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"I LOVE TO WRITE MY STORY": STORYTELLING AND ITS ROLE IN SENIORS' LANGUAGE LEARNING

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"I LOVE TO WRITE MY STORY": STORYTELLING AND ITS ROLE IN SENIORS' LANGUAGE LEARNING

"I would like to write a story about myself and improve my English. That is very important. I love to write my story."
—Storytelling class participant

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Abstract

> This article examines the role of storytelling as an arts-based educational approach in an older-adult immigrant language-learning program. As a special group within the adult language-learner population, immigrant seniors benefit from educational strategies that emphasize recognition of life experience over knowledge accumulation, which is a common goal of more traditional educational approaches. We present a small study of a storytelling class held within the English Conversation Program at the University of British Columbia Learning Exchange. Based on compelling results, we argue that storytelling is a powerful strategy that not only facilitates language learning, but creates a safe, inclusive learning community.

Résumé

> Le présent article se penche sur le rôle du conte comme approche pédagogique axée sur les arts dans le cadre d'un programme d'apprentissage de langue pour les personnes immigrantes d'âge mûr. Les personnes immigrantes aînées, un segment particulier de la population de personnes apprenantes adultes, bénéficient de stratégies pédagogiques qui mettent l'accent sur le vécu plutôt que sur l'accumulation des connaissances, cette dernière étant un des objectifs courants d'approches pédagogiques plus traditionnelles. Nous présentons une petite étude d'un cours sur le conte offert dans le cadre du programme de conversation anglaise à la University of British Columbia Learning Exchange. Selon les résultats convaincants, nous soutenons que le conte constitue une stratégie puissante qui non seulement facilite l'apprentissage de la langue, mais qui crée aussi une communauté d'apprentissage sécuritaire et inclusive.

The Storytellers

At the time of the project's birth, we—the authors of this paper—were at different stages of our pedagogical careers. Natalia was completing her dissertation research and Spring was working as the program coordinator for the English Conversation Program (ECP) at the Learning Exchange, a community-engagement initiative of the University of British Columbia (UBC). Both of us are deeply devoted to adult education as a form of community development. We are particularly drawn to arts-based programming, having experienced and witnessed its power to enhance learning. When we met at the UBC Learning Exchange, our creative interests merged and we decided to start a Seniors Storytelling Club (SC). SC is situated within Seniors Thrive, an arts-based language-learning program for seniors who make up more than half of the learners in the ECP.

The data that we share in this article come from two complementary data sets. The first set was generated through Natalia's doctoral study, approved by the UBC Ethics Board. The data include the description of the curriculum and development of the classes, as well as interviews regarding seniors' language-learning experiences. The second data set comes from an ongoing internal evaluation of the Seniors Thrive program, which was carried out concurrently with Natalia's research. At the beginning of the term, each class member within Seniors Thrive, including SC learners, completed intake surveys to establish a foundational understanding of what drew them to the class and what they hoped to learn. Other data included the registration database, attendance sheets, class observations, and a facilitator journal. At the end of the term, a focus group was held during which learners collectively identified the most significant benefits and challenges they had experienced. This internal program evaluation did not require approval by an ethics board as it adheres to its own formal ethical standards.[1]

The strength of combining two sources of data in this article is that we are able to provide a more holistic overview of the program. Natalia was using one lens for her dissertation study, and the evaluation specialist was using another. While there was some overlap, there were also distinct findings. For example, the Seniors Thrive evaluation data included motivations for participating in the class. By sharing our project from these two perspectives, including learners' feedback regarding its impact, we hope to inspire readers to try out new forms of teaching and working with older-adult language learners.

Where Our Story Takes Place

This story began in 2014 when we connected through the ECP at the UBC Learning Exchange. Established in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in 1999, the unit builds relationships between the university and the diverse inner-city community. At the UBC Learning Exchange, community members, students, faculty, and staff work collaboratively to exchange knowledge and engage in the critical issues facing communities today (Towle & Leahy, 2016). Through formal and informal discussions with seniors attending the ECP, we came to understand that participants were interested in both language learning and improving their well-being.

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1   In accordance with Article 2.5 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement, the evaluation adheres to ethical standards for program evaluation outlined by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation.

In February 2014, the ECP held a Seniors' Fair, which brought together seniors and students to discuss how English language learning could better meet the needs of seniors. Feedback from this event indicated a strong interest in a wide range of arts-based learning activities. With this knowledge and building on the existing curricula, the Seniors Thrive program was born. The program, funded by the Carraresi Foundation, aims to increase social capital among seniors in the inner city, in addition to improving English language skills, thereby improving their health and well-being.

Today, Seniors Thrive comprises a set of informal senior-focused English language classes that fall under the headings of the arts, health literacy, and digital literacy. Our current core arts-based programming includes a drama club, choir, dance class, storytelling, and drop-in karaoke. The number and type of activities offered each term depend on the interest of seniors, the availability and talents of the facilitators, and the capacity of the team, which consists of the program coordinator and two student support staff.

What We Know from the Literature

This project was grounded in two bodies of theory and research: principles of educational gerontology and storytelling as an arts-based approach to learning. We see storytelling as a unique pedagogical opportunity and a tool of collaborative language learning within the older-adult classroom. For the purposes of this article, we use *story* as an encompassing term to describe any "narration of personal experience" (Tyler, 2009, p. 138) that is "conveyed orally and directly, face-to-face by a teller to listeners in a facilitated forum" (p. 138).

First, research in the field of educational gerontology shows that in addition to the desire to learn new things, older adults are interested in socializing and developing peer support networks in community-based settings (Chené, 1991; Clark, Heller, Rafman, & Walker, 1997; Duay & Bryan, 2008; Kim & Merriam, 2010). Connection with others through informal learning is highlighted to emphasize that seniors tend to rely on peers to overcome the sense of being on the periphery due to their age. As Golding (2011) argued, socially situated informal learning with peers results in "particularly therapeutic" (p. 117) outcomes for seniors. Thus, learning in social settings plays an important role in the lives of older adults, as it encourages them to stay more connected with their peers and communities.

Second, storytelling is one of several arts-based learning approaches used by educators to foster embodied learning. Following Freiler (2008), we define embodied learning as "a way to construct knowledge through direct engagement in bodily experiences and inhabiting one's body through a felt sense of being in-the-world" (p. 40). In addition to storytelling, Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) included theatre, photography, weaving, quilt making, and "drawing visual metaphors" (p. 35) as embodied arts-based approaches to learning. They defined storytelling as "a kind of shapeshifting or changing the form of ourselves, our emotions, our thoughts, our worldviews, and our relationship to others, toward a more just society" (p. 35). Storytelling, as a pedagogical approach, is widespread in its application across educational contexts. For example, in language learning it is a well-established tool of student engagement (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002) and a pedagogical technique (Ko, Schallert, & Walters, 2003). In socially sensitive contexts, it is a vehicle for addressing past trauma (Kingston, 2006) and building learners' resilience (Geres, 2016). Reaching beyond the classroom walls, storytelling has applications in many domains, such as learning about sustainability through tours (Gillard, 2016).

The act of storytelling engages learners through multiple senses, memories, connections, and emotions. Indeed, storytelling is a multifaceted learning tool and "a way to make sense of our own experience and to communicate that experience to others" (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Andrews (2007) defined the importance of such narrative experience the following way: "Stories are not only the way in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences… but they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves…we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell" (pp. 77–78). The sense making happens retrospectively as we synthesize and organize the story for our audience (Tyler, 2007).

Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) wrote that "the arts are a way to communicate our stories in ways that connect with others" (p. 35). The listener plays a vital role too, not only as a respectful, engaged audience member, but as someone who may connect deeply with the story and come to a new personal understanding through listening (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Storytelling also "requires attention and slowing down" (Tyler, 2009, p. 137) and so becomes an effective language-learning tool for seniors who require a slower pace for their language learning and ample repetition.

Jensen (2005) added emotion as "an important learning variable" (p. 68) to this pedagogical approach and argued that this "affective side of learning is the critical interplay between how we feel, act, and think" (p. 68). Emotions are distributed through many areas of the brain and "drive attention, create meaning, and have their own memory pathways" (LeDoux as cited in Jensen, 2005, p. 69). When the emotions are engaged, deeper learning occurs. Storytelling engages emotions, particularly when a true story is being told (Jensen, 2005). The act of storytelling can be intimidating, especially for those without extensive experience in storytelling, doubly so when the story is not told in your first language. Fear, while considered a negative emotion, may trigger the fight-or-flight response and actually drive the experience and therefore the learning deeper (Jensen, 2005). To alleviate some of the fear, Kuyvenhoven (2009) suggested taking time to understand the circumstances of the teller and the listener working together. Storytelling is a shared experience.

How We Told Our Stories

When the first announcements about the newly formed SC were distributed among the patrons of the ECP, there was significant interest in this initiative. After the research purposes were clarified and consent forms distributed, both in English and first languages of the learners, 10 seniors enrolled. The group was heterogeneous: five men and five women, ranging from 61 to 86 years old, who have lived in Canada for a variety of time periods. The most recent immigrant arrived in Canada in the early 2000s, and some have lived here for over 30 years. Five learners originally emigrated from China, two from Vietnam, two from Taiwan, and one from Iran. The majority of the participants heard about the class from the facilitator or the program staff, while 25% heard through a friend. The top reasons for attending the class were to improve English skills (78%); because they liked the content/teacher (33%); and to improve their quality of life (22%).[2] None of the participants expressed particular interest in storytelling as an art form or expected that their stories would be interesting for others.

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2   Participants were able to select more than one category.

The pedagogical goal of the 10-week SC was to bring together language practice, in-class conversation, and writing activities that would provide scaffolding for storytelling. SC lessons were delivered through small group discussions, pair sharing, and discussions of stories. We met once a week for a 75-minute class to write, read, and share stories. In addition, learners and SC facilitators spent time reflecting on the value of storytelling in their lives (see Table 1 for the class outline). The choice of storytelling activities was grounded in Formosa's (2002) arguments to consider topics of interest to older adults. In addition, we followed age-specific considerations for curriculum planning for older-adult language learners (Ramírez Gómez, 2016), such as using real-world materials, peer teaching, and recognition of life experience through life review.

Table 1: Class Activities

Class	Discussion	Prompts
1	Stories, stories, stories	Fairy tale
2	Stories we tell	Childhood memory
3	Story outline	My learning journey
4	One or many stories?	Coming to Canada
5	Life story	Experiences with English
6	Power of a story	Community
7	Passing stories on	Family
8	Living stories	Ways of belonging
9	A picture tells a story	Places of the world
10	Sharing stories	Plans

As an English language class, SC was intended to enhance language learning, develop seniors' language fluency, and increase their speaking confidence. Because of this, storytelling activities took centre stage in the classroom. At the same time and following the principles of lifelong learning for older adults (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Cusack, 1995; Duay & Bryan, 2008), the learners were encouraged to draw on their life experiences, allowing them to shape the lesson content. We focused on shared life experiences such as immigration and language learning, as well as on unique life experiences such as belonging to a cultural community, childhood memories, and so on.

The class, led by two facilitators, began with an activity about storytelling and outlined the structure and purpose of different types of stories. At the initial stages, we felt that it was important to spend considerable time discussing the importance of storytelling and the forms this practice can take, including short stories, anecdotes, fairy tales, and visual storytelling. After the storytelling activity, participants wrote and shared their own stories based on a prompt. After each session, participants were given a new prompt to ponder at home. For example, prompts included "tell me a story about your immigration experience" or "tell me about your first day in Canada."

The learners responded favourably to the lesson structure and enjoyed having prompts for discussion and storytelling. Some of the learners used these prompts to prepare for the next week's class, while others came up with their own topics and themes for storytelling. Some learners especially benefited from being able to practise speaking skills in class and writing skills at home while preparing for the next class. Another positive aspect of the structure was the smaller class size, as it gave everyone an opportunity to talk and share their stories in the comfort of a small, supportive group setting. By allocating time to process information and compose narratives, the SC facilitated self-directed learning (Cusack, 1995; Roberson & Merriam, 2005), which recognizes seniors' ownership of their own learning process.

While the learners were enthusiastic to begin the class, the storytelling practice started off slowly. At first, participants were reluctant to share their stories, unsure that they were worth telling. Moreover, many of them were used to traditional classroom practices where the teacher leads the activity, occasionally breaking into pair or small group work. Gradually, the learners began to gain confidence. As they got more comfortable with storytelling, stories took shape, transforming the classroom into a nourishing community space. Two learners were inspired to write their own memoirs and share them in class.

One of the surprising turns in the class was that learners started bringing up stories seemingly unrelated to the pre-planned curriculum. For example, one learner shared a story about medicinal herbs in class. This story sparked discussions about the importance of urban gardening in the lives of seniors, who have limited access to land. On many occasions, as each person shared their story, the facilitators could see how it resonated with the rest of the group. This collective energy permeated the class, at times moving the listeners to tears when we shared stories of loss or setting off heated exchanges when we reflected on ethnicity and nation building. As Lawrence and Paige (2016) pointed out, "Sharing our stories in dialogue with others helps us to understand the concepts at a deeper level" (p. 67). Stories also beget stories, with one person's story setting off another person's in a kind of snowball storying effect. The experience of sharing stories publicly challenged us all "to reconsider the meaning of our experiences" (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009, p. 36).

As the class was coming to an end, the stories written by the seniors were published in an illustrated booklet (Figure 1). Gaining permission was an important part of the process, given that learners were the ones who needed to formally consent to have their story printed and shared beyond the classroom. Having their work "published" helped to build their confidence as storytellers. Each participant received a copy of the book as a keepsake of the time spent together. This small book served as an important artifact for the SC pilot project, a memento for the learners, and acknowledgement of the value of their stories.

What We Learned from This Storytelling Experience

Learners' evaluations of the storytelling language class speak to the potential of arts-based approaches when working with seniors who might feel uncomfortable in traditional language-learning settings. To date, we have found that the learners in the SC class as well as the other arts-based seniors' classes in Seniors Thrive increase their social connections, gain confidence, and become more involved in other educational offerings of the UBC Learning Exchange.
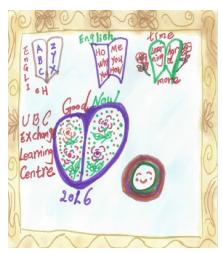
Figure 1. This image is an illustration created by one of the learners for the collection of stories produced in the Seniors Storytelling Club.

Connecting through Difference

Most of our learners did not have wide established social networks. Over 10 weeks, the members of SC grew closer as learners. The class became a space for making new friends across nationalities and age groups and building new social connections beyond the classroom. The SC fulfilled one of the desired outcomes of the Seniors Thrive program, as illustrated by this quote: "We should communicate with people. Other people all over the world. Chinese, Taiwanese, every people are here. We should know their culture, their habit. But if we don't that's not good. That's not good."

While unorthodox conversation classes such as personal storytelling, singing, and drama clubs require a certain level of vulnerability, "such vulnerability and shared experience deepens relational connections and builds trust" (UBC Learning Exchange, 2016a, 2016b). In our classroom, the cultural diversity at times presented challenges—for example, when navigating sensitive social topics (e.g. China–Taiwan relations). However, storytelling, particularly stories of "difference" (Lawrence & Paige, 2016; Tyler, 2007), was effective in promoting empathy and understanding across cultures. Social connections, so desired by our participants, work to combat loneliness among seniors while also increasing their general well-being (Scheffler et al., 2010). Many of the SC participants have maintained the friendships started in the classroom.

Increase in Language Confidence

As mentioned previously, SC was appreciative of seniors' own life experiences. This explicit stance encouraged seniors to speak more and disregard minor language issues in favour of communicating their message, as illustrated by one learner: "Because I have many experience, I have many story, I like speaking, I enjoy speaking. So, I can feel very oh—speak more, oh more happy, more comfortable."

As the quote suggests, storytelling as a pedagogical practice not only facilitates language learning itself, but also adds an element of well-being to the lessons. When asked about

the impact of lower language proficiency on their lives, one of the participants answered, "When we can't speak English we become upset, we become depressed." This response reflects the general sentiment of the group at the beginning of the project. While we did not formally test for language development, learners did self-report improved confidence in their language abilities. Several participants shared that SC empowered them to tell their life stories to others. In addition, many learners noted recalling words and phrases more easily, so found speaking to other English language speakers less intimidating. Overall, there was a lot of appreciation for the SC in terms of being a place where people felt comfortable and more confident speaking English.

For some learners, SC was one of the few places where they could practise speaking English, as they live in isolated or monolingual communities. For example, one learner explained their experience as a "lucky" opportunity to meet peers from diverse language communities: "I am very happy and lucky to join this class, I learned a lot from my instructor. I met many people from different countries and different language." Thus, for senior learners, storytelling practice created a safe space where they could take time to overcome perceived barriers in communication. In contrast to the everyday struggles with speaking English to strangers, by practising English in the company of peers—through pair work and small group sharing of stories—learners' confidence in their English language ability grew.

Increase in Active Participation

Many senior-oriented programs aim to foster active mindsets and encourage learners to reinvent themselves or become leaders in their communities (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Cruikshank, 2003; Cusack, 1995). We observed a similar effect after SC came to its conclusion.

One of the learners noted, "I want to try here one or two more years, after that my English is very good I want to be a facilitator to help people, my people. I teach *you* English!" After participating in the SC, some of the participants expanded their participation at the UBC Learning Exchange. Some enrolled in other program activities, attended social events, volunteered within their communities and within the unit, and invited others to join their activities.

In summary, storytelling allowed for multifaceted outcomes of language learning within this group of seniors. Our participants acknowledged the difference in the way they and their experiences were valued in SC. Some learners went as far as suggesting that the class model should be replicated in other adult learning centres in Vancouver. As the seniors' program keeps growing and developing, we find that older-adult language education framed as a creative practice based on storytelling has the potential to increase learners' language proficiency and contribute to community building.

Story Endings Are Beginnings

The story of the SC started with a fortuitous coming together of ideas and grew into an inspiration for new projects and a belief that storytelling is a powerful tool to address complex issues. Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of creating and spreading knowledge. Immigrant seniors harbour myriad experiences, memories, and testimonies. Unfortunately, traditional language classes do not always make use of these rich narratives. By foregrounding

individual life story and allowing storytellers to create social connections in the classroom, SC became a truly unique learning experience for both the seniors and us.

Storytelling creates a unique space within the classroom. As language educators, we came to see storytelling as a way not only for seniors to practise language at their preferred pace, but also to celebrate the experiences that these learners bring to the class. As the facilitator, Natalia practised gratitude and humbleness with the seniors who shared their life stories with her, and she felt free to express her own feelings and emotions in a group of people who knew how it feels to lose a friend, to say goodbye to your loved ones, or to leave home. As the program coordinator, Spring became committed to creating more spaces for storytelling at the UBC Learning Exchange.

Seniors need educational practices that allow them to draw on their own life experiences during the learning process. Storytelling fits this requirement perfectly. It is an emotional process in which the storyteller must be focused and fully present to engage others. We hope that the theoretical framings and practices described in this article will inspire our colleagues to recognize seniors as storytellers and to create opportunities for them to take charge and grow as agents of their own learning. As for us, we have begun another storytelling class, much to our learners' delight!

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