

New cooperative learning opportunities for older learners

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Note 1: I will attempt to present this paper as a PowerPoint presentation from Australia using TightVNC Software. If the technology or the speed of the Internet lets us down forgive me please. The technology is becoming more robust with time and the ideas I discuss in this paper have all been effectively used in cooperative ventures with U3A colleagues.

Note 2: In this paper I use the terms UTA and U3A interchangeably. Read the two as meaning the same and merely reflecting differences in terminology used in different countries.

Abstract: This paper begins by discussing examples of constituency research, a powerful idea not only for cooperative learning across nations but one that could ultimately give rise to novel research outcomes which conventional research could not achieve, without huge cost. I then underscore the point that cooperative learning is not new to us in the UTA movement but that the Internet has facilitated hitherto unattainable possibilities for cooperation. I conclude by climbing off the hand waving horse and become concrete by demonstrating some new or not so well known methods for cooperating. My overall message is – bring it on.

Constituency Research

In the early nineties two colleagues and I carried out a series of constituency research studies in which we worked closely with Brisbane U3A colleagues to deliver, by telephone, a series of courses for frail older people (Swindell, James & Mann 1992). All the frail elderly had alert minds but were too ill or incapacitated to regularly leave their homes. The idea behind what we thought might lead to a virtual U3A was quite simple. At a designated time three different groups of six older people were phoned in their own homes and for the next hour they were provided with an intellectually stimulating talk. Every few minutes the U3A moderator asked the guest lecturer to stop. She then asked each participant in turn whether they would like to ask a question or add something from their own experience, then the talk continued. The program of talks ran for 8 consecutive weeks with three different groups (a total of 18 frail participants), and covered topics like nutrition and health; current affairs; heroes and heroines; drama in the 50s and 60s; poetry from our youth. A trained nurse visited each of the participants several times throughout the study to monitor blood pressure and other basic health-related functions and to ask them to fill out questionnaires about their health and well being. The study was repeated with variations with participants in other cities, and in nursing homes (Swindell, Singer & Singer 1994).

In brief, the courses were well received and resulted in measurable increases in participants' quality of life. However, the time was not yet right for the virtual U3A we were thinking of. As you can well imagine, delivering U3A learning activities by phone is fraught with difficulties. Some frail older people found it difficult to hold onto a

telephone receiver for extended periods. The preliminary organisation of each session was very demanding – the kind of thing that would ultimately deter even the most dedicated volunteer teacher. Another major obstacle was scheduling. Participants, guest lecturers and the moderator all had to be available at the same time for at least eight consecutive weeks. This was a daunting obstacle when everyone had their own daily commitments to make. And of course, only one person could contribute at a time, which meant that participants got little time to share ideas. Finally, all the teleconferencing trials were expensive; particularly those involving presenters in one city working with participants in another. We concluded that a virtual U3A required a far more flexible and inexpensive delivery medium which would allow anyone to participate when they chose. In other words, what was needed was a medium like the Internet, which was then widely used by academics, but which needed to evolve into in a far more user-friendly form if older people were to be attracted. The transformation of the Internet, email and computer software into packages that older people could easily learn, took place relatively quickly from the mid 90s. In 1998, the first practical virtual U3A, U3A Online, became a reality. (I'll talk more of that later after we've further thought about constituency research.)

In another constituency research study in which appropriately qualified Brisbane U3A members acted as research assistants, lengthy one-on-one personal interviews with older people in their own homes, were undertaken to examine a wide range of quality-of-life issues. In this study the research assistants were paid. Because the U3A research assistants were seen to be “of the right age” most participants were able to relax and speak candidly with them. This contrasts with studies carried out by young researchers where personal safety, suspicion about revealing private information and other considerations frequently cause older people to refuse one-on-one interviews, particularly in their own homes.

A third constituency research example involved a team of Brisbane U3A members searching local free newspapers distributed to various suburbs around the city, to find clubs and societies advertising interesting activities for older people. The researchers then compiled a booklet containing details of each of the identified clubs. When completed, a delegation met with the Mayor of the Brisbane City Council and presented him with the booklet and asked that it be made freely available to Brisbane seniors. The council subsequently printed 20,000 copies for free distribution to seniors. This tangible outcome, which over the years helped older people to form new social networks, would not have occurred without the initiative shown by the Brisbane U3A research group.

A final example resulted in the commercial publication earlier this year of a book entitled “A voice worth listening to” (Braxton, Swindell and MacKinlay, 2007). The book is the outcome of a two and half year Successful Ageing study by U3A Online. Ethics clearance for the study was obtained through Griffith University in Brisbane. “A voice worth listening to” is a series of life stories about people over the age of 80 in Australia and NZ who continue to do remarkable things with their lives. The interviews which were carried out mainly face-to-face by retired 78 year old journalist Dorothy Braxton are intended to rebut the ageist fallacy that older people are a burden on the health system. (Dorothy is also one of three co-founders of U3A Online).

The fundamental strength of constituency research is that it entails research “with” rather than research “on”. The difference between “with” and “on” may not matter too much in large scale tick-a-box surveys. However, if much richer findings are needed

these are more likely to arise from interviews carried out by peers who are perceived to have primary empathy with the participants, than with younger researchers whose appearance, clothing, language and general persona may create barriers to open communication.

UTA appears to be an organisation which is tailor-made for a leadership role in constituency research. UTAs are all about learning and there are few if any learning opportunities which can surpass discovering new knowledge or achieving novel outcomes through applied research. Although UTAs are open to all older people, they tend to attract those with higher than average educational qualifications and/or those from leadership positions in their former working lives. These are the people who could become interested in forming an international network of UTA researchers who carry out research studies which could benefit the wider ageing population, not just nationally but internationally.

To cut our teeth on a practical U3A project which would interest all our members and demonstrate our abilities to work as a team we might want to research what the global U3A/UTA profile is in (say) 2009 (pick a year); and repeat that study every 5 years. I know there are currently 63,000 members in 201 groups in Australia. Up-to-date information about such basic information may be available in many other countries but I suspect it is not. Why not compile basic demographic data about our members and share that on the AIUTA website? A quick click and everyone can have a broad-brush view of the global U3A family. And it would be comparatively easy to widen the survey, not of every member, but a randomly selected sample from which we could draw reasonable inferential conclusions. Probably none of us have any idea of the male/female ratio, average age, average membership duration, highest educational qualification, number and kind of courses on offer, multicultural mix, main reasons for joining, and so on. This kind of baseline international information would help us to benchmark U3A's progress over subsequent years. It is important to have evidence that we are moving with the times and consequently likely to remain relevant to the interests of new retirees. New retirees joining U3A bring in fresh energy and ideas. We can all probably think of clubs which may have been popular in our parents' time but which died slow deaths because they were irrelevant to the needs of younger retirees.

Once we have the runs on the board by succeeding with one large scale project might it be possible for AIUTA to attract funding from UNESCO or elsewhere to undertake substantial international projects which can help older people in general? Perhaps it might be possible to add substance to our belief that UTAs, as successful ageing organisations, are saving countries huge amounts of money by helping members to maximise their chances for remaining independent and minimising their likelihood of premature need for expensive health care.

Large scale research studies which underpin the Successful Ageing model show that older people need to regularly do only a small number of things to maximise their chances for prolonged independence. They must regularly

- do intellectually challenging things
- engage with life by doing interesting things
- develop new social networks
- exercise
- adopt disease minimisation behaviours (eg quit smoking, eat properly, take prescribed medications etc)

UTAs certainly promote the first three of the above and some include exercise programs like dance, yoga, aqua aerobics, walking for pleasure etc as well. A constituency research program could be designed to find out whether the many social and intellectually challenging activities provided by UTAs result in measurable improvements in members' subjective health and well being. If the anecdotal reports that many of us have heard about the benefits of UTA are verifiable, then such a finding could have very far-reaching benefits in terms of a country's preventative health programs.

But we shouldn't try to run before we have shown we can at least walk. Let's first do a small scale, doable project that costs nothing except effort and expertise to carry out.

The start of online cooperative learning

Cooperation among older learners is not a novel idea. The whole concept of UTA is based on cooperation. Large learning networks such as AIUTA, the Third Age Trust in the UK and the Lifelong Learning Institutes in North America would never have come into being if older learners were not prepared to share. But the Internet has dramatically increased the cooperative activity possibilities; borders, countries, language, race or creed need no longer serve as barriers to lifelong learners of good will who want to share with other like-minded people anywhere.

Think back to the Internet of only a decade ago. By the mid to late nineties the Internet was well established and becoming increasingly widely used in society, but not by the large majority of older people. The technology was difficult to use, it was expensive, and it was unstable causing programs to drop out frequently – three real turnoffs for retirees who had not learned to cope with the Internet at work. Certainly, many older people who were new to computing were taking an interest in the computer as a stand alone tool for word processing, graphics, games etc, and computer awareness courses rapidly became the most popular course on offer in most U3As. Outside U3A, specialised groups sprang up specifically to cater for the growing interest by older people in learning to use the computer.

Email became faster and easier to use. So easy in fact that it quickly became a popular medium for communication for the entire family. The word spread quickly that older people could easily, regularly and very inexpensively keep in touch with children and grandchildren by email and this was the catalyst that propelled many retirees into the virtual communication world. It's now old information that many retirees routinely use the Internet for many purposes. This is the technology which is creating so many new cooperative learning activities for older people.

In 1997, a few adventurous U3A people from Australia, New Zealand and the UK, who had taught themselves how to use email and other Internet applications, began brainstorming about how email could make the idea of a virtual U3A for isolated older people a reality. A large grant from the Australian Government as part of their International Year of Older Persons project funding led to a much more grandiose web-based project than the initial email concept under discussion. In 1998 U3A Online, the first virtual U3A was started. The project began by offering two 8-week long trial courses, *Writing Family History* and *Botany for knowledge and enjoyment*. These courses were written and taught by two adventurous retirees, neither of whom could

even use email at the time. In the true U3A spirit they just had a go because they had adventurous minds. They learned everything that was needed to prepare and offer an online courses as they went along.

By 2000 the number of courses on offer had grown to eight, one of which was written and taught by Jean Thompson in the UK, clearly demonstrating that geography was no barrier to cooperative learning. Jean also ran her course with Elderhostel evaluators in the USA, and colleagues in Germany, Australia, NZ and the UK.

In 2000, the Third Age Trust started to prepare online courses for UK U3A members. From the outset cooperation was the watchword between TAT and U3A Online, and all courses were prepared in a similar format and made available to members of both organisations. Online volunteer editors from both countries worked cooperatively on each others courses. The multiplier effect of both organisations working together to avoid duplication and maximise productivity has since benefited large numbers of retirees and demonstrates that other cooperative U3A developments are both practicable and desirable. We should all cooperate rather than try to reinvent the wheel.

In a novel variation on the UTA cooperation theme, Carmen Stadelhofer and her team in Ulm agreed in 2003 to experiment with the idea of cooperative learning across language as well as geography. Their volunteers translated a popular U3AOL course *Autobiography and Journaling* into German. The big picture idea was that if U3AOL courses were translated into many languages then native speakers, regardless of where they live, could gain intellectual stimulation by having interesting and challenging courses taught by teachers with the requisite language and cultural knowledge. For example, Australia has a large German community. It was hoped that participants from both countries could share a common course in their native language, delivered through U3A Online course delivery software and develop new social networks. This is a potentially very powerful idea. One of the “musts” of the large scale research-based Successful Ageing study (Rowe and Kahn, 1999) is to keep the brain stimulated. As multilingual people get older they tend to revert to the crystallised speech patterns of their native language. How powerful it could be to offer online courses written by older people for older people, taught by good teachers who live anywhere! And another benefit associated with online learning may well occur.

Maintaining or renewing social networks is another “must” of the Successful Ageing model. We in U3AOL have noticed that through our courses, some older people form enduring friendships with like-minded people in other countries. Perhaps they are studying online because they are caring for a dementing spouse, or they may be ill, incapacitated, agoraphobic or who knows whatever the reason for their reaching out online? Even though they may never meet (and who knows, the friendships may give some the incentive to travel to meet their virtual friends) they regard these virtual friends as real friends. For example the following gives a flavour of the virtual social networks that are formed.

When I eventually retired I discovered U3A Online which seemed an excellent way of keeping the mind active. I have found it is a lot more. Each unit I have undertaken has pointed me in so many different directions with their links to related URLs. They have also brought me into virtual contact with a whole range of different people so that I now have contacts across the globe and literally in my own suburb.

As an active participant I enjoy communicating with other members. One has become a good online friend.

I enjoy the feeling of learning and being a part of a group. It's like meeting old friends when familiar names crop up in other courses. The discussion forum is interesting even though comments do not always respond to the points others have made. I am really enjoying ongoing contact with one participant.

I missed people who did not respond for a couple of weeks, and when they returned with explanations about where they had been or what had happened to them, it was like greeting old friends again.

These and many other supportive comments accessible on the U3AOL website show that cooperative learning through the virtual U3A is making a real difference to the quality of life of many isolated people. www.u3aonline.org.au

Unfortunately, the big picture idea from the German experiment was not as easy to achieve as the intellectual hand waving which I have just engaged in, might suggest. Many readers of this conference paper are fluent in more than one language and recognise that translating from one language into another is not straight forward. (Remember the instructions accompanying your new foreign-made appliance?) Setting that aside, if there are expert translators available to translate a course, as there were with the Ulm experiment, then the real difficulty is the overwhelming dominance of websites written in English.

Let me explain. A good Internet-based course is not a textbook – you can get a textbook almost anywhere, including the web. Courses on the web should not emulate what's available by text only; that would be a waste of much of the potential of online learning. Ideally, each adult education Internet lesson should set the scene then send the learner off to different linked websites so *they* can extract what *they want* out of the lesson rather than what the teacher thinks they should know. Beginners can then study new material to the depth they require; others can study the ideas in greater depth. After their journey to one or more online sites they return to their online course to be steered into a new and challenging direction. Ideally then, back they navigate to their course site to exchange ideas with others or the course leader by typing into the course forum. (We never use live chat; the teleconferencing experiments at the beginning of this paper showed us the inappropriateness of trying to force older learners into someone else's timetable.)

Great! That works well in English. A Google search quickly finds a large number of sites in English which achieve the course writer's purpose. Not so in German, at least with *Autobiography and Journaling*. Because there were few appropriate sites the course had to be entirely rewritten by a local expert and linked to the comparatively few Internet resources available in German. I imagine the same would apply if our courses were to be translated into Arabic, Chinese, French or any other language. A large amount of additional work would be needed.

Recently, the Internet has further revolutionised communication and opened up even more new opportunities for cooperative learning. Many of us are now using Skype or other free or low cost voice-over-Internet-protocol (VOIP) software not only for free international phone calls but also two way video. Translation of documents into different languages is also freely available through Google or Babel Fish. Based on the speed of Internet developments it may not be very long before free automated interpreting services are available, further increasing the practicality of global cooperation among UTAs.

New cooperative learning media and projects

In the foregoing I have spoken of constituency research and sharing courses. Let me now briefly talk about some of the free tools and activities which are waiting for people of goodwill and imagination to harness either internationally, or used locally within their own UTAs, to value-add to older people's learning experiences.

The following ideas are "show and tell". They are based on ideas which my friend Tom Holloway from WorldU3A has developed and which I have adapted through close consultation with him. Ideally I would have liked to have presented this session jointly with Tom but he is back in India where it is very difficult to get high speed Internet connections.

What's a wiki?

A wiki is a very easy to set up website which allows many people to add their own pages of information or modify work done by others. It is a simple matter to add photographs, videos and other media to make the site exciting and interactive. Most of us have come across the wiki idea before by typing into Google or other search engines a request for a definition. For example, by typing into a Google search the term "what is a u3a?" one of the first listed items will take you to wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia with almost two million entries which anyone can add to or change. (In case you are wondering, there are checks and balances before any entry is accepted or changed, to confirm the reliability of the information.)

The same idea can be easily set up to allow international exchange of ideas. On a small scale I have done something similar to allow U3As in Australia to share information and I'll demonstrate that in my talk. Redlands U3A near Brisbane has a writers group who research famous Australians (yep – there are some ☺). They develop their stories and, as each new story is written the writers sets up new pages and publish their stories on the joint wiki. Any member of the group can then add to or change any story or upload photographs to build on the ideas already there. A number of people from other U3As are already adding to the wiki. What a simple and motivating way for older learners to share their work and gain from other writers' ideas!

The best way to understand how simple it is to set up a wiki is for you to experiment with your own, for example by setting up a site where your extended family can each start their own page and share photographs and family news with each other. Here's how.

1. Go to <http://pbwiki.com/>
2. Dream up a name for your wiki
3. Within seconds your wiki address will be sent to you by email
4. Click to open
5. Pick an easy password for your family to remember (the password keeps sightseers away ☺)
6. Select the free option. It gives you 10 MB of free space, enough for a large number of photographs and other information
7. Follow the instructions. Use the excellent help functions or if necessary send them an email – they will reply within 24 hours with helpful advice.

Once we understand the simplicity of wikis we can easily set up similar sites for our own UTAs to help members to share information and ideas. It is very rewarding for older learners to see their creative writing, poetry, photography, art, whatever, come alive on the Internet for others to see.

What's a Flash Meeting?

FlashMeeting allows video meetings to take place with people from other countries, each sitting in the comfort of their own home. All that's needed is an Internet connection and an inexpensive webcam and microphone. A registered user pre-books and sends the meeting password to participants. At the designated time, participants log into the FlashMeeting. I'll show a brief recording of a FlashMeeting held earlier this year between Tom Holloway, Jean Thompson (UK); Carmen Stadelhofer (Germany) and Rick Swindell (Oz). The topic was cooperative learning opportunities and it was based around Timewitnesses (see below), the wonderful living history project devised by Tom Holloway.

Points to watch for in the recording (see next page)

- One person speaks at a time – the speaker's video takes centre space
- Other people can simultaneously chat by text (rather like not paying attention in class ☺), or use the whiteboard or emoticons while waiting their turn to speak
- People indicate they want to speak by raising a virtual hand; or they can interrupt
- If necessary people can vote on an outcome
- A replay of the entire meeting is immediately available. (That is how I got the sample of what you'll see (hopefully) in my session

Incidentally, because the meeting file is huge it is very difficult to send to anyone else. The sample I'll show you in the conference is a "shrunk" version which you'll find difficult to read and hear. The proper size is more like the illustration shown.

FlashMeeting can enable novel cooperative learning/teaching activities to take place. For example, my Australian colleague Kathy Rossini from U3A Online recently worked with Heinz Mohn and his high school students in Germany to discuss climate change. With the wealth of talent in the UTA community this is the kind of intergenerational cooperation which could quickly help dispel myths and stereotypes about ageing and maybe even give older people a dangerously good reputation in the community ☺.

Timewitnesses www.timewitnesses.org

Talking about intergenerational cooperation, most readers will know of the wonderful example of international cooperation embodied in Timewitnesses. This living archive allows people from any country with memories of WWII to share their stories for everyone. It is not only a powerful antiwar statement it is a superb educational tool freely available to schools around the world. Many of the stories have been translated into German and French and in a number of cases school children assisted with the translations. Kids are addicted to the web. What a marvellous way for teachers to amalgamate history, language, geography and sociology-based subjects into a captivating learning experience.

This page shows a screen shot of the recorded conference. The resolution is poor because it is a copy of a copy. All I did when I found a suitable moment was to press the Print Screen key on my keyboard and the free software called PrintKey 2000 v5.10 printed the screen. I then used other features of the package to edit the screen to what I want.

When someone is talking (Carmen with Gaby observing) their video takes over. On the right you can see the time and the name of the person speaking. This makes it very easy to go back later through the recording to review a discussion. At the bottom of the screen is a graph showing when each person is speaking. If six people are in the meeting then you will see six tracks. Click on anyone's track at any place and the recording immediately jumps there and continues playing from there. Very convenient.

Chat, vote, send urls with these tags



Conference replay allows you to jump to any part of the recording. For example I chose Carmen by clicking on one of her recording tracks

World U3A <http://worldu3a.org/>

My final example (and there others I know of and I'm sure many that I don't know of), evolved from a site that was set up in 1997 to encourage Internet-based networking in the UK U3A. As U3A enthusiasts asked for information about U3As in other countries and new members from beyond the UK joined in the stimulating exchanges and started to share in UK Internet-based projects, the name was changed to WorldU3A to reflect a vision of project inclusivity involving any U3A member regardless of location. Some of the international projects carried out by email and other technology can be seen on the WorldU3A website at worldu3a.org. One of the most valuable of these projects is the ongoing "technical support" email list involving a network of hundreds of U3A members with computer and Internet skills who can provide almost immediate answers to technology-based problems which we all encounter from time to time

Concluding comment

The baby boomer tsunami is upon us. Countless new retirees who routinely use new communications-based technologies are roaring into retirement every day, seeking interesting things to do with their new-found leisure time. Many have excellent skills which they would be happy to share with others via the Internet and many will have new ideas of how the Internet could help us and them to engage in new cooperative learning ventures. Although the average age of U3A members is probably 10 or more years older than the average age of new retirees we need to demonstrate to them and us that we remain a forward thinking group who welcome new ideas and new ways of doing things. There is no need for new retirees to start new organisations because of a perception that U3A can't move with the time. International cooperation is a wonderful way of demonstrating our openness to change. International cooperation opens up a new world of learning and teaching possibilities for younger and older retirees alike.

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