Neighbourhood Houses: Lifelong learning, community, connections, and later life learners

Ursula Harrison, Dr Cheryl Ryan PhD – presenters,
Dr Jennifer Angwin PhD, Dr Tracey Ollis PhD,
Professor Karen Starr

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This presentation

- Context
- Research Design
- Later life & new directions learners
- Major themes
- Learner stories
- Policy implications
- References

Context

Economic, social and political context

- Education and training policy influenced by global market economics and neo-liberal policy agendas
- Deregulation of the VET sector
- Ageing population: learning across the lifespan is becoming more common
- New economy: changing profile of industry, agriculture and employment
- Important role of ACE in provision of affordable, accessible education (Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education, 2008)

Neighbourhood Houses

- 390+ Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, 1000+ in Australia
- ACE - Formal and informal learning
- Accredited and vocational training provided by 30% NHs in Victoria, 15% RTOs
- 50%+ Learn Local providers
- Extensive range of services and activities for marginalised and disadvantaged groups

Research Design

- Qualitative inquiry, multiple case study methodology
- Stories and 'poetry as text'
- 2 Phases: Phase 1 focus on second chance learners, 2 groups of learners identified. Phase 2 focus on both groups of learners
- 96 semi-structured interviews with Neighbourhood House learners and managers
- Critical pedagogy perspective

Later life and new directions learners

- Post-employment stage of life
- Aged 50 – 84, varied education levels, CALD, learning difficulties, disabilities
- Learning for personal interest, new skills, basic education, social engagement
- Volunteering

Major Themes

- An environment highly conducive to learning
- Becoming more independent
- Becoming more interdependent
- Becoming more worldly

An environment highly conducive to learning

- Friendly, inclusive and welcoming
- Helpful, supportive, non-judgemental
- Local, low-cost, small class sizes
- Informal and relaxed

The atmosphere was fantastic, you were able to relax, do your homework.

(Dorothy, 64, rural, learning difficulty, left school in year 8, Adult Basic Education, COM member, carer)

Well it's handy because it's close by, it's easy to travel to the centre. The managers are nice and the Neighbourhood House it's so good to have.

(Julia, 75, born in Poland, metropolitan, left school in Form 4, Computers)

Becoming more independent

- Developed confidence and greater resilience
- Sense of self-accomplishment
- Changed identity as a learner
- New opportunities

If I'd stayed at home I would never have left. Being included here, trusted enough to do their office work, and accepted as a meaningful member of the group means more to me than anything.

(June, 69, rural, completed year 10, volunteer, committee member, Creative Writing Group)

I went to English classes and Computer classes, it was very embarrassing because I can't speak proper English, but I did very well there. I'm a widower, and if I'm on my own I am going to get worse, so I'd better come here.

(George, 76,born in Croatia, metropolitan, completed year 7 overseas, arrived in Australia at 15 years of age, Computer class)

Becoming more interdependent

- Making new friends
- Learning together and supporting each other's learning
- Developing new social support structures and networks

The companionship is very important to me. That's what it's all about, bringing women together. If I didn't come people would ring me up and ask, 'Are you alright?'

(Elizabeth, 65, rural, former dairy farmer, completed year 11, Craft group, committee member)

They've helped me in my survival and learning. Where else do I learn? This is just an amazing backup of people that I'm totally comfortable with, a real good support system in lots of ways.

(Caroline, 76, rural, former horse-breaker, Writing group, Committee member)

Becoming more worldly

- Greater awareness of the world around them
- Engaging with current affairs and community life
- Understanding and embracing the diversity in their community

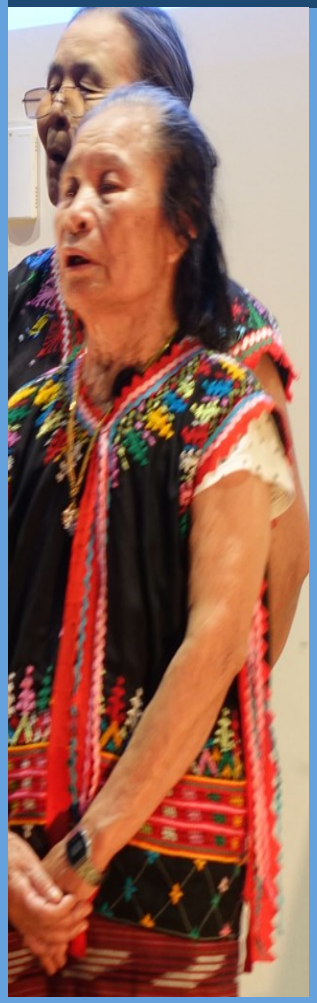
We have some very interesting conversations and we do talk about anything. Being mature you don't have the same inhibitions about talking about certain things.

(Beverley, 65, rural, left school during year 9, work injury, Craft group, Committee member)

You're helping other people along the way, people that wouldn't live the same as I do. It helps me see how the other half live, and makes me think I'm lucky having what I've got, because some will never have it.

(Henry, 60, metropolitan, completed year 11, disability, Gardening social enterprise)

Learner Stories



- **Tim:** 65, born in Vietnam, did not complete sec. schooling. In Australia he has completed a Certificate in Aged Care work and worked in this sector. Unemployed due to a chronic health condition. Attends English and Computer classes.
- **Kaye:** 70, left school at 15, having completed Form 4. Work history includes bank teller, administration and retail. Currently works at a supermarket. Came to NH after her husband died. She facilitates a weekly social program, and is a Committee of Management member at the NH.
- **Jack:** 70, founding member of the Men's Shed, a program of the Neighbourhood House. Completed year 11, worked as an engineer.
- **Florence:** 50, completed school, is dyslexic. Work history includes varied retail positions, and tram conducting. Left work to care for her father, now cares for a niece. Attended Adult Basic Education and Horticulture classes at NH.

Policy implications

It matters that there be voices in society speaking of what exists outside ideologies, that acknowledge both the beauty and the pain of this life, that celebrate complexity of what it is to be human without judgement, that aspire, to give our lives meaning … (Richard Flanagan, *The Monthly,* October 2016)

- Opportunities and constraints of funding: NHs are constantly dealing with conflicting priorities and uncertainty.
- Increasing levels of participation by later life learners in ACE
- Extensive social, economic and health benefits for later life learners' through participation in ACE. Measurable?

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