7-11-2016

Online Elder Circles: A Follow-up Study

Trudy Medcalf
Sheridan College, trudy.medcalf@sheridancollege.ca

Lia Tsotsos
Sheridan College, lia.tsotsos@sheridancollege.ca

Pat Spadafora
Sheridan College, pat.spadafora@sheridancollege.ca

Sheridan | Centre for Elder Research

Online Elder Circles: A Follow-up Study

Project Team

Trudy Medcalf (Lead Researcher)	*Sheridan Centre for Elder Research*
Lia Tsotsos (Principal Researcher)	*Sheridan Centre for Elder Research*
Pat Spadafora (Director)	*Sheridan Center for Elder Research*

About the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

The Centre for Elder Research conducts innovative Lab to Life^{TM} research that enhances the quality of life of older adults while serving as an education and research hub for Sheridan and the broader community.

The Centre for Elder Research was launched in 2003 at the Oakville, Ontario campus of Sheridan College. The Centre has an established track record in applied research and a reputation as a leader that challenges traditional thinking, creating possibilities that transcend historical boundaries.

The applied research conducted at the Centre has contributed to the implementation and evaluation of programming at all levels of society, from the general public, to industry partners, all the way to regional and municipal policy-makers.

Embracing an interdisciplinary approach and, working with faculty and staff from all departments of the college, the Centre is able to directly support the scholarship of teaching and learning at Sheridan, enhancing the student experience and giving all students the opportunity to broaden their horizons through applied research.

Our applied focus, Sheridan's institutional strengths and our strong network of community and industry stakeholders positions the Centre to ensure that knowledge is effectively translated into goods, services, programs and policies that directly benefit older adults and their families.

For more information, please contact:

Sheridan Centre for Elder Research, 1430 Trafalgar Road, Oakville, ON L6H 2L1

Pat Spadafora, MSW, Director
(905) 845-9430 ext. 8615
pat.spadafora@sheridancollege.ca

Lia Tsotsos, PhD, Principal Researcher
(905) 845-9430 ext. 2407
lia.tsotsos@sheridancollege.ca

Table of Contents

Abstract

This participatory qualitative research project is a follow-up study to an earlier (2013) Centre for Elder Research (hereafter referred to as the Centre) research project – Online Elder Circles: A Guide to their Creation and Benefits – that explored the experience of creating and delivering an elder circle program in an online format as well as the benefits to the participants. Elder circles are learning circles, facilitated small closed groups of older adults who explore collaboratively the experience of growing older and living in old age. In the earlier study, the researcher and the project's participants successfully translated the face-to-face elder circle model to an online one with significant self-reported benefit to all participants. The present project provided a further opportunity to learn about the online elder circle model. Seven participants, aged 83 to 65, recruited through the Centre's online database, met online for facilitated asynchronous discussion on a password-protected website for a period of six weeks. This time, technological issues contributed to a much less satisfactory experience for the participants. The report describes what was done and what was learned, with participants' reflections on their experience as well as their insight into what worked and what did not. Conclusions and recommendations are included.

1. Introduction

This participatory qualitative research project – Online Elder Circles: A Follow-up Study – supported by the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research, builds on the experience and findings of an earlier project – Online Elder Circles: A Guide to Their Creation and Benefits. The report of the earlier project, also supported by the Centre and technically supported by the Sheridan Institute, is available through the Sheridan library. This similarly designed follow-up project enabled another experience of participation in an online elder circle for a second small group of older adults.

Elder circles are facilitated elder-centred small closed groups of older adults who meet face to face at regular intervals, usually weekly, to explore and share ideas and insights related to the experience of growing older and living in old age. They are, in fact, learning circles. Participation in elder circles has enabled groups of older adults to reflect on their aging process collaboratively and has helped them to better understand for themselves a personal meaning of later life (Medcalf, 2009). Online elder circles attempt to provide similar benefit to that of face-to-face elder circles but within an online format.

The questions that guided this research are:
1. What might be the benefits for participants of carrying out an elder circle in an online format?
2. What might be learned, by carrying out an online elder circle as a research project and with the input of participants, about how to create and deliver an exemplary online elder circle program?

1.1 Background

In 2002, I presented to members of the seniors' centre in Orangeville, Ontario, a series of workshops that explored the experience of growing older. I based the original series on the work of Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, whose ideas are presented in the book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. Over the next decade, I volunteered my skills as a teacher and counsellor to deliver many elder circles, initially as a way of learning for myself, at first hand, something true about growing old. Yet I was not the only one to benefit profoundly from taking part in a collaborative exploration of later life. Regular, facilitated engagement with their peers in collective meaning making through participation in an elder circle enabled the participants to learn about, to reflect on, and to better understand their aging process. Participants reported feeling validated by the group, experiencing positive effects from looking closely at their stage of life, and being helped to accept what *is* while also beginning to see theirs as a distinct, significant and valued phase of life. Some spoke of their elder circle experience as personally transformative. In 2011, adapting elder circles for a pilot program of their own, the Suicide Resource Group of Wellington-Dufferin (Ontario) used the face to face elder circle model for their ElderTALK program, which explored issues of older adult mental health.

Over the years, the elder circle model that I developed and continue to refine has become less and less curriculum-based and facilitator-driven, instead unfolding through close attention to the ongoing involvement of the participants week-by-week.

After several years' experience teaching university-level courses to traditional age students online, I began to wonder how the elder circle model itself might transfer from face to face to online. I reasoned that elder circles offered online could greatly increase the availability of the experience to older adults.

1.2 First Centre online elder circle research project – 2013

In 2013, six older adult participants and I engaged in our first online elder circle research project. As with our second online elder circle, we participated in an asynchronous program; the site was available for our use 24 hours a day, every day, for six weeks. Our key recommendations from the earlier project, the participants' and mine, for the creation and delivery of an exemplary online elder circle program were as follows:

Online elder circle participants require –
- Assurance that safety and security features are in place for users of the online elder circle website
- Regular access to a computer and the internet
- Basic computer skills
- Quick access to technical support for their own computer, preferably at no or low cost

Online elder circles require –
- The presence of a skilled facilitator
- A secure website housed within an institution or organization
- For the facilitator, ongoing connection to a technical support person working within the institution for occasional questions and clarification
- A small number of participants
- Participants who are initially unknown to each other and to the facilitator

I had developed over a decade of elder circle delivery an understanding of the benefits of participation in a face-to-face elder circle program. With the help of a skilled facilitator, elder circles provide a learning opportunity in a safe environment that is respectful of the contributions of all participants. Elder circles engage older adults in collaborative exploration that fosters purposeful social connection, allowing time for confidence to build, for understanding to grow, and for decisions to be made by the participants about how to apply what they have learned.

Our first online elder circle was found to provide similar benefits as well as additional ones. The asynchronous aspect of our online project made the experience accessible at any time day or night, a bonus, we discovered, for those who found themselves awake during the night. Participants also found that, unlike in the face-to-face model, the online and asynchronous aspects benefited those who preferred to read posts, take time to think about the content and their response, and then carefully compose a post they were proud to share. Our online conversations could easily be visited and revisited, reconsidered and built upon; nothing was lost. Some participants suggested that during our Canadian winters or, when poor health or lack of transport prevents an older person from engaging in social activities face-to-face, an online elder circle could provide an alternative means of ongoing socialization.

1.3 Use of the participatory research method

Participatory research was for me the obvious approach to use for this research project; its effectiveness required the direct involvement of the participants in ongoing input and collaboration both in the discussions and in the research process itself. A recent article by Munn-Giddings, McVicar, Boyce and O'Brien (2016) explores the reasons why older people choose to become involved in participatory research projects,

whether the involvement be one-off or sustained. For several years they have worked to develop participatory methodologies that enable older adults to contribute their knowledge to a collective and indeed to run their own projects. Marlett and Emes (2010), writing about the value of partnered research with older adults, suggest that partners bring different perspectives and that appreciating and acknowledging the contributions of one's co-researchers facilitates openness. Unlike more conventional social science research, in which there is a separation between the research process – planned beforehand and controlled throughout – and the research results, ours would be collaborative, the openness that Marlett and Emes write about enhanced, the research progressing with input from the participants themselves.

Participatory research usually engages participants from the outset (Morris, 2002), as they work together to address a perceived need or gap. In this case the participants were not involved in the design of the project but joined once the site was built. I received support, through the Centre, from Learning Management Systems and Learning Technologies at the Sheridan Institute, who erected the scaffolding – the online environment – around which we, as a research team of researcher and participants, could begin to build the work. In both of these projects, the central participation throughout of the participants, the Centre and the Sheridan Institute was essential.

1.4 The participants

Seven participants aged 83, 81, 80, 78, 78, 76, and 65 were recruited for the online elder circle from the Centre's electronic database by means of a recruitment flyer posted on the Centre's website (see Appendix A). All of the participants had previously indicated their interest in receiving information by email about the Centre's upcoming research projects along with recruitment details. Names and email addresses of the first six people to respond to the recruitment flyer were forwarded to me from the Centre as well as the next six names to provide a waiting list. A follow-up telephone conversation was held with each of the first six respondents; four chose to participate. A similar telephone conversation was held with individuals on the waiting list with an additional three choosing to participate.

Participants were contacted by email in the order that their responses to the recruitment flyer were received at the Centre. The only requirements for participation in this research project were age (65+), regular access to a computer and to the Internet, and basic computer skills, defined as experience in using a word processing program and in using email. In 2013, all of the first six who responded and chose to take part in the project were women: four were aged between 70 and 73 and the others were 83 and 87. (There were two men on the waiting list for the 2013 project.)

As all of the participants in the Centre's first online elder circle research project were women, and for this reason alone, I elected this time to ask specifically, on the recruitment flyer, for older men over 65. Although neither of our online elder circle projects was designed with a focus on gender, the engagement of older men this time would, I thought, provide added richness to our exploration of the elements of an exemplary online elder circle as well as to our understanding of the benefits that participants might receive.

Thus the participants this time were seven men, all of them unknown to each other or to me when the project began. All lived in their own homes. All were physically mobile, still driving, and involved in activities outside the home. One, aged 65, identified as still working full-time; one, aged 76, as self-employed, five as active retirees. Six were

currently married and one had lost his partner 13 years earlier. All were living in or near the Greater Toronto Area.

1.5 Participants' intentions for their involvement

The intended benefits for participants were as described in sections 1.1 and 1.2 of this report. Before we began our work together, the participants and I spoke on the telephone and at that time each was asked about his own hopes for the project and the reasons why he had decided to take part. Below are excerpts from those responses, using the pseudonyms the participants chose for this report (see Appendix B for complete list of pre- and post-project interview questions).

Buggs, 80, was curious. If it turned out [as it did] that the other participants were close to him in age, he said he would look forward to sharing his experiences with them. He was eager to contribute to the research. Most of his friends were much younger and indeed he was off to Cuba before the project began, taking gifts to schoolchildren.

Ces, 83, was interested in hearing how other older people are progressing through their lives. He would begin while in Africa and thought his participation would provide a break from the work he would be doing there.

Simon, 76, described himself as "not your typical 76-year-old." The father of school-age children, he offered the perspective and the insight of an active, engaged, healthy older man.

Duncan, 78, brought the experiences of a varied career.

Otto, 78, wondered how other seniors progress after retirement, and brought his experience as a father and grandfather.

Tez, 65, though still fully employed, was also involved as a Board member in a seniors' organization and was an advocate for a variety of seniors' issues. He looked forward to discussion about the challenges of growing older and of life after retirement.

Keets, 81, offered his help with the project as one who is comfortable asking "anything of anyone." Retired 23 years, he offered to share that experience with the other participants.

1.6 Situating the project within the related literature

This project is informed by previous work in the areas of older adult learning, online learning, and online support for older adults. Findsen and Formosa, in their handbook, *Lifelong Learning in Later Life* (2011) connect older adult or later life learning to improved health status and characterize it as a way to empowerment, self-fulfillment and personal growth. Kenyon, Bohlmeijer and Randall (2011) present a wealth of viewpoints within narrative gerontology that argue for the central importance of story in later life.

The literature of online learning generally is vast, and some of it has relevance for this project. Guidebooks such as *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community* (Palloff and Pratt, 2005) contain helpful strategies for effective online group interaction but are for faculty and geared to teaching students. The fact that much of the literature of online learning is being written either for and about traditional student learning or about executive and enterprise training only means that one needs to tread carefully in the search for useful information that could be applied to an activity such as an online elder circle. Much of the literature that addresses online learning and older adults has been focused on skills training (i.e., reports of projects in which older adults were taught computer skills). There are reports of studies that examine older adults' experience with

online learning (see, for example, Dorin, 2007) but very few, it seems, that are focused on online learning for older adults.

Research into online communities designed for older adult social support and personal growth provides opportunities for comparison with the online elder circle model. Nimrod's paper, "Senior's Online Communities: A Quantitative Content Analysis" (2009) explores the benefits and characteristics of online communities for older adults, finding that they result in increased well-being and feelings of empowerment. Online communities such as those discussed in Nimrod's paper, however, are open discussion boards with thousands of discussion threads and thousands of participants. Discussion boards, chat rooms and social networking sites seem to be the examples of online social support for older adults that are currently being offered and studied (see, for example, Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson, 2009). Online elder circles provide a different level of connection and support among participants, a declared focus on the exploration of one's aging process and a corresponding difference in learning potential.

1.7 Importance of the research

The relevance of this second online elder circle research project in building on the knowledge gained from the first one in 2013 makes it worthy of attention. Online elder circles provide learning opportunities to participants that can in turn benefit them as they give thought to their own aging process and to aging in general. The online elder circle model may also be, in the way that face-to-face elder circles have been, adaptable for use in other circumstances, providing alternative approaches to the delivery of other initiatives for, to, and by older adults. For example, online elder circles have potential as an important tool to combat social isolation in older adults, a concern expressed and investigated widely (see, for example, Cloutier-Fisher, Kobayashi and Smith, 2011; Jaeger and Xie, 2009; Khvorostianov, Elias and Nimrod, 2011; Masi, Chen, Hawkley and Cacioppo 2011; Sinha, 2013; Thomas, 2004; United Nations, 2002).

2. What was done

2.1 Introduction

For six weeks during February and March of 2015, the participants and I attempted to engage in an elder circle as an asynchronous conversation about the experience of growing older, exploring the topic collaboratively in an online format. The research objectives were to examine for a second time both the essential design and delivery elements of an exemplary online elder circle and the benefits of an online elder circle for its participants in light of the findings from the first online elder circle research project in 2013.

2.2 Beginning the project

During my introductory telephone call, each respondent consented to receive a letter of information and consent form, with a signed copy to be returned. Once enrolled into the research project, the participants each took part in a semi-structured telephone interview with me, lasting about 30 minutes. (See Appendix B for pre- and post-project interview questions.) The central purpose of these telephone interviews was to assess each participant's prior experience with formal online learning, to address issues of

security and explain how safety and security within the online environment were to be maintained, to discuss participants' expectations of the project and of their contribution to it, and to answer any remaining questions.

Before beginning the online component, as I had done for the first online elder circle, I asked each participant to prepare an autobiography of 150 words. I did the same. One hundred and fifty words allows little space for the details of a long and complex life, but in fact it would give them each the opportunity to choose from those long lives the essential elements that they wished to share with the group as we began. Because I would ask them to post their autobiographies to our online elder circle site, it also provided an opportunity for each of them to access and try out the site, after receiving instructions from me by email and, when requested, also by telephone. This way individual participants could let me know if they were having difficulty with access, navigation or posting.

2.3 Ending the project

At the end of our six weeks of discussion, the site became inaccessible, irretrievable, and was erased, as we all understood it would be. About a week after the end of our online elder circle, I once again carried out semi-structured telephone interviews lasting about 30 minutes with six of the participants. (See Appendix B for pre- and post-project interview guides.) The seventh participant did not take part as I was unable to reach him by email or telephone to arrange an interview.

The research data used in the qualitative analysis consisted of both an electronic and a printed copy of all of our written online posts as well as transcribed recordings of the telephone interviews conducted before and after the project took place. In addition, through the SLATE2 learning environment, I had access to information such as numbers of participant visits to the site and to various rooms, number of posts authored and total time on the site for each participant over the six weeks. Particularly as this had been a participatory research project, incorporating the participants' insight in their own words, they have been given the opportunity to review and approve the inclusion of their own input before the report's submission.

2.4 The website and its rooms

Our website consisted of three "rooms" or discussion areas. First was the "Discussion," in which the participants, with me as facilitator, were invited to discuss elements of their aging experience in the context of the questions posted there, both mine and theirs, and the links to articles, web sites and YouTube videos that I presented to them. After the first week, which I began with a quote from George Bernard Shaw about aging and life purpose, I worked to tie my choices of resources to comments appearing within the participants' discussion. That is, there was intentionally no pre-existing curriculum for our elder circle. Except for the first week, questions, comments and resources were to be introduced by me in response to the participant-driven discussion. A new discussion began at least once a week, presenting at times a different perspective on the previous discussion and usually, but not always, accompanied by online resources.

Another room was "Research Process," in which I posted comments and asked the participants questions about the "how" or the process of the research project. Participants were encouraged to post their own questions and comments related to the process and progress of our research project.

The third room, "Coffee Bar," was included as a direct result of the experience of the first online elder circle where, without a social space provided, the participants had created one for themselves. The Coffee Bar was intended as our social space, an optional open place for conversation that the participants might determine didn't fit into either of the other two rooms.

2.5 Attempts at creating an online community

Our first task was to create a sense of community among the participants, from which we could begin our collaborative work. Following are some examples from Week One in the Discussion room. Although no words have been changed, selections are edited and indeed some parts of conversations have been left out, so that enough but not too much is presented here. It is intended to give a sense of the energy and potential of the online format as a learning tool in our exploration of the experience of growing older.

During our online project we used our real names; they appeared as authors' names atop each of our posts. In contrast, for the posts below the participants have each chosen a first-name pseudonym to be used when threads of conversation are presented, so that we avoid confusion for the reader while maintaining confidentiality. My own entries appear here under my name – Trudy. When stand-alone quotes in quotation marks are used, given as examples and not part of a thread of interconnected responses, no pseudonyms appear. All comments, whether in a thread with pseudonyms or in an unnamed quote, were the opinions of one or other of the participants and were either posted on the site or given as responses during our telephone interviews held at the end of the project.

Trudy: The "Discussion" is our work room. About twice a week, depending on how the discussion is going, I will post a question and often a related link, connecting both to the content of some of your previous posts. Please keep the discussions here to our elder circle focus of exploring and sharing ideas and insights related to the experience of growing older. And try to connect them to the discussion that has come before. This room is in part about your own learning and in part about collective meaning-making. If you have comments or questions about the research process please go to the "Research Process" room. If you have any other comments, try our "Coffee Bar."

Trudy: ….keep your responses relatively short so that others can grab on to your thoughts and let the conversation come alive. At the same time, one of the advantages of this format is that it allows us time for reflection before responding.

Here's our first question, preceded by a quote:
"This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by our self as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."
<div align="right">George Bernard Shaw</div>

After writing and posting your own autobiography and reading those of our circle participants, I wonder if you'd agree that many of you have in fact written something about purpose – your idea of what your purpose has been, and is. What are your thoughts about purpose?

Keets: I never really considered that I had any purpose in the various stages of my life but upon reflection I believe I was driven more by achievement.

Otto:….I did not spend much time to contemplate any purpose. I found it much more important to deal with life's challenges honestly and as a decent human being.

Simon: Like Keets and Otto, I have never given much thought to "the purpose of life." As I see it, I was given a life through no choice of my own (with apologies to any Buddhists who may be present) and once I got past 30 all I wanted to do was live it. I respond to Shaw's notion of being thoroughly worn out before being thrown on the scrap heap, and I am working diligently to accomplish that."

Simon: Also working diligently to learn the navigation of the site, and finding it a little confusing. That side of my brain is underdeveloped I fear.

Trudy: In the Research Process room, can you let us know some aspects that are confusing? I agree and am hoping to clarify as much for us as I can before we get too much further in.

Duncan: I'm afraid to think I may actually be responding after hours of trying to figure this process out…."Purpose" has comprised a rather large part of my life, as has attempting to put it aside whenever possible, that is when I might get away with ignoring it all. [My previous professions] all thrive on "purpose" …. An interesting and challenging 'life change', is what does one do upon retiring, when "purpose" recedes in general importance, as life is now simply 'your own' existence and concern. The transition between 'retiring' and actually becoming an 'Elder' is not a definable or smooth transitional process.

Tez: ….I rarely contemplated my purpose, at least not consciously. Inherent in my being while raising a family was just that, taking care of my family. My purpose now is ensuring that my wife and I can live comfortably into our old age."

Buggs: Perhaps I'm a bit off base but I think for me the past is past and it is a question of what my purpose is into the future. I find it difficult, for example, to look at production and achievement as if they are gradually coming to an end. I believe it is a never ending process. The venue just keeps changing over time."

From our first days, the participants' posts had the potential to spark lively and insightful discussion as well as foster engagement. When references to retirement surfaced during the first week, the second week began with an invitation to begin a conversation on the experience of retirement, eliciting posts such as the ones in this thread:

Tez: Frankly retirement frightens me, especially over the winter. To be honest I cannot afford to retire. Oh I won't starve, but like most folks my age I'm worried about running out of money before I die, and like 2/3's of retirees I do not have a company pension.

Otto: I finally figured out how to work with this program, and can join the discussion again. I have been retired since September 2001, and my transition from working life went relatively painless. I had anticipated and wished for this retirement day for quite some time. After a forty year career with increasingly growing responsibilities, I was ready to "call it quits". My employer tried to convince me to stay, but I had made up my mind to retire after the month of my 65 birthday. What I immediately cherished as a retiree was that the component time suddenly became available. Time was a very precious commodity during my working life. How do the other participants see time? Is it something valuable and precious? It certainly is for me.

Simon: I have waited a few days to see how the discussion progressed because from the get-go on the subject of retirement I feel like an outsider and unqualified or incapable of making much of a contribution. As someone who has been self-employed all his professional life, and having the good fortune to do exactly what he wants to do, I have no interest in retiring. Retiring from what? Something I enjoy and am fulfilled by? I don't think so. And retire to what? As there is nowhere else I would rather be, I'm already there…. The very fact that we are all participating in this discussion says something about our curiosity with life, our willingness to explore and our having the security to share with 'strangers'. I don't sense that this is a group of mature people who are standing still and waiting.

Buggs: I think that 'retirement' is a DIRTY word in many ways! Some people seem to use the word to indicate that one is now useless once you have reached that bridge. Folks I have met at times have left me feeling as if 'you are on the wrong side of the track - get back to were you belong!' That is to say RETIRED - lacking ability to do what you have been doing (since when). To me in many ways the meaning of the word retire(ment) suggests the closing of a door or closing a curtain on what has gone before and forgetting. That should never be so.

Keets: One thing that my 23 year "retirement period" has allowed me to do is to spend more time researching items of interest. The old saying "Curiosity killed the cat" is a misnomer as far as I'm concerned. If this were true I've exceeded my 9 lives several thousand fold throughout my entire life. Learning is a lifelong experience and the trick is to decide when you want to start giving back knowledge that you have retained, for the benefit of others. It does not start or end at your so-called "Retirement".

Otto: In my view, it really doesn't matter what the fourth phase of one's life is called (after childhood, adolescence, adulthood), be it retirement or senior years, more important is what to do with this fourth phase.

Ces: I am not sure if the fault lies with Sheridan or the wretched Windows 8.1 but it seems that whenever I get something started, the screen suddenly goes berserk and I can finish up anywhere. Has anyone else had similar problems?
We are all, thankfully, individuals, and it is impossible to produce a "one fits all" statement dealing with retirement…. Of course we all need money to exist but I am totally convinced that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. I am currently completing a work session in Uganda and have been privileged to meet some of the world's poorest and yet some of the happiest people I have known.

Trudy: We began Week One with a quote about "being used for a purpose," "being thoroughly worn out," "being a force of nature," and a question for you about purpose. A few days later I posted a link to a YouTube video "Elderhood Rising," in which Wm Thomas talked about the significance of later life. In Week Two there was a link to an organization of former world leaders, still vigorous and committed, called "The Elders." The day before I had opened up a discussion for you about retirement, with more questions than ever. All of those discussions are still active, and I invite you to return to them when you wish, as none has been exhausted. But on we go.

2.6 Technical support

Our project was possible not only because of the contribution of the participants and the guidance of the Centre's staff, but also the support of the Manager of Learning Management Systems and Learning Technologies at the Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. Through the Blackboard Learning Management System, we were provided a space for our virtual community via SLATE2 - Sheridan's online learning environment used widely within the Institute by its students and faculty. For security we were each provided a username and password, giving us sole access to our site for the period of six weeks.

We used no audio or video enhancement in order to see or hear each other. Our work as an online elder circle was carried out by means of the written word, talking with our fingers through posts to the site. An objective of the 2013 project had been to learn what is essential in the creation and delivery of an online elder circle community and this time, in an attempt to replicate the first online elder circle's format in as many ways as possible, we set out to further extend that learning.

2.7 Technical issues

The Research Process room was created as the place to talk about our research project as co-researchers, a place for reflection on the research as well as for problem identification and problem solving, a room that was separate from the Discussion. My previous experience in teaching university-level courses online had shown me that when one online workspace begins to be used for a variety of quite different purposes the result is a soupy muddle that quickly brings confusion, disorganization of ideas and instructions, and indeed irritation among users. The Centre's first online elder circle, the 2013 project, showed me again the value of keeping a limited number of separate online spaces. Thus, three rooms were in place again this time, each with its own purpose.

Here is part of my first post in the Research Process room:
"Keep in mind that this site has been created for us from a much more complex learning environment, SLATE2, designed for Sheridan Institute students and faculty. A great deal of what the new learning environment needs to provide for them is neither necessary nor useful for us. We are breaking new ground by having access to this learning environment for our online elder circle research project. I may have mentioned to you that I was engaged in a previous online elder circle with the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research. The site has been revised and updated since then, so we are all finding our way. I invite you to explore without too much worry that we can go far wrong, if we stick to our rooms - Discussion, Research Process, and Coffee Bar."

In fact I was wrong. The technical aspects of our project, getting into and around the site, posting and being able to find and read others' posts, brought significant challenges and indeed frustration to most though not all of us. The Research Process room, an important location for participant feedback and problem solving during the first project, was this time rarely used; the same was true for our third room, the Coffee Shop.

The following are among the comments posted to the Research Process room by participants. The first comment is my own:

"My plan is that the site itself doesn't get in the way of our communication. Frustration isn't intended to be part of our work together."

"Experimentation, trial and repetition will take us the right way. After doing just that I find my way easy enough."

"Although I am relatively computer literate, accessing the site just about drove me into senility and getting around is not a piece of cake either."

"Wow – finally someone has put into words what I have been experiencing so far with this site! I can't find the discussion site let alone anything else. I ended up here by accident!"

"If anyone does require further assistance in navigating the site from room to room, I have found this way a lot easier…."

"I share the concerns about the complexity and density of the website and I must confess it effects my ability to contribute as much as I would like…. Simply put, the entire process is absolutely not intuitive for me. It's difficult, linear work…. Bottom line – you as moderator and we as research participants are spending way too much time dealing with the mechanics of information management rather than creating the information. And you [Trudy], I feel certain, are the most frustrated of us all."

"One final point. By the time I get the hang of the Slate website I hope to be recommended for an honorary doctorate, but it will be either posthumous or I will have gone stark raving mad. Oh for the day of the quill pen!"

It is evident from this selection of posts that there were varying degrees of comfort, and indeed of discomfort, for the participants as they worked to find ways to access, navigate, post and respond on the site. Unfortunately, the revised learning environment – SLATE2 – resulted in an experience for the participants that was more challenging throughout than that of the participants in the first online elder circle.

2.8 Summary
The participants and I began our six-week online project by posting 150-word autobiographies to the online elder circle site. This had worked well for the first online elder circle in 2013, enabling starting points for participants to move from as the discussion began. This time the autobiographies were, for some, difficult to find within

the site, never actually serving as those starting points. Some autobiographies remained unread throughout.

Three discussion areas were created: one to address the ongoing research process, one to house our central discussions about the experience of growing older, and one to provide an unstructured social space.

Through the following weeks, I posted questions and links based on the content of our developing discussions. Most of the participants engaged in the conversations that took place in the "Discussion" room, always respectfully and with openness, offering both insight and enthusiasm. The other two rooms were little used. The infrequent use of the Research Process room was the more problematic.

At the end of the six-week period, the online elder circle site became inaccessible and the data on it were removed. I retained both a printed and an electronic copy of our online posts for analysis and conducted post-project telephone interviews with six of the seven participants.

3. What was learned

3.1 Introduction

A group of seven older adults previously unknown to each other participated in the online elder circle project. It has turned out that in some ways, particularly but not exclusively in relation to the issues with technology, the experience of this second online elder circle was a markedly different one. In this section of the report I will attempt to detail the learning that resulted from our experience.

3.2 Posts and visits to the online rooms

The frequency with which people show up to an activity can provide useful information about the engagement they are maintaining with that activity. The first tables below provide data on the frequency of participant posts to each of the site's three rooms and a comparison with post totals from the earlier online elder circle in 2013 (Table 1). As mentioned in the previous section, one of the many additional features available this time, through the SLATE2 learning environment, gave me the ability to track the number of individual participants' visits to the site with or without posting a message, the number of posts authored by individuals, and the total time that each participant spent within the site over the six-week period (Table 2).

Table 1. Participant post totals by room – Online Elder Circles 2015 and 2013

Second Online Elder Circle – 2015 (7 participants)

Name of Room	Participant Posts
Research Process	13
Discussion Room	60
Coffee Shop	17
Total	**91**

First Online Elder Circle - 2013 (6 participants)

Name of Room	Participant Posts
Housekeeping	72
Discussion Room	167
Tea Room	136
Total	**375**

Table 2. Participant visits to the site, posts authored, total time on site –
Online Elder Circle 2015

Participant	# Visits	# Posts authored	Total time on site
#1	50	16	2 h 39 m
#2	45	12	3 h 29 m
#3	19	15	1 h 31 m
#4	75	2	3 h 33 m
#5	16	7	1 h 34 m
#6	12	10	0 h 25 m
#7	204	29	11 h 09 m
Totals	421	91	24 h 33 m

Totals for participants #1 – 6, excluding participant #7
Total # Visits – 217
Total # Posts authored – 62

Data on the numbers of visits to the site were unavailable at the time of the first online elder circle, but a comparison of participant posts shows a stark difference between numbers of posts within each of the two projects – 375 posts among six participants during the first project and 91 posts among seven participants during the second. Without the inclusion of the highest number of individual posts, made by the seventh participant in the second project, the post totals are 375 compared with 62.

3.3 *Similarities in design between the two online elder circle projects*
The initial instruction to participants at the beginning of both research projects – to compose and post an autobiography of 150 words – was the same. The material presented at the beginning of each project (Shaw quote about purpose, Wm. Thomas video on elderhood, and link to The Elders website) was identical, offered as focusing and, more importantly, jumping off points for our evolving discussions. A review of comments made by participants of each project during the initial telephone interview shows similar reasons for wanting to take part and a similar anticipation about what might be learned. Duration of the project, small number of participants, age range of participants, support and guidance of the same facilitator, recruitment from the same Centre database, asynchronous feature, initial enthusiasm of participants, all were the same. One significant difference, interestingly, was that the level of confidence and

comfort with computer technology initially appeared higher overall, by self-report, for this second group of participants than for the first.

There are features of both projects that cannot so easily be measured or commented upon. The influence of gender is one. Although it may have been a factor, it is an area of investigation that must be left for a future research project. There was not a declared intention in the design of either project to compare the two but rather, for me, to hold the findings of the first project as a base of acquired knowledge from which to build understanding through the implementation of the second. As it has turned out, I have often compared the two projects in regard to the research experience that each gave to its participants.

3.4 Thoughts about our online community

Our participants were lifelong learners and initially keen to contribute. Connections and support occurred through ideas rather than feelings. Insight appeared often, though stories did not. On reading and rereading their posts, I found little evidence of sustained collaboration among the participants, a desired outcome of an elder circle experience. Questions, very good ones, were often asked by the participants of their online colleagues with, I think, the intention of beginning a discussion among the participant group. Here are just a few examples:
"Do you need to give up anything to embrace elderhood?"

"An inevitable question arises: what does one do when one's expectations, physical, mental and spiritual do not match up with one's abilities?"

"How do the other participants see time? Is it something valuable and precious? It certainly is for me."

"Retirement in its traditional meaning is anathema and outdated. So just what should this time of one's life be called?"

"Why is it that we and (overly protective?) well-meaning friends and relations are so quick to point out 'at your age really you shouldn't be doing that'?"

"So what about the future? What about 'Elderhood?' There was a roadmap, either explicit or implicit for Childhood, for Adolescence and for Adulthood. Where, we might well ask, is the roadmap for Elderhood?"

A candid and insightful discussion about retirement began during Week Two and another – about the notion of freedom in later life – continued through Weeks Four and Five. But for much of the time, participants' questions to their online colleagues went unanswered. Two participants suggested that responding to <u>my</u> questions was what was expected. In the final interviews, two participants had almost identical comments, "Trudy's posted another question; I'll answer it." I hoped that my questions would also be used as jumping off points for discussion rather than as defined and therefore limiting discussion topics themselves. One participant had hoped for more provocative questions, ones that generated "sparks." Two suggested that having an email notification to let them know that one of their posts had been answered would prevent having to go online too often to see whether anyone had said anything.

3.5 The impact of our technology issues

Despite the ongoing support of the Manager of Sheridan's Learning Management Systems and Learning Technologies and the SLATE2 learning environment, our attempts at creating a collaborative online community were less successful, for some much less successful, than we had hoped. The ease of movement within our site that the 2013 participants had experienced, its relative simplicity, the clarity of organization and the accessibility of both the site and of our posts were this time lacking. This time the attempt to adapt for our online elder circle research project a virtual environment that was built and enhanced for the students and faculty of a large learning institution was problematic.

This information is known: Two participants expressed little concern about the technology. One of those posted irregularly, however, as a result of unforeseen personal demands on his time, while the other posted a prodigious amount. Another participant posted twice at the beginning of our project and never again, although it appears that he continued to visit the site for the next several weeks. He could not be reached for an interview or for any comment. Another participant pulled out in frustration early on, calling the project "a complete failure." Three participants, each of whom had a degree of difficulty with the site, persisted, posting regularly to the Discussion room.

It is not, of course, possible to record with any certainty how our technology issues impacted the research, nor how the outcome might have been different. During our final interviews I said more than once and, with some agreement from the participants, that the experience seemed to me as a fire that had been laid and lit without actually catching flame.

3.6 Participants' reflections during post-project interviews

Buggs reported that the experience was overall "very informative." Particularly interested in our discussion about freedom, he said he surprised himself with some of his responses and that our elder circle was "different to what's discussed with friends." A man involved in many activities, he said that he hadn't taken the time to read all of the posts. Speaking of himself as "not technically competent," he nonetheless persisted, commenting on the difficulty with access and navigation as well as in trying to sort out posts that did not appear to be in chronological order.

Ces said that the initial concept had been a good one and that he'd "looked forward to taking part, to interacting with fellow seniors and getting to know them through meaningful interaction." In fact he found the experience "very frustrating and extremely disappointing." After three lengthy attempts to navigate the site, he reported, he abandoned the project.

Simon had tolerated the technical challenges. He worked to engage the others in the discussions, particularly about the idea of "elderhood" and the need for a map to this new territory. For him, "the project seemed to end suddenly, just as it was starting to get going."

Duncan did not respond to my invitation to reflect on the experience of participation.

Otto spoke in our interview about problems with the technology, answering a question about the lack of participant presence in the Research or Coffee rooms by saying that if he found the Discussion room, he thought, "Thank God I found the place. I'm not going anywhere else." He thought it "stimulating to learn that people at our age are confronted with similar issues." "I always tried to envision us sitting together in one

room, talking about what is of concern to each of us. And sometimes I felt sorry for you trying to put this all together. But it was interesting and I'm glad I made the effort."

Tez had been "hoping to get more out of it than I did." Technology wasn't the problem; other aspects of his life took him away from the project, although moving through the site was "not seamless or smooth."

Keets was surprised at how much participants opened up, beginning with their autobiographies. "Generally, I thought the project went extremely well." "I was able to find short cuts to get on and around the site, basically trial and error." He suggested that "having a week just to play around with the program might have helped," that perhaps people were frustrated by the program and had little patience left to engage with the discussion.

3.7 Summary

Overall there were far fewer posts made this time, and those posts that were made were often, though not always, what could be called "stand-alones," that is, good responses that held to the topic without connecting to the ideas expressed in earlier posts, without making references to others' posts and building on them, without evidence that participants were learning from and teaching each other, without a spirit of collaboration.

A spirit of collaboration, I suggest, needs an environment that is open and accessible to all, an environment in which participants do not need to pay much attention to the means: the technology. It was not always easy, for example, to see all of the posts on a particular topic. Otto's comment is telling, that if he did mange to reach the Discussion room, not a certainty, he wasn't going anywhere else. And if he did mange to reach the Discussion room, there would be no guarantee that his colleagues' posts would be visible to him, though likely some would.

The discussions about retirement and about freedom stand as evidence for me of the potential of the online elder circle to bring people and ideas together. And perhaps because the autobiographies were themselves not easily accessible, the participants' personal stories were not integrated, not woven into our discussions.

There were, nonetheless, opportunities for me to learn from this second attempt. The experience this time did serve to enrich my understanding of the more nuanced as well as the more conspicuous elements necessary for the creation of an exemplary elder circle. Some of the participants did report benefits from their participation and those for whom our online elder circle was a disappointment exercised their option to leave the research project. All, I think, began the project with enthusiasm and all made a degree of effort toward its success. I am grateful to all of the participants for helping to forward the research.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Introduction

The participants and I engaged in this participatory research project for the purpose of answering two questions:
1. What might be the benefits for participants of carrying out an elder circle in an online format?

2. What might be learned, by carrying out an online elder circle as a research project and with the input of participants, about how to create and deliver an exemplary online elder circle program?

Building on what was learned from the earlier online elder circle research project undertaken through the Centre in 2013, this similarly designed follow-up project was an attempt to learn more through the experience of participation in an online elder circle for a second small group of older adults.

4.2 Limitations of the research

Elder circles are learning circles that explore one's experience of growing older and living in old age, whatever that may be for individual participants. Shared meaning making provides additional richness to one's individual exploration of the topic. Collaboration can provide answers to questions such as:

Do others share my thoughts, feelings, understanding of this time of life?
What can I learn from others' experience, others' joys, others' fears, about growing older?
How might I share my own experience?
What might be ahead? and
What are we learning that could make a difference to me or others?

For this participatory project, collaboration on topics and issues related to one's aging and ongoing feedback about the progress of the research were necessary, indeed essential elements. Without collaboration through an ongoing conversation in the Research Process room, for example, a barrier was created to participant engagement in the research process. Without a community of participants engaging in ongoing discussion, the elder circle experience for those who took part was diminished.

Sheridan Institute's Learning Management Systems and Learning Technologies worked to accommodate our project within SLATE2, their updated learning environment. They made our project possible. Yet one critical recommendation for any future attempts is that the online elder circle be housed within an environment capable of adaptation to suit the project's specific needs. These needs go beyond ease of access and navigation to include the presentation of information within the site, ease of viewing and of organization, as well as other ways, both implicit and explicit, of encouraging and stimulating involvement. Furlong (1997) cautions me about the ever-changing technological environment as I accept that my assumptions about our website had undergone little change from the first project to the second.

While the attempt to piggy-back onto a learning environment, albeit one built for another purpose entirely, provided a welcomed second opportunity to conduct the research project, the result was a hobbled project and more importantly, a much-limited elder circle experience for participants. For that I apologize to Buggs, Ces, Duncan, Keets, Otto, Simon and Tez.

4.3 Key recommendations

Just as one of the participants in the first elder circle project learned that aging is a work in progress, I have been reminded that the concept of the online elder circle is itself a work in progress. I believe it to be important work.

To the list of recommendations presented in section 1.3 *First Centre online elder circle research project – 2013*, the following can now be added:

Online elder circle participants require –
- As much time as is needed for orientation to the site
- Specific instruction or training as well as modeling from both the facilitator and the participants to encourage collaboration.

Online elder circles require –
- A website that enables participation focused on content and interaction rather than on overcoming technical problems; a website that can be responsive to the project's specific needs
- Recognition that this new approach to an exploration of later life requires time for participants to grow accustomed to it. The possibility of an increase in the time for the circle to be active online (i.e., beyond six weeks).

Please see Appendix C for a list of suggestions for future research.

4.4 Conclusion

Additional learning occurred about the creation and delivery of an exemplary elder circle, although our project could not be described as exemplary in itself. It is not possible to present conclusions about the effect of the issues with technology on the outcome of the project for its participants, other than to say they had an adverse effect. And what is the influence, if any, of the gender make-up of the two sets of participants in the two research projects? For what additional reasons were the levels of engagement, of collaboration, or the frequency of posts this time less than anticipated? One thing at least is known, and I hope was clear to the readers as they read the words of the participants. Participation in our online elder circle engaged each of the participants, for however long and to whatever degree, in research that has increased understanding of the online elder circle model. I am grateful to the seven men who agreed to take part.

5. References

Cloutier-Fisher, D., Kobayashi, K., & Smith, A. (2011). The subjective dimension of social isolation: A qualitative investigation of older adults' experiences in small social support networks. *Journal of Aging Studies, 25*, 407-414. doi: 10.1016/j.jaging.2011.03012

Dorin, M. (2007). Online education of older adults and its relation to life satisfaction. *Educational Gerontology, 33*(2), 127-143.

Furlong, M. (1997). Creating online community for older adults. *Generations, 21*(3), 33-35.

Findsen, B., & Formosa, M. (2011). *Lifelong learning in later life: A handbook on older adult learning*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.

Jaeger, P. T., & Xie, B. (2009). Developing online community accessibility guidelines for persons with disabilities and older adults. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 20*(1), 55-63.

Kenyon, G., Bohlmeijer, E., & Randall, W. L. (Eds.). (2011). *Storying later life: Issues, investigations, and interventions in narrative gerontology*. Oxford.

Khvorostianov, N., Elias, N., & Nimrod, G. (2011). 'Without it I am nothing': The internet in the lives of older immigrants. *New Media and Society, 14*(4), 583-599. doi: 10.1177/1461444811421599

Marlett, N., & Emes, C. (2010). *Grey matters: A guide to collaborative research with seniors*. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press.

Masi, C. M., Chen, H-Y., Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2011). A meta-analysis of interventions to reduce loneliness. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 15* (3), 219-266. doi: 10.1177/1088868310377394

Medcalf, T. C. (2009). *The reality beyond appearances: Elders on growing old*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Dissertation No. NR50308)

Morris, M. (2002). *Participatory research and action: A guide to becoming a researcher for social change*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Munn-Giddings, C., McVicar, A., Boyce, M., & O'Brien, N. (2016). Learning from older citizens' research groups. *Educational Gerontology, 42*(1), 58-69.

Nimrod, G. (2009). Seniors' online communities: A quantitative content analysis. *The Gerontologist, 50* (3), 382-392.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2005). *Collaboration online: Learning together in community*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Pfeil, U., Zaphiris, P., & Wilson, S. (2009). Older adults' perceptions and experiences of online social support. *Interacting with Computers, 21*, 159-172. doi: 10.1016/j.intcom.2008.12.001

Schachter-Shalomi, Z., & Miller, R. (1995). *From age-ing to sage-ing: A profound new vision of growing older*. New York: Warner Books.

Sinha, S. K. (2013). *Living longer, living well: Highlights and key recommendations*. Retrieved from Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, Government of Ontario website: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/ministry/publications/reports/seniors_strategy/docs/seniors_strategy.pdf

Thomas, W. H. (2004). *What are old people for? How elders will save the world*. Acton, MA: Vander Wyk & Burnham.

United Nations. (2002). Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. Retrieved from http://undesadspd.org/Portals/0/ageing/documents/Fulltext-E.pdf

An invitation to older men (65+)
to participate in our <u>6-week</u> online program to study
the effectiveness of Online Elder Circles for older male participants

Elder Circles are facilitated, elder-centred small groups of older adults who meet regularly
for the purpose of exploring and sharing ideas related to the experience
of growing older and living in later life.

Elder Circles conducted face-to-face for both men and women have been
shown to benefit those who take part in them. This project will explore the effectiveness
of participation in an elder circle, for male participants only, in an online format.

Through activities, readings and conversation, six participants will engage in
structured online discussion with each other and with the researcher-facilitator
about their experience of growing older.

Six-week program begins in mid-February, 2015
Participants will work online from home for approximately 2 hours per week
Open to older men aged 65+

You will need regular access to a computer and the internet.
Only basic computer knowledge is required

If you have any questions, or to register please contact:
<u>serc@sheridancollege.ca</u>

(This project has been approved by the Sheridan Research Ethics Board)

7. Appendix B:

Pre-Program Interview Questions for Participants, by Telephone

1. Brief introduction and welcome

2. What interests you about taking part in this online elder circle project?

3. Do you have previous experience in online learning? If so, please tell me about it.

4. Whether or not you have previous experience in online learning, what questions do you have at this point about the project?

5. What do you hope to get out of the experience of participation in the online elder circle?

6. What do you think you will bring to the online elder circle?

7. What concerns do you have, if any?

8. As the facilitator, I have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of the participants. What will help you to feel safe and secure as we carry out our elder circle research project?

9. My hope is that participants in this elder circle will benefit from the experience. That is what has happened in the previous elder circles that I have facilitated. What might be the benefit for you and for the others?

9. If a friend or a family member asked you about what you will be doing in the online elder circle, what would you say?

Post-Program Interview Questions for Participants, by Telephone

1. Please tell me about your experience of our elder circle.

2. What surprised you? What did you learn?

3. What, if any, were the benefits for you and for the group?

4. What worked well? What didn't work well? What improvements would be helpful?

6. Please comment on the online format specifically. In your view, what must be considered in offering elder circles online?

8. Appendix C:

The following are suggestions for further research adapted from the report of the first Centre for Elder Research online elder circle, 2013

With additional research, it may become increasingly evident that the online elder circle can be an important tool to combat loneliness and to promote feelings of social inclusion, with the attendant health benefits that may bring. Possibilities for further research with the model are many. The research focus could, for example, be on gender, age, ethnicity, or aspects of health both physical and mental. Social inclusion may not be an end in itself; circles also focus on learning and indeed problem-solving. An online elder circle could be a component of community engagement. Circles could intentionally serve a specific base or, like ours, consist of those who respond to a flyer.

Some of these suggestions clearly require, both in the research phase and beyond, the direct involvement of suitably-trained professionals. Participant groups to be considered might include, among others:

- A mixed-gender or one-gender group
- A group comprised of two different age groups within elderhood
- A group whose members share an ethnicity or new immigrant elders
- The recently retired or the about-to-retire
- Those at home whose chronic health status limits their mobility
- Those at home who are temporarily less mobile (e.g., recovering from surgery)
- Those who are homebound for any of a variety of reasons.

Online elder circle research might also focus on extending the reach of learning organizations such as Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs) or enhancing and indeed strengthening the experience of participation in an action-focused elder group. Members of such groups may reside near each other, as most of ours did, or on opposite sides of the globe.

Depending on the online elder circle's purpose, its duration and indeed its configuration could be adapted. It is the *idea* of the online elder circle that can be embraced at this stage, and creative consideration of its potential adaptations made subsequently. My hope is that some of the readers of this report and the earlier Centre for Elder Research report – Online Elder Circles: Their Uses and Benefits (2013) – will give thought to ways they might investigate and adapt the idea of the online elder circle to address needs within and beyond their own professional and research settings.