CHAPTER 18

EDUCATION OF OLDER ADULTS

One area of adult education which has grown in importance over the last quarter of a century is that concerning the education of older adults. For this purpose, we follow the US Department of Labour definition as referring to the post-55 years, although, as always and with most aspects of life, there is no precise numerical cut off point here. The changing demographic landscape in many parts of the world has foregrounded this aspect of life, making it clear that the population is aging, fitter than ever (although much depends on context here), and capable of learning and developing. Of course, we would argue that age should remain a concern irrespective of demographic developments. Nevertheless organisations such as the Council of Europe, the European Association of the Education of Adults (EAEA), the UN’s International Institute on Ageing (INEA), and the European Union have given, or are giving, due importance to the educational dimension of this field.

The education of older adults has, for quite some time, been featuring in the adult education literature through the works of such authors as Mary Alice Wolf (Wolf, 2009; Wolf & Brady, 2010), Alexandra Withnall (2010), Keith Percy (1990), Eric Midwinter (1984), the late Cambridge history professor, Peter Laslett (1984, 1996), the late Frank Glendinning (2000), the late Paula Allman (1984), who subsequently moved on to dealing with other issues, Dorothy MacKeracher (1998), Carole Roy (2002), Brian Findsen and Marvin Formosa (see Findsen & Formosa, 2011). The scope of analyses has been impressive ranging from discussions concerning learning in later life in general to Universities of the Third Age (the subject of excellent critiques, based on Bourdieu’s [1984] concept of distinction, by Formosa, 2007) to old age learning as a form of social movement learning as well as learning for social awareness and change (see, once again, Roy’s work on the “Raging Grannies”, 2002). A common thread throughout these writings is the notion of older adults as subjects, and therefore social actors, as opposed to the more conventional pathologising accounts of individuals in older age. The task of adult educators working in this area of older adult learning is to bring the insights of demography into conversation with gerontology and learning. In merging these interdisciplinary insights, the adult educator is best equipped to work with the aging adult.

The finest and more perceptive writings on learning on older age in general debunk some of the stereotypes surrounding this variegated category of people and citizens. Old theories and paradigms of thinking are refuted outright, paradigms
reflected in the sentiment “you cannot teach an old dog new tricks” and other graphic illustrations concerning intelligence such as the gradually descending curve featured in older psychology textbooks like Alice Heim’s (1970) Intelligence and Personality (p. 127). Along with these pervasive and negative ideas about aging, there are stereotypes that “older adults should render themselves invisible in a youth-oriented society” (Findsen, 2005, p. 439). All in all, older adults are told to be quiet, just at a time when many are ready to take on learning tasks that eluded them in their earlier years through busyness or through social class impediments. Building on US Census data, Americans Wolf and Brady (2010), for instance, draw attention to the fact that among older adults (over 55) 34.5% have only a high school education and 9.4% have less than a ninth grade education. The senior years are often a time to make up for lost learning opportunities from youth.

Adult education has its version of a role model for people in their third age in the form of an icon – Paulo Freire. In his late 60s and early 70s, Freire would pull crowds together wherever he spoke. He tried to make up for the lost time in exile, severed from his roots, by serving as Education Secretary in the PT Municipal Administration and taking on the onerous task of reforming the entire public education system in the megalopolis of São Paulo in Brazil. He could easily have rested on his laurels having been both a man of action and successful writer who suffered imprisonment and exile for his revolutionary ideas. As a speaker, he was “seen” as well as “heard,” and often ushered into auditoriums as though he were a rock star, even though his looks were those of an Ancient Greek philosopher, a Socrates. He would write in Pedagogy of the Heart (Freire, 1997b):

> I was returning hopeful, motivated to relearn Brazil, to participate in the struggle for democracy … As I write this at seventy five, I continue to feel young, declining – not for vanity or fear of disclosing my age – the privilege senior citizens are entitled to, for example, at airports … People are old or young much more as a function of how they think of the world, the availability they have for curiously giving themselves to knowledge. (p. 72)

Older adults are often pathologised through the adoption of the medical model when dealing with issues and policies concerning people falling into this large and variegated age bracket. People are expected to view themselves, and are positioned, in a system shaped by and for people of a younger age. They are othered or pitied for not conforming to the societal norms, without one asking: who sets these norms and in favour of whom? But adult education is also replete with literature in which older adults learn and impart the fruits of their learning, resulting from a social construction model of old age. Peter Laslett (1996) emphasises this aspect of learning in older age with reference to the U3As in the UK in which participants are both teachers and learners at the same time – gladly will they learn and gladly will they teach, as former City Lit director, Bill Tyler once put it with reference to adult education and drawing from Chaucer’s Clerk in The Canterbury Tales.¹

¹ Presentation by Bill Tyler at the European Conference on “Adult Education & Social Change: Governments, Markets and Democracy,” Bundesinstitut für Erwachsenenbildung St. Wolfgang, Stroble-St Wolfgang, Austria, 28 September–1 October, 1993.