

Special Issue:
'Getting of Wisdom', Learning in Later Life

From the Guest Editors' desk
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This specially themed '*Getting of Wisdom', Learning in Later Life* Edition of AJAL is not so much concerned with the issue of ageing itself, but more about quality of life regardless of age. It is about taking, but also giving back as best as possible at any age. As guest editors, we regard this as being about rethinking the possible richness of humanity and connectedness of lives regardless of time and space. We are hopeful that this issue provides an optimistic and timely message that each of us can contribute towards social emancipation and greater equality.

This special issue is a result of the one week 'The Getting of Wisdom Exchange', a collaboration between around 100 adult education practitioners and researchers from ten countries from Australia, New Zealand, Asia and Europe. Experiences and knowledge were shared during three one-day conferences, which were held in Ballarat, Australia (13 February, focused on *Older learning in diverse contexts*), in Melbourne, Australia (14 February, focused on *Learning in later life and social inequalities*), and in Wellington, New Zealand (15 February, focused on *Learning, empowerment and identity in later life*). The program of all three conferences consisted of international as well as local papers and presentations. The focus was on learning in community

for being, becoming and belonging. Community was perceived as a forum for building relations, which encouraged the forming of space, open for learning. The focus of discussions was on the roles of communities, established by people, by their connections and creativity, by reciprocity, exchange and sharing knowledge and skills. Possibilities for being, becoming and belonging into community are lifelong and lifewide, presupposing acknowledgment of heritage, culture, languages, traditions and art; they presume connection between past, present and the future. We opened up questions of linguistic and cultural imperialism, intersected with questions of what counts as indigenous learning, but there was also a strong need to learn how to incorporate non-Western epistemologies in our too often monocultural scientific knowledge (Darder, 2012). Western modernity is founded on the tension between social regulation and social emancipation and distinction between metropolitan societies and colonial territories. As Santos (2014) said, emancipatory dichotomy only applies to metropolitan societies, but never to colonial territories. This point was an important issue at our conferences and during our visits to communities. Each country, particularly countries where Indigenous people live, and in the case of Australia have lived for thousands of generations, has to address diversity as a core of global resistance against capitalism and search for the alternative forms of sociability (Santos, 2005; Coleman, 2012). We've been therefore talking about the invisible and largely subjugated knowledge, which includes popular, peasant, indigenous knowledges, knowledge of and for older people, which are, as Santos (2014) says, on the other side of the line, and could not be fitted into 'true knowledge'. We've talked about the need to overcome distinctions between 'nature and culture, natural and artificial, mind and matter, observer and observed, subjective and objective, collective and individual' (Oliveira, 2017: 14), but also about being in the network of spaces-times, defining the frame for our learning.

Wisdom was a word, standing out and reflecting the wish of participants of the exchange to understand learning in different contexts, from various perspectives, reasons and with diverse goals. But does wisdom reflect the struggle to overcome inequalities, defined by class, race, age and gender? If we look through these lenses, age seems not that important any more as a defining characteristic, but more as an additional factor which should be taken into account when assessing

learning and educational activities and possibilities of different age groups in different contexts, particularly political. However, to connect past, present and the future, memories of older people, intertwined with the knowledge of heritage and tradition, are crucial. Age and wisdom are therefore related and bring new solutions and possibilities to the forefront. For long-life societies (Sigg & Taylor, 2005), valuing these resources is essential and one crucial part of developing new ideas of solidarity and community, given that people can expect increasingly longer and healthier lives in more digitalized and multicultural societies.

Our main focus was on the quality of life of members of the community, particularly older people, with the emphasis on social inclusion, participation and civic engagement. During conferences, meetings and field visits we saw copious evidence that older adults are a very diverse population with different learning and social needs and abilities, very different learning pre-conditions, interests and educational requirements. Most older people don't participate in formal and non-formal, organized education. As research shows, older participants in education in most 'developed' nations are primarily formally educated women, predominantly white, with better occupational backgrounds (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Schmidt-Hertha, Jelenc Krašovec & Formosa, 2014, etc.). An important question is, "What are the aims of learning and education of older adults and how could possibilities for successful life also in older age be provided?" Older people should be allowed to talk about their own ageing and their perception of the need to learn and change. What are their images of ageing, as Featherstone and Wernick (1995) define it. What are their ideas about their own ageing?

The way older adults self identify and evaluate themselves, their possibilities and perspectives related to health, cognitive abilities and societal contribution influences their health and wellbeing in later life significantly (Levy, 2003). The same effect can be observed for how they are addressed by their social environments. If relatives, friends, neighbours and other people treat them just as frail, irrelevant and in need of help in their social environment as a result of negative age stereotypes, they are, in effect, exhibiting a patronizing attitude towards older peoples. This affects older people's self-efficacy negatively, and neglects or discounts the value of their knowledge and experience, including a high risk of being excluded from communities.

These findings confirm that there is a strong need to support community education and learning through sometimes radically different settings, like neighbourhood houses and Men's Sheds in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Golding, 2015). These kinds of settings are not primarily devoted to learning, but are spaces where informal learning and occasional training occurs. Community settings (associations/ organizations) are ideal places also for strengthening intergenerational solidarity, which is diminishing with demographic ageing, creating cultural gaps and conflicts among generations (Estes, Biggs & Phillipson, 2003). Papers, presented at the conferences in the frame of the Exchange addressed all the mentioned perspectives and questions.

Participants of 'The Getting of Wisdom Exchange' came from different countries with different political backgrounds; our discussions were marked by people, coming from different cultures, speaking different languages, and dreaming different dreams. Among participants and presenters there were Indigenous scholars and community members in both Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, discussing social and individual identity formation and sharing their knowledge on barriers to and possibilities for emancipation of Indigenous people. Participants were from different age groups, which encouraged intergenerational interaction and opened questions, important for the evaluation of age roles in groups and the community. All in all, the Exchange was a strong learning experience for all of us. We've learned that – regardless age – we should all make more effort to establish emancipating learning practices. They should be intertwined with everyday life of older people and based on networks of knowledge and networks of people in different living spaces (domestic, community, citizenship, the world), as defined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. They should connect our individual and social identities 'on every level of social life, in a permanent and dynamic way, even though we remain grounded in our roots' (Oliveira, 2017: 4). And as Santos stresses, despite the roots upon which we depend, we have a possibility to choose.

In this issue, papers are presented from Sweden, Ireland, Aotearoa/ New Zealand, Australia, Slovenia, Poland, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Papers cover different topics and open questions about various issues in older people's learning. Papers are in the alphabetical order by the surname of the first author.

In the first article authors **Helene Ahl (Sweden)**, **Joel Hedegaard (Sweden)** & **Barry Golding (Australia)** compare the organizational

conditions for Men's Sheds in Denmark and Australia, and highlight the experiences of the Danish participants. After presenting a description of some of the salient organizational and contextual factors of Men's Sheds in Australia, they analyse, describe, and compare two Sheds in Denmark, developed mainly as a result of the wish to improve men's health by customising the Australian model to a new Danish context.

In the second article, **Ann-Kristin Boström** (from Sweden) deals with lifelong learning (LLL) in practice, focusing particularly on popular education and study circles. She presents the development and the implementation of the LLL model, to emphasising that social economy is supported by informal learning, voluntarism and social relations. The author presents recently developed knitting cafés and poses the question, 'Who is getting education and learning in later life?'

Lucia Carragher from Ireland is the author of the third article, in which she analyses the "buffer generation" of men, caught between the silent, strong, austere masculinity of their forefathers and the demands of contemporary society. Using mixed method research she analysed the well-being of 297 older men, involved in community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland. Her findings demonstrate that we can no longer ignore nor deny the social, environmental and cultural factors which influence the lifestyle choices and risky behaviours of some men.

Brian Findsen from New Zealand investigates the engagement of universities in older adult education in the specific context of Aotearoa New Zealand. As expected, he finds out that older adult education exists only on the margins of the formal education system and discusses initiatives mainly beyond New Zealand to observe new trends in other societies that might be applied in practice. He offers a reflection of possibilities to identify potential for future development in New Zealand in its university sector.

The first of the autoethnographic articles in this issue, written by **Barry Golding & Annette Foley** from Australia, actively mirrors ways of using techniques developed through academic autoethnography to empower older people to share and make sense of their lives by exploring some of the unexamined assumptions that govern everyday life, behaviour and decision making. They discuss the role of wisdom in later life learning and present their autoethnographic stories as researchers.

The next article, written by **Sabina Jelenc Krašovec & Marta Gregorčič** from Slovenia analyses informal learning through participatory democracy processes from the perspective of intergenerationality. Their findings show that through the process of participation in self-organized groups, besides knowledge and skills of all involved generations, values and attitudes regarding other generations have changed most dramatically. They conclude that participation in political community activities has immense potential for reaching new forms of solidarity and trust between younger and older generations.

Małgorzata Malec Rawiński from Poland analyses what it means to be an older (age 65+ year) Polish immigrant in Sweden by applying a biographical approach. She emphasizes the broader contexts in which the individual's story and experiences are embedded. Her article presents a single case study of a 93 years old Polish immigrant lady based on an outstanding life story including her recollections and experiences during the liberation of Poland, which, together with experiences from migration, shaped her life and learning across the life-course.

Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha and **Margaretha Müller** from Germany look at older workers and their participation in continuing vocational training. Based on a representative survey of the German labour force, they investigate the meaning of educational and occupational biographies for current participation in continuing vocational training. Whilst these effects cannot be demonstrated in multivariate regression analysis, the study points to significant gender differences, which demand further investigation.

Robert Tobias from New Zealand writes about the history of adult and community education (ACE) in Aotearoa New Zealand from the 1970s to 2016, with special reference to the changing context for the learning and education of older adults. He sets these changes in the context of responses to a number of parallel economic, political, social and cultural changes, including growing inequalities under the influence of neoliberal policies, and the rise of several progressive social movements, particularly those associated with the Māori renaissance.

Esmeraldina Costa Veloso from Portugal explains the specific development of the U3A in Portugal. She compares the Portuguese

U3A with other models, searching for specific national characteristics, By analysing the shift in the organisation of U3A, she attempts to understand and explain changes in its organization. In Portugal different educational and training projects coexist, particularly within the domain of the so-called Senior Universities or Senior Education Programs, which meet the different expectations of a heterogeneous group of older adults.

Next to last paper is an autoethnographic journey, written by **Alexandra Withnall** from the United Kingdom. From a feminist perspective, she analyses the process of diagnosing and living daily with the illness of Type 2 Diabetes. She describes the process of self-learning to identify, access and to use necessary resources to manage conditions of illness through personal experience. She critically evaluates the available non-formal educational programs as well as help for patients and offers deep reflective analyses of the whole self-learning and self-healing process.

The last paper, *Ma te ora ka mohio* / 'Through life there is learning' offers a critical rethinking by the editors, **Brian Findsen, Barry Golding, Sabina Jelenc Krašovec and Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha**, based on a critical reflection of the papers, as well as the process of the Getting of Wisdom Exchange and the final Declaration, jointly created and accepted by the European, Australian and Aotearoa/ New Zealand participants.

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