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Developing a conceptual framework for understanding older adults and learning

Brian Findsen

It has become commonplace to acknowledge the changing demographics in most countries of the world in which the proportions of older adults are increasing, particularly as the 'baby boomers' enter their 50s and 60s (Bond, Coleman & Peace, 1993). For the first time in history, most societies have to contend with large numbers of adults in what Laslett (1989) has dubbed 'the third age'.

This paper is concerned with examining attempts to depict the nature of learning for third age learners. I am interested in examining how the field of 'educational gerontology' or 'older adults and learning' (OPAL) has been conceptualised and the attendant strengths and limitations of these efforts. Initially, I will define who are older adults to identify who is included within this term before discussing the notion of 'lifelong learning', especially that learning which does not emanate from institutional educational providers. The basic but problematic question of just what is/are the purpose(s) of education for older adults is addressed. Next I analyse the type of educational provision which flows from particular philosophical positions. Finally, I present alternative ways of conceptualising educational gerontology which derive from applying critical theory to older adults' learning or what Glendenning and Battersby (1992) call 'critical educational gerontology'. I employ a Freirean approach which stresses the active construction of educational strategies among older adults to improve the quality of their lives through empowerment. It is a mode of conceptualisation which links strongly with social gerontology.

Who are older adults?
There has been a considerable literature built up over recent decades, principally in the USA, which has attempted to define an older adult. It has become clear that only in few societies are there clear markers (perhaps apart from 'retirement') of when a person enters older adulthood. We do not wake up one day and suddenly declare that we are older adults but our notions of what constitutes 'old age' tend to change as we ourselves age. As ageing is both a physiological and social process, it is necessary to acknowledge that while ageing in a physical sense is inevitable, how we as individuals respond to this process is culturally and socially defined (Phillipson, 1998).

Explanations for ageing have been dominated until recent times by biology with associated emphasis on frailty, sickness and reduced energy. While physiological decline does have an impact on our lives, it is quite exaggerated in a world dominated by youth culture and physical prowess (Blaikie, 1999). However, we do not need to subscribe to deficit notions of ageing; we are free to project more positive aspects of ageing which stress good health, increased life experience and the joys of living.

Chronological age is a misleading and dangerous criterion used to encapsulate 'old age' because there are cultural variations in its social construction and there exist huge individual developmental variations within same cultural groups. Neugarten (1976) formulated a categorisation which differentiates between 'young-old' (adults usually aged 55-65) and the 'old-old' (aged 75-85) to distinguish between healthy, active older adults and those less active due to chronic and acute health conditions. Even for that time this was an inadequate conceptualisation because of the numerous exceptions due to many older adults' propensities to reject stereotyping related to chronological age. Since then Sheehy (1995) has revealed through large scale analysis of 'older adults' living patterns in the USA that what were formerly 'young old' now consider themselves as 'middle aged'. Many older adults are breaking away from previously set social norms to explore increasingly more diverse lifestyles. Riley and Riley (1994) have described this phenomenon of the tendency of social structures to not keep pace with the ways people actually enact their lives as 'structural lag'. Contemporary Western societies are today much more complex and subject to social change than those wherein social norms for older adults' patterning of their lives were originally established.

Laslett (1989) has described four main phases to the lifespan. The *first age* is essentially one of early socialisation in which a person is dependent on others (usually parents); the *second age* is one of adult maturity where a person typically takes on responsibilities such as established social relationships, career and financial independence and perhaps childrearing; the *third age* is that of fuller autonomy wherein an individual is freer of constraints imposed in the second age. The person has the opportunity to enhance one's intellectual and spiritual capacities. The *fourth age*, one of dependency and ultimately death, is usually short.

In *A fresh map of life* (1989) Laslett argues for aligning the considerable years ahead of most older adults with profitable activity, especially active learning. While his ideas are closely linked to the institutional context of learning via the University of the Third Age (U3A), they transcend this setting as an exhortation for elders to lead a heightened quality of life. Unfortunately, this depiction by Laslett is overly-romanticised as he assumes that older adults will have the financial resources and social support to uphold this dream. In the neo-liberal Westernised world, the gaps between rich and poor have increased and there are growing numbers of marginalised older adults who are disenfranchised from much educational provision and freedom of choice in how to conduct their lives (Phillipson, 1998). Laslett's perspective is middle-class and primarily male in its emphasis – it leaves out as much as it includes.

The concept of lifelong learning
As the global economy has materialised, respective governments have tended to emphasise the need for a competitive workforce which is 'upskilled' and more knowledgeable in an international marketplace. In New Zealand, for instance, the term 'lifelong learning' has more frequent mention in reports such as *Learning for life 2* and the very recent Tertiary Education Advisory Commission's (TEAC) white paper. To adult educators, the notion of lifelong learning has been a treated as a 'given' after an individual's compulsory education experiences. Back in 1972 the Faure Report celebrated the centrality of lifelong learning for people to enjoy fulfilled lives across multiple adult roles – as parents, workers, grandparents, volunteers, caregivers etc. Boshier (1980) discusses three elements from the Faure Report which are intrinsic to lifelong learning: 'vertical integration' (the idea of continuing to learn throughout all the phases of life);
'horizontal integration' (acknowledging equal status to learning, regardless of where it is acquires, be it formal, non-formal or informal); and the democratising of the education system in the name of a learning society.

The importance of viewing learning as life-long and life-wide should not be under-rated – hence, schooling in this scenario is seen as an important context of many for people to learn rather than as a one-shot preparation for life and work. Quite clearly, schooling is an inadequate tool for people to deal with the vicissitudes of adult life and it may have minimal impact of an older adult's capacities for learning (Illich, 1973). In particular, what significance for a 70 year old will the place of schooling experience have?

Three contexts for learning, alluded to above, are further explained by Jarvis (1985, p3) as follows:
Informal learning – the process whereby every person acquires knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitude from daily living;
Non-formal learning – any systematic, organised, educational activity carried on outside the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population;
Formal learning – the institutionalised, chronologically graded and hierarchical educational system.
Informal learning occurs in our daily lives without much deliberate intent or consciousness that one is learning. The nearest that adult education research has come to delineating such learning has been via the research of pioneer Canadian, Allen Tough, who systematically investigated what he called 'learning projects' (1971). By this expression he meant a major learning event which is a deliberate and sustained (minimum of seven hours) attempt to gain some clear knowledge or skill. He was interested in finding out how much time and effort adults exerted in pursuing learning projects. Through his research he was able to demonstrate "that 'the average adult' spends about 90-100 hours on each learning project, conducts eight such projects every year, and plans or directs the projects personally" (Tennant, 1988, p.10). Applying this kind of framework for understanding the learning activities of older adults would probably reveal more about their learning propensities and interests than would a direct examination of participation in structured educational events. In particular, an analysis of working class and minority groups learning projects would be especially useful. Hiemstra (1976), for example, using Tough's methodology, demonstrated that many older Nebraskans undertake such learning projects. He reports "minority, less educated, blue-collar, and lower class persons in this study were engaged in many hours of learning" (p.337).

The second type of learning identified by Jarvis (1985) refers to those numerous activities in which they engage as members of manifold social

and recreational groups. Many older adults are members of voluntary organisations, leisure-oriented groups, social welfare agencies, community learning centres and public helping agencies. They may be office holders, part-time workers, volunteers or consultants. In most of these agencies the objective of education may be a subsidiary function but nevertheless the likely learning experiences are plentiful and enriching. In grandparent roles, too, older adults may relate to inter-generational programmes which are significant for their learning. Non-formal contexts for older adults are plentiful.

The third category of learning occurs in higher education providers such as universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and whare wananga in the New Zealand context. Such environments usually entail clear hierarchical structures, credentialism (in which exams are often a norm of assessment) and are often vocationally-oriented. Not many older adults participate in such learning settings (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999) because they often prefer expressive forms of learning and they may have longstanding inhibitions of such 'distant' institutions. Formal learning contexts sometimes evoke fear, performance anxiety, and expectations of passivity (Cross, 1981).

Within lifelong learning, Peterson (1980, p5) has identified three essential elements:
1. There should be coordinated learning opportunities for people of all ages;
2. All manner of organisations – schools and non-schools – concerned with the well-being of people should take part in facilitating learning;
3. The community (or city or metropolitan region) should be the locus for planning and conducting learning activities.

The first element stresses the ongoing nature of learning with the implicit idea that no stage of human development (childhood, older age) be exempt from opportunity. Underlying this statement is the concept of equal educational opportunity, with age as the main criterion in this instance. The second emphasises the variety of agencies which may be involved – family, clubs, social networks and those organisations of which older adults are members. The third component stresses that the closer the participant is to the planning process – ideally older adults should be involved in shaping their own learning opportunities – the greater the likelihood of satisfaction from the learners.

Much of the persuasion for older adults to be positively engaged actors in learning and education rather than marginalised recipients of crumbs

from the educational mainstream table rests on the belief that learning is lifelong and continuing education is an entitlement. If Governments and employers took this basic premise seriously then older adults would benefit significantly and so too would organisations and society more generally since education is both a private and public good.

Philosophies of education for older adults
The question which is often asked is "What do older adults need education for?" Frequently this question is not asked in a neutral tone but in a more disdainful attitude. This attitude is one based on a belief that it is indeed wasteful to spend time and money on people who are nearing the ends of their lives. Nevertheless, it is important for educators to be able to respond proactively to this question.

Philosophical approaches to older adult learning have been from diverse traditions. Generally, these are philosophies of adult education which have been applied more specifically to older adults. I believe that such approaches are legitimate but do not go far enough in situational analysis of older adults' lived experiences. There is a need to apply critical theory to educational gerontology to sharpen its political relevance (Phillipson, 1998); there is a need to link observations on older adults learning with the social, economic and political dimensions of their lives (Freire, 1984; Battersby & Glendenning, 1992).

An example of the application of adult education philosophies comes from the work of Lowy and O'Connor (1986) who call upon the well-known typology adopted by Elias and Merriam (1980). The original work discusses five major strands of purposes for adult education – liberalism, progressivism, behaviourism, radicalism and humanism- and they opt for the last-mentioned as most appropriate for older adult learning. While accepting that other philosophies are also of some relevance, they feel that humanism - with its emphasis on freedom, autonomy, individual growth and self-actualisation – is the most apposite. Certainly, it is hard to disagree that such human virtues should be incorporated into older adults' learning but the harsh reality is that the majority of older adults have diminished capacity in these dimensions because of economic, social, gender-related, ethnic and other discriminating factors operating against them in society (Walker, 1993; Arber & Ginn, 1995).

A commonplace and popular way for adult educators to approach purposes of adult education is to use the 'needs-based' model. Here the appropriate way for determining what counts as knowledge is related to the 'expressed' needs of learners (Boshier, 1978; Knowles, 1980; Boone,

1985). Such approaches, while prevalent among adult educators, including those who work with older adults, are laden with ethical difficulties (Benseman, 1980). For example, who should decide on older adults' needs? Usually, the old adults themselves but are they always in the best position to make this decision and what about other stakeholders (e.g. the family; the state)? Ethical issues will always arise in a needs-based approach because of multiple stakeholders and restricted resource allocation.

In the field of educational gerontology, McClusky (1974) was an early investigator of the learning needs of older adults. He posited that there are four kinds of different 'needs' for older adults to be met through education. These are:

- *Coping needs* – those arising from daily life's adjustments such as physical fitness, economic self-sufficiency, basic education
- *Expressive needs* – those related to adults taking part in activities for their own sake and not necessarily to achieve a goal
- *Contributive needs* – those related to adults deciding to be useful contributors in society
- *Influence needs* – those arising from adults wanting to become agents for social change

Each category of needs is suggestive of the principal purpose of adult education with many programmes being developed on the basis of which needs predominate. When examining mainstream providers of adult education, in terms of programmes primarily geared towards the needs of older adults, most are aligned to meeting coping and expressive needs. This relates to educators' perceptions of older adults as consumers of leisure activities and as passive recipients of education. Few programmes are directed towards older adults' greater self-determination or heightening their political consciousness. This comment is valid for most mainstream provision in adult education but is particularly noticeable in the older adult environment where dependency behaviour is expected by much of society (Koopman-Boyden, 1993).

If the prevalent needs-based approach is not entirely satisfactory as a philosophical basis for older adults' education, then what is? I recommend a theoretical framework which arises from critical theory or emancipatory learning, using Freire as an exemplar, and from insights gained from the political economy of older adults, as explained in the kindred field of social gerontology. (This framework is elaborated later in this paper).

Educational gerontology

The field which has emerged, especially since the projected reality of the demographics of older adults' growing presence in societies have been revealed, is that of 'educational gerontology'. The term seems to have been early used by an American, Peterson, who described it as "a field of study and practice that has recently developed at the interface of adult education and social gerontology" (Peterson, 1976, p.62, cited in Glendenning & Percy, 1990, p.14). In the journal *Educational Gerontology*, Peterson further elaborated this interface to embrace:

(i) education for older adults;

(ii) public education about ageing;

(iii) the education of professionals and para-professionals in the field of ageing (ibid).

In each of the three components, there can be a concentration on either *study* or *practice* – hence, he differentiates the field into at least six sub-components.

Glendenning, in his book, *Educational gerontology: International perspectives* (1985, pp.42-5), elaborates on the number of major areas for study and practice as follows:

Educational gerontology – instructional gerontology, senior adult education, self-help instructional gerontology, self-help senior adult education;

Gerontological education – social gerontology and adult education, advocacy gerontology, professional gerontology, gerontology education. He argues (1990) that much more coordination and rigour needs to be adopted, particularly in gerontological education.

Quite clearly, this field of older adults and learning is vast. The central thrust of this paper is that social gerontology and adult education need to be better synthesized and that the form that education takes is from a more critical paradigm cmpared against the functionalist explanations of the past.

Participation among older adults

As already pointed out, Tough's conception of participation has been very much broader than most people have traditionally conceived of it. In most instances, participation in (older) adult education has been conceptualised in terms of engagement in more formalized learning activity.

Older adults' involvement in mainstream adult education has not been commensurate with their percentage of the population. In Australia and

New Zealand, little hard evidence exists on the extent of older adult participation on a national basis. One international study – The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) – comparing 12 OECD countries, indicates that in the 56-65 age group (no older age group was surveyed) New Zealand has approximately 25 % participation and Australia 18%. It is known from the United Kingdom, though, that participation in formal learning institutions (e.g. universities, local education authorities) is negligible (Walker, 1990); there is no reason to doubt the wider applicability of this remark to other Western countries. An interesting exception in the British scene has been participation in the Open University (OU) where older adults constituted 4.5% of the total undergraduate population (90% of all older higher education students in Britain) in the mid 1980s. This suggests that it is the mode of distance learning which is the significant factor in their participation; recent popularity of SeniorNet provides additional evidence to support this claim.

In the recent policy document disseminated by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in the United Kingdom entitled *Learning to Grow Older and Bolder* (1999), participation of older adults was analysed and the picture depicted above was confirmed. More specifically, Carlton and Soulsby cite Naomi Sargant's study, *The Learning Divide*, wherein a population sample of 4,755 older adults were asked about their efforts to consciously choose to learning something, as evidence of older adults' learning patterns. It was found that

> *while more than 2 in 5 of the whole population over the age of 16 were currently learning, or had done so over the previous three years,*
> *only 1 in 4 of the 55 to 64 age cohort, 1 in 5 of the 65 to 74, and less*
> *than 1 in 7 of people over 75 did so* (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999, p.22).

The general observation that "participation in learning declines with age" (ibid) needs to be tempered by knowledge of the type of activity and preferences of older adults for locally accessible learning opportunities.

If we look more generally at the types of people who tend to avail themselves of adult and community education programs, the profile includes disproportionately high numbers of:
- those who have attended school more than an average amount of time and passed formal qualifications

- women (although men tend to be a majority in more vocationally oriented courses)
- those under 40 years of age
- Pakeha (European)
- those who have above average incomes
- people who are in full-time work and most often in a white-collar occupation
  (Benseman, 1996).

People outside of this profile (including older adults) are typically marginalised in terms of access to education. For older adults, the historical time in which they were children in schools, is more than likely to heavily influence the extent of their 'disadvantage'. Also, if we analyse the heterogeneity of older adults – look at specific sub-populations within older adults – then we are likely to find that participation is strongly associated with previous educational experience, gender, race/ethnicity and social class (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999).

Barriers to learning for older adults
There have been many models developed to explain participation (e.g. Cross, 1981) and typologies to identify barriers to people's participation in learning activities. Darkenwald and Merriam's (1982, p.137) system of categorising such barriers has been often cited and will be used here. They describe the barriers as follows:

- **Situational** – these relate to an individual's life context at a particular time i.e. the realities of one's social and physical environment
- **Institutional** – those erected by learning institutions or agencies that exclude or discourage certain groups of learners
- **Informational** – institutional failure to communicate information on learning opportunities
- **Psychosocial** (attitudinal or dispositional) – individually held beliefs, values, attitudes or perceptions that inhibit participation in organized learning activities.

For older adults, all levels of barriers may pertain and for some individuals each category may have relevance in decision-making. In the case of *situational* barriers, disability may prevent people's adequate mobility or the need to use public transport may limit access; *institutional* barriers could include non user-friendly enrolment procedures, high fees, an inappropriate venue or unexciting methods of teaching and learning; *informational* barriers may include brochures printed in too small type and crammed formatting or a failure to display brochures in places which older adults frequent; *psychosocial* barriers could be a belief in the adage "I'm too old to learn" or generalising from previous poor learning episodes to current programs.

Quite obviously, educators can do much to reduce or negate the effects of the above barriers. Some are not within educators' power to change overnight. These types of barriers will require societal level changes in attitudes to older adults, in practices which discriminate against elders, including policies adopted by local and central government. This observation is reinforced by Walker (1990: p.105) in her analysis of participation:

> *The larger more intractable issues that form the real barriers,*
> *educational and class status, lack of self-esteem and power,*
require a
> *more radical solution (Walker, 1990, p.105).*

Most practising adult educators engage with older adults, few as they may be, in their programmes. A significant issue for educators is the extent to

which they tailor their programmes to the interests of older adults. What is or should be the responsibility of educators towards this group of citizens and what kinds of learning are most appropriate? Assuming there is agreement on the provision of education to older adults, who should control the learning process and to what ends? At present these questions largely remain unanswered.

Providers and provision
In terms of provision of educational opportunities for older adults, the range is enormous and generally mirrors the complexity found in other domains of adult education. Philosophical diversity is suggested by the framework of needs mentioned above - programmes can be concerned with individual development and coping skills; or focus on recreational and leisure pursuits; less often relate to fostering vocational skills (though this might change with the growing need of retired adults to find further income); still less are they concerned with developing critical capacities of elders to challenge the social order.

In general, there are at least four types of adult education organisations in terms of provision for older people:
- those self-help agencies controlled by older adults to meet their own learning needs (e.g. University of the Third Age (U3A);
- those agencies who develop programs explicitly for older adults (e.g. Elderhostel; the Pre-Retirement Association);
- those mainstream providers who develop some courses which might appeal to older adults (e.g. retirement programs run by centres for continuing education);
- those who ignore or neglect older adults (no provision is made for them and no facilities have been established to encourage their participation). (Findsen, 1999, p.23).

The reality is that in most communities there are few educational agencies that have been established with older adults as the constructors of the knowledge or that have this group as their primary target. This could reflect the relative powerlessness of older adults in youth orientated cultures (Phillipson, 1998). However, there are certainly many mainstream providers who have provided a token level of support, that is, they establish a few courses which they hope will appeal primarily to older adults (e.g. preparing for retirement). The harsh reality is that there are still more agencies that have neglected their learning needs. There is an immediate challenge here for raising the consciousness of such providers to their responsibilities of working with traditionally marginalised groups, inclusive of older adult sub-populations.

The above typology assumes that the organisation has an *educational* role. The range of educational options reflects the degree to which these agencies are overtly carrying out provision for older adults. Aside from this categorisation of educational purpose, there are many organisations which are concerned about the social issues facing older adults (e.g. Age Concern; City Councils; Grey Power; Help the Aged). While their principal goals and main activities may not be explicitly related to education, it is likely that education is a means by which they would want to fulfil their mission. Education is often a supportive strategy or a subsidiary goal. Whatever the case, there is also great potential on local or national scales to encourage greater collaboration amongst such agencies and to work alongside older adults in the enhancement of quality living. Learning is a close partner to living; social and educational issues can become intertwined so that by addressing older adults' social issues we are often addressing their educational needs too. The initiative recently taken by the Blair Government in the UK, *Better Government for Older People*, is a realisation of the need for organisations to work more effectively on a co-operative basis (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999).

Within the educational context, workers in an adult education agency are confronted with some significant challenges. There is a need for agency workers to become much more analytical about their type of provision and who is benefitting most from it. If it can be readily demonstrated that the older participants in the program are not in proportion to their population in the surrounding district, then some of the barriers mentioned above are likely to be preventing their participation. Agency practices – such as modes of promoting or publicising programs, more particularly the language used – need to be closely examined for cultural or social class bias. Perhaps multiple forms of publicity are required and new ways of communicating with disenfranchised people are necessary. Sometimes agencies use an individualistic framework for communication when a more collective approach, based on direct approaches to marginalised groups, would reap better rewards.

It is not uncommon for adult education agencies to fail to incorporate older adults into the manifold processes of program development. For example, what direct input have older adults had in the planning phase? Have the learning needs and interests of the older age group been properly assessed in a non-threatening manner? Right through the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of programming there are numerous fruitful opportunities for older adults to be involved (Caffarella, 1994). Sometimes an agency working in tandem with an

older adults' organisation (e.g. Age Concern) can stimulate positive outcomes for both parties, including a reduction in bureaucracy and a call on scarce resources.

An alternative approach: critical theory

Several educational gerontologists have acknowledged the limitations of current conceptions of this field and have used critical theory as a basis for new developments (Battersby, 1987; Battersby & Glendenning, 1992; Arber & Ginn, 1995; Phillipson, 1998, 2000; Cusack, 2000). This paper supports this critical approach and argues for a more hardened coupling with social gerontology as an appropriate way forward (Estes, 1991; Bury, 1995).

A new discourse about the education of older adults is required which moves away from a functionalist tradition of adaptation of individuals to society to one which emphasises the agency of older adults, their collective capacity to empower themselves. Critical theory – an umbrella term for a range of radical education theories – provides the basis for such a critique of the status quo and the call for social action to empower older adults. Battersby and Glendenning (1992) have used the phrase 'critical educational gerontology' when they applied critical theory to educational gerontology.

Phillipson, in a recent article in Frank Glendenning's edited book entitled *Teaching and learning in later life: Theoretical implications* (2000), writes of three elements which have emerged in the growing debate about the nature of an ageing society as follows:
1. The political economy perspective in which there is an awareness of the structural pressures and constraints affecting older people, the most obvious of which are gender relations, ethnicity and social class.
2. The perspective from the humanities of contributions from scholars such as Thomas Cole and Harry Moody who sometimes combined with historians and ethicists. Their concern was focussed on the meaning which older adults give to their daily lives in routines and relationships.
3. The biographical and narrative perspectives in gerontology. Advocates of this approach extend our knowledge through the social construction of later life.

All three perspectives share an orientation of critique of prevailing perspectives within gerontology and endeavour to develop alternative approaches to understanding the processes of growing old. Phillipson (2000, p.26) notes further that "from all three perspectives there is a focus

on the issue of empowerment, through the transformation of society (for example, the redistribution of income and wealth), or the development of new rituals and symbols to facilitate changes through the life course".

A Freirean discourse: Older adults and critical educational gerontology

Elsewhere (Findsen, 1996; 1998; 1999) I have pointed to the potential for the use of Freirean philosophy and practice for marginalised groups in society, including indigenous peoples, the poor and disenfranchised workers. Principles as espoused in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1984) and Freire's subsequent writing provide a "framework of action which promotes ownership of curriculum by groups as much as by providers" (Findsen, 1996, p.270). This approach, the seeds of which were planted in Freire's literacy work in Brazil, Chile, and other (primarily developing) countries, emphasises challenging the status quo, power sharing and the establishment of learning programmes for marginalised groups to assume greater autonomy in what they do. Within this context, the plight of many older adults is similar – apart from self-help learning organisations such as U3A (the membership of which is disproportionately white, middle-class and economically and educationally privileged) - the majority of older adults have diminished prospects for effecting change to improve the quality of their lives.

Freirean principles have been fairly readily adopted by adult educators who work from a more radical perspective (i.e. those who openly challenge prevailing orthodoxy which favours the dominant groups in society; those who seek to use more liberatory means of empowering disenfranchised sub-populations). Success stories have been documented in such varying locations as an inner-city suburb in Edinburgh (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989), popular education in Canada (Gatt-Fly, 1983) and experimental education at Staten Island Community College, New York (Shor, 1980). It is not appropriate to explore in-depth Freire's educational work here but I will select a few concepts for further discussion which lead to some principles for action by adult educators working with older adults.

A fundamental tenet of Freire's work is that adult educators should be fully conversant with the socio-cultural context in which older adults conduct their lives. Educators should understand cultural and material conditions so that they are dealing with these adults' realities, not some false projection of reality assumed from a distance. Freire advocates that people are capable of being the subjects in their own learning, of knowing

their world and acting on it (Freire, 1984). The relationship implied between educator and student is that of partners, collaboratively understanding the constraints of the situation brought on by structural conditions but also the potentiality of learners to overcome oppression via collective social action. First it is necessary that *co-investigation* of *limit situations* be undertaken wherein taken for granted aspects of daily life are reinterpreted for *generative themes* which may include an analysis of differential power relations; then through *conscientization* – the new collective awareness of the oppressive features of the social context by the affected group of learners – and *praxis*, adopt specific actions to challenge the social order and make significant changes in their lives.

This liberatory task is not for the fainthearted for it challenges dominant groups who are not readily about to give away their privileged positions and power. This approach is essentially one of *problem-posing education*, not *banking education*. Freire criticises most of traditional education for its narrative character in which knowledge is usually bestowed by some expert to the masses (empty vessels) and regurgitated at some appropriate point (e.g. for examinations). This banking education approach is the antithesis of a humanising, authentic pedagogy, one which endorses the creativity of people to become what they are capable of becoming. This new form of collective knowledge creation is based on the effective partnership of educator and student, as previously mentioned. Teachers are sometimes students; students are sometimes teachers. Every person is engaged in on-going learning to some degree.

In an article concerning Freire and adult education (1999), I identify some principles emanating from Freire's pedagogy which can be adopted in the ways in which adult educators work with older adults. These principles are as follows:

- an adult educator does not impose knowledge on others but works with them to jointly construct knowledge
- adults should be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their own learning and not be dependent on the teacher (outside expert) to interpret their world for them
- teachers and learners are, in fact, co-learners in a situation where mutual respect must operate
- learning is not something done to learners but is a process and result of what learners do for themselves
- the teacher does not enforce choice but rather encourages learners to make decisions and choices for themselves
- responsibility and freedom are primarily in the hands of learners but the teacher is not exempt from exercising responsibility and on occasions intervening in the situation.
  (Findsen, 1999, p.76).

This set of principles applied to older learners advocates an active, creative struggle to become legitimated as lifelong learners when typically education is seen as a front-end loaded enterprise (i.e. for the young in preparation for life). It will not be an easy task to change this conception of education. (See Riley and Riley, 1994, for a fuller discussion on how the typical construction of education, work and leisure as sequential activities is more liberatory when reconceptualised as concurrent life events). It will be a struggle to adopt a lifelong learning strategy because extra resources are hardly going to be created in times of economic stringency and there will be considerable reluctance to rechannel resources from the young to the old. Nor can employers be called upon to support claims of older adults except perhaps in preparation of workers for 'retirement'. So either older adults continue their learning independently (as, for example, via U3A) or seek funding from Government or philanthropic sources.

For adult educators, the above principles point to a new kind of relationship with older adults. Ideally, the educator comes from within the group – a Gramscian *organic intellectual* - one who emerges from the particular cultural group and who understands the social norms and aspirations of the people. However, professional educators are not discounted from working effectively within these principles. Such educators do not take control of the learning process but act as co-investigators, to help older adults understand better their sources of powerlessness and to work collaboratively to effect social and political change through an educative process. This does not mean that educators are neutral agents – rather these persons' values, predilections and expertise are explicitly stated to the group of older learners. In this case, educators' roles are transparent throughout the investigation of older adults' themes and issues. Educators and learners are jointly engaged in a consciousness-raising exercise for the purposes of enacting social action to change their world, to improve their quality of life. The learning programmes which emerge, therefore, reflect the authentic aspirations of the older adults and tend to be issue-based. This differs from conventional provision for older adults where curriculum is usually determined by experts who think they know what is "educationally worthwhile" (Paterson, 1979, p.94) for this group of people.

This Freirean approach links to the contributive and influence needs of older adults, as previously outlined. Too much provision has so far been couched in coping and expressive terms only so that little real progress is made for older adults in terms of self-determination. This critical educational approach requires older adults to assume more active construction of their own knowledge and to collectively decide what needs changing in their physical, social and political environments to improve the quality of their lives. Adult educators still have a role to play but it is one which necessitates greater sensitivity and disclosure of their own agendas than most may be used to.

Conclusion

In endeavouring to encapsulate the domain of older adults and learning I have introduced a number of aspects which I believe to be crucial to gaining a fuller understanding of educational gerontology. Initially, it was necessary to describe who are older adults before describing Laslett's four ages of mankind of which the third is deemed to be the one for the greatest achievement of humanistic ideals. While this depiction is arguably romanticised, it does provide a useful connection with the pivotal concept of lifelong learning.

The concept of lifelong learning provides a basis for arguing that learning for older adults is a natural element of living and that educational provision should be justified as a basic human right. Age should have nothing to do with one's access to education. However, there are many types of education, most of which reinforce the status quo from which older adults, especially those in the lower socio-economic echelons and minority groups, are largely marginalised.

The field of 'educational gerontology' is multi-faceted to include the education **of** older adults, public education **about** ageing and the education **of** professionals. Clearly, each is important and none should function without reference to the others. No conceptualisation of older adults' education can be complete without discussion of the issue of participation (or its converse, non-participation). Who gets to define what counts as education, who has access to do it and who controls it are fundamental sociological questions to be answered. Too often this education is controlled by those members of society who control most of the resources – namely, white middle-class males. Coupled with participation is the concomitant issue of who provides adult education for older adults and the character of that provision. One thesis of this paper is that too little is provided and much of that is based on adjusting older adults to society rather than enhancing their capacity to be active and contributing citizens.

In order to answer the question of what kind of education can be more empowering, I discussed critical education gerontology before concentrating on an example of a more radical discourse, that of Paulo Freire's pedagogy. This approach respects the socio-cultural context of learners wherein groups of older adults can practice emancipatory learning strategies to make significant changes in society for their betterment.

This conceptualisation is a work in progress. It will only stop when we can all be confident that our understanding of older adults' learning is complete. This will not happen in a hurry.

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