



The Association for
Education & Ageing

AEA DIGEST

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Spring 2010



Baroness Estelle Morris speaking at the parliamentary launch of “Enhancing Informal Adult Learning for Older People in Care Settings” – see page 4 (photo by Ed Melia – NIACE)

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FROM THE CHAIR.....

Jo Walker

Dear friends,

As this long and tedious winter finally loosens its grip, grudgingly allowing some spring colour to emerge, we also await the re-birth of our Journal. *The International Journal of Education and Ageing* has been a long time in gestation, but the first issue is now in preparation. Initial publicity, including invitations to subscribe and to contribute, has been circulated literally all over the world to networks and contacts that we hope have interests in later life learning.

If by any chance you have not received information, or can pass it on to your own contacts, please let us know. And please subscribe! Rates have been kept very low (and are lower still for members), since we do not have large overheads - but we do need a critical mass of readers. See our website for details

<http://www.associationforeducationandageing.org/pages/journal.html> and put your order in as soon as possible.

Do also consider writing articles, accounts of practice, analyses of policy and reviews of resources (books, audiovisuals, etc.). The Journal is for all of us to share and disseminate good work and ideas about learning and ageing. It should be able to reflect the interests and experience of Association members worldwide, as well as identify additional contributors and enquirers new to the field. The editors look forward to hearing from you.

AEA members have been busy promoting later life learning at various

events and conferences this spring. The potential role of higher education for older people was discussed at a Universities UK meeting, which included members' papers. A number of us attended the big policy conference Ageing Population 2010, which showcased UK government policies for older people across the board. How does this compare with other countries? Does joined-up thinking happen more easily, or is it always difficult to achieve? Others have been involved in European network meetings, where government and non-government agencies often find a way of working together.

The Association was pleased to be involved in launching a series of innovative publications to improve learning in the fourth age (see brief report on page 4). This often-neglected area of older people's learning has so much to offer in terms of quality of life as well as for the training and standards of the care services involved. As ever, please let us know if you are attending or presenting at a conference or event. We would love to hear your reviews of such meetings and of the work you are involved in. We would also like to supply you with AEA cards and Journal flyers to take with you!

Reports on recent conferences and further conference news can be found on page 6.

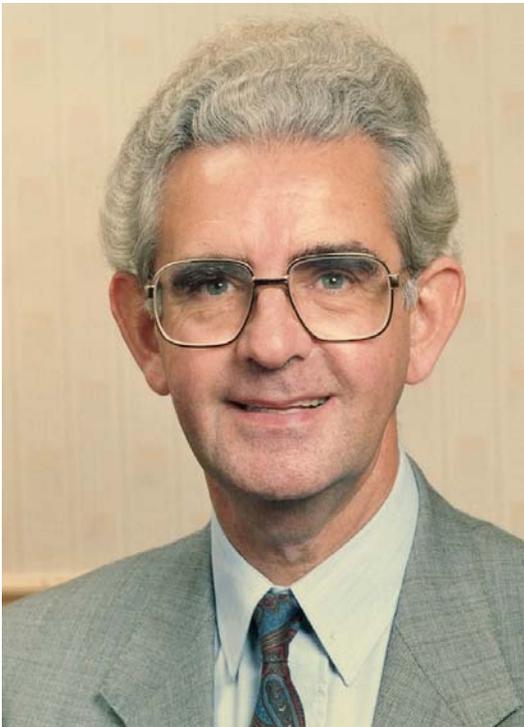
If you are planning to attend a conference and would like AEA promotional materials to distribute there, please contact Jim Soulsby on jim.soulsby@btinternet.com or Carol Allen on aeasecretary@googlemail.com

NEWS ITEMS

Obituaries – Don Steele and Sidney Jones

*Don Steele and Dr Sidney Jones, two key figures dedicated to promoting a positive concept of ageing, died in December 2009. **Brian Groombridge** remembers their lives and their achievements.*

Don was best known as a dynamic senior officer in ARP050 (the Association of Retired Persons Over 50) and the related Federation of Friendship Centres. Sid will be remembered as the highly effective founder-member of one of the very first U3As, the U3A in London.



Don Steele
(born 1933, died 19th December 2009)

As an ARP050 spokesman, both before and after retirement, Don Steele believed too much was being heard about negative aspects of ageing, when the country needed and older people themselves wanted to be active senior citizens eager to learn, enjoy the arts, and keep fit. ARP050 also campaigned about pensions and related issues and Don, an outgoing communicator, broadcast every week about them on LBC radio. I mostly saw him in action at ARP's enjoyable and enlightening national conferences. His funeral Order of Service (in Uxbridge Methodist Christ Church) quoted him: "Learn something new every day. Make someone happy every day!". Off duty he and his wife Jean were keen members of Hillingdon Choral Society.

Sid Jones was a pioneer who demonstrated very effectively that the vision of U3As across the country could become a reality. By 1981, it was time for Eric Midwinter, one of the visionaries, to publicise the idea in order to test potential interest in the U3A. In a BBC radio programme, he urged listeners to write in if they wanted to know more. Eric and I agreed that if there were any letters from the London area, I would deal with them and he would handle the rest. The response was bigger than expected - more than 400 letters, many of them from Londoners.

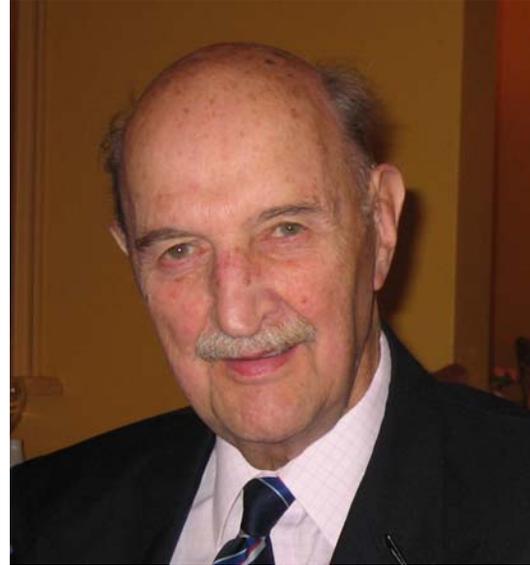
At the time, I was director of Extra-Mural Studies at London University and Sid was responsible for teacher training at North London Poly. He'd been experimenting with a 'Learning in Later Life' programme for retired people. It

was well supported. Many of these older students had left school at 14 could now study music, history, literature and psychology (Sid's own specialty) - not to get jobs, but for enjoyment. So I knew he'd share my interest in the U3A.

Together we followed up the letters forwarded by the BBC and set up 'the U3A in London' (now one of the 38 U3As in London but it keeps its original name). The Poly granted him a year's leave of absence, and the U3A then owed its existence to Sid's practicality and enthusiastic energy. With support from a Planning Committee, he found suitable accommodation in several locations (including the Royal Free Hospital Nurses' Home, the Working Men's College, and others). By 1982, there were enough successful courses and groups to justify a formal launch at the Regent's Street Polytechnic. It was a great success and the ad hoc planning group was replaced by an elected committee. Sid and I were glad to be elected - I was the chairman; he was chief programme planner-administrator.

Sid's wife and supporter Renee was one of the many who joined, and Sid stayed active in the U3A in London (now housed in Hampstead Town Hall) as a psychology tutor for almost the rest of his life (both in London and at summer schools) and in another lively organisation which he set up: the London Psychology Society. He and the U3A in London were an influence in many circles. To give one example from many, with former extra-mural psychologist Peter Shea he took part in Preparation for Retirement for BBC staff. In 1982, that important year, Sid also completed a PhD at the Institute of Education: Learning and Meta-Learning

with Special Reference to Education for the Elders. It anticipated the current neuroscientists' view that our potential for creativity can increase as we age.



Dr Sidney Jones
(born 1924, died 26th December 2009)

Sid was older than Don by several years. I don't believe they knew each other, but their life stories overlap. Both were Londoners evacuated during the Second World War (Don to Cornwall, Sid to Chelmsford); both served in the RAF - Don was a bandsman who became a Salvation Army officer after the war, while the RAF stationed Sid in Cairo, where he found time to get some more School Certificates. Both graduated as mature students, Don at Middlesex University and Sid at Birkbeck. And they both helped Lifelong Learning to be more than a slogan.

In February AEA participated in the parliamentary launch of 'Enhancing Informal Adult Learning for Older People in Care Settings' at Central Hall, Westminster, which was attended by Baroness Estelle Morris and Kevin Brennan, Minister of State for

Further Education. AEA Chair Jo Walker was also present at the event.



**Baroness Estelle Morris Kevin Brennan,
Minister of State for Further Education
(photo by Ed Melia - NIACE)**

Enhancing the learning of older people in care settings – usually residential homes, supported housing or community centres – was one of the areas of development to come out of The Learning Revolution, the 2009 white paper on informal adult learning. Specific mention was made of the value of learning in promoting health and quality of life. The challenge to enhance such learning opportunities was facilitated by NIACE, because Jim Soulsby had undertaken development work in this area a few years ago. Now wearing his AEA hat, Jim and representatives from a number of other agencies (Government departments, local councils, voluntary organisations and commercial companies) have helped NIACE produce not one but several resources, for the practical guidance of public, private and voluntary sector care providers.

The package of resources, entitled *Enhancing Informal Adult Learning for Older People in Care Settings* includes:

- **Report and consultation document** by NIACE researcher Fiona Aldridge, laying out the background and context for learning in the fourth age, and case studies of organisations that illustrate good practice.
- **Guidance for Learning Providers**, again giving background material and including a set of activities to help providers work through what they could do, in order to offer better provision.
- **Inspirations**, a stand-alone set of case studies to encourage and stimulate development.
- **Guidance for Local Authorities**, which explores all that can be done by Councils, from strategy to detailed practice and from partnership working to building their own capacity to deliver better quality of life for older citizens.
- **A Guide for Care Managers**, explaining both educational policy and practice and encouraging care providers to develop a culture of learning, with all its benefits.

AEA was delighted to be part of the group that has produced an inspiring and accessible set of materials and hopes also to help with disseminating this valuable work. The publications were given a ‘Parliamentary’ launch at Central Hall Westminster on 23rd February, where we were represented and thanked for our part, alongside the other partners. Kenneth Brennan, Minister of State for Further Education, spoke positively about the need for high quality learning to be available to all. Baroness Estelle Morris, a keen

supporter of learning in the fourth age through her involvement with First Taste, spoke of a vision for entitlement at any age, instead of the current exclusion of older people, and the relevance of the good practice highlighted in the NIACE publications.

Many thanks to NIACE for laying on a splendid reception and exhibition of organisations, who offer services to fourth age learners.

A short film produced by NIACE on the subject of Informal Adult Learning in Care Settings was also shown at the event. It can be accessed online via NIACE

<http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/IALCare.wmv>

or on YouTube at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsDCs3t3HHQ>

Duration is 7'29"



One of the older learners, who also attended the launch, here demonstrates her painting skills (photo by Ed Melia – NIACE)

CONFERENCE REPORTS

*A number of AEA members were invited to attend **Ageing Population 2010**, a one day conference in London held on 25th February, organised by GovNet Events. **Jo Walker** reports.*

The aim of the event was to bring together many elements of the 'ageing agenda' to discuss some key issues and hear how Government is responding in terms of policy and practice. Sadly, learning was not a key issue, at least not in terms of the plenary contributions, although it did feature as one of four optional seminars. For the purposes of the conference, the key issues were health care, social (personal) care and pension reform. There were contributions on these from senior government policy people and heads of various units (e.g. Health Care Commissioning; Pension, Disability and

Carers Service; Care Quality Commission; Social Care Strategy Unit; Fuel Poverty Review). The enormity of the task of joining up government thinking and planning for older people is apparent even from this limited list. Each spoke cogently and passionately about their area of work and its contribution to 'building a society for all ages'.

There were also contributions based on local authority case studies, showing how Councils were responding to particular issues (such as dementia) or were managing health and care related services. The large numbers of local authority delegates seemed to bear out interest in such sessions. The seminars, on the other hand, looked at more cross-cutting concerns for older people such as justice, employment and learning /

training which are not so neatly represented in Government or Council structures. These sessions were run by specialist NGOs - Age Concern / Help the Aged ('Just Ageing'), The Age and Employment Network, Qualifications and Credit Framework / NIACE. Hopefully it was useful for the public services folk to meet with the voluntary sector specialists, and vice versa. AEA members who attended spread themselves across the various seminars and made the case for continued learning in later life, so that justice, employment and training could be achievable for greater numbers.

The day was opened by Angela Eagle, Minister of State for Pensions and the Ageing Society. She emphasised the Government's intentions of bringing about a more age-friendly society, starting with a need to tackle ageism in its many manifestations. In a daring move for so early in the proceedings, she asked all delegates over the age of 50 to identify themselves. Not surprisingly, the majority of hands went up, enabling Ms Eagle to make the point 'old is us'. She observed that anti-age discrimination is one of the last 'isms' to be built into equalities and human rights legislation, but the Equalities bill was now in the House of Lords. Furthermore, she felt that a more sophisticated approach to retirement / work exit had still to work itself into mainstream practice, which included dispelling the myth that retaining older people in employment prevented or restricted opportunities for younger workers. More pertinently for the day's proceedings, the Minister called for the re-engineering of central and local government structures to truly respond to the characteristics of an ageing

society, with all its needs and opportunities.

*On the European front **Brian Groombridge** has been renewing his friendship with learners in Finland, where earlier this year he attended a conference on **Lifelong Learning and Wellbeing** held in Tuusula.*



Lake Tuusula (photo by Gil)

As AEA's Sibelius fans probably know, Tuusula is where that great composer lived with his wife Aino. I have visited their home ('Ainola') two or three times, but in January I went back to Tuusula for a three-day, word and action-packed international conference on Lifelong Learning and Wellbeing organised by the English-language journal *LLinE (Lifelong Learning in Europe)* with the Finnish Society for Research in Adult Education. It was held at Gustavelund Hotel, a well-designed location with a fine hall for plenary sessions and workshop areas. *LLinE* will publish papers based on the Conference in the summer so it may be useful to anticipate its contents here; AEA members will be kept informed.

As well as the hotel sessions, there were study visits to three interesting places in the neighbourhood: a Lutheran Education Centre, for the development of priests and lay people concerned with the wellbeing of parishioners; a second education centre for people with physical disabilities; and the Music Institute of Jarvenpaa in Tuusula.

The conference opened with an authoritative keynote address by Professor Sir David Watson from London's Institute of Education, co-author with Tom Schuller of the recent, forward-looking *Learning Through Life*. He provided an introduction to the book and some of the international implications of its follow-up Inquiry.

The other keynotes were on Wellbeing at Work (Professor Kiti Muller, Director of the Brain and Work Research Centre at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health) and Happiness (Luigino Bruni, Professor of Economics at Universita di Milano Bicocca). Each keynote was followed by a Case Study. These were respectively on Sharing Awareness.org by Tuoma Erkkila (a Finn from Stockholm Folk High School); Memory Schools for the Third Age (Paivi Marjainen); and The Performers' House, Denmark (Lars Ilum).

There were three workshop themes: (1) Wellbeing at work; (2) Wellbeing across generations; and (3) Transforming lives through learning. The internationalism of the conference is indicated by the presenters' centres. They came (1) from the Theatre Academy, Helsinki, and HAMK University of Applied Sciences, Hameenlinna, southern Finland; (2) Brno University of Technology, Czech Republic; University of Macedonia, Greece, and in mid-sandwich, my slot on

The Arts: older people's learning and wellbeing. Finally (3): introduced by academics from South Korea; Middlesex University; PRO-MED, Poland; and the University of Belgrade, Serbia.

For me, the highlights included what I learned in my workshop group from the other two speakers and the discussions that followed, as well as gaining new ideas and information about my own topic; plus Lars Ilum with his video-illustrated talk about the Performers' House (a Folk High School with a specialised purpose). As in all good conferences, the chat and gossip at meal and other off-duty times were refreshing. In many ways the most enjoyable and illuminating time of all was spent in the Music Institute.

Everyone knows of course about the world-famous university, the Sibelius Academy, in Helsinki, but I had no idea that there are 20 advanced music schools in the Helsinki region alone - 95 in Finland as a whole (NB population: c.5,500,000), with similar curricula. In Tuusula there are 400 students plus 30 advanced level students, 120 in an 'open department' and 310 kindergarten students, etc - a total of 860 - 900 students from a region with around 80,000 population. The Vice-Dean, who told us all this and much more, then showed us round the tutorial and practice rooms and then we went back to the hall. There a young couple of professional singers who had graduated at this Keskinen Uudenmaan Musikkiopesto sang beautiful duets to us. They had yet another surprise for us - we were invited to join them on stage and they showed us how to sing - and move as a group - to an Inuit folk song with gentle rhythmic dance movements. Gorgeous experience!



Finnish folk singing

There was also music for us all between courses at a splendid last night dinner in a nearby ancient manor house - two young singers, friends of Markus Palmen, the conference organiser, sang Finnish folk songs most persuasively. We owe LLinE, Markus and his colleague Sirkku Parviainen a big thank you - or, to use one of my few Finnish words: Kiitoksia!

Brian Groombridge's paper arising from the conference will be published later this summer and will focus on the importance of arts and performance for non – professional practitioners. No mention of Dame Judi Dench or other older professional artists here! Key words: 'Learning', 'Arts' and 'Older People', plus Opportunity, and Creativity. Brian writes further:

Since UK governments continue to restrict funds for general adult education, not even recognising that older people are likely to cost the NHS less if they're creative, I deal mainly with policy ideas in such reports as Mental Capital and Wellbeing, Our Creative Talent, etc., or movements such as the flourishing U3A, plus intergenerational activities, organisations promoting specific arts (choirs, quilting clubs, writing groups, etc), dementia and ill health, and the major new ESRC research programme.

Colleagues who would like to see a draft and possibly offer suggestions/critical comments via e-mail, please contact Brian on bgroombridge@blueyonder.co.uk

*AEA member Christine Ball attended a one day conference in February on **The Future of Adult Learning**, held at the Swarthmore Adult Education Centre in Leeds. She suggested that **Maggie Butterworth**, Director of the Centre, to report for us on the event.*

Over 70 people from students to U3A members to staff working across the sector attended the conference about the future of Adult Learning at Swarthmore on Saturday 27th February 10am-4pm.



Hilary Benn MP

Hilary Benn MP for Leeds Central took to the platform first speaking about Swarthmore and how they celebrated their Centenary year during 2009. He

went on to quote figures and how this government have invested in education in real terms. He demonstrated his support and commitment to the event after flying into Heathrow from a climate change conference in Bali at 5am that morning.

Dan Taubman is UCUs (University and College Union) Senior National Education Official. He kept delegates up to date with the latest cuts to adult education budgets and highlighted the aims of the Campaign Alliance for Lifelong Learning and how people can get involved. Some 7000 jobs he told us are at risk across providers nationally. "At a time of the greatest economic crisis in 80 years and unemployment above 2.5 million it is nothing short of scandalous. Surely this is a time when this government should be investing in the future by increasing funds for adult learning not cutting them".

Ann Walker, Regional Director of the WEA and a previous Director of Swarthmore (also the first woman) gave the audience a clear message about the values of education and how adult education relates to the wider aims of narrowing the gap between rich and poor, better health and community cohesion. The WEA have put together a 'speak up for lifelong learning' campaign pack ensuring people know how to quiz aspiring politicians in the run up to the general election.

Kevin Campell Wright is a learning technology adviser and social media enthusiast with a passion for community engagement and learning. He gave the delegates plenty of food for thought with his interesting presentation on digital technologies, how they surround our

everyday lives and how we could make more use of them in adult education.

An interesting and intelligent debate followed with questions from delegates answered in full by all panel members, while delegates who attended the 'knowledge café' in the afternoon came up with plenty of solutions to the proposed questions. ** see footnote.

The conference ended with all delegates joining the drumming and percussion circle led by Swarthmore tutor Steve Hill. A terrifically inspiring and stimulating day was enjoyed by all.

Maggie's report on that Digital Divide workshop is on page 13.

*In the last edition of the digest Professor Chris Phillipson looked forward to the then forthcoming **Universities and Active Ageing: Engaging Older Learners** event. The conference took place on 17th February at Woburn House Conference Centre, London. Among those attending was **Alex Withnall**.*

The event was jointly hosted by Universities UK and NIACE and chaired by Professor Dame Janet Finch, Vice-Chancellor of Keele University. Consisting of a series of short presentations and three fascinating workshops, the day was very well attended and was generally considered to have been stimulating and worthwhile.

Professor Phillipson gave a cogent overview of the report *Active ageing and universities: engaging older learners*, which he recently completed with Jim Ogg with funding from HEFCE. Observing that only a small proportion

of people aged 50+ are currently involved in higher education, he argued that there is a strong basis for building up work with older learners and identified some specific areas for development. For example, it would be possible to develop educational programmes supporting new forms of civic engagement and/or community-based programmes focused on healthy ageing. He also commented on the need to take account of varying regional and local demographics and to establish partnerships with NGOs such as Age UK and with employer organisations. Finally, he identified three key challenges for higher education in respect of older learners – the intergenerational mix of students; the need to produce robust evidence of the benefits of learning in later life; and the need for a higher education strategy for older learners.

Professors Tom Schuller and David Watson summarised the findings of their recent book *Learning Through Life*, concluding with their ten recommendations including the adoption of their (somewhat controversial) model of the four-stage educational life course. Participants then moved into one of three workshops run by visionary practitioners from the Universities of Strathclyde and Leicester and the Institute of Education. I attended the latter, led by Anita Pincas who discussed some issues arising from attempts to engage older learners in higher/further education and drew attention to her innovative master's level module on *The Lifecourse after 50*. She certainly succeeded in stimulating a lively and fascinating debate with heated discussion continuing over an excellent lunch!

In the afternoon, we heard from Hugh Pullinger, Head of the Older Persons and Ageing Society Division, DWP, who gave us a short insight into the recent publication *Building a Society for All Ages*. He was followed by Professor Stephen McNair from NIACE speaking briefly with his customary insight and flair about older learners' hopes and needs and the policy response. Part of his theme was the need for an entitlement curriculum and he concluded with a succinct summary of what needs to change. His analysis included the need for an entitlement framework and the importance of building learning that strengthens both communities and autonomy and independence.

Finally, in what had been an interesting and thought-provoking day, two of the morning's workshops were repeated with the third being a new addition in the shape of a discussion around the Senior Learners' Programme at Lancaster University, which gave the opportunity to hear Professor John Benyon's account of the very successful programme of 29 seminars on lifelong learning, older people and society run since 2005 in the Institute of Lifelong Learning at Leicester University. His evaluation of their impact raised some interesting issues that led to a lively discussion concerning a University's responsibility to engage with its local community and to disseminate relevant research findings.

Overall it was a very well organised event that probably raised more questions than it answered but that nevertheless left us all buzzing with excitement!

Phillipson, C and Ogg, J. (2010) Active ageing and universities: engaging older learners. London: Universities UK This publication can be downloaded free from <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/ActiveAgeing.aspx>

*Professor Phillipson will be contributing a further article on the subject to the first issue of the new **International Journal of Education and Ageing**. See our website or contact the Secretary for details of how to subscribe.*

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES

The Workers Educational Association Northern Ireland will be holding a one day conference on the theme of ***The Sustainability of Later Life Learning*** at the Stormont Hotel, Belfast on **Wednesday 9th June 2010.**

Learning can make a real difference to the quality of life and work for older people. It can help them stay longer in work, improve their health and wellbeing and support them in facing the challenges of retirement and late old age. Despite this later life learning is facing challenges on many fronts; an increasingly youth centred education system, the promotion of skill based qualifications and a tough economic backdrop.

This conference will give participants the chance to look at the future of lifelong learning, how it will be resourced and how older people and the organisations that work with them can build a culture of learning self help.

The conference is intended for:

- Older learners and the organisations that work with them
- Age sector organisations
- Education sector organisations

- Politicians and policy makers with an interest in the impact of later life learning
- Academics and researchers interested in later life learning

For further details please contact Carolyn Hale Carolyn.hale@wea-ni.com or telephone 02890329718

Dates and details have now been confirmed for the first two seminars in the 2010 ***Lifelong Learning, Older People and Society*** series at the University of Leicester.

Friday 30 April

The Long and Winding Road – Travel and Older Learners

David Ewens: Programme Director, Equality and Diversity, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
Learning benefits older people but how can we ensure that older people are able to travel to where the learning takes place?

Friday 28 May

Learning and Older Workers in the Recession

Vanessa Beck: Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester
What are employers' perceptions of older workers especially during an

economic downturn? What role can learning play?

The third seminar in the series is scheduled to take place on **Friday 25 June**. Details will be available shortly. All seminars run from 11.00am-1.00pm, followed by a lunch on the 4th floor of the Charles Wilson Building, University of Leicester. Places are limited so

booking is essential. To book a place or for further information please contact:

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Date for your Diary

AEA Conference, AGM & Frank Glendenning lecture

This year's Conference and AGM will be held on Thursday 22nd July from 1.00 pm to 6.00 pm in the Council Chamber at Camden Town Hall in London. The event will also include the Frank Glendenning lecture to be delivered this year by Dr Alex Withnall. Full details of the programme and subjects to follow.



IT student Bernard Featherstone
(photo – Digital Unite)

*The pace at which the world has gone digital is frequently bewildering. E-mail, the internet, not to mention tweets, blogs, I-phones and the fact that even the telly in corner is going in that direction. Older people in particular often find themselves at a disadvantage in this increasingly digital world. The issue of the **Digital Divide** was vigorously aired by a small group of retired people in a workshop at the recent Swarthmore conference, reported on page 9.*

Maggie Butterworth summarises the discussion.

Fears were expressed that technology can exclude people – there is an assumption that everyone has a computer or easy access to a computer, and the skills to use it, and this is not the case. There is an ever-increasing emphasis on the Internet for information, and to enable things to happen. If you don't have access to a computer and the skills to use it, you are immediately disadvantaged. Age, skill and economics are the key factors affecting inclusion/exclusion at present, although there was a feeling that in the future economics will be the key factor because as technology becomes embedded through schools, future generations will have the skills they need to use it. However, literacy and numeracy are also embedded in schools, but many people continue to leave school with insufficient skills to function effectively – this may be true of technology skills too.

It was felt that, although everyone will have access in a few years' time, not

everyone will be able to continue to update their skills indefinitely. Technology changes so fast and becomes so complicated constant change was seen to be unnecessary, boring and time-wasting. Familiarity is important – fear develops as change happens, and this is alienating. The need to cope with technology will drive older people forward in the future but it won't remove the fear. That will be done through building skills, confidence and competence.

A discussion around how we could support older people to develop their skills and confidence on an ongoing basis included the following comments:

- Some will learn on their own, and some will need access to a tutor – as with everyone, older people have different learning styles and needs
- Accessibility will be key, and should not depend on income or locality. Public facilities e.g. libraries and learning centres like Swarthmore need to continue to provide equipment and courses which are universally accessible.
- In a discussion on the concept of working independently and remotely on the computer to access further learning, some vehement points emerged about dehumanisation, including the critical importance of the social aspect of learning, without which we lose social and personal contact. Fears were expressed that young people are already becoming less engaged with society on a human level, because of their extended use of the internet and other technologies and that self study e.g. via the internet could lead to a loss of relational skills. Blended learning was discussed but it was felt to lose the excitement and instant rapport of face to face contact.,

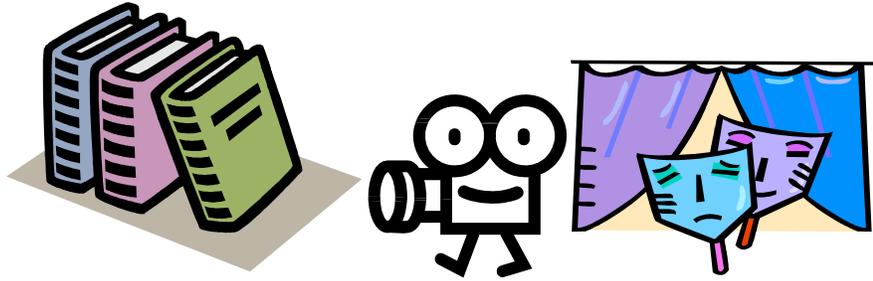
though there was a grudging acceptance that provided the learning was balanced more in favour of face to face, then some self study could be used to complement it. It was agreed that 'appropriateness' is fundamental – technology can inhibit or support learning and can be of benefit in some situations e.g. for the housebound, dispersed families and supporting other studies.

- Technology should complement, support and enhance, rather than replace, existing models of learning– although the balance may change at different stages of our lives and development.

The differences between Skills and Education were discussed, and it was unanimously agreed that we need both.

There is still considerable distrust of the internet e.g. for banking – not felt to be secure. Fears of losing individual choice and decisions was another area of discussion – it was felt that technology in some way diminishes you and removes choice and decision-making from the individual.

The discussion evolved into issues around the effective use of technology e.g. providing a sewing machine with the instructions on a CD Rom was not appropriate – it assumed that the sewing machine user has access to a computer in the same room as the sewing machine, and close enough not to have to move from one side of the room to read the instructions and then the other side to carry them out. It also assumed the user would have sufficient skills to operate the computer and access the instructions. Ineffective and inappropriate use of technologies increases alienation and hostility towards them.



AEA DIGEST CULTURE SECTION

*In the last digest we carried news of a Comedy Sketch show course for over 50s, which was so popular it filled up quickly and many would be comedians were unable to get on it, although it is hoped that further such courses may be mounted later, should funding be available. The course was organised by specialist workshop organisers **Silver Comedy**.*

Silver Comedy is Britain's first specialist comedy training company that has been established to work specifically with older people. It seeks to enrich their lives by actively engaging them in comedy workshops and performances. It intends to reduce social isolation, challenge stereotypes associated with ageing and give older people a forum to explore relevant issues through comedy. It has recently been set up by co-founders George Baddeley and Chris Head. George has a background in community development while Chris is an experienced producer, director and comedy trainer.

Prior to becoming a freelance community development consultant, George previously worked at Genesis Community, the charitable wing of Genesis Housing Group as a Community Development Manager, where he

developed a pioneering IT training project that won a NIACE "Fred Moore Institutional Award" for its successful engagement with older people in supported housing. He is now also a NIACE Consultant. George says, "My previous training work with often vulnerable older people convinced me that, like anyone else, older people like to have a good time. They're also often very keen to learn about new and enjoyable ways to improve their quality of their life. Entertainment and fun is always in demand. I want Silver Comedy to help older people make their own entertainment while developing new skills that enhance their wellbeing".

George's colleague and co-founder of Silver Comedy, Chris Head is an experienced comedy trainer as well as producing and directing comedy productions. Chris is able to train people in such areas as comedy writing, stand up and improvisation. Chris first met George when he joined one of Chris's stand-up comedy training courses, which culminated in a live comedy performance.

Chris teaches comedy writing and performing in Central London to all age groups, including retired students. He has run workshops for the BBC and

Channel 4. Articles about his teaching have appeared in Time Out, The Guardian, The Times Education Supplement and more, and his teaching has been featured on BBC Radio. He has also appeared on screen as a comedy tutor on Channel 4 and the new digital channel Blighty and as part of the Channel 4 project *Year Dot*.

Silver Comedy provides tailor made comedy sessions in group settings for relevant organisations that support the needs of older people, including those living in supported housing. It offers nationwide opportunities for older people to explore and develop comedy writing and performing via a network of professional comedy trainers and facilitators. All Silver Comedy tutors are fully qualified and have long experience in the adult education sector, working

with a range of students including the senior age group.

Silver Comedy is currently working with the Capital Age Festival which is supported by the Greater London Authority to create a series of comedy sketch podcasts developed by older people that will be recorded in front of a live audience at City Hall and then released in the following weeks over the internet. Silver Comedy is keen to develop more innovative and cutting edge projects with colleagues in the adult learning sector. If you wish to learn more about Silver Comedy you can visit their website at: www.silvercomedy.co.uk. For more information you can also contact George Baddeley on 07525154616.



*The issue of older people has been well to the fore in the theatre recently, explored both by a contemporary writer (see Carlie Newman's theatre review page 18) and in the classical theatre. Following on from Ben Power's recent two-handed exploration of passionate love remembered in old age, A Tender Thing, which used Shakespeare's text to create a powerful love story for any generation (see AEA Autumn digest 2009), the Bristol Old Vic has been causing a lot of interest with **Juliet and Her Romeo**, in which the lovers are played as eighty year olds. Carol Allen looks at how critics have responded to this ground breaking piece of theatre.*

In this production, which uses most of the original text with slight adaptations, the action is relocated to a modern-day care home, Verona plc. The Montagues are those residents who have been forced to cash in their homes and their life savings to live and sleep in a communal ward. The Capulets are those from rich families who have private care and a room of their own. Younger actors play doctors, nurses, the institution's volunteer padre, Friar Lawrence and Juliet's mercenary daughter, who wants to marry her off to wealthy geriatric Paris to help pay the nursing bills. When fights break out, they are not with swords but walking sticks and Zimmer

frames and Romeo finally kills Tybalt by smothering him with a cushion.



Michael Byrne (Romeo) and Sian Phillips (Juliet) Photo: Simon Annand

In his review for the Daily Telegraph Charles Spencer wrote that “the older members of the cast, playing characters that are young in the original play, bring a wonderful battered dignity and experience to their roles. I was especially moved by Michael Byrne, who plays Romeo like some old-school, rheumy-eyed poet, blessed with a rapt sense of wonder and with a delicious rueful humour about him as he declares: “With love’s light wings did I o’er perch these walls”. Sian Phillips brings a faded glamour and a sense of style to a Juliet, who will be 80 “come Lammas Eve”, and the love scenes between the pair have a gentle, heart-catching ardour.”

Paul Taylor in the Independent was also full of praise for Phillips, who, he said, “radiates an inner loveliness as Juliet and speaks the verse with an ardour that takes your breath away, sometimes wittily modifying her delivery to acknowledge the change of circumstance. Her Juliet is a physically frail but spiritually intrepid lady, almost like the ghost of herself in her white nightdress and lace shawl and yet at the same time still situated within a body

that she refuses to consign to some socially dictated scrap heap.” He was not however as convinced as Spencer by the production itself, claiming that: “nearly every detail grates and fails to convince. Indulgent laughter greets the idea, in the balcony scene, that Michael Byrne's Romeo (who is sympathetic but about as impetuous as a cup of Complan) has scaled walls to get there. The physical relationship is conducted by little chaste, tight-lipped kisses and a show that is designed to stick up for the old comes across as dismayingly juvenile.”

Michael Billington in The Guardian, while impressed by certain aspects of the production, particularly Phillips’ performance – “she defies time and knows how to weight every syllable to communicate meaning” – but his ultimate verdict was that “I still feel the play demands the headstrong violence of youth.” However director Tom Morris argues: “Why shouldn't people who are 80 have the same life-transforming experience when they fall in love as a 14-year-old?” The difference isn't between young and old love: unlike Antony and Cleopatra, this is a story about people falling in love. You actually see that moment dramatised. And you can apply that to any age.”

*Carlie Newman continues the theme of the depiction of older people on stage in her **Theatre Review**.*

I was not exactly jumping with joie de vivre when I came out of **Really Old, Like Forty Five** (the National theatre until 20 April). In fact Tamsin Oglesby’s new play about older people is quite depressing in parts. The setting

on two levels is a little disconcerting with many short scenes in different settings. There are the scientists are on the upper level trying to decide what to do with old, feeble people. Should they make them should they make them surrogate grandparents, as Lyn (Judy Parfitt) becomes later, where they would need to demonstrate “active participation” or give them a home death? Another of their ideas is to have a slow lane on pavements where old and disabled could walk and a faster one on the outside. This all sounds good until the question is asked about overtaking! On the lower level we first meet Lyn and her family during the interval of a play they have been watching, with which they are not impressed. We can already see that Lyn, who like her siblings is in her seventies, has the beginnings of dementia. As with many very intelligent people who have held positions of power in the past, Lyn develops Alzheimer’s and her daughter, Cathy (Amelia Bullmore) announces that she doesn’t want her mother to move in with her. Lynn continues at home with her brother (Gawn Grainger), who wears a wig to try and appear younger to his girlfriend, and their sister Alice (Marcia Warren) who has three grandchildren, until they are all consigned to hospital and into the care of a programmed robot nurse, Mimi (Michaela Meazza), a computerised moving doll-like creature, who responds by purring when she is stroked.

The head Boffin (Paul Ritter) also has the beginnings of dementia, which shows up in his own laboratory tests. As someone aptly remarks that, “If you can’t find your keys it is OK. If the keys are in your hand and you don’t know what they are for, you are in trouble.”



Michela Meazza and Paul Ritter in Really Old, Like Forty-Five at the Cottesloe

The play has a lot to say about the treatment of our senior population, most of which is unflattering, and puts it across in a witty manner. The acting is excellent with particularly moving performances by Judy Parfitt and Marcia Warren. I have to say that the rest of the audience, which included a good number of older people, laughed a lot and didn’t seem as disturbed as I was. As usual the NT programme is most instructive and includes facts and figures about Alzheimer’s.

Really Old, Like Forty Five links in with Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (Duchess Theatre until 15 May). While the NT play shows the provision of ways of disposing of older people as ludicrous, *Ghosts* looks at a mother’s dilemma when faced with pleading from her son to end his life if he deteriorates so profoundly that he is incapable of doing anything for himself.

Oswald Alving (Harry Treadaway) returns to his family home and his mother (Lesley Sharpe) when he begins to be too sick to work as an artist. Mrs Alving is very worried when she finds out that her son fancies Regine

Engstrand (Jessica Raine), who is actually the illegitimate daughter of her dissolute husband with their former maid. She tells Pastor Manders, played by Iain Glen, who also directs the play, that Captain Alving, her late husband, whom everyone believes to have been an honourable pillar of the community, has always been sexually depraved and in fact died of a venereal disease. The Pastor congratulates her on having done her duty by staying with her husband but agrees that Regine should move out to avoid any incest with her half-brother and he advises that she should stay with the man she believes to be her father. Mrs Alving disagrees with this as Engstrand is about to set up what he describes as “a sanctuary for seamen”, which is in fact a bordello. When Oswald discovers the truth about himself and his inherited syphilis he begs his mother to kill him when the time comes.



Harry Treadaway as Oswald & Lesley Sharp as Mrs Alving

Ibsen’s play, in a new translation by Frank McGuinness, looks at parental choice and responsibility in facing the notion of assisted suicide – the very issue we are seeing reflected in our daily newspapers as I write. In Glen’s production the emphasis is on the “filth,” not only of the dead Captain but also in the lives of many of those living in the community. While Glen’s acting is sometimes a little loud and obvious,

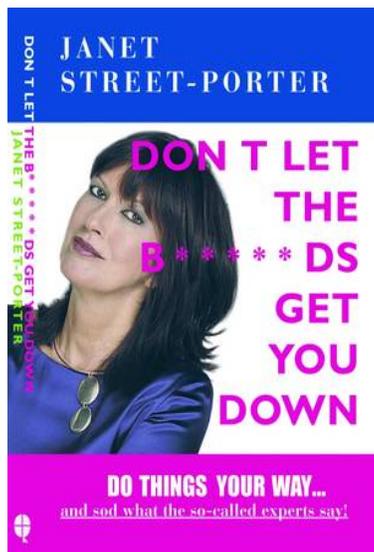
Sharpe gives an accurate characterisation of a woman who has gradually come to realise that perhaps she was wrong to keep quiet about the real character of her husband. Treadaway gives a most sensitive portrayal of Oswald, at first upset at his inability to pursue his artistic career and later devastated by the news of his inherited condition. This is a harrowing play to watch, but worth the effort.

*In the world of books, journalist Janet Street-Porter has been sounding off again. Alex Withnall reviews her latest opus, which rejoices in the would be provocative title of **Don’t Let the B*****s Get You Down***

Yes folks, she’s back. The 60-something journalist, whom a male acquaintance of mine recently described as ‘the woman who gives feminism a bad name’ has produced a follow-up to her previous so-called guide to modern living, *Life’s Too F*****g Short*. This time, she’s produced a manifesto to counteract ‘the new directives from those who are trying to run our lives’. These include ‘our intrusive government’, ‘do-gooders’ and ‘the thought police’ who, she claims, are causing us to live in a constant climate of fear, anxiety and guilt. That’s even before the recession kicked in! So here we have JSP’s own guide for keeping our spirits up and ‘smiling through’ whilst cutting the crap and living life on our own terms.

The topics she covers range from what she sees as pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo about what we eat, through shopping, money, growing your own, your home and green issues to the emergence of ‘a new caste’ – the posh

frugalistas who enjoy playing at being poor. Wealthy journalist Celia Walden and environmentalist Sheherazade Goldsmith (wife of Zac) come in for particularly venomous comment here as does the magazine *Vogue* with the resurrection of its ‘more dash than cash’ feature. The popular kitchen equipment shop Lakeland also gets some flak; you may be struggling to make jam and preserves to save money, but you’ll have to fork out £40 for the right equipment first. As JSP sarcastically comments ‘that’s a lot of jam before break-even point’.



JSP’s deep distrust of authority and inbred cynicism makes this book an amusing read and I have to admit that some of her forthright opinions and suggested solutions to some of the dilemmas of modern life are spot on. For example, she cuts briskly through all the health and beauty advice dished out to women by asking just how many of them have the time to follow the totally unrealistic regimes advocated by magazines and self-help manuals. And why can’t *Staying In* be the new *Going Out*? We need to focus on making our

homes just how we want them ‘and sod the taste police’. Her overall message is that we should take control of our immediate surroundings and not set ourselves impossible goals. She even comes over all philosophical with a final reference to Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; we only have one life to lead and nothing repeats itself. Decisions and events aren’t ultimately that important, so mistakes don’t matter.

My major dislike in this book is not the tone, even though I don’t agree with all of JSP’s rants, but the garish colours, changing fonts and (sometimes irrelevant) illustrations that hit the reader full on on every page. It’s really quite difficult to follow the arguments and suggestions whilst trying to cope with this onslaught. Maybe JSP needs to resist this particular creative urge in her next book. But overall, there’s a lot of good sense lurking in the pages and this is a highly entertaining and inspiring read.

*Don't Let the B****s Get You Down*
(2009) by Janet Street-Porter is
published by Quadrille at £12.99



Pearce Brosnan and Ewan McGregor star in
“The Ghost” (see next page)

On Screen - Carol Allen

The Ghost has a very good, well made thriller plot adapted by Robert Harris from his own novel and is director Roman Polanski's first major movie since *Oliver Twist* five years ago.

McGregor plays the ghost writer of the title - he isn't given a name - who's hired to write the memoirs of former British Prime Minister Adam Lang (Brosnan). As part of the deal the writer has to leave immediately, spend a month holed up with Lang at his publisher's remote island home off the East coast of America and worst of all, he discovers his predecessor on the project died suddenly in mysterious circumstances. As he's about to board his plane, he sees on the news that Lang has been accused of illegally seizing suspected terrorists and handing them over to CIA torturers, which is going to make things a bit tricky. And when he gets to the island, the plot really thickens.

It's all very entertaining, well acted, atmospheric and the many twists in the story keep you on your toes. McGregor holds the central role well, giving life to a character who doesn't even have a name, let alone much in the way of background. Brosnan as Lang is also a bit of a mystery - an enigmatic mix of charm and explosiveness. Rumour hath it that Harris got disenchanted with Tony Blair and New Labour and this novel was his revenge. Some of the parallels - Lang's holidaying in someone else's luxury pad, his "special relationship" with America and the murky allegations of turning a blind eye to the torture of Iraqi prisoners are a bit close but there's no suggestion that this is anything other than fiction and the final twist of the plot

should insure Harris against libel. Nor does Olivia Williams, very good as Lang's embittered wife Ruth, who has her own secrets and who seduces the Ghost, have any resemblance to Cherie Blair. There's also good support from Tom Wilkinson as a former fellow student of Lang's from university, Robert Pugh plays the British Foreign Secretary, giving him a distinct physical resemblance to the late Robin Cook, while Kim Cattrall makes a strong impression in the underwritten role of the prime minister's assistant. What the film doesn't have however is that special Polanski touch which usually mark his films out as being something a bit different from the norm. This one could almost have been made by any good director.



Marisa Gibson as Delilah and Rowan McNamara as Samson

Samson & Delilah is a simple and affecting tale of two aboriginal teenagers in contemporary Australia written and directed by fellow aboriginal Warwick Thornton.

Samson (McNamara) and Delilah (Gibson) live in a small and isolated community in the Central Australian desert. He lives by himself in a shack, sniffing petrol and glue and rejected by what family he has. Delilah cares for her elderly Nana, (Mitjili Gibson), helping her create the paintings she sells for a few dollars to the white guy, who runs the only store in the settlement and who, we later discover, is selling them to a city art gallery for a small fortune. Samson and Delilah are attracted to each other, though their courtship is almost wordless. When Nana dies, Delilah is beaten up by her family, who blame her for no good reason for her grandmother's death, and the young couple decide to escape to the city in search of a better life. There they again meet with rejection at all turns and are reduced to living rough under the motorway. To the white people, the couple are invisible and the only person who shows them any kindness is an alcoholic tramp, Gonzo, played by Scott Thornton, Warwick's real life brother. In the end they are forced to return to their community. The film leaves us with a glimmer of hope for their future together, but frankly not much.

In some ways the film is reminiscent of Lee Tamahori's debut film about a Maori family *Once Were Warriors* in terms of it being about what happens to a people when their culture is interfered with and destroyed, but it is a very different story and set up, in that the two main characters here are created by the settlement environment, not the city.

The two young leads are terrific, both very beautiful, both conveying volumes without the need for words. It's by no means a flattering picture of the

Aboriginal community. It is though an astonishing and very moving film and despite the downbeat nature of the story, it is uplifting rather than depressing.



Gemma Arterton as Alice Creed

The Disappearance of Alice Creed is a cracking little thriller about a millionaire's daughter, who's kidnapped on the street by two men and held hostage. Despite this being a well used movie situation, it's original and full of unexpected twists- very well plotted and structured, well paced so we never lose interest and well acted by its cast of three – Eddie Marsan as the ruthless professional, Martin Compston the apparently naive younger one and Arterton as their spirited and full of tricks victim. The opening, where we see the detailed and careful preparations for the kidnapping, is brilliant in that it totally intrigues and captures our interest. Although this is largely set inside the kidnap house, it still feels very cinematic and the resolution of the story, when it moves out of that enclosed environment, brings it to a perfect ironic conclusion.

As you will have noticed, while older characters have been featuring strongly of late in the theatre, they've not been as evident in the movies as in previous months. Direct Peter Greenaway's films, which always look like works of art, tend to appeal to those who love beautiful cinematic pictures whatever their age. This is particularly so of *Nightwatching*, which is about the seventeenth century Dutch painter Rembrandt. The premise of the story is that, while painting *The Night Watch*, the work that is regarded as his masterpiece, the artist uncovered a conspiracy of murder among the socially powerful Amsterdam merchants, who are its subject – a discovery which upset them more than somewhat, as the painting is full of clues about the murder and who did it. Greenaway also suggests other nefarious goings on, in that one of the merchants, an apparently worthy and charitable citizen who runs an orphanage, has turned that orphanage into a child brothel.

It's an intriguing premise but one which in the telling is frankly difficult to get a grasp on. It is, to put it mildly, distinctly tricky to work out what's going on. Until the end that is, when there are some Greenaway trademark explicit sex scenes between Rembrandt and his servant girl mistress Geertje (May).

There are though good performances. Martin Freeman sporting longish curls and a cute little beard holds it all together as the likeably lusty, expletive spouting Rembrandt, Eve Birthistle is affecting as his sickly but feisty wife Saskia, while Natalie Press is waif like as the unfortunate orphan Marieke, who blows the whistle on the orphanage to Rembrandt. After a short run in the cinema, *Nightwatching* is due to be released on DVD at the end of April. And despite its somewhat wonky narrative, it's worth seeing for its sheer visual beauty. Every frame looks like a Rembrandt painting come to life in its colours and lighting.



The merchants of Amsterdam posing for Rembrandt's masterpiece in *Nightwatching*.

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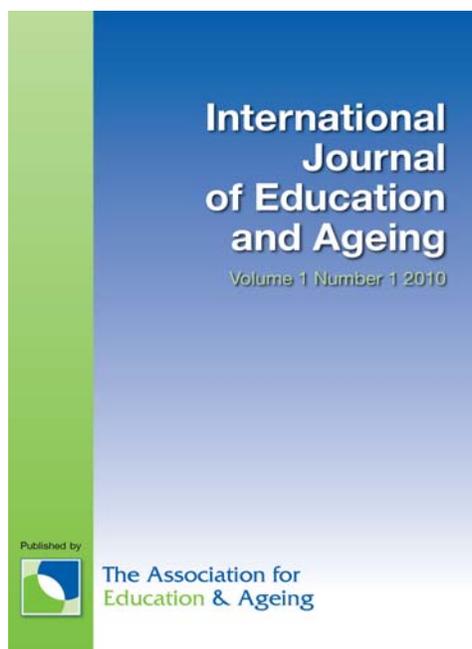
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