

# Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

## THE EXPERIENCE OF PEER TEACHING IN LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTES

by

E. Michael Brady

Steven R. Holt

Betty Welt



Osher Lifelong Learning Institute  
University of Southern Maine  
Portland, Maine



UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTHERN MAINE

Contact Information:  
E. Michael Brady  
Professor and Senior Research Fellow  
Bailey Hall 400-B  
University of Southern Maine  
Gorham, ME. 04038  
(207) 780-5312  
[mbrady@usm.maine.edu](mailto:mbrady@usm.maine.edu)

# The Experience of Peer Teaching in Lifelong Learning Institutes

## Introduction

Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs) - alternatively called Institutes for Learning in Retirement or Learning in Retirement Institutes - are organizations of older learners dedicated to meeting the educational needs of their members. Generally Lifelong Learning Institutes fall into two categories: institution-driven and member-driven. In the institution-driven model the curriculum is often planned by professional staff and taught by regular higher education faculty. In the member-driven model, courses of study are planned and taught by institute members. In fact the use of peer teachers - in addition to the program being sponsored by a college or university, charging modest membership fees and tuition, being predominately age-segregated, and offering a wide range of liberal arts and cultural offerings - is considered to be a core ingredient in distinguishing a Lifelong Learning Institute from other programs in adult or older adult education (Manheimer, Snodgrass, and Moskow-McKenzie, 1995; Manheimer, 1995). Despite its importance in the growing field of senior adult education, there has been surprisingly little research thus far on the experience of peer teaching in Lifelong Learning Institutes.

A number of studies conducted in the early 1980's examined different aspects of older persons as teachers or trainers, but all were located in social service and community-based programs rather than higher education contexts. Brown (1981) investigated the nature of older adult teachers in community learning centers. She found that persons with a high level of education and an interest in transmitting knowledge to others are motivated to become instructors later in life. Also, there was a positive relationship between the extent of the person's reported history of community participation and their willingness to teach. In age-segregated settings older teachers typically viewed their role as a helper or friend as compared with an "expert" or "leader." Another study conducted by Kaye, Monk, and Stuen (1982) examined a "Seniors Teaching Seniors" training program in New York City. They found that when older persons who had no previous teaching experiences participated in a formal train-the-trainer program, it increased their confidence to teach in senior centers. While this orientation program helped to build confidence among the inexperienced teacher, it also served to develop and/or polish skills among participants who did have teaching experience.

Another project in New York City and selected areas of New York State explored the use of elder "learning companions." The purpose of this program was to establish links between community colleges and social service agencies in order to provide continuing education opportunities to physically and emotionally impaired homebound elders. Older adults, many of whom were employed by social service agencies, enrolled in 10-week non-credit community college courses. Between class sessions, they visited shut-ins (as part of their regular jobs) and shared the knowledge they learned in class. One finding from the research component of this project was that some workers were not able to make the transition to learning companion and were not viewed by the homebound elder as an equal. However, in other cases the pre-existing relationship between the social service worker/learning companion and frail elder was enriched and deepened by this new

dimension of interaction. Other findings revealed that the program helped to alleviate some of the loneliness and isolation and also increased the general life satisfaction experienced by the homebound (Delaloye, 1981).

A more recent study at the McGill University Lifelong Learning Institute in Montreal examined 42 course “moderators” and their perceived roles. The benefits of moderating study groups with peers include intellectual stimulation, increased understanding of a field of study, social interaction with one’s peers, and an increase in “*joie de vivre*.” At McGill, moderators facilitate four distinct types of study groups: research-oriented, expression-oriented, appreciation-oriented, and experience-oriented (e.g., participants exchange personal experiences on a chosen topic). Actual roles divide into three primary functions including “*animator*,” “*teacher*,” and “*organizer*.” One finding from this study was that a moderator who was overly didactic risked causing passivity among the learners. “At times, those listening to the presenter may sit back and expect to be entertained, which results in one-sided participation. A knowledgeable presenter may dominate the discourse, unintentionally overwhelming participants with information and inhibiting further discussion.” (Clark, Heller, Rafman, and Walker, 1997, p. 755).

The peer-teaching model expresses several ideals in adult education practice including a voluntary spirit, andragogy and self-direction (Knowles, 1990; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Jarvis, 2001). Peer teaching is a learner-centered activity because members of educational communities plan and facilitate learning opportunities for each other. There is the expectation of reciprocity, e.g., peers will plan and facilitate courses of study and be able to learn from the planning and facilitation of other members of the community. Peer teaching is the rare and provocative model of education in which in the morning a person may teach a class for her peers, and that same afternoon have one of her “students” become her teacher.

### **Research Method and Sample**

The Maine Senior College Network consists of 15 Lifelong Learning Institutes distributed throughout the State of Maine. Forty-eight teaching faculty from five LLIs were interviewed via focus groups. The five programs in the research sample were the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in Portland, Seniors Achieving Greater Education in Presque Isle, Coastal Senior College in Thomaston, Senior College at the University of Maine-Hutchinson Center (Belfast), and Midcoast Senior College in Bath/Brunswick. These programs were recruited into the research sample during the summer of 2002. At that time leadership in the Maine Senior College Network (e.g., board members, curriculum committee chairpersons, etc.) convened for a statewide conference to discuss issues related to elder education and program management. During this leadership conference, a workshop on research was held and this peer teaching investigation was announced. The five Lifelong Learning Institutes listed above agreed to participate in the study.

The specific recruitment of faculty into the focus groups occurred in collaboration between the research team and the director of each of the five LLIs. This was a purposeful sample with the goal being to invite experienced faculty from a variety of disciplines to participate in one focus group with colleagues in their own LLI. We also sought a balanced gender representation. A total of nine focus groups were facilitated: three in Portland, two in Presque Isle, two in Thomaston, and one each in Belfast and

Bath/Brunswick. The focus groups averaged 90 minutes in length and were tape recorded. After data were collected tapes were transcribed. Each of the authors independently read the narratives, using an analytic induction approach to theme development (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & Steinmetz, 1991; Krathwohl, 1993; Cresswell, 1998).

Although no survey data eliciting demographic information from the sample were collected, an overview of the professional background of these peer faculty was obtained from the opening focus group question (“Would you please introduce yourself and briefly describe your background?”). Most of the sample, which consisted of 28 men and 20 women, had professional backgrounds in teaching. Of the 48 participants, 20 had taught full-time at either two-year colleges or universities for a major portion of their careers. An additional 13 had been teachers at the kindergarten through high school level. The remaining 15 persons in the research sample had careers in business (N = 5), religious ministry (N = 2), and a variety of other fields (N = 8). The miscellaneous fields represented by these remaining faculty included child care, library science, museum management, symphony music, military, and civilian government service. In terms of their educational backgrounds, most people had degrees in the liberal arts and sciences with “history” being the most frequently mentioned major (N = 7). An additional seven people reported having earned formal degrees in education.

### **Preferred Method of Teaching**

One of the core questions in this study related to teaching method. We introduced this issue in the focus group by making the following statement: “We have observed in Lifelong Learning Institute classes that there are three primary ways people teach - through lecture, discussion, and a studio or “hands on” approach. Would you please comment on the way you generally prefer to teach your peers.”

Since most of the courses taught in the Maine Senior College Network are led by experts in the subjects areas being offered - as compared with study circles, work groups, or alternative models in elder education (Clark, Heller, Rafman and Walker, 1997) - the time-tested method of *teaching through lecture* is common practice. A typical way of managing a lecture-type course would be to present information and welcome questions from students. “I tend to fall more in the lecture area because of the subject matter,” commented one instructor who teaches courses in controversial issues and theater. “I don’t wait until the end of class to hear questions. They are free to interrupt and they frequently do. And it’s very challenging – you have to be on your toes and also ask questions to put them on their toes. So this is kind of a modified lecture.”

Some teachers in this sample went out of their way to defend the lecture method. “I would like to make my position against the current idea to dislike lecture. I think lecture is essential . . . it is destructive to open a topic up for discussion that may be somewhat esoteric to beginners. What can they say?” Another teacher in the sciences, after defending the idea of lecturing, engaged a remarkable metaphor for his own practice of lecturing and for teaching in general: “I wonder if sometimes the word ‘lecture’ and ‘lecturer’ hasn’t fallen into bad repute. It’s a bad word. Now there are people who need to be lectured. I took three organic chemistry classes before I passed one. The only escape for me was the instructor who lectured privately to me about it . . . I think there is a place for a lecturer who has spent the time to accumulate the information . . . I like to

think of myself with a lot of stuff whirling around in my head and my heart and about three feet away from me is a partially finished bridge. And the student has the same thing. They have bridges. My problem is to get the ends of those bridges together.”

A second method often used among peer teachers in this research sample is *group discussion*. Several people talked about discussion being at the core of good adult education. One, a woman who teaches life story writing, argued that participation is essential to any quality learning experience. “I don’t mean to put anyone who lectures down, but . . . “ Another person discussed what she believed to be the inefficiency of teaching through discussion, but then followed by reporting that she could not imagine teaching any other way. She described the discussion method as “changing the direction from teacher to student.” Other individuals employed a well-known adult education concept by referring to their practice as student or learner-centered. “I use a student-centered approach. I have a syllabus. During the first class session I distribute it and say: ‘what might you want to get out of this course that isn’t here? Generally we get some good ideas that I add to the syllabus.” Two instructors in the sample referred to the use of the Socratic method in their teaching. In both cases, when questioned about what this meant, they described the use of provocative questions that not only got their students to talk, but to think more critically.

In many cases both class and room size determine whether or not teachers design their course around a discussion format. Some courses in the Maine Senior College Network have 40, 60, and even 100 students. Although it is possible to encourage participation in large classes through the use of small group activities, it is often necessary to structure the seating in rows rather than rectangles or circles. As one focus group participant, who designs her teaching for smaller class sizes, told us: “I like the hollow square. If you want discussion, me sitting behind you looking at your head while you’re sharing doesn’t work very well. But if we are all sitting around the hollow square it creates a comfort level . . . .” In some cases the most popular teachers act generously and allow large numbers of students into their classes. However, by virtue of this largesse the teaching methods they can use become limited.

A third method that is frequently used in senior college is a *hands-on* approach. This method fits best in painting, collage, theater, writing, and other studio-type courses that are offered as part of the curriculum in nearly all Maine senior colleges. This hands-on or experiential approach to teaching and learning is also employed in computer classes where students work in a laboratory. However, even the study of an “academic” subject as traditional as mathematics may lend itself to experiential learning in the hands of a creative teacher. In one course entitled “The Joy of Math,” the instructor wanted students to obtain both a conceptual and affective understanding of the concept “one million”:

One of the things that I have is a cardboard box of stuff. I have the students pick out a card and that is what they had to do. Somebody had “How long is a million dollar bills from end to end?” I gave them a dollar bill and they had to figure out the answer. “If you walk a million paces how far would you have walked?” So they went out into the corridor and measured their pace and then came back in and did the arithmetic. “How much time will pass when your heart beats a million times?” . . .

at the end they had to report the answer, but more importantly, what procedure they used to get the answer.

A fourth method is actually a combination of the first three, what teachers in our sample called a *blended* or *hybrid* approach to teaching. These blends included lecture and discussion, hands-on experiences with group process, and lecture followed by hands-on techniques. One teacher working in the area of genealogy first presents ideas and provides resources for his students. He then organizes small groups and “each one would throw out a problem they were having and we would discuss how they might approach that.” His course also involved the learners making field trips to the Church of the Latter Day Saints, museums, state libraries, and other sites where genealogical research may be undertaken. This LLI faculty member clearly involves a multiple-method approach to teaching and learning.

One teacher, who was new to the LLI environment after spending a career in the area of financial investments, admitted that he had to quickly make a major adjustment in his plans to teach once he entered the classroom. “I came into this situation with a very structured notebook and one of the things I quickly ascertained is that these students are outspoken about what they want to talk about . . . the course evolved into sort of a hybrid of lecture and discussion.” This instructor went on to tell of one student who brought an article to class that became the focus of much of the class discussion. After listening to his colleague relate this experience, another member of the focus group commented: “I think what it comes down to is that people come to our class because of our enthusiasm. We shouldn’t have any textbook dictate our enthusiasm.”

Another instructor, a retired minister who teaches courses in spirituality, combines in-class discussion with outside-of-class experiences as his primary method of teaching. “One of the things I do which seems to work well is I assign partners to meet between classes so that everybody connects with a number of people for lunch or some other encounter . . . I think that spirituality is essentially relationships and so here we have a chance to foster relationships between members of the class. We always sit in a circle and I encourage full participation. Usually everybody has talked two or three times by the end of class.”

The fifth and final method of teaching that emerged from the focus groups was unique to one senior college program, the smallest (in numbers of students and courses offered per semester) and most rural in this research sample. This is the teacher as *course coordinator*. The way this model works is that ideas for new courses are discussed by the program’s curriculum committee and somebody either volunteers or is recruited to manage the development and implementation of that course. At times this would mean reaching out to an entirely different person to do the actual teaching. In some cases a coordinated course involves inviting a series of guest speakers or planning field trips. The job of the course coordinator is to see that the course runs, to be responsible for managing logistics, and to have a kind of general manager’s role. In the words of one of these course managers: “I coordinated a watercolor course which meant that I not only sought the instructor but was also responsible for making sure that we had the paint, getting the right kind of room, and managing the behind-the-scenes details that the instructor didn’t have to worry about.”

After analyzing the narrative data from this first research question, it became clear to us that when we began this study we had not thought broadly enough about the teaching methods being employed in Lifelong Learning Institutes. According to the way peer teachers understand and describe their own practices, they use five - not three - primary methods of teaching. The teaching technique that is employed the most - the mixed-method approach - was not among the original three we anticipated (note: while we did not use survey or quantitative measures with this or the other two research questions we examined in this study, simply counting the number of references made in the focus group narratives revealed that twice as many people use mixed-method or hybrid teaching than any other approach). This mixed method of teaching maximizes flexibility and allows LLI teachers to be more responsive to the needs of their students. Both flexibility and adaptability to learners' needs are seen in the general adult education literature as core elements of good teaching (Merriam and Cafferella, 1997; Palmer, 1998; Brookfield, 1995, 1999).

### **Differential Experiences in Teaching**

The second research question in this study explored how, if at all, teaching one's peers was different from other teaching experiences LLI faculty may have had earlier in their careers. There were four responses to this question: Students are participating voluntarily, are tolerant of teacher limitations, are interested in engaging in a co-learning experience, and both seek and realize a sense of community.

Unlike many learning experiences where participation in education was mandatory in order to attain certification or degrees in their professions, now older students are *participating voluntarily*. In LLI's in Maine and elsewhere there are no tests, grades, or attendance requirements. People are learning because they want to. As one focus group member said, "Students are there not to get degrees or titles, but to share ideas and experiences." However, teachers in this sample reported an interesting corollary to voluntary participation. Since participation is voluntary, some older learners feel no obligation to attend class regularly. One peer teacher put it this way: "They're there because they want to be and they may not show up." Another reflected on the fact that "there is a combination of hard core people who are always there and those who drift in and out." When students are in class, they feel free to either actively participate or passively observe. "They can engage or not engage as they desire," said one focus group member. Particularly in LLI courses that are studio-based or in which readings are done in advance of class, this nonchalant attitude on the part of some students is a source of frustration.

The second way peer teaching is different from earlier teaching experiences lies in *students' tolerance of faculty limitations*. Older learners do not expect their teachers to have immediate answers to all their questions. One teacher said, "In senior college students have more questions and you'd better know the answers. But if you don't, they'll be patient with you. They'll wait until the next class." Other research subjects commented about teaching traditional undergraduate students and the fact that many of these younger people considered teachers to be subject-matter experts and expected a high degree of certitude and even omniscience. On the other hand, what many LLI students expect from their teacher is a degree of knowledge and experience in the subject area being taught - and honesty. "These senior college students have a passion for

learning and they expect you to share what you know.” One teacher spoke about how she approaches this situation:

I found that the best thing you can do is think of a course that you believe would be enjoyable for yourself . . . First of all is honesty. You need to stand there and say: “This is the truth. This is what I know about this subject. I’m going to share it with you, and there may be others here who know much more about it and if there are, then please tell us . . . “

The third response to the question about differential teaching experiences related to the idea of *co-learning*. Patricia Cranton provides an apt description of co-learning in her book, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* (1994):

The educator who is a co-learner acts as an equal participant in the process of learning, discovering, and changing. The effective co-learner is one who builds an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, sincerely engages in learning, stimulates enthusiasm and interest in others, and challenges others’ values and beliefs.” (p. 128)

The passion for learning expressed by LLI students and the enthusiasm for teaching expressed by faculty creates an atmosphere far different from traditional educational environments where instructors often see their role as providing knowledge to uninitiated learners. In the LLI context what is engaged is a “conversation among equals.” One teacher put it another way: “I think what we are aiming for is to learn together.” The richness of the co-learning experience is, in good measure, made possible by the depth of knowledge and range of life experiences found in each senior college classroom. “The depth of knowledge is incredible. Teachers tap into this reservoir not only for the other students for but themselves.” However, because students have such breadth and depth of knowledge, discussions can be harder to guide once they get started. As one peer teacher reported, “You get tremendous opinion statements. With 18-year olds you retain the power to end discussion. But this is not the case with one’s peers.”

Another dimension of co-learning that was raised is the challenge of setting expectations and seeking feedback from one’s peers. One subject talked about how he always has to ask his students why they signed up for this course, which “helps a lot in preparing what we do in the next several weeks.” Getting feedback is important to peer teachers not only to help them keep the course on track, but also to establish and nurture teacher-student relationships.

The depth of emotion is another aspect of co-learning that can be evoked during a class. Old feelings, perhaps long-buried, may rise to the surface when writing stories or retelling experiences in class. One focus group participant recounted, “how emotional some people would get {writing about their life}. The memories they were writing about were very poignant and painful.” Another peer teacher recounted:

We had one woman who I thought was going to have a breakdown because she was looking directly at the Brookside Nursing Home . . .

she was obviously uncomfortable in the class so I said something and she said, “My sister is there. She’s dying in that room. She’s schizophrenic, and I’m looking right into her bedroom.” So I said the first thing that occurred to me: “Why don’t you come and sit over here so you’re not looking into that room.” She was dealing with a dying situation and she eventually wrote about it . . . and she stuck with it and dealt to a certain extent with the problems. But we did have a lot of emotion and sensitivity and I tried to be very careful of that, and the class I would say was very supportive of the fact. They were great.

The same teacher went on to add, “You must limit the class in terms of it becoming a therapy session.”

The fourth and final theme that emerged in response to this research question related to the *sense of community* that develops in many senior college classrooms. This feeling of community, in good part, grows from the commonality of life experiences and ages of the students. It is also nurtured by mutual respect. One teacher said, “You can say what you think. Nobody will judge you.” Another person shared the following thought: “This sense of community enables students to feel safe in class, in a comfort zone where they are comfortable asking for help when they need it.” This feeling of kinship can make students reluctant to cut the bonds developed during classes. The relationships they build in class will often extend beyond the boundaries of a particular classroom or semester. One teacher told the story of how, after her course had ended, a number of students chose to continue meeting on their own to work on the subject matter. These individuals have continued to work as a group, outside of the formal LLI curriculum, for more than two years. The spirit of kinship and community is also reflected by the fact that selected faculty seem to attract “groupies” who make it a point to sign up for every class they offer. Often small clusters of friends will register together into the course(s) taught by their favorite teacher. Frequently relationships developed in the LLI environment that helps to keep students – and faculty - returning semester after semester.

The late educator and author, Malcolm Knowles, made an observation that, we believe, summarizes what our research sample was telling us about the experience of teaching in an LLI. Reflecting upon his own transformation from transmitter of knowledge to adult learning facilitator, Knowles said:

I saw my role shifting from content-transmitter to process manager and, only secondarily, content resource . . . I found myself performing a different set of functions that require a different set of skills. Instead of performing the function of content planner and transmitter, which required primarily presentation skills, I was performing the function of process designer and manager, which required relationship building, needs assessment, involving of students in planning, linking students to learning resources, and encouraging student initiative. I have never been tempted since then to revert to the role of teacher (Knowles, 1990, p. 181).

### Special Challenges of Teaching One's Peers

Our third research question asked focus group participants to describe the challenges of teaching one's peers. Five distinct challenges emerged from these research data: The wide range of students' educational backgrounds, learner subject matter expertise, program structure, physical deficits associated with aging, and mission.

The very nature of a Lifelong Learning Institute, an educational program with no prerequisites, tests, or grades, presents teachers with challenges, one of which is addressing the needs and expectations of a *wide range of students*. In any given class, students with advanced degrees may sit side-by-side with others who are self-educated. As one instructor said, "I find you run a tremendous spectrum of experience and education levels in these classes...and my challenge is to nurse along the neophyte and not put the experienced one to sleep, and that's a difficult challenge." Another said, "The trick is you try to find the magic chemistry: that the really bright ones will learn it the first time you say it and manage to drag the other ones up...that for me was always a challenge." In another focus group, one instructor stated, "The range in the ability of our students here is very wide. We get some very brilliant students, and we get some who shouldn't be here. For every one of our entry classes there is this range." More than one teacher did not find a student's lack of formal education to be a handicap. One put it this way, "A lot of people who don't have the kind of credentials that we might admire are terribly talented and have read a tremendous amount." Another teacher made a similar comment, "They might have a keen interest but not much education. I found out the first year that I had one man in class who was really interested and did a lot of reading but he had only two years of high school."

In addition to having diverse educational backgrounds, the seniors' reasons for attending may translate into different levels of effort within the class. For some students, the primary motivation may be to learn, while for others social interaction may be more important. The challenge to the teacher is to cover the material but also to be aware that some members of the class may not read the recommended text. One teacher's way of dealing with disparity is to prepare a list of books and say to the students, "This is the good stuff. If you read it, fine. If you don't read it, that's your loss but this is where you ought to be headed. This is the standard." Another instructor has a different approach, "I like to offer easy reading suggestions and then I offer some more intellectual things. I try to go the middle road – interest the intellect and interest the enrichment people." In one instructor's view, reading or not was immaterial. "I think simply by doing it, even if they don't read the book, even if they sometimes don't listen, even if they say, 'I have to go to my neighbor's for coffee and that takes more time than reading the book for class' . . . I think they sharpen their brains."

Another major challenge involves the talented and often, highly expert, people who attend these courses. In a senior college class, it is not unusual for a student to have considerable *subject expertise*. As one teacher put it, "These people are sophisticated. They come from very knowledgeable backgrounds, have degrees, graduate degrees, some of them, so in anticipation I think I prepare harder for these eight sessions than I did in my undergraduate teaching, because I know that someone in there is going to know a lot about what I'm saying." How to manage that expertise can be challenging. As one instructor, who was teaching a math class, stated:

One of my students was what you call an actuary who deals with probability. In my outline I indicated I'd do one unit on probability. I began to get a little apprehensive about putting together a unit on probability that would satisfy the general interest in math, not what he did... I asked him, 'Might you be willing to speak on the issue of the relative probability of anecdotal data?' He was delighted. He really enjoyed it and he picked up on a just-for-fun activity on probability.

One challenge in teaching peers who are highly knowledgeable can be "to balance the class and make sure that not one or two powerful intellects are dominating the whole class." Another peer teacher put it this way: "Sometimes we have too much enthusiasm, some who want to share and don't shut up."

Managing class time is important because the typical course in the Maine Senior College Network meets only two hours per week for six, seven, or eight weeks. *Program* structure, including term length, presents challenges voiced by several instructors. One person, who worried about not having enough material to cover the 8-week session, "found that I had to cut short on a lot of stuff because I had more than enough." This opinion was echoed by a teacher who said, "eight weeks is not enough for some courses – you could just go on and on."

As one focus group participant pointed out, "Another challenge is that many of our students are busy in terms of traveling and you can't always count on them being here. It's not a problem because there are no grades involved, it's just a reality." As one teacher pointed out, by missing one session, "they've missed one-eighth of the class." In fact, senior college students may miss more than a single class. One instructor was irked by "the way certain people kind of float in and out of class. They'd be in class for two weeks and then I don't see them for three weeks and then they come back and they've been to Florida. They try to pick up where they left off."

Being conscious of the inevitable *physical deficits associated with aging*, e.g., impaired hearing, vision, or memory, is important in senior college teaching. As one peer teacher related, senior students are not reluctant to admit a special need, "People are willing to come forward and say, 'You're going to have to speak loud because of my hearing aid.'" "You do have to be very conscious of physical difficulties," said another person. "You need to make sure that there is an elevator, make sure that people who go on trips wear the right kind of shoes." The students themselves help in finding ways to circumvent a physical impairment. In a class on Ukrainian egg dying, one student with macular degeneration was having difficulty seeing the lines. The instructor said of the student, "She actually came up with the solution, which was to have a different colored background. And I said, 'This is really great.'"

Another peer teacher described his approach to physical deficits, "I find that with all the dimensions of the senior student there is the inevitable decay of the mind, of energy. I'm 87 years old but - I'm very conscious of this - there's all that resilience that just goes with age. You don't have it, and . . . I have to constantly remind myself of it. I used to

teach with a high degree of irritability, and of intolerance for any kind of slackness or sloppiness or if the attention is gone, but I don't do that anymore."

One common problem reported by focus group participants is a tendency for the students to nod off, particularly in afternoon classes. A few refuse to teach after lunch for that reason. As one teacher put it, "You have to have a technique with the older ones so that you don't go too long. They get tired." Scheduling a break at the midpoint helps to hold the learners' attention. It serves another need as well, as one instructor succinctly stated, "My biggest problem is physical. I don't know I can last fifty-five minutes without going to the john!"

Perhaps the most basic challenge for LLI faculty is determining exactly what is their *mission*. For example, when referring to a class in which a strong sense of community was developed, one teacher observed the students' desire to continue in some way. "There is a longing for community and connection and I wonder how senior colleges deal with that? I'm not sure it's consistent with the mandate, but I think senior college is going to have to address that question. What really is our mission?" One focus group participant believed that "most of the people who sat in these classrooms sat under the weight of their bad memories from school, and the purpose as I saw...the main purpose I had...was a tool to make them feel good, to make them feel that they could handle life, and I think that's a large part of it." Another instructor wondered if there might be some way to structure selected classes "so that they're more driven to those people who want the substance rather than watering everything down to the people who are here because it's Thursday." A colleague concurred, asking, "Can senior college provide some classes that are academically more rigorous, if you will, and some classes that are academically less rigorous? People will self select."

Another facet of mission ambiguity is tension between whether a senior college instructor is an educator or an entertainer. In one focus group, the instructor for a course entitled "God and the American Writer" found his course listed on a bulletin board as entertainment. He asked, "Am I entertainment here? Am I supposed to come and fill some spare time for these people who have a lot of time on their hands and need to be amused? And how many people [who] seek out the senior college do it just as a release from boredom, not out of a desire as a true learner?" Another faculty member took a more sanguine approach to the tension between education and entertainment:

I remember a professor I had back in college who said, 'I've got you for how many weeks? How much are you going to remember? The best thing I can do is stimulate you to learn more.' And that's what I think it's all about...so I'm very conscious of putting on a bit of a show... It's a serious subject, but there has to be some entertainment value in it and I tell stories, which I've told for years and years. I do that purposely, to make people enjoy what they're listening to and learn something.

Another telling example of what might be construed as a mission for a Lifelong Learning Institute lies within this story from a peer teacher in Belfast.

I think senior college has another purpose that can best be illustrated by a story. One day I spoke in class about a photographer who, back in the early part of the 1900's, photographed around the streets of New York. He had come from Austria and his first job was to lead a pony to the playground where he put kids on top of the pony and took their picture. The next week the photographer came back with the prints and sold them. There was this tiny little lady who took my course – she must have been well into her nineties. At the beginning of the next class she showed up with a picture of herself as a child on top of this photographer's pony . . . I think that's what senior college is for – to show people that they are in contact with the world. That they are part of a larger reality, and they are not separate from it just because they cannot jump rope anymore.

### **Discussion**

In his highly acclaimed book *The Courage to Teach*, the educator and activist Parker Palmer suggests that good teaching is an act of hospitality. The author argues that the concept of hospitality, which is rooted in ancient times, for many centuries has suggested that the food and shelter one gave to a stranger today is the food and shelter one hopes to receive from a stranger tomorrow. Thus, hospitality invites reciprocity. "It is that way in teaching as well," continues Palmer. "The teacher's hospitality to the student results in a world more hospitable to the teacher" (Palmer, 1998, p. 50).

The unique act of hospitality that is peer education in Lifelong Learning Institutes represents, in many ways, the epitome of excellence in adult education. Reaching back to one of the earliest source documents in the adult education literature of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Eduard Lindeman wrote that "power with" (as compared with "power over") is at the soul and center of genuine adult education. In traditional higher education - not to mention "lower" education - there is an excess of "power over." Tests, grades, and the exigencies of earning degrees slant authority heavily toward the teacher and the institution sponsoring the learning program. There can be little democracy in such an environment. However, when the external factors of tests, grades, and diplomas are removed adults may find themselves coming together in the spirit of freedom and collegiality to learn with and from one another. These conversations among equals represent the true meaning of adult education (Lindeman, 1926).

Happily the story of higher education is changing such that more and more opportunities have arisen in the recent past for these conversations - especially among older adult learners - to take place. The movement that began in 1962 with the New School for Social Research's "Institute for Retired Professionals" has grown into more than 400 Lifelong Learning Institutes in the United States alone. There are hundreds more similar programs, often referred to as "Universities of the Third Age," in Europe and elsewhere in the world (Laslett, 1989). Even in the small and rural state of Maine, where our research project was undertaken, there has been remarkable recent growth in this burgeoning area of adult education. What began in 1997 as a 200-member older

learner program at the University of Southern Maine in Portland has grown to 15 senior colleges serving more than 3000 older learners statewide.

We learned in this study that when a peer teacher enters the classroom in a Lifelong Learning Institute his/her previously held mental model of education and methods of teaching are challenged. Older learners are substantially different from high school or traditional college-age students. A teacher in a more traditional setting who expressed one point of view on a complex issue may have gone unchallenged, but that probably will no longer occur in this context. Older students' great enthusiasm for learning, as well as their expectations (by many individuals) for thoughtful and stimulating discourse, present a daunting challenge for the volunteer peer instructor. One focus group participant told us that she prepares 20 hours a week for her two-hour senior college class! She makes this effort without the expectation of a single dime in remuneration. While technically this is an environment where, for the most part, retired professionals facilitate the learning of other retired professionals, the "spirit of the amateur" - that is, one who acts out of love for the activity itself - is very much alive in Lifelong Learning Institutes.

We also learned that those who participated in the focus groups enthusiastically seized upon the opportunity to talk with other faculty colleagues about teaching. When faculty gather together - in Lifelong Learning Institutes and elsewhere - often the agenda is organized around administrative and other necessary but mundane matters. The enthusiasm generated by small groups of faculty who were invited to talk about the craft of teaching itself was palpable throughout this research experience. One interesting outcome of collecting these data is that in several participating LLI sites teachers have voluntarily organized faculty gatherings to continue the conversations begun during the focus groups. This indicates an apparent need and desire among peer teachers to talk with each other and further reflect on the richness and subtlety of the craft of teaching.

The finding that some peer teachers are uncertain about the main outcome toward which they are working in this environment - education vs. entertainment - is an intriguing one. During most of the conversations in which this issue arose the assumption seemed to be that this was an either/or predicament, that is, the primary goal as a peer teacher either was to challenge students to learn or to make the learning space a comfortable one in which people had a good time. As we consider this matter further, we suspect there are situations when education and entertainment may be mutually exclusive, especially when grades and professional credentialing are factored into the mix. However, in many educational settings, particularly those such as Lifelong Learning Institutes, the goals of education and entertainment are compatible and even complementary. One of the research subjects in this study, a former college professor with expertise in the history of photography, offered his focus group colleagues a stunning image when he told the following story:

Winter Olympics - I think it was in Sarajevo - there was one guy who was training ski jumpers and his people were always winning the medals so the interviewer asked this person, "How do you select the people you are going to train?" And he said, "I have them jump for me, but I don't watch how far they jump. I watch whether they smile when they're in the air." This is my task, I feel. I want to see my students smile.

In Lifelong Learning Institutes, educating versus entertainment is not a zero-sum game. It is possible for peer teachers - and their students - to jump a considerable distance and still manage to smile.

## References

- Clark, F., Heller, A., Rafman, C., and Walker, J. (1997). Peer learning: A popular model for senior education. *Educational Gerontology*, 23 (8), 751 – 763.
- Cranton, P. (1994). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Delaloye, J. (1981). *Teaching the elderly homebound through learning companions – A peer-teaching approach*. New York City Technical College: Brooklyn Division of Continuing Education and Extension Services. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ED 253710).
- Fisher, J. and Wolf, M.A. (Eds.) (1998). *Using learning to meet the challenges of older adulthood*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 77, Spring. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jarvis, P. (2001). *Learning in later life: An introduction for educators and carers*. London: Kogan Page.
- Kaye, L, Monk, A., and Steun, C. (1982). The efficacy of a self-help leadership training program for older adults. Paper presented at the 35<sup>th</sup> annual scientific meeting of the Gerontological Society of America. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ED 223866).
- Knowles, M. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.
- Laslett, P. (1989). *A fresh map of life: The emergence of the third age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Manheimer, R. (1995). *The second middle age: Looking differently at life beyond 50*. Detroit: Visible Ink.
- Manheimer, R., Snodgrass, D., and Moskow-McKenzie, D. (1995). *Older education: A guide to research, programs, and policies*. Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press.
- Merriam, S. and Cafarella, R. (1999). *Learning in adulthood (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.