Serious Learning: Older Adults in University Continuing Education

by

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Abstract

Non-credit programs for older adults have had a peripheral but growing role in Canadian universities since the 1970s (Ratsoy, 2016; Findsen & Formosa, 2011). As the population ages, interest in such programs is increasing, but they remain relatively neglected in research (Findsen, 2018; Kops, 2017; Snyder & Taylor, 2012).

Adding to the literature that takes older adult learning more seriously, this case study describes in depth the experience of learners in a continuing studies program for older adults in a Canadian university, anonymized as the “Seniors Program.” Through critical reflexivity and narrative inquiry, using insight from my perspective as a member of the Seniors Program’s administrative team, I tell a story of the program which includes: the problem of exclusion of so many from older adult learning at university; the persistence of older paradigms of learning; the contrast between passively accepting facts and actively exploring mystery as a learner; the question of whether older adult learners in general are significantly different from younger; and ageism and issues of gender. To illustrate these themes, I describe a specific initiative in the Seniors Program, the introduction of courses and events exploring end-of-life issues. I address the unacknowledged complexities of older adult learning, and the potential and challenges of programs for older adult learners in university settings.

Keywords: education, older adult learners, continuing education

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List of Acronyms

AFU	Age-Friendly University
COVID-19	the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2.
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
ICU	intensive care unit
MAiD	medical assistance in dying
MOOC	massive open online course
OA	older adults
OAE	older adult education
OLLI	Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
STEM	science, technology, engineering, mathematics
SWOT	strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
U3A	university of the third age

Glossary

Age-friendly university	An institution of higher education that has embraced the principles of the AFU global network, to be inclusive of older adults
Death café	An informal meeting organized as part of a worldwide social franchise in which people come together to discuss death openly, demystifying the topic
Fourth age	A period of increasing dependency towards the end of life, sometimes characterized as “old old”
Gerotranscendence	A spiritual stage of personal development attainable at the end of life
Lifelong learning	Any form of learning for professional or personal development undertaken as an adult (but the term is sometimes used to refer to older adult learners only)
Third age	A period of freedom from obligations of work or childcare later in life, sometimes characterized as “young old”

Chapter 1. Introduction

Vignette 1:

2017. I am sitting outside the studio with a little plastic cup of water, about to do a ten-minute local radio slot about the Seniors Program. The theme is likely to be the usual one for media interest in the program—the novelty of older adults going back to school. I'm nervous for several reasons. I have been working in the program for a few years but, like someone who moves to a small-town community, still feel like a newcomer and outsider. Can I represent the Seniors Program accurately? If I don't, I'm pretty sure that I'll hear all about it tomorrow at work. I have a few facts and figures ready, about thousands of students each term for example. But how to explain the essence of the program—the joy of learning, for example—without sounding clichéd? Also, how might I push back against the subtly patronizing basis of the radio slot (do I dare?)? And how do I get the depth and complexity the Seniors Program across, in just a few minutes? The questions I anticipate—why do older adults go back to school and what do they get out of it—are also themes of the research I have started to work on. My worries about the interview and about the research are much the same—how do I explain the Seniors Program in this format? And I need to try to attract some new people to the program, maybe helping build the diversity that it sadly lacks. I take a sip of water. I've never been on the radio before, and I repeated "well, um…" way too many times practicing for this yesterday. It's a lot of worry for a few minutes squeezed between the weather and the traffic news.

Non-credit programs for older adults have had a marginal but growing role in Canadian universities since the 1970s (Ratsoy, 2016; Findsen & Formosa, 2011, Findsen, 2018). As populations age, research interest in such programs has increased (Kops, 2017; Snyder & Taylor, 2012). This thesis describes a large and long-established continuing education program for older adults, the "Seniors Program," at a Canadian university. It offers an account of the motivations and perspectives of older adult learners in the program, and a critical description of learning in the program. My research complements the short list of studies that take on the complexities of learning in later adulthood, for example, Ardelt (2000) on the different possible goals of adult education—information, competence or wisdom; Bunyan and Jordan (2005) on the motivations of

older adult learners and barriers to their accessing later life learning; Talmage, Mark, Slowey, and Knopf (2016) on the potential role of universities; and Maginess (2016), whose book is based on co-research with older adult learners and takes a deep dive into their experience of a specific program.

The experiences of older adult students—those above or around traditional retirement age of 65 or so—are under-represented in research literature on adult learning (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Snyder & Taylor, 2012). There are some descriptions of programs for older adults within or affiliated with universities that suggest models for older adult learning (Jamieson, 2016) and there are notable theories about older adults, such as andragogy and geragogy. Scholarship in the fields of education theory in general contains ideas that can be usefully applied to the Seniors Program (Freire, 2009; Illeris, 2018; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Noddings, 2007). There are, in addition, a few studies that dig into specific university-based programs for older adults, and explore their complexities, contradictions and intractable questions. However, many studies of older adult learners romanticize or celebrate programs, omitting serious critique (Hansen, Talmage, Thaxton, & Knopf, 2019).

My research is a case study that draws upon methods of narrative inquiry and critical reflexivity. The study is concerned with what and how the learners in the *Seniors* Program learn, and seeks to bring to light complexities in the program that might open new understandings of older adult learning. My research raises themes in the education of older adults such as ageism and stereotypes, exclusion and inclusion, how older adults learn, the role of universities, how to explore end-of-life issues, and the tension between the persistence of the expert-novice paradigm of passive learners and a perceived need for more engaged and active ways of learning. A specific example in the research is how the introduction of courses tackling a personally challenging topic—end of life—tested what seems to be a comfortable preference, for many learners in the program, for traditional lectures.

I consider how and why older adults learn from my perspective as an administrator, and very occasional instructor, in the program. There is little literature created by “shop-floor level” staff or instructors in university programs for older adult learners, although these emic perspectives can offer insights into the everyday pedagogies and decisions, the discourses of older adult learning, and the experiences of

the older adult learners themselves. I hope to demonstrate the possibilities of such programs for individual and social development as well as theories and concepts that might further enrich the field.

Simons (2009) points out that the descriptive analysis of the case study approach allows for “partly political” ends (p. 5). Undertaking this research, I realized that I also have an agenda: to make the claim that the pedagogy of the Seniors Program is as worthy of attention as for-credit university teaching and learning. This complexity lies not only in the teaching and learning that happens in the program, but also in issues of exclusion in older adult learning, and the various internal and external barriers potential participants in programs for older adult learners might face. I also hope that the research can inform pedagogy and program design in older adult learning.

In the next section, I describe the context of the inquiry—the Seniors Program and myself as researcher.

1.1.2. The Seniors Program

The Seniors Program has been offering university-level non-credit courses to older adult learners since the 1970s. It grew out of student-led club for older adults, and also has elements of an opera club in its DNA. Looking back over old brochures and programs, I sense rather dusty and elitist ideas, a tendency to default to a “great books of the western canon” curriculum, although with notable exceptions. Classes cover a diversity of topics including literature, art, history, religion, science philosophy, music. Describing the program to new and prospective instructors or learners, I usually say that we offer lectures, smaller seminars and some hands-on workshops throughout the year, and that we try to welcome learners over 55 of all educational backgrounds. I describe the courses as designed to be both accessible and academically rigorous, and the learners as typically saying they take classes for the joy of learning, to make social connections, and to keep their minds active.

The current student body is typical of this kind of program across North America: 80% of the learners are women, and the average age is around 70. More than half of the learners already have some postsecondary education, and they tend to have above-average social, economic and cultural capital. Most are already comfortable in a

university setting. A typical course costs $120, and there are bursaries available for learners with low incomes, as well as regular free lectures and events. Courses are all non-credit, but learners can opt to work towards a non-credit certificate. They do this by writing reflective essays on the courses they take.

How learners approach these reflective essays offers insight into tensions in the Seniors Program. The essays are intended to be personal, thoughtful responses to courses, with no formal research needed, but many learners write third-person accounts based on extra material they have researched on the course topic. Some, on the other hand, write heartfelt essays that open their lives to the reader. Which form is more "difficult," "rigorous," or "worthwhile"? This raises questions about the validity of different kinds of knowledge. As Palmer, Zajonc, Scribner, and Nepo (2010) say:

> A critique that advocates of integrative teaching and learning must address is that this pedagogy is too "messy" to qualify as higher learning . . . The kind of knowledge most valued in the academy is that which can be dealt with in a rational, linear, controlled manner; words such as these define the comfort zone in academic literature. (p. 36)

This program is one of the largest in Canada. Over 1,000 individual learners register in courses each term. As with other kinds of program catering to older adults, the Seniors Program is surfing a demographic wave: "Some independents [i.e., centres for older adult learning not affiliated with universities] have been "victims of their own success"; their membership can become so large that finding sufficient space and enough volunteer administrators is proving challenging" (Ratsoy, 2016, p. 86).

Scholarship on aging addresses the current reality that more adults will enjoy decades of healthy life after retirement (Decady & Greenberg, 2014). Affluent baby-boomers are the first generation to have the luxury of an extended retirement, a "third age" free of childcare and work responsibilities (Withnall, 2010; Aspin, Chapman, Evans, & Bagnall, 2012). For come, this retirement might still mean care responsibilities, for grandchildren or, with increasing age, for partners in ill health, but for those with economic and social capital, is a time of choice:

> The 21st century is being transformed by demography and technology; both work and leisure practices are radically changing and this affects the nature of human learning and adaptability, partly facilitated by the new tools . . . As they live longer, and as they look towards the traditional retirement age, they may in fact be "up-skilling" themselves in order to

> continue working. On the other hand, many who have reached retirement may be taking the opportunity to prepare for a different kind of work, perhaps something they had always dreamed of doing. (Pincas, 2007, p. 28)

The proportion of the Canadian population aged 65 years and older is expected to reach 20% in 2024 (Statistics Canada, 2015). In Japan the proportion is already 26%. These are unprecedented figures, sometimes seen as a problem by those who discount the resources and potential of older adults. As mentioned above, these demographics fuel the success of the Seniors Program and others like it.

Instructors are drawn to the program in part because there is no set curriculum, and courses do not have to ladder into more advanced offerings. Courses, therefore, can be a mix of the idiosyncratic (the science of scents, novels of flight, autism in Austen) and the straightforward (art, Chinese history, and novels from “the canon”). There is also room for smaller courses intended to be more engaging (end of life, life writing, and Indigenous theatre). Apart from an optional reflective essay (see previous page), there is no formal testing or evaluation. Instructors report positively on the attentiveness and enthusiasm of learners. Classes are more heterogeneous in terms of life experience and perspectives than the typical class of undergraduates (the age range of learners in the Seniors Program spans three generations, from 55 to over 90).

Personal connections with colleagues confirm the literature suggesting that the Seniors Program shares many traits with other university-based older adult learning programs:

> The great majority of those aged 60+ who enrolled on an extramural course were retired people. There were, as expected, more females than males . . . as has been well documented in other research, supported from our research, upper/middle class people (i.e. those who are already relatively highly educated) are over-represented among adult, particularly older learners. Over half of those over 60 already had a degree. (Jamieson, 2016, p. 480)

My research is not intended to be a representative account of older adult learning in general. Rather, I hope to describe as richly and accurately as possible this one program, considering my own and the learners' experience in light of the literature, with the goal of illuminating processes and possibilities in older adult learning.

1.1.3. My story

There is unexamined privilege in the Seniors Program, and I am also privileged in many ways. I am a white, cis-gendered male settler ("settler" describes a non-Indigenous person living on un-surrendered Indigenous territories in what is now called Canada; the term acknowledges how I benefit from the ongoing process of colonization). I am an immigrant to Canada, but from Scotland, which shares the dominant culture of Canada. I do not have the experience of people marginalized here by gender, ethnicity, or language and "what we can see depends heavily on what our culture has trained us to look for" (Painter, 2010, p. 16). My position inevitably means I am not always aware of not being aware. I am an older student myself (born in 1962 at the tail end of the boom and late to the party) but cannot claim to identify with most learners in the Seniors Program. There is a huge difference, for example, along the one dimension of gender alone. As described in Section 5.2.2: Gender, older women can be marginalized in the curriculum of the program, which tends towards "malestream" practice, despite their being in the majority in numbers.

My personal experience and perspective are significant to the research questions, as well as to the data collection and analysis. My first salaried position in a university was working in a community engagement project (anonymized as "Inner-City project" in this thesis) in a neighbourhood which is the site of numerous economic, social and political issues. That project was founded on asset-based community development (McKnight & Block, 2010), with residents of the neighbourhood learning through volunteering and supporting others. I moved from that context to join the Seniors Program six years ago (coincidental with starting my doctoral journey, too). Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2014) say that "autoethnographies begin with the thoughts, feelings, identities, and experiences that make us uncertain" (p. 47). This research is not an autoethnography, but it has been inspired in part by my uncertainties about my new job, and the contrast between the approaches to learning in the Inner-City project and the Seniors Program.

In my previous roles as an educator, I was concerned less with people acquiring specific competencies, and more with changing attitudes and building confidence: Teaching and learning was more than an intellectual exercise. As a nurse, I worked with people with developmental delay and mental health challenges, and most of my career

centred on community care and inclusion for people who had been institutionalized. My work in the Inner-City project aimed to foster sustainable change in a marginalized community by identifying and facilitating the strengths that people bring. In contrast, an initial impression I had of the Seniors Program was of people passively strolling through an art gallery, not being touched by the works there, but feeling somehow virtuous and cultured just by being in the gallery. How can people really learn, sitting silently through a two-hour lecture on Mozart? The program seemed a little too frivolous and genteel, which is a sweeping, unfair picture. As my research demonstrates, there is much more to the Seniors program. Nevertheless, the contrast and my doubts raised serious questions: What is the purpose of the Program? What kind of learning takes place? For the research, I draw on my previous experiences as an educator and a learner, combining “the power of the personal perspective with the value of analysis and theory” (Stahlke Wall, 2016, p. 8). My work experience with people who are economically and socially marginalized, and which was more concerned with social justice and inclusion, turned out to be illuminating.

I have more in common with the learners in the Seniors Program, in terms of educational background and current socio-economic status, than I do with those populations I worked with previously. I have had only the smallest personal glimpses of exclusion, of being an outsider; For example, and relevant to exclusion and the Seniors Program, I was (a long time ago) a “first generation” student at university, and had a taste of feeling lost, out of place and not knowing the unwritten rules. I have worked outside academia for most of my career, and am not a university insider. My first career was in nursing, in the fields of mental health and developmental delay. I am wary of but familiar with academia, which is maybe a different stance from many learners in the program, who love the idea of university or who have no previous experience of it. I am pursuing an EdD, in part at least, to prove that I can and to stimulate my mind, so my motivations are similar to the expressed motivations of some Seniors Program learners. I am concerned about, and feel implicated in, a sense of complacency and self-congratulation in the Seniors Program over the joy of learning and how wonderful learning is. It is important to note, on the other hand, that learners in the Seniors Program are also aware of this and object to media descriptions patronizing them as wonderful older learners. And the student body is not a monolith, of course. Some learners welcome more engaging styles of teaching and learning. They also worry about

exclusion, who is missing from the classes and what is missing from the curriculum: some research participants spoke about Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning, and about education for social change. Moreover, in this research, I find that joy and sense of accomplishment in the Seniors Program can be significant and genuine.

My role in the Seniors Program is as an administrator. I also dabble in being an instructor in the program, running a workshop on how to write reflective essays for those who are working toward the certificate. Teaching of one kind or another has been a thread throughout my various jobs, and it has been the element of any job that I have loved the most. I am deeply involved in the Seniors Program, although my personal history and my role distance me somewhat from the learners and the issues they face and are interested in. This position aligns with the research stances and methods of critical reflexivity and narrative inquiry that I adopt in this thesis because each method involves sustained experience of the site of research as well as the ability to step back from it.

The next section outlines the thesis, describing the main chapters and their content.

1.2. An overview of the thesis

1.2.1. Literature review

I start Chapter 2, the literature review, with accounts of the roots of older adult education programs that arose in the context of demographic and social change, along with new university policies concerned with outreach and community engagement. Guided perhaps by unexamined assumptions (about age, for example) and vague mandates, the programs tended to evolve haphazardly, and to be peripheral to the university. Partly because of this, they often have ad hoc approaches to teaching and learning, too, which can be both a strength and a weakness.

The literature review also considers relevant models and theories of older adult learning, along with descriptions of student motivations and goals. Various teaching and learning paradigms that can be usefully applied to the Seniors Program and programs like it are described, along with relevant theories and philosophies of learning in general.

I also explore literature on the topic that takes a more critical perspective, discussing issues of individualism, consumerism, gender, ageism, and exclusion.

The literature review suggests that a thick description of a program for older adult learners would be useful, particularly a description that aims to take seriously the issues involved rather than to focus on celebration of the positives of older adult learning. My methodology of a case study based on critical reflexivity and narrative inquiry follows from this suggestion.

1.2.2. Methodology

Chapter 3, "Methodology," outlines why the case study approach (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Swanborn, 2010; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2017) that I adopt suits the nature of the research questions. The chapter also elaborates on the critical reflexivity and narrative inquiry approaches through which I explored the experience of learners, and my own. Critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016a; Ng, Wright, & Cooper, 2019; Flores-Sandoval & Kinsella, 2020) goes beyond reflection on practice, to consider the researcher's assumptions along with the wider, societal context of the object of study.

My research is intertwined with my everyday practice, informing it and being informed by it, but also considers larger issues such as ageism and gender discrimination. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007a; Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011; Kim, 2016) is suited to considering and presenting ambiguities, in a holistic way that I hope captures more complex issues in the Seniors Program. Narrative is also ubiquitous in the program, in how learners talk about it and themselves, and explicitly in some writing courses. The chapter discusses the challenges of narrative inquiry for me. The chapter sets out, too, how the methodologies reinforce and complement one another, and align with my stance of "lightly held ontologies" that inform my data collection, analysis and presentation.

My research questions, arise from themes and ideas in the literature review and align with the methodological approach of critical inquiry and case study:

1. What pedagogies are enacted in the Seniors Program and how do these relate to adult learning theory and practice?

2. What expectations and resources do learners bring to the program, and what do they value in the program? In other words, how do they shape it and what is their experience of it?

3. What can be learned from these pedagogies and experiences to inform university programs for older adults?

1.2.3. Findings and discussion

Learners

Chapter 4 centres the learners in the Seniors Program. It introduces the 13 research participants and asks why learners seem to demand the traditional lecture format, and why the program continues to rely on this "old-school" approach. What hidden strengths might the lecture have? The chapter also considers the relationship between learners and instructors, who are central to the Seniors Program. I also discuss an interpretation of the concept of "folk pedagogy" (Bruner, 1993). What habits, ideas and assumptions underlie teaching and learning in the Seniors Program? How was the ethos, or character, of the Seniors Program formed? Do the learners learn how to be learners? What is their role in forming the institution?

In Chapter 4 I also explore the topics of individualism, solitary learning, and passive learning. I consider inclusion and exclusion and barriers to participation in the program. I also consider the question of how older learners are different, not in the ways described in the theory of andragogy, but in their joy in going to school, their humility and their attitudes to and perspective on time. This chapter also talks about different forms of silence, including the reticence of learners in class, and the voices missing from the Seniors Program, and from the research.

Chapter 4 addresses my second research question, about the nature of the learners in the Seniors Program, what they bring to the program and how they shape it, adding to the recent literature describing this kind of learning (Bunyan & Jordan, 2005; Talmage et al., 2016; Maginess, 2016).

Learning

Chapter 5 is concerned with the nature of learning in the Seniors Program, what the learners understand by "learning" and the benefits they say that learning brings. I

discuss why learners in the program want to learn. Motivations include “plugging holes” in previous education, personal growth, and the joy of learning for its own sake.

I was surprised by the kinds of learning valued by learners. They seek personal growth, but not dramatic change, or “transformation.” Contradictions and problems are also discussed in this chapter. Does the attempt to “plug holes” lead merely to uncoordinated, dilettante learning? Is reveling in the joy of learning really about learning, or about its trappings, the superficialities of identifying as a student? Can celebrations of “joy” be subtly exclusive? I discuss, as many of the research participants wanted to, the question of what “real learning” is, and contrast the acquisition of hard facts with the exploration of unanswerable questions. What is “getting to the heart of it” and do we dismiss assimilation of facts too lightly? These questions connect to my first research question and the overlooked complexity of the pedagogy of older adult learning.

In Chapter 5, I also revisit critical issues from the literature review; for example, how effective a response learning in the Seniors Program is to the problem of loneliness, and how issues related to gender are significant to the program. The chapter ends with a consideration of approaches to learning which might be more engaging and have more impact than those currently in use. I explore possible answers to my third research question, how programs for older adult learners might better achieve their goals, whether these goals set out in a formal mandate, or emerge from an informal consensus among learners.

End-of-life case example

In Chapter 6, I describe a series of different events, courses and classes in the Seniors Program which coincided with my research and which addressed end of life, both the practicalities and the deeper concerns we might all have in facing up to and preparing for death or bereavement. The chapter outlines the new medical, social and legal landscape of end of life. It describes the various elements of the end-of-life learning initiative, including the institution’s motivations and goals, and the learners’ perspectives. I try, in particular, to include the viewpoints of the overwhelming majority of learners who did not participate in the initiative, who left blank a question in a survey administered by the Seniors Program about end-of-life courses, or who complained that such a topic did not belong in the Seniors Program at all. Finally, I consider what the story of the end-of-

life initiative can tell us about the larger Seniors Program and about theories on older adult learning.

This chapter highlights, in a particular and testing instance, several of the issues raised by my research question including: the notion of learning for fun or joy and its limits; the resistance of older adult learners to being stereotyped or pigeon-holed; how storytelling might be effective in older adult learning; the lack of clarity of purpose of programs for older adult learners in universities; the tension between acquiring hard facts and exploring mysteries as paradigms of learning held by learners; and barriers to participation in programs for older adult learners in universities and how we might remove them.

Vignette 2:

I've been a mentor, facilitator, coach, and trainer in work settings, but this is my first paid experience teaching formally in a classroom. I am responsible for two courses, both for the same group of prospective care-aides.

One is about developmental psychology, with an emphasis on Adler (who I had to read up on, starting with Adler for Beginners)*. To pass the test, the learners need to remember the different stages of development set out by a few different sages, and keep straight which is which. I see my role as organizing the information as clearly as possible. Once, when the person who hired me visits the class, he asks the students what they've learned. I am both taken aback and relieved at the answers:*

"Who's the guy who sounds like a watch? Piaget… that's it. OK, so he goes sensorimotor, which is about things like sucking your thumb, then preoperational, which is…"

The other class is on managing "challenging behaviour." This has been a major part of my work for the last fourteen years. It is a more practical class, on a topic the learners are anxious about, but it still takes place entirely in the classroom. There are some key ideas I want to get across: that challenging behaviour is almost always an attempt to get a legitimate need met, expressed the best way someone knows how, for example. Mostly, however, the class is a free-flowing and down-to-earth discussion. There is one heartfelt question: Do I honestly think they'll be able to cope with this

aspect of their work? Having spent time with them, I can answer, "Yes—not perfectly, but no one can handle this perfectly." I am surprised at the relief in the room when I say so. Our connection in the first course is an unspoken agreement to beat an arbitrary test but, in this course, there is something different that I don't, yet, have the words for.

1.3. Conclusion

This case study tells the story of the Seniors Program in depth and detail from an insider's point of view. It also considers wider issues and contexts for older adult learning such as ageism in society. The research is intended as a deeper exploration of a particular program for older adult learners that shares characteristics of similar programs across North America and that wrestles with similar issues of teaching and learning. In this, the research contributes to the learning needs of a growing but, until recently, relatively neglected demographic.

The next chapter describes literature related to programs for older adult learners, to guiding theories of teaching and learning, and to critical and often neglected perspectives on how gender, class and ageism are relevant to older adult learners.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Just ten years before this research, Withnall (2010) wrote that there was “little understanding of older learners and the kinds of learning in which they might be involved” (p. 16) and that “older people still tend to be largely ignored in educational policy circles” (p. 19). Sloane-Seale and Kops (2010) agreed, arguing that “there continues to be a dearth of research on older adults who participate in educational activities” (p. 6). As people at the peak of the post-war demographic “boom” age, however, there has been growing interest in older adult education. This review addresses both older and more recent examples of research, focusing on older adults in continuing studies programs in postsecondary institutions, i.e. programs similar to the Seniors Program.

The first section of this review considers the roots of older adult education in universities: why programs were set up, what forms they took, and how they have been shaped. The second section deals with literature about the learners themselves: their motivations, preferences for what a classroom should feel like, and their own resources and potential. The third section includes literature that throws light on some of the complexities and contradictions that can be uncovered in the Seniors Program, along with some critical perspectives on older adult learning.

2.1. Older adult learning at university: Roots and development

This section outlines the common roots of educational programs for older adults, as described in the literature: how they were largely a response to demographic change and to new mandates for universities to engage with communities. The development of many of these programs seems to have been haphazard, and most remain peripheral to the core activities of the university. What are the institutional goals and purposes behind setting up programs for older adult learners (if any are articulated)? What models and theories are helpful in understanding what goes on in the programs? Does the concept of “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1992) make sense? This section concludes with a recent development in thinking about older adult learning at universities, the “age-friendly university” movement.

2.1.1. Beginnings

Older adult education programs in universities were created in significant numbers in Europe, North America, and elsewhere starting in the 1970s, as traditional patterns of retirement changed (Withnall, 2012). Formosa (2014) says the change resulted from older adults having the time and ability "before morbidity" to learn or to undertake other leisure activities. Ratsoy (2016) similarly describes the original impetus for the University of the Third Age (U3A) movement as a response to how existing "social structures" failed to recognize the needs of the emerging cohort of older adults. Kops (2017), focusing on Canada, also notes that this kind of program is rooted in the "fairly new concept" of "retirement as an active phase of life" (p. 2).

Formosa (2014, pp. 43–44) outlines the history of U3As, a movement originating in France in the 1970s and now comprising hundreds of thousands of learning centres (some attached to universities and some "sturdily autonomous") for older adults worldwide. Formosa's description of the roots of the U3A movement presents a similar story to that of the Seniors Program: small, less formal beginnings, nominal fees, and reliant (where attached to universities) on the pool of instructors available in the institution. Kops (2017) describes Canada's model of older adult learning as a "hybrid of British [i.e., tending to be peer led] and French [i.e., tending to be university run] U3A models" (p. 1).

Schuetze (2007) suggests that little thought was given to the nature of the programs, as there seemed to be a natural coincidence of demand (more older adults with more leisure time and some affinity for postsecondary education) and supply (universities with a commitment to community engagement). Programs can still be shaped by happenstance rather than strategic planning. Maginess (2016), for example, describes a program quite similar to the Seniors Program, to which the skill and charisma of individual instructors are central, influencing which kinds of courses thrive.

Ratsoy (2016) points out that programs for older adult learners at universities tend to be peripheral, run as a minor part of larger cost-recovery and career-oriented units, and often off the side of an administrator's desk, which circumstances can contribute to this happenstance evolution. Ratsoy (2016) describes a smaller program for older adult learners at Thompson Rivers University, which is volunteer run. Its low

position in the institutional hierarchy brings some benefits, such as the flexibility allowed by an informal, collegial atmosphere unrestricted by “red tape.” Similarly, Formosa (2014) suggests all U3As are, or were, places to acquire knowledge in “an agreeable milieu and in accordance with easy and acceptable methods” (p. 43). The motivation of learners and the warmth of the atmosphere in U3As are stressed in Formosa’s paper. These qualities result at least in part from the informality of programs that are unencumbered by policies and procedures. This freedom also means that programs can be shaped, for better or worse, by individual stakeholders’ personal tastes or whims.

Kops (2017), on the other hand, outlines various institutional supports given to programs for older adult learners in Canadian universities. Despite these supports, all programs seem to be under potential threat through tightening budgets, with their peripheral position making them more vulnerable. Formosa (2014) also mentions problems arising in programs now because of increasing demand, such as the difficulty of simply finding space for classes in competition with departments more central to the university’s core business. Thompson and Foth (2003) anticipated student services ramping up to match the demands of older learners in the decades ahead, but this has not turned out to be so. Typically, the various services, such as library privileges, mental health counselling, study skills training, and so on that are available to for-credit students are *not* available to older adults taking short, non-credit courses. This might not be due to budget issues alone. There are logistical problems in offering services to learners who attend “casually,” for only a few weeks at a time.

Generally, programs for older adults in universities tend to be on the margins of the institution, in terms of resources and status, which seems to bring some advantages—freedoms, essentially—but also uncertainty.

2.1.2. Pedagogy in practice

The Seniors Program is an example of the kind of program described above, with informal roots and a haphazard evolution described above. As a result, its methods and goals are ill-defined, which might be a strength. Pointing out that older adult learners are not a homogenous group (although often treated as such), Tam (2014) suggests that taking “an approach,” rather than following a pedagogical theory, is a more practical and flexible way to “make sure that learners with diverse backgrounds and characteristics

are taken care of in the teaching and learning processes and that appropriate methods and strategies are used to address the diversity" (p. 815).

Monteiro and Ruby (2009), writing in an entirely different field (international relations), provide a possible theoretical defense of this eclectic and unsystematic approach to pedagogy, by recommending avoiding "imperial foundational projects" which impose frameworks on disciplines (p. 17). Theoretical and methodological pluralism, they say, allows a question-driven field, which allows room for new ideas that can be tested in practice (rather than measured against "foundational rules").

The virtue of pragmatic, empirical approaches to older adult teaching and learning might rise from necessity. Merriam and Bierema (2013) suggest that older adult learners value learning for the sake of learning, while younger people are concerned about professional development and qualifications (pp. 151–152). Noddings (2007) cites Dewey's suggestion that growth without a specific end is the aim of education. Learning does not have to be growth towards anything, except perhaps, more growth (Noddings, 2007, p. 26). Apart from these thoughts about the importance of process rather than outcome, there seem to be, however, few "rules" to follow and few theories that explain teaching and learning for learners like those in the Seniors Program. The "how" of teaching older adults is not well supported theoretically. Precisely why the various stakeholders value and promote older adult learning can also be unclear. The obscurity of the motivations of some institutions are explored below.

2.1.3. Institutional goals

Kops (2017) outlines some rationales for running programs dedicated to older adults in the Canadian institutions he surveyed, the "top three reasons" being: "to serve the growing population of OA [older adults], to fulfill the mandate of continuing education, and to satisfy a commitment of the university to community engagement" (p. 2). The original aims of the U3A movement included "productive aging," empowerment, and promotion of health including mental health. As in several other accounts, Bagnall's (2006) language on institutional goals tends to be high-flown and self-congratulatory. Bagnall (2006) talks of "liberation from ignorance," of "seeing each of life's events as a learning opportunity," and of how the movement should be committed to reason and social justice (Bagnall, 2006, pp. 26–27). The sweeping vagueness of the goals of

programs for older adult learners also offers freedom to programs to find their own way. But the vagueness could also be a weakness, especially when institutional resources are limited and the question is asked, to borrow the title of Jamieson's (2007b) paper: "Higher education study in later life: What is the point?"

Findsen and Formosa (2011) question the stated and unstated purposes of older adult education programs. They list the kinds of question critical educational gerontology asks, including: "why do we teach? whose interests are being served? who controls the learning process? why is education 'good' for people?" (p. 93). Formosa (2002) points out that older adult learning programs seem to operate on assumptions rather than careful planning, "assuming that any type of education is emancipating and empowering," for example, and "disregarding the programmes' inherent bourgeois bias." Formosa (2002) proposes critical principles on which to found new programs, including

> a socio-political framework which examines society's treatment of older people within the context of the economy and the state; founding educational gerontology within the traditions, the literature, the experience and the debates present in critical social theory; establishment of a new discourse that includes such concepts as emancipation, empowerment, transformation, and social and hegemonical control; predicating CEG [critical educational gerontology] on the notion of praxis as the dialectical practice between theory and practice. (p. 75)

Examples of such programs are scarce, although one described by Creech and Hallam (2015) might come close. That program was based on older adults learning to play musical instruments, and "aspired to empower their participants through developing a positive interpersonal climate, valuing participation, using the participants' prior experiences as a resource, and guiding their groups towards creative expression" (Creech & Hallam, 2015, p. 43). The program seems to have been successful in creating a trusting atmosphere, in which older adults' potential desire for the familiarity of "directive teaching" was overcome by instead embracing fun, play and exploration as valid to learning. The choice of *what* to teach and learn might have been crucial to this program's success, however. Most programs for older adults in university continuing education do not teach music, and in fact tend to favour lectures and to avoid teaching hands-on skills, most likely because of resource constraints.

Rather than being based on principles of critical gerontology, many programs for older adult learners are haunted by the "functionalist" paradigm. Findsen and Formosa

(2011) define this paradigm as framing education in later life as a solution to the problem of how to integrate older people into a social order, so that they remain active contributors despite their failing abilities (pp. 89–90). Researchers seem to stumble into the functionalist paradigm unintentionally, too. Ratsoy (2016) talks of older learners "not draining public resources but augmenting them" (p. 2). Kops (2017) hints at this as well, saying, "Successful (active) aging, characterized by minimal or no decline in function, is an achievable goal for many older adults" (p. 2).

Promoting older adult learning programs on the basis of their contributions to health and well-being can be problematic. The notion of "successful aging" implies personal fault on the part of individuals who do not live up to the ideals of the independent, healthy, and productive older individual (Lamb et al., 2017). The assumptions behind successful aging are that older people should take personal responsibility to be useful, motivated and independent, regardless of the infrastructure around them and for whom it is designed (Cruikshank, 2013). Successful aging can be described in upbeat terms, as "avoidance of disease and disability, maintenance of high physical and cognitive functioning, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities" (Merriam & Kee, 2014, p. 133) but this still implies blame, for succumbing to "disease and disability." Justifying older adult learning programs by how useful they are to society is not only dubious ethically. In practical terms, it introduces a "trap" similar to that faced by the humanities, in which departments try to justify themselves in a business paradigm.

Institutional goals can thus be surprisingly murky and problematic, despite the good intentions of stakeholders. In the next section, I turn to explanations in the literature of older adult learning that might apply to the Seniors Program.

2.1.4. Models and theories of lifelong learning

Schuetze (2007) takes a broad perspective on lifelong learning, including adults of all ages, and both formal and informal education. His ideas can be applied to educational programs designed for older adults alone. Schuetze (2007) identifies three possible models of "lifelong learning" programs: the social justice model, of making lifelong learning available to everyone; the more limited "open post-industrial society" model, in which the programs provide part of the necessary infrastructure of a developed

country but are open only to those willing and able to participate; and the human capital model, which is focused on maintaining a workforce that can meet the needs of the economy (p. 9).

Many programs for older adult learners would describe themselves as following the first model, based on "the notion of equality of opportunity and life chances through education" (Schuetze, 2007, p. 9). Some might be based more on the second notion, and the "functionalist" idea of providing worthwhile ways for people to spend their "post work" time. However, the underlying purpose of the program is often not explicit, and many offer a broadly "liberal arts"–based curriculum on the basis of education for its own sake, enjoyment and personal development.

For Findsen and Formosa (2011), this broadly liberal humanist perspective is key to older adult learning programs: "It remains a fact that such practice has served various needs and interests of the adult population in recent years" (p. 97). "Liberal-humanism" suggests a curriculum based on the cultivation of personal development and meaning, as opposed to useful skills or behaviours. Formosa (2014) suggests that the popularity of this approach, and of curricula based on the humanities and the arts, is explained by convenience. Humanities and the arts are simply what the pool of available instructors teach.

Other than happenstance and convenience (Section 2.1.1: Beginnings), there are few theories about why older adult education programs take the shape that they do. A seldom-cited book from 1986 describes a model that the Seniors Program seems to fit. Elsey (1986) outlines the "recreation-leisure" model briefly in a piece otherwise focused on adult learning in general. Elsey (1986) says that the recreation-leisure model is "usually formal and didactic" and that, in it, "teaching and learning are valued as activities in their own right" (p. 15). This describes the Seniors Program, but Elsey does not explain why leisure, formality and learning for its own sake are linked. Findsen (2005) similarly describes how learning for older adults based in churches is "traditionally modelled on the lecture format of 'expert-novice'" and he notes that "in modern churches the relationship is increasingly 'teacher-participant' as services become more collaborative and interactive" (p. 104).

Jones and Symon (2001) take up the notion of "serious leisure," a phrase coined by Stebbins (1992), in relation to lifelong learning. Their model describes serious leisure as involving significant effort, identification with the activity, and a "unique ethos" as part of the activity, "qualities that are associated with paid employment" (Jones & Symon, 2001, p. 272). Certainly, for some participants in this study, it was important to be taken seriously as a learner and challenged academically. And learners in the Seniors Program can be quick to complain if they feel a course is "dumbed down." The limits of the notion of serious leisure are probed in Chapter 6, which describes how a deeply serious topic—end of life—failed to find a place in the program. Formosa (2002) introduces another link, suggesting that programs that fit the "leisure-learning" model also favour "authority experts and universal knowledge" and bourgeois interests (Formosa, 2002, pp. 77–78).

If a group of people who have never thought much about pedagogy or learning organize a learning opportunity, is their default the lecture and the expert-novice model? Is this why leisure learning and formal didacticism are connected: Lectures are the "common-sense" way to teach and learn? Elsey (1986) says that the recreation-leisure model features "teaching and learning valued as activities in their own right," which might mean learners taking education *more* seriously than those looking for qualifications, who tend to see classes as merely a means to an end. While those seeking qualification might not concern themselves too much with the look and feel of their learning spaces, is it possible that learners who value the idea of education highly, yet might not have been in formal education for many years, would want their classroom to take a conventional and traditional format, in order to feel that they and their learning are being taken seriously? For which cultures and groups could all of this be true?

Turning to literature that is not descriptive but prescriptive, a more recent initiative seeks to integrate older adult learning into universities, rather than consigning it to peripheral programs, and is an attempt to design older adult learning more intentionally, on explicit principles, rather than ad hoc. The first principle of the age friendly university movement is "to encourage the participation of older adults in all the **core activities** of the university, including educational and research programmes" (Dublin City University, n.d.). Other principles include recognizing the range of educational needs of older adults, and (as with most of the models already outlined) nurturing personal wellness through arts and cultural activities. Unlike most of the

models described above, the ideal age-friendly university would feature learning that is "a communal phenomenon rather than a passive teacher-transmit-information-to-learner phenomenon" (Talmage et al., 2016, p. 546). A distinctive feature of the movement is the principle of enhanced access for older people to the university's regular activities, implying promotion of intergenerational learning and not a separate program for seniors.

Talmage et al. (2016) say that "achieving a university that is age-friendly in practice would require nothing less than a cultural transformation for most higher education institutions" (p. 550). The movement is, at the moment, more of an aspiration than a widespread practice, although successful examples of age-friendly universities do exist, such as Arizona State (Talmage et al., 2016). The age friendly university movement is still new. It is novel in having an explicit and coherent *raison d'être*, something many programs for older adults, including the Seniors Program, might struggle to articulate.

There are, however, theories and models of learning that, while not matching older adult learning in university continuing education precisely, can be helpfully applied. The following section focuses on the learners in older adult programs, and outlines some of the concepts of learning that apply to them.

2.2. Older adult learners

This section revisits the theory of andragogy, and also considers the more recent idea of geragogy. How helpful to understanding the Seniors Program is the writing on these concepts? This section also describes accounts of the purposes, motivations and goals of *learners*, rather than of the institution, and of how learners can shape the programs they patronize. Relevant literature on "transformative learning" is also considered. Is transformative learning theory a useful lens through which to view the program? The section concludes with an outline of paradigms of teaching and learning described in the literature, focusing particularly on a tension evident in the Seniors Program, the contrast between the comfortable, familiar "transmission" or "banking" approach to teaching and alternatives aimed at promoting more engaged learning.

2.2.1. Andragogy

The concept of andragogy would have been in pedagogical fashion when the Seniors Program started in 1974 or 1975 (as with many such programs, the early days of the Seniors Program are not well documented, and it is difficult to pinpoint when it began). However, as Skilbeck (2006) observed, "'andragogy' attracts less attention now than in the 1970s and 80s, partly because it was soon realized that 'andragogy' is an element of sound educational practice regardless of the age of learners" (p. 52). As early as the mid-1980s, Davenport and Davenport (1985) were able to dismiss the theory of andragogy as presenting a false dichotomy between "learner-centred" andragogy and "teacher-centred" pedagogy.

An important principle of andragogy is that adults need to collaborate in the planning of their learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 183). Knowles et al., (2005) propose encouraging adults to be self-directing learners. For example, they quote Lindeman (1926) approvingly: "Adult learners are precisely those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid, uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized institutions of learning" (Lindeman, 1926, pp. 27–28). This contradicts much of what has been written about older adult learners, who are often described as preferring a passive role, as the novice in the expert-novice relationship (e.g., Formosa, 2014).

Another underlying assumption in andragogy can be inferred from Knowles et al. (2005), that education is a kind of unpleasant medicine, and there needs to be a promise of reward for putting up with the taste. "Clearly, the opportunity to motivate the student comes from capitalizing on the learner's own internal desire for goal attainment and personal achievement. . . . Motivation is also attained through clearly stated learning objectives at the beginning of instruction" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 244). This does not match with the evidence that older adults enjoy the process of learning, and are not motivated by qualifications and objectives

Throughout his book, Wenger (1998) clearly makes an assumption that adult learning is professional, vocational (maybe mandatory) training. This is not the case for the Seniors Program. Looking back through what records there are from the program's beginnings, there is no evidence that the theory of andragogy played a role in its design

and development. As described above, the shape of the program most likely was formed by chance and in the spirit of planning little more involved than asking colleagues, “Do you have a spare afternoon and an existing lecture you’d like to deliver to some retirees.”

Andragogy can, however, offer some explanation of phenomena observed in the Seniors Program:

> The minute adults walk into an activity labelled ‘education,’ ‘training,’ or anything synonymous, they hark back to their conditioning in their previous school experience, put on their dunce hats of dependency fold their arms, sit back and say ‘teach me.’ (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 65)

This could explain the passivity of learners, but it sounds like an unfair judgement. If educational systems spent years training students in this behaviour in their childhoods, and now present them once again with all of the same cues (for example, a lecture podium, and seats all in a row), a tendency to passivity is not the fault of the learners.

Geragogy, on the other hand, is a theory specifically addressing older adults, likely not in the workforce. It focuses to some extent on social and physical barriers to learning and the accommodation of different motivations (Schuetz, 1982). Again, though, the principles could apply to and improve education for all ages. Tam (2014) gives an overview of literature arguing for and against the need for a distinctive theory of learning for older adults. In favour, Tam (2014) lists different “learner characteristics, needs, motivations, interests, approaches to learning, difficulties and barriers” (p. 815). Arguing against the need for a distinctive theory for older learners, on the other hand, Tam (2014) says objections are similar to those against the need for a theory of andragogy; with geragogy “differences between older and younger adults are emphasized, yet the similarities are largely ignored and overlooked” (p. 816). Tam’s answer is simple and pragmatic, suggesting, essentially, that there is no need for a separate theory, but that

> education for older learners must take cognizance of the fact that they are old, must tie their rich life experiences in the classroom, and facilitate them to overcome those age-related impediments to effective learning by way of an approach and practice that is based on dialogue between instructors and learners to facilitate communication, openness, trust and commitment. (p. 818)

Russell (2011), based on seven years of research with learners aged 70 to 90, describes one particular important difference between younger and older adults in the "post-work phase" of their lives. Their experience of time is different, and older adults can experience a "paradox of time," in which they have plenty of time in the sense that their days are free of work commitments, but they also believe time is not to be wasted as they are "coming to terms with the finitude of life" (p. 562). Russell (2011) describes the tension regarding time for older adult learners as follows: "Later-life learners acknowledge their closeness to the end of their lives, but do so with a sense that they intend to live fully until they die" (p. 562). This might explain the preference for "serious leisure" rather than frivolous entertainment.

Except for the observation that adult learners tend to bring paradigms of education from their childhood, such as passivity, to their learning, the theory of andragogy does not describe the Seniors Program. Andragogy suggests adult learners should be collaborative and self-directing, but most learners in the Seniors Program prefer to learn as individuals and passively. Andragogy assumes, too, that the goal of education is qualifications rather than enjoyment of the process. Neither does geragogy seem to be helpful to an understanding of the Seniors Program, describing fourth-age learners, but also prescribing care and attention to learners' strengths that would benefit all ages of learners. Russell (2011) raises an important difference between younger and older learners, perceptions of time, and this is explored further in Chapter 4.

If andragogy does not give an accurate description of how older adult learners learn, what theories might? The following sections explore older adult learners' motivations and expectations, and consider transformative learning.

2.2.2. Learners' motivations

Early rationales for offering programs for older adults hold an assumption that adults are "naturally motivated to educate themselves" (Ahl, 2006, p. 385). Recently, several researchers have paid closer attention to what motivates older adults to participate in educational programs at universities. Withnall (2010) sums up the consensus around a few points of motivation: keeping "the brain ticking over"; maintaining and developing skills to keep up economically; remaining independent, as

part of health promotion; for reasons of social inclusion; to understand and respect diversity; to promote empowerment, personal growth and choice (Withnall, 2010, p. 88).

There is a range of other possible motivations mentioned in the literature, too. Bunyan and Jordan (2005) point out that education for instrumental reasons, such as career advancement, tends to be less important to older adult learners in relation to personal development, making up for lack of previous educational opportunities and the "joy of learning" (pp. 270–271). Sloane-Seal and Kops (2010) also report "joy of learning" as a motivation, along with "to productively fill their time, and to meet people and socialize. Other reasons cited were to deal with a life event, such as a family death, and to fill gaps in previous education" (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010, p. 14). Talmage, Lacher, Pstross, Knopf, and Burkhart (2015) have a more comprehensive list of what motivates older adult learners. "Potential benefits . . . include intrinsic satisfaction, enjoyment, self-confidence, coping abilities, social involvement, physical fitness, intellectual stimulation, self-knowledge, practical knowledge, nurturing and supportive communities, enhanced self-esteem, personal and spiritual renewal, meaning, and purpose" (p. 235).

Complicating this consensus around "the joy of learning," Jamieson (2007a) finds no evidence in her research "that older learners are just there 'for the fun', for social reasons." Jamieson's (2007a) research, based on questionnaires and in-depth interviews with older learners attending "extra-mural type classes" at a UK university, concludes that the learners are seeking "time well-spent" that contributes to quality of life, rather than diversion. Bunyan and Jordan (2005), meanwhile, argue that even if education is accessed "purely for the sake of enjoyment," it is a public good, and older adults "should have equal rights and access to" it (p. 268). Proponents of older adult learning can be defensive about the value of simply enjoying classroom-based learning, which is maybe an example of the persistence of old paradigms or simply of memories of school: that learning is not fun. The phrase "joy of learning" implies "time well-spent" more than mere "fun," perhaps and learners in the Seniors Program speak more about the "joy" than the "fun" of the program (see Section 5.1.2: The joy of learning: Its pros and cons).

Confirming the theme of participating in classes as a means of finding social connection, Boulton-Lewis (2010) reports motivations such as "new friendships" (Boulton-Lewis, 2010, p. 219). Boulton-Lewis (2010) also says that, in earlier research

she conducted, older learners expressed a preference for the practical and down-to-earth, wanting, for example, to study “transportation, health and safety” rather than the more abstract “technology” (p. 219). Boulton-Lewis (2010) suggests that these research participants might have been listing what they thought they could most successfully tackle, rather than what they really wanted to learn. Few papers explicitly wonder in this way about the face value of statements from older adult learners participating in research.

Xiong and Zuo (2019) found an unusual motivation in the special circumstance of older adult learners in a “massive open online course.” Most were looking for help to solve concrete problems they were facing, rather than for joy in the process of learning or for “knowledge for future use, or without any specific utilitarian purpose” (p. 86). This focus on the *content* of learning might be connected with the nature of MOOCS, but it contrasts with the consensus on the general motivations of older adult learners, which is that the perceived benefits—joy, connection, mental exercise—do not depend on course content.

Jamieson (2016) is retired, and an “older adult learner” herself. She lists types of student motivation in a way that rings true with my experience of the Seniors Program: those searching for meaning, who choose philosophical and religious topics; those who study as one of many activities in a busy post-work lifestyle; and those who are as interested in any kind of organized leisure or social connection as they are in education (p. 481). Withnall (2012) has a similar list; for example, the “golden years” student, the “second career” student, and the “portfolio life” holder (p. 660).

Some academic writing on older adult learners falls into the journalistic genre of “heartwarming stories” about older adults going back to school (e.g., Baker, 2016), painting a superficial and sunny picture. This might be because of deference to age, a desire to avoid the “deficit model” (Glendenning & Battersby, 1990) of education and aging, and to communicate the genuine joy in learning that can be found in these programs. Regardless of the intention, in my view this literature falls short of representing the complexity and diversity of motivations. Much of the literature fails, for example, to fully describe what older adult learners might understand by “learning,” when they say they value the joy of learning. This is discussed next.

2.2.3. Familiar fields and certainties

> *The path of philosophy . . . is not simple or efficient. It will lead us wrongly, it will confuse us, it will mess us up. And this is good. (Warren & Rehn, 2007)*

The literature describes a preference for the expert-novice and transmission models of learning, which suggests that learners would like to be given "the facts"—what might be seen as the authoritative, correct view on a topic, and they generally expect this by means of traditional lectures. The literature also describes how this preference has shaped educational programs for older adults.

A defining characteristic of the Seniors Program has been the well-crafted lecture based on the transmission model (Miller & Sellar, 1990). The lecture is not fashionable pedagogically, and it has been going out of pedagogical fashion for a long time. Phillips and Soltis (2004) describe Dewey turning against the passive learner paradigm—"theoretical spectators . . . absorbing knowledge"—held by Locke and Plato, to demand more activity on the part of learners (Phillips and Soltis, 2007, p. 17). Traditional lectures are still often the default, however, in university programs for older adult learners. For example, the program for older adults that Maginess (2016) describes has smaller classes, more suitable for discussion and peer learning, but some tutors still favour a more "instructionist" (rather than constructionist) approach (p. 55).

Older paradigms of education can be persistent, and "middle-class" views of what form education should take can dominate. Findsen and Formosa (2011) state that the teaching and learning content and approach in many older adult learning programs "tends to be hijacked by the middle-classes so that its standard curriculum becomes articulated through abstract intellectual discourse whose function is more to reproduce the dominant culture" (p. 97). Formosa (2014) confirms the tensions and contradictions: The U3A movement grew out of rebelliousness in the 1970s, with a claimed anti-authoritarian stance, but participants believe that "docile, passive, listening alone is enough" (p. 58). Engeström (2018) points out that the hidden curriculum even in well-intentioned and progressive projects can perpetuate some old ideas, such as how to be a good student, how to please the teacher, and so on (p. 51). Findsen (2005) explains that some institutions did not intend to perpetuate traditional forms of teaching and learning. He describes U3As, which promote peer learning, as "exemplars of provision of

adult education" (p. 90). Engaged, participative learning was seen as the gold standard for older learners from the beginning. Findsen (2005) contrasts U3As with other agencies "operating out of a 'social services' mentality which emphasizes the passivity and dependence of older adults" (p. 97).

Freire (2009) is of course talking about a different social context, but his argument could apply to the favoured teaching and learning style in the Seniors Program:

> The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration, contents which are detached from reality . . . this is the banking concept of education. (Freire, 2009, pp. 71–72)

It may be that lectures are appealing because the format suggests authority, as well as familiarity. It has echoes of the schoolroom and of traditional, expert-driven didacticism. Skilbeck (2006) suggests that the older form is coincident with "a more static view of subject matter" (p. 70) which, since the 1970s, has been challenged by the influence of postmodernism and constructivism emphasizing the dynamics of the logic of inquiry and the interpretations of individuals and groups. The lecture format lends itself more to transmission of facts, to certainty and authority, than it does to questioning and open-ended exploration of issues.

Institutional pressure tends to favour the predictable and measurable. McKnight and Block (2010) say, however, that "all learning comes from mystery . . . In actualizing its abundance a community welcomes mystery, for that is a catalyst for creativity" (p. 90). However, they also say that "in system life mystery is considered poor planning . . . institutions are about eliminating mystery" (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 90). The various forms and templates used to promote courses in the Seniors Program, are the same as those in the wider Continuing Studies unit and prescribe clear "learning objectives" and course syllabi that tell learners "exactly what to expect." It takes some ingenuity to work mystery into these formats. The institution, instructors and learners can all be "complicit" in keeping the classroom predictable and orderly.

Franzese (2005), writing about legal issues in the US, describes how gated communities "now represent the norm of housing development" there (p. 335). She

characterizes the running of these communities as “government for the nice” (Franzese, 2005, p. 337). Franzese’s paper thus supplies a useful analogy for the difference I feel between my work in the Inner City and the Seniors Program. The Inner-City project was unpredictable, challenging and capable of changing lives and pushing boundaries. The Seniors Program, like gated communities, values and promotes niceness and predictability. This gentility hinders the formation of authentic community and prevents challenge to outdated assumptions and practices. The lecture is perhaps experienced as a comfortable and familiar format only by those who have had positive experiences of education previously.

These comfortable assumptions and practices can be described as the “field,” in Bourdieu’s sense, of the Seniors Program. Possibly, some learners feel at home in the Seniors Program because they have found a field where their cultural capital—social assets such as being able to enjoy lectures and knowing the unwritten rules of the conventional classroom—is valued: where “this competency can be employed” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) say that “a capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field” (p. 101). It is a challenge for those of us who find it easy and even pleasurable to enter a classroom to imagine how difficult it can be for others. Bourdieu (2018) says that “apprehension and possession of cultural goods . . . are possible only for those who hold the code making it possible to decipher them” (p. 73) and further that the “laws of cultural transmission” mean that cultural capital is added to cultural capital. This describes one process by which, inadvertently, the Seniors Program can exclude people, and why so many learners in the program already have postsecondary education experience.

I am sure that learners would agree that their cultural, social competency in the context of the Seniors Program is not a kind of superiority. Some would, in fact, describe it as “oddness” (see Section 4.4.1: Wanting to go to school). A fixed hierarchy of prestige for cultural capital does not exist: Bourdieu (2013) says that desirable traits “can be given opposite (positional) values in the same society at different epochs or in different societies” (p. 297). Further, understanding and following the unwritten rules in the lecture theatre is not even a deliberate, individual achievement. Wacquant and Bourdieu (1992) describe habitus—the embodiment of cultural capital, or how people respond and think in certain contexts—as something between a personal act of will and an unavoidable imposition by external forces. It is “social, collective. Habitus is a socialized subjectivity”

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). It is important to the Seniors Program that habitus, which could be seen as a component of institutional inertia, is changeable. It is an ''open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). Instead of the Seniors Program asking that people acquire the cultural capital that would make participating in the program easier, the values and practices of the Seniors Program can evolve to include a more diverse student body, perhaps by giving up an air of predictability and familiarity that appeals to a relatively small number of people.

The apparent certainties that can be transmitted through lectures are part of this comfortable atmosphere. However, in his overview of epistemological uncertainty, Law (2004) argues that we have to give up "our desire for certainty, the expectation that we can arrive at more or less stable conclusions about the way things really are" (p. 9). But postmodernism is not prominent in teaching and learning practice in the Seniors Program. As Dirkx (1997) says:

> Learning, however, continues to be framed within a technical-rational view of knowledge, in which we learn instrumentally to adapt to the demands of our outer environment. Bubbling just beneath this technical-rational surface is a continual search for meaning, a need to make sense of the changes and the empty spaces we perceive both within ourselves and our world. (p. 79)

Some learners in the Seniors Program might recognize something in the second part of this quote, about desire and a search for meaning, but not enough students are enthusiastic enough about the unpredictable "search for meaning" to sustain programs that tackle such mysterious matters head-on, as I will explain later in the findings and discussion chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). Many learners embrace a passive stance and prefer being given facts and truths by an authoritative expert.

On the other hand, offering a possible scholarly defense of the lecture and apparently passive practices of learning, McLean (2015) builds a compelling defense of "self-help" reading, and points out that transmission is not necessarily *just* transmission:

> It is important to see the process of reading (along with all other processes of adult learning) as involving active processes of reception. Readers actively interpret and construct meaning based not solely on the structure of the texts to which they are exposed but also on the basis of their

> preexisting patterns of thought, feeling, and belief. Exposure to neoliberal discourse does not imply that human beings become constituted as neoliberal subjects. (p. 211)

Lectures and self-help books imply passive learning, but “passive learning” turns out to be a complex concept. Among the complications, Bruner (2018) talks about learners going “meta” in order to generalize rules that they are given (p. 186). Learners can make what they want of bare facts, depending on how they reflect on and work with them. The theory of transformative learning takes the concept of personal reflection to promote personal change further. Transformative learning, and its place in older adult learning is discussed next.

2.2.4. Transformative learning

Many learners say they come to the Seniors Program looking to “acquire knowledge.” Particularly through an optional non-credit certificate, which involves writing a number of reflective essays (as well as through the efforts of many of the instructors in class) the program tries to gently nudge learners into a different approach to learning. “Where possible, it [i.e. education at its best] avoids coercion. It prefers the language of invitation, offering, encouragement, guidance, sharing, advice and trying-out to that of requirement, compulsion, prescription, testing and assignment” (Noddings, 2006, p. 339). What light could the literature on transformative learning throw on these attempts?

Kegan (2018) warns against the tendency to see any change in learners as “transformation” (p. 35). Transformative learning might be better described as bringing about “fundamental change at a very basic level” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 15), in contrast to simply creating more tolerance or self-confidence, for example. Merriam and Bierema (2013) contrast content reflection, on *what* we learn, with process reflection, on *how* we do what we are doing, and with premise reflection, on *why* we are doing this at all. The last type of reflection is what brings about transformation: Why do we think, perceive and act as we do (p. 85)? Is this self-examination what learners in the Seniors Program sign on for? Do older adult learners in university continuing education want to “transform,” or just to acquire some new knowledge?

Charaniya (2012) describes, in broad terms, a spiritually attuned form of transformative learning that suggests a possible objective for educational practice in the

Seniors Program: “cultivating critical openness, engaging the whole person, stimulating critical thinking through dialogue, appreciating diverse perspectives, dwelling with questions, touching the affective, strengthening the cognitive, and enhancing the social” (p. 237). Some of these aims match the outcomes often described as overall benefits of the Seniors Program by learners: social connection and mental health. It surprises me that transformative learning does not seem, from the literature, to be more deeply involved with learners’ social, emotional and spiritual growth. The “head versus heart” debate is alive and well (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Tisdell (2012) criticizes Mezirow’s original conception of transformative learning as too rational, not paying enough attention to “emotions, spirituality, or embodied forms of knowing” (p. 23).

In the fields of medicine and education among others there remains a reticence to engage with the “messiness” of spirituality. More recent writing, such as Charaniya’s (2012), does draw the spiritual into the theoretical scheme of transformative learning, but does not have concrete, actionable suggestions about how to achieve the ideal described. The various courses and events exploring end of life in the Seniors Program, described in Chapter 6, were not designed to promote transformative learning, spiritual or otherwise. However, research participants did mention insights and new perspectives arising from the courses, that hinted at the possibility of deeper “transformation,” even from relatively straightforward facts. For example, for myself, hearing the full extent of the theory and practice of green burial was personally significant. It is not just biodegradable coffins, but involves not having grave markers and, over time, returning the green cemetery to wilderness.

Kovan and Dirkx (2003) link transformative learning to a “shift in consciousness—on our self-understanding—and how this shift influences and shapes our being in the world” (p. 102). Transformative learning is an apt theory with which to examine the Seniors Program, despite the program’s reliance on the lecture format. Many learners are, in fact, seeking something other than passively receiving information: Their expressed and unexpressed wants include identifying as lifelong learners, cultivating open and active minds, seeking joy and connection, and being more interesting people. Some literature on transformative learning suggests possible paths for the Seniors Program. For example, Palmer et al. describe a slow, “contemplative” learning methodology (p. 112), which would give learners in the Seniors Program more time to reflect, and for joy and care in the classroom. Noddings (2012) centres feminine

care in teaching, with the teacher being first of all attentive, watching and listening (pp. 772–774). Even the learners in the Seniors Program who just want to listen to the expert value being acknowledged in the classroom.

Palmer et al. (2010) say that their view of integrative learning has been criticized as a “grab bag” of pedagogies (p. 23). Nevertheless, according to Palmer et al. (2010), the essence of integrative learning, more fundamental than specific techniques and teaching approaches, is that it includes the whole person, heart and soul, and integrates the objective outer world and a learner’s inner life (p. 10). Palmer et al. (2010) describe the importance of emotion in the classroom, giving as a concrete example how young women, of course entirely capable of success in learning math, were historically conditioned to fear and feel anxious about the subject (pp. 41–42). Emotion in the classroom has real effects and cannot be dismissed. In the Seniors Program, internal, emotional barriers can block not only learning but any participation in the program at all. Anxiety, about being out of place or not knowing what to do or say, should not be a barrier in a caring classroom which pays attention to emotions, connection and feeling.

Cranton and Taylor (2012) argue that “it may be that good teaching always has the potential to foster transformative learning, and transformation is dependent on the readiness of the learners” (p. 15). Some of the research on fostering transformative learning suggests it can be promoted by what might simply be seen as good practice in teaching, “using direct and personally engaging experiences, involving prior experiences of learners, encouraging reflection, promoting dialogue” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 14), for example. Newman (2014) says that a list of potential shifts in perspective attributed to transformative learning could be brought about through “good old-fashioned information gathering” or “reading, talking, and listening” (p. 350). Reading and reflecting on fiction can also be a catalyst for transformative learning (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015) as can autobiographical writing (Karpiak, 2003). Teaching in the Seniors Program involves these approaches: “conventional academic practice” (Newman, 2014, p. 351).

Transformative learning can also arise without “teachers,” through life experience, in particular through bereavement. The potentially transformative grieving process is described by Snyder and Taylor (2012) as a “repositioning of relationships” (p. 44) that does not seem to require, or even leave room for, support from formal education. This challenges the notion described by Wenger (1998) that learning “has a

beginning and an end, that it is best separated out from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching" (p. 3). The richness of the life experience and informal learning of many in the Seniors Program demonstrates that the notion is not true, although they might not recognize the validity of their informal learning themselves.

It seems, then, that much of the power to bring about (or resist) transformative learning lies with the learners. Learners in the Seniors Program make of their learning what they want to. According to Newman (2014), quibbling about the difference between "significant learning" and "deep transformation" is not important in practice. Possibly, and particularly in the Seniors Program, the difference is not *visible* in practice. Few of the desired outcomes of the program, from new social connections to improved cognition, are seen in class. They are certainly not assessed and are likely not measurable in the classroom, within the limited timespan of any particular course. Possibly, the role of the Seniors Program is limited to continuing to develop good teaching practice in general: offering opportunities and supporting potential change

Gerotranscendence

"Gerotranscendence" refers to a stage of personal development at the end of life, in which wisdom and perspective are achieved. It is partly derived from Erikson and Erikson's (1997) work on stages of human development, and springs from Tornstam's (2011) interpretation of data pointing to increased life satisfaction, selflessness, and new perspectives on "time, space, life and death" in old age (p. 168). Transformative learning is clearly related to gerotranscendence, although Tornstam (1997) describes the *discovery* of aspects of a person, rather than a change in a person: "An 85-year-old respondent discovered a literary talent. Another respondent discovered that she is actually a cheerful, light-hearted person" (p. 150).

Other descriptions of gerotranscendence are more mystical: "The respondents often reached the conclusion that it has become more difficult to identify the boundary between wise and unwise" (Tornstam, 1997, p. 152). The literature on transcendence tends to use "big words" freely without full description of what they mean in practice: love, death, heart, joy. Erikson and Erikson (1997), for example, maybe wrestling with the inadequacy of academic language, or of any language, resort to some purple prose at times: "To reach for transcendence is to rise above, exceed, outdo, go beyond,

independent of universe and time. It involves surpassing all human knowledge and experience" (p. 127).

Despite the difficulty of pinning down exactly what it means, this transcendence appeals to me. It goes beyond Erikson and Erikson (1997), and other theories that describe looking backwards to find meaning in life, "The ego-integrity described by Erikson is more of a reverse integration process within the same definition of the world as before, while the process of gerotranscendence implies more of a forward or outward direction, including a redefinition of reality" (Tornstam, 2011, p. 172).

Gerotranscendence, like transformative learning, is not a teaching approach or theory, although Tornstam (2005) suggests exercises that will help attain the goal. Rather, it is presented as a natural (if not often achieved) stage of development. A major problem in applying Tornstam's thinking to the Seniors Program is that he is describing fourth-age learning, and most of our learners are not in that stage. However, Tornstam (2011) notes that "only 20 percent of the population automatically reaches high degrees of gerotranscendence without trouble" (p. 176). Transcendence seems not to rely on formal teaching and learning, and the role of an education program would be to explore with older adults what kind of support those having "trouble" might want.

The theory of gerotranscendence is useful in considering the Seniors Program in that it points to capacities special to older adults, to the desire for older adults to look forward and for personal development, rather than to contemplate life already lived and make meaning in retrospect. It challenges stereotypes of older learners.

While it is *possible* to learn transformatively or transcendently through listening to lectures, are there modes of teaching and learning that can promote transformative learning more effectively, and do older adult learners welcome them? The next section considers alternatives to the lecture.

2.2.5. Alternatives to the lecture

The title of a presentation I gave at the 2018 American Society for Aging Conference was based on a comment emerging from this research: "I just want to listen to the expert." This is representative, maybe, of an individualist view held by many older

adult learners, in which they see education as a 1:1 transmission of knowledge from teacher to student.

Duay and Bryan (2008) follow an enthusiastic description of the need for interaction with this account of the problems the lecture format raises:

> Although interaction and discussion are important, nearly half of the participants emphasized that these elements can also significantly hinder a learning experience when they are not carefully managed and controlled. Charles, 83, stated, "Some professors don't control the class . . . A good professor will say, 'Hold that till later.'" He added that "Too many times the question is not a question. It's a platform that the senior will get up and expound on whatever he wants to talk about." Similarly, Maria commented, "When the teacher does not have a strong personality and the students talk or interrupt in the class, this bothers me. When the teacher loses control of the class, I find this distracting." (p. 1073)

These complaints from learners about interaction and discussion in the classroom sound familiar to me in my role as program coordinator. Yet the Seniors Program persists in trying to nudge learners towards peer learning. Research participants raised these questions: Do learners come to the Seniors Program to be told facts, or to learn with peers? Are they passively acquiring information or actively seeking to share wisdom and develop personally?

Influenced by the theories of Erikson and Erikson (1997) programs for older adults, particularly for adults in the fourth age feature "life review," systematically evaluating and making meaning of one's past (Haber, 2006). Illeris (2007) says, "Looking back towards previous experiences is less interesting for pupils than looking forwards to new challenges and experiences" (p. 130). The word "pupils" implies a much younger group of learners, but why would older learners not also be more interested in new challenges than passive contemplation of the past? Williamson (1997) sees storytelling as a way to express wisdom, and also to "make sense of information, past and present" (p. 178). Learners in the Seniors Program might want to add "and future" to that quotation. Wisdom needs a sense of how life has been lived *and* the ability to apply what has been learned to the present and future. Alheit (2018) roots this in "biographicity," an awareness of the narrative in one's own life that stores and uses "human capital," as defined by Bourdieu. Alheit (2018) says that "learning within and through one's life history is therefore interactive and socially structured" (p. 162). Alheit's concern is the world of work and transferrable skills: "Knowledge can only be genuinely

transitional if it is biographical knowledge" (p. 162). Alheit (2018) also defines wisdom in terms of "self-management checks, permanent quality control" (p. 156), but the ideas apply to older adults, too

How is wisdom expressed? Are stories the best medium for the ineffable content of wisdom? Wisdom, stories, and self seem to be intertwined:

> If wisdom has to do with self-knowledge, and if self is inseparable from the stories through which we conceive it, then, like memory and meaning, wisdom also has a narrative dimension… …To grow in wisdom, whatever else that process may entail, is to grow in (ironic) awareness of the narratives we have woven round our life's events. (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011, p. 31)

Wisdom is not easily quantified and transmitted. Dirkx (1997) makes a heartfelt case for "uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox," which "invite expressions of soul," in education (p. 82). Building on criticism of transformative learning theory as "too rational" (see above), he says:

> At its core is a vision of learning that leads individuals, through reason, reflection, and rationality, to greater levels of self-awareness and consciousness of society Less well developed in these views of transformative learning, however, is the role that imagination and fantasy play in the development of self-knowledge. (Dirkx, 1997, p. 88)

Dirkx (1997) might be suggesting that 'imagination and fantasy' and openness to emotion give us access to the kinds of knowledge that the Seniors Program's prosaic, common-sense "folk pedagogy" does not. "Transformative learning also involves very personal and imaginative ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences" (p. 79).

Academia favours words: "Knowledge is believed to be about rational thoughts, communicated in verbal language" (Plate, 2014, pp. 11–12). Storytelling might be less rational and direct, but is usually word-based, too. Wisdom, however (and feelings about end of life, for example) go beyond language. Scharfstein (1993) acknowledges the flexibility of language but says that "there is always the residue" of things unsaid for several possible reasons and that "these ineffabilities are the demons (and maybe angels) of incompleteness and incompletability" (p. 220). Again, in trying to share wisdom learners in the Seniors Program will maybe also have to learn to tolerate, or celebrate, incompleteness, ambiguity, and the ineffable:

> To talk in the abstract about death, as I do here, remains at one remove from feeling it; for when we feel it, there may be no words sufficient. The ringing, ragged sadness of poetry and fiction may the closest we can come. (Schillace, 2016, p. 163)

In the context of wisdom and other ways of knowing, some participants mentioned Indigenous approaches to learning and teaching. Beyond the scope of this literature review, the Seniors Program is hesitantly trying to live up to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action*. Like many, we are concerned about getting this wrong. We are wary, for example, of superficial "additive" versus meaningful "integrative" practice (Kanu, 2005, p. 55). There are principles, however, that align with good educational practice, such as that of holism:

> Education, hence, is not a process or institution separate from everything else in life. There is no distinction between formal or informal education. The term education is a Western concept that does not speak to the traditional African reality, in which the entire community is continually engaged in learning and teaching. In traditional Africa, learning begins very early in life, soon after birth, and continues to old age. The whole of life is a process of learning to become fully human, to attain personhood. (Salem, 2019, p.163)

The ethnographic scholarship of Lave and Wenger (1991) describes another alternative to lectures and transmission, an "apprenticeship" that reminds me of how I learned most of all on the wards in my nursing experience. Apprenticeship happens as a way, and in the course, of daily life. It may not be recognized as a teaching effort at all:

> A Maya girl who eventually becomes a midwife most likely has a mother or a grandmother who is a midwife, since midwifery is handed down in family lines . . . Girls in such families, without being identified as apprentice midwives, absorb the essence of midwifery practice as well as specific knowledge about many procedures simply in the process of growing up. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 68)

This echoes Indigenous learning and teaching. Discussing Bedouin women in Eastern Egypt, Salem (2019) says, "Fathers and mothers teach through their own performance of activities and tasks, peers teach through collective activities, elders teach through storytelling, and nature teaches through its features, power and prowess" (p.164).

Riley and Johansen (2019) describe a form of learning that would test those learners who do not want to waste time listening to anyone other than the expert:

> Perhaps one of the most anthropologically discussed difference between Western and indigenous communities is that indigenous communities have a holistic worldview rather than a compartmentalized one . . . when speaking, indigenous students may seem to digress from the point at hand, but if allowed to complete their thoughts it becomes clear that they were merely methodically analyzing all aspects and repercussions of a potential decision before coming full circle and answering the question posed. Class discussions should, therefore, provide ample time for the conversation to move in and out of different directions. Likewise, instructors require the skills to identify the underlying themes and bring the discussion back to the key curricular objectives. (p. 398)

Kuokkanen (2007), a Sámi scholar from Ohcejohka/Utsjokiin in Sápmi (Finland), critiques from an Indigenous standpoint the promotion of individualism and the false appearance of independence in universities, a promotion based on exchange of knowledge as a kind of market transaction, rather than knowledge being shared as a non-obligatory gift. Ahl (2006) also criticizes the "Western, individualistic understanding of humans," which she maintains does not adequately explain humans, "even in the West" (p. 398).

Institutional inertia and the expectations of learners, would most likely be barriers to "learning wisdom" in the Seniors Program, if only in the form of the logistical demands of rooms and times, or the impatience of learners with digression and "full-circle" analysis. On the other hand, with its flexible mandate, and the enthusiasm of several learners at least, the program might be better placed than many other units in the university to experiment successfully. The literature on older adult learning provides at least one possible answer to the question about "facts" versus "wisdom" in the Seniors Program:

> Holistic approaches and multiple ways of knowing, rather than single truths, are important for older adults to thrive an interconnected and globalised world. This importantly includes arts and humanities, which . . . contribute to knowledge through ways of knowing that transcend the verbal, linear, and measurable. (Kivnick & Pruchno, 2011, p. 143)

In summary, older adult learners, according to the literature, like "old school" lectures and can learn deeply from being given bare facts. Older adult learners might also welcome alternative approaches to teaching and learning. Drawing on a wealth of life experience, they might be open to creating and relating narratives of their live, communicating wisdom in some way. They might not, however want to focus on the past along. In fact, older adult learners are not so different from learners of any age, although

institutions and society in general might treat them differently, in various ways. The third part of this chapter takes a different perspective on the older adult learning, looking critically at the larger contexts that shape the programs and what happens in them.

2.3. Critical perspectives on older adult learning

As stated in the introduction, there is a tendency in the literature to be positive about programs for older adult learners. "Perhaps, individuals engaged in university-based lifelong learning experiences romanticize the notion of going back to college for fun" (Hansen et al., 2019, p. 234). This is patronizing, and Hansen et al. (2019) point out that another problem with not taking a critical perspective is that it lessens the urgency to reach people with, for example, previous negative educational experiences. We need to take these programs seriously, in order to improve and recognize where work needs to be done.

2.3.1. Individualism

The centring of the individual is one persistent old idea shaping teaching and learning in older adult education. McLean (2015), putting older adult education into wider context, sees the "focus on individuals rather than collectives" as one of the defining features of neoliberalism (p. 197), the hegemonic ideology of the age. Wenger (1998) points out that "our institutions, to the extent that they address issues of learning explicitly, are largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process" (p. 3). Discussing methodologies of inquiry in adult education, Charmaz (2017) says that "individualism pervades Anglo-North American inquiry," shaping methods and interpretations (p. 37). Phillips and Soltis (2004) refer back to Dewey stressing the social nature of learning: "The self is not a separate mind building up knowledge anew on its own account" (p. 56), but many learners in the Seniors Program grew up in education systems that stressed individual achievement, and where peer collaboration was considered "cheating" or "talking in class."

The topic of individualism is also complex, of course. Illeris (2018) outlines a concept of self which is a barrier to learning. There is a tension between wanting to learn—to change and grow—yet maintain the same, strong idea of self, which is a necessary defence given the "gigantic volumes and impact of influences we are all

constantly faced with" (p. 9). Although Tennant (2018) describes self-improvement as a "core cultural value," he says it comes along with definite norms of self, including stability (p. 170). That "stability" can create tension, as learners might want to gain new skills but not change fundamentally. Illeris (2018) says that ambivalence, for example in choosing to take a course but then complaining and resisting, is a "very common form of defense" (pp. 9–10). This kind of defensiveness might explain some learners' reactions to end-of-life courses in the Seniors Program. End of life is surely the biggest threat to self. Illeris also points out that resistance contains the potential for significant learning. Resistance means not just accepting what is said (Illeris, 2018, p. 10).

McLean's (2015) study on reading self-help books (almost icons of neoliberalism) concluded that learners are not one-sided:

> A significant minority of our interviewees—and a small majority of our male interviewees—expressed narratives in which their individuality was marked by traits such as autonomy, resilience, ambition, and other markers commonly associated with neoliberal times. However, most of our interviewees expressed narratives in which their individuality was fundamentally linked to social relationships through caring, sharing, belonging, struggling, helping, and other processes not typically associated with neoliberal times. (p. 211)

Looking critically uncovers yet more complexity. Findsen (2005) points out that "the adult learning literature is heavily weighted towards concepts which advocate for continued independence throughout life" (p. 117). A feminist objection would be that many value and benefit from *inter*dependence throughout life (English & Mayo, 2012), and "rugged individualism" is a false idol. Noddings (2007) pushes back against the tendency to champion community over individual. She raises a concern about "the death of the subject", and women having finally achieved subjecthood only to have it disappear (Noddings, 2007, pp. 217–218). Nevertheless, traditional education remains individual and "selfish." In practical program-planning terms, offering courses based on the individualist paradigm allows for classrooms familiar to many older adult learners and matches the capacity of the available resources, but it limits the possibilities of a program.

2.3.2. Consumerism

Consumerism can also be an individual pursuit. Usher (2018) describes the consuming experience as “autonomy and self-expression,” and consumer choices as emblems of identity, casting back “a glow illuminating the self who consumes,” confirming “their sense of the appropriateness and validity of their taste for cultural goods and practices” (pp. 190–192). I wonder if some of this identity building through consumerism is seen in learners who “consume” course in the Seniors Program, buying into the identity of “lifelong learner” or “student,” which would be a kind of virtuous, non-materialist consumerism. In this form of consumerism, Tennant (2012) describes how loss of community, tradition, and a degree of certainty in life trajectory is replaced by consuming goods, experiences, food, services, and “even education” (p. 47).

Biesta (2015) says:

> We would expect teachers not just to give students what they know they want or say they want or are able to identify as what they want, but to move them beyond what they already know that they want . . . To turn the student into a customer, and just work on the assumption that education should do what the customer wants is therefore a distortion of what education is about. (p. 82)

This is not just a criticism of academic bureaucracy. The typical Seniors Program student might be reluctant to pay for peer learning. Would they also hesitate to pay to be confused and mystified? This question invokes the “managerial culture” culture described by Bergquist and Pawlak (2008): “Students in the managerial culture firmly believe in the academic institution as a vehicle for upward mobility—as the royal road to a respectable profession” (p. 55). This culture prioritizes “acquisition of competencies with minimal expenditure of time and money” and “encourages clarity of communication, specificity of roles and outcomes” (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008, p. 68). This is a paradigm from the larger “lifelong learning” concept, involving vocational learning and younger adults, but the Seniors Program can manifest this “value for money” approach, too. As discussed particularly in Chapter 6, there is concern in the program that learners will not pay for peer-learning opportunities or courses that tackle unanswerable questions. This hesitancy might be unwarranted but, working in the Seniors Program with an eye on budgets and registration numbers, I am guilty of it.

2.3.3. Gender

As stated above, the student bodies in university programs for older adults in North America are typically 80% women. According to Lightfoot and Brady (2005) participating in an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (an "OLLI") can be transformative for women marginalized in their previous education:

> Many of the women in the focus groups contrasted their experience at OLLI with earlier times when their participation in education was devalued or ignored. Sometimes this devaluation began at an early age. One woman recounted attending a grammar school where only the boys were taught science. Others described being intimidated or ignored in high school and college. Some found that this repression continued at home . . . These and other women talked enthusiastically about finding their "voice" at OLLI. "You suddenly realize that women have so much to say," said one participant. "We have a voice!" (pp. 231-2)

Yet this inspiration and discovery of voice happens in a context of historical marginalization of older women, which has left a legacy of bias in educational institutions and in wider society. Even in Lightfoot and Brady's (2005) uplifting account, learners reported they were initially reluctant to join the institute because they assumed it would just be "old women sitting around playing bridge." Cruikshank (2013) describes the historical injustice uncompromisingly:

> It is unnerving to acknowledge that hatred of old women is an important strand in Euro-American culture. In many other cultures, by contrast, postmenopausal women gain power and status. The witch craze is like a toxic waste site covered up for a long time but still emitting poisons. (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 141)

This "hatred" can show up more insidiously in programs for older adult learners. Noddings (2007) warns against biases and omissions in "doubtful or biased" material that is "defended as true" by educators, giving the example of "general neglect of historical contributions made by subordinated groups" and pointing out that feminist and critical thinkers have shown that the "canon" was formed under certain power structures (p.123). Formosa (2010) says that not only the content of lessons, but also their mode of operation can marginalize women: "U3As have been found at fault for pandering to the interests and needs of middle-class elders, while also clinging to a "malestream" mode of operation where women learners are rendered invisible in the classroom setting" (p. 198).

However, as discussed above, learners are comfortable with this kind of content and teaching approach. Many come to the university looking for authoritative, bedrock certainties. Discussing the conservative and outdated information and "curriculum" of museums, Clover, Sanford, and de Oliveira Jayme (2010) say, "Not only do educators perceive a lack of rudiments or knowledge on the part of the learners, the learners themselves often believe they have come to hear or learn from the 'expert' and not themselves or other members of the lay group" (p. 9).

Various ways to tackle the problem are suggested in the literature. Butterwick (2012) describes an attempt to change the prevailing, masculine, competitive behaviours of the typical postsecondary seminar: "Three of us decided to try an experiment at a daylong seminar. We slowed down our speech, lowered the timbre of our voices, avoided interrupting, and invited others to speak. When we 'had the floor,' we referred to points made by other women" (p. 61). Noddings (2007) suggests that teachers should "build curriculum around significant problems that require learners to formulate questions, gather information, discuss alternatives and make decisions" (p. 123).

Similarly, Merriam and Bierema (2013) describe feminist pedagogy as parallelling good education practice: feminist teachers "share authority and decision making with learners, empower, help learners develop voice, address power relations in class, challenge learners to think critically" (p. 218). This seems to be challenging to many learners in the Seniors Program, who, finding themselves in a class where the instructor takes such an approach, complain of disorganization or time-wasting. McCusker (2017) describes the practical compromises necessary to change the nature of the space in the classroom and to bring learners along with her attempts. Notably, McCusker (2017) is describing young undergraduates in this paragraph, not older learners with longer memories of "malestream" practices in their education:

> The power sharing that sits at the heart of feminist pedagogy was daunting for some. In all my interactions with students, I aim to retain my feminist principles, but inevitable practicalities and organisational constraints mean that often I may take on an authority role. Initially students expected me to fulfil this role and looked to me for leadership. It is understandable that they may not be ready to shift their perceptions. (p. 452)

I have used the next quote to prompt discussions (and also in the hopes of prompting a change in their writing) in classes I teach for the older adults on how to tackle reflective essays:

> For most African-American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus lived experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims. (Hill Collins, 2002, p. 257)

For some learners, it is liberating to learn that their own experience is more interesting to read about than, and in some ways as valid as, references from texts. For others, the idea seems to be nonplussing. Giving equal weight to personal experience and academic authorities might suggest a lack of shared, fixed truths. From the perspective I try to promote, it might threaten the discomfort and mess of "real learning."

Although "malestream" approaches to learning are prevalent, men are a minority in the Seniors Program and most other such programs. There are various explanations for this. Bunyan and Jordan (2005) suggest that men prefer to "sit and think," while women are more active and sociable (pp. 274–275). There are deeper issues: Their research is from Ireland, and older men in Ireland tend to have less pleasant memories of education, having been physically punished there. King, Holden, and O'Driscoll (2002) say that "older men tend to favour all-male groups and sometimes have more difficulty in admitting they don't know something, especially when women are present" (pp. 81–92). Carragher and Golding (2015) point to habits of self-reliance among men and limiting arenas for their socializing. Their paper describes hands-on learning in "men's sheds," informal learning in places that are literally workshops, and thus more welcoming than university classrooms (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Carragher and Golding (2015) also describe the empathy and openness, contrary to stereotypes, of older adult men, which was confirmed in conversations with the male research participants.

There is a danger of seeing all older women as similarly oppressed and all older men as anti-social or as "confident individuals already well-served by educational provision" (Withnall, 2010, p. 34). Merrill (1999) describes how the self-doubt often reported on the part of women who participate in educational research is also expressed by men marginalized for other reasons:

> A few participants were surprised that anyone would want to listen to their life histories and remarked: "I am not sure that I have got anything interesting to say," or, "I do not know if this will be helpful for your research." This self-doubt about the value of their lives occurred with both female and male participants, although many feminists argue this is characteristic of researching women . . . The men who expressed similar views in my research were working-class, part-time adult students studying for a Labour Studies degree. (p. 53)

There is a contradiction in the persistence of old-school "male" pedagogy in classrooms filled with women of a generation famed for advances in feminism.

2.3.4. Ageism

> *The issue of why society should be bothered about the provision of education to older adults (given their likely imminent death and perceived limited utility to the wider society) should not be avoided. (Findsen, 2005, p. 19)*

An obvious area of critical concern is age itself, and views of it. There has been a long-standing consensus that older people in general are discriminated against: "Older people still tend to be largely ignored in educational policy circles" (Withnall, 2010, p. 19), and "elders are no longer seen as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 114). Troyansky (2016) suggests that it has always been so, saying that the notion of a golden age when elders were venerated was challenged at the end of the last century when historians realized that the story of old age throughout history "was more one of ambiguity" (p. 5).

It can be argued that, in terms of well-being and status, older generations are, in general, in many ways better off in developed nations than they have ever been. The story is "messier" than the one-sided optimistic or pessimistic accounts would have it. The subtleties and complexities of ageism are important themes in the literature; for example, how problems with mobility are seen as problems of individuals and not of society's choices about infrastructure (Cruikshank, 2013), or how tropes about "successful aging" and "productive aging" are problematic.

Cognitive decline is a concern for learners in the Seniors Program, although often expressed in a light-hearted way as a desire to "keep all my marbles" and similar idioms, as reasons for participating in the program. The idea that old age means cognitive decline is pervasive. Findsen (2005) complains about the New Zealand

government invoking the “stereotypical factor of cognitive decline . . . in a clumsy attempt to explain non-participation” of older adults in mainstream adult education (p. 71). Boulton-Lewis (2010) points out that older adults often simply need more time “to achieve equivalent learning outcomes to younger learners. It has been found that with extra practice an older adult will perform as well as an unpracticed younger adult” (p. 218).

Educational and psychological theories that consider developmental or life stages can fall into the trap of assuming that old age involves inevitable decline. Vallet (2015), for example, seems to assume “sensory-motor and cognition decline occurring in aging” (p. 4). This line of thinking is not necessarily helpful in the classroom: “Cognitive researchers have offered a number of ideas for teaching older adults. However, the question remains as to whether the learners themselves would consider these recommendations effective” (Duay & Bryan, 2008, p. 1071). van Dyk (2016) points out how people in the “third age” (or “young old”) are *valued* as other, because of how they retain the characteristics of youth, like attending school, but those in the “fourth age” (or the “old old”) are *disdained* as other, “radically othered” and excluded. A more prosaic discrimination against old age is the assumption that education for older adults should be about coping with age, an approach rejected by learners in university programs for older adults (Maginess, 2016). Formosa (2010) argues that “learning coordinators must work to counter the psychosocial barriers that older adults face in becoming members, but especially, the stereotypical and ageist belief in the adage “I’m too old to learn” (Formosa, 2010, p. 210).

Positive stereotypes of aging can be unhelpful, too. Older adult education as seeking the “crown in life” sounds grand, but patronizes:

> Perceived as socialization in the First Age and controlled by Second-Age vocational interests and training personnel, education fails to meet the learning needs of those seeking self-realization as their “crown in life” in the Third Age, Laslett believes. Yet, if those in the Third Age are to recognize and accept their responsibilities for the cultural past and social future, appropriate forms of education need to be devised. (Williamson, 1997, p. 218)

As described above, older adults might want to learn with the same outlook as youth, and might see their education as forward looking, not contemplative.

The issues discussed above—individualism, consumerism, gender, ageism—shape what happens in the Seniors Program, and they also contribute to continuing concerns about the program, which include a lack of diversity in the student body, and how people who could benefit from participation are, for whatever reason, not in the room. The next section discusses exclusion.

2.3.5. Exclusion

"Many educators may assume that middle-aged adults do not want or need further education" (Patterson, 2018, p. 57). There is a danger of losing sight of everyone who is not participating in older adult learning at university. Findsen (2005) describes a situation similar to that of the Seniors Program:

> Comparatively few older adults frequent formal education and they tend to be primarily from white middle class backgrounds, typically with solid educational credentials. Their involvement tends to be in the arts, humanities and social sciences rather than in more vocational and technical programs; more women than men enter the universities. (p. 57)

Programs like the Seniors Program, along with much of the research on adult education, are skewed towards privileged groups, tending to be "already well educated" (Jamieson, 2016, p. 478). Merriam and Bierema (2013), in a criticism of Knowles' work on andragogy (and similar research), point out that subjects are overwhelmingly White, middle-class, and already educated (p. 58). For example, Cincinnato, De Wever, Van Keer, and Valcke (2016), in research based on Bourdieu's work on cultural capital in 23 countries, looked at the effects of parents' educational level. They found that success in adult postsecondary education depends more on one's own cultural capital: "readiness to learn." But where does that disposition come from, if not from our parents and other intergenerational systems of privilege? Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2017), in a survey across 25 countries, found that "fairness" in adult postsecondary education is increasing although slowly, and older, racialized people with less formal education continue to be poorly represented.

Patterson (2018) points out how little we know about the "90%" of adults who do not participate in education other than that they are low income, racialized, and likely to be less formally educated. Boulton-Lewis and Purdie (2010) interviewed 160 older adults

about barriers to education. Transportation and concerns about health and safety were important but the biggest barrier was “physical disability”:

> Efforts to encourage participation normally begin with the removal of barriers and the provision of opportunities, but because institutional responses have typically focused on increasing opportunities without the necessary removal of obstacles, little has changed either for older adults, who historically have been marginalized by many educational institutions, or for other disadvantaged groups. (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010, p. 6)

External factors such as physical accessibility and transport are not the only problem, though: “Learning is affected by a variety of physical and social factors and by policies . . . but equally or even more by the immediate ‘lifeworld’ or environment, its stimuli, ‘feel,’ ‘tone,’ feedback, challenges and rewards” (Skilbeck, 2006, p. 48). These barriers can be internal. Bunyan and Jordan (2005) found that “mixed feelings about former education” were a major barrier to participation in older adult education programs (p. 272). This is reinforced by the interviews in Patterson et al. (2016):

> “As you get older you haven’t quite got the confidence that you had . . . you lose it and going into a room full of strangers for the first time is very intimidating.” (Heather, 75) Most participants reiterated this apprehension by stating that they would be reluctant to start a new activity on their own for a fear of being judged by existing participants. This appeared, in part, to be based on a perception of the closed nature of existing groups. Fear of not being welcomed was commonly expressed. (p. 1589)

Hansen et al. (2019) discuss internalized barriers, “Older adults may feel they lack enough intelligence to engage in lifelong learning programs” (p. 224). They might feel they lack the qualifications or even “the proper attire” to enter the university, or they might identify the problem as the “general perceptions of university-based learning” and the answer as “information,” possibly from peers (Hansen et al., 2019, pp. 224–225). Formosa (2010) argues that U3As should dismantle barriers “that exclude older adults” from underrepresented groups, for example those living in rural areas and the working class. His measure of success is that “membership becomes more representative of the older population” (p. 210). Part of Formosa’s answer is that learning opportunities would be offered outside the university, in communities, homes and “sports centres and pubs” (p. 210).

Young (1990) describes how communities are defined by, and even built on, the exclusion of others. Quinn (2013), quoting Young, also describes how community is

used as a means of regulation, through norms, expectations, do's, and don'ts: "enforced community." It is a mistake to give "learning" and "community" neutral value (Quinn, 2013). Communities can be created for many purposes and they can be coercive or unforgiving. Noddings (2007) suggests that founding a community on relatedness and reflection guards against this.

It is, of course, complicated. Noddings (2007) also points out that knowledge is associated with privilege. It is almost inevitably elitist, and there are problems with ensuring wider access: the elites will move on to something else marked as elite (Noddings, 2007, p. 126). Similarly, Lovett (2019) contrasts two approaches to education for marginalized populations in the UK, one based on the desire to be accessible and welcoming, and thus "informal group work" and "keep fit," versus a less patronizing approach with "no concessions to informal community discussion methods" in which "working class activists" were given the chance to become experts in a skill or field (p. 156).

This is relevant to the Seniors Program, in which learners value the feeling of access to expert, prestigious knowledge in a somewhat exclusive atmosphere, often expressed benignly as learning with "people of like mind." Jiménez (2007) points out, on the other hand, that inclusivity helps everyone. Privilege is a learning deficiency, denying many kinds of opportunities for learning. Ensuring wider access would not be a case of "dumbing things down" or lowering standards but of opening up to different perspectives and experiences.

2.4. Conclusion

> *Little in 'pure' adult learning theory prepares us for the contradictions, tensions and paradoxes of aging. (Findsen, 2005, p. 3)*

Three decades ago, Glendenning and Battersby (1990) challenged the assumptions of the time about older adult education, criticizing how older adults were seen as a homogenous group, and how education programs were based on the "needs" of this group and intended mainly as a method of promoting well-being. Glendenning and Battersby also criticized the lack of thinking about why older people should participate in formal education, along with the assumption that education is a neutral enterprise and simply "good for" people.

As I have suggested in this review of the theories and concepts related to my inquiry, these criticisms have not been fully answered. However, there is now significantly more literature taking a critical look at older adult education and digging into the complexities of the field. On the other hand, I suspect that, for the uninitiated, there is still an assumption that programs for older adults at universities represent a less serious but heartwarming "nice-to-have" addition to community engagement efforts. Have these programs ever been taken seriously? The literature points to ad hoc development, with questions about the purpose and goals being inadequately addressed. These haphazard beginnings might have shaped the programs in many ways; for example, in their general reliance on lectures, the most straightforward kind of class to put into practice (although lectures are popular with learners, too).

It is possible to apply educational theories to such programs. Writing on transmission and "banking," contrasted with more engaged or transformative learning, can illuminate what happens in the Seniors Program. Learners' motivations and goals, along with issues facing older people in wider society, are also important to describing the program fully. We can usefully consider, for example, the contrast between a social justice model of education, in which access to learning is a right, and the functionalist model, in which investment in older adult learning pays off in a reduced "burden" on society. The oxymoronic notion of "serious leisure" is useful, too, in highlighting contradictions in the Seniors Program. Learners look for learning that is joyful, but rigorous, authoritative and prestigious, too. Finally, a new and challenging model, the age-friendly university, seeks to integrate older adults into the mainstream of the university. Is that a realistic goal?

Andragogy and geragogy do not describe the Seniors Program adequately. The former is more concerned with working adults, and the latter with the fourth-age. The literature does describe the wide range of motivations of older adult learners, a range that can be seen in the Seniors Program. The literature also contains accounts of alternatives to traditional classrooms, generally favoured by educators but often resisted by older adult learners. The desire for *some* stakeholders to promote sharing of wisdom, telling of stories, creation of communities, and exploration of Indigenous approaches to learning is part of the "hard facts" versus "heart and soul" classroom debate.

A more critical look at the Seniors Program, or programs like it, is bound to find more problematic issues, and some of the literature does this. The pervasive individualism of the society in which the Seniors Program operates has an influence on what is seen as serious teaching and learning, for example. Consumerism, gender issues and ageism have various effects on what shape the program takes.

Exclusion is one of the most obvious of these deeper issues. Most literature on older adults at university agrees with the conclusion of Formosa (2002): We need to seek solutions to the problem of older adults being excluded from appropriate education. Formosa says there's a "moral responsibility" to reach out to those who have not yet enrolled. Ahl (2006) says that, for many, education is a "no-choice," something that they had not even considered until a researcher asked them about it, and making such people aware of the option would perhaps be the start of fulfilling the moral obligation. Ratsoy (2016) says that "directing courses to ethnic minorities, for example, or to parts of cities with high poverty rates would seem a logical action for continuing education units, particularly in a country such as Canada that espouses multiculturalism and equality" (p. 82). The assumption that learning is good and that people want and need to learn, but are held back by various barriers, seems a less harmful assumption than that which opened this literature review: that many older adults do not want to learn.

Working in one of these programs, particularly after reviewing the literature, I know that they are more frustrating, joyous, enlightening, and puzzling than they first appear. The next chapter describes the methodology I have used to work on this puzzle: the case study approach, critical reflexivity and narrative inquiry. Chapter 3 also sets out my research questions.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical framework

My research is a case study (Simons, 2009; Swanborn 2010; Yin, 2017) of the Seniors Program, a non-credit program which is part of a university continuing education department. Within the larger case study, there is also a specific case example with a narrower focus on a smaller "unit of analysis" (Yin, 2017). The case example describes a set of courses and events that made up an illuminating but ultimately unsuccessful initiative which introduced end-of-life studies into the Seniors Program. This case example highlights some issues from the larger study. The case study methodology draws upon the methodological approaches of critical reflexivity (Attia & Edge, 2017; Cunliffe, 2016a; Ng, Wright, & Kuper, 2019) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007a; Davis, Dwyer, & emerald, 2017; Kim, 2016), and it embraces an epistemology of "mess" (Law, 2004) and compromise.

3.1.1. Case study

The purpose of a case study is "to portray an in-depth view of the quality and complexity of social/educational programs or policies as they are implemented in specific sociopolitical contexts" (Simons, 2014, p. 458). I hope that my research, taking an in-depth view of the Seniors Program, makes clear that it is more intriguing pedagogically than it might at first seem. Simons (2014) also says that case study research is suited to "puzzling through the ambiguities that exist in many contexts and programs" (p. 456). I have had a few small epiphanies during this research, including that not all questions need to be answered neatly. Identifying and clarifying a good question has heuristic power, and the open-ended nature of the case study approach facilitates this. The case study approach also allows the research question to develop in the course of the research (Swanborn, 2010). My original intention was to investigate teaching and learning about end of life only, but it became clear early in the research that the essential issues of teaching and learning raised by classes on end of life also applied to the larger Seniors Program, and the research focus could be usefully widened.

As Yin (2017) points out, one challenge presented by case study methodology is that it is not routinized. There is little consensus on the steps to follow. Yin (2017) also

implies that case study researchers need to take more care to establish their work as rigorous academic study. While case studies are appropriate for dealing with ambiguity, how to conduct a case study is itself unclear. Tackling a case study might be compared to writing free verse, which demands more care than following "routinized" meter and rhyming schemes if we are to produce something recognizable as a poem. This chapter explains my approach, which aims to balance acknowledgement of the unknowable or ineffable with academic rigour.

This study represents one situation, unique in time, which allows for depth of understanding and description. As Takahashi and Araujo (2019) argue, "It is the depth and not the number of cases that provides an actual contribution to theory; and the researcher's purpose should be to get closer to the setting and interpret it" (p. 105). In order to expand "the parameters of reflection" (Gould, 2015, p. 82), the case study is based on critical reflexivity.

3.1.2. Critical reflexivity

"Critical reflexivity" can mean different things in different fields, and even within fields: "It is clear that several notions of reflexivity are in evidence within educational research" (Grenfell & James, 2003, p. 124). I am guided by the definitions set out by Ng, Wright, and Cooper (2019): "a process of recognizing one's own position in the world in order both to better understand the limitations of one's own knowing and to better appreciate the social realities of others" and in which the objects of study are "societal norms and structures and power relations" (Table 1, p. 1123).

Flores-Sandoval & Kinsella (2020) point out that "critical reflexivity goes beyond pragmatic reflection" (p. 227). In this study, I try to unearth assumptions and mutual understandings affecting the program. For example, I engage with neoliberal narratives about individualism because they influence the form of teaching and learning in the Seniors Program, as well as expectations about learning and what kinds of curricula and pedagogy are possible. As already noted, the program has few formal, explicit institutional restraints on its curriculum, so hesitancy about new ways to teach and learn, while partly to do with practicalities, is also internal and socially constructed. In exploring what happens in the Seniors Program and why, I have also paid attention to power

imbalances, for example in discussions about inclusion and exclusion, and how ageism and subtler discourses of “successful aging” affect the program.

Rule and John (2015), discussing the relationship between theory and case study, say that “research is a useful way of structuring a dialogue between theory and practice” (p. 2). Cunliffe (2016a), however, suggests that critical reflexivity goes deeper, so that “instead of applying theory to practice, critical reflexivity emphasizes praxis—questioning our own assumptions and taken-for-granted actions, thinking about where/who we are and where/who we would like to be” (Cunliffe, 2016a, p. 411). My inquiry has included questioning of my own values and ideological perspectives and how my life experience (particularly my previous work) shapes my practice in and perspective on the Seniors Program. For example, I first approached the program from the stance of “pedagogical snob,” dismissive of the lecture format in the Seniors Program. However, over the course of my research, as I stepped back to consider the lecture in light of theory and the perspectives of learners, I discovered its value in this context. This approach is fundamental to critical reflexivity, according to Attia and Edge (2017): “We observe in action; we step back to reflect; and we step up again to action. That, at least, is the simple model that we find useful to hold on to” (p.36).

Literature on conducting case studies often includes consideration of “participant observation” (Zahle, 2019, p. 33). But I have been more than “participant observer” in this case, more deeply embedded in the program, as a member of the staff team running it rather than a visiting researcher. Cunliffe (2016b) argues that, rather than grappling with the implications of being subjective as a researcher, we should be concerned with “intersubjective ontology” (p. 741), which acknowledges that we do not operate in society as individuals, but in relation to others and the prevailing culture, and this perspective better describes my orientation to the Seniors Program—to other learners, instructors and university staff—as well aligning with critical reflexivity. My role in the program is a strength of the research. Discussion with others involved in running the Seniors Program has been an important to the research, and Attia and Edge (2017) confirm that this is part of critical reflexivity: “The workings of reflexivity are accessed via observation and reflection, and through interaction with colleagues” (p. 36).

I am, moreover, being over 55, with some postsecondary education and an interest in lifelong learning, a peer of the learners and many instructors in the Seniors

Program, which makes me an insider, and “the 'insider’ role is a powerful reflexive position used to gain deeper engagement and insight into participants' understanding of lived experience” (Cooper & Rogers, 2015, p. 2). Abma and Stake (2014) say that “naturalistic case studies are those that are performed in the ordinary setting and natural habitat of the case” (p. 1150). My research arises from and has informed my “natural” work, as I step forward into the action of the everyday administration of the program, and step back to theorize and reflect.

According to Attia and Edge (2017), rather than seeing the influences of researcher on research, and vice-versa as “contamination,”

> prospective reflexivity seeks to help researchers grow their capacity to understand the significance of the knowledge, feelings, and values that they brought into the field to the research questions that they came to formulate, to the analytical lenses that they chose to employ, and to their findings. (p. 35)

According to Ng, Wright, and Cooper (2019), the thinking of Bourdieu and Foucault suggests that this reflexivity is *necessary* to research, with Bourdieu arguing that we have to understand and overcome our own conceptual limitations, arising from “our social and cultural origins, our position in the field, and our knowledge claims” and Foucault proposing similarly that we have to understand how “what is thinkable and knowable” for us is constrained by prevailing discourses (p. 1124). Critical reflexivity thus includes my own worldview, considered and reflected upon, as data for the research. This research is not aimed simply at improving my own practice: It is “messier” (Law, 2004). I do believe that my practice has improved and become more intentional over the course of the research, but this is incidental to attempting to describe and better understand the complexities of older adult learning. Attia and Edge (2017) say that, beyond the “simple model” of stepping back to reflect and stepping up to action, “the actual complexities of thinking, feeling, and acting spread out before us” (p.36).

Cunliffe (2016a) says that critical reflexivity should be “a philosophy-driven practice in which we take responsibility for creating our social and organizational realities” (p. 408). Considering my own responsibilities, the question that arises of why would I seek to change, or upset, a program so successful by many measures, not the least of which is general enrollment with over a thousand learners each term. Looking back on my career, I have often managed change in the institutions I worked in. Is one of

my personal values change for its own sake, or was the disruption I initiated throughout my career warranted? Trying out new approaches when the Seniors Program seems to be at its strongest is best organizational practice, according to resiliency theory (Bhamra, Dani, & Burnard, 2011) and my supervisors have been supportive of experimentation in the program. I still wonder, however, if I just want to upset the applecart: Is it all just a little too genteel for me?

If my role in the Seniors Program were as an instructor only, it would be helpful to undertake a reflective project to improve my practice—"single-loop" learning in the phrase of Cunliffe (2016a), which she defines as "problem solving, identifying, and correcting errors" (p. 412). As a researcher, and also an administrator and instructor in the program, it is more useful for me to look at the systems and social constructs that have created and shaped the classroom, as well as my own assumptions and perspectives. This is "double-loop" learning or "thinking more critically about behavior; questioning assumptions, values, and espoused theories; disconfirming, inventing, producing, and evaluating new theories in action" (Cunliffe, 2016a, p. 412). If I have a practical question, it could be "how can I nudge this complex construction in a better direction?" while questioning my own questioning, for example, what does "better" mean and who gets to say so? And what *are* the complexities underlying the Seniors Program's structure?

In summary, the approach of critical reflexivity is well suited to considering what underlies thinking behaviours, including my own, in the program and to see how wider societal issues shape what happens here, too. Yin (2017) says that case study research "does not depend solely on ethnographic or participant-observer data" (p. 20), and this case study does not depend on critical reflexivity alone. I have also employed a narrative inquiry approach, explained next.

3.1.3. Narrative inquiry

Vignette 3:

I arranged to meet John and Janet after their class to talk about their involvement as learners in the Seniors Program. I intended to write up the discussion as a story for the next program brochure. These pieces cannot be more than 300 words long, and I planned to get only a few comments about how they started in the program and what

they value most about it. Instead, sitting in the food court with them, two coffees later, I realize I am hearing three biographies—three because John's sister, who is unable to travel to the Seniors Program, turns out to be an important part of the story, too. She experiences each course through John and Janet, who visit her after every class, and give her a "blow-by-blow" account. I cannot avoid telling so much of my own story, too. Looking at my pages of notes later, wondering how to find a strand that can fit in the limited space in the brochure, it strikes me that I did not need to use any of the prompts and questions I had prepared. The stories simply flowed.

Vignettes like the one above are generated from my research journalling, refined and rewritten into narrative form. These vignettes aim to be more subjective and "creative" than the rest of the text, with the aim of giving a fuller picture of the Seniors Program. In the creation of the vignettes, I strive to capture "unanswered questions, awkward or strained interaction" (Mazzei, 2007, p. 47). D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez (2007) warn about overestimating the evidentiary strength of "writings that employ 'multiple voices', sometimes in boxes alongside the text" (p. 79), reminding us that these are "only the creations of the author" (p. 79). However, I hope that readers can make their own, unpredictable, connections and conclusions, drawing from the creative ambiguity of how these vignettes are presented (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo, 2009). The narrative approach in this way allows me to try to communicate what otherwise would have been missing from this thesis. It is important, too, that these vignettes are "supported by theory and connected to the literature" (Stahlke Wall, 2016, p. 6).

Kim (2016) makes a distinction between "narrative" and "story":

> a story is a detailed organization of narrative events arranged in a (story) structure based on time although the events are not necessarily in chronological order. This is what we mean when we say stories (not narratives) have a beginning, middle, and end" (p. 9)

Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2011) say that stories are also distinguished by having a point. Although they make points, and contain important elements of "narrative" and "story," the vignettes are more accurately described as anecdotes than as stories or narratives. The research interviews, too, were not ideal for narrative but short, anecdotal narratives emerged despite the context (as might happen in student contributions in classes in the Seniors Program). It is important to note that, methodologically, stories are

not the main data for this research, that narrative analysis was one technique applied to the data, and that the presentation of findings is leavened only by very short stories. Methodologically, narrative inquiry is a tool in this research, an effective, holistic and helpful way of analyzing the data, listening for resonance, resisting quantification or dissection, and building a fuller picture of the Seniors Program.

I believe the appropriately sensitive approach for older adult learners and for the particular topic of end of life is the "slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet method. Multiple method. Modest method. Uncertain method. Diverse method" (Law, 2004, p. 11), and storytelling can be slow, diverse and uncertain. MacKinlay (2001) asks, "How do elderly people perceive value and meaning in their lives? . . . Story is an important aspect for many aging people" (p. 21). Stories from people I previously worked with in the Inner City were important: There was an urgency. For them, the point often seemed to be "speaking truth to power" or correcting the naiveté of others about life in a marginalized community. Seniors Program learners generally welcome opportunities to share stories about their lives (except, for many, in the lecture theatre) as my experience with Janet and John illustrates, but I am not sure that weighty concepts like "value," "meaning," and "importance" are obvious in their storytelling. A sense of urgency was not present in my research interviews. Possibly many learners in the Seniors Program feel that their voices are heard, and their stories have been told. For the research participants, stories are perhaps simply a natural way to illustrate ideas. Nevertheless, the interviews in my research, and interactions with learners in my everyday work, feature many anecdotes and accounts of life experience.

Discussing case study presentation, Swanborn (2010) contrasts the efficacy for time-pressed policy-makers of "charts, diagrams, illustrations and overviews" (p. 136) with the lack of transparency and precision of a holistic, narrative approach. Swanborn cites Stake (1978) as preferring the narrative approach because it is "epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience" (p. 136), and says Stake's (1978) preference for holism is "easily ridiculed." I feel, however, that the emotional and epistemological match of the narrative approach with the preferences of the older adult learners in the study is ethically and methodologically important. The findings about what it feels like to enter the lecture theatre decades after leaving school, for example, does not lend itself to quantitative representation.

While I did not code participants' words into graphs and charts, "holistic" does not mean presenting the stories I heard complete and unedited, however. Davis et al. (2017) suggest that in narrative inquiry, poetry and imagery are tools to "reduce rich and detailed stories to shorter text that could be shared readily" (p. 84). I believe that this study is itself a story, including ideas and insights from participants' stories, and the story of my research presented here has been edited, polished, and reduced.

As well as matching the nature of the Seniors Program, narrative inquiry has the necessary openness and capacity for ambiguity for my research. Based on learners' thoughts about and experiences of end of life, and the surprisingly deep question of why, what and how people learn in the Seniors Program, my inquiry is "connected to understanding how stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living" (Leggo, 2012, pp. xviii–xix). As with case studies in general, stories do not have to pinpoint "truths" to be meaningful. According to the tenets of symbolic interactionism, "if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Beuving & de Vries, 2015, p. 52). My research is about what the stories told mean to study participants and to me.

I had hoped to include more poetry and poetic inquiry in my research. For me, poetry is an attempt to reach beyond the constraints of language, to the "implicit aspect of experiencing" (Letherby & Davidson, 2015, p. 26). It is an attempt to "represent the unrepresentable" (Lerner, 2016), and thus a possible answer, for example, to the problem posed in this study by silence (see Sections 3.2.2: Data collection & 4.4.2: Humility and perspective). In describing a Quaker meeting, Law (2004) points out that "what is made present [i.e. the spiritual] does not necessarily take the form of a 'single crisp sentence' or a statement . . . we are in the realms of allegory or gathering as these press up against the limits set by the demands of language" (p. 116). Tornstam (1997) addresses this, too, in the context of wisdom and old age:

> When talking about understanding life and what it is all about, a common response was that ordinary language is sometimes preventing us from insight and understanding. Language constrains us to a certain form of understanding, a 71 year old man said, and implying that transcending the barriers of language gives rise to new forms of awareness. He gave as examples music and painting which may allow forms of understanding beyond those that can be expressed through language. (p. 149)

How does academia acknowledge what cannot be put into words? Yankelovich (1972) giving an example of fallacy in business management, wrote, “What can’t be easily measured really doesn’t exist” (as cited in Molinaro, Lovejoy, & Cummings, 1996, p. 1). An education equivalent might run “what can’t be put into words doesn’t really exist.” In scholarship, it seems, alternative forms of representation—dance, music, or other rival “allegories”—have to be explicated in words. I am in awe of St. Pierre (2018), who tackles the primacy of words head-on:

> I wonder why I thought I should interview anyone at all given that I was thinking with Foucault (1971/1972), who made it clear he was not interested in the speaking subject. And why did I think words in interview transcripts and field notes could be data—the ground, the foundation of knowledge claims—given that I was thinking with Derrida who made it clear that meaning cannot be closed off and contained in language, that meaning always escapes. (p. 603)

Nevertheless, my research, obviously, remains reliant on words. In this way, it is an imperfect, messy, compromise that follows patterns already laid down and thus is analogous to the Seniors Program itself. The research is about educational practice, and practice depends on compromise; for example, adjusting lesson plans that need more time and a different kind of space to fit the confines of a two-hour slot in a traditional classroom.

The next section considers how these research methods, narrative inquiry and critical reflexivity, align.

3.1.4. Alignment of methodologies

Lal, Suto, and Unger (2012) warn that mixed methodology approaches “are at times poorly anchored within an identifiable epistemological or theoretical perspective” (p. 2). And Takahashi and Araujo (2019) say that “in case studies with a non-positivist orientation, rigor can be achieved through careful alignment (coherence among ontology, epistemology, theory and method)” (p. 109). I believe my methodology of narrative inquiry and critical reflexivity within a case study is coherent, and aligned to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Narratives, insights and information from the research interviews complemented my critically reflexive perspective on the Seniors Program. My point of view, for example,

on underlying assumptions, hidden inequities and educational theory relevant to what happens in Seniors Program classrooms informed the content and orientation of the interviews. In interviews, I could read between the lines. As Zahle (2019) says at more length:

> How research participants actually behave as opposed to how they say they behave; ways of acting, thinking, valuing, etc. that research participants consider too obvious to mention in an interview; behavior indicative of norms, understandings, and the like that are tacit such that research participants are unable to state them. (p. 35)

Conversely, as Zahle (2019) also says, the interviews gave me insight into "behaviors, settings, etc. to which the researcher is denied access because they are too private, or for members only, etc.; ways of acting, incidents, etc. that the researcher is prevented from observing on practical grounds" (p. 36). In particular, the research participants were able to tell me about conversations with learners who did not attend, and actively objected to end-of-life courses in the Seniors Program, a perspective I could only otherwise catch glimpses of in my practice and research.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2017), however, warn against the underlying positivism of this view of triangulation. "These methods, however, carry the same domain assumptions, including the assumption that there is a 'fixed point' or an 'object' that can be triangulated" (p. 1415). Instead, they suggest that

> the central imaginary for "validity" for postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017, p. 1415)

I am drawn to this image, the balance it suggests between extreme stances. It proposes an alternative to notions of research arriving at "timeless truths," or a bedrock of certainty, a view of knowledge that some learners in the Seniors Program also seem to hold (see Chapter 5). This question of ontology is addressed in the next section.

3.1.5. My research stance: Lightly held ontologies

D'Cruz, Gillingham and Mendez (2007) define reflexivity as "an individual's self-critical approach that questions how knowledge is generated and, further, how relations of power operate in this process" (p. 75). My research is based in part on a questioning of knowledge generation, and specifically of an expert-driven and "objectivist" paradigm (this is also a thread in the findings of the research, see Section 4.3.2: Experts and individualism). The broad epistemology/ontology in which I have located this study is perhaps closest to that described by Law (2004): that there is a reality independent of us, but that typical common-sense assumptions about this "out-thereness" do not necessarily hold true. The out-thereness, for example, is not independent of us, anterior to our investigations, definite, or singular. We shape our reality by our research methods and by what we choose to pay attention to or not.

Law (2004) also stresses "the importance of a number of goods: truth; politics; justice; aesthetics; inspiration and the spiritual" (p. 153) that are neglected by the positivist tradition, which values one "good": an objective reality. I believe Law's epistemological/ontological stance is compatible with the methodologies that form my research framework. It is also appropriate to the questions I am asking, which are about constructed phenomena; for example, how we like to learn. As Law explains, "I want to argue that while standard methods are often extremely good at what they do, they are badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular" (p. 4). This aligns with critical reflexivity, which Cunliffe (2016a), describes as "challenging our conceptions of reality, and exploring new possibilities" (p. 411).

However, it is difficult to change habits of thought, and positivism still has influence on the social sciences (the "soft" sciences), both subtle and overt (Somekh & Lewin, 2005; Scharff, 2007). Even interpretivist, phenomenological approaches can hold assumptions that they are uncovering "essential truths about reality" (Rolfe, 2006, p. 307). St. Pierre (2016) says:

> In a study claiming to be "posthuman," for example, qualitative researchers will, nonetheless, assign proper names to and, using the identity categories, describe interview participants as unique, essentialist individuals; they privilege participants' authentic voices; and they represent participants' everyday lived experiences by placing the human against a background of culture thereby maintaining human exceptionalism and the

> binary of human/nature—culture/nature, human/other, human/material, mind/body, objective/subjective, and so on. (p. 9)

I am not too troubled by the compromises that occurred in practice in my research. For example, as described in Section 3.2.2: Data collection, I used conventional, one-on-one interviews in the research. Georgakopoulou (2007) and DeFalco (2010) make a convincing case against the set-piece interview in favour of a fragmentary, happenstance storytelling that facilitates contradictions and mutability (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 154) while avoiding artificial tidying up and "closure" of stories (Speight, 2015). However (much like lectures in the Seniors Program) traditional interviews follow an intuitive and familiar format which allows participants to focus on the content. Of course, as a researcher, I need to be clear about what I am doing so I am not claiming to be holding to theoretical consistency when I am not. It is a question of awareness, balance, and dealing with the inevitable messiness of theory meeting the real world.

Schön's (1991) work on the reflective practitioner aligns with a constructivist perspective, contrasting the uncertain, emergent, relationship-based stance of the reflective practitioner with the distant and authoritative role of the "expert" (p. 300). My everyday decision-making in the program, and my reflexive study of it, are based on "an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (Schön, 1991, p. 49). Cunliffe (2016b), discussing research, describes a "subjectivist ontology" in critical reflexivity "based on the assumptions that we shape our social and organizational worlds in our everyday conversations and actions" (p. 742). My research is not reflective practice, focused on my personal capacities and professional development, nor is it based on reflexivity, which is also mostly concerned with personal capability (Watts, 2018). It is critical reflexivity, which draws on social and philosophical thinking (Watts, 2018) and required of me some learning about philosophical traditions. It has opened up new ways of thinking for me. I am more aware, now, of how the Seniors Program has been given its shape by the complex interactions of countless people, educational and institutional developments, and societal context. Nevertheless, learners in the program often demonstrate, in contrast, a preference for subject-matter experts with straightforward, objective truths, a preference which I sympathize with to some extent. I feel that I still have a foot in both camps.

Scharff (2007) uses the phrase “weak post-positivism” as a criticism, describing postpositivist discourse that itself adopts the positivist assumption of having an objective “view from nowhere”: “In fact, it is all too easy to think oneself a thoroughgoing opponent of the View from Nowhere and yet present one’s arguments . . . as if from Nowhere” (Scharff, 2007, p. 510). I think, however, that “weak post-positivism” usefully describes a workable perspective, which acknowledges how we slip into thinking through postpositivist ontologies in positivist ways. “Weak post-positivism” is maybe not an inspiring banner to follow, and I would describe my stance in this study instead as having “lightly held ontologies,” signifying the necessary flexibility to acknowledge the challenges of applying pristine theory to the messiness of the world.

This tolerance for crossing theoretical lines does have limits, and I avoided quantitative methods such as coding, for example. I agree with Takahashi and Araujo (2019) that

> it is not possible to access social phenomena through objective, detached methods. Instead, the interaction mechanisms and relationships that make up social constructions have to be studied. Deductive approaches, hypothesis testing and quantitative methods are not relevant here. (p. 104)

I worry, too, about the stereotypical gender roles lurking behind all this. Is positivism “patriarchal, male interpretive bias” (Denzin, 2009, p. 99) seeing itself as “hard, firm, real” rather than “soft, mushy, fuzzy and weak” (Denzin, 2009, p. 101)? Belenky, Mcvicker Clinchy, Rule Goldberger, and Mattuck Tarule (2008) say “real talk” (Chapter 7) is taking an empathic approach to interview, seeking connection, reciprocity, and cooperation. This might be contrasted with a “masculine” impulse to frame research interviews as one-sided mining for “the truth.” The data collection and data analysis sections (Sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3, respectively) discuss further how the interviews were conducted and how the conversations were analyzed, or “mined.”

Learners participating in this study were thoughtful. I think they would be open to ideas such as “It is possible to have some knowledge of the external world but that such knowledge is always uncertain” (King, 1984, p. 16). The participants were comfortable talking about “unanswerable questions” on end-of-life issues, although, in the time available, often did not get to dig into ideas beyond there being more to end of life than we can know, and something undefined beyond the materialist, positivist worldview.

Postpositivism was not explicitly mentioned in any interview, but it is (weakly) my stance and can be seen in my research in several ways.

As mentioned above, I have avoided coding, instead paying attention to ideas that participants, and myself identified as important, no matter how, or how often it surfaced. This follows the advice of MacLure (2013) to pay attention to whatever in the data might "grasp us," rather than to employ a "mechanical search for meanings, patterns, codes or themes" (p. 228). I have not been quite brave enough though, to follow St. Pierre (2018) in including in my data ideas from absolutely anywhere, including dreams. Like St. Pierre (2018), I have tried to pay attention to the awkward bits of data, those that irk me, or seem to spoil the emerging, coherent, communicable story. For example, one of the participants, Deborah, whom I will introduce in more detail in Chapter 4, said that she did not contribute in class because she felt there was nothing she could add that had not already been said on the topic over the years. This complicated the view I had held, that learners' silence in class was due to their passivity as old-fashioned learners, or as mere consumers. The comment instead suggested a complexity of different kinds of silence. Paying attention to Deborah's "awkward" perspective raised the theme for me of humility, discussed in Section 4.4.2: Humility and perspective.

The study should be easily understood by, and maybe even useful to all stakeholders in the Seniors Program: "Does the author hold himself or herself accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people he or she has studied?" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017, p. 1418). Kucukaydin and Cranton (2012) take issue with ill-defined "extrarational" concepts in educational literature. The criticism has echoes of "hard-headed" demands for clarity and testability:

> If someone claims that he or she experienced transformation through "soul work," we can accept that this is the case for this person. But when it is worded this way . . . the experience has been generalized without the reader necessarily knowing what the archetypal nature of our being is and on what basis it can be related to "adult learning." It needs to be possible to question any knowledge claim and its validity. (p. 50)

I tend to nod in agreement with statements such as those about "heart" being necessary in teaching and learning, but they lack clarity and specificity. What do statements like this really mean, and how do we assess the claim or put it into practice?

(My unpoetic, positivist side trying to assert itself?) Clarity of representation is preferred by many learners in the Seniors Program.

The analogy that comes to mind in considering how to represent what seemed important, quirky, different, and compelling in the study is as follows: If the range of options were a swimming pool with “positivism” at the shallow end (statistics about the learners in the Seniors Program, facts and figures about classes) and constructivism or interpretivism at the deep end (more impressionist representation, and attempts to capture the ineffable), then the final thesis would be somewhere around the novice swimmers’ preferred spot, feet not quite losing touch with the bottom.

As described above, my research is intended to describe the case of the Seniors Program at a particular time and not, for example, older adult learning programs in general. Richardson and St. Pierre (2017) provide a guide to my research:

> Poststructuralism suggests two important ideas to qualitative writers. First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times. Second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone. (p. 1414)

This is freeing, but also disconcerting. As an older adult student returning to academia, I sympathize with learners in the Seniors Program. My first impression of university, decades ago, did involve mining for the bedrock of universal certainties, the “correct” view on the topic. I need to remind myself occasionally of my own advice to learners in the essay-writing class, that the personal and subjective is not only valid, but also often more intriguing.

Despite my advantageous “middle management” position, I cannot be aware of all that is happening in the Seniors Program, even with my special role and access, although acknowledging this is perhaps less postpositivism than common sense. Even sitting in on a whole course as a “student,” my view of the class, although informed about many of the issues behind the scenes, is only what I could see on those days from that seat. Richardson and St. Pierre (2017) describe the liberation of this:

> Qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak. They do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge. They can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated

> speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it. (p. 1413)

I like this perspective. It is something I try to get across to learners in the essay writing class I teach: that, in the reflective essays they write about courses, their own subjective experience is valid and "academic," assuming they keep in mind that they write as a sample of one. Many of them are skeptical and still say they feel the need to go and research enough facts to present truths and create a "proper" essay. I sympathize with them as I, too, am mediating between two worlds.

3.2. Methods

3.2.1. Data sources

The Seniors Program, is at what Swanborn (2010) calls the meso level for a case study, "an organization, such as a firm or a department" (p. 6). Data from the program includes many kinds of documentation from the program archives, including internal notes and proposals, "landscape surveys" of other institutions, course materials, and marketing materials, including program brochures. Some of these documents are decades old but, maybe typical of this kind of program, the record is not at all complete. As a member of staff in the Seniors Program, I created a significant amount of the more recent relevant documentation myself. Also fuelling my critically reflexive study of the program, and sometimes overlapping with the "official" documentation were notes on observation of classes and reflections on my own teaching and on interactions as an administrator with learners, instructors/course designers and colleagues. These notes are written and audio-recorded, and some were what Zahle (2019) calls "headnotes", points and impressions remembered but not written down.

There are also 13 formal interviews with learners in the Seniors Program, audio-recorded, and my notes and reflections on them.

3.2.2. Data collection

Data collection included one-on-one interviews conducted over four months in 2017. I recruited learners for the interviews through forms left at a "welcome table" that is set up in the first week of classes for every session, and at the information table for the

one-day events on end of life (see Section 6.1.1: The end-of-life courses). I also included a request for help with my research in some classroom announcements. The intention was to put as little pressure as possible on learners to participate: learners opted in by contacting me. The information and consent forms were created according to the guidelines of my university's office of research ethics. It is likely that the requests were heard and the forms seen by hundreds of potential research participants, and 13 volunteered, which was a manageable number.

The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of the student body. Most of the participants had taken part in the Seniors Program for several years. They knew instructors by first name, and wrote the optional essays, and some had volunteered to help at events or sit on student committees. There were also four participants who were not "insiders" in this way, having taken only one or two courses in the Seniors Program.

At the time I was recruiting, it seemed the end-of-life initiatives were to be the main focus of my research, and several of the participants had taken courses on end of life. I was a little disappointed that none of the participants objected to the Seniors Program's running courses on end of life. My research consequently lacks a first-hand account of that perspective, which we know from various comments and complaints existed in the larger student body. I was surprised to find three participants who were educators or former educators. All of the participants had broadly positive views about education and educational institutions.

I did not collect demographic information such as age and educational achievement. Noting ages, in particular, seemed contrary to the ethos of my research and of the Seniors Program, too. I hoped to elicit and discuss stories, ideas, and perspectives on the program, and adding a filter of analysis, or "judgement," to a particular idea on the basis of its being said by a 60-year-old or an 80-year-old felt pointless and discriminatory. Having said that, most participants volunteered their ages and educational backgrounds in the course of the interviews, and the group does match with the larger body of learners in the Seniors Program, who have an average age of around 70, ranging from 50-something to 90-something, more than half of whom have at least some postsecondary education, and most of whom are women.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of places: a food court, a participant's office after work, my office, and a borrowed office at the university, anywhere we could find a couple of chairs. The aim for all the interviews was to create as relaxed and natural an atmosphere as possible, for which the office setting might have been less successful. Interviews lasted about an hour and were recorded. I also took notes. The interviews followed general topics rather than being pre-determined. This matched the tenets of narrative inquiry in fostering "evolving conversations" that flow from open-ended questions (Riessman, 2004, p. 710). Many learners in the Seniors Program have demonstrated a preference for having "time to think" before responding to questions or prompts; for example, when completing course evaluations. The participants had the opportunity to receive and review interview prompts and questions a few days beforehand, if they wanted.

Holstein and Gubrium (2012) say that "interviews are active, meaning-making occasions, interview data are unavoidably collaborative" (p. 67), which was the nature of several of the interviews in my research. Occasionally, crosstalk in the transcripts makes it uncertain where an idea comes from. Sometimes I suggested a thought a participant then ran with, and a few times I told a story about my own experience prompted by the participant's comment. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) reject the notion of "prospecting," searching for the truth hidden in the respondent by digging out the facts. They see a need to acknowledge that a participant "in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from and transforms the facts and details" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012, p. 16). This sense of discovery was also evident in the interviews, with comments like, "I hadn't thought of it that way." I embrace this messiness in my research.

Discussion prompts that worked well in the interviews included those on the participant's experience of education in general and in the Seniors Program, on the participant's preferred learning approaches and contexts, on their personal experiences of end of life and end-of-life issues, and on their reasons for taking end-of-life courses. These generally started rich and unpredictable conversations. Liamputtong (2007) discusses the necessity of self-disclosure when interviewing vulnerable and marginalized people, and of a back-and-forth about experiences. The participants in my research might not see themselves as "vulnerable," certainly not as vulnerable as the people in the examples Liamputting uses, but end of life is a sensitive topic. I hoped for

stories and “to begin narrative research by asking for or encouraging stories is to limit the narrative” (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2011, pp. 24–25) so I shared stories of my own experience, aiming to create the space for relaxed, informal conversation. There was little self-conscious “storytelling” in the interviews, but many anecdotes and short narratives.

I was not consistent as an interviewer across the interviews, mostly because my confidence grew as the interviews progressed. In the first two or three, I did not give all the space I might have to discussion of the more difficult themes, like grief and bereavement. I tended to move on to a new topic rather than follow up or leave a silence. I might also have been too intent on trying to cover all of the questions in the guide. I was more relaxed about this in later interviews, allowing the conversation to follow the participant’s train of thought.

Planning the interviews, I had been doubtful that the format would be able to capture aspects of the inquiry such as spirituality, or perhaps memories of early educational experiences. Participants therefore had the opportunity to respond through poetry, short story, autobiographical writing, or with images, if they choose to. In hindsight, this was a mistake, but not a critical one. Simply, no one acted on the opportunity and, again in hindsight, it was a presumptuous demand on participants’ time. The point was driven home to me when I found out that one of the participants is a practising artist. I was in effect asking for a work of hers for free. I should also have known that many learners in the Seniors Program have busy lives. They are the “portfolio” learners described in the literature review (Section 2.2.2: Learners’ motivations) for whom continuing education is just one activity among many.

Much of the data was collected by my being in the Seniors Program every day. My experience inevitably informs the research as a whole. The following vignette is an example of my experience sitting in on a class in the program. As described above, the vignette is polished, anonymized and has been made more concise and linear. It is a good example of an event “distorted into clarity” (Law, 2004, p. 2).

Vignette 4:

It’s a lecture theatre but it feels small and comfortable, perhaps because of the worn, natural surfaces and the shabbiness—wood and cloth, and duct tape repairs on

the carpet. It's more intimate than the newly remodelled classrooms, which are smaller but have shiny vinyl floors, and are full of hard, white surfaces. Here, learners in the front row chat easily with the instructor. I can't hear what's being said, but they know her and seem to be continuing past conversations. The instructor recognizes the problem with this and takes some care to bring quieter learners and new faces into the discussion. She builds on comments from learners. The lesson is a lecture interrupted. Learners respond sympathetically to problems with a malfunctioning microphone (this room really needs some work). I've written that the atmosphere is friendly and relaxed, but then I notice that learners barely engage with each other. When there's disagreement about the style of the writer they are discussing, points are made through the instructor.

My actual notes from that day are messier—words scribbled on top of others, inserted in the margins, or connected by circles and arrows. There is more detail, and more "raw data": comments and observations that might be irrelevant or the start of a new train of thought. It is not possible to show those first drafts here, if only because they were written hurriedly without attention to anonymity. Sometimes, in my work, there is no writing, but a few mental notes. Revisiting and rewriting these notes as part of my research is itself is the exploration of the data (see Section 3.2.3: Data analysis). Validity for my research lies in the clear connection of the various drafts and versions. Clandinin and Caine (2013) say that "moving from field texts to interim texts and final research texts is a complicated and iterative process, full of twists and turns" and the process is one of their "qualitative touchstones for narrative inquiry" (p. 169). Additionally, Richardson and St. Pierre (2017) propose as a test of research writing, "How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?" (p. 1418). I hope that there is enough of myself and my background in this research to allow readers of it to evaluate these words.

I would also hesitate to reproduce a page of notes here because, not having time to search for the right word, I may have put down an unkind one, or one that might be read that way. There is a note where I write that a student "shows off," for example. I am reminded of training about nursing notes, how we were told to write only observable actions, and how that was a doomed appeal to objectivity. The writer's bias is, of course, unavoidable, in which actions to highlight, and what context to include or not. Even a note such as "starts to recite poem but falters and forgets after four lines" is speculative.

Instead of “shows off,” I could have instead written that the student added a few lines of poetry to the discussion. In short, phrasing in field notes affects the conclusion; “learners try to build discussions and learn from each other” versus “learners try to impress the teacher and be model students.” Self-awareness is part of the answer to this pitfall. Ethical care for how people in the Seniors Program are represented is important, “for to observe is not to objectify; it is to attend to persons and things, to learn from them, and to follow in precept and practice” (Ingold, 2014, p. 387). Paying proper attention means kindness.

Silence and absence are a concern in my methodology. “In qualitative research, we are usually dealing in voices . . . and, in doing so, privilege what is said rather than what is not said” (Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005). There are silences and absences that I needed to pay attention to while collecting data, such as the 2016 program-wide survey (see p. 10) and the embarrassed or awkward responses sometimes given in face-to-face conversations on the topic. It also takes into account incidents like the one in which learners in the Seniors Program did not take part in a university-wide survey of learners, feeling, perhaps, it was “not for them,” although the intention was to include the perspectives of non-credit, continuing studies learners. These silences are saying something about end of life, university, and older adults’ attitudes towards them but, of course, are ambiguous and present a puzzle. Is the silence avoidance, an unwillingness to talk in this particular forum, or that the topic is beyond words? Research that has successfully described older adults’ learning in reaction to bereavement still shows evidence of the limits of language: “Then, there was Josephine, who exclaimed, ‘I believe there are some things I’ll never forget,’ and yet ‘I can’t really put it into words . . . that’s really hard to put it into words’” (Moon, 2011, p. 30).

Nairn et al. (2005) suggest the possibility of interpreting what is not said, particularly paying attention to “who we are in relation to the people we research” and learning from “failed interviews” (p. 221). The example they use to illustrate this involves marginalized schoolchildren not talking openly with researchers in formal interviews, but the idea applies, too, to adults unwilling to talk about end of life (with me). The silence in surveys and classes in response to mentions of end of life, tells a story.

The stories of people not in the Seniors Program represent another kind of silence. We know little about learners who, for various reasons, can no longer or have

never been able to study in the program. That women significantly outnumber men, more so than general population demographics would predict, seems to be a common factor in third-age learning programs (Maginess, 2016). The relative lack of learners without previous postsecondary education also seems to be common, suggesting those who were excluded in the past continue to be on the outside (Maginess, 2016).

"Truth, uncompromisingly told, will always have its ragged edges" (Shields, 2011, p. 33). Does messiness imply rigour and faithfulness? Or could it merely signify incompetence or incompleteness? On the other hand, neatness, in the form of consistency and alignment, or tidy narratives, does not imply validity (Lawrence-Wilkes & Ashmore, 2014; Lather, 2017). It is important to the credibility of this study that I strove to include the perspective of the outliers and the awkward; for example, the learners who do not want to talk about end of life.

3.2.3. Data analysis

I enacted data analysis through writing, including transcribing, narrative and poetic analysis, and "dancing" and "flirting" with the data. The "conceptual frame" for analysis (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013) was provided by concepts from the literature review (Chapter 2), including inclusion and exclusion, the "transmission" and "transformation" paradigms of learning, and the search for certainty versus the embrace of ambiguity. Analysis was also guided by the tenets of critical reflexivity, in particular being aware of hidden assumptions and wider contexts that might shape the program. The main challenge of the narrative and writing analytical approaches I took was how to arrive at "findings" without following a predictable and routinized method. Kim (2016) says that finding meaning is basic, but meaning is not tangible or static, and narrative analysis is hermeneutic, interpretive and thus imprecise. Kim (2016) also says that coherence is, nevertheless, possible,

If qualitative data analysis is both an art and a science, my approach leaned—against my initial instincts—more towards art. Literature on narrative inquiry describes intuiting echoes, reverberations, and resonances (Clandinin, 2007b; Manankil-Rankin, 2016). "The only potential wrong way . . . would be to stop at the surface level of the story" (de Madeiros, 2013, p. 121). On the other hand, Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that "making it all come together . . . isn't based on romantic inspiration" (p. 59) and

Denzin (2009) says that we should take an iterative and exploratory approach to data, not a “heroic, romantic” one (p. 94). I leaned more towards what Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe: “Qualitative analysis . . . requires above all an intuitive sense of what is going on in the data” (p. 19). Rather than statistical analysis, I used holistic approaches to interpreting the data.

At the outset of my research, I was not planning to flirt with data. I would likely have been horrified at the idea. However, Kim (2016) explains that “flirting with ideas allows us to dwell on what is unconvincing, uncertain, and perplexing, rendering surprises and serendipities, and of course, disappointments as well” (p. 188). Flirtation prevents jumping to conclusions too soon:

> Flirtation: Exploits the idea of surprise and curiosity; Creates a space where aims or ends can be worked out; Makes time for less familiar possibilities; and is a way of playing with new ideas without letting these new ideas be influenced by our wishes. (Kim, 2016, p. 188)

Simons (2014) gives concrete examples of flirtation:

> You might focus on identifying insights through metaphors and images, lateral thinking, or puzzling over paradoxes and ambiguities in the data, after first immersing yourself in the total dataset, reading and re-reading interview scripts, observations and field notes to get a sense of the whole. Trying out different forms of making sense through poetry, vignettes, cameos, narratives, collages, and drawing are further creative ways to interpret data. (Simons, 2014, p. 464)

I used most of these to make sure I was not forcing the data to fit easy preconceptions. I did not try collage, but did add mind mapping.

Cancienne and Snowber (2003) describe literally dancing with the data, but my dancing was more metaphorical. Simons (2009) says that interpretation “is open to different senses of understanding, such as dancing with the data,” but she describes a more down-to-earth method:

> Dancing with the data using one of the processes described above—from interview transcripts to story—I have often cut interview transcripts, once categorized, into illustrative excerpts and laid these on the floor, along with observations and field notes on 3 × 5 cards. I move around these data physically, standing on them, stepping between them, backward and forwards, positioning and repositioning them until they make a certain sense. (p. 140)

I tried this and found it an effective way to identify ideas in the data that were fruitful, leading to more thought, and that confirmed or challenged existing descriptions of the Seniors Program.

Flirting and dancing were approaches suited to exploring the data holistically and were useful for keeping possibilities open in the initial stages of analysis. Eisner (1997), discussing data presentation, describes "productive ambiguity" as evocative, generating insight and inviting "attention to complexity." Having identified challenging, intriguing, complex, and ambiguous themes, my next step was both familiar and new to me: writing. I did not think of writing as a method of analysis, until I saw it articulated by St. Pierre (2018) in sharing her thesis-writing experience:

> Writing is also an empirical field of inquiry. I needed the aside to think-write, so I thought and wrote it. As I continued to write, I wrote other asides, using them as a different writing space, a breather in the long, formal text of the dissertation. In the space of the aside, I took risks and experimented. I wrote playfully and poetically, and, in that "free" space. (p. 605)

For me, writing was a form of testing and seeing what made sense in that format; imagining, for example, how it might be read by people connected to the Seniors Program, a kind of virtual member check. Pessimistically, I imagined them more often saying, "That's not how it is" than, "I never thought of it that way." St. Pierre (2018) describes abandon and freedom in writing analysis, which does not resonate with my writing experience though I did respond to this prompt: "This writing does not begin in recognition (Ah, I recognize that—that's what that is! I'll describe it.). This writing is adventure, experimentation, pushing through toward what?" (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 605).

I recognize writing less as a way of "dancing with the data," and more as the next step, crystallizing thoughts, and seeing if and how they could be expressed with clarity. This writing-analysis process is illustrated in the vignettes throughout this thesis, most of which emerged from exploratory writing. As already mentioned, I tidied up the vignettes for legibility, creating texts that Law (2004) would refer to as "distorted into clarity" (p. 2). Here is a short example of "writing analysis":

Does age lead to impatience of age, wanting to use every day properly and wisely, or to the "'detachment" of gerotranscendence, and appreciation of seeing the big picture? This quote, from a course evaluation, with its pivotal "but" follows me; it contains both ideas, "We got talking and sometimes took up time but I found the conversation always useful."

Figure 1. Example of writing analysis

At first, this paragraph seemed to be a crystallization of a thought about "time," which seemed to be a significant concept, mentioned in interviews and a common complaint (the lack of time) in course evaluations. Writing it down was a step in testing this interpretation, seeing how it looked on the page instead of as a vague notion in my mind. Rereading the two sentences, I saw that I was "reaching." I wanted to shoehorn that quote into my research somehow and attached it to the meaningless and unsupported "impatience of age" versus the "detachment" of gerotranscendence. In the end writing it out made it clear that what really troubled me was the qualifying word, "but." That a student felt it remarkable that talking in class was fruitful ("took up time *but* . . . useful") was one of the roots of the central theme of this research, that there are underlying tensions in the program.

I had hoped to make use of poetry in data presentation and analysis but it played a smaller role than I expected. Found poetry was a helpful device in revisiting and rediscovering overlooked ideas from the interviews. I composed the following found poem, focusing on concrete objects and materials, from the interview notes:

Bronze and steel, tissue paper, birch bark,
Cheap vinyl, compostable ash, a leaflet,
The distraction of having to move around and shuffle chairs,
Piles of books around me as I write.

I live in a paper world because of many things that are on paper:
Games and poems, and courses, and programs.
Who would stop them pouring their hearts out?
Resin, plaster, heroin, needle-roller bearings,
Writing was painful this time. No more papers.
I am supposed to take my essay in a brown envelope,
And mail it to you, or take it to you. . .?

I had a friend who was a mechanic, like a guardian angel,
When I first started, we were sending tapes to people,
And then we had videos and then finally discs,
And then I retired before the technology got really,
Got really fantastic.
Cement, porcupine quills, lead fishing weights,
“When you put those bearings back in the transmission,
Put them in grease first and they’ll stick to the shaft.”

Temples, alcohol, flashcards, a shovel,
Caskets, photos, medals, my shoulder,
A letter stamped by Westminster Bank,
There isn't any explanation, but some materials will do and some won’t,
And then the story comes out, and the materials tell some,
And the composition tells some.

The poem drew attention to what I left out. Poetry was part of my analysis: flirting with the data. It contributed to some of the content in the findings and discussion (Chapter 4). I might not have arrived at those insights without poetry as a tool of analysis. Leavy (2015) calls poetry a holistic research method, and I believe it is, but I found that trying to *present* findings in poetic form decontextualized what the participants had said, and seemed disrespectful. Leavy (2015) also points out that poetry is a “complex artistic craft” (p. 103), and my dabbling in it, as anything other than a tool in analysis, would perhaps be disrespectful, too, to “real” poets.

I found transcription, which might also be seen as a mechanical and “positivist” process, helpful to becoming familiar with voices and meanings, and to generating insights from the interviews. I have created what Green, Franquiz, and Dixon (1997) call “linear” transcripts, while remaining aware that they are not objective records of the interviews, because transcribing is

> a political act that reflects a discipline’s conventions as well as a researcher’s conceptualizations of a phenomenon, purposes for the research, theories guiding the data collection, and programmatic goals . . . a transcript is a text that “re-presents” an event . . . what is represented is data constructed by a researcher for a particular purpose, not just talk written down. (p. 172)

For example, a line in the transcript of the interview with Ronja reads, “I love doing research and I love having piles of books around me as I write” (see Section 4.2: The research participants). It was impossible to capture in writing all that was communicated in the moment in the interview. There are so many ways of saying “I love

x." I took this snippet and built an idea around it, but the representation of this comment in the transcript is inadequate. Read from the transcript, Ronja's comment might be a throwaway line, a prefabricated, formulaic piece of speech often repeated, or a heartfelt realization of a deep feeling about the trappings of academia. My choosing to give it weight was based on how I understood it, given all of the non-verbal cues available to me in the in-person discussion, a context challenging to reproduce in writing.

This choice is an example of the (wobbly) principles of weak postpositivism, trusting my subjective impressions while being aware of their possible pitfalls. As described above, I believe this compromise is a stance well suited to the topic and to the Seniors Program. There is compromise in everyday practice; in talking, for example, about death in the classroom in a way that is sensitive to the mystery and the emotions of the subject, but also moves discussion forward in an ordered, scholarly way; and in saying something "magical" happens in class while also wondering how to replicate that magic. This weak hold on a philosophical stance parallels the choice between certainty (lectures, experts, bedrock facts) and ambiguity (peer learning, unanswerable questions, seeking wisdom) that learners navigate, or complain about, in the Seniors Program.

In summary, "interpretation is a highly skilled cognitive and intuitive process, often involving total immersion in the data, re-reading transcripts, field notes, observations and other forms of data in the data set, such as poems, vignettes, cameos or narratives" (Simons, 2009, p. 117). Irvine (2015) suggests that insight, especially in the arts, tends to come in small steps, through constant reiteration and revision. The process is "workmanlike," not "inspired" (p. 256). He also points out that apparently sudden inspiration can depend on years of previous study. This reinforces the importance of critical reflexivity to this study. It is my history in education that shapes my interpretation of the data.

Lather (1986) suggests that a challenge for qualitative, intuitive studies like this one is to establish the trustworthiness of data which are "qualitative, fleeting, and, at times, frankly impressionistic" (p. 78). Morse (2015) says the criteria for trustworthiness of qualitative research set down by Lincoln and Guba (1985) "have been used extensively [in various forms] for ensuring rigor for four decades" (p. 1212). I believe, as described above, that I have met some, at least of these "traditional" qualitative criteria: credibility, based on prolonged engagement and complementary research method;

potential transferability, based on thick description; and reliability, based on records such as participant quotations and attention to data that did not “fit” (Lather, 2017; Morse, 2015). I would hope to, for a positive answer to a question posed by Morse (2015): “Can the description be recognized by others who have had the experience, or appreciated by those who have not had the experience?” Aspects of this trustworthiness I would not claim include replicability. Even if they asked the same questions, someone else researching the Seniors Program would create a different research project with a new conclusion.

In the end, despite my tendency to envy the (apparent) certainties of positivism and quantifiable results, I believe my research is stronger for not having pretensions to generalizable truths, instead aiming to promote a resonance so that people might recognize themes in their own work. The main test I want applied to my research is based in its impact, or catalytic validity. Sparkes and Douglas (2007), discussing a research participant’s reaction to the research (on sports psychology), quote her as saying, “That’s me—that’s ugly, now what can I do to make it better?” (p. 184). For them, and for Lather (1986), catalytic validity is “the degree to which the research process re-orients, focusses, and energizes participants” (p. 67). I hope that I have presented not an ugly but a helpful picture of the Seniors Program that might spark ideas in others.

I have aimed for resonance through thick description and “aesthetic evocative representation” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). I have attempted to meet this criterion by incorporating some creative writing in the findings and discussion. There is description of the Seniors Program throughout the thesis, but I lean heavily on the words of the research participants for thick description and evocative representation and I hope I have allowed their voices to come through. Besbris and Khan (2017) argue for “less theory and more description” in the field of sociology. Their argument makes sense in the field of education, too. They suggest that the obligation to produce a new theory with every article and research project leads to a proliferation of weak theories. They say that “instead, we should aim for a descriptively rich discipline, where our theoretical frameworks are considerably less numerous and therefore more powerful” (Besbris & Khan, 2017, p. 147). My research leans towards description.

“Resonance,” for me, is a piece of writing that I feel communicates something true about the Seniors Program, as I see it, and also that I believe others would

recognize. I have felt this, for example, in talking about the learners “just wanting to listen to the experts” at a conference, and seeing the nods of agreement from colleagues in similar programs, before we discuss why we might want to do anything about it and, if so, what. I want readers to ask of my research:

> Does this piece seem “true”—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the “real”? . . . Does this piece affect me emotionally or intellectually? Does it generate new questions? (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017, p. 1418)

3.3. Ethical considerations

I intended the research design and implementation to be intuitively graspable to the participants, which meant a conservative and straightforward approach; for example, the conventional interviews, which participants seemed comfortable with, and required little explanation as a method. “Corridor conversations” and other short but casual interaction with learners in the Seniors Program inform my understanding, both as a researcher and as staff in the program, but were not recorded as consent was difficult to obtain in the moment. However, I have generated field notes and reflections on these conversations with careful attention to anonymity.

One risk was that learners might feel obliged to “help me out” in my research. Seniors Program learners do not have the same relationship with staff and instructors as typical undergraduates might, so there was no implication that participation in research might lead to improved grades or other academic favours. However, most participants were aware of my role in the program, and might have seen the research interviews as an opportunity to advocate, to influence me to shape program in certain ways. This (trying to influence the program) was less an ethical concern than a methodological one. I did not, however, detect anything other than an open account of what kinds of course, instructor and topic the participants prefer.

The advice from the ethics review board that gave me the most pause for thought was to not ask too much of the participants’ time. As outlined above, I had plans to “give participants the opportunity” to respond through alternative, creative media such as poetry and painting, bit this would have been an imposition. My excuse is that I must have been carried away by my own interest in the topic. As described in findings and

discussion (Chapter 4), the preciousness of time emerged as an important theme in this research.

Davis et al. (2017) address member checks, touching on the ontology of narrative as well as the difficulty of ensuring reliability. They point out that a story is not the reality and that member checking does not bring reality into sharper focus. It only adds “what someone said about what they said about the experience” (p. 8). Sharing the progress of the research has thus been informal, and a matter of ethics more than of methodology—courtesy, not a member check. My informal connection with most of the research participants has been ongoing, as we meet in the day-to-day life of the Seniors Program, and we sometimes have time to chat about the research is going.

End of life can, of course, be an upsetting topic, to say the least. If the research participants had been in for-credit university courses, they would be able to use all of the supports available from university student services. However, as non-credit, continuing studies learners, they would have needed to seek counselling about end-of-life issues, elsewhere. The study explicitly did not recruit people experiencing complex grief (e.g., through a recent bereavement). Recruitment materials explained that the study was not a form of counselling or therapy.

3.4. Conclusion

In summary, my research is a case study based on critical reflexivity and narrative inquiry. Each of these approaches offered challenges and insights to me as a researcher. The case study approach itself was new to me, and I had to learn to appreciate the value of a deep inquiry into one instance. Like many of the learners in the Seniors Program, I had held “hard facts” in high regard, having a sneaking envy of quantitative studies that can confidently and straightforwardly state, for example, that 16.9% of learners in a study were “seeking fun” in their learning (Xiong & Zuo, 2019). Over the course of this research, I developed a curiosity about and distrust of that kind of information, and an appreciation for ambiguity, complexity, and what might not be knowable or describable (what does “seeking fun” really mean, what did the learners really say, and how did they say it?).

Critical reflexivity proved to be impactful on my work as an analytic stance and sensibility. My assumptions about education, and my role in the Seniors Program, were challenged throughout this study; for example, my initial dismissiveness about the lecture format. I came to take a deeper look at myself as and, and also as a manager, administrator and stakeholder. Critical reflexivity also meant considering the various forces and narratives shaping the program. Narrative inquiry was well suited to tackling ambiguity and unanswerable questions head on. I enjoyed the challenge of communicating as clearly and fully as possible my experience of program, and also that reported by learners. I was at once dependent on and aware of the limitations of the written word. Narrative analysis, particularly writing as a method of analysis, was particularly appropriate to this "messy" subject, but a leap of faith for me, in its lack of established processes.

If I were to do this research again, I might try to engage more deeply with fewer participants, following logic of the case study in seeking depth. Balance is important, however, and the approach I took generated rich data, described and discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.5. Research questions

My research questions explore the complexities of the Seniors Program as a case study. Zahle (2019) says:

> In case studies that rely on participant observation and qualitative interviews, the aim is rarely to determine whether some hypothesis is correct or not. Instead, the research question is typically an open-ended one, i.e. one that has multiple alternative answers that are not pre-fixed. (p. 35).

My research questions lend themselves to the case study approach described by Swanborn as, "an appropriate way to answer broad research questions" (Swanborn, 2010, p. 3). The overall question could be phrased as "What happens in the Seniors Program, and how?" and Yin (2017) advises case study research when "your main research questions are 'how' or 'why' questions" (p. 3).

1. What pedagogies are enacted in the Seniors Program and how do these relate to adult learning theory and practice?

2. What expectations and resources do learners bring to the program, and what do they value in the program? In other words, how do they shape it and what is their experience of it?

3. What can be learned from these pedagogies and experiences to inform university programs for older adults?

The next three chapters comprise my response to these questions, the findings and discussion sections of my research.

Chapter 4. Findings and discussion: Learners

4.1. Introduction

The data for Chapters 4 and 5 are drawn from interviews, observations, and narrative inquiry. The discussion is based on taking a critically reflexive approach to my experience in the Seniors Program, and to research participants' accounts of their experience of being learners in the program.

Chapter 4 first introduces the research participants. Like programs described in the literature, the Seniors Program has had a haphazard evolution. However, it has also never had a "blank sheet" to plan on, and Chapter 4 also considers how institutional inertia, and the backgrounds, desires, and habits of learners and instructors, have combined to shape the program in particular ways. Lack of an explicit mandate does not mean that the Seniors Program has ended up with no purpose, but with an accidental multiplicity of purposes. Older paradigms of education, such as the lecture format and the assumption of the expert-novice approach, persist in the Seniors Program. Why are these approaches so resilient? Do they have benefits, a hidden positive value? What stamp do the learners themselves put on the program, in their preferences and expectations?

The theories of andragogy and geragogy do not seem to be of practical use in the Seniors Program. Older adult learners, nevertheless, are different from younger in a few ways. They simply have had more life experience to reflect on, and they have the potential for enhanced perspective, wisdom and insight. This much is described in the relevant literature, but this study also identified humility as a possible, distinctive characteristic of older adults. My study also suggests that time has a different significance for older adult learners in general, in more than one way. Older adult learners are different, too, in *wanting* "to go back to school." What lies behind this impulse?

4.2. The research participants

I interviewed 13 learners as part of my research and, although not randomly selected, they were as a group reasonably representative of the Seniors Program

student body. Three of the interviewees had multiple certificates from the Seniors Program, indicating active involvement over many years, and two were studying in other higher-education programs. Generally, about half of the Seniors Program student body has at least some postsecondary education. Two were men, again in line with the general gender distribution in the Seniors Program.

Here is a brief description of what each participant discussed (to preserve confidentiality, these are pseudonyms):

Barbara talked about her previous education. Although she has a degree, she was brought up to think women got married rather than having careers. She was concerned about how fast the Seniors Program courses go by. They are too short and hurried for her. She sees loneliness as a problem, but has made friends in the program.

Ronja is pursuing a degree in a different program in the same university. She spoke about loving to study and being a student. She likes no-nonsense lectures with solid information and also likes to research on her own, “surrounded by books.”

Gerald chooses the courses he takes in the Seniors Program almost at random and finds something to appreciate in them all. He sees the program as an important part of spending time well and maintaining health in retirement.

Deborah describes herself as “loud,” but she also said that in every class there is a student “who won’t shut up,” and she does not want to be that person. She wants courses that make her think and change her mind.

Patricia spoke in metaphor about not coming to class like a little robin with her mouth open to be fed worms but with a twig under her arm ready to help build something. She is concerned not so much about loneliness but about how society is set up on the assumption that everyone is part of a couple or an extended family, which is not so.

Hazel is also pursuing a degree in a different program in the university and said that once she is done, she will write no more essays at all. Her interest in the Seniors Program was in the end-of-life courses exclusively.

Diane was previously an educator, working with remote communities in northern BC. She took time away from education on retirement but missed it. She spoke about the joy

of learning and also the practical problems of trying to run classes on end of life in the Seniors Program.

Mo was also previously an educator, working in high schools. Not a “regular” student in the Seniors Program, her connection with it was through taking only one end-of-life course. She spoke about empowering students, and people in general, so communities can take back responsibilities from the “experts.”

Larry has experienced a range of educational settings, from rebuilding a car on his own in his youth to, more recently, taking part in a silent Buddhist retreat. He spoke about courses “expanding his heart” and also about courses that get to the heart of issues.

Mila also spoke about instructors bringing heart into the classroom. She is interested in issues of social justice outside the classroom, too, and what the university can do to help people effectively help others.

Lynette spoke about the Seniors Program filling gaps in her education. She also appreciates the program as a way to stay active and mentally healthy. She said she was not ready to talk about death and was not interested in end-of-life courses, but she told some deeply felt stories about her parents.

Jennifer loves going to school and having her universe expanded. She likes all kinds of teaching and learning approaches, when they are competently done, and she said she does not mind at all leaving some classes more confused than when she went in.

Sharon, another former educator, said the courses in the Seniors Program are a gift to her. She made the point that, fundamentally, courses in end of life are not (or should not be) about death but about how to live well.

4.3. Persistence of old paradigms

The literature review (Chapter 2) describes programs for older adults on the periphery of universities, without a clear mandate, but also enjoying some freedom from institutional restraints. The Seniors Program fits this pattern in that there are no curriculum requirements, and instructors can teach whatever field and topic they are

passionate about. Moreover, the learners are not seeking academic credits, skills with immediate practical use, or career advancement. There is no compulsory testing or marking. Under these desirable conditions, the Seniors Program should be free to apply innovative approaches to teaching and learning. However, also following a pattern described in the literature on this kind of program, the expert-novice model and lectures remain the default.

4.3.1. Lectures and inclusion

There are several reasons for the persistence of lectures. From an administrative point of view, the traditional lecture simply helps meet the overwhelming demand for seats, it makes the program financially viable, and it works with the design of the classroom spaces available. From the point of view of many learners, at least those who have had positive experiences of education, the traditional classroom is perhaps more welcoming by being predictable and familiar. Sharon said, “Some [students] just want to be there and be unknown.” The lecture, presenting a well-ordered room with an expert in charge, has simpler unwritten rules for behaviour, at least on the surface. It is possible, for example, to join in successfully just by sitting quietly.

The lecture format may also mitigate potential uncertainty about “how to be a student” in the Seniors Program. Patricia said, “It’s like everybody knows about education—we’ve all got very strong opinions but have no idea what’s happened in the 70 years since we left public education.” The diversity of life experience in a student body ranging in age from 55 to 90 is one of the elements of the Seniors Program that attracts instructors, but it can also mean even less homogeneity and consensus on etiquette than in a typical university cohort of recent school leavers. Older learners have decades of differing life experience, and maybe educational fashions, too.

How do learners learn the conventions? Sharon told a story about a course on authors and aging:

> Sharon: [The instructor] wanted people to discuss the difference between Tolstoy’s death and Ivan Ilyich, his death . . . and she wanted us to really talk about that . . . to each other, as well, about our own feelings. And this one man, he just broke my heart, he was so sweet. He was all in a suit and tie, you know—starched collar, and you know none of the rest of us show up like that [laughter] not that there’s a right or wrong [about dress] . . . And he said, “You speak so romantically

> about all this, you're so attached to everything you're saying. And he said "How do I get to be like that?" And he said that "I feel like I'm in kindergarten. Because even the people that respond to your questions, you are all speaking from the heart, and I can't do that. How do I learn that? I've got nobody in my life that talks like that." And of course, everybody in the class just wanted to go and hug him.

The situation described depends in part on learners and instructor having built connection over (possibly) years of teaching and learning in the Seniors Program. It illustrates a problem with inclusion and connection: it inevitably implies some exclusion. The cohesion of the existing group can be disconcerting for a newcomer. I wonder how many learners there have been who did not speak up about feeling like outsiders, and simply decided the Seniors Program was not for them. It is notable from Sharon's story that the internalized barrier described by Hansen et al. (2019) might be real: you *can* get the attire "wrong" for university. Nevertheless, for all its limitation and faults, the traditional lecture could be the easiest format for a newcomer to the program to navigate, especially if it holds warm memories. Just sitting quietly and listening is the basic requirement.

I was witness to another heartfelt comment during a class. In this case, a student asked a question about landlords in a course on the early history of Newfoundland. The question included a short but emotional account of their imminent eviction from their apartment, a landlord story loosely connected to the historical landlords mentioned in the lecture. Unlike the comment from the "suit-and-tie" student above, this comment was met with obvious irritation and grumbling from other learners, to the point that the instructor had to intervene, to defend the legitimacy of the question. Both learners' contributions were heartfelt, authentic and equally tangential, but the unwritten rules can be harsh, as well as potentially welcoming. Quinn (2013), in her study of learning communities of adults in higher education, points out that the term "community" can falsely be given neutral value. "Community" can also mean regulation, and enforcement of norms.

Difficult to show in transcriptions and quotes, but clear to me in the course of the conversations, was the confidence of most research participants and their individual ownership of how and why they learn.

> Ronja: I'm most comfortable attending lectures. I'm not good at doing online . . . the lectures are good, and then I like doing the essays

> because I learn better in class when I know I'm going to do the essay at the end, because I pay more attention, and then I can't write an essay without doing research—my essays are always research based. Research, and [Instructor] loves my essays [laughter] . . . I need to go to class. Sitting at home in front of a computer I won't get anything done . . . I need to go to class, and I need to have the instructor there so I can ask questions right away.

This describes an ease with the established etiquette. Ronja is able to turn the lecture into a conversation, spot the gaps and pauses for questions. She has learned her way around the classroom, and has achieved Lave and Wenger's (1991) "comprehensive understanding" of how to be a student in the Seniors Program. Even in the simplicity of the lecture format, "old hands" can seem more comfortable and adept than newcomers. Nevertheless, I believe the lecture works, in the Seniors Program, as an introduction that can be familiar and intuitively navigated.

Participants in the research were comfortable using first names of instructors and with name-dropping philosophers and writers. This might be off-putting to anyone who does not know those names, but is it more exclusionary to talk about Socrates' views on learning than about Gretzky's views on taking the shot? As Lave and Wenger (1991) describe, activities of almost any kind will have more practised insiders and others on the periphery. Joining any group, people will find countless unwritten rules to learn. The difference seems that everyone has some experience of learning in childhood, good or bad. As Patricia said, "Everybody knows about education." School is not a topic that everyone can easily dismiss. To tell someone that you love the classroom evokes a reaction that love of a particular hobby or sport, for example, does not.

On the other hand, it is clear in the Seniors Program that lectures can be an inclusive group experience, in the same way that theatre is. Our largest lectures have around 100 learners, still small enough for a collective experience. Sitting in on such lectures, I feel there are more laughter, groans, and general reactions than I remember in lectures from my student career. Maybe my memory is at fault, however. Like many of the current Seniors Program learners, it has been a few decades since my undergraduate days.

Describing one particular lecture, Diane was told one of the few stories that came up about light-hearted "fun," rather than "joy," in the classroom.

> Diane: He was a fabulous physics teacher, and he had all of us, old people, sitting there with these glasses, these different glasses on, watching lights, and we were like little kids laughing our heads off, and when he turned down the lights everybody was just "whisper, whisper, whisper," and I thought, "Oh, you need a picture of this for advertising to say how much fun learning can be."

It is significant that Diane describes this as a moment that would attract people to the Seniors Program. Research participants wanted to share the joy of the program, which is not readily apparent or easily communicated. Working inside the program, it is easy to forget that formal education for its own sake, for enjoyment, is an odd idea. Education is generally seen as task oriented, with students focused on reaching the goal, not appreciating the process.

The lecture thus works for practical reasons, and also as an effective, though fallible, way to welcome newcomers and to make learners feel comfortable. It is not simply a default and straightforward model of teaching and learning. The lecture is closely connected to the expert-novice paradigm of learning and, despite involving a room full of people, to individual learning. The emphasis in the Seniors Program on the role of individuals in the role of instructors and authoritative experts is discussed next.

4.3.2. Experts and individualism

> *Patricia: I don't come to listen to unedited rambling. I come to listen to the expert at the front of the room.*

Matching with the theme described in the literature review (Chapter 2), of how older adult programs without a clear mandate or model can be shaped haphazardly by individual personalities, the role of "superstar instructors" in the Seniors Program is significant. It has numerous benefits, but also reinforces the resistance to peer learning, and the persistence of traditional paradigms of education.

Learners and instructors in the Seniors Program are often peers. Barbara, for example, mentioned having made friends with an instructor, and most of the research participants were comfortable using instructors' first names. We know that many (maybe most) learners choose courses in the Seniors Program by instructor rather than by topic or any other consideration, and a handful of instructors have large followings, which means that their courses consistently have waiting lists. The research participants discussed why some instructors are so popular, and some are not, in the Seniors

Program. Deborah was critical of instructors who only "talk well," entertainers who do not "make you think."

> Deborah: [I prefer] any course that makes you think . . . It's really good to have [instructors] who have had experiences in the workforce that are of interest to us . . . special people like [Instructor] . . . anyone who has an interesting story to tell.

In addition to authoritative knowledge, learners also seem to recognize care and thoughtfulness, instructors who bring "heart" and connection to their lectures:

> Mila: [Instructor] got into my heart and being, much more so. Because she was good at lecturing, and kind of got us going in our own heads—thinking, and telling stories. And some of the stories I heard, I still think about them, because people really opened up.

Mila's mention of effective and compelling storytelling as a strength of "good instructors" was a surprise, because it is not something that shows up in general student feedback. This points to how different some of the learners in this particular group of research participants were: less concerned with instructors as distributors of facts and figures and more interested in them as familiar individuals with important stories to tell.

Jennifer listed some points that mark poor instructors from the learners' point of view, and these *did* match with what we generally see in student feedback:

> Jennifer: There's nothing more frustrating than having a course, and you read the course outline, then you get in the class and it's a totally different class. Or there's nothing more frustrating than having an instructor that can't control the class, or hasn't prepared, or . . . is so behind all the time you never catch up, and instead of saying, "That's it for today," says, "Oh, I'm sorry, we never did this, this, this, and this" —and you never would have known if they had just shut up! [laughter] But that's human, and they're human, I guess.

This mirrors feedback we get from learners, which tends to be about the basics of classroom organization, which are maybe more noticeable or more easily described than deeper issues of pedagogical approach. Student feedback is on forms filled in on the last day of class. It is usually written in a hurry and it takes an interview to dig deeper into what makes a good instructor or to be able to put into perspective an instructor's failings: "We're all human."

Vignette 5:

I begin to worry that things might not go so well when I meet the new instructor looking lost in the corridor, unable to find the classroom for the first day of class. I go with them, to show the way, and to help set up their laptop with the AV in the room.

It still trips me up when prospective instructors ask about our process for considering new course proposals. "Process"? You just drop by and have a chat. The Seniors Program is awkward, with some of the aspects of a "cheap and cheerful" volunteer-run society—where instructors are rewarded with a mug or a pot plant—and with some aspects of the larger university—where instructors are contracted and paid through the institutional bureaucracy.

The instructor's anxiety seems to be getting worse. We get to the room late, and help with AV turns out to mean trying to fix their PowerPoint slides as class begins. I'm still there as they start the class with a question, "So, what do you know about…?" Ordinarily, it might have worked, but in the somewhat fraught atmosphere we've created, it falls flat. Someone asks, "Who are you? Could you tell us a bit about yourself?" "And we don't know about it," another adds less kindly, "You should be telling us." Maybe it's not helping that I'm there, and I slip out of the room as quickly as possible.

Walking back, I am thinking about what it takes to present effectively as "the instructor" to a class of 70-year-old learners. Back in the office, I pull out the instructor's impressive resumé again—but all of those presentations were to other academics. How did we miss that? Maybe we need a process.

The "superstar" instructors seem to have one or two traits in common. Partly, it seems to be simply knowing their field thoroughly. Learners in the program are astute enough to realize when an instructor's lesson comes from a hinterland of personal experience and knowledge. There is high praise for instructors who can deliver material "without notes" or who can answer any (relevant) question in full, without hesitation. The program has successful and popular instructors without particularly impressive academic credentials but with extraordinary life experience and the ability to describe it compellingly. In their own various ways, they take charge of the classroom and manage it efficiently. The instructors we can recognize as the Seniors Program's superstars teach a range of fields, and there does not seem to be any particular age or gender bias

in how learners choose them. Also, signing up for course by these instructors, students are sure of what they are going to experience. The popular instructors represent authority, it seems, and students feel safe in their hands. These are positive aspects of the lecture format, too.

The teaching and learning approach of the Seniors Program is shaped largely individual instructors. Bruner (1993) coined the phrase “folk pedagogy” to describe a pedagogy based on the prevailing culture of the time, particularly models of the mind. The phrase might also apply to the approaches that instructors in the Seniors Program use, based on their own educational experience and whatever they have found tends to work with this group of learners. Thus, pedagogical approaches in the program, and others like it, might borrow from any and all of behaviourism, humanism, pragmatism, the psychoanalytic tradition, learning communities, constructivism, transformative learning, and integrative learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, pp. 26–35).

The epistemological approach of each course also depends on the instructor, and there are contrasts. My class observation notes from one instructor, talking about literature, describe an approach that sees the context and interpretation as “static”—fixed, universal knowledge as described by Freire in the literature review (Chapter 2). The delivery is warm and engaging, but the lecturer is also clearly explaining the “best” way to read the poem. In another class, on history, the instructor’s main theme is “But how do we know that?” He describes being surprised and confused by primary sources. He is also challenging a traditional, somewhat jingoistic view of an episode in Canadian history, proposing that the story is likely more complex. Both instructors present as confident, but one is confident in his lack of confidence about what “really happened.” Learners seem to be accepting of both, and are equally engaged.

The Seniors Program tries to support instructors who are more pedagogically progressive, like the instructor in the second example above. I feel that he opened up more student questions, and questions that were more wide-ranging. Talking from the lectern about what a poem means and what the writer meant to say, on the other hand, surely tends to close down discussion, although many learners tell us in their course evaluations, and by the courses they opt for, that they prefer that absolute approach. This contradicts Diane’s point about wanting to be made to think, and suggests that the

research participants take a different approach from the student body as a whole, perhaps simply having given teaching and learning some more thought

This is not a criticism at all of the instructors' various approaches. Even where educators are inspired by and are trying to follow one educational theory, there is "fragmentation, ill-defined teaching methods, and lack of in-depth theoretical analysis" (Kokkos, 2014, p. 181). Although not a theoretically pure approach, the Seniors Program's folk pedagogy might work best by being flexible. As with learners who have learned how to negotiate the space created by the Seniors Program community, superstar instructors are also those who can read the room and know their audience.

The reliance of the Seniors Program on sessional instructors who teach more for the love of it than as part of a formal contract has advantages and disadvantages. Courses are successful when instructors teach what interests them most, and the freedom to do this is what attracts many instructors to the program. However, this "free to teach your passion" approach also means that, when we seek to diversify course topics away from the "Western canon" we need to seek diversity in instructors, rather than asking existing instructors to extend their repertoire. One particular problem we face is that efforts to Indigenize or decolonialize the Seniors Program depend on individual instructors (likely a university-wide problem, as Usher [2018] points out). The program's administratively straightforward roots, bringing in university colleagues to teach lessons they already had in a desk drawer, set a pattern that is difficult to change.

This confirms a pattern mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2), in which programs for older adult learners tend to bend towards the traditional canon and liberal arts curriculum (see also Section 4.3.3, Exclusivity and exclusion). In the case of the Seniors Program, this is not only because of the interests of the prevailing demographic in the student body, but also because of the interests and previous academic careers of the instructors. However, the fact that learners will choose courses by instructor rather than by topic also promotes enrolment in some more challenging and unusual topics. Learners who might say, "I'd take a course on the history of *string* if [Instructor] taught it" are also willing to take a course on recent instances of non-violent protest, for example, following a particular instructor. Similarly, with regard to approach rather than content, seeking to offer alternatives to the expert-novice model, we depend on recruiting individual instructors committed to pursuing different models of learning. This is the

nature of a peripheral program using contract instructors, with staff whose main tasks are putting together schedules of courses and essentially getting the right people into the right room at the right time. Whatever educational capital we need, we have to borrow.

The focus on the individual permeates the Seniors Program, more than in just the "stardom" of some instructors. When learners talk about the joy of learning, they are often referring to lectures by skilled and caring instructors. This seems to be based on the paradigm of "Euro-American academia": "We seek out individuals, we celebrate their achievements, we praise them for their singular efforts" (Todd, 2017, para. 2). Does elevating the individual instructor's role marginalize the potential contribution of the whole class? Does connection with the instructor lead to or inhibit connection with classmates? Is the obvious connection between some instructors and learners who have "followed" them over the years off-putting to newcomers, or does it hold a promise of similar connection for newcomers to the program?

Gerald said that he much prefers lectures along with working alone on an end-of-course essay (see Section 1.1.1: The Seniors Program, for a description of these essays). He said that he often leaves the room when the questions start, not wanting or needing to participate: "When you write an essay, you get to say it all." This implies that discussion in class is in some way frustrating or incomplete, and it suggests an appreciation for time to think and edit. Solitary learning, even in a crowded classroom, was most likely the rule in many learners' childhood experience. It may be that the learners can accept, intellectually, the educational case for "student talk" but, in their hearts, they retain an uneasy feeling that it is connected to disrespect, fooling around in class, or cheating. Their memories of school, combined with present-day pressure to be seen as independent and strong, push learners towards being quiet and stoic in the formal lecture. Participating in courses as a solitary student among other solitary learners seems to be a personal preference for many in the program. In any case, learners almost always tackle essays alone, often reluctant even to talk the essay over with the instructor beforehand (maybe because they do not want to "bother" the expert?).

Tornstam's (1997; 2005) theory of gerotranscendence also involves a constructive perspective on individualism, suggesting that "positive solitude" and reflection are necessary to achieving gerotranscendence. In Tornstam's (1997) work, moreover, abandoning superfluous social contacts is described as a natural, even

desirable, part of aging. It is possible that wanting to learn as an individual, not as part of a community, is a valid desire, and it might even be an effective choice, to some extent, for learning about certain topics which demand introspection and reflection.

However, one major problem is that the expert-novice, or transmission, model of teaching and learning suggests a passive role for the learners. The familiar comfort of the expert-led class is disempowering. Lynette said, "I had a problem in that class [on Becker's *The Denial of Death*], because he [the instructor] was encouraging questions, but it took up too much time in a two-hour time. I wanted more Becker and less of the students in the class." Having the expert at the front of the room might imply that there is no expertise in the rest of the room. Lynette's perspective seems to be common. Other research participants disagreed, however:

> Diane: The richest classes usually are the ones where the students participate, too, because people have such fascinating and varied backgrounds, and they have so much to offer. I like when there is time to ask questions and listen to what people have to say . . . There was a guy who was teaching on British spies, and people in the class knew 50 times more than he did.

Possibly, the success of student contributions, or not, depends on the topic, how discussion is managed, how relevant the comments are, and a host of other unpredictable variables in the classroom on any given day. Nevertheless, the expectation that learners will quietly listen to an expert seems to be the default for the Seniors Program, and it seems to be an important part of the prestigious aura of "academia" that learners value. The next section considers the importance of the prestige of academia to the Seniors Program.

4.3.3. Exclusivity and exclusion

> *Mo: I wasn't expecting the theoretical underpinnings to have as big a place, but, you know [surprised voice] "Oh, yeah, it's a <u>university</u> course!" [laughter]*

Many learners in the Seniors Program, and in similar programs, do not have postsecondary experience and are "making up for lack of opportunities in the past" (Bunyan & Jordan, 2005, p.270). They seem to be seeking old-fashioned, prestigious, teacher-centred authority, to test themselves against it or at least get a taste of what they missed. Counterintuitively, is it elitist to deny this "Western canon"–based learning

to others, having benefited from it for all its flaws, as I have done and most of the older instructors have, too? An objection to the idea of reclaiming power from the experts is, paradoxically, that it is a stance based on privilege, on already having the capital to be able to do so confidently.

The literature suggests that programs for older adults tend to have an inherent bourgeois bias, and this is evident in the general topics the Seniors Program has been offering. As described in the introduction, the program has elitist roots and, although the phrase “liberal arts” became part of the program’s name only recently, it has always been based on a traditional, humanist curriculum, which centres on

> the great documents of human seeing, hearing, imagining and understanding, that is to say, in the Old Testament, in the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, in the New Testament, in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Frances Bacon, Shakespeare, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, the great novelists of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche, Freud, Whitehead . . . our intellectual heritage. (Klein, 1986, p. 77)

Every term now, there are more imaginative and diverse course topics appearing (and, to be fair, there has always been a sprinkling). However, we still struggle, for example, with choosing images to illustrate our brochure and webpages. Unless we pay attention, we can end up with too many “old, dead white guys” in wigs. Topics and people mentioned by research participants included Lucretius, Handel, and a handful of books that were groundbreaking in the 1970s, but also science, contemporary sociology, reconciliation and Indigenous issues, which show that the Seniors Program is also known for newer and more progressive subjects. But the canon, however defined, is valued. It has the same appeal, maybe, as Ronja’s image of studying “surrounded by books,” (see p. 111) signifying time-tested academic authority and prestige, particularly for anyone not privy to educational debate over the last few decades.

Whatever this atmosphere of prestige and elitism is, some learners can be protective of it, wary of how it might be diluted. The course on death and dying Jennifer describes in the quote below involved older adult learners joining an undergraduate class on the topic, specifically because of the older adults’ experience, their being much more likely to have experienced death of their parents or others. Their presence in the room successfully changed the quality of the discussions, but the atmosphere was very different to a typical Seniors Program class:

> Jennifer: I liked reading the articles in the death and dying course, and I'd like to try discussing them without "the kids" [laughter] ["kids" = undergrads in a blended class]. Of course, I realize why we were all in that class together, but I sometimes wanted to ask the kids to be quiet . . . would like to discuss articles and books with the "adults."

Jennifer's comment was made in humour, with a twinkle in her eye, but it could belong to a different conversation, about communities built on the backs of the excluded (Young, 1990, as cited in Quinn, 2013, p. 46). "Learning with/meeting like-minded individuals" is an idea that turns up regularly as a benefit of the program in evaluations, and it concerns me that "like-minded" can sound positive but has a clannish, exclusive note, too. Possibly every activity, and not just those for older adults—from art to Zumba–has the potential to develop an "insiders" versus "outsiders" stance. The unease I feel about this exclusive, defensive tendency in the Seniors Program may stem from the historical exclusivity of higher education. One of the challenges of my role is how to open up the program, introducing diversity of all kinds in all areas and stakeholders, without losing whatever it is that makes the Seniors Program distinctive and popular (with the existing student body at least). The Seniors Program needs to play to its strengths, and one of those is an air of academicism, a feeling of exclusivity, although this is in tension with our obligation to create a space for ideas, cultures, and topics that are new or outside the mainstream.

Learners find lectures familiar and embrace the expert-novice model of learning. The experts, in turn, play one of the largest roles in shaping the nature the program. For many learners, possibly, the instructors *are* the Seniors Program, and the charisma or prestige of an instructor is central to how learners value a course. Although on the periphery, the program also borrows the prestige and character of the larger university, for better or worse. The next section of this chapter looks more closely at the learners themselves.

4.4. Older learners *are* different

Older learners *are* different, but not in the way described in the conventional theories of andragogy. Research participants described feeling different from other adults in that, for various reasons, they *want* to go to school. They could be different, in general, from other learners, too, in how they view time, and in the particular way they express humility about their knowledge and learning.

4.4.1. Wanting to go to school

Lynette: My friends ask, "Why'd you want to take a course on philosophy?" I say I enjoy it. I don't always understand it, but I enjoy it.

Classes in the Seniors Program are driven not by learning objectives but by the learning process and the inherent joy in it. However, there seems to be an assumption in some literature on (and practice of) adult education, such as Knowles et al. (2005), that adult education is a medicine that needs to be sugar-coated, that adults will resent and resist finding themselves in a classroom again. In the wider Continuing Studies department, to which the Seniors Program belongs, many learners simply want to reach their objective, usually a work-related credential, as quickly and painlessly as possible. Jennifer, however, speaks for many of her peers in the program when she says, "Every September I want to go to school. The blood rises . . . I loved school." Learners in the Seniors Program are different in that, as a group, they enjoy education, and pursue it for its own sake.

The learners might see themselves as "excluded" or "marginalized," in a sense, and in terms of one aspect: their interests and conversations. Of course, many have above-average social and economic capital and are not socially marginalized, but participants in the research reinforced what other learners often say about the Seniors Program, that it is somewhere they can have "odd conversations," not entertained elsewhere. It seems that the program can be a kind of third space where there is encouragement to talk about, for example, philosophy, death (particularly death, in the research interviews; see Chapter 6 on end of life), mathematics, or poetry in ways not possible elsewhere. Given the goodwill of participants, it seems that the space for odd conversations, serious conversations on sensitive topics, can be created quite quickly. When I sat in on a class considering Bill C-14 (a bill on medical assistance in dying), I noted how, only half an hour into a conversation among strangers, the afterlife and "holy ground" were being discussed. I remember, too, a casual "corridor conversation" with a student about technical engineering aspects of an environmental controversy, after which he thanked me for the odd conversation, a conversation "the guys" would laugh at him for opening.

Participants shared intimate ideas in the research interviews, too. For example, Ronja talked about feeling the presence of her deceased mother at her graduation

ceremony for her undergraduate degree. The interviews were even more time-limited than typical Seniors Program classes are, but participants were willing to talk about deep and personal topics. Discussing wisdom and beliefs about end of life with Barbara, I apologized for asking impossible questions.

> Barbara: No-o-o. I don't think it's too difficult. I think they talk about many things in the classes. Um, we're supposed to be mature people, and we should be able to talk about anything.

Similarly, to the issue of how to navigate the unwritten rules of behaviour in the lecture, the question arises of the unwritten rules on *how* odd the conversations can be. In a class I observed, one student wanted to talk about the punctuation of a poem, but his question was too odd. It did not fit the class's discourse, up until then, on "big ideas" and historical context. It struck me that the reaction around the room, of puzzlement and vicarious embarrassment, as the instructor tried to move on while sparing the student's feelings, was maybe the same as the reaction would be to someone wanting to talk about poetry in general conversation outside that classroom.

Participants articulated why having such conversations is important:

> Gerald: People were very open in their discussions [in a class]. It was really powerful, and human . . . If you're of an academic turn of mind, it's always nice to hear what somebody else has said because it makes you feel a little less odd [laughter].

The literature on andragogy tends not to address this idea of seeking out different kinds of interaction, being focused more on learning applied to career development. The implied purpose of geragogy in much of the literature is also pragmatic, or functionalist—maintaining personal capacity. Wanting to go to school in your 70s in order to enjoy the process of learning itself might be seen as odd. But maybe everyone has an "odd" interest of some kind, from astronomy to yarn bombing. As Jamieson (2016) says, education for many older adults can be one element in a portfolio of interests. Nevertheless, one of the aspects in the Seniors Program that instructors most often remark on, with surprise, is, "Everyone really wants to be in class."

As well as being different in embracing this odd, academic third space for the joy of it, older adult learners might also have a special kind of humility, discussed next.

4.4.2. Humility and perspective

Humility is not described in the relevant literature as a general trait of older adult learners. In fact, educational programs for older adults are seen as a way to empower oneself and gain confidence. However, research participants did not seem to be seeking empowerment. The humility described here is perhaps expressed from a comfortable or relatively privileged position in society, but it was striking in the research nevertheless.

in contradiction to descriptions in the literature of fulsome sharing of wisdom and life experience, learners in the Seniors Program tend to be silent in class. Possibly hesitancy in class is natural, and younger students in for-credit classes speak up mostly because there is a mark attached to participation. But the reserve of learners in the Seniors Program is not necessarily rooted in shyness or lack of self-confidence. Deborah was confident and assured when she said, “In a class of 25, do I really have anything to add?” She was simply making a reasonable point. This could be a new type of silence, to add to Mazzei’s (2007) list of types of silence, a silence based on the patience, contentment, wider perspective and lack of competitiveness of old age. This is not the state of gerotranscendence, discussed in Chapter 2, but it might be something akin to it, particularly in that reaching old age is a prerequisite for it. This kind of humility is not described in the literature.

In general, in the Seniors Program, learners show a hesitancy to speak up without first being given a considerable amount of information. They want context, and examples of thinking on and critiques of a topic. For example, in a small class specifically set up to facilitate discussion on poetry, the instructor reported that the first five classes had, in fact, been lectures because the learners clearly, confidently said they did not know enough to comment. In a joint project with a for-credit program from the same university, the Seniors Program learners involved reported that, despite readings and even site visits, they felt they did not have the depth of knowledge necessary to add something worthwhile to conversations, or even to ask appropriate questions. As with Deborah’s question about having anything to add, this does not seem to be caused by a feeling of disempowerment in academic settings, but is based on a realistic appraisal of one’s possible contribution on particular topics and fields.

Participants shared their own life experience and wisdom, but they were quite firm about avoiding presumption, and about needing to be invited to do so. Ronja said she would not teach others—she has her own views that people likely would not agree with. Gerald said he had shared some of his thoughts about old age, "if people seem interested." Patricia said that teaching "would be presumptuous," as she had no expertise. Both Gerald and Deborah talked about memoirs or some kind of legacy writing. Deborah said it is something she feels people need to be asked for, by their family, and Gerald that he did not feel "sufficiently illustrious" to write about his life. There is maybe an acceptable time and approach to sharing life experience and perspectives. Perhaps, as Deborah said an invitation is needed. Implied by the discussion with several research participants, and what they said about other learners who interrupt the expert with unrehearsed comments, the time to share life stories would not be in competition with the content expert in a classroom.

Older adult learners are not a homogenous group, of course. Within the age range of the Seniors Program there are three or four generations, and a range of different life experience within each generation. Deborah felt that it is *younger* generations who are humbler:

> Deborah: I think everyone's taught humility in the workforce now, because it's a brutal world out there. Whereas when I went through, and certainly [generations] a bit older than me, when you joined there was almost a golden path. Now, how long are you employed for?

This highlights the danger of trying to pigeonhole entire groups of learners. Reticence might be seen as an element of wisdom, patience, understanding, or perspective. These are positive stereotypes, but stereotypes nonetheless, of old age. Humility might be a realistic perspective that comes with life experience: knowing you are not that special, in the end.

A downside of humility is that other learners are expected to be reserved, too, which might create a culture of shushing and irritation at "long" interruptions. As with the "government for the nice" (Franzese, 2005, p. 337; see Section 2.2.3: Familiar fields and certainties), one's own humility or "good behaviour" can turn to policing of others. Deborah commented on the "problem" of learners who talked too much in class:

> Deborah: If classes were longer, we could better learn our place, but in most classes there's a really annoying person who won't shut up. And I don't want to be that person

Is someone's silence in class the calm confidence of age, or is it a kind of internalized ageism? It may be more to about wanting to "do it right." While learners do not want to make mistakes in class, which would be an example of the influence of previous educational experience, it might be more that they do not want to waste time.

> Hazel: There was one person in the class that really dominated discussion . . . repeating stories . . . telling the same stories and they're off topic.

Do older adult learners, in fact, tend to be quieter and humbler than comparable but younger student bodies? It may be that intolerance for or pleasure in talking with other learners depends on how a course is advertised. If it is "sold" on the basis of the content that students know a highly qualified instructor can explain well, for example, even if it is called a seminar, learners will join with particular expectations. This is the usual situation in the Seniors Program. There is a tangle of factors that inhibit or encourage conversation and connection in class, that make it a welcome and integral part of class or an irritant, including the instructor, the room, the mix of learners in the room, the topic and so on.

There are also learners who do not speak up at all, and who maybe need more time or a completely different format. Silence haunts my research. This section is missing representation of the many quieter, less confident learners, the people who "just want to be there and be unknown." I was talking with research participants *about* these silent learners rather than hearing from them. The voices of all those who opt not to join the Seniors Program are also missing. Deborah said that, "My husband hesitates to come because he's scared of looking a fool." This feels like a failure of the program, that someone hesitates to join it for fear of being humiliated. It again raises the question of what kind of silence. Is it an unremarkable choice to spend time elsewhere, or is it a regretful, missed opportunity—something about the Seniors Program that discourages people who could benefit from and contribute to it?

Silence takes a few forms in the Seniors Program. It might arise from a lack of confidence or from a realistic assessment of one's contribution to class. It might be an expectation of behaviour in the program, policed by learners themselves. It is not clear if

it is a characteristic of older adult learners, or simply of learners who do not feel pressured to speak up in order to be assessed. The most concerning silence, however, is from those who do not register I the program at all. The third distinctive trait of older learners, the significance of time, is discussed below.

4.4.3. The importance of time

> *Barbara [describing how short the six-week courses in the Seniors Program feel]: the professors have to be very fast. Sometimes it's like throwing knowledge at people and saying, "Catch it!"*
>
> *Mila: You don't say "You're going to be my friend!" You realize after two years or 30 years.*

Russell (2011) discusses the "paradox of time" (see Section 2.2.1: Andragogy). For the research participants, education is not as important and consuming in their lives, either in totality or as part of daily schedule, as it is for typical undergraduate students. Also, they have simply been alive longer than, and have a deeper well of experience to draw on, than the typical undergraduate. Finally, as Russell (2011) says, time for older adults can be a precious thing, to be invested carefully.

The research participants have more freedom than undergraduates might to take what courses they want and to decide for themselves how and when to apply, and whether the learning was worthwhile. Formal education could be a much smaller fraction of older adults' lives than it typically is of younger learners', both in terms of how much of a week it takes up, and what overall proportion of their lives it represents. Participants all had full lives outside the Seniors Program:

> Lynette: I've got to socialize. I've got to get out, go for walks, do this errand or that errand, do stuff, right? It's also given me the opportunity to do things I didn't get the chance to do when I was working, because I didn't have time, stuff now that I didn't have time to do when working.

Possibly past life experience is a bigger difference, however. When older adult learners in the Seniors Program are making meaning for themselves and doing the work of integrating ideas and information from the various courses they take, they are assimilating learning into life experience, often in retrospect, not as co-curricular activities. All of the participants shared something about their previous working lives. One clear difference for these older adults is that they have the experience of a

completed working life. Work, for them might be an object of calm contemplation and not of anxiety or ambition. Again, this would not be the calm withdrawal from society described in gerotranscendence, but a milder version of it.

Vignette 6:

In the class I run, on writing an essay for Seniors Program certificate, it's easy enough to say, "You should use the first person in your essays." Learners generally nod in understanding, and when I talk about "I" being forbidden in my schooldays, I usually get a few smiles of recognition. It's when we dig into the idea, or when they sit down to write, that it gets difficult.

As I'm wrapping up one of these classes, a student has a question about library access, which is complicated for Continuing Studies students. He says he needs to research polar bears for an essay in a different program. He knows their numbers are declining, but he needs to cite a reference. He says he's always had an interest in polar bears, since having a kind of encounter with one when he was a child. A couple of other learners pause in gathering up their belongings to leave.

"An encounter?" "What happened?" "Where was this?" "How . . .?"

I try to point out what a good example it is of what we have been talking about: a unique personal experience rather than a quote from a book that anyone could access. Some people are leaving the class, and some are hanging back. It's an awkward moment, and the student smiles shyly, shrugging and shaking his head. He doesn't think a story from his childhood is what the other program is looking for. The student gathers his papers together quickly, and heads out of the room to the library.

Participants also spoke freely, prompted by questions, of learning in many different contexts, and at different times of life. Younger adult learners might have a wide range of life and work experiences, too, of course, but Larry, for example, could speak of recently learning on a silent retreat and reflect on an earlier self and a particular kind of self-directed learning:

> Larry: I really didn't have any hands-on experience with anything . . . I remember when I started, I would undo a nut and a bolt, and the nut would fall down into the engine and disappear. I didn't have any facility with my hands. But what I did was, I took a year off . . . rented a double

> garage, and took the entire car apart, down to the needle-roller bearings in the transmission. I mean *everything* . . .

Larry's car started on second try on being rebuilt. The significant learning, however, was that he found a "whole new dimension of himself." It takes time to build up a stock of significant learning experiences like this one, and having such a resource is maybe more common in older adults. Possibly, on the other hand, not all older adult learners realise that rebuilding cars and going on retreats are "learning," which would explain their impatience in the Seniors Program with approaches other than the traditional lecture.

Cruce and Hillman (2012), in the unfortunately titled paper *Preparing for the Silver Tsunami* (older adults as a natural disaster?), discuss time as a barrier, time as an investment and time as a scarce resource for older adult learners. Jamieson (2016) confirms Russell's paradox of time for older learners:

> Where the older learners differed mostly from the rest of the learners was in respect of notions of time. More older respondents answered positively to "I enjoy my leisure time more" and "It has helped me make better use of my time." The awareness of time—on the one hand having more free time and at the same time knowing that life time left is shrinking—are recurring themes in the interviews. (p. 481)

Some of the resistance to class participation in the Seniors Program may be because of the limited time that is spent in each course, which does not allow for the reserve of older adults to be overcome and trust to develop. Learners talk about the difficulty of "breaking the ice." Learners stay with the Seniors Program for years or indefinitely, as do the learners in the program Maginess (2016) describes. However, the courses that the programs run are themselves short. Learners might not see themselves as "going to university" for a set number of years. Instead, they spend a few mornings there each term, opting each term to participate or not. The brevity of individual classes also means that a few interruptions or digressions add up to a significant percentage of class time. This might explain some of the anxiety about speaking up in class, although (see 4.4.2) I am sure there is more to older adult learners being quiet. All kinds of learners might complain about wastes of class time, or shortness of time but is it fundamentally different for older adults in non-credit courses? We are careful to warn instructors new to the Seniors Program that, unlike almost everywhere else we know of, ending a class five or ten minutes early does not make the learners happy to have some

free time, but sends them straight to the office to complain about not getting the full class they paid for.

Of course, as the diversity of student bodies in the larger university increases, there will be many younger learners with varied life experiences or for whom university is a relatively small part of their time and energy, and many older learners committed to full-time, mainstream for-credit programs. The learners in the Seniors Program do seem to be different, however, not in terms of developmental stages or generational cohort but mainly because they have been around longer, which strikes me as a phenomenon both simple and profound.

4.5. Conclusion

Learners in the Seniors Program contribute to the persistence of old paradigms, often with good reasons. For example, the lecture format is familiar to many of them and its rules are relatively straightforward. However, like many unwritten rules, they can have an exclusive effect. The lecture format welcomes some people and excludes others. Individualism, another persistent paradigm, is reinforced in lectures. The individualist tendency in learning in the program also has its strengths, and solitary learning can be effective particularly for older adults.

There is a tension between prestige and inclusion in the Seniors Program: Learners want access to the academic experience they might have been denied earlier in life, and therefore they do not want a specially designed, accessible program for older learners, but a taste of “the real thing.” On the other hand, courses in the Seniors Program are short, non-credit and the program could not function otherwise. For the mainstream student, university is a means to an end, and they are therefore, maybe, more open to whatever makes learning more efficient. Older adult learners tend to be seeking the prestige of university for its own sake, not as a passport to a career or further study. They are suspicious of changes to what they see as the traditional university approach. If the classroom chairs are pulled into a circle and the instructor says little, for example, they worry that they are not getting authentic, serious university learning but a watered-down, airy-fairy version.

The research participants confirmed the centrality of instructor/student relationship, special in the Seniors Program because they tend to be peers, in age and socio-economic status. My research also confirms the common theme of learners' wanting to hear from experts. Along with the focus on tradition, this regard for expertise tends to reinforce the bourgeois and exclusive nature of the program. While this is disempowering for learners, it is integral to the nature and history of the program.

There are identifiable differences in how older learners approach learning, but not in the ways described in andragogy. A major difference is *wanting* to go to school for its own sake, "loving" school. Research participants and other learners in the Seniors Program also seem to be seeking different kinds of conversation, not possible or welcomed elsewhere. They enjoy serious or recondite topics, and seek a space that promotes this. Humility is a noticeable trait among the research participants. Even humility has a downside, however, reinforcing the notion that learners should stay quiet and listen to the professional teacher. Humility can reinforce silence and exclusion. Learners in the Seniors Program also confirm the experience of the "paradox of time" from the literature: having spare time, being in their third age, but also being aware of time's finitude in a way youth tends not to be. The longer life experience of older adults is significant, too, including their having had many different experiences of learning.

It might seem tautologous to say that older adult learners are different because they are older, but it is arguable that old age can give learners significantly distinctive attitudes to learning, from holding a different perspective on the urgency and importance of one's own contribution to class to having different purposes for being in class in the first place.

Chapter 5. Findings and discussion: Learning

While Chapter 4 described the learners of the Seniors Program, discussing their expectations, preferences and perspectives on learning, Chapter 5 focuses on the learning itself. What kind of learning takes place in the Seniors Program? In interviews, the research participants explored what they hope to learn from courses in the program, and how they like to learn. I have added my more distanced perspective to the discussion, revisiting the critical views of older adult learning from Chapter 2, the literature review, as they apply to the program.

The educational cliché, the "joy of learning" really exists and can be experienced in the Seniors Program. But what is it, exactly? What kind of learning do learners find joy in? Is there a downside to something that sounds so desirable? Studying for the joy of learning, for example, it seems some learners feel the absence of any kind of testing. They talk about "serious" learning and "getting to the heart of" a subject, which implies a sense of lack in learning that seems superficial. I contrast the perspective of those in the program who want to acquire facts and seek certainty from experts with the view of those who seem comfortable with ambiguity and the open-ended exploration of topics. Contrary to some expectations, such as in Erikson & Erikson (1997), older adults' interest in learning is forward looking and aimed at personal development, not contemplative and concerned with reflecting on past life experience.

This chapter takes a critical perspective. The Seniors Program is a serious and complex program that should be taken seriously, and a more critical look at what goes on is instructive. Learners value social connection, for example, but the promotion of connection in the program struggles against educational paradigms of individualism and the wider phenomenon of atomization of society. The literature also points out that many such programs for older adult learners have relatively few men as participants. Gender issues are more complex than just this absence, however. Old, male-dominated perspectives on educational practice still prevail in the program, subtly disempowering and silencing.

All of these aspects of the Seniors Program have an effect on its inclusiveness or exclusiveness. For a program categorized as community engagement, it is not doing an optimal job. There is a question, though, of how much change to the program is possible

without losing those elements that make up its essential character, and make it viable as a program. Is there potential in the Seniors Program, however for different approaches to learning?

5.1. Learner motivations: Seeking joy and certainty

The literature describes a range of older adult student motivations, and many of them can be seen in the learners in the Seniors Program. Whatever other goals and benefits learners seek from the Seniors Program, however, “learning things” is almost always the first mentioned. What does “learning things” mean for learners in the program?

5.1.1. Plugging holes and mental health

Some motivations for older adult learning described in the literature, such as making sense of a life already lived or seeking personal “transformation” rather than “development,” were not seen in my research. The idea of “filling gaps” in previous education, on the other hand, was confirmed.

For Sharon, the joy of life and learning is explained in the word “childness,” which she found in the *The Poetics of Reverie* (Bachelard, 1971) and which, for her, describes an enduring questioning and learning attitude to life.

> Sharon: For me, [the Seniors Program] is all about continuing to be a child, you know, in a way that’s not childish but that’s open to learning, still.

I understood Sharon to be saying that her perspective is on the present rather than the past, an engagement with life in the moment rather than a contemplation of life retrospectively. Erikson and Erikson (1997), in their influential work, see the developmental task of old age as life review, recapitulating the life stages, and Noddings (2007) says that “meaning is created as we live our lives reflectively” (p. 66). Maginess (2016) says, however, in the introduction to her study, that “learning is all about the future” (p. 8). Learners in the Seniors Program seem to share this view. They want a positive, life-affirming, and forward-looking atmosphere. The “special projects” in the program Maginess studies, which dealt with life review and meaning making were less popular, possibly in part because they seemed to be backward looking, and because

they involved learning about being old. The Seniors Program offers some courses in autobiographical writing, which is necessarily retrospective, but learners in the courses seem to approach them as skill building, developing their potential now, or as creating legacies to share with their children and grandchildren.

> Ronja: I would probably be writing for [my daughters], writing stories that they can read at some point.

All of the participants said they valued personal growth as lifelong learners. The interviews did not bring to light, however, any views that affirm Tennant's (2012) concept of the learning self, changeable and constructed in different ways by the different communities in one's life. Nor was there clear evidence of Tennant's (2018) continually changing and vulnerable self, necessary for anything other than superficial learning, in Tennant's view. On the contrary, participants tended to seem sure of who they were, and how they approached life and learning. On the other hand, courses on psychoanalysis, particularly Jung, are popular and often oversubscribed in the program. Possibly, as with an oversubscribed course on the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator test, the learners are not so much interested in personal change (unlikely in a 12-hour course) but in finding a "type" that will describe who they are now and who their group is. They are seeking recognition and connection rather than introspection.

Barbara reiterated an idea expressed by many in the Seniors Program: "Well, of course, I think the most important thing is to keep that brain functioning somehow." The appreciation of learning for its own sake, rather than its content, might be rooted in a focus on mental health (possibly itself based on an unspoken fear of cognitive decline). There is a contradiction, however, between this expressed wish for mental activity, and the preference, also widespread in the Seniors Program, for passive learning in lectures. Nevertheless, for learners, it seems that it is not as important *what* you study but *that* you study. Moreover, the research participants talked more about the "joy of learning" than about learning for instrumental purposes. Unlike other learners, they can take what they want from classes, not what they need for qualifications or application at work:

> Gerald: The Seniors Program generally, I think is outstanding. It obviously works for me . . . I don't think I'd want something that would consume me that much . . . And the richness of what I get out of this program is stunning. I know it goes into far less depth, but if you write essays, you go a bit further. I'm just tickled pink with that.

Less than 10% of learners write an essay on taking a course (see Section 1.1.1: The Seniors Program, for more on essays), so Gerald is unusual in writing essays. Gerald still notes that he appreciates that the commitment is does not "consume" him. For many other learners in the program, even the relatively small demand on time of the essay spoil the joy of learning, and they have their own ways to make meaning or find joy in the Seniors Program. For these learners, the process, rather than any certificate or test, is the point.

Lynette spoke about something that seems relevant particularly to women in the Seniors Program: seek outing out what they feel they missed in earlier education.

> Lynette: [After I retired] I thought about, should I do a master's degree. And I thought, well, why? I mean, who cares? OK—I just get more initials after my name—"I want to be like my dad with all the initials." But then I thought, no one's going to hire me to do anything, so then I thought, I'll do something where I don't have to do a lot of work. I'll just try to plug in the holes of knowledge that I never really got.

"Plugging holes" is resonant. When we started to include more scientific and technical courses, we intended to attract more men into the Seniors Program, but these classes filled with women who told us they had been pushed away from such subjects early in life, not just through this kind of inequity but because "life happened." Many learners feel that there is some learning that they missed out on, that they have not been given the key to. In the context of the Seniors Program, they are maybe having to trust the "authority" of our eclectic selection of courses or are deliberately choosing topics that will make their education better rounded. But how do they know what they do not know? This is maybe another difference between older and younger learners: the feeling of lost opportunity, of making up for loss.

However, is it fair to say that all of this leads to a dilettante kind of learning? The Seniors Program is not a grand "liberal arts" project. Courses are not connected and do not ladder into higher levels. On the other hand, rather than encouraging dilettantism, could offering all of these disjointed snippets and insights be empowering to learners? They can put the uncoordinated pile of learnings together however they want, in whatever way works for them. Maybe this is the best way of filling in the gaps, and discovering the unknown unknowns.

This section considered what kind of learning is sought in the Seniors Program. Learners want the learning to be forward-looking, not retrospective, and they do not want to learn explicitly about old age. They are sure of who they are and, for them, personal development maybe means increasing knowledge and skills, rather than fundamental change, "transformation." Without having specific topics in mind, many want to make up for missing out on postsecondary education, for various reasons, earlier in life. They value the process of learning, not outcomes, in order to keep their minds active. The next section examines the idea perhaps most commonly expressed by learners in the Seniors Program as a motivation: the joy of learning.

5.1.2. The joy of learning: Its pros and cons

Learners in the Seniors Program talk about "the joy of learning" in both formal and informal feedback. I find myself saying the phrase after sitting in on classes. Larry, talking about his experience in a course on fine art and street photography, said, "It felt like your heart expanded." Penny used the same word, about a course on physics: "I love having my universe expanded like that." Sharon said, "These courses are the greatest gift in my life." I have also heard learners talking about coming out of classes and feeling as if they are "walking on air." It is difficult to describe this feeling adequately. Maybe it has to be experienced. The research participants suggested that "joy" is a deep and serious motivation. It is possible that there was an unspoken agreement in interviews that learning in the Seniors Program is not frivolous:

> Sharon: Your big question [about engagement and the university] connects brilliantly with the wisdom of Socrates. Because his whole goal was, is, to get people to think about how should we live, how should we die? . . . For me, the will to live connects with will to learn.

My own experience of joy in participating in Seniors Program classes was the dance of getting caught up in the moment while also stepping back to pause and think. Appreciating the skill and care of an instructor, or the genuine wonder of student questions, is not quite the "joy of learning" as learners talk about it, but a welcome moment where I could drop out the race to walk for a while, to look around and better appreciate what was happening—another way of getting to the heart of things.

For learners in the Seniors Program, joy of learning might include enjoyment of the behaviours and the milieu, the outward signs of learning rather than the deeper

purposes. Taking on the conventions of being a Seniors Program student is maybe an unspoken requirement for inclusion, as discussed above. The Seniors Program can be described as a community based on unwritten rules and customs. Quinn (2013) suggests that "part of learning to belong is learning what emotions are acceptable to perform in whatever learning community" (p. 40). Yakhlef (2010) points out that Lave and Wenger's *Situated Learning* (1991) is

> silent on the cognitive content of what is learned by participants in a community of practice. Nor does it address explicitly the role of individuals in the knowing process. Individuals are merely depicted in terms of a desire to belong to a community, progressing from a peripheral participation position to a more central one. (Yakhlef, 2010, p. 39)

Ronja said, "I love doing research and I love having piles of books around me as I write." It may be unfair to wonder how important the signs and signifiers of learning, rather than the learning itself, are to the learners, but Ronja's statement hints at that. Is learners' joy in learning alloyed by a delight in identifying as a student? The comment about "piles of books" echoes other chance remarks on learners' joy in the traditional learning environment, whether the experience or the classroom setting. In feedback about the Seniors Program, it is possible to see two kinds of appreciation, one typified by delight in learning and one by delight in identifying as a "lifelong learner."

In either case, how does this joy or delight look from the outside? One of the most dramatic expressions of joy in the Seniors Program is "registration day," but this event can also demonstrate exclusion and inclusion. The program has hundreds of learners on waiting lists each term and, in order to be fair in allocating places, registration for courses opens at 10 a.m. on a particular date. Some courses sell out in minutes and most learners now register online to be sure of a place, but a significant number still come to campus to register in person, even though that decreases their chances of getting into the courses they want.

This is a joyful event for the learners who participate, and it has picked up its own traditions. I have lost count of how often I have said, to the handful of learners already lined up as I come in to work, "Oh, but registration opens tomorrow. . ." Often the date in summer coincides with a book and bake sale in the same area of campus. Local media have featured the day. It is the least efficient but the most sociable way to register for courses.

> Sharon: Sitting in that lineup, on registration day. I do that partly because I enjoy the people that I meet and the conversations that go on.

I recall trying to help a prospective student register on one particular registration day. She was literally on the periphery, standing uncertainly to one side of it all, and completely new to the Seniors Program. Like many who are new to the program, she had just happened to pick up our printed course brochure in a library. The contrast between the buzz of joy, anticipation, and connection from the crowd of "regulars," and her hesitancy and confusion—her fundamental questions about what the program is, and how it works—was striking to me. It was a challenge to explain the Seniors Program to someone for whom it was a whole new world: What is this? What is it for? What do I do?

How conventional is "joy of learning"? It feels authentic as expressed by research participants, and I have experienced it myself, sitting in on some courses in the Seniors Program, but is there also a touch of what Hansen et al. (2019) describe as the romanticization of going back to school? One of the first things a student said to me when I joined the program staff was that, being 70, they were "not scared of anyone anymore." But is there a deference to convention somewhere in these celebrations of the joy of learning? It oversimplifies what might be difficult or upsetting at times and possibly reinforces bourgeois ideas of learning: wondering at mind-boggling summaries of the big questions of physics, for example, or hearing about the "great books" we should all be familiar with. Courses that deal with more troubling issues, and there have been several in the Seniors Program, are maybe not so identified with "joy of learning."

I wonder, too, if learners who talk of "joy of learning" are also somehow distancing themselves from "learning," in that their participation in the Seniors Program is, if not performative, self-conscious. Joy of learning is, however, a real element of the Seniors Program although it can be problematic, and its nature is difficult to pin down. Learners in the program, nevertheless, use and recognize the phrase every day. People outside the Seniors Program might see "joy" and "learning" as contradictory. The next section deals with another possible opposition, filling learners full of facts versus "real learning."

5.1.3. Acquiring facts and getting to the heart of it

"To learn" is a common answer to questions about why learners participate in the Seniors Program. Their answers are not necessarily connected to learning *something*. Participants were generally against the idea of passively "acquiring facts." Sharon, for example, as part of a story about consumerism (people in old age substituting what they *do* in their job with what they *have* in possessions), said "What some people think they want when they sign up for courses here, they want more 'things' to tick off, in a way."

In fact, several research participants talked about other learners who seem to see collecting information as the point of participation in the Seniors Program:

> Larry [discussing a course on Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973)]: I talked to a woman [who said] "I'm really disappointed, I thought it would be all about Becker and the book, *Denial of Death*, and I'm not getting that . . . and I'm not going to read the book, because he hasn't excited me about it." [I said,] "I think what you're getting is Becker . . . even if he's not saying, here's salient points about Becker, and here's Chapter 1." There wasn't a whole lot of that, but—I won't say he was being Becker—but he was animating the ideas. I think she wanted the Coles Notes of Becker, so she didn't have to read the book . . . [Her perspective was maybe] "Tell me in four weeks what I need to know about Becker, so I can talk coherently at a cocktail party,"

Larry's "cocktail party" comment might be a little unfair. Being "filled with facts" might not be a selfish or limited vision for a student in the program. If knowing a few facts makes someone feel more confident and interesting socially (able to talk at cocktail parties), then it serves the significant goals of social connection, maintaining mental health, and playing an active role in community. And these are explicit learning outcomes for the Seniors Program, promoted as benefits of participation in any of the courses.

Bunyan and Jordan (2005) are cited in the literature review (Chapter 2) defending the value of learning just for fun, but research participants shared an assumption that "real" learning was, or should be, the goal of the Seniors Program. Again, there may have been an unspoken compact in the interviews that the Seniors Program is not merely fun, but there does seem to be genuine concern that learners in the program should be *learning*, and not just at a superficial level. Does criticism of just collecting facts arise from concerns about whether or not others are really "getting it," or just memorizing a few phrases?

This sounds like the iceberg problem of knowledge as described by Noddings (2007) and by Phillips and Soltis (2004, p. 87), in which, because of a lack of insight into a student's thinking, what might look like a grasp of the content can disguise an underwater mountain of misperceptions. Phillips and Soltis discuss this in the context of formal testing for proper comprehension, but it also applies to adult learners who are not assessed but who, "lonely in the crowd" in a lecture, might have no opportunity to receive feedback on their understanding.

For educators outside the informal bubble of the Seniors Program, the problem necessitates testing, or at least trying to work out, through demonstration in the classroom, whether students understand the lesson (Noddings, 2007, p. 107; Phillips & Soltis, 2004, pp. 59, 87). It is a larger and older philosophical question, too. How do we know what someone else makes of new information? Are they alive to deeper implications? There is no institutional pressure in the Seniors Program, however, to find out if learners have really "got it." Hazel said of a course that it "gave [her] a lot to think about, that [she] hadn't thought about before," which implied contemplation later, outside class and far from any testing.

In the Seniors Program, judgment of the depth and reality of their learning is up to learners. Concepts and facts picked up in the classroom might put someone on the path to a transformative learning experience that the university will not see. For example, hearing that "Becker says knowledge of our impending death is the main motivator for our creative acts" might not hit home or be applied until years later. This is maybe true for learners of all ages and stages, of course, but the Seniors Program is free of the need to prove the impact of learning during class time. The learners, nevertheless, can still wonder about, and express frustration at, how classmates are missing the point or seem to be taking only a superficial interest.

Research participants talked about learning that is truly engaging rather than superficially entertaining. Larry talked about "the mechanics" versus "the heart of it":

> Larry: You can do it like [instructors], a "how-to" course. But that doesn't get to the heart of it and there are plenty of other courses like that—you can pick up a leaflet. [End of life involves] ineffable fear or whatever, and we keep sliding around it. It's a really big deal. It would be amazing to figure out a way through the territory that gets to the heart of it rather than the mechanics.

What does “getting to the heart of it” mean? For Larry, it seems to be getting past superficial facts and information, maybe to face personal demons. For educators, it might be having students grasp the underlying structure of the subject (Phillips & Soltis 2004, p. 74). Or it might be, more in line with Larry’s thinking, to “care for and nurture the presence of the soul dimension in teaching and learning” (Dirkx, 1997, p. 80). It might be avoiding drill and memorization in class, instead altering or improving the mind (Bruner, 2018). Clearly, “really getting it” has too many possible interpretations, although most students and instructors in the Seniors Program at least recognize the issue the question addresses.

For some learners, “getting to the heart of it” means achieving a kind of bedrock certainty of universal truth, the “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” reality mentioned by Freire (2009, p. 71; see Section 2.2.3: Familiar fields and certainties). Diane sympathized with this down-to-earth perspective:

> Diane: You could certainly have something about aspects of dying, and then have a notary public or somebody there to say, “Here’s how you do the will, or this representative [agreement] that’s a fairly recent thing.” So, if you gave somebody something really concrete. . .

Diane and I were talking about “others,” trying to understand their preference for hard facts. Is there a suggestion that there is something disappointing or “not quite as good as” in how we see others preferring just the facts? Freire (2009) might add a critical perspective on this, pointing out the political dimensions of the teacher presenting reality as static and compartmentalized to students who are consequently ignorant about what is really going on.

Vignette 7:

A woman phones to complain about a course called Sensory Writing. She tells me that she is 75 years old, the only one of her generation left in the family, so she needs to write her memoir. She is, however, upset at how “airy-fairy” the course is. “I just want to write a memoir, a factual document,” she says, “And this instructor has us listening to our breathing and writing poems and all kinds of nonsense. One woman read something she’d written and burst into tears.”

I sense the shiver of disapproval even over the phone. As we talk, it turns out that the woman is a former ER nurse, which leads me to feel I have an insight into her

no-nonsense approach to memoir writing. Then she tells me, "I've seen terrible things in my life. Terrible things. I want to know how to write about them so my grandchildren and great grandchildren don't think I'm an awful bitch."

It is a frustrating conversation. I guess that we are close in temperament but far apart in our experience of education. I understand why she dismisses the airy-fairy but I also suspect that the airy-fairy is exactly what she needs to get over that one, particular obstacle to being able to write. Instead, we discuss where she might find some no-nonsense, straightforward instruction on writing a memoir.

Is this worry about how deeply others have *really* learned the lesson a kind of pedagogical snobbery? Could the snobbery arise from notions of how "copying" is taboo in mainstream paradigms of education, or the high status given to originality of thought? Ranking of ways of knowing is not confined to mainstream education. Trungpa (1987) in a Buddhist iteration of constructivism, explains that knowledge cannot be simply handed on but must be "experienced anew each time," in the mind of the recipient (p. 17). How useful is it to ask of learners whether they really get it (like *I* do)?

Filling students with facts has long been caricatured and criticized: "The little pitchers before him, who were to be filled so full of facts" (Dickens, 1905, p. 4). Reviewing a 2016 survey of learners (see p. 10), I was struck by the verbs learners chose to describe their learning, "gathering" facts and "gaining" knowledge, for example. I might have been applying another kind of educational snobbery, about the value of assimilating or integrating learning versus collecting facts, as if in a pitcher. But acquisition of facts does not preclude deeper learning. There is no bright dividing line between remembering facts and having an epiphany. Mezirow says that "transformative learning may occur in instrumental learning" (2018, p. 117) and research participants touched on the potential impact of transmission of facts in a lecture. Deborah talked more directly about the relationship between gathering facts and transformation:

> Deborah: A good class is where I'm different at the end of it than I was at the beginning, not that I know some extra facts of what date a battle happened in ancient Greece. Good courses are where someone has done something, worked in it. [Instructor] on laws of war, honour and dishonour; [Instructor] on civil rights. I want something that will change the way— I don't want to learn facts. You don't need facts now so much. You can look them up. You need to know what to do with them.

It is notable that Deborah is describing courses that were traditional lectures. It seems that being different at the end of the course for Deborah arises, in lectures, from the feeling of an authentic connection with instructors she knows and trusts to have done the work or put in the life work.

Particularly in end-of-life classes, although lectures promote one-way transmission of information and control over the process by the instructor, they can be valuable. Lectures might prompt learners to reflect, simply by pointing out that there is a different way to think about or do something. There is a power in having a name for something, merely "acquiring the labels" (Vygotsky, as cited in Phillips & Soltis, 2004, p. 59), and in "mere" awareness. Obviously, the societal change that the participants have lived through is more complex than just this, but on a personal level, "I didn't know there was a name for that" and "I didn't know that was an option" are simple statements that can indicate profound change and learning. Learning that there is a recognized term, "complex grief," for example, can be meaningful. It also seems that, in discussing end-of-life issues, simple facts tend to lead to bigger issues. It is difficult, for example, to discuss an advance directive properly without thinking about what we value in life or considering our mortality. Acquiring facts and getting to the heart of a topic are complementary.

The next section of this chapter considers some of the issues raised in the literature review—individualism, gender and more engaging forms of learning—in the context of the Seniors Program

5.2. Taking older adult learning seriously: A critical look

I often tell instructors new to the Seniors Program that, while learners seldom complain about a course being too challenging, they are quick to object if they feel they are being patronised and the material is being oversimplified for them. Some critiques of programs for older adult learners seem to do a similar disservice to the learners, romanticising them and glossing over problems. This part of the chapter takes a closer look at some problematic areas of the program.

5.2.1. Individualism and loneliness

"Social connection" is almost always mentioned in conversations with Seniors Program learners about the benefits of the program. The question of loneliness and its mitigation leads to a larger question about what the Seniors Program is supposed to be for. It has no explicit mandate to tackle social problems, although it is understood that learning has positive side effects such as increased confidence, improved mental health and the opportunity for connection. Research participants described how issues of isolation and a perceived lack of connection in "society today" are reflected in the Seniors Program, perhaps reinforced by educational conventions like the lecture, and the focus on the instructor, rather than peers. They also described how connection can successfully be made, incidentally and over time, as part of attending classes together.

> Barbara: I think small groups are probably better because you can have a chance to talk. . .
>
> Mark [confidently]: Yes.
>
> Barbara: . . . to the instructor. You see?
>
> Mark [less sure]: Uh-huh.

Emphasis on the individual in the teaching and learning approaches of the Seniors Program might promote loneliness. Is the experience of loneliness in the lecture theatre different for older learners? Although maybe drawn from a narrower range of socioeconomic status, the student body of the program could have a wider range of life experiences, spanning more generations, than a typical class of postgrads or school leavers, and thus less common ground on which to start building connections. It is striking, though, that descriptions of not knowing how to connect on the first day of class, and being lonely in the lecture theatre, are similar for undergrads and older adults.

There may be a connection between the loneliness of learners in the Seniors Program and long-standing notions of individualism in wider society. Students in Mclean's (2015) study on self-help reading associated learning alone with autonomy, personal resilience, and responsibility, which supports Cruikshank's (2013) critique of "rugged individualism" as an impossible, internalized ideal that older people feel compelled to live up to. Patricia widened discussion of being alone in the program to the

problem of being an individual, rather than a couple, in society, particularly in the unwelcoming community of the city:

> Patricia: You have no ground, less of a connection to the community, never had a partner to discuss things with . . . There is an art piece [of mine], it's called *Entangled but Not Connected*. That is the issue facing a single person. At the end of life.

The ideal of the village or the old-fashioned church-based community was mentioned several times in interviews. Jennifer contrasted the loneliness of people who live "in town" with the daily contact she has with neighbours in the suburbs. Patricia described co-housing, and the need to get away from thinking that connection relies on being in a couple. She felt that co-housing works in reconstructing the village, in a way. Delanty (2003), however, debunks the myth of the traditional community, based on the mistaken notion of cultures with roots lost in the mists of time. I challenged Mo when she brought up this nostalgic view of the village:

> Mark: But . . . was there ever actually a golden age, where there was a village and people learned naturally about end of life, or are we just romanticizing it?
>
> Mo: I think the village that learned about it [i.e. end of life] in New Brunswick, the friends that I had back East, the ones who were from small towns, it wasn't a cheery "Oh, good, now I am healthy." You know a number of those were suicide, and it was quite an array of reasons why people die, and [pause] I think what it does is make you realize "This is hard, this is hard." I don't think you can have a real society if you don't have the ebb and flow of joy and so forth. So I think when you did live in a smaller community [you were present at] each other's funerals or grandparents' funerals or whatever it was, because "We're with you" and "We'll cry with you."

Patricia's feeling of connection was similarly realistic and unromantic. She was anticipating needing support in older age, and trying to identify who could provide it if family and overstretched services cannot. Mo further pointed out that community is not necessarily about the cosy village versus the cold city. She described a large school she had worked in which was much more of a community than smaller ones, through the deliberate efforts of staff. Looking for connection is maybe more of a practical and achievable objective than a romantic yearning.

Nevertheless, chance conversations with many learners in the Seniors Program let us know that some learners struggle to find a sense of community in the program, and maybe always have found it difficult to connect.

> Mila: At some stage, hopefully as young as possible, you say, "It doesn't work for me to be shy. I'm going to start taking risks. I have to, or I'll never live my life." And then you have to become bolder when you're old.

At the beginning of each term, Seniors Program staff visit each new class, to make some "housekeeping" announcements and also to welcome new learners, often suggesting they not be shy about talking to classmates. We have tried other gestures towards building community, setting up common rooms and after-class discussion groups, for example. These have not been sustainable, however. Learners in the program are either hesitant, or already have their own meetings over coffee and lunch organized.

> Diane: I think there's enough community in the classes, and people talking to each other, and you talk to the people next to you, and so on. The thing that's really great is that the courses are usually so interesting that people just can't shut up! Talking afterwards.

Jennifer said that "It's really scary to reach out to other people" and spoke about fears of rejection. As we discussed loneliness in the Seniors Program, she pointed out, "There's nothing like being in a crowd to make you feel more lonely." This conversation raised the need for learners to have social and economic capital.

Barbara was brave enough to talk about her own loneliness:

> Barbara: I just wish that I knew more people in the classes than I do.
>
> Mark: Oh. You know, that comes up a lot.
>
> Barbara: Does it?
>
> Mark: Yes, because, you know, we talk to students and say, you know "Chat to your neighbours" and "Try to be part of the community," but you know, it seems difficult to . . . break the ice . . .
>
> Barbara: Yes. Yes, I mean, how many people want to go out for lunch afterwards. I get so used to being alone right now . . . except for one male friend who visits me, that, I can go to The Keg and have lunch [by myself] between these classes, and not feel too much alone.
>
> Mark: Uh huh . . .

> Barbara: But, if I knew somebody in the class, I could say, "Would you like to go to The Keg with me and have lunch?"

However, apart from Barbara, none of the participants in this research expressed concerns about loneliness for themselves. An unavoidable flaw in my research is the lack of representation of learners who were unwilling, for whatever reason, to come forward to describe their negative experiences of the Seniors Program as part of research. I imagine it would be particularly difficult to "admit" to not having made connections with other learners. Some instructors have the ability to get learners in the program to work together in class. I think much of their success lies in taking time to persuade learners of the value of this. And there have been two courses that directly cover the topics of friendship, loneliness, belonging, and connection. These were popular, but possibly mainly because they were taught by an instructor who learners follow, rather than because of the topic itself. Some groups of learners have continued to get together after the courses ended. Sharon described the successful creation of community in another particular kind of course, which has the expectation of group work and sharing of life stories:

> Sharon [talking about an autobiography-writing course]: [The instructor], I thought wisely, she let us stay in those small groups instead of moving, moving group to group. [She] thought, "You're trying to tell something deeply personal. I don't want you having the distraction of having to move around and shuffle chairs and all that sort of thing." And we became such a close-knit group. We've been meeting ever since.

Even with the help of courses that promote community, however, those who connect in the Seniors Program are maybe those, like the participants in my research, who have the motivation and skill to be able to connect in any case, even in large, impersonal lectures.

> Jennifer: The social aspect . . . I'm spending too much money on lunches (laughter) . . . I didn't know anybody [in the Seniors Program before joining the program], I went to one course and somebody asked me to go to coffee. It was kind of nice. And we meet for lunch every week now, the same people. There's two other women . . . we ended up taking the same courses, too. Just out of interest, we happened to have the same interests.

The effectiveness of the Seniors Program in mitigating loneliness should not be underestimated. Learners in the program can make deceptively dismissive comments about how "it gets me out of the house" or "I have to get up and dressed" as benefits of

the program. This is an indication of the Seniors Program meeting a need, one that people do not like to talk about. There is, however, surely the potential to do more, and to do better. A principle my previous work in the Inner City was built on, set out in (McKnight & Block, 2010), is that to build community and connection you do not offer people help, but ask them *for* help. There are some volunteering opportunities available in the Seniors Program, and these might be expanded, to tackle the serious, often hidden societal problem of loneliness.

5.2.2. Gender

The student body is, as already described, generally well resourced, but the issue of gender discrimination surfaces in many ways. The literature notes the gender imbalance in programs similar to the Seniors Program, and offers some potential reasons for this. The Seniors Program seems to be typical, with around 80% women and 20% men (Jamieson, 2016). This concerns the institution, the same way any other mismatch between the representation in the student community, and the diversity of the city. Two of the 13 research participants were men, and they gave some insight into why men might not be looking for connection. Larry described having engaged in a wide range of forms of education, including, for example, a silent retreat for a month. We spent some time, though, talking about what might be seen as stereotypically "male" forms of learning. One story was about getting lost in researching what stereo to buy, in the days before the internet:

> Larry: I learn by doing, I learn by reading about . . . I get a rising interest in something, and then I study it like crazy for months. [For example] I got this idea I'd like to know more about it all, audio gear and sound systems, and music . . . including the physics . . . I torture myself for months and months, decision making [about the stereo components]

Of course, this solitary pursuit of understanding of technology or "gadgets" is not necessarily something men in general undertake, but it is noticeable that the few courses the Seniors Program offers that do have a majority of men in them are the ones we offer on, for example, photography and astronomy. Gadgets seem to be a draw for men. Although designed and delivered as "academic," these courses feature the proper use of cameras, telescopes and their associated software. Expensive gadgets, and "how

to" courses on using them, however, do not fit with the aim of a more diverse and inclusive program.

It might also be significant that Gerald suggested that what people might go and learn by themselves would be limited to practicalities of end of life, the simpler and more "linear" learning possible on this topic. Gerald was doubtful about whether courses in the Seniors Program on the practicalities of end of life, such as wills and advance directives, would be viable at university: "The problem, maybe, is people who want to know, probably go off and find it out for themselves." Is that a male trait, to seek facts and certainties, in solitary research? Anecdotally, and in the vignettes included here, it is men who are looking for certainties, and who tend to reject the idea of unknowable, no universal truth, no clear right and wrong interpretation.

The gender imbalance does not seem to be a priority for learners. It is remarked on, but not as a complaint or a source of concern. Maybe, however, concerning issues around gender show up in more subtle or insidious ways. What happens, for example, when humility, described above, intersects with marginalization? If older women tend to be overlooked in the classroom, is it because of stereotyping and internalized stereotypes? For example, learners have told me how they, as older women, tend to get ignored and overlooked in academic discussion. They perhaps feel that there is an assumption their opinions will not be worth listening to:

> The message that being old is funny or embarrassing is so ingrained that many old women and men take this view of themselves, at least in social groups. Biased attitudes reinforce discriminatory practices, such as . . . maintaining an educational system focused on the young. (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 137)

Although learners are overwhelmingly women, and there are as many women instructors as men, the feel of the Seniors Program might still be male dominated. Sexism is maybe not obvious in a classful of women However, the competitive, individualist "male" approach to education is internalized in a way similar to McCusker's (2017) description of the resistance she met in trying to establish a different, more collaborative, tone in a seminar group, and to the description of the perpetuation of male-dominated paradigms of museums in Clover, Sanford, and de Oliveira Jayme (2010) in their default to "great books" or the conventional, male-dominated history of art, for example (see Section 2.3.3: Gender). Instances where we have tried to push back—

for example, lecture series on neglected women artists, mathematicians and so on, or courses focused on women playwrights—are still exceptional, not part of the default, mainstream of the curriculum. Even the prevailing norms on "how to behave in class, " such as individuals stoically keeping quiet in a two-hour lecture, might be seen as more "man" than "woman" oriented.

Mila identified competitiveness as a problem, an undesirable part of classroom atmosphere, although she did not explicitly connect it to gender:

> Mark: [Comment about preferring questions and confusion to answers]
>
> Mila: But that's arrogance, isn't it, and it's always being in control, in charge, to know [answers]. And I can always very much be in that space, and I don't need more of it . . . competitiveness, it's so in us, survival of the fittest

Many of the women in the Seniors Program are of a generational cohort who were in general marginalized, and who remember the more severe marginalization of their mothers' generation. Suggesting another example of the transformative potential of "just the facts," two participants reflected on past generations:

> Lynette: I'm not sure my mother lived her life the way she wanted
>
> Mila: When we were younger, women in the '50s with children were a very underprivileged generation, [with] no resources. Maybe very angry without knowing it. Now we have more opportunity.

Mila, who was "awed" by the Indigenous conception of community, in contrast with settler notions of individualism, illustrated this tension when she also celebrated meeting individual challenge, free from social restraint. Generations coming up will be different again.

> Sharon: [Instructor] is a very thorough teacher. She has everything so well prepared for you . . . She structures everything for us so that we have the freedom to let our imagination go and our creativity go. And I think that that is a real learning for me, to think that you can structure something for somebody to help them get more out of it.

"Structure" seems to be important to learners in the Seniors Program, as something the instructor brings to a class. A problematic word that turns up in course evaluations from time to time is "disorganized." It is difficult to pin down what learners mean in each iteration of this criticism. Is it an unprepared instructor, an instructor who is

having problems with classroom technology, an instructor who is improvising the class depending on what happens on the day, or an instructor who is not presenting as the confident (arrogant, maybe masculine?) image they hold of the teacher? Or is it simply because the class involves discussion? Do learners worry about what *looks like* learning, and what *looks like* sitting about chatting?

Consumerism, pressure of time, and lack of confidence in their own knowledge mean that maybe many learners do just want to be fed the (nice and juicy) worms, and they judge the effectiveness of a class by the predictability and "structure" of its content. Classes in which the instructor gives some power to learners can, certainly, be more unpredictable and less structured, which can make everyone in the room uneasy, but the unpredictability can be fruitful, and tapping the resources of learners can lead to richer learning. The "risky" courses are worth persevering with.

Gender equity is not seen as the most pressing concern in the Seniors Program, and the program is gently addressing gender inequities originating in past generations, by "plugging holes" and introducing feminist thinking in a growing number of classes. The bigger concern is cultural and ethnic diversity: the Seniors Program better representing the diversity in the community it is supposed to serve. Learners in the program are generally well-resourced, with considerable economic and social capital. In particular in the intersection of ageism and gender discrimination, they can be unfairly treated, however, and particularly in a university context. Is this "academic marginalization" why many are defensive about the Seniors Program being acknowledged as serious learning? It is an odd contradiction that learners in the program value traditional lectures while for-credit "proper" university programs acknowledge (or ought to) that best practice lies in another direction. The next section explores the new directions that might be possible for the Seniors Program, if we can persuade learners to come along with us.

5.2.3. More impactful learning

Knowles et al. (2005) cite Lindeman's (1926) description of an ideal of older adult learning that could have been written today:

> Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous, who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations, who dig

> down into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary facts, who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles. (Lindeman, 1926, p. 11)

Why aim for something like this? If lectures are popular and work logistically, why promote a different approach? There are a number of reasons. Engaged learning increases student connection in classes, and helps solve the problem of isolation and loneliness described previously. The goal that learners often express as “keeping my brain ticking over” is not well served by lectures. I recall an exchange in a class where a student asked about Mozart being good for the brain. The instructor replied that the benefits to brain health likely occur only if you are learning to play the violin. Sitting passively in a lecture might feel like academia, and it might have benefits, but not as many as more active learning. More active learning likely also promotes deeper understanding which is better retained. It acknowledges learners’ experience, and lets them build meaningful learning for themselves. It allows them to check their understanding with others’, to ensure they are “really getting it.” And more active learning still allows for the acquisition of interesting facts. In short, if we take learners at their word on what they value about and benefit from the Seniors Program, we should move towards something like Lindeman’s vision.

My memories of significant teaching moments across my career are about messy processes. The train-the-trainer workshops I conducted in the Inner-City project depended on “modelling of a positive, accepting, supportive, and humorous atmosphere” p. 8 (Sellick et al., 2011), which aimed to build the confidence of the trainees, so that they in turn could effectively build up the confidence of the people they would be helping practice English. As facilitator of the workshops, a large part of my role was to demonstrate taking care and paying attention, allowing everyone in the room to contribute or at least to be acknowledged. The stereotypes many held of what it is to be a teacher—a distant and authoritative expert—was a challenge. In teaching about essay-writing in the Seniors Program, my role includes getting some tips and tricks about writing across, but the most engaging and important part of the class is usually when the learners get to grips with how to write a reflective essay: when they realize that the challenge is not to show how much you remember of the course content, but to be vulnerable and honest in putting yourself into the essay. These are not easily definable learning outcomes, and do not involve my transmitting information. Possibly, much of the real learning happens outside the classroom, putting ideas into practice. Dirkx (1998)

says that “transformative learning has neither a distinct beginning nor an end-ing. Rather, it represents a potential that is eternally present within our-selves and our learners” (p. 11).

Complicating this romantic vision in practice are, as described previously, long-held assumptions about individualism and experts in education. Even where we have group discussion in classes, for example, it seems that the default educational paradigm remains the promotion of *individual* understanding and development. These real-life complications pose a problem for courses on end of life in particular, where ideas and feelings are discovered and shared spontaneously, often when putting into words worries that had never previously been articulated. Maybe, for many learners in the Seniors Program, the classroom does not feel like the place to talk about such deep and unpredictable topics “unedited” and unrehearsed. Perhaps end of life is *too* messy and personal for the classroom.

In peer learning and discussion, we depend on the resources and willingness of the learners. How prepared do they need to be? What skills in critical thinking—digging into complexities, pushing for insight and honesty, or being comfortable with ambiguity and “leaving the classroom more confused than before”—are learners expected to bring? One potential challenge would be the consumerist attitude from some learners, as Mila phrased it (on their behalf): “I pay for the information they’re going to give me.”

Going further, the literature on university teaching contains many complaints about the lack of spirituality and heart in the classroom. Would learners also be able to bring the “heart” (Palmer et al., 2010) to their education? Learners would need to be able to open up, and talk freely about personal concerns, the way that interviewees in my research did.

It is not only a question of attitude or willingness but also skills and abilities in the classroom. Discussing Habermas, Mezirow (2018) lists conditions that adults need to meet in order to learn transformatively (pp. 115–116). They include being able to “weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively.” Mezirow’s list also specifies that learners are “able to become aware of the context of ideas and critically reflect on assumptions.” Many learners in the Seniors Program surely come to the program with these abilities

but, for others, are these outcomes rather than preconditions? Do learners learn how to learn in the Seniors Program? How resistant might they be even to the suggestion?

Vignette 8:

I can't help smiling as I walk into the room. There are two kinds of instructor: those who just start teaching, and those who have to rearrange all the furniture first. I tend to prefer the latter, although the Seniors Program pays a kind of fine to Classroom Services if everything isn't put back exactly as it was.

I join the learners in the circle of chairs, in the clearing created by pushing all the tables to the walls. There's no sitting at the back and observing here, and I am drawn into talking about memories of Shakespeare as experienced in high school.

At the end, as everyone is leaving, a student draws to me to one side. "What <u>was</u> that class?" she asks. I'm not sure if she is asking about the topic, and I try to clarify. "Everyone was talking, <u>except</u> the instructor," she goes on, "I've never seen that before." She is not complaining, but puzzled. I try to explain the concept. She says she didn't really know what to do or say, although it felt like everyone else did. She seems to be uncertain whether she likes the idea or not. We forget, maybe in any job, that parts of it that are routine to us can be a closed book to others.

This student's experience seems to be what Nicolaides (2015) describes as "reality that is at first unrecognizable, oblique, simultaneously evoking fear of 'no-cognition'" (p. 179). It is about neither skill nor attitude, but the happenstance of experience, the same situation that means it might never cross someone's mind to go to university for classes in retirement. Introducing more impactful learning approaches, we would need to be careful to bring all learners along with us, which might mean keeping the familiar lecture as an option. As described previously, the traditional welcome can be paradoxically welcoming and inclusive in its familiarity.

On the other hand, and pointing to the need to take classes in new direction, Diane, talking about coping with grief and end of life, said "Books can help, but you've got to experience it." Talking about making education in general more meaningful, Patricia said we have to "loosen up and go outside." This suggests transformation, or

significant learning by doing, by experience, taking on some ideas from the larger university and for-credit courses such as cooperative education.

Mila asked for support from the university, using a real-life example:

> Mila: I befriended two Indigenous carvers on the Drive. That's been quite an experience that has profoundly affected me . . . so can [the university] do something, because I need to volunteer. I need to do something, and gather these strands and recognize where my strengths are and where I need to function as a volunteer in order to keep growing and growing. How can you help me develop, um, the vision and the skills to choose a direction, what is there out there that I should choose . . . It's like university students get guidance—you go into the schools, and they get some help that way. But when you get older, that's no longer there. We have to grow old on our own.

Mila knows that helping out two individuals is not creating sustainable change, and she is looking to the university to help her develop the capacity to have more impact. The Seniors Program's role here could be to ensure sensitive, empowering, sustainable and careful volunteering and community work. Mila, like many other learners in the program, was looking for knowledge not so much for personal transformation but as a support for making a difference in society. The knowledge given might not itself be transformative but, along with the actions it facilitates, could be critical to putting learners on the path to transformative learning. The context need not be as dramatic as wanting to support marginalized people. The learners who want some facts to be "more interesting at parties" might also be putting their learning to use to find a way to change "meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76).

Does "real" learning need to be transformative learning? Mo, Sharon and Diane are educators, but we did not talk about educational theory. Instead, we discussed personal experience and practice. In the literature review (Chapter 2), Kegan (2018) is cited in a warning not to label any change in learners as "transformation" (p. 35). But do the labels matter? Any significant learning is good. Newman (2014), in an iconoclastic paper advises replacing the word "transformative" with the word "good," and deciding if it makes any difference to praxis. "*Good* learning involves a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions" (Newman, 2014, p. 350). This reminds me of Deborah's idea that a good course is one that makes her think, and after which she is different. In looking to create more impactful learning, we do not need to aim for

"transformation." Possibly, the Seniors Program has a role to play in "good" learning as a kind of catalyst or support to real-world problems that learners want to tackle.

The participants in my research again seemed confident and outgoing. Deborah discussed wanting to be a better citizen, and Mo talked about the importance of being a "citoyen" [citizen], too, and of communities' reclaiming responsibilities from professionals. Generally, the research participants demonstrated open-mindedness, a hunger for new ideas, and awareness of issues of social justice and inclusion, although Mila was the most articulate and explicit on the topic. She said she decided in life to work "at cooperativeness . . . to use my energies not competitively but in support of other people and common projects." This would perhaps be an effective response to what Newman (2014) describes as the individualism and indulgence of education as a personal development project. The Seniors Program could instead take on some of the community-building elements described by Pstross, Talmage, Peterson, and Knopf (2017):

> "Seven positive pursuits are highlighted regarding their potential to assist the implementation of community building into lifelong learning programs: (1) asset-based thinking; (2) critical reflection; (3) systems thinking; (4) cognitive vibrancy, (5) inclusiveness; (6) creative expression; and, (7) purpose in life. (p. 62)

I am not sure how far the research participants would go in supporting such radical changes, but they clearly did value peer learning and more meaningful learning with wider impact. Diane said that "the richest classes usually are the ones where the students participate, too because people have such fascinating and varied backgrounds." Patricia said:

> The hive mind will [pause] will embellish, will be good for each individual. It's part of being engaged in a community, is that you deal, is that your discussion about topics of import are done with other community members. And I think that, in my experience of the program there's a really strong community engagement, or there can be.

Jennifer, talking about possible courses on end of life said, "Personally, I wouldn't go with a notebook and write down answers. I'd go to listen to what others had to say. [I'm] OK with leaving class being more confused and upset than before."

5.3. Conclusion

Some of the perspectives on learning in the Seniors Program can seem straightforward: to follow up interests or to “plug holes” in previous learning, for example. But what kind of learning happens that way? How meaningful is it, and who gets to judge this? Research participants, and learners in the Seniors Program in general, make little mention of personal change and transformation, common themes in the literature. Confirming Maginess (2016), learning about old age itself or reflecting on life experience are not popular topics.

Research participants described how the process of learning can be more important to them than the content of lessons, and shared that the joy of the learning itself should be savoured. This enjoyment is not to be underestimated, and is not just an easy cliché. It is real, but also problematic on closer examination. Joy can be exclusive itself, particularly if it is based on the signs and symbols of learning—piles of books and old-school lecture theatres. Learners in the Seniors Program want to be taken seriously as learners and, when they use the word “joy,” it signifies more meaningful challenge than “fun” or “leisure learning.” Research participants also contrast acquiring facts with “real learning” or getting to the heart of it. But what is real learning and who gets to say? Acquiring facts can be a worthwhile and transformative adventure. And acquiring facts has power. In this program, and maybe for other programs for older adults, it is up to learners to judge what learning is worthwhile for them. The lecture accommodates all this: It is not aligned with heartfelt insight but can play a part in it. It does get facts across and they can be powerful. Learners can take their own meanings and significance from a lecture.

Both the literature on older adult learning and learners in the Seniors Program say that social connection is an important benefit of such programs. However, the prevailing emphasis on individualism in education, as well as in wider society, works against connection. There is another contradiction in how few men participate as learners in the program, while the underlying approaches and paradigms of teaching are male-oriented. Ageism is obviously relevant to the Seniors Program, particularly where it intersects with gender. Is resistance to marginalization and belittlement why learners are defensive about being seen to participate in serious learning? Is it important to learners in the Seniors Program, in order to be taken seriously, to be associated with what *looks*

like real learning? More active learning, in unfamiliar formats such as the talking circle might *look* less traditionally serious, but could address the other issues, of connection and true gender diversity. Some research participants are willing to try new approaches, but what is lost if we move away from the lecture and in whose interest would that be?

The various courses and events that made up the end-of-life initiative in the Seniors Program were an attempt to put some of the ideas expressed in this section into practice and to bring a different kind of educational approach, tackling a deep and complex societal issue, to the program and its learners. In the end, however, the initiative was not successful in achieving these goals. The next chapter explores why that was so.

Chapter 6. End of Life Courses: A Case Example

6.1. Introduction

This chapter considers an unsuccessful but instructive initiative in the Seniors Program. The project comprised various courses and events dealing with the topic of end of life. It followed an arc of conceptualization, implementation and, ultimately, suspension for lack of registration which coincided with the course of my research. The story of this "end-of-life project" provides insights into several issues in the Seniors Program: lack of clarity about purpose; lack of clear outcomes and objectives; exclusion of different populations of potential participants; preferences for either hard facts or open-ended exploration; different approaches to teaching and learning; and the paradox of serious learning as a leisure activity.

In this final chapter, I consider how the Seniors Program responded to the new legal, medical, and social landscape of end of life. Program staff identified a need for education about how much is changing in this area, which meant opportunities for the Seniors Program in tackling the problem. However, putting ideas into practice turned out to be problematic. For example, research interviews highlighted assumptions involved in planning the initiative, including what "end of life" means precisely, which I had not considered until participants in my research brought it up. Research interviews also included discussion of how best to learn about end-of-life, and this chapter considers learners' perspectives, shaped by life experience and current narratives on end of life, including several older and newer books. Learners' motivations are explored too; for example, some were looking not to be given details and "how-to" guides, but to make meaning of life and of death with the help of the institution.

As Sork (1991) points out, while "success is wonderful" failure offers "potent learning opportunities" (p. 5). Reflecting on failure prompts questions about assumptions and values that success might not (Ernst & Martin, 2006). Failure gives urgency to the need to examine and change processes, strategies, and procedures (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009).

6.1.1. The end-of-life courses

The new end-of-life projects included:

- Two large, free, one-day events that offered public talks along with information tables set up by a variety of organizations working in the field of end of life
- Short non-credit courses that were part of the usual scheduling, and of the same format as most other courses in the Seniors Program, except with a smaller number of learners than usual and different teaching approaches designed for more engaged learning
- Two experimental “death cafés”
- An ambitious attempt to set up a course leading to a non-credit certificate in end-of-life studies, which was aimed at a wider audience than just the Seniors Program learners, hoping to attract working professionals whose jobs involve dealing with end-of-life issues

The free one-day events were hugely successful, attracting around 1,500 people in total, the six-week courses less so. The end-of-life certificate course is currently suspended due to a lack of enrolments, despite considerable support and interest from a variety of bodies and professionals in the field.

6.2. The institution’s perspective

6.2.1. The problem addressed by courses on end of life

As with the demographics of an ageing population, we are in new, uncharted waters when it comes to end of life, and the various projects listed above were intended to help learners navigate them. Medical, legal and social certainties have disappeared, and we have not yet worked out how to deal with new technologies and concepts. Schillace (2016) describes the feeling of loss of societal consensus, and the surrender of control to “experts,” that research participants also discussed:

> We still look to find meaning in life and death but, for many, the familiar rituals of our parents and grandparents simply no longer seem satisfying or meaningful. When it comes to death, however, we increasingly deliver the most important aspects into the hands of others. These 'others' have themselves become diffuse, more like systems than individuals. Instead of the fatherly doctor who made medicine and traveled by horseback to treat patients, we find medical marts, alternative therapies, impersonal clinics, service providers and a quagmire of internet information. (pp. 181–182)

Gawande (2010) gives a dramatic account of how advancing medical technology has brought new challenges to how we think about life, living and the end of life:

> "Is she dying?" one of the sisters asked me. I didn't know how to answer the question. I wasn't even sure what the word "dying" meant anymore. In the past few decades, medical science has rendered obsolete centuries of experience, tradition, and language about our mortality, and created a new difficulty for mankind: how to die. (Gawande, 2010, para. 23)

The new initiatives in the Seniors Program aimed to address this new social, legal, and medical landscape. Specific examples of developments that few institutions are teaching about include laws such as MAiD; innovative forms of burial, such as green burials and do-it-yourself funerals; forms of self-advocacy such as advance directives and other paperwork; and emerging orthodoxies such as the normative expectation that everyone should eventually "accept" death (Zimmermann, 2012).

The challenge exists not only for medical staff but also for anyone who has to navigate "medical marts, alternative therapies, impersonal clinics, service providers and a quagmire of internet information" (Schillace, 2016, pp. 181–182). Staff in the Seniors Program felt that we had identified, in short, a need not being met.

6.2.2. The opportunities offered by creating courses on end of life

We also identified an opportunity. A survey of other institutions early in the development of the end-of-life certificate course discovered few that had taken up similar challenges. The University of Glasgow, for example, has an "End-of-Life Studies Group" (University of Glasgow, n.d.) taking a multidisciplinary approach to social science research on end-of-life care. Kings University College at Western University offers a BA in Thanatology, with an interdisciplinary overview of death and dying in North American culture (King's University College at Western University, n.d.). Related, but not focused on end of life, the University of Ottawa offers a Certificate in Medicine and the

Humanities to Faculty of Medicine students, aiming to broaden perspectives, promote reflection, and foster tolerance to ambiguity (University of Ottawa, n.d.). All of these were open only to existing students at the universities. We also found many unaccredited courses, mostly online, offering training to be an “end-of-life doula” or “end-of-life midwife.”

With our own end-of-life certificate course covering the broad field of end-of-life issues, we hoped to attract a new kind of student—professionals. McIlwaine, Scarlett, Venters, and Ker (2007) discuss the inadequacies of professional training on end of life in the medical and social work fields in Scotland: “Some students’ perceptions are that they have had no teaching on this topic” (p. e157). My own nurse training (back in the 1980s) was three years long but included only one short class on the topic of death. The consensus of the advisory committee for the end-of-life certificate course was that there is no comprehensive training on end-of-life issues, nothing bringing together legal, historical, medical, and spiritual questions, and that such training is urgently needed.

We aimed for a wider audience than just medical and social work staff. Advertising for the certificate course on the university website said it would interest health professionals, legal professionals, policymakers, researchers, gerontologists, psychologists, social workers, and educators. The thinking was that the course would support the many professionals such as lawyers and financial advisers who are finding themselves dealing more often with more complex end-of-life issues.

This new target audience was an opportunity for the Seniors Program. The end-of-life certificate course would charge much higher fees, and be positioned more as a “revenue-generating” than a “community-engagement” initiative. Raising the status and visibility of the Seniors Program in the institution is an important strategy, supporting its ongoing viability and pushing back against the idea that the Seniors Program is merely a less-than-serious “extra” to the university’s core business. The plan to attract this new kind of business was ultimately unsuccessful. The final meeting of staff, instructors and the advisory committee for the certificate course discussed how almost all of the learners in the course had participated for personal interest rather than professional development. This was a problem for the viability of the course. It needed to attract working professionals in large numbers to be viable financially.

Possibly, the lack of uptake was due to ineffective marketing, particularly in trying to “rebrand” the Seniors Program as offering career training to younger adult learners. It seems that expressions of interest in the end-of-life certificate course did not translate into investing the money and time to register. Sork (1991) cites an earlier case study of the failure of an educational program, one of the few papers, Sork says, whose authors were willing to discuss failure. In that earlier study, Smith (1974) pointed to a marketing issue that also applied to our courses: “Learner is not promised specific rewards or outcomes” (cited in Milne, 1974, p. 41). The issue goes deeper than marketing. A “messy” and ambiguous issue does *not* require a messy and ambiguous approach. We could have been clearer about what learners were going to take away from the course. Our promises were vague, with objectives such as “more confidence” and “greater awareness.”

Another problem was a fundamental assumption: “There seems to be a need to educate older people on what to expect during the dying process so that they can make realistic plans to better cope with it” (Cicirelli, 2002, p. 191). This sounds straightforward, and there is a need, but why should *universities* take this on? Some basic information is necessary, because, generally, many people seem to have an unrealistic view of the dying process, but providing basic information is not the potential strength of university. And why should the Seniors Program in particular take on teaching about end of life? This also sounds like a version of “functionalism”: making life easier for institutions by preparing older people to be less of a burden. Given the preference in the program for lecture and acquisition of facts, were we well placed to facilitate deep discussion on uncertain and challenging issues?

On the other hand, the one-day events offered opportunities to raise the profile of the Seniors Program by taking over a large part of the campus space for a day. Focused on the general public of all ages, they engaged people who did not have the resources or inclination to attend the regular courses. These large events were intended mainly to give straightforward information, and to identify resources that participants might follow up with on their own. The events asked for little commitment from participants. While there were opportunities to reflect and discuss, participants mostly listened to lectures and picked up leaflets from tables.

Meanwhile, the “regular courses” that covered end-of-life issues as part of our usual schedule, being just six-weeks long and without a certificate, offered opportunities to develop the capacity of the Seniors Program as a whole by promoting new modes of learning. End of life is not just a serious topic but one in which we felt learners could contribute more to discussion. As one of the research participants points out, there are no “experts” on end of life. These courses were initially successful, but registration numbers fell after the first two years, possibly once most in the student body who are interested in the topic had taken a course.

We hoped in short, to raise the profile of the Seniors Program, to attract new business, and to promote more engaged learning. What, however, did potential registrants make of our initiatives? What were they looking for?

6.3. Learners’ perspectives

The research participants discussed formal and informal learning about end-of-life. Most of the participants had taken one of the courses described above. What did they bring to the courses? What issues in society were they already aware of? Why did so many avoid the courses, even criticizing our decision to offer them in the Seniors Program? What did learners think the courses would be about, and what did they hope to learn?

6.3.1. Popular literature

Participants in my research mentioned books that had shaped their views on end of life. Becker’s *The Denial of Death (*1973) was one, although it is less a book about end of life than an account, in Freudian terms, about how fear of death rather than the sexual drive is the underlying motivator in our lives. As Larry summarized:

> Larry: Denial of death shapes our culture, and so we’re all driven to not think about death, to keep ourselves preoccupied with our wants, our projects, our purchases, our trips, our lifestyle—you know, you could think of it as a kind of immortality project.

A second influential work unavoidable in discussions about end of life is Kübler-Ross’s *On Death and Dying* (1969). Kübler-Ross’s concept of the stages of grief is still in use, and is maybe another example of emerging orthodoxies, in that some medical staff

seem to see it as a kind of checklist of the correct responses to bereavement (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007). Descriptions can become templates and the scholarship can come to be seen as what "should" happen. Medical training tends to look for certainties, checklists, and safe procedures, distorting messy reality into clarity. Possibly, some of the learners participating in the new end-of-life courses were looking for the same preciseness.

Participants in my research also mentioned examples from a new subgenre of popular medical books (e.g., Kellehear, 2014; Gawande, 2015; Kalanithi, 2017). These have a common narrative arc: doctors outgrowing the arrogance and certainties instilled by their training, instead coming to acknowledge the unknowable and the "messiness" of human experience. Looking back on my own training as a nurse, I recognize this opposition in the disjunction between the tidy presentation of nursing theory in the classroom and the confusion of insoluble problems on the wards.

Jenkinson's *Die Wise* (2015) was brought up by two participants in the research, and it has featured in some of the Seniors Program's new end-of-life courses, too. Jenkinson (2015) points out how two opposed perspectives on end of life (which could perhaps be broadly characterized as scientific versus superstitious) can contribute to our difficulties: "It is harder to die now, with all of our medical pain and symptom solutions and psychological technologies and New Age affirmations, than it has ever been" (p. 214).

On the "scientific" side, Rosendaal (2010) says:

> After centuries of medicine governed by magical thinking and witchcraft, it was only a relatively short time ago that we embraced the concept of science-based and evidence-based medicine, and nothing is to be gained by returning to the dark ages of superstition and miracle cures. (p. 1)

Yet, concerning end of life, positivism can lead to oddities like the "death anxiety scale," with its multiple dimensions, including "a death anxiety dimension, a dimension reflecting thoughts and talk about death, a dimension dealing with the subjective proximity of death, and a dimension reflecting fear of pain and suffering" (Cicirelli, 2002, p. 124). Can these feelings really be meaningfully plotted on a graph? On the other hand, Neumann (2017) lists some questionable alternatives to the scientific approach:

> Need someone to “be present” for your final hours? Need music, aromatherapy, reiki? A death doula will, for a fee, swoop into your home and help you navigate the end of your life, from your spiritual needs to the arrangement of the furniture in your sickroom. Awkward, Americanized, consumer-focused forms of Buddhism have long since taken over our exercise (yoga), our offices (mindfulness), and our homes (feng shui). Now, with doula programs popping up like mantras in the mind, they’ve come for our deaths. (para.2)

As our survey of other courses and institutions demonstrated, these alternative approaches are common. The Seniors Program considered, briefly, offering an end-of-life doula training course (in fact, this was the germ of the whole initiative). We dropped the idea, however, because we could not see how a short course could qualify someone who was not already competent to take on a role demanding such sensitivity and interpersonal skill. Can universities teach those traits, in any length of course? Should we have tried?

Jenkinson’s *Die Wise* (2015) is anecdotal, provocative, and not academically rigorous, although it is based on years of first-hand experience of working with the dying and their families. It is an unforgettable book: a typical sentence runs, “He died in the distracted, reluctant, twilight awareness of his dying that for much of the indigenous world might be the very definition of hell: argumentative, terrorized and addled” (Jenkinson, 2015, p. 55). This passage reminded me strongly of my experiences as a nurse and maybe gets to the heart of one reason we should explore end of life now, before we are “under the gun.”

This literature shaped the view of some of the research participants. That they were familiar with it illustrates how the courses attracted people with an existing interest in exploring end of life. What can we infer about those who stayed away?

6.3.2. But no one came

Low uptake of places in the end-of-life courses is the biggest part of the story. We ended the initiative because of the lack of registration. Some participants in the research felt that the low numbers in the courses were due simply to people not wanting to talk about an uncomfortable topic:

> Diane: I have found that some people really don't want to ever think about it. It's just one of those things, that they're really uncomfortable with the word "dead."

The Seniors Program does address difficult topics in its other courses. The program has run successful, regular, courses on genocide, war, destruction of cultural heritage and the environment, and numerous other serious issues, but none of these seemed as off-putting to the majority of the student body as exploring our own mortality. This might be partly because the dark topics listed were presented with some academic distance, generally by lecture. Learners were not asked to discuss their feelings about genocide, for example. End of life is perhaps both too serious and too personal:

> Ronja: A lot of people say it's tough to have that conversation with [their] children. They don't want to hear it. My daughters said, too, that, "We don't want to talk about it. Just write down what you want, and we'll do exactly what you want." And I said, no, I want to discuss it and I want to feel . . . um, well I think that's fairly typical. People for some reason feel uncomfortable talking about it.

There have been stronger objections to the end-of-life courses than simple non-participation. End-of-life courses are unique in the Seniors Program in that some learners who do not want to take them do not just ignore them but want them gone from the program. Talking to a class about an upcoming end-of-life-related course, I got the usual mixed reaction: some interest and some awkward laughter. There was also a comment, "Wrong audience!" I did not respond at the time but the comment stayed with me: "wrong audience" in what sense? That they were there for diversion and amusement only? That "end of life" would not interest anyone in the room? That it does not belong in the Seniors Program? Reactions similar to these were quite common, which I remember taking as confirmation that the end-of-life project was necessary, rather than how difficult it might be.

Maginess (2016) conducted co-research with learners in a program in Ireland for older adult learners that sounds similar in many ways to the Seniors Program. She describes "special courses" focused on issues of aging, which are not so well subscribed in the Irish program. Maginess suggests resistance to stereotypes as a reason, an idea which Diane echoed, "What somebody took exception to was the death and dying [course]. They said, 'What's wrong with this [program]? They want to focus on the death and dying stuff so much. Is it because we're old?'"

Seniors Program learners seem to object to being "pigeonholed." They come to the program to participate in academia in some way, not to contemplate old age or to be singled out as having special needs:

> I suspect that part of the rejection of courses to do with ageing was also to do with the frequently negative stereotypes of older people. . . . The characterisation of older people as a burden, decrepit or incapable is one which older learners very understandably wish to repudiate. (Maginess, 2016, p. 66)

Maginess (2016) suggests alternative hypotheses for low registration, which could also apply to the Seniors Program; for example, the courses were taught by unfamiliar instructors and were not marketed as effectively as the regular schedule of courses. Maginess (2016) says, moreover, that students felt they "already knew how to do old age" (p. 66). It is possible that many people see end of life as another milestone in life, like marriage, parenthood, or a first job, that few of us take special training for and which we can muddle through when the time comes. Possibly, as Kellehear (2014) suggests, people do generally find enough courage and resource in themselves to manage end of life or bereavement.

However, the one-day events on end of life did have overwhelming participation and were the success story of the end-of-life initiatives. They were free to the public, which helped, of course, and asked only for a few hours' commitment. Participants could choose how deeply to engage: They could browse information tables, listen to talks, or get involved in facilitated discussion. This range of choices, too, might have contributed to the success of the events. On the other hand, for Lynette, even the practicalities were daunting.

> Lynette: They're the [learning opportunities] I haven't taken—the practical—because it seems too real [laughter]. . . . Oh, my God, that's too real! The will, the representation agreement, the funeral, the burial, power of attorney, all that kind of stuff.

Nevertheless, the various agencies at the information tables reported their happiness to be approached by people who *wanted* to talk about green burials, advance directives, estate planning, MAiD, and so on. They did not have to spend time carefully working up to the topics. Although we succeeded in attracting large numbers willing to dip a toe, at least, in these waters, our problem in selling end-of-life courses was finding the people ready and willing to explore end of life in more depth.

> Jennifer: [I am] surprised and not surprised [at students' objections to end-of-life courses]. The people I talk to are desperate to talk about any facet at all, but I can also see a big death denial side to culture.

Learners in the Seniors Program are ambivalent about end of life, perhaps, and need the option to easily and gracefully disengage if necessary. Learners might have been reluctant to register for courses because they were not sure what kind of room they might end up finding themselves in. Courses on end of life that mentioned group discussion about end of life might have seemed too daunting, given that many find group discussion alone a challenge.

In summary, end of life seems to be more challenging than other difficult topics, maybe because it is more personal and intimate. Perhaps learners do not want to discuss their death or any death, and certainly not in a class of near-strangers. It is also possible that more mundane issues such as inadequate promotion limited participation in initiatives, or that the project was seen as outside the scope of the usual Seniors Program offerings. It did not fit the culture of the program as learners had come to know it. Student resistance to end-of-life studies might also have been rooted in resistance to stereotyping older adult learners, and the question "why in this program?" On the other hand, the success of the one-day events points to the importance of low-barrier, low-commitment learning opportunities particular in areas that are new and untested.

As when courses on teaching skills are offered to faculty, it is possible that those who do not attend are those who would most benefit. I recall reading through the responses to a program-wide survey of learners (see p. 10), growing more and more disappointed that questions on end-of-life courses had been skipped by most learners. Eventually, I realized that the growing tally of "no response" was not simply a blank but was saying something. What, exactly, I could not tell: "Let's talk about something more pleasant" or "I think I can manage this without help"? I learned to listen to silences and "failed" surveys or interviews, which can be just as instructive as failed projects.

Another lesson that came up in the interviews for my research was that there was no shared or common understanding of the phrase "end of life."

6.3.3. "End of life"?

Participants raised questions about what "end of life" means. When does "end of life" begin? Or, if a life ends suddenly in old age, was there a period of "end of life"?

> Gerald: Tomorrow evening we'll be going to the opera, and one of the guys in the group is 93 . . . he's just back from a trip that he took by himself—he'll be telling us about it—and he's planning another one in the next few weeks. Is [he] at the end of his life?
>
> Patricia: So what do you mean by "end of life"? Because, you know, compared to when I was 12, my perception of end of life is "Now I can see it." And, all things being equal, I have an idea about how long it will be. So I view myself in the end-of-life stage but I'm not sure that's what you mean.

The question of definition contains a few issues. One is the new landscape, discussed in the introduction, which has an extended period of life for the majority of people after retirement. Are these new-found decades "end of life"? I used the phrase "end of life" in my research questions, and we maybe tended to use it in the Seniors Program as a gentler way to say "death," but it is not just a euphemism for facing up to death. As Patricia said, "So this, to me, is not about death. This is about a continuum, so 'end of life' has a sense of continuum and 'death' doesn't. 'Death' has a finite feel to it." Larry picked up on a concept from Jenkinson (2015), raising the question about whether courses on "end of life" are about life, or about dying:

> Mark: What do you want to learn? What don't you know?
>
> Larry: [commenting on my note-taking] Long pause. [laughter] Well, I guess . . . I would be most interested in how you lead your life now. In whatever remaining years you have.

Of course, people might be uncomfortable with the idea that end-of-life studies is life affirming. There is confusion about what "exploring end-of-life issues" means. Is it learning about "how to die well" (in practical or spiritual terms), or is it about how to live, even if in the last stages of life? Is it inevitably connected with old age and decline? Deborah, just as I switched off the voice recorder, talked about her prison visiting with heroin users whom she describes as very close to death, despite their youth. She said that many will inevitably use again, though they do not want to, and are much nearer to end of life than learners in the Seniors Program.

Even in this relatively homogenous group of learners interested in the topic, there were a range of conflicting views on what end-of-life studies might be about and for. I do not think we addressed or clarified the issue in our various offerings on the topic of end of life, which variously (and, it might have seemed to learners, randomly) covered these and all kinds of other issues inevitably connected to end of life. We might have missed an opportunity to attract more learners to the various end-of-life courses by pointing out that "end of life" includes life and how to live it, but that perhaps is a philosophical point, more than a marketing approach.

Vignette 9:

It's a new term, and the middle of the morning in which courses begin, around the time when they take their break. I get a call to meet a student at the reception desk.

Seniors Program courses all take place in one building, which also contains the program's office. I appreciate how learners feel free to drop by the office in the first week of classes, to say a course is not what they expected or is not up to standard. I do not enjoy so much that they often ask for their money back, which sounds like a reasonable request but runs up against university policies. This puts me in the role of the unreasonable bureaucrat "just following the rules." Walking round to reception, I am metaphorically dragging my feet.

This turns out to be a pleasant chat, however. J. apologizes and says the course is not going to work out for him. I try my usual spiel about university policy on refunds, and also about giving the instructor a fair chance—not judging them on the first hour or so of a course, when everyone is just getting settled in the room. J. says, "Well, I'm 80 years old" and explains he doesn't want to waste his time persevering with an instructor he doesn't really take to. He is not complaining and not upset at all. We come to an arrangement, bending the rules, so that he can switch to a different course that has space. It strikes me that J. telling me his age is important: not wanting to waste time, and the unspoken thought behind that. It reminds me of my father mentioning in a phone call that "he's had a good innings" and how we glide over that allusion to death. Neither J. nor my dad seem anxious about it. Maybe they are comfortable living with the idea, if it's not quite articulated.

6.3.4. Learner motivations

What were the disappointing numbers of learners who *did* register in end-of-life courses looking for? Despite the consensus on how difficult the topic of end of life has become, several participants described finding out about the new legal, medical and technical issues as quite straightforward:

> Jennifer: If you go to the [Nidus Personal Planning Resource Centre] website—it's not a very friendly website—there's some stuff that a lawyer has told them they have to put in there, I'm sure. But when you actually get down to the [representation agreement] form, there's only three pages, and it's very simple.

Like many other aspects of daily life, although end of life is more complicated now, there are also more resources available to help cope. In fact, giving out this relatively straightforward information, the kind that can be communicated in a leaflet, was one of the main successes of the one-day events. Hundreds more people were involved in those than registered for courses on end of life.

Do people look to formal education, in general, for practical support and information as they move through the various stages of life? Does seeking the "joy of learning" for its own sake in the Seniors Program seem so remarkable because other forms of education, from preschool onwards, are seen as practical preparation for what happens next? This is not necessarily a criticism. Practical preparation could include the idea of education as empowerment, of getting some insight into how things work. Specifically, regarding learning about end of life, it might include learning in order not to be panicked and swept along, ending up with end-of-life decisions being made for you. One of the modules in our non-credit certificate, for example, was explicitly about making health care at end of life "work for you." As Patricia pointed out, however, not all practical problems lend themselves to classroom learning:

> Patricia: I have no family in the city. Think about this for a minute . . . Like, what happens if I don't have somebody in my community that's able to step forward—the cohort might be my age, and they're not going to step forward. And I *have* a cohort, a charming bunch of wacky 50-year-olds . . . But, it's a lot of detail [to be communicated] for somebody who doesn't know you, for when you croak and you can't be around to tell them what you really want.

This is maybe the kind of problem that older adults getting together as peers could work on effectively. I suspect, however, that many in the Seniors Program would not see it as “learning,” still less as the kind of academic learning they seek joy in.

Coming together to discuss end-of-life issues suggests a different purpose than the usual stated benefits of the Seniors Program—learning things, social connection and mental health—although it could surely provide those, too. Perhaps the special motivation is the promise of a kind of learning or exploration that cannot be found elsewhere. Could groups of people discussing death in a context that promotes serious exploration (whatever than might mean for them) replace the common traditions and competence around end of life that we are popularly supposed to have lost? Is it possible to contemplate end of life as a solitary learner, by reading about it, for example? Is it even safe to do so, without some support and facilitation?

Participants, although without saying it was necessary to do so in a university context, did discuss how simply talking about worries with other people brings them into perspective:

> Mila: Amazing how talking about anything that bothers you draws it out of you, rather than festering in your body and creating illness. Listening is good. It can help friends move through a spot where they're stuck . . . How do you unstick people? What will provoke them and promote a person’s growth? If they’ve resisted for a long life, maybe you just have to let them be . . . but it’s so sad when they sit around the edges, nursing their drink, getting more and more tight—and won’t dance.

Again, there is the question of whether the reality of end of life is generally avoided. Jennifer pointed out that people can and do talk about it:

> Jennifer: I think a lot of people want to talk about it. That’s my impression anyway, of the people that I know. A good example would be [a 10-minute meeting that] turned into a three-hour gabfest. Because two other people were there, and we must have spent an hour talking about that, end of life.

Deborah, on the other hand, illustrated how our culture generally avoids talk of death, and is maybe more squeamish about end of life than it is about, for example, sex:

> Deborah: Sitting in the car age four, mother explained to me that everyone will die. Well, I thought it was a very bad idea. Didn't like it at all . . . You know, books are always very keen on describing first sex, but [they] don’t talk about when people discovered they were going to

> die. When you're not religious, that is unbelievably overpowering and awful.

Simply raising the topic of end of life can be powerful. I came across the Go Wish game (Coda Alliance, 2006), while working on our end-of-life certificate course. It is simply a pack of cards, each of which has a short prompt, suggesting something that might be important to you about end of life, from "to have my financial affairs in order" to "to have human touch." They can be used in various ways, including shuffling through them and talking about whatever comes up. One of the research participants borrowed a pack, and I am glad to say never returned it, because it is in use still in a hospice. However, the cards are being used there without needing any of the support of academia. Is just being able to raise the topic of end of life and start conversations a weighty enough purpose for study at university?

Possibly, the real lack, and the consequent need to study, is that there are no common rituals to follow. There is little consensus, and emerging, secular "orthodoxies" tend to be thin and may be inadequate:

> Jennifer: People aren't having funerals anymore, they want celebrations of life, which I don't quite agree with. What's wrong with having a funeral or a memorial service? I don't think everybody's life is worth "celebrating." Certainly remembering, but—I guess the celebration part—some celebrations of life that I've been to have been rather peculiar and very forced. My family are English, so if somebody dies, there's the church service then everyone gets home and has strong drink [laughter]. And sandwiches and nibbles and that sort of thing. It cheers you up a bit. I've always liked the idea of the New Orleans funeral.

The new orthodoxies are not time-tested and can contradict each other. Home funerals are "good," but that means no organ donation, which is "bad." The legislation around MAiD is being reworked to try to solve insoluble ethical conundrums; for example to protect certain categories of vulnerable people, who cannot access MAiD, which means that they are being discriminated against as well as protected.

Hazel told a story about a blue suitcase, a "thin" kind of family tradition that started as a joke. I struggled with how to characterize the story and the "tradition." Maybe the "thin and inadequate" is, in fact, worthwhile? Maybe this could be as deep and meaningful as imagined, half-remembered traditions of our ancestors:

> Hazel: We're not at all religious, and pretty matter-of-fact about death, and we have a blue suitcase. So, I think we're pretty irreverent. When my grandmother died about 20 years ago, my sister inherited a blue suitcase. It was sort of a joke but not really. My aunt wanted everything gone, and so that's what my sister took out of the house. And it was like a cheap vinyl suitcase from the '60s or '70s. . . . We were out for dinner one night with my dad and were joking around about [my sister's] blue suitcase, and we asked what we should do with him when he dies, and he said just put him in the blue suitcase. So we decided then that as each family member dies we'd put the ashes in the blue suitcase, and the last one standing has to deal with the suitcase [laughter].

However helpful and meaningful it might be, the blue suitcase is inside a family, a kind of serious in-joke. Participants demonstrated that there is a lack in current-day beliefs and rituals, I believe, although they were not often explicit. It is unfair to expect a deep cosmology and exploration of death in a one-hour interview, but the ideas we talked about on afterlife, for example, were quite commonplace. None saw an answer for themselves personally in religion.

> Jennifer: I always see myself as living on through my children—and the people that remember you. But I don't think of myself as—in the other way round—as being my grandparents' memory.

> Lynette: I think you stay as memories with your children, nephews, nieces . . . Photos on the computer can be gotten rid of too easily. I have photos on my walls—parents and siblings. Then you pass things down to people—and those things take on this kind of memory. That's how I think that we stay.

As discussed below, however, academia cannot substitute for religion, and I do not believe this was what motivated learners to take part in these courses.

Largely missing from the literature, and from our planning for most of these courses, is the motivation that came up in research discussions, that thinking about death can improve one's life now in various ways, and that is why we should find a way to explore it: changing attitudes, promoting care and connection, deepening appreciation, correcting perspective, and so on. It is a key idea in some workshops on end of life that I have participated in, too. Maybe this idea is missing from the literature because it sounds like "carpe diem", a truism that seems trite in writing, no matter how meaningful. Schillace's (2016) book is subtitled "What the history of death and dying can tell us about life and living," but it is an exception.

Religious writing does articulate the benefits to everyday life of studying death. For example, “it is possible to come to terms with the fact of death in a way that enriches our lives” (Lief, 2018, para. 8). Lief’s Buddhist view is that contemplating death “wakes us up” and counteracts our “clinging” to the temporary and illusory. And from a Christian perspective, Quivik (2018) says:

> Remembering that our lives will end creates a realistic context for the choices we make regarding how we spend our time and respond to change, what we do with ourselves, our time, and our possessions . . . In the face of death, priorities get rearranged. Sometimes keeping death before our eyes gives us the courage to do the hard thing. (p. 56)

Jennifer noted the value of someone else’s faith, described in an article she read for class (“and it was palpable, even in reading this article you could see the woman’s faith”) along with how the younger students seemed to be unable to recognize it: “When they made the report at the end, they missed out completely on this woman’s faith, at all, at all.” Are Seniors Program learners of a generation and place that means that they, while not being religious, have first-hand experience and memories of religion, more so than their children?

Some research participants brought up the idea that death should be explored because it is part of life. Mo put it in terms of a concern about inclusion and exclusion:

> Mo: It must be part of it! To not experience cancer and disability and dementia and frailty as well as excellence—you know, we’re cutting ourselves off from this vast expanse of what it means to be human.

Participants suggested several reasons for more deeply and broadly exploring end-of-life issues. A common idea was that we should make the effort to compensate for how “these days” death is hidden away. Some of what participants said, although specific and considered, tended to sound like common complaints about “these days” not measuring up to the past:

> Lynette: Well, I think, nowadays, people don’t want kids seeing death. There was a time in history when everything happened at home, and the body stayed at home and people came to visit, and all these rituals were performed at home, so there was not a mystery, no mystique, involved in it, but now it happens somewhere else—it happens in hospitals or, you know, care homes or wherever.

Mo pointed out that the aim is not to gloss over end of life.

> Mo: It's not about being happy about it: It's about embracing all of humanity and life's emotions. Hence the insipid blandness of "acceptance." It's embracing sadness, hurt, pain, etc., not [just] accepting and being happy, happy, happy.

This raises the question about "joy" in "joy of learning." Learners in the Seniors Program value *serious* learning. They seek "joy," not "amusement," and joy demands depth, but is there a point at which the seriousness becomes too dark? There is enthusiasm for darker topics and also for engaging and participatory classes, but maybe not for both of those elements together. This, in turn, raises the question again of whether or not university, and the Seniors Program, was the right place to try to explore these issues. How far can we push the boundaries of what university classes can successfully take on, and how far could we stray from what learners expected of a course in the Seniors Program? How do you explore end of life within the physical and institutional restraints of the classroom?

6.4. Learning in classrooms about end of life

6.4.1. Lectures, transformative learning and end of life

So far, we have seen what the end-of-life projects can tell us about institutional and student purposes and perspectives in the Seniors Program. The projects can also tell us more about issues discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the hidden depths of the lecture format, and the tension between "just the facts" and "exploring mystery" approaches to teaching and learning. It is possible to see in some of the participants' answers an underlying assumption that university is an authoritative source of clarity:

> Diane: I did do that *Denial of Death* course, with the guy before, but it's interesting that he has such a . . . I guess that he's very politically driven. He's quite a character, and it was interesting, but I didn't really come out of it with a clear sense—I did read the book, by Becker—but I never really came out with a clear thing, about people and denial of death.

When I asked participants what university could teach them about end of life, I was falling into the same way of thinking, of learners being given a "clear thing" on the topic, and my question landed awkwardly:

> Deborah: What can university teach me? Well, [pause] I have all the paperwork in order.

Even though my question seemed, on the face of it, to be asking for student input, it contained an assumption that the university has to transmit something and is in charge of the learning process, as in a typical lecture. That contradiction is apparent in Seniors Program classes, too. If an instructor opens with "What do you know about *x*?" or "What do you hope to learn?," often someone will respond with "I don't know, you tell us," "Isn't that your job?," or something similar. Research participants were not making wisecracks, but they still struggled with the question:

> Mark: What can we teach you? Or what help do you need, or what support do you need?
>
> Mila: That's a very good question, and a very natural [answer] that comes to me is that I do not know. Because that's going along with the process. I know what I have learned and I can kind of grasp at things, strands out there that I might have to go to next.

Looking for "a clear sense" from a course is not necessarily limiting. As also quoted in Chapter 5 (5.1.3. Acquiring facts or getting to the heart of it) "transformative learning may occur in instrumental learning" (Mezirow, 2018, p. 117). "Just the facts" about end of life, in particular, might be transformative:

> Sharon: What changed for me—because we've written up all our things, Nidus and lawyer—but I wasn't sure about where I wanted to be if there was a protracted death. I don't want to be at home—I don't want home to be a place of dying. The concern is that there's enough hospice beds in the city.

The course Sharon is talking about was not intended as a reflective, personally affecting course. Yet, the information Sharon encountered brought about change, for her personally. Hazel had a similar experience in a different course, information about burial options leading to some hard thinking:

> Hazel: One thing disturbed me in class—cremation is environmentally unfriendly. There are green burials, but so little choice. There's science maybe—donating bodies. And new forms of cremation—electricity and alkaline—leave compostable ash.

There might also be reassurance in some facts and statistics:

> Larry: I attended a talk by a guy who's focused on dying . . . one of the things he said was that people are terrified of dying but actually the reality is that maybe about two-thirds of people who die have a good death. They have a pretty decent experience of it.

When talking about Seniors Program courses on other topics, learners often describe the six-week course or one-off lecture as “an avenue into” a topic. Similarly, could smaller, more manageable details represent a way to approach exploration of end of life? Learners might start with learning about advance directives, wills and funeral options, not with how to grieve or how to die. However, most of the participants in my research had already found that way in, and most already seemed to have the paperwork completed and in order. For some information, a leaflet is all that is needed. Finding out for yourself can go a long way:

> Ronja: My younger daughter ordered something similar from . . . I don’t remember who wrote it . . . from Amazon. It’s kind of a workbook, it gives you questions and it’s a workbook that you work on at your own pace, and it asks you all kinds of questions, for instance to write down stories about the person who died.

A rule of thumb that we use in the Seniors Program for planning offerings each term is that we do not offer “practical” classes, such as language learning, photography, meditation, and so on, that teach how to do something (other institutions, such as community centres, do this more effectively). In planning the end-of-life initiative, the Seniors Program did not clearly decide between this desire for “something deeper,” and the feeling, expressed above, that it is simply good to get some clear, practical facts into the open, where they seem less daunting. Were we reassuring people and nudging them towards preparing, or were we challenging and perplexing them, in the name of “real learning”?

Vignette 10:

Talking about death in a classroom. Every idea on this PowerPoint slide, if it were opened up to discussion, could take up a whole session. Each nugget is thought-provoking. There’s the (surprisingly large) number of people who have taken advantage of MAiD in this province compared to others, and the (surprisingly long) history of euthanasia, for example. It feels like the instructor is racing through it, and I recognize the impulse to stick to the plan and cover the material. Whenever she leaves a pause, learners jump in, anxious to talk. A conversation is starting to take shape, despite the rush, and the questions are mostly as thoughtful as the presentation. There is some laughter, too, punctuating the mood of attentiveness and concentration.

One student tells us what God has just said to him about the topic. His comment doesn't sound out of place, just a little long and repetitive. It's handled well by the instructor. Most instructors seem to have the instinct to take care of the feelings of these "off-the-wall" commenters, to make their contribution relevant and to pull a point from it somehow that is accessible to everyone in the room. Towards the end of the class, someone brings up an interesting point about the validity of connecting historical instances of euthanasia to elitism in accessing end-of-life services, but now we're out of time.

Like several others, Mo had assumed that courses on end of life would avoid the lecture format and take the form of some kind of seminar. She suggested that opening the conversation and providing "expert facilitation" would be the university's contribution:

> Mo: Students pay for expert facilitation. Seminar starts with university owning the opening part, while students research

Diane agreed with this idea of the university offering support:

> Diane: A seminar course on things that people could openly talk about. You have to have . . . obviously it needs to be an instructor that could guide it well, but I could see myself being quite helpful for people in that because [story about talking to a friend with cancer]. And I think that university could be very helpful in this.

Should the Seniors Program have done more to access and use the experience of learners in the end-of-life courses? Gerald said "all our parents have now died," which is surely true of many older adults. He also mentioned friends and relatives who had died younger and unexpectedly.

> Patricia: The resources of individuals make it a very rich experience, and consequently, I suppose, very effective.

Gerald spoke, too, about lessons learned from his father's death, about asking for help and not being afraid of the dying person: "They're still the person you know and love." Mila spoke about a different kind of loss "living death" of her parents with Alzheimer disease. Lynette also spoke of her mother's "bifurcated life"—how, having "lost 95% of her biography, it is almost as if she has outlived her life, and maybe thinking, in moments of lucidity, 'Please, God, let me go.'" Diane talked about supporting

a friend who died of cancer, and also about how her grandchildren can talk openly to her about death: “When you die, Gran. . ..”

The depth of experience learners have suggests peer learning would be viable. In the context of end of life, peer-learning is exemplified by the death café movement, a worldwide social franchise or “free affiliate scheme” in which people meet to discuss death. Crettaz (2010) created the death café concept. His goal was “to increase awareness of death through peer discussion, in order to help people make the most of their (finite) lives” (Impermanence, n.d., para. 2). It is in part a reaction to the “professionalization, medicalization and bureaucratization of dying and death” (Northcott & Wilson, 2016), as well as to the perceived disappearance of society's familiarity with death. Death cafés are explicitly free, peer led and informal. Ideally they are held in cafés, with food and drinks, and without any expectations or anyone in particular in charge. This is uncomfortably different for many even from facilitated discussions in an educational context.

The rules of the death café franchise discourage facilitation of the discussion, relying instead on the milieu of the café to shape discourse, and insist on food and drink being available. “Il n’ya rien de plus simple q’un Café mortel . . . une parole sur la mort dédramatisant par le boire et le manger d’un bistrot” [There is nothing simpler than a death café . . . a discussion about death de-dramatized by the food and drink of a bistro] (Crettaz, 2010, p. 21). Cafés are also non-academic, “sans recourir à la philosophie, la religion, la culture, la psychoanalyse” [without recourse to philosophy, religion, culture, psychoanalysis] (Crettaz, 2010, p. 95).

However, the death café model can also demonstrate the limits of peer learning. The initial impulse behind the Seniors Program’s one-day end-of-life events came from death café participants in Vancouver wanting to dig deeper into the issues, rather than repeating the same basics at each café, which inevitably happens as newcomers join each session. They wanted more information, and to speak with experts in the field, too. The building where the Seniors Program holds it classes thus became host to two large, public, one-day events on end of life, with expert speakers and professionals in the field mixing with the general public.

Moon (2011) describes how transformative learning can arise in life, outside formal educational settings, specifically from bereavement, a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 118). Few of the end-of-life courses and events in the Seniors Program were intended to deal with bereavement. We felt this was a service more effectively offered elsewhere, and immediate experience of grief could not be properly addressed in the classroom. One six-week course was, however, designed to foster connection and reflection, to allow time for personal experience to be discussed, and to take a slower, more careful approach than the courses aimed at professionals (which were, in hindsight, overfilled with content and learning objectives). Sitting in on classes in this “care-full” course reminded me of facilitated discussions in my previous job, discussions that could go in any direction. Each week of the course tackled a different aspect of end of life. Some weeks focused on practicalities, and some delved deeper. Learners were not sure what to make of it. There was praise for how helpful the course was with practicalities. along with appreciation of what different students described as “emotional information” and “spiritual information.” These phrases sound to me like people trying to describe something unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. “Emotional and spiritual information” sounds something like the ideal, but not easily measured, learning objectives Noddings (2006) lists, which include “tolerance of ambiguity, concern for the common good, heightened aesthetic sensibility and self-actualization” (p. 340). The short course described was a success but, unfortunately, like other in the end-of-life initiatives had low registration numbers.

While end-of-life courses and events did feature peer discussion and might have facilitated transformative learning, they mostly made use of lectures and were held in traditional classrooms with rows of tables, including all the paraphernalia of the university. This context might have been limiting but also, similarly to a death café, might have presented a milieu that felt familiar and predictable. The next section discusses the special milieu that academia offers.

6.4.2. The feel of academia

Where can we talk about end of life? What supports that conversation, and how important are the intangible aspects of particular spaces? Does the Seniors Program offer a special resource, even if just a gathering space that facilitates exploration of end

of life? If there was a golden age of communal understanding and acceptance of death, can universities help recreate it?

Gerald maybe identified an opportunity for universities in his recognition of the strengths older, traditional institutions bring to helping people deal with grief and end of life:

> Gerald: I have a lot of time for people who subscribe to a religion and practice it, because churches are one of the few literally cradle-to-grave institutions. They meet a huge human need, that at every stage of a life, there are people in a community who will comfort you, advise you and guide you, and if things go wrong, a lot of people will pray for you and look after you. So the power of prayer in many cases is not calling up God and asking him to fix something. It's doing something that will really help a fellow person . . . If I were to lose my life and I was lonely, I might very well join a church for the company. And they do superb funerals—and that's not being "cute"—the standard Christian funeral, and I've been to a Sikh one too. They're terrific in working through from grief and shock and eventually to "go forth in peace." It's beautifully done, and it's thousands of years of experience behind the practice.

Does a North American university carry the same solidity of tradition—"thousands of years"—that a church does? Does the Seniors Program want to take on that aura? If we did, what control would we have over the process? It could work only if built organically by learners and instructors. Some people do seem to look for authority, trustworthiness, and an air of being "time-tested," when it comes to end of life. This gravitas is maybe an antidote to the thinness of tradition described above. What institutions, other than universities and churches, have it? Of course, a major difference is that, for our services, there is a charge, and this sets up a different relationship and expectation.

Is the Seniors Program a place with enough tradition and authority to be able to hold conversations on end of life? For many, it has a reputation for a leisurely learning experience, and research participants commented on how many of their fellow students want to talk about something more pleasant. But could the Seniors Program also borrow some of the authority of the university, which, combined with the feeling (for some learners at least) of supportive community, would make it a comparably "sacred" space?

Mila talked about courses dealing with personal and complex, "messy," topics, and saw the Seniors Program as having a role in providing the help, not defined.

> Mila: Growing into our elderhood, what is it to be an elder, reaching out to society, and doing it with your help. We can't do it alone. I can have the vision and desire but can't do it alone.

It is difficult to see how the Seniors Program, as it stands, could help with "growing into elderhood." The program overall tends to have a conventionally academic, distant, and "in your head" feeling. Like two other participants, Mo is an educator, and these educators seemed the least impressed by classroom learning and the gathering of facts. Mo talked about how to bring real-life experience into the classroom.

> Mo [following a story about, as a young teacher, dealing with the death of a student]: To not experience cancer and disability and dementia and frailty as well as excellence—we're cutting ourselves off from this vast expanse of what it means to be human . . . A possible course in which students go out and find these neglected experiences and report back on them. All the different ways of being human, what they love and what drives them crazy.

I had thought this research "homework" would be something most learners in the program would reject, but a recent course on nature in urban neighborhoods, with learners gathering examples of "the wild" in the city to bring to class (in the form of sketches, notes, poems, or photographs), followed this model quite closely and successfully. Would Seniors Program learners in end-of-life courses have needed to go out and look for end-of-life conversations and experts to report back on, or would their own life experience have sufficed? With some planning end-of-life courses could be spaces to reflect on experience, and to ask difficult (or "odd") questions. In other words, the classroom could provide a special kind of space, where worries about death might be noticed and examined rather than hurried past (just as plants in the sidewalk might otherwise be ignored in the case of the nature course).

The demand, ubiquitous in end-of-life commentary, to "take death back" from professionals and professional settings contradicts the notion of the safe classroom space. There's a tension between reclaiming end of life from professionals and wanting some "safety," structure and tradition around how to explore it.

> Mo: Who teaches about the array of humanity that is out there? . . . In an earlier time, it would have belonged to the community. It would have belonged to parents, and grandparents, and aunties and uncles . . . I'm not sure everything the public schools have absorbed belongs to them, so how do we engage our society to [pause] re-engage?

Hazel, in the context of movements to reclaim end-of-life care and decision making, broadened this to medical experts:

> Hazel: [I'm] against the medical profession. They've taken birth over AND death. People with cancer going through a year of misery, instead of letting them die. The medical profession intervenes way too much sometimes.

"Take it back from the professionals" is maybe a demand that only the privileged feel safe in making. Is the Seniors Program exclusionary in how it approaches end-of-life discussion? Does it work only with a group of reasonably like-minded individuals? Is the need to "make meaning" or "dig deeper" a middle-class, academic kind of obsession? Maybe most people are too busy getting on with life to sit back and contemplate it in the perspective of inevitable death. Maybe there is a valid folk wisdom in avoiding the topic.

Talking about death can be seen as an odd conversation, just because of the topic.

> Patricia: We hide our dying people away, and our dead people. We do not include it in our appreciation of the cycle of life. You're woo-woo if you think that way. It makes people very uncomfortable . . . the discomfort comes from not being able to express feelings . . . [instead there is] giggling, embarrassment.

Participants suggested that the Seniors Program offers a place where people can have "odd conversations":

> Mo: "I'm different, I'm the weird one, nobody else is like me" . . . But, guess what, on this taboo subject [i.e., end of life], either we're all weird, or we're all part of this wonderful mix we call human. Maybe that's part of what they're looking for [in Seniors Program courses], "to know what I know and feel what I feel." And to not know.

What other institutions offer a space where people feel they can talk seriously and at length about death? In the end, the key seems to be life experience plus something. That "something" might be more than conversation with peers, as in a death café, which is only a start that people seem to outgrow quite quickly. The "something" might be sitting in a lecture and hearing some thought-provoking ideas. Is the lecture also helpful at getting people "on the same page," sharing information and insights equally? Is that what the Seniors Program can help with? Are universities good at getting people started on reflecting, then going off and thinking about it on their own? Questioning assumptions? Can universities also help people dig deeper, providing

resources and forums? Can the university nurture that deeper learning in the relatively short, non-credit courses that programs like the Seniors Program typically offer?

6.4.3. Stories and wisdom

Maybe the topic of end of life should have been approached indirectly, through story. "Death, bereavement, and rebirth have always been present in art and mythology" (Letherby & Davidson, 2015, p. 347). The courses were not set up to facilitate or manage this—mostly, perhaps, by being time-limited. Hazel, for example, brought up a familiar complaint:

> Hazel: There was one person in the class that really dominated discussion, and repeating stories . . . telling the same stories and he's off topic.

In a class designed for storytelling, this might have worked. Deborah demonstrated how storytelling could work, although it was in a discussion about how children respond to grief and loss:

> Deborah [discussing children and end of life]: For my grandchildren I have a book called *Seal Is Lost*. This little boy loves his seal, a stuffed seal, and he loses Seal, and it's how he deals with Seal being lost . . . My grandchildren . . . really like the book. *Seal Is Lost* is one of their favourites.

This is a metaphor that works for children, but the interviews revealed an interest in stories and possibilities for their use in adult learning, too. Storytelling was the alternative approach to teaching and learning most commonly mentioned by participants. There was a hint of romanticizing stories, affording them the same reverence academics tend to have for books—for their own sake rather than their use. It is a romantic view that I share, but it obscures how useful stories might really be in teaching and learning.

Participants in my research were not sure how courses on end of life could manage learners' stories and input, perhaps thinking of the instructor-centred "Q&A" model, concerned about how discussion could be kept on time and on track:

> Diane: That would be the thing in something like this [i.e., a course on end of life] if you've got someone who's recently bereft, and then they're pouring their grief out, and no one would really want that in a format where you've got an instructor handling it.

> Jennifer: That sort of situation opens itself up to people talking very personally. And that might be harder to deal with. If someone's talking about the death of their husband, you can't say, "Well, that's fine, but we've reached Point 4" . . . That might be a problem.

I am not sure how we could have made better use of story in our end-of-life courses and events, either. When I tried setting up a death café (see Section, 6.4.1: Lectures and end of life, for a description of death cafés), I was aiming to encourage storytelling, not opinions, or relation of facts at second-hand. It was not really the café as described by Crettaz (2010). Of necessity, it was in a classroom, with the tables pulled together, a plate of muffins, and a tablecloth. Nevertheless, the conversation was as deep, wide-ranging and compassionate as it has been at "real" cafés that I have attended. The café at least demonstrated the possibility of learning together as peers. Feedback, however, included that the café was not moderated assertively enough: One woman's story about losing her husband "went on too long." I, on the other hand, saw that story as a special moment, with someone speaking from the heart, and the whole room listening. In general, as in other death cafés I have attended or heard about, there was discomfort with the lack of obvious facilitation or leadership at the table.

Some participants perhaps saw stories more as a way of connecting than as a teaching strategy:

> Mo: I think stories are a huge part of "village." I don't think you can have village without story, because that's what, that's the hook. That's what brings us together . . . Stories connect us to the Godhead. It's part of that nature we were given. Not interested in who was given that nature—dogs [for example]? It's a huge part of how you're alive.

Caxaj (2015), whose research was with the community of San Miguel Ixtahuacán in Guatemala, points out that Indigenous storytelling is neither self-focused, nor fashionably postmodern. It is not romanticized, either. It is based on specific places and cultures:

> In contrast, Indigenous storytelling is grounded in a unique history and trajectory, revealing value-systems and ways of knowing of diverse Indigenous peoples. (Caxaj, 2015, p. 2)

Participants did tell stories unselfconsciously, although about family rather than cultural history. Without talking *about* stories, Lynette was able to tell meaningful stories based on particularities:

> Lynette: I go and I visit the cemetery where my father is, and I talk to him, and I do miss him. I mean, there's not a day goes by when I don't think about him. I think about him every day, even though he was just a couple of weeks shy of his 92nd birthday when he died, so he had a full life . . . we all have memories of our dad, and when we get together, we talk about our dad. We feel we were lucky and blessed to have had him for a father.

Lynette told several stories about her father, including one she pieced together properly only after his death. At the end of the Second World War, he had the job of dismantling bombs, and the war machine in Germany in general. When doing so, he disobeyed orders to destroy ruined factory buildings, because homeless civilians were living in them. While her father was alive, Lynette had heard only some parts of this story, and her brother others. She also found medals when cleaning out his belongings. "That's death," she said.

Cook-Lynn (2008), of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, points out that Indigenous stories are different from this typical kind of family history of the dominant culture in North America. Indigenous stories have specific purposes and have been passed on by countless generations:

> The recording of Native views while investigating philosophical formulations has always been the purpose of storytelling, especially that storytelling that tells one generation of listeners what the previous generation has come to know through the long tenancy of the tribe in a specific geography. (p. 330)

Jenkinson (2015) suggests that the cause of the feeling of lack or thinness of tradition for settlers in North America is that they miss these deep roots in the place they have settled. Possibly, in a culture that does not have a living tradition of storytelling (outside of books), trying to introduce stories as a strategy to explore end of life is doomed to failure. It is artificial and self-conscious in a way that focuses on the form rather than the intent. A true tradition of storytelling needs no support or explanation. I am reminded of my father-in-law. He was a natural and gifted storyteller, but would have been baffled to have been called (in a reverent, academic tone) a "storyteller":

> Traditional Irish and Scottish storytellers used narratives—anecdotes and short autobiographies—to answer questions about storytelling generally, and about their own storytelling in particular. (Ryan, 2006, p. 318)

This fundamental unselfconsciousness cannot easily be promoted or facilitated in class. Without it, we are marvelling at how wonderful the stories are and not paying attention to what matters. Participants clearly valued stories from previous generations, however, and drew lessons from them, in Deborah's case stretching back to her family's origins in Europe:

> Deborah: I have 300 years of family letters . . . So I have dealt with reading about people's lives and how they got involved—and the things that were happening! And their lives were so real! And they're all dead. And I've got involved in stories. My great-grandfather—one entry in his diary one day is [about] his son, who he clearly loved. "Closed Harry's coffin" . . . um . . . "Harry's coffin was closed today." That was the only—other days had lots other stuff, the weather and all [but this day was only] "Harry's coffin was closed today."

In general, participants talked more about family, and living on in family memories. No one had "myth," a resource broad enough to offer the listener the opportunity for reflection and interpretation. Expecting that in a relatively short research interview is unrealistic, however.

A common trajectory of conversations about end of life might be that any piece of information can lead to unpacking of emotional or spiritual issues, which leads in turn to thoughts about life and how we live it. It is an old idea, that thinking about mortality compels us to think about changing how we live now. Is that part of why learners push it away? Thinking about end of life makes difficult demands about how we live now, prompting reconciliations with friends or family, maybe, or the end of proacrastination.

All of the participants reflected on life and offered their perspectives, particularly about end of life. Ronja spoke about grieving:

> Ronja: And the thing is that when somebody dies, people often say, "Oh, you'll get over it." You don't! You never get over it, because that person's never coming back. You never get over it. You get used to it, to a point where you can go on with life. But you never get over it.

Gerald told a story of organizing a burial plot, and identifying a cemetery near his wife's family's home. Expecting formalities and paperwork, they were surprised to be told there was a family plot with room for "three more" and that, when the time came, someone should simply "talk to Bob" about opening the grave, "or you can just bring a shovel." Gerald said that is sounded like the kind of place where he would like to spend eternity.

Larry talked about Buddhist practice and the impermanence of everything, including moods. Mila talked about “bowing out gracefully,” even though the party goes on without you. Diane talked about regret and the importance of reconciling with family, if necessary, and also told how her cousin talked about her own impending death with her grandchildren. Mo spoke about the death of a young student, when she was starting out as a teacher, and how difficult it was to “make peace with that.”

This is sharing complex and subtler information, not available in books or leaflets, and it taps the resources of learners, engaging and acknowledging them and their strengths. It is also demystifying, humorous, normalizing and liberating. This storytelling offers encouragement to prepare, and reassurance about the many forms the work of grief work can take. Where else is there space created for this? Even in interviews which were only an hour long and in quite artificial and forced circumstances, participants shared this usually unspoken and avoided, but potentially useful and comforting, wisdom about end of life. It may not be myth nor a deep tradition of storytelling but is meaningful nonetheless.

6.5. Conclusion

What lessons were learned from the end-of-life initiative? The large, free events were effective in attracting hundreds of people and, it seems, in meeting a need. Their popularity was not due only to the lack of fees. It arose from the different levels of engagement offered to tentative, ambivalent learners. What can the university provide that a death café, for example, does not? Possibly, the university can provide authoritative information to get people started in discussion or reflection, along with an air of authority or trustworthiness in which to hold discussions. Maybe, because of the persistence of old paradigms of education, the ghosts of lecturers in the room, there is a feeling of structure and safety.

The courses on end-of-life issues aimed to tackle a pressing problem in society, and to promote a different kind of learning in the Seniors Program, in line with the description of “cognitive vibrancy” described by Pstross et al. (2017):

> Going beyond the adage “keep your mind active or you’ll lose it,” cognitive vibrancy is exemplified in classroom settings where the instructors challenge learners to come up with creative solutions to world problems. In

> the process, students have a chance to discuss and build upon each other's responses. Thus, the ideas of other people force learners to respond and think as their own points of views are being contested. (p. 70)

The end-of-life courses were useful to many learners, including at least some of the research participants. The story of the courses is useful, too, in throwing into sharper relief ideas important to this research such as different expectation of the university's role: transmitting practical facts or facilitating challenging discussions. In particular, there was the question of the initiative's intended outcomes. "More awareness of the issues in the new landscape of end of life" was a more precise outcome than most that have been articulated for the Seniors Program, but was still too vague to be helpful in designing courses, or in letting potential participants know what to expect. Leaving it to learners to make of the courses what they may sounds intriguing, but also excludes the less confident, or people less familiar with postsecondary education. The free open-days, which had an overwhelming participation rate, show what is possible when barriers—fees, registration, fixed time commitment—are removed. This raises the question of how much more welcoming the Seniors Program as a whole could be if we were, for example, to offer more learning opportunities without fees or complicated registration processes, on topics outside conventional curricula, and not tied to traditional classrooms (although there would be, of course, numerous, interesting practical issues to solve if we moved in that direction).

Highlighted issues

Some issues that surfaced in the larger Seniors Program were also evident, sometimes in a more pronounced way, in the end-of-life initiatives.

The end-of-life initiative tested the concept of "serious leisure," and the difference between learning "just for fun" or more seriously. The Seniors Program has offered successful courses on serious topics, but end of life seemed to be a step too far from fun, and even from the deeper sense of joy found in tackling challenging issues. Maybe end of life is too personally affecting. The end-of-life projects also probed the limits of the Program as a space for "odd" conversations: Maybe there are some kinds of conversation, such as those on end of life, for which the university cannot create an appropriate space. Many students asked why the Seniors Program, in particular, was offering course on end of life, and if it was due to an assumption that older age is about

death, highlighting the resistance of older adult learners to being pigeon holed or stereotyped.

The format of the courses also pointed up objections from some older learners to being offered courses that they see as less “university-like.” Telling stories did not strike them as part of serious learning, raising again the tension, and connection, between acquiring hard facts and exploring unanswerable questions as definitions of serious learning. The end-of-life courses also made clear the practical difficulties of facilitating storytelling and sharing wisdom through the existing resources of the Seniors Program: its physical space, administrative constraints, student and instructor assumptions. This reflects the challenge faced by any unconventional approaches to learning in the program. The end-of-life initiatives, despite going through a formal planning process, also mirrored the lack of clarity about purpose, approach or curriculum in the larger program.

More positively, the series of courses and events pointed out that there are some students, at least, willing to tackle particularly challenging topics and unfamiliar formats, still in the broad context of pursuing serious leisure for personal interest, learning for its own sake. And the free, open one-day events contrasted with the fees, registration process and time commitments of our regular courses, and suggested a possible alternative.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

My research questions explored what an insider's description of the Seniors Program can tell us, how learners and other stakeholders have shaped the Seniors Program, and the possibilities for change in older adult learning at university. The concepts that surfaced in this research include: the relative scholarly neglect of older adult learning; the problem of exclusion of so many from older adult learning at university, despite the logic of program mandates and in tension with how the exclusivity and the cachet of academia are valued; the haphazardness of the evolution of older adult learning programs, and their consequent adoption of persistent, older paradigms of learning and traditional curricula; the contrast between preferences for being given facts as a passive student and exploring mysteries as an active learner; the question of whether older adult learners in general are significantly different from younger; and ambivalence about changes to approaches to teaching and learning.

The following three sections summarise key findings and themes in the research.

7.1. Taking older adult learning seriously

Despite growing research interest, the quality of older adult learning in university is neglected, and accounts of it can be romanticized or patronizing. Learners in the Seniors Program want to be taken seriously as learners and not stereotyped as elderly. They prefer the courses they take in the Seniors Program to be university-like, but their ideas of what that entails can be rooted in more traditional, didactic teaching and learning practice than what most universities currently offer

Theories and models in the literature of older adult learning do not describe the Seniors Program. For example, the literature on andragogy describes working-age adults, and on geragogy adults in the fourth age—cohorts that are respectively younger and older than most learners enrolled in the Seniors Program. On the other hand, models from other areas of education are more apt in describing or informing the actualities of the Seniors Program, models such as social justice or liberal-humanist paradigms of education and the concepts of leisure learning and "serious leisure" (Stebbins, 1992). In particular, Elsey (1986) suggests a link between leisure learning and the expert/novice, lecture format. The Seniors Program aligns with descriptions of similar

programs in that its default mode is the lecture, an administratively and logistically convenient format. The lecture has advantages for learners, too, that are not widely acknowledged: It can be inclusive in that it is familiar, with relatively simple etiquette. On the other hand, that familiarity and comfort are experienced by those who have had positive experiences of formal education, and there are still unwritten rules, of behaviour, dress and speech that can be inadvertently transgressed by those not "in the know." The lecture and the culture of learning in the Seniors Program can be exclusive, too.

The literature does not fully capture the complex dynamics of the Seniors Program, either. There is a conundrum about the potential exclusivity of traditional teaching and learning methods and curricula. Many learners in the Seniors Program might have, for various reasons, missed the chance to attend university earlier in their lives. The traditional lecture feels to them like the authentic experience that they missed out on. With this in mind, the ethics of pedagogically progressive engaged learning are drawn into question. As noted earlier, in whose interests are these efforts at progressive education, and who decides on them? The feeling of prestige and exclusivity of a university is paradoxical: It might be valued more by those who have been excluded from it by those whom have already benefitted.

The lecture can perpetuate the novice/expert and transmission models of learning. Nevertheless, despite pedagogical snobbery about "filling pitchers with facts," people can also learn in significant and empowering ways from lectures, making their own meanings, coming to their own understandings, and finding pathways to further exploration. A lecture audience is not necessarily passive. The tension is sometimes clear in the Seniors Program: For many learners, serious learning and "getting to the heart of it" in class mean being given certainties by an expert while, for others, real learning means engaging in peer discussion of imponderables. The end-of-life initiatives in the Seniors Program highlighted this: Some learners wanted to be given information on straightforward practicalities about managing end of life, and some wanted to discuss its mysteries and spiritual dimensions. Of course, these two approaches are not neatly, mutually exclusive and discussion of apparently straightforward practicalities also prompted deeper, less easily answered questions, as can happen in all kinds of learning.

Transformative learning is connected to paying attention to learners and taking care of others. This means slowing down in lessons, and not worrying about covering

certain amounts of objectives in particular time limits. It means acknowledgment that emotions and spirituality are *not* “something that simply invades our experiences of teaching and learning, an alien force trying to mess up our best-laid plans and intentions” (Clark & Dirkx, 2008, pp. 89–90). Teaching in a way that fosters transformative learning perhaps demands more of a disposition than a technique. It can be done in the context of a conventional classroom, but demands a different attitude to efficient use of class time, and to classroom dynamics such as who gets to contribute and about what.

The idea of ‘sharing wisdom’ is a cliché connected to the active-peer-discussion versus passive-lecture-audience question. In the Seniors Program, the cliché exemplifies a contradiction. How can sharing wisdom with one another be valued, when most learners just want to listen to the expert at the front of the room? Similarly, learners and the literature cite social connection and brain health as benefits of the Seniors Program and others like it, but lectures (despite their strengths) are not the most effective way to promote either. Learners in the Seniors Program do seem to value it as a place to hold conversations that would not be appropriate elsewhere—on abstruse or academic topics—but learners are not tolerant of “time-wasting” discussion by other learners in class, and the lack of success of the end-of-life initiatives demonstrated limits to how challenging those conversation can be.

The ‘joy of learning’ is another cliché often heard in the Seniors Program, and is part of the oxymoron of “serious leisure.” Learners in the Seniors Program see a difference, difficult to pin down, between learning merely for fun and, more seriously, for joy. One is about indulging in an amusing pastime while the other means deep topics in academic surroundings. But is the air of seriousness more about the superficialities—the lecture theatre, piles of old books and so on—than the substance? Sitting in on or leading classes, I have experienced the joy of learning in the Seniors Program, but I wonder if it is both real and somewhat performative.

7.2. Influences on and expectations of the Seniors Program

Learner motivations described in the literature include joy, wellbeing, connection, empowerment, and time well spent. In the Seniors Program, learners also talk about filling gaps.

As described in the literature on other programs, the Seniors Program is shaped by the paradigms learners hold about what education should feel like. They love the feel of school or academia, as they idealize or remember it. The experience of the many learners who loved school at some point in their past tends to nudge the program towards solitary learning, passive learning, and the traditional “malestream” curriculum of experts who pass down certainties. There is a tendency to middle-classness and maybe to a kind of predictable niceness—the appeal of comfortable classes that are not too challenging, yet give a taste of academia. The end-of-life initiatives, the existence of which in the program many learners objected too, provoked objections in part by being too personally challenging, maybe too serious. In fairness, however, complaints were also based on perceived ageism, the Seniors Program hosting courses on end of life as if old age and death were the most natural match.

The ageism of society in general has an influence on the Seniors Program. Is the program based on the functionalist paradigm, of keeping older adults active and preventing them from being a burden on society? Does the ideal of independence and individualism for older people drive the preference for education for personal development or benefit? It is difficult to say: These are assumptions about old age in society often unspoken and internalized. The defensiveness of many involved in the program, a perceived need to avoid being seen as a charitable and trivial program for old folk, might reinforce the inclination to traditional and serious-looking approaches in the classroom.

Russell (2011) describes paradox of time for older adult learners which applies to experience in the Seniors Program, too (see Section 2.2.1: Andragogy). Time is experienced differently for older adult learners as, from one perspective, they can have more free time while, from another, time is more obviously running out. And short, non-credit classes represent a smaller fraction of the life of an older adult, as does time spent

in school itself. Older adult learners tend to have a deeper well of experience, along with experience of a wider variety of kinds of learning, perhaps, simply from having been around longer.

For many in the Seniors Program, however, this fund of life experience does not lead to confidence and outspokenness in class. Not mentioned in the literature is a particular kind of humility on the part of older adult learners. Their reserve might stem from a down-to-earth, realistic perspective on the likely originality or value of their contributions in class. This is not gerotranscendence, the spiritually-oriented withdrawal in old age from mundane concerns in old age described by Tornstam (2005; see Section 2.2.4: Transformative learning), but a version of it. It is maybe a taciturnity that is easiest to hold from a comfortable, privileged place. And it has a downside—learners' own reticence in class might mean policing of others' humility through an expectation of letting only the expert, with their prepared and authoritative remarks, speak.

The maintenance of mental health is commonly mentioned by learners and in the literature as a motivation to learn in later life. Again, there is a contradiction between the goal of keeping the mind active and the apparent passivity of listening and deferring to expert authorities. On the other hand, learners in the Seniors Program do confirm that *what* they are learning is less important than *that* they are learning. That the process of learning is the outcome is the most noticeable difference between the Seniors Program and most other credit and non-credit programs in the university. Is it arguable that the Seniors Program potentially promotes the most serious learning because it is focused on process not qualifications?

Social connection is also often mentioned as a motivation by learners in the Seniors Program. Despite the emphasis on individual learning, learners can connect in the program over time, but perhaps only if they are skilled at connecting in any case. Many learners also remain lonely in the crowd. Some are happy with the amount of social interaction the program provides: The comment "it gets me out of house" can be taken as flippant, but also as quite profound. Research participants expressed nostalgia for closer-knit communities of the past, compared to the loneliness of the modern-day city. However, although social connection is seen as important, it remains an accidental, incidental aspect of the Seniors Program.

A notable aspect of the Seniors Program and similar programs is how few men participate. Women make up the majority of the student body, but are still marginalized by a mostly traditional and masculine curriculum. Research participants touched on how the exclusion of a generation of women from STEM subjects in high school is being put right, in a small way, by courses available the program. They also contrasted stereotypically male traits in work and school, individualism, competitiveness and arrogance with interdependence, group learning and learning in order to help others and promote social change. There are problems in classrooms in the program, however, when some instructors try to move from the familiar structures, sharing power with learners, rather than lecturing from a position of authority. They are criticized as disorganized, or making it up as they go along.

Issues of cultural, class and ethnic diversity in the Seniors Program, however, seem more pressing for the program than those of gender. The student body, and the roster of regular instructors, do not reflect the diversity of the city in which the university is located. The literature points out that 90% of older adults are not involved in formal education (Patterson, 2018). The Seniors Program has financial support for learners, and regularly holds free events, but it seems that particular kinds of cultural and educational capital are also necessary to see participation as an option. Despite the fundamental (if often unstated) mandate of the Seniors Program, and others like it—"learning throughout life is a human right" (Talmage et al., 2016, p. 540)—this is a problem the Seniors Program has yet to effectively tackle.

7.3. New possibilities for older adult learning programs

As described above, there is some agreement on why people attend programs for older adult learners at universities: social connection, mental health, the joy of learning, information, and empowerment. Institutions have often given such programs a broad mandate to serve communities not otherwise engaged with universities. Research participants expressed enthusiastic appreciation for the Seniors Program as it is, and demonstrated some openness to change too. How could university-based programs for older adults change to better meet their goals and mandates? What is the potential, and what might stand in the way?

There is some advantage in a program's having vaguely stated goals. It allows space for experiments and for diverse approaches. On the other hand, as described above, the vagueness can lead to a narrow, conventional kind of curriculum based on learners' ideal of what university should feel like, and that does not facilitate learners' contributions in class. This air of traditional, expert-to-novice, academia is both a central point of appeal and potential barrier to participation in the Seniors Program. The large one-day end-of-life events in the program gave a glimpse of how reducing barriers might work in practice. The events were free, but this was not the only reason they were popular. Participants in the events could decide their own level of commitment in the moment, browsing information tables, listening to a talk, or contributing to a discussion. The events still relied to an extent on the authority, perhaps trustworthiness, of the university, for the events to have credibility in tackling a weighty subject. Participants did not have to already have a fondness for school and the lecture theatre to feel they would be welcome.

For a program as a whole, the findings of the thesis support offering a range of options, including the traditional lecture and more engaging and effective learning opportunities. The research points out the value and popularity of traditional classes, and the importance of not pre-judging their importance and efficacy from learners' perspectives. While some older adult learners are open to new approaches to teaching and learning, and to education to help bring about societal change, for example, even those learners might want to occasionally sit back, relax and take in a well-crafted, old-school lecture on a traditional liberal arts topic. Change in the Seniors Program would be a process of adding alternatives, not necessarily of replacement.

My experience of setting up Death Cafés as part of the end-of-life initiatives in the Seniors Program suggests that change needs to be carefully explained and justified. A course based on story-telling will not work if learners are judging it by the standards of a lecture, where long, unrehearsed contributions from participants is generally an annoyance. And I have explained to a few instructors new to the program that, generally, they cannot simply ask learners to get into groups or pairs to discuss something, they not only have to explain, they have to sell the idea. Older learners, not having been in school for decades perhaps, might need to take time to learn about new ideas on being a student. Storytelling in class, for example, should be a good fit for programs for older adult learners. Even in the relatively brief interviews I conducted for this research, stories

flowed naturally. Storytelling follows the logic of the consensus on the purposes of older adult learning: social connection, mental health, and even “serious learning.” Storytelling could move a program away from the cramped paradigms of solitary learning and expert/novice transmission. Storytelling might even lead programs further, to alternative ways of knowing and alternative venues, getting people out of the classroom. But the idea would have to be sold. Learners would need to understand the methods and the aims.

Kenny and Davis (2018) delivered a paper at the Age-Friendly Universities Conference in Dublin, 2018, in which they said, “Overall, information is key to decrease barriers” (as cited in Hansen et al., 2019, p. 225). This was about reassuring people to encourage them through the door, but could also apply to opening things up inside the program, making them more welcoming. It would mean learning about learning. How do we increase the diversity in the student bodies?

Learning about learning might mean raising awareness of how people learn outside conventional notions of silent, solitary students. It could also mean engaging with the discussions about equity, diversity and inclusion that are occurring in the larger university: for example, looking critically at who is included or excluded from the program, and how and why. It would mean studying privilege, in the same way we are opening up exploration of what it means to be a settler. Learners do not seem to like course on age but this could also mean considering ageism. While taking on these topics can be justified as an ethical necessity, the discussions and the learning involved are also in line with desire for the Seniors Program to be taken seriously, bringing it up to date with best university practice. The questions posed would also have a practical goal—facilitating opening the program to diversity.

As explained in Section 3.1.3, the vignettes in this thesis are intended to capture aspects of the program not otherwise represented, and are more open to interpretation by the reader. This final vignette concerns the move to exclusively online teaching and learning that came about because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred as I was writing final drafts of the thesis. The themes the vignette touches on include (I realize after writing it): change in the program, and its unpredictable forms: wariness of learners about new approaches; exclusion (now based largely on digital literacy); and

defensiveness about the Seniors Program in comparison to the notion of real, serious academia.

Vignette 11:

"I call them pineapple essays," says the instructor.

On Zoom, we're looking back at almost a year of teaching online with classrooms closed because of the pandemic. She's noticed a change in the essays that learners are submitting.

"Pineapple essays?"

"Yes. The kind that start, 'I have always liked pineapples, and my grandfather used to like pineapples, too. He had a tree in his garden…' and they go on for pages and pages about the significance of pineapples in the student's life—then at the end there's a sentence, 'In conclusion, I learned a lot from this course.'"

"Ah," I can't help smiling, "I think that's my fault and I'm not sorry. I've been encouraging folk to use the first person. I was trying to nudge people away from what you might call 'Wikipedia article' essays, but it sounds like we've over-corrected."

She agrees to have a look at the online course I created on how to write essays.

"Maybe you could add a word or two about tying things back to the topic," she suggests, "Or at least about just mentioning the topic now and again."

Working from home, working with instructors on adapting to online learning during the pandemic, I am getting more insight into their ideas on teaching and learning than I did when we met face to face each week. The sudden, forced shift to online learning has thrown several issues into sharper relief. Exclusion, for example—we see only about a quarter of the usual number of learners in a reduced schedule of courses. And the continued persistence of the lecture… The instructor and I move on to the problem of what content should be presented on the course website, and what (if any) the instructor should lecture about on the Zoom platform, in live videoconferencing. Many learners seem to prefer passively listening to a "Zoom lecture," ignoring the website, and all the new resources and fora that online learning offers. But I'm still smiling to myself at the thought of a noticeable shift in how essays are written in the Seniors Program as she says,

"If they want to watch someone read a script and show a PowerPoint, we could just record the lesson and post the video."

"Ha, yes. But if they want recordings, they might as well go to the Yale website and watch some serious lectures for free..."

7.4. Reflection on the research

In the interview for my position for the Seniors Program, I was asked if I could find the same reward and challenge working with relatively privileged people in the program than I had encountered in my previous work in the Inner-City drop-in program. In that interview, I managed to fumble together a barely adequate reply about ageism and intersectionality. The question was about taking this program seriously, and I feel I have answered it fully through research. Taking the Seniors Program seriously means not shying away from finding fault with it. My research has supported me in championing more engaged forms of teaching and learning, persisting with less popular courses and experimental formats, nudging learners gently out of their comfort zones. On the other hand, my research has also increased my appreciation of the value of what I had seen as outmoded approaches to teaching and learning. I have more respect, too, for those learners who describe the benefits of the Program simply as, for example, "giving me interesting things to say." This is a serious outcome.

The formal interviews I conducted with research participants were designed to be a comfortable and familiar format. Elsewhere in my methodology, I took my own advice about getting out of a comfort zone. Narrative inquiry took me away from the illusion of hard facts presented by coding and statistical analysis of survey data that had been my original intention for the research, and to more intuitive, less positivist approaches. I learned to be comfortable with "mess" (Law, 2004), ambiguity and uncertainty, as was required for a study of the Seniors Program that encompasses contradictions, paradoxes, hidden strengths and problematic issues which I can now better explain. The methodology of critical reflexivity was based on my insider role in the Seniors Program, but I learned some humility through the difficulty of encapsulating the program, even in this extended account. Although I hope it is informative and thought-provoking, this thesis still represents a limited perspective at a moment in time for the Seniors Program.

Contribution to literature

This research confirmed several aspects of descriptions of programs for older adult learners. For example, older adult learners generally resist being stereotyped, and thus avoid classes on aging. They are often most comfortable with listening to an expert, uninterrupted, in a conventional classroom setting. They love learning for its own sake.

The research supports the unfashionable lecture format, which has its place in this kind of program, being familiar to many. The research also explains the link between leisure learning and an authoritative, didactic approach which might not seem well-suited to either leisure or learning. Not only can the lecture welcome learners, it *can* bring about significant learning. The lecture is part of the "serious leisure" oxymoron, based on wanting to be taken seriously and to spend time in worthwhile way, which leads to embrace of approaches which at least signify prestige and gravity.

The research also adds to the descriptions of older adult learners of the third age. In particular it identifies a specific kind of reticence in the classroom, a humility arising from the perspective of older age. The research suggests that older adult learners in university settings appreciate how this particular milieu allows for conversations on a range of serious or obscure topics which are not entertained elsewhere. The research found evidence to support the view that, like younger students, older adult learners want learning to be useful going forward: They are not necessarily interested in reflecting on past life. I also explored the clichés that tend to come easily when talking about older adult learning—the joy of learning and sharing the wisdom of old age—finding that these phrases persist because they hold truths, although they are inadequate to fully describe the problematics of power and bias evident in the Seniors Program.

Further research

While the approach I took generated rich data, further research might profitably undertake a co-research model, with older adult learners interviewing peers. This would mirror the recommendations in this thesis of more active learner roles in teaching and learning approaches, too. The co-research approach could also be suited to amplifying the voices that are missing from this research, such as those of learners who have dropped out of the Seniors Program or who have never considered it.

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Appendix: Research instrument

Research Instrument

Introduction:
Researcher background, career, doctoral study aims.

End of Life Interview topics
- Interest in and reason for attending the class or event on end of life at which recruitment took place.
- Beliefs and family or cultural traditions and practices on end of life.
- Perspectives on/understanding of spirituality.
- Personal experiences of end of life and end-of-life issues.
- Possible personal learning goals about end of life:
    - Gathering information on practicalities; e.g. funerals, wills, advance directives, legislation.
    - Exploring academic and philosophical views on end of life; e.g. "history of approaches to death"
    - Giving (rather than receiving) advice and help, sharing wisdom.
    - Finding out about how to leave a legacy (such as a memoir), or other ways to reflect on a life.

Education Topics:
- Participant's perspective on and experience of the Program.
- The "fit" or appropriateness of end-of-life education and the Program.
- Participant's perspective on and experience of education in general.
- Participant's preferred learning approaches and contexts

Artistic Response Option:
- Explanation of option to respond to the topics through creative writing or imagery.

Wrap Up:
- Opportunity to add comments on anything not covered.
- Opportunity to ask questions.
- Participant's feedback on interview.
- Check on how the participant feeling. Did they learn anything about themselves, or get any new information? Was there anything that has left them feeling unsettled or upset?
- Check whether or not the participant agrees to future contact
- Thanks for participation.

Research Instrument version to be sent to participants before the interview, if requested:

In order for you to think about your replies beforehand, here are the topic areas I will be asking about in the interview:

- Your interest in and reason for choosing the class (or event) on end of life where I mentioned this research.
- Your beliefs and family or cultural traditions and practices on end of life.
- Your perspectives on or understanding of "spirituality."
- Your personal experiences of end of life and end-of-life issues.
- What you might want to learn about end of life:
    - Gathering information on practicalities; e.g. funerals, wills, advance directives, legislation.
    - Exploring academic and philosophical views on end of life; e.g. "history of approaches to death"
    - Giving (rather than receiving) advice and help, sharing wisdom.
    - Finding out about how to leave a legacy (such as a memoir), or other ways to reflect on a life.

- Your perspective on and experience of the Program.
- Your ideas on the "fit" or appropriateness of end-of-life education and the Program.
- Your perspective on and experience of education in general.
- How and where you prefer to learn (e.g. in lectures or group discussion, from books or "hands on," etc.)