barriers, and sometimes … if there’s a common barrier, it’s confidence and that’s at all ages – that’s my perception. (Tutor 2)

The interview transcript shows that the second tutor described the age of adult learners having little effect on how a program was conducted.

Tutors 3 and 4 (interviewed together) responded similarly, describing older learners as perhaps a little nervous and “a bit scared of the equipment”, but not difficult to teach. Not only did they consider most older learners competent in the online environment—partly because of the transferability of skills from typewriter to computer—but they made it very clear that they did not discriminate according to age: the age of the learner, they agreed, was not an issue—what was important was the individual needs of each learner.

*Have you had to develop any particular strategies for older learners?*

T3: I don’t think so. Even though you’re delivering to a class you’re delivering to a lot of individuals and you tailor to the individual, to a certain extent.

T4: Sometimes it requires a bit of patience and to go over some things again. Mostly there are one or two students who need a bit more help.
You don’t plan to do things differently with older learners?

T3 and T4: No, we don’t patronise in any way at all.

When you deal with older learners you have a whole range of abilities, much the same as with a group of younger learners?

T3: Yep, exactly.

The fifth tutor’s commentary was also about recognising the needs of the individual learner and not judging people by their age. People of 65-70 were “mentally active and quite capable”, he remarked, “it’s not right to say that older ones have more difficulty … I’ve had 65s who have had more problems than someone of 85 … it’s an individual thing”. Although we have no measures of peoples’ competencies in different age groups (i.e., we have no quantitative data), we place considerable value on the judgements of the tutors—that older learners are not in a different category from other adult learners. The sixth tutor, also an administrator in the community learning centre, and whose interview is referred to later in the paper, was not in a position to respond to these questions directly. Taking the other five interviews, we concluded that community learning centre tutors (a) refuse to create categories of learners based on age or other demographic criteria and (b) regard each learner as an individual. These results indicate that tutors are more likely to adjust their teaching to individual learner characteristics than they are to employ a pedagogical model that reflects the needs of older learners as a group. were somewhat unexpected and it seemed, initially, to indicate there was no basis for making generalisations about good practice and the older learner.

Reviewing the abbreviated transcripts we identified information about how tutors related to older learners and how they facilitated their learning needs. From this review of the data, it was evident that the tutors (a) provided a supportive learning environment and (b) responded to the learners’ strengths and weaknesses. They used the same approach for both young and old, whether they were in ‘seniors’ groups or in mixed classes.

3.2. Data from the learners

When asked “What was helpful to you as you were learning? What else might have been useful?” older learners consistently responded that competent tutors, small classes and social interaction were the things that most assisted their learning. They had no suggestions for a change of teaching practice.

Tutors who were regarded by the learners as competent were those who ensured that “every one’s keeping up” and who did not leave people to struggle on their own when the course content became difficult. As the following comment shows, learners appreciated tutors who had the knowledge and experience to ‘scaffold’ learning appropriately: “I think teachers make a lot of difference … if you get the right teachers and you know they’re not going to treat you differently if you can’t keep up with the class or get it right …”. Care for the individual learner was an important part of the process and individual attention appeared to be related to class size. The remark “Small groups are essential, I think” typifies responses in this category. Not only class size, but class interaction was mentioned frequently. The comment, “We had a nice small group and we worked well together”, which learners registered as ‘helpful’, reflected tutors’ purposeful use of group interaction for particular learning outcomes.

Course structure did not emerge as an important factor. At one end of the scale there were people who were unhappy about formal arrangements and at the other end, people who were pleased about it. One interviewee lamented, “Sadly, the teacher is often confined by the syllabus … there’s a need to tick things off in an accredited course … they could shape the course to suit the participants”, another indicated “…it has been good to move from informal to formal learning”.

The grouping of classes according to age similarly proved to be an unimportant factor, overall. Whereas some older learners were frustrated by the experience of being in a multi-age group,
others were not. At least one of our interviewees was thrilled to have the experience of being grouped with younger learners, who befriended her, assisted her, and boosted her confidence by complimenting her. “It’s not age so much, it’s tenacity that counts”, she said, apparently pleased to have proven her competency in a mixed group.

The data showed that all learners, without exception, valued learning through interaction with others; they valued sociable classmates and the encouragement generated through their common activity. Social interaction for learning was identified as the most significant factor assisting older learners alongside teachers and class size. For some who were course participants the learning/social interaction phenomenon extended beyond the bounds of the classroom into the everyday. One participant spoke of continued email contact with classmates after a course had finished: “we were very lucky”, she said, “in that we had a very good group and we all got along very well and so we send each other bits and pieces with email …” and she believed that some people were actually developing social lives that were conducted online. “That seems to be the way we are going”, she added, as she reflected on her own need to keep in touch with distant children and the fact that technology seemed, increasingly, to be “preserving the family connection”. Social interaction, and especially family connectivity, was often an underlying reason, or motivation, to learn. “There is no doubt that email has produced a substantial and meaningful enhancement in interpersonal connectivity” (Nie, 2001, p.433).

4. DISCUSSION

The nine older learners in our study seemed to have proved their competency in going online, although, like many new users, they might have struggled along the way (Russell 2005, p. 116). This outcome fits well with those of Kliegel and Altgassen (2006) who found that age is no barrier to learning, in most respects, and that individual intelligence and the ability to approach tasks strategically were more important than youthfulness in learning. We found that (a) tutors had been helpful, (b) small class size had been helpful, and (c) the learning environment—supportive and socially interactive—had facilitated learning.

Our research has generally not supported the development of an older learner pedagogy (Gelade et al, 2003) as that might be conceptualised as a set of identifiable and fairly static principles that might be applied to older learners more than to other groups of learners. Instead, our research has been rather more supporting of the concept of interactive and interactive responses from teachers towards their learners, on the basis of observation, experience, and access to a range of strategies that they can deploy to assist learning by the individual in focus at the time. The small class context of the community learning centre was clearly a factor here, as is the small group nature of the online learning context within the centre. Smith and Dalton (2005) and Smith (2006) noted in their interactive model that teaching contexts where the teacher is remote from the learner (as it commonly the case with online learning) there are special issues of responsiveness. Also of interest here is the finding in this research that provision of a supportive environment, and responding to learner strength and weakness were important factors in tutors developing and providing individual responsiveness to learners, whether they were older or younger. That resonates strongly with the Smith and Dalton (2005) and Smith (2006) factor analytic results that showed that response to learner preferences for learning context and response to learner delivery preferences were the two key factors in generating responsiveness to individual learners

Our conclusion here is that good teaching for older adults is similar to that for any learner group, and necessitates strategies in teachers to identify and process individual learner characteristics, and then to translate those into strategies designed to assist that learner. There would appear to be little need, at least at the level of delivery, to make special pedagogical provisions for older adults, apart from minor issues such as the size of fonts and other visual images, and perhaps the examples used for learning.
Accordingly, the emphasis in preparing for the delivery of online learning to older adults perhaps needs to be on the adequate development of the necessary IT skills, the development among teachers of the necessary learner observation and identification skills, and the strategies that can be employed to respond to individual learners.

5. REFERENCES AND CITATIONS


Earle, L. (1992) Social network needs among older people, Adelaide: Recreation for Older Adults S.A. Inc.


