Third Age Learning in Regional Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores the diversity of third age learning in regional and rural communities when people open themselves to new experiences and challenges in everyday life in two very different parts of South Australia's Eyre Peninsula. One is Whyalla, an industrial city with a small university campus, and the other, largely rural Lower Eyre Peninsula focused on agriculture, fishing and aquaculture. Both communities have ageing populations above the state average. The paper is a synthesis of a number of research studies, conducted between 2000 and 2015, and has relevance for all concerned with the importance of learning throughout life, including educators, community organisations and service providers. While rural and regional communities may appear to have limited opportunities for formal education compared to large centres, community activities provide numerous, perhaps unique, learning venues and occasions for informal and non-formal learning, especially for older residents. Smaller, less diverse populations result in usually higher volunteering levels in social, economic and service organisations that provide many of the basic, essential and emergency services. Some organisations support the interests and needs of older residents, with various special interest groups providing opportunities for socialising and new learning opportunities that have individual and community benefits, fulfilling the aspirations of both. Supplementing these modes of learning are technologies enabling regional, rural and remote people to access formal education and training offered by open access colleges and universities.

Keywords: *Regional, rural and remote, informal and non-formal learning, community engagement, active ageing*

Introduction

In recent years, older Australians have had access to learning opportunities that were unimaginable to previous generations. In the interests of active ageing and for the associated health benefits, they are encouraged to continue learning to remain useful and productive (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015; Boulton-Lewis, Buys, & Lovie-Kitchin, 2006; Ranzijn, 2002; Walker & Maltby, 2012). They are also encouraged to adapt to their changing bodies and to keep up to date with new technologies, communications and business practices. Indeed, learning for all ages is essential in a continually changing world (Illeris, 2014). In addition, older people contribute to their communities as volunteers and that requires them to change and learn. Social activities, often through volunteering and civic engagement, remain the most effective means for new learning about the self, the community and the wider world that contributes to individual and community wellbeing (Boulton-Lewis, Buys, Lovie-Kitchin, Barnett, & David, 2007; Findsen, 2003). Thus, their third age lives become more meaningful, fulfilling and personally rewarding.

This paper explores the diversity of third age learning (Barnett, 1997; Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006; Findsen, 2003; Ranzijn, 2002) in two Australian regional and rural communities in two very different parts of the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia when people open themselves to new experiences and challenges in everyday life. Both have similar populations of about 23,000 people; Whyalla in the north-eastern corner is a compact, industrial, steel and mining city and hosts a small university campus that supports a University of the Third Age (U3A) branch. The Lower Eyre Peninsula (LEP), at the southern tip, is classed as remote with limited services and 3.5 hours by road from Whyalla; it is largely rural, based on agriculture, fishing, aquaculture and tourism. Port Lincoln with a population of about 14,000 is a major port and Cummins and Tumby Bay are smaller rural service centres, each with an area school and a small hospital servicing the smaller farming and fishing communities of their area. Technical and further education opportunities are available in both Whyalla and Port Lincoln. In addition, the Whyalla and LEP communities have ageing populations, well above the state average with about 20% retired (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2015).

Third age learning is a broad field of which the University of the Third Age (U3A) is only a small segment. This paper illuminates the diversity of third age learning in rural and regional communities that may be more universal for older people generally. Commonly, the third age is a transition period associated with post-retirement years, but for the generations of women who were not in the paid workforce, the third age may begin in midlife at the age of about 50 years, with menopause and the departure of their children from the family home. For the first time in many years, parents have the time, freedom and flexibility to design a more independent identity and a different way of living that will take them into their later years.

The present generation of rural third agers had limited educational opportunities when they were young (ABS, 2013). Consequently, only two of the women in the LEP study described below had completed their fourth year (Year 11) of secondary education which was as far as they could go without moving to Adelaide. One completed the final year 12 as an adult once it became available locally and one went to university from school. Two, including the first author, gained university qualifications as third age students.

The Third age and Learning Opportunities

The concept of the third age is based on the notion of the four ages of man with mature adulthood being the third age; it is generally regarded as a flexible period of personal achievement and fulfilment before the final age of dependence, decrepitude and death (Laslett, 1991). The term "third age" originated in France in 1972 with the founding of the first *Université du Troisième Âge* at Toulouse, initially to provide a learning environment for retired professionals. The movement in its various forms spread around the world and the third age has come to encompass the years after paid employment, which, for many, is a significant period of life. With people living longer and healthier lives, Laslett (1991) argued that the third age should be "the crown of life" (Laslett, 1991, p. vii), a productive period of community and personal activism with strong themes of generativity, social engagement and intellectual development for those who seek different experiences and new challenges. According to Sadler (2006), the third age is a period of second growth, self-realisation, purposeful living, rejuvenation, transformation and redirection through active ageing and learning, and an opportunity to develop one's creative potential. For many older adults, it can be a time to realise old dreams and passions, to make up for missed education, to develop a second, third or fourth career in something that delights and inspires (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Furthermore, it is an opportunity to explore their "unlived lives", the forgotten dreams and aspirations and the undeveloped aptitudes of youth, to become the person they were meant to be (Alheit & Dausien, 2007, pp. 65-66; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Thus, life becomes more meaningful and the individual experiences a completeness of self with the realisation of their potential. They experience a personally satisfying, rewarding and fulfilling

wholeness of their being. While Laslett (1991) and Sadler (2006) describe idealised models for the third age, the LEP research revealed that some older people could experience a third age renaissance through their voluntary activities by engaging with others within their communities to make their lives more meaningful and rewarding. This paper argues that third age people can experience personal fulfilment and identity development in unexpected places and situations from their community engagement and civic activism, despite, for some, diminished financial resources. Even though growing poverty for those whose working life was mostly before compulsory superannuation may militate against pursuing formal education, learning can still occur. Their most valuable learning is incidental, experiential and informal through what they may regard as normal everyday activities. However, policy makers are not interested in people's learning beyond the age of 64 and no data are collected on older people's learning (Golding & Kimberley, 2016).

With the increased longevity and declining birth rates since the 1970s, the ageing demographic of many countries has become a feature of the early 21st century. While the negative economic costs of pensions and health care are frequently stressed, in Australia many older people contribute substantially to their families and communities, and many find opportunities for growth and personal fulfilment (Kinnear, 2001). In addition, many of the essential fire, ambulance, emergency and aged care services in smaller communities rely on volunteers, many of whom are older people. Rather than being a burden on society, many older people tend to maintain their independence well into old age and contribute significantly to the economy through their financial and voluntary contributions, and supporting and mentoring younger family members, new generations of parents and their communities (Kinnear, 2001; Onyx & Leonard, 2007). Thus, in later life, they perform valuable generative tasks (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Stewart & Vandewater, 1998; Warburton, Paynter, & Petrowskyj, 2007) which have prospects for intergenerational learning with its capacity to benefit all parties. Learning in later life has additional benefits and has the potential to counteract the economic concerns relating to increasing numbers of people in retirement (Warburton, 2010). Moreover, Hodgkins (2012) contends that people become more attached to their communities as they age and their individual and collective civic and community participation peaks over the age of 60.

Context

Australian regions are ageing more rapidly than the cities and, currently, 36 per cent of those over the age of 65 years live in regional, rural and remote areas (Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians, 2011; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). With the outmigration of the younger generations for education, employment and lifestyle, the remaining older residents are an important lifeline for many struggling rural, regional and remote communities. Superficially, these communities appear to have limited formal education opportunities compared to large centres; instead, incidental and experiential learning (Fenwick, 2003; Hayes, Golding, & Harvey, 2004) in casual conversations, over a beer, a 'cuppa' (tea or coffee), having a go or trial and error are the preferred modes of acquiring new information or skills. Since rural people tend to be more self-reliant, resourceful and resilient, many find challenging activities within their communities that result in later life learning (Lear, 2013). Consequently, community activities provide numerous, and perhaps unique, learning occasions, especially for older residents. Moreover, since volunteering levels are usually higher than in larger centres (Warburton & Stirling, 2007), people can find themselves working with diverse sectors of the population.

Unlike many women who came to their rural community as teachers or nurses or after marriage, more rural men have generational ties to their communities in which they were born, raised and worked. Their shared history has created strong lifelong bonds to the people, region and community that their partners come to share. Cheers (2001), who knew the Eyre Peninsula well, suggested that many have a spiritual bond to their land that deepens their connections to place

and people. In the early days of her research, the first author interviewed a professional man who had lived and worked in the region for most of his adult life; he spoke of his community as members of his extended family and added that the remoteness of his town discouraged outsiders from visiting.

Civic Engagement: Volunteering

In smaller rural and regional communities, a higher proportion of residents are involved in social, economic and service organisations that provide many of the basic, essential and emergency services that are staffed by professionals in larger centres (Teather, 1998; Warburton, 2010). A recent report (Schirmer, Yabsley, Mylek, & Peel, 2016) found that volunteering in rural and regional communities is high, particularly in South Australia, with women aged over 65 years being most committed to their communities. Moreover, while some organisations are specifically associated with young people, education and sport, others support the interests and needs of the wider community, including older residents. Consequently, many have an Apex, Lions or Rotary Club in addition to a Men's Shed, Meals on Wheels, and a range of special interest arts, craft and cultural groups that provide their senior citizens with opportunities for socialising and new learning about the self, the community and the wider world that has individual and community benefits (Golding, 2006; Hayes et al., 2004). Indeed, one reason given for the failure of U3A in Port Lincoln was that many third agers were too busy with their existing organisations to take on the management of another. This is supported by Hodgkin's (2011) research that older people are more likely to participate actively in their communities. In recent years, new technologies and improved communications have enabled regional, rural and remote people to access formal education and training offered by open access colleges and universities (Lear, 2007, 2016). However, according to Marchant and Taylor (2015), educational experiences can limit socialisation within one's community due to time constraints and change in interests. Consequently, enrolling in online external education programs may mean that the person excludes themselves from the communities that may otherwise benefit from their experiences and wider worldview.

While the shift to neo-liberal policies in the 1990s left many rural and regional communities feeling abandoned by government (Cheers & Luloff, 2001; Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005; Cornford, 2009; Higgins, 2002), it created learning opportunities for people and organisations as they struggled to regain some control over their future viability and wellbeing. New organisations based on community strengths emerged to find solutions to the prevailing sense of loss and neglect created by the withdrawal of services and businesses. These developments created opportunities for different types of leadership and activism and, for the first time, third age women assumed these positions to rebuild community cohesion and devise strategies for a more sustainable future (Alston, 1996; Lear, 2011, 2013). Many communities enhanced their natural resources to develop niche events based on their geography, physical resources and needs to fund infrastructure and facilities, and to maintain services for their residents. Participating in the planning and management of these niche projects has presented residents with new experiences that have the potential for new learning that results in self-discovery and a deeper understanding of the self and the world (Alheit & Dausien, 2007).

Community Engagement: Generativity

People in small communities learn through their community engagement, which is driven by their strong sense of generativity that Narushima (2005) described as 'payback time' to give back, to nurture and enrich their communities and to make them more viable, vibrant and sustainable for future generations. Thus, their midlife generativity involves feelings of personal agency, efficacy, and a core responsibility of increased commitment and care for the world (Dörner, Mickler, & Staudinger, 2005; Erikson et al., 1986). Rural communities are particularly rich in social and generative activities since many families have a generational attachment to the land and the

community where many were born, went to school, worked and plan to live out their lives. Consequently, they are passionate about their community, which they regard as an extension of the family, needing comparable care and nurturing for its long-term survival which may contribute to the high rates of volunteering in rural communities (Schirmer, Yabsley, Mylek, & Peel, 2016). Rural women's midlife sense of generativity (Dörner et al., 2005; Josselson, 2003; Warburton, McLaughlin, & Pinsker, 2006) and their significant community work (Alston, 1995; Teather, 1998; Lear, 2013) are powerful motivations for further learning in their third age. Hodgkin (2012) confirmed that older people's care and connection to community deepens with age. Hence, community engagement, commitment, and generativity are important motivators for third age learning that offers the potential for personal and social change.

Thus, in regional and rural communities, community commitment, generativity and third age learning are interconnected and interdependent. People learn through their community engagement which is driven by their need to socialise and be generative, to enrich their communities and make them more vibrant, viable and sustainable for future generations and for their old age.

While regional communities can be challenging places to live, they offer many opportunities for personal and community development, learning, and personal growth through change (Lear, 2011, 2013). Each LEP community has many different organisations that provide services, and manage community social, cultural and sporting facilities according to the population's different needs, priorities and amenities. However, each region is different and what works in one may not in another. On South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, Whyalla, with its industrial base, centralised services and university presence, along with numerous community organisations, offers different types of learning from the LEP with its scattered farming, fishing and tourism communities.

Researching Third age Learning in the Regions

A combination of the findings of past research projects and the authors' extensive local knowledge from many years of living in their LEP and Whyalla communities has provided the data on which this paper is based. The Whyalla researcher has a long association with the university campus, U3A and the local schools, whereas the LEP researcher draws on her PhD research of rural women's learning and her extensive local knowledge of living in different communities in her region as a farmer and third age learner.

The LEP study of women's third age learning explored their incidental learning via their community engagement as change agents and community activists. It describes the emergence of rural women from the supportive roles in backrooms and kitchens to become leaders and decision makers; this has seen women become more prominent directing and managing social, economic and political change in rural communities since the 1990s. Men actively supported and encouraged women to fill the influential leadership and decision-making positions in local government and on community management boards that the men had previously monopolised. While this research focused on women, rural men have found different learning opportunities and new challenges as business people, farmers and retirees.

Knowledge of third age learning opportunities in Whyalla has come from several research projects undertaken from 2000 onwards, involving both male and female participants, as well as knowledge gained through the researcher's residing in Whyalla for 30 years. The projects focused initially on the U3A (Ellis, 2006), and its relationship with the University of South Australia (Ellis, 2009; Ellis &Leahy, 2011), and the learning opportunities available in various organisations with a membership that included older people (Ellis, 2013a, 2015). Older learners' involvement in formal education as enrolled university students was investigated in another study (Ellis, 2013b). A more recent Whyalla study has investigated the benefits of music learning activities for participants'

wellbeing. (See the table under Findings, where there is information concerning the participants in these studies.)

Methods

University Human Research Ethics Committee approval was gained for the various research projects described. Unlike many researchers who come to rural and regional communities to conduct research, the researchers have used their extensive experience and knowledge of living in the communities they are researching and have a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the people and culture of their different localities (Stehlik, 2001; Van Maanen, 1995). Their implicit and tacit knowledge and understanding have come from their personal experiences, engaging with others in everyday situations at work and in the community (Eraut, 2004; McAdam, Mason, & McCrory, 2007). Thus, this paper reflects elements of autoethnography with its close relationship between the researched and the researcher, its emotive and textualised autobiographical narratives in which meaning and truth are shaped by context and resonate with the reader (Ellis & Berger, 2001; Van Maanen, 1995). While local knowledge is context-specific, it can be applied to the learning opportunities and experiences in other regional and rural communities. The authors argue that these rich, evocative narrative descriptions of regional third age learning provided by the research participants will broaden understanding of the different types of incidental and experiential learning that occurs in rural and regional communities. Furthermore, it is a representative sample of older rural and regional people who are actively engaged in learning, as carers and volunteers in the many religious, social, educational and welfare organisations that provide services to and for the community.

Lower Eyre Peninsula (LEP)

Lear's (2011) doctoral research of rural LEP women's third age learning via their community engagement used heuristic inquiry and autobiographical narratives to explore how six rural women aged 60 – 71 experienced personal growth and fulfilment in their third age. The women were purposively chosen for their community activism and were occasionally mentioned in the local media. While the selection process may seem restrictive, the women varied considerably in social status and education. The researcher had known some of them while living in the region as a farming partner, but had had no contact with them since leaving the industry over 20 years earlier. They became co-researchers as they explored their mutual experiences and their midlife learning with the researcher in two audiotaped and transcribed conversations, each lasting about two hours. During the research conversations, these co-researchers were asked to reflect on the changes in their communities and their learning from their community engagement.

The conversations were analysed using the heuristic concepts of self-dialogue, intuition, indwelling and focusing in continual cycles of initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis to construct a series of portraits by calling on the researcher's tacit knowledge as a long-term resident, former farming partner and a third age learner. The researcher's personal involvement with the research phenomenon is a fundamental stance of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Validity is a question of meaning and authentic writing enables the reader to see, feel and imagine things outside their personal experience (Jourard, 1971). The researcher returned repeatedly to the relevant co-researcher seeking their assessment, verification and validation of the comprehensiveness, accuracy and verisimilitude of the experience. The quality of the researcher's reflexivity and her ethics contribute to the trustworthiness, goodness, rigour and utility of the research, as they assume primary responsibility for the truth and authenticity (Moustakas, 1990).

Whyalla

The various Whyalla-based research projects employed survey methods, with qualitative data subjected to thematic analysis. The data were supplemented by insights gained through participant observation and informal conversation. A later project (W5) also included a focus group. The first small study (W1) was conducted in 2000 to investigate U3A members' perceptions of the importance of continuing to learn and the impact on them of their continued learning; a paper survey was distributed by the committee, and used by them for gathering information about course preferences before passing on to the researcher, identifying information having been removed (Ellis, 2006). A study (W2) relating to mutual benefits for university campus and U3A arising from the campus's sponsorship of the local U3A (providing a free venue, some guest speakers, and some administrative assistance) involved a paper survey for U3A members and a questionnaire e-mailed to staff (Ellis, 2009; Ellis &Leahy 2011). A later survey (W3) of older formally enrolled higher education students was online (Ellis, 2013a). Other organisations were later surveyed (W4) concerning their past, present and potential connections with the university campus, and also learning opportunities; paper-based questionnaires of two types were distributed – to individual members and to leaders (the latter for organisational information) (Ellis, 2013b). The most recent study (W5) has related to the benefits for wellbeing of music learning activities; a paper questionnaire was administered early to a newly formed ukulele group, followed by a later one after they had been learning for some time, and a focus group provided further insights.

Findings

Third age Learning in the LEP

Five co-researchers (who were allocated pseudonyms) had lived on the LEP for more than 40 years; Martha, Esther, and Sarah were born in the region; Louise and Helen, like the researcher, arrived as young adults and Marian came in midlife and described the move as the beginning of her third age. Louise, Esther and Sarah were some of the first married women with young children to return to paid employment in the early 1980s. Like Marian, they changed direction in midlife and found challenging opportunities within their communities as they emerged from relative obscurity to become leaders, community activists and change agents. Some of the women had high status due partly to their family and partner's historical links to the region, and education levels varied from three years of secondary schooling to university qualifications which are relatively rare in the older generation of rural people (ABS, 2013) as, at the time, teachers were required to complete only two years of training. It was interesting to note that the women tended to have more years of schooling than many men, many of whom left school to work on the farm at the end of Year 7 (Alston, 1995).

The co-researchers regarded themselves as ordinary women wanting to make a difference and to make their communities better places for themselves in their older age and for the younger generations. In midlife, the women had the freedom, flexibility and creativity to develop new interests, find new passions and rediscover old dreams. Three became community activists and leaders; one preferred to remain in the background "*cleaning* toilets", but was an important community mentor and advisor; another provided welfare and social services for the frail elderly. Their lives were transformed and several won local, state and national recognition and awards for their community efforts. Their learning was unintended, incidental and experiential through having a go, becoming involved and taking responsibility. In the process of transforming their communities, they learned more about themselves and gained a deeper self-understanding as they discovered unsuspected abilities and strengths. In addition, they learned to manage diverse people and interests, and build support for successful outcomes for new projects and initiatives, despite pockets of opposition and conflict. Thus, the community provided the opportunities for

learning and personal development far beyond their expectations. Before the research conversations, most of the participants had not recognised the everyday experiences as learning opportunities.

Louise, who described herself as a professional volunteer, recalled the move to establish a district economic development committee of which she became the inaugural chair:

> I got this real negative sense of community; things were getting smaller. We were starting to feel a bit dead on our feet; the flow-on of loss in the community. We lost the bus service, the banks; we lost the infrastructure and the skilled people. There was a sense of things being taken away from us and not being able to do anything about it.

The first projects in one small town were relatively minor; they established a small caravan park to overcome the lack of short-term accommodation and staged major events such as the Kalamazoo Races racing rail-workers' manually powered rail carts along the railway line through the centre of town. It gave the community a new sense of identity and additional funds to apply for grants for further projects and to establish a community bank. Louise continued:

> We brought a business back to the town. It's a huge learning curve for me. I gained an understanding of governance and corporate business; it opened my eyes to how businesses actually operate. The community has some control over it and it has made a huge difference. Things are happening and we are putting money back into the community which is really positive. We've turned our town around and now our young people are coming back with their families to work.

The community bank has returned over $3 million to the region since it was established, but perhaps its major contribution is the learning and the experience of being a board member that is not common in small Australian rural and regional towns. Moreover, the success of the bank has given the community the confidence to undertake major community projects, to improve social services, such as early childhood and after school care, and establish other small community-operated businesses that improve employment and the quality of life for the wider community. Rather than being passive to life's circumstances, the community has become a "can do" learning society and has won state and national awards.

However, the Community Economic Development Committee is not the preserve of the older members of the community and it provides many opportunities for intergenerational learning. School students and young adults are encouraged to participate in community decision-making, projects, and to plan and manage their own events. Thus, the community has been transformed into a more inclusive, cohesive, self-reliant, viable, innovative society open to change and new ideas. In recent years, community members have started art groups and the local hotel hosts a Pub Science discussion once a month.

The women also spoke of other non-formal learning programs that they enjoyed through their membership of a community organisation such as the CWA (Country Women's Association), church guilds and committees, school councils and parents and friends and the various sporting bodies. Martha recalled:

> We've been putting on concerts, shows and performances for 15 years and we've nominated someone as Citizen of the Year and applied for grants. We do these things for the community and it's all learning.

Generational change was an ongoing issue for all community organisations. Before the older members retired or moved on to other interests they trained the next generation of leaders to take over the organisation's administration and management in a transition process that Martha described thus:

We've done our 10 years plus and it's time for a change. We've had a new president and secretary this year and I've written everything down for them for next year and said, 'Next year, this goes in the minute book and that's all the stuff we've done. You add what you've done and next year we'll allocate it to others.' It's the organisation they can't get their heads around; they're willing to do it, so we've got to stand by them, mentoring them.

After inheriting a local history collection, Martha edited several community history books for the state's sesquicentenary (1986) and national bi-centenary celebrations (1988). Others sought her advice on community affairs, culture and people, and she was described as the senior wise woman in her community. She was motivated by her generative need for intergenerational understanding:

It's important the children understand our grass roots. We are all connected to our grandparents, the early farming days. We've got to teach them to be prepared for anything and how they can cope if they are faced with real hardship.

Martha believed that connecting the children to their pioneering grandparents and great grandparents would strengthen their resilience and encourage them to be innovative and resourceful in a future of economic, environmental and social change.

Third age Learning in Whyalla

While Whyalla is different in character in many ways from the LEP, some commonalities are plain, with high levels of volunteering and support of various community organisations and events. In current difficult, uncertain times, the resilience and social capital built up over the years by these senior citizens will be a source of community strength.

The table summarises the small Whyalla-based studies drawn on for this paper. For further details, please see earlier publications reporting on these (Ellis, 2006 and 2009; Ellis & Leahy, 2011; Ellis, 2013a, 2013b; and 2015).

The early U3A study (W1) identified that this organisation played a significant part in enabling its members to satisfy their desire for continued learning, particularly in a context where stressful examinations were absent and where the financial commitment was low. (At the time of the W1 survey, the annual membership fee was only $15 single and $20 a couple, as documented in the Chairperson's report of February 2000.[1]) They felt that continuing to learn was important for *"general interest, personal development, mental stimulation"* and because *"All learning broadens my outlook and gives me something to think about"*.

The input of U3A knowledge is as enjoyable as it is informative and health-giving. I am … very aware the mind and brain have to be constantly stimulated to function at their maximum. When the mind deteriorates, the body does also – they work together!

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[1] There has been an increase since: Whyalla U3A newsletters produced each term show that the fee has for some years been $25, and $15 for those joining in the second half of the year. These low amounts, possible because of the rent-free facilities, entitle members to attend as many classes as they wish, with small additional charges for materials in some courses.

When conducted	Title	Focus	Participants
W1: 2000	Lifelong learning in the third age in Whyalla	Perceived importance of continuing to learn; impact of U3A on participants	19, including 2 couples (8 M; 9 F; 2 not stated) U3A members (out of 45: response rate 42%)
University and seniors working together (overarching title for the project from 2008 on)			
W2: 2008	UniSA and U3A relationship	Mutual benefits of UniSA's sponsorship of the U3A branch	28 U3A members (11 M; 17 F; over half aged in their 70s) out of 105 surveys sent out, but a high response rate of those actively involved) UniSA staff (13 e-mail responses, 13 academic; 2 professional staff)
W3: 2010-2011	Older undergraduate students	Study experience of older students in formal higher education	10 regional students, including some from another regional campus, aged 55 or more (25 eligible: response rate 40%; 4 M; 6 F; 7 aged 55-60. 3 aged 66-70)
W4: 2010-2011	Learning for seniors in other local organisations	Types of learning experience; possible university connections	15 organisations; leadership responses and 66 individual responses (51 F; 9 M; 6 not stated)
W5: 2014-2015	Music learning and wellbeing	Benefits of learning the ukulele	21 members (9 M; 12 F; most 65 and over) of U3A ukulele group (total membership then in the 20s)

After some reliance on university and other external tutors, growing confidence enabled many members themselves to take charge of classes – from languages to crafts, music appreciation and more. Learning something completely new, for example a musical instrument (W5) has proved challenging at times, but a positive experience overall.

The continuing partnership with the campus over the last twenty years has brought benefits to both partners, with U3A members benefiting from mixing with younger people on campus, sometimes assisting as "patients" for Nursing students or in other campus activities; it has also helped to make university staff more aware of the needs and expertise of older citizens – "*they bring a different perspective to the campus as well as highlighting for all students that one is never too old to learn*". They have helped to bridge the "town and gown" gap, enabling the campus to extend its community engagement through these widened networks (Ellis, 2009; 2011).

Most of the learning of Whyalla's third agers is of a non-formal or informal nature – through membership of a wide range of organisations (service, church, sporting, cultural, and cause-orientated) and other volunteer work. The variety of learning includes: learning skills of various types (sporting, craft, gardening, woodworking, computer usage); learning from serving others through various charities and support groups (e.g., Lifeline, opportunity shops, hospital auxiliary, Meals on Wheels, service organisations); learning from visiting speakers at service clubs, church groups and U3A; learning about relating to others through sharing common interests (crafts, music, dancing, family history, puzzles and games, photography, astronomy); learning about health and managing health conditions (e.g. Diabetes Support Group); learning about improving

the community and environment (e.g., Advancing Whyalla, Friends of the Conservation Park); and learning to advocate on environmental and social justice issues. (See Ellis, 2015 for further details.)

However, some third agers, or others well past middle-age, have engaged in formal learning opportunities through TAFE and university. The local University of South Australia campus has had enrolled students in certain programs who have been well into their fifties or older. As well as aiming for qualifications in a vocational context, some W3 participants had self-actualisation goals; they were also able to contribute from their wider experience to class discussions. While they experienced challenges, such as the need to adapt to new technology, or to fit study in with their other commitments, they appreciated the opening up of "*a whole new world*", and appreciated the advantages stemming from their greater life experience.

Discussion

Our research has confirmed what has been mentioned earlier concerning third age community loyalty, sense of generativity and the motivation provided by their engagement and commitment for learning, leading to personal and social change. The high achievers in the LEP study found new ways to engage with their community and to express their generativity that is subtly transforming the social fabric of their rural environment. They assumed the leadership of new organisations and committees to focus on reversing the pervasive sense of loss, neglect and devastation following the closure of businesses, the withdrawal of services and the loss of critical skills, knowledge and employment in the 1990s. With no formalised or existing power structures, different types of leadership based on collaboration, co-operation and visions of an alternative future emerged. The communities acknowledged their weaknesses and strengths, and identified niche opportunities that had the potential to improve their economic well-being. Their activism provided significant learning opportunities as they staged and managed major events, established new businesses, project-managed infrastructure and developed new internal and external networks negotiating with governments, service providers, institutions and business. Local initiatives to build stronger, more sustainable and viable communities allowed the women to express their generativity in new ways, actively influencing change rather than merely supporting it.

Like other women in the project, Helen experienced personal and community conflict and opposition. One of her last projects to improve the health facilities required substantial funding support from the community in the form of increased local government rates over many years. She invited people to discuss the issues with her, encouraged groups to visit the current facilities, gave guided tours and explained the proposals to different groups in outlying communities. While individual opposition remained, the consensus was that the community needed to support the project to maintain their services for the longer term.

While smaller rural and regional communities do not have the diversity and resources of larger centres, the LEP study (Lear, 2011) reveals that they do offer opportunities for third age personal growth and development through community and social engagement. Helen used her many years of experience on local hospital boards and health advisory councils to articulate the environment of living in smaller rural and regional communities:

> We have to become proactive and negotiate the provision of essential services with policy makers, the demographics and working out what services are sustainable in our community. That's a whole new learning field.

In the past, most LEP adult learning was either incidental, experiential and practical, or private and personal. The CWA (Country Women's Association) and other social organisations provided opportunities for creative learning, while most farmers learned from each other and the local businesses with which they dealt. Every community had a small number of progressive, curious

and inquiring individuals who read widely, researched and experimented to innovate and resolve problems and issues that confronted them in their daily lives. They shared their new knowledge with others who tended to rely on observation and asking questions. When researching rural women's learning, the first author commented on how parochial she found the community when she first arrived in 1969 and Martha, a co-researcher, recalled how, in the past, the transient professionals benefited her community and broadened their perspectives. Martha lamented that loss of diversity as regional and rural employment became more static and fewer professionals transferred regularly between rural communities and for privacy and personal reasons teachers preferred to commute to work from outside the town.

Adult formal learning in rural and small regional communities is relatively uncommon due to limited availability, despite its well-documented wellbeing, social and economic benefits for the individual and the community (Golding, 2011). For Whyalla residents, the presence of a university campus makes internal study more accessible, though the desired programs may not be available. Those that do undertake formal distance learning tend to keep it private and at this stage the numbers of residents on the Eyre Peninsula who are currently studying at university as external students are not known, although one of the co-researchers is completing her PhD. While many of the government-supported community services that depend on volunteers, such as the fire brigade, ambulance and emergency services, require members to learn to fulfil legal, safety and technological requirements (Hayes et al., 2004), many of the mandated formal learning programs do not value members' past learning and their practical skills and common-sense knowledge accumulated over their lifetimes (Golding, 2011; Lear, 2009). Moreover, with the ageing of small rural communities many of these volunteers are older men and women and some find the continual demands for learning and the legal, health and safety obligations onerous (Hayes et al., 2004). In larger communities, such as Whyalla, volunteers also play a significant role, and some services have been maintained only as long as there have been volunteers able to be involved (e.g. Holmes, Holmes, Warren, & Ellis, 2010).

Additionally, special interest, social, sporting and educational clubs in small communities provide many intergenerational learning opportunities. Over the years, the older members, who once served their own apprenticeships, mentor new generations of members to take on leadership positions in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2001). They provide members with the opportunities to extend and update their skills experientially and incidentally. Martha believed that her husband, as a young man, benefited from his membership of the local Lodge chapter. Under the mentoring of older members, he acquired the confidence and knowledge of meeting procedures and public speaking skills that enabled him to run for public office and lead other community organisations in later life.

Although older rural men may have limited education and lack formal learning qualifications, they have accumulated broad practical experiences and considerable prior learning over their lifetime. As Kimberley, Golding, and Simons (2016) acknowledge, older individuals have substantial knowhow that they describe as tacit knowledge or practical expertise of how to perform tasks that are difficult to identify and transfer verbally or in writing. As Polanyi (1969) argued, they know more than they realise, but it only becomes apparent in practice. They have a strong desire to remain useful to their families and their communities, a need to create a new identity in retirement, to socialise and to learn about caring for the self, their wellbeing and health (Golding, 2011). According to Golding (2011) and Hayes et al. (2004), men want to learn, but prefer it to be situated, local and social in a community of practice that values their life experiences, rather than as formal training with assessments. They prefer hands-on learning from other men whom they know and trust. They learn in casual conversations by asking questions and observing how others do it. As they have for most of their lives, they seek out trusted community people with prior knowledge or experience of the task, issue or problem. The camaraderie, friendship and support from other men in a community men's shed satisfies many of these needs (Golding, 2011, 2015). A

few days after the devastating Wangary bushfire in 2005, the men of Cummins, under the watchful eyes of the local general practitioner, gathered at the Emergency Fire Shed to mourn their dead friends, to reminisce and to begin the recovery and healing processes (Lear, 2011). The development of a men's shed in Whyalla in recent years has also provided such opportunities, including learning about health issues through various initiatives, including from occupational therapy students on placement there (Misan et al., 2018).

New technologies have a significant role to play as learning tools. Technology is critical in allowing older residents in regional communities to stay in touch with their families, many of whom have moved to other parts of Australia and overseas. Moreover, technologies enable rural, regional and remote people to engage with the wider world, to study online, pay their bills (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015) and read state and national newspapers, which are more expensive west of Whyalla and are no longer delivered to rural people's homes. It has facilitated the researching and recording of family histories (Russell, 2005, 2011). Keen photographers, including older ones, have embraced digital photography and new printing techniques that offer many learning opportunities as users experiment with new equipment. Some develop a third age career by reaching out to consumers of products and services. Avid users of new technologies at advanced ages give the lie to stereotypes characterising these as being only for younger people (Came, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the knowledge of ageing and third age learning in rural and regional communities that have received little recognition previously. Older people become increasingly attached to their communities; they want to stay there for the remainder of their lives. Consequently, community survival and the continued viability of services are of supreme importance to residents, particularly in Australian regional areas with long distances between towns and services. Contributing to community wellbeing and social cohesion is therefore of intimate concern to all residents and is a strong motivator for learning in later life.

Like their community, individuals will thrive only if they are flexible, learn and change. While the individual benefits of third age learning are well documented, the situation for rural and regional people is somewhat different. Since the lack of professional services is a characteristic of remoteness for rural and regional communities in Australia, particularly smaller ones, it is vital that residents maintain their independence and self-reliance, keep informed and develop the skills to care for their social, health, financial and economic wellbeing as they age. Their learning preference is to learn incidentally and informally from their family and other community members that they know and trust, usually in a social situation while engaging with others as part of everyday life. Consequently, social activity and community participation in the third age are critical for individual and communal health and wellbeing.

Within a group, some people will want to learn for the intellectual challenge, or to remedy earlier gaps, or to keep their brain exercised, while for others the social benefits may be their prime motivation. A diversity of learning contexts caters for a range of needs and interests. In all of them, older learners have the potential to contribute from their life experience, as well as learning from younger co-learners, thus adding to the sum of human capital in their community. Encouragement from local government and beyond is well warranted.

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