

**Adult Learning and Meaning-making
in Community-based Guided Autobiography
Workshops**

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SUMMARY

Learning characterizes older adulthood as much as it defines the childhood years, but receives far less attention and systematic investigation. In this article, we review literature on learning among middle-aged and older adults. Secondly, we summarize initial findings from our exploratory study investigating learning reports from six guided autobiography workshop groups comprising older adults, mostly in their 60s and 70s when queried: “What am I learning in this guided autobiography workshop?” Guided autobiography workshops (Birren & Cochran, 2001) are designed to facilitate participants’ interests of writing and telling their life stories. We analyze learning reports of participants about how and what they were learning and the major topics and themes identified in their reports. The older adults participating in this study were clear on the impact and value of their learning experiences. Their reports corroborated two recognized axes of adult learning: outcomes and processes (“learning that” and “learning how”) and expansion and consolidation -- distinguishing between learning which is developing and expanding into new interest areas and learning that is consolidating prior life events or current experiences. Their learning reports also identified nineteen learning topics which focus on three major domains: (1) learning about themselves (self-value, well-being, new learning, beliefs-values, meaning-making, reminiscing, goals-tasks-plans, and mental health,); (2) learning about others while sharing their life stories (communicating, family, legacy, trust-openness, and universality) and (3) learning which derives from workshop structures and activities (developmental exchanges, small-group work, guided autobiography value, writing, triggers-primers, and thanks). Finally, we highlight the intersections between themes in the literature and related topics in older adults’ own words. Collectively, their learning reports provide a rich and

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vital look into the learning potentials of older adults and how they acquire meaning and purpose in community-based programs.

I want to talk about learning. ... I am talking about the student who says, "I am discovering, drawing in from the outside, and making that which is drawn in a real part of me." I am talking about any learning which the experience of the learner progresses along this line: "No, no, that is not what I want"; "Wait! This is closer to what I am interested in, what I need" "Ah, here it is! Now I am grasping and comprehending what I need and what I want to know!"

(Carl Rogers, 1983: p. 18-19).

INTRODUCTION

The literature on adult learning is extensive and on adult development offers multiple perspectives on cognitive abilities, memory and the social contexts of adult education. A selective overview of the literature is reviewed to identify the major ideas about learning and selected global or world views on learning as social and cultural events. The foundations of the approaches taken in the research report are offered in Smith and Pourchot's (1998) *Adult Learning and Development: Perspectives from Educational Psychology*. It is the most comprehensive perspective on current research and applications shaping adult learning and development and provided a foundation of the research report in this paper. Two foundational books provide access to the literature on adult learning and practices in adult education. MacKeracher's (1996) *Making Sense of Adult Learning* provides a robust use of literature on learning theory applied to adult educational interventions and facilitation of the adult's learning experience. Merriam & Caffarella (1999) *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* provides exactly that – a comprehensive guide on theory and practice in adult

education. While the collection of articles in Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Schroots & Svensson (Eds.) (1996), *Aging and biography: Explorations in adult development* provides a comprehensive overview of autobiography, reminiscence and life review that help shape this research project.

Nonetheless, the literature is sparse regarding the potentials of older adults for continuing growth and development essentially made possible by continuous learning and new experiences. Seldom do studies explore and validate older adults' views on their own on-going life course experiences and learning potentials for purposeful, adaptive, and creative life styles even as they face limitations. "Up-hill" and "down-hill" (Hall, 1922) and often "over the hill" remain the predominant metaphors with their myths and prototypes about aging decrements obscuring a fuller understanding of the new terrain and vistas explored by older learners (Thornton, 2002). Perceptions and stereotypes about 'aging' are difficult to change becoming buried in cultural traditions, social policy, professional boundaries, and all too entrenched in the dominant economic paradigm (also mythic) of dependency. Riley, Kahn, & Foner (1994) labelled this as 'social lag' where social policies, institutions, and programs operate on out-dated models lacking substantive knowledge of existing social needs or wants in changing population groups. Neugarten's (1982) exploration of social policy for an older population policy proposed that it should be founded on 'need' not 'age'. Learning 'needs' or 'wants' or 'abilities' of older adults, however, have not been fully conceptualized or documented for their developmental characteristics and potentials. Nor has the prevailing lifelong learning paradigm in adult education expanded significantly to deal with these shifts, or the myths embedded in aging and an inclusive view of the life-course or life-span developmental issues shaping learning. Presently lifelong learning programs in later

life are dominated by leisure and intellectual pursuits, volunteering, and staying healthy (Thornton, 2003) and are significant in some communities, for example, the 'Elder College' and 'peer learning' initiatives in many post-secondary institutions; but they are not available in many communities. Community-based programs are difficult to sustain financially, yet they can reach more adults and offer the social context for developing the potentials of the older adult in changing communities. No doubt, being an older, aging adult is a personal, social and economic challenge. However, present educational strategies and interventions fall short of involving older adults in identifying, documenting, adapting, or facilitating their own learning experiences during this period of pivotal life transitions and transformations and offering them new perspectives for understanding learning in the developmental-aging paradigm.

Typically, life span or life course perspectives have not significantly shaped education policies across formal, informal, community-based, and self-directed programs. Development and aging are regarded as separate ways of being such that lifelong learning does not frame the lifespan in its entirety. There are emerging bio-psycho-social perspectives linking developmental ~ aging changes and their influence on late life transitions and transformations.

Educational discussions are limited on how individuals learn over the life course and in particular in their later years. Nor are there many conversations taking place on how continuous learning might influence and shape well-being and potentiate growth into old age. A broader and dynamic understanding is needed to outline how older adults might enhance their own personal growth and create purpose and meaning in their lives through engaging in essential developmental tasks for social productivity, well-being, and wisdom, and in their requisite educational interventions. Fundamentally, expanded multidisciplinary perspectives are needed on those events of learning and experiencing that shape later life and clearer models are necessary to

understand the strategies and interventions at the community level that guide and facilitate adult learners' developmental explorations.

Multidisciplinary perspectives of learning over the life span or life course must encompass a time-span of biographical maturation, increasing complex social experiences, and autobiographical reflections. These longer-view perspectives are essential to bridge and understand such developmental ~ aging transition issues while offering expanded perspectives of learning as a developmental construct and of lifelong education as an appropriate social investment.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

Throughout the current literature on learning among adults are repeating themes of growth and development, purposeful adaptive lifestyle change, reconciliation and therapeutic healing, restructuring interpretations of past experiences, acquiring new skills, making meaning, personal growth, and involvement in social communities of peers. Many of these ideas are similarly promulgated by teachers, academics and researchers scholars who have focused their professional careers on the study of lifelong learning and adult development. The question remains whether adults themselves interpret their own learning experiences in terms anywhere similar to those professional scholars and writers.

One of us is an adult educator (Thornton) with several decades of experience in leading guided autobiography (GAB) workshops among adults wishing a structure and format to assist them in preparation of their personal autobiographies: to leave a legacy, to make the transition into retirement, or to just explore their life to date. Regular features of the guided autobiography workshop's ten sessions are: (1) focusing each workshop session on a major life theme common

to most everyone's life (major branching points, family, career, money, health, spirituality, etc.); and (2) concluding workshop evaluation exercises examining participant expectations, facilitation procedures, large and small-group features, and an evaluation of the overall experience. Thus it was a simple step to add a small but critical writing exercise as part of the next to last workshop session inviting guided autobiography workshop participants to report "*What am I learning in this guided autobiography workshop?*" to help them understand the therapeutic effects they were experiencing in workshop activities (Birren & Cochran, 2001, p. 9).

The second co-investigator (Collins) focuses on program evaluation and the gathering and arranging of data to inform decisions on improvements to educational programs for adults. Thus the pairing of personal interests in learning programs operations and delivery together with interests in the structured examination of data gathering and organization led to a fruitful interplay between exploring and evaluating learning processes and outcomes and characterized as expanding and consolidating behaviors or abilities. These complementary (and sometimes conflicting) interests influenced how each co-investigator explored participants' learning reports in order (1) to test whether their learning reports approximately matched the themes in the scholarly and professional literature; (2) to document the themes and topics of learning and experiencing which participants identified as they remembered, reflected, and re-told the stories their life experiences; and (3) to summarize information which participants reported about their learning experiences in community-based guided autobiography workshops – all in an effort to better understand the learning processes and outcomes, growth, and development that older adults' experience and report from telling the stories of their lives in communities of their peers and writing on the themes most meaningful to them (Collins & Thornton, 2007).

The research objectives guiding the study were developed to understand the learning and experiences of participants in order to promote guided autobiographical activities as a learning strategy and educational intervention the community. Also, it is important to be able to differentiate it from applications in counselling psychology and social therapy. Guided autobiography's format was developed in formal academic settings to explore issues shaping the adult life course in the fields of developmental and gero-psychology. Its foundations are grounded in reminiscence and life review, both of which are influential therapeutic interventions based on narrative and telling your life's stories. Thornton (2003, 2008) has argued that these therapeutic interventions share common interests with the guided autobiography method on how these learning activities shape the story of who we are – the foundations of developmental and transformative change, but guided by different social and professional guidelines. The therapeutic effects experienced in the guided autobiography method need to be understood if they are to be utilized effectively as learning interventions and social activities.

CONCEPTUALIZING OLDER ADULT LEARNING

Any discussion of adult learning experiences must cover 30- 50years of the life course – from the mid-forties to late eighties. And there are numerous ways to divide and label this span of time: 3rd to 4th stage of life, early-middle-late adulthood, adulthood, sagehood, and elderhood. The adults who participated in this study ranged in age from 46 to 92 years, and the majority were between the ages of 60-75 and will simply be called older adults.

The time span for adult learning and the focus of that learning over time is conceptualized differently than in the formative years of acquisition and achievement (Schaie, 1977-78). Schaie's 'stage theory of adult cognitive development' proposed that adults during

this period the transition moved from ‘achievement’ to a ‘responsible-executive stage’ to a ‘reintegrative stage’, and involves reflecting on past and shifting from what should be known to how and why it should be known (Figure 1, p 133). During the past two decades, Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence has added to a broader understanding of this stage as a period in life of...”redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental existential questions.... less self occupied....more selective of choice of social and other activities....increased feelings of affinity with past generations and a decreased interest in superfluous social interactions” (The Social Gerontology Group, www.soc.uu.se, accessed June 6, 2009).

These ideas suggest that learning processes and outcomes occur in time and over time, are stored for a life time and are essential to how we access our autobiographical memory and understand who we are (see Klein, German, Cosmides & Gabriel, 2004). Autobiographical memory is full of events and experiences occurring in social contexts with others that add complexity and diversity. Learning processes and outcomes involve ways to trigger self-awareness and meaning of these experiences which then expand outward reshaping the self and self-other relationships and behaviours. This directionality leads to developmental transitions and transformations of making meaning, achieving purpose, and potentiating wisdom in one’s life. Randall (1995) called these “the poetics of learning.

Learning process that are expanding suggest developing new skills, behaviours, possibilities, or potentials but not yet as goals with commitments – opening the door and imagining next steps, but without yet committing to the first steps of goal setting , for example, mental forecasting by athletes to help them imagine or see their movements in their minds before moving. Learning outcomes are expanding when behaviours, either recent or old, are developing

beyond existing behaviours and being reworked, modified, relearned, or added to. New language acquisition or writing skills are illustrative instances.

In contrast, consolidating learning processes suggest ideas or movements that had been envisioned, that are in a trial-and-modify mode, and “imagining if” further steps are needed or can be tried. In this case, the athlete begins ‘to shape’ what’s imagined – the movements – and framing the performance – an outcome in the making, if you will. Learning outcomes are consolidating when previous behaviours are stabilizing so that which is being learned can be repeated or refined such as skill refinement or repertoire expansion. Most learning studies are based on quantifying learning outcomes and what was learned. For developmental ~ aging perspectives it is timely to explore questions on “how” older adults learn and why they learn. This can inform programmatic efforts to enhance “what” they need to know, given the complexity and diversity during late life (See, Baltes & Baltes, 1990). And exploring these distinctions might offer deeper views of learning at any age including creativity, meaning-making, and ‘saging’ or wisdom.

The directionality of learning, expanding or consolidating, that enhances meaning-making was suggested by Granott’s (1998) three attributes of “developing learning”:

Developing learning is defined as a fundamental learning process that undergoes microdevelopment (i.e., showing a rapid growth of knowledge during a learning period) and generates internalization of knowledge that can actively trigger further knowledge construction. Specifically, three attributes identify developing learning:

1. *Growth trajectory*. Developing learning clearly shows a progress to more advanced knowledge levels.

2. *Fundamental restructuring*. Developing learning undergoes restructuring that results in qualitative shifts in knowledge reorganization.

3. *Self-scaffolding*. Developing learning generates knowledge that supports unguided construction of more advanced knowledge.

Although developing learning can occur through interaction with a more knowledgeable partner, the learner has an active role in the process. By actively restructuring and self-scaffolding his or her own knowledge, the learner creates an evolving process marked by a growth trend. These attributes prevent learning from being shallow, superficial, reversible, and rote memorizing (attributes that characterize non-developing learning)” (pp. 17-18).

The first, best evidence for each of these states of learning are the verbs used in people’s own learning reports. For example, Pinker’s (2007) factive verbs to learn, to know, to remember are useful. Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of learning objectives – to know, to comprehend, to apply, to analyze, or to evaluate – are verbs forms that lead toward understanding ‘how’ or ‘that’ of learning. Evidence is to be found in the expressions offered by learners as they are encouraged to discuss that which they are seeking and how they are learning: “Ah, here it is! Now I am grasping and comprehending what I need and what I want to know!” (Rogers, 1983, p. 19). The best evidence of learning as uncertain and interpretation-testing (abductive) processes and outcomes is offered by participants expressing what they imagine, recall, see, hear, write and describe and the complex feelings and connections they make (Collins & Thornton, 2007; Thornton, 2008).

Current research in neuroimaging opens many doors on linguistics and cognitive strategies and how we learn, particularly by writing and reading. This research offers deeper

views on how writing and reading contribute to the expanding, consolidating, continuously changing learning and cognitive capacities of the brain (See for example, Smith, 1998; Wolf, 2008). Smith (1999) recaps a helpful five-step outline of learning processes progressing from overt behaviors of gaining knowledge to complex understanding and use of experiences:

“Some year ago Säljö (1979) carried out a simple, but very useful piece of research. He asked a number of adult students what they understood by learning.

Their responses fell into five main categories:

1. Learning as a quantitative increase in knowledge. Learning is acquiring information or ‘knowing a lot’.
2. Learning as memorizing. Learning is storing information that can be reproduced.
3. Learning as acquiring facts, skills, and methods that can be retained and used as necessary.
4. Learning as making sense or abstracting meaning. Learning involves relating parts of the subject matter to each other and to the real world.
5. Learning as interpreting and understanding reality in a different way. Learning involves comprehending the world by reinterpreting knowledge (Quoted in Ramsden 1992:26)” (p. 2).

These five categories emphasize the qualitative differences that help discriminate rote learning from deep understanding. Smith (1999) further noted that understanding this hierarchical directionality and differences involves

“...what Gilbert Ryle (1949) has termed ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’. The first two categories (#1 and #2) mostly involve knowing that. As we move

through the third (#3) we see that alongside ‘knowing that’ there is growing emphasis on ‘knowing how’. This system of categories is hierarchical – each higher conception implies all the rest beneath it. ‘In other words, student who conceive of learning as understanding reality are also able to see it as increasing their knowledge’ (Ramsden 1992:27)” (p. 3).

In guided autobiographical activities, the exploration of life stories over-time and in-time, from now to the past or envisioned future, is more than hierarchical, more than from “that to how” or even from “how to that”, or from reality to knowledge and then abstraction, as Ramsden proposes. Learning systems are dynamic and complex embedded and embodied processes, and starting points of learning don’t spring necessarily from previous achieved states (outcomes). Some ‘process’ starting points “come out of the blue” by imagining and intuiting possibilities, then moving toward a reality of living in that space. The stories we craft of who we are and want to be must be first imagined, then abstracted, and maybe subsequently planned and executed, and certainly built on “know that” (understanding) and “knowing how” (using our experiences).

Developmental Perspectives. Most current methods of studying cognitive development in mid-life and old age are inadequate to understand the integrative and re-integrative stages which face older adult learners and lack the salience of guided autobiography methods. The most productive and rewarding methods of exploring late-life cognitive and intellectual development are done among peers in social groups which offer diversity, are based in contexts of everyday life, and are shaped in real time (Birren & Birren, 1996). In combination, these factors facilitate access and transfer of knowledge more readily among the familiar and known to the unfamiliar and unknown, while capitalizing and building on the collective wisdom of diverse social groups.

Three major developmental paradigms offer a learning perspective for the later adult years associated with transitions, transformations and transcendence: Schaie's (1977-78) reintegrative stage theory of cognitive transitions; Mezirow's (1981) critical thinking and transformative learning; and Tornstam's (2005) perspective on gerotranscendence including transitions and transformation progressing toward purpose and wisdom. For example, Schaie noted that transitions in the

"reintegrative" stage occurs at a time when the complexity of the adult cognitive structure has reached an over-load stage, and consequently demand the simplification, and where environmentally programmed role requirements are reduced due to occupational retirement, relinquishment of responsibilities for children and family, and other role restrictions previously described as "disengagement" phenomena. But the cognitive response is not that of disengagement at all, it is one of achieving more selective attention to cognitive demands which remain meaningful or attain new meaning (Schaie, 1977-78, p.135).

The current response to reintegrative transitions is offered by Baltes & Baltes (1990) and Baltes & Carstensen (1996) conception of "selective optimization with compensation" during the transitions and transformations of later life. This raises the question: How do we learn to do that in one's changing social environment. Transformations and transformative learning experiences comprise complex conceptions on critical thinking and emancipatory learning and are two perspectives on processes about framing our life and circumstance (Mezirow, 1981; 1991): fundamental in any learning schema for meaning-making, purpose and wisdom. Tornstam outlines gerotranscendence as an "empirically based theory" on "the individual moving towards

and through experiences of the redefinition of self, relationships to others, and new existential understandings and questions” (Tornstam, 2005). All three perspectives see late life for all its expanding potentials for growth and new experiences even with the increasing appearance of limitations, some physical but many social – some of it is ‘uphill’ and some of it ‘downhill’ – but certainly not just ‘over the hill’.

Current life-span and life-course perspectives on bio-psycho-social transformations and transition over the adult years into old age have begun to integrate greater plasticity across these stages of development. For example, Birren’s (1988) “counterpart theory of aging” helps bridge and entwines developmental periods of early childhood to mid-life development with mid-life to late life ageing – the span of time covered by themes in guided autobiography workshops. There are few schemas that account for the interactive nature of life-span and life course phenomena, particularly the “threads” and “frames” among learning and experience and their social-cultural context.

How do we weave it together during the reintegrative, transformative, and transcendent phases of late life? The major focus of this research project was to extract from participants’ learning reports comments on “how” they did it in these guided autobiography workshops. The guided autobiographical method (Birren & Birren, 1996) and forms of structured life review (Haight & Haight, 2007) do stimulate participants toward behaviors beyond reintegrative stages into purposeful transformations, meaning-making and transcendence. These are important dimensions given some attention by MacKeracher’s (1996) cautionary comment on reintegrating which needs to be explored:

Speculatively speaking, what Schaie (1977-78) calls 'reintegrating intelligence' may involve the integration of the three aspects of intelligence, into a sort of

global intelligence or wisdom in which mental processes become an integral part of the experience and context within which they are developed and used. Such a process would likely make older adults both more competent in the familiar contexts and less competent in unfamiliar contexts. That is, the more the three forms of intelligence are integrated with each other the more difficult will be the transfer of knowledge from one context to another" (pp. 121).

Community-Based Programs. There are comparatively few studies of adult learning in community-based programs and most studies are reports on peer learning group activities or else surveys or reports on participants' satisfaction with activities, programs, and venues. Most adult programs are structured on prevailing continuing education formats (didactic and often collaborative) of teachers – learners in classrooms and focused on specific topics, such as history, social issues, and technology, creative writing, crafts, and so forth. However in all of these programs, there is less emphasis on developing transitional and transformational potentials essential for continuing self-growth and making meaning of one's life or the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of life's experiences.

Autobiographical activities energize, challenge and change the bio-psycho-sociological capacities in our dynamic body-mind-brain potentials – even in later life – and are developmental in all aspects of learning, health, and growth (Thornton, 2003). Developing these potentials can be realized anywhere, but they are perhaps best formalized and sustained in community-based programs. Community-based programs are more typical of the social contexts in which our life stories resonate and are lived. Further, community-based programs sustain the social relationships among participants, the programs, and the organizations providing them. Ideally, in

community-based contexts, guided autobiography workshops are not set up as classrooms, participants are not students, and the organizer is a facilitator not a teacher. Goals, methods, and assessments are grounded in collaborative and situational learning theory (Thornton, 2008). If we are to expand our understanding of adult learning in later life, we need to explore how processes of learning and experiencing emerge and function in everyday life during this re-integrative period and in the social communities in which older adults are situated. Deeper understanding of these processes in community-based programs can greatly facilitate knowledge transfer among individuals and community agencies, and can expand the potentials of community-based education activities.

Guided Autobiography. The guided autobiography method as a learning experience necessitates greater scrutiny of the processes and outcomes that continually emerge and reshape the learner's responses in the experience and to the social contexts within which they occur. Autobiography-related activities are framed in a constructionist perspective where collaborative and situational learning are strategic and instrumental to activities, and may be offered across formal, informal and self-directed learning programs; however, community-based programs and workshops are preferred reaching a larger, more diverse group of participants.

Several concepts provide the foundation for guided autobiography workshop methods and shaped this research report: adult developmental life themes, reminiscence and structured life review, and social group interactions. Narrative themes that shape our life story are based on adult developmental issues outlined by Birren & Deutchman (1991); Birren & Birren (1996) and Birren & Cochran (2001) and structure workshop group session. In each session, small group activities are grounded in group dynamics which potentiate a "developmental exchange" that

stimulates, enriches, and expands participants' learning experiences in the group's activities. Participants' group learning experiences shape their exploration of personal stories becoming deeper, more 'open' among participants. All this becomes a nested and interconnected sharing, and that 'scaffolds' (Granott, 1998) in the following order:

guided autobiography methods → *small group activities* → *developmental exchanges*
→ *learning and experiences*

Several workshop sessions are required for participants to grasp the collaborative nature of the group's activity. However, during the third or fourth session of the workshop, the dynamics of participants' exchanges begin to "flow" not in one direction but moving back ↔ forth, up ↓ down (scaffold), enhancing interactions (bonding) and expanding and consolidating learning. The learning experiences developing between and among participants are dependent on the dynamics in small social groups, the overall facilitation of the workshop, and the thematic materials presented for review, writing, discussion, and sharing on adult life course issues.

The guided autobiography method stimulates participants to indicate their goals for engaging in activities of story writing and telling: essential narrative, reminiscence, and life review activities. These activities are sustained by elaborate behavioural repertoires of learning enhancing, integrating, reconciling and making sense of one's life as lived – all leading to a "therapeutic effect" as part of the learning experience. Birren & Deutchman (1991) identified these areas of development associated with this therapeutic effect in activities: strengthening concepts of self, maintaining a sense of community, contributing to the family, contributing to cognitive functioning, releasing motivation, adapting to new late life roles, gaining new skills, reconciling life and accepting death. In guided autobiography activities, learning processes and outcomes are seldom explored or documented by participants in community based programming.

We know little about the learning processes or outcomes experienced by participants as they create, express, review, and remember and share their stories as aspects of their daily lives.

Developmental Exchanges. Developmental exchanges create the social context in the guided autobiography method for learning and change (Reedy & Birren, 1980). “Coupling events” or bonding emerge in small work groups of five or six people, which create explicit bonding across and within self ↔ other dialogs in the group. In the developmental exchange, “*we are learning our story as we are telling of our story*”– the “telling” invokes images, emotions, experiences, and associated abilities which potentiate further self-learning of additional repertoires and abilities that “re-stories” images, emotions, and experiences in autobiographical memories. Story telling is central to everyday learning experiences at all stages of life and critical for successful aging, particularly in the emergence of meaning of and purpose in life. It is in these developmental exchanges that story telling enhances developmental reintegration and personal transformation. Personal narratives and story telling must cover a life time if we hope to understand who we are, where we’ve been and where we want to go – fortunately, learning experiences are not ‘hardwired’ and are “restoried.” In guided autobiography, various prompts and probes (images, emotions, and language) are used to explore autobiographical memories which participants use to “*tell their story*” in familiar social contexts created in community-based programs.

Meaning-Making. The developmental exchange mediates the dynamic tensions among autobiographical memories and social experiences, a tension which is often sensed as therapeutic when resolved as the exhilaration of finding meaning in our life. Learning and memory are

invoked in what Kegan (1982) has termed a “meaning-making conversation” stimulating our development from within, shaping our behaviour and responses to our experiences in our social world (Thornton, 2003).

“...it’s possible in certain intensive learning experiences to have—and perhaps through a lot of collective participation and scaffolding and support—a temporary apprehension of a different, more complex way of experiencing yourself, which you cannot sustain for long outside the workshop. ... it has a certain value if it doesn’t become invisible to you. If you can at least remember it, or it creates the notion of a space between the way you normally tend to be and some other way that you could see or experience yourself, that’s valuable...” (Kegan, 2001, “Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail” Workshop) [www.dialogonleadership.org].

Reker (2003) notes that “In addition to assessing outcomes, more research is needed to understand the underlying meaning-making processes inherent in life review, reminiscence, and narrative approaches” (p.16). The following sections offers initial insights into how these processes are experienced and how meaning-is-made is explored and illustrated through this study’s learning reports and topics of participants in recent guided autobiography workshops.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROCEDURES

The study explores the learning processes and outcomes that are stimulated and sustained in social groups through dialogues: exchanges and conversations revealing, sharing, exploring, and affirming feelings, experiences and events - including body-language. The dialogs are acknowledged as “telling stories” and “retelling-stories” over the life course. Butler (1998) argues that these narrative abilities are based on the mind-brain plasticity to develop and create

alternate and new pathways for processing experiences and for expressing that which is changing, how it is changing, and what is being learned.

The research objectives of this study are (1) to document self-reports offered by participants on their learning experiences in guided autobiography activities which are offered and conducted in informal, community-based adult education venues, (2) to categorize their statements into workable clusters of content, and (3) to confirm that guided autobiography results in demonstrable learning – even though it is not commonly viewed as an educational activity. Participants are both active and collaborative agents in the guided autobiography workshop and each person brings to the activity a personal knowledge base essential to what they are learning. Similarly, participants establish their own goals and assess what they are learning or have learned in the activity.

Exploratory Questions: Two exploratory questions prompted participants to report their learning experiences in the workshops.

1. *“What am I learning in this guided autobiography workshop?”*

This first question is commonly discussed in the next-to-last workshop session. People write out their answers informally and often in long-hand form. Their comments are not formally discussed in the open workshop sessions but sometimes there are side-discussions about what participants learn and achieve in their small-group activities. The pluperfect word “learned” was intentionally avoided so as not to suggest that this was an evaluation exercise or that learning was in any way complete, but was a continuing and ongoing process.

A second exploratory question was routinely discussed during the last workshop session to help participants explore and outline their future intentions and goals for continuing work on the life stories.

2. *“Where to go from here?”*

The question is introduced to workshop participants by noting that “[g]uided autobiography is really a kind of fishing expedition. By now you have done a lot of writing and know that each two-page piece you have written could be expanded into a book. You have learned a great deal about yourself and your colleagues. What now? Subsequent courses? Publishing? Preparing a scrapbook for family? A video? Reunions with this group?” (Birren & Cochran, 2001, p. 165).

This second question guides workshop participants toward setting potential goals for continuing work on “their life stories”. It is not intended to evaluate participant accomplishments or workshop activities, but as stimulation and motivation to continue their learning experiences. It is useful in suggesting further guided autobiographical activities and encouraging participants to continue meeting after workshops.

PROCEDURES

The guided autobiography workshops that are central to this investigation spanned a five-year period from 2004 to 2008 and a geographic spread from British Columbia’s Central Okanagan Valley to Vancouver Island, plus an additional English-speaking workshop in the Lake Chapala area of north-central Mexico. In all instances, the workshops were the initiatives of local community organizations and non-profit agencies, while three involved collaboration with a university center on aging. All workshops were offered in community-based venues.

The central focus of each workshop was advertised to be “a ten-week autobiography workshop” with the purpose of “writing the story of your life”. Data gathering about learning experiences and topics were kept unobtrusive and incidental to the workshops’ autobiographical objectives: exploring life stories, leaving a legacy; facilitating life transitions, and building a sense of community (Birren & Cochran, 2001). An adult learning grant in 2008 from the Canadian Council on Learning made it possible to collect these learning reports in the three-workshop series funded by New Horizon Canada to the Centre on Aging, University of Victoria, The Friends of the Centre, Saanich Silver Threads, and Family Caregivers Network, Victoria. Ethical review was obtained and granted through the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Normal procedures of signed, informed participant consent were followed.

Participants: Learning data were summarized from 109 “*What am I learning?*” scripts provided by 114 consent-granting participants in six guided autobiography workshops (see Table 1 in the Appendix), five conducted in various BC locations and one in an English-speaking retirement community in Mexico. Scripts averaged about 175 words. Two participants chose not to report age or education, but of those who did, 88 were women and 26 were men ranging in age from 46 to 92, and averaging about 67 years. Five people attended the workshop series but did not submit “*What am I learning?*” scripts although they did provide written materials submitted by other participants on their goals for taking the workshop as well as the evaluation forms required by the program. Participants were a comparatively well educated group, with 85% of them reporting various forms of post-secondary, university, or graduate education. Of those reporting birthplace, approximately 65% were Canadian-born with others reporting Asia, the United States, and the United Kingdom or another location in Europe as their place of birth.

Analysis: Each participant's learning script was transcribed into a text file and content analyzed using the Provalis Research QDA Miner qualitative data analysis package. Both co-investigators read and re-read the scripts from two different perspectives each: (1) What is the thick description or possible meanings of each person's responses to the question '*What am I learning?*'; and (2) What are the generic topics that are evident in their answers? In general, Glaser and Strauss' (1967; Kelle, 2005) constant comparative analysis strategies guided the content analysis, with a particular focus on the first three of their four stages: codes, concepts and categories. Since learning as process and outcome of guided autobiography is a comparatively unexplored research domain, interpretations of participants' scripts and learning reports were regarded as abductive and emergent rather than selective or substantive (Pierce, 1903 Glaser, 1989).

RESULTS

Workshop participants were forthcoming with answers to "*What am I learning?*" Collectively, their 109 scripts contained about 940 direct answers averaging between eight and nine "learning statements" per participant. Early readings by both investigators made it clear that people's answers fell into three large conceptual clusters, which we call for the purposes of this study, Explanatory Comments, Learning Reports, and Learning Topics.

Explanatory comments consisted of answers that reflected "getting their writing going" or "gathering their thoughts" or "organizing their day" prior to the task of constructing a direct written answer to the question. Comments such as "*It's 5:30am. I'm not a morning person but I haven't got your question answered for today's class*", or "*My computer broke down again...sorry for the delay*", or "*As I reflect upon the workshop, its social aspects ... and the*

manner in which it has been conducted...perhaps I shall put this in point form as I reflect" characterized this category. While these were often the first things participants mentioned, they were comparatively infrequent and constituted less than 2% of total responses.

Learning Reports were by far the largest category of people's responses and consisted of more or less free-form answers to "What am I learning?". Except for explanatory comments, nearly all the more than 900 responses could be interpreted as some form of learning report.

Learning Topics were identified during a second round of coding and represented a sub-category of Learning Reports, with a more detailed focus on common topics or categories reflecting how participants made meaning of their workshop learning experiences and social interchanges. These Learning Reports and Learning Topics frame the direct statements forming the primary data sources for the project's principle objective: to document and better understand the learning processes, outcomes, growth and development which occur when older adults, write, discuss and "tell the stories of their lives" in communities of their peers.

Learning Reports: Participants' Learning Reports reflected two distinctly different axes of learning: a process ↔ outcome axis and an expanding ↓ consolidating axis. Nearly all their reports could be readily identified as either outcome-focused (*"Probably the most valuable thing I learned is that I like writing"*) or process-focused (*"I am learning how to write on themes that challenge my thinking in areas I do not usually speak of"*).

In personal discussions with Thornton (Author), cultural anthropologist Harry Wolcott echoed Randall's (1995) and Granott's (1998) ideas in noting that many participant reports expressed a sense of expanding, elaborating, or opening-up while others suggested consolidating, drawing together or solidifying. Thus we added an expanding and consolidating axis reflecting a

distinction between statements reporting a consolidation of events, feelings, experiences in participants' past versus those indicative of resolutions in the present or looking forward to new vistas, activities and initiatives in their near and mid-term future.

Extensive discussions between the co-investigators gradually resulted in high agreement about which reports were process or outcome and which were expanding or consolidating with an overall agreement level of 91%. In later coding comparisons, agreement levels were 98% for outcomes, 87% for processes, 91% for expanding and 87% for consolidating.

Outcome Learning Reports accounted for about 66% of participants' overall comments (n=621) while process comments about 'learning how to...' accounted for the remaining 34% (n=326). These results will be reviewed in subsequent analysis as coding and categorization protocols develop on these learning reports and topics.

Among the common outcome reports were comments about the accomplishment of tangible results like a framework for their autobiographies, an understanding of the importance of sharing and exchanging stories, new interpretations about events earlier in their lives, acquisition or improvement of new skills such as writing or computer usage or the importance of journaling, the value of listening and accepting without judgement, interest in and contentment with one's own life, and the universality of human experience.

Similarly, the process reports highlighted both new and ongoing learning reflected in statements illustrating *how* certain activities induced greater understanding (not simply *that* it did, but *how* it did): "*recalling different episodes of my life allows me to become more visible to myself*"; "*learning that I'm more productive when I have to be accountable to others*"; "*The sharing of common events and new approaches sharpens our senses as we move along the path of our past*"; "*helping me think about who I was then and who I am now*"; "*finding peace in the*

memories of the past”; “learning to express my thoughts through poetry”; “Talking and sharing my life within this group made it easy to laugh or cry about some issues”; “I’m learning ways of expressing the bad times without malice”; “The sensitizing questions have been of great value in stimulating our memories”; or “Having to talk about our experiences in life, somehow you gain strength, that you can do anything if you make your mind up”.

In terms of consolidation and expansion, the divide was much narrower: about 56% involved themes suggesting consolidating (n=529), while 44% were expanding themes -- looking to the future and expanding elaboration of self or personal agendas (n=395). Typical consolidating statements included: *“It has helped me to look back on my life and what I have accomplished”; “Writing my life story has given me greater clarity about myself”; “As I look back and see how everything, even the most painful events of my life, has worked together for good”; “I do have great inner strength”; “I have been made to face problems I had thought buried forever!”; “As I look back and see how everything, even the most painful events of my life, has worked together for good”; and “A realization that maybe my life was richer and more rewarding than I had imagined.”*

Statements characterizing expanding views among participants included: *“I am learning new personal discoveries”; “...to use the computer in more interesting ways”; “I am learning to clarify my desires and go get them”; “Writing never came easy to me...until now”; “I am learning in this course that I have a unique and far great, enriched life than the average”; “I never knew I had this in me”; “I am learning to become attentive to my inner self again”; I am learning that I can still learn, and that I can still write”; “No problem is so big I can’t overcome it”; and “I am learning to trust, not to judge others, to have faith in myself, to forgive myself, to love others, and to forward into the future”.*

While these illustrations are extracted from individual participants in six different workshops, the themes they express are near universal across the six groups. Initial statistical tests confirmed that there were no overall significant differences between men and women, between younger and older participants, nor between the six workshops held at different times and in different locations.

Learning Topics: Of course, people’s learning reports conveyed much more detailed information than simply process and outcome or consolidating and expanding themes. They provided specific and topical answers to the question “What am I learning?” In global terms, their answers reflected three large categories: comments about *themselves*, about *others*, or about various aspects of the guided autobiography workshops. The specific topical content of their reports fell neatly into 19 thematic categories; eight about themselves (S), five about others (O), and six about GAB workshop aspects (G) as follows:

S-Beliefs/Values	O-Communicating	G-Developmental Exchange
S-Goals/Tasks/Plans	O-Family	G-GAB Value
S-Meaning-Making	O-Legacy	G-Small Group Work
S-Mental Health	O-Trust/Openness	G-Thanks
S-New Learning	O-Universality	G-Triggers/Primers
S-Reminiscing		G-Writing
S-Self Value		
S-Well-Being		

Participant reports characterizing each of these eight self-referential topics include these illustrative (but not exhaustive) examples:

S-Beliefs-Values: *“I realize more than ever that I have been blest by love and opportunity and that it is far better to forgive than to bear grudges”*; *“We are all human -- it's what we women or men contribute to the world that's important”*; *“I think through our life's experiences or journey, we learn to make better decisions and unlearn bad experience”*.

S-Goals/Tasks/Plans: *“First of all, I have to admit, that having a time table[or] a deadline works for me”; “ I intend to follow up and locate the Birren books in Canada”; “Hopefully I will be able to finish [my manuscript] after the classes have ended”.*

S-Meaning-Making: *“Patterns repeat themselves over throughout life”; “Would I have made different decisions if I had known then what I know now?”; “I was not aware of my feeling of isolation until I wrote about it”; “Quite often, I have come to a different conclusion and about a personal historical event, and it's in the telling that I rewrite my story”.*

S-Mental Health: *“I have learned that with aging you can take a positive, negative or somewhere in between approach to your inevitable physical decline and those who complain constantly are unhappy and not good company; “A major part of my happiness and contentment depends upon times and activities which allow for my creative expression”; “[I have] also dropped some nouns like co-dependent, rescuer, caretaker”.*

S-New Learning: *“I am learning how important it is to one's health, on many levels, to state one's own truth”; “Taking time to write my memories, feelings, and thoughts forces me to be quiet -- just briefly -- and hear the ‘me’ inside -- away from all the turmoil”; “I also discovered writing can be a great communication tool with my partner and friends”; “I am learning to cope much better with my shortcomings, and tomorrow I go to the B.C. Museum to talk to the children about my life in the Royal Air Force. I could not have done that but for this course, it's given me such confidence”; “Having to talk ... about our experiences in life, somehow you gain strength, that you can do anything if you make your mind up”.*

S-Reminiscing: *“Many events and experiences that were forgotten opened up”; “Being 76 years old things have slipped back that were pertinent to my life some time, long ago”; “ I recognized*

significant achievements and realized how far I have come from a shy, quiet & reserved girl who grew up in the mining town of Kimberley, BC”.

S-Self Value: *“I do have great inner strength”; “I struggle at times when it comes to sharing aspects of myself that I see as different from the norm and which others may judge me for”; “The fact that I embraced my fear that first session, that I over-ruled all those voices that said, “You won't fit in. You can't do it,” has shown me that I can embrace my fear and challenge myself the next time I feel incompetent”.*

S-Well-Being: *“It is so true that we are responsible for my/our own happiness and boredom”; “I found the article about GAB at a time in my life when I really needed it”; “Mind you, writing about yourself probably the easiest thing to do, as you know the subject so well”; “I can now enjoy the thrill of pleasant memories all over again”.*

Second, participants also made numerous references to *others*, frequently in the contexts of communication, interpersonal and familial relations, the legacy of their stories and lives, and comments about the universality of human experiences as they exchanged their narratives. Additional other-related comments reflect the self-other interactions that developed in their small working groups and in the developmental exchanges that are key to workshop success.

O-Communicating: *“ I learned quite a bit about group dynamics too and how total strangers can learn to interact and share their private thoughts and beliefs when they may never have done so with relatives and friends”; “I have learned a lot about myself and my confidence, to put thoughts into words”; “ We do try to clarify what people are trying to express but it takes energy”; “To be patient and to listen and hear what your group is saying to you”; “I'd like to remember to say "I love you", and mean it -- because others are in need of support too!”.*

O-Family: *“I have written the biographies of the members of my family. But so far I have not completed my own”; “I’m learning the importance of writing my story, particularly because I have lost three siblings and the only way their children will know their parent’s history is through my telling of it”; “Memory is precious -- my sisters and I just recently became aware that no longer can we rely on our Mother’s Memory to keep furnishing some key family stories or as a source of information”; “I know in the end [my children] will make their own decisions, and go on their life’s journey and learn”.*

O-Legacy: *“I did want to share some of my lifetime experiences with my adult children and grandsons”; “There are also good and humorous memories I can pass on to my children and generations to follow”; “It will likely be the only record other than some snapshots, a few mentions in the local museum and Statistics Canada”; “My choices have had a large impact on my children’s past and their journeys”.*

O-Trust/Openness: *“[O]ther people’s life journeys are fascinating and that we older people have a lot to teach others”; “They have been very supportive”; “I am learning that some people have not had an outlet to work through tragedies and losses in their lives”; “How can we be anything but understanding and compassionate?”.*

O-Universality: *“No matter how different, we have a trough line that connects us”; “...so, behind our masks we are all the same and different”; “I do not live in a vacuum and others have walked the path as well”; “We all have our stories, memories, ideas and hopes -- all different but all with the same common goals: be kind and do no harm”.*

Third, a sizable fraction of their “what am I learning” reports made reference to the guided autobiography workshops themselves, to their structure, organization, internal processes, and to various interactions with other participants or with the workshop leader.

G-Developmental Exchange; *“Having other like-minded people in this class to discuss experiences with was a great catalyst and I hope we will meet in the future”;* *“Needless to say the positive reinforcement of the small group gives an individual the confidence to expand on the writing theme”;* *“[It is also an opportunity to increase others' understanding of people different from myself”;* *“The sharing of common events and new approaches sharpens our senses as we move along the path of our past”.*

G-Small Group Work; *“The small group was a blessing although I realized that my life has been so different and maybe for some people hard to apprehend”;* *“ The people in our group all have different stories about their lives that are very interesting and make them unique in many ways”;* *“I have sharpened my listening skills and tried to remember details from others sharing their stories”;* *“It has also been very useful to share some of this exercise with those in my small working group”;* *“They have been very supportive. I could not have wished for three more understanding companions on this guided journey”;* *“It also has given each of us in the group a chance to be the mediator for our table, at least once”.*

G-Triggers/Primers; *“This course, especially the weekly guided pages, has helped me to focus and put my memories on paper”;* *“The “Life Graph” identifies the ups & downs in life & the “resiliency” to bounce back”;* *“I am learning....how important it is to focus on “life themes” in developing an autobiography”;* *“Without this structure, I probably would have just gone chronologically through my life, relating details”;*
“Having the weekly topics & questions was very helpful, so using this guide means that I have learned to use a new tool”; *“Thanks for the phrase – “heal the past, claim your present, transform the future”.*

G-Writing *“I learned that I really enjoyed the writing”; “Writing never came easy to me...until now”; “Certain grammatical guidelines should be observed in writing – use of active verbs, concrete details, metaphors and similes, the ever valuable “show, don't tell”; “Journaling is an activity I have always enjoyed and found useful – useful in terms of self-understanding.”; “ How valuable the process of writing it is -- writing one's life”; “My stated goals at the beginning of the workshop were to explore incentives for journaling and writing, and to explore overall themes and times of my life”.*

G-GAB Value *“I am surprised at how well I was able to reconstruct my life and my family with the assistance of the sensitizing question each of sheet of a subject matter”; There was a lot more happening in my life than I imagined and I would love to continue this type of workshop”; “It all makes for good education”; “I am learning.... that if I hadn't taken this workshop, I wouldn't have started my life story yet”; “This course gave me the inspiration to collect numerous occurrences in my lifetime”; “Life experiences and impressions become real”.*

G-Thanks *“So, thank you very much for the time, planning and guidance that you have given myself & others in our GAB I class”; “A special thanks... for keeping the class on track and appraised of the methodology and other aspects and riches that come from this work”; “Thank you for opening this door”; “Thank you for arranging the workshop and starting us off in the right direction”; “So, thank you for this enlightening experience”.*

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

These classification schemes of process and outcome and expansion and consolidation plus the 19 topical categories (eight self-referential, five other-centered, and six GAB-related) outline an emergent framework for describing and categorizing people's reports to *“What am I*

learning in this guided autobiography workshop?”. What is immediately apparent is the sheer volume and richness of participant responses, as reflected in over 900 Learning Reports from 109 scripts. Each participant reported an average eight to nine discrete and different answers to the question. Nearly all responses were readily identifiable as either process or outcome and most were phrased in ways that indicated either consolidation learning or expansion learning. Only minimal cross-category duplication occurred (Table 2).

Table 2. Process/Outcome and Consolidation/Expansion Co-Occurrences

	Pro	Out	Con	Exp
Process	326			
Outcome	2	621		
Consolidation	129	287	529	
Expansion	107	206	0	395

For learning processes, consolidation reports occurred with roughly the same frequency as expansion reports (129 vs. 107). For learning outcomes, consolidation reports were mentioned somewhat more often than expansion reports (287 vs. 206), but not significantly so. Learning reports were exhaustively coded so that each of the 940 comments was closely examined for initial categorization into either process and outcome or consolidation and expansion grouping. In contrast, participants’ learning topics were more sparsely coded for illustrative instances but not for every possible mention of each of the nineteen Learning Topics. Hence, an analog to the table above showing co-occurrences would be misleading. However, Table 3 highlights comparisons between themes found extensively in the literature and these participants’ reports of “*What am I learning*” and the correspondences are illustrative. See Table 3 in the Appendix.

While the study was conceptualized as an exploratory investigation rather than an exercise in hypothesis testing or confirmation, Table 3 shows that each theme identified in the study's literature overview was echoed numerous times by participants, but in their own words. The literature themes are relatively generic in their phraseology while the nineteen learning topic categories are declarative and illustrative of exactly what kinds of learning is occurring. Program and workshop facilitators need to understand the substantive processes of "knowing that" and "knowing how" developing learning occurs and the content which shapes "what gets learned in guided autobiography". We propose that the categorizations of the learning topics are more substance-rich than the literature themes which are often written to different audiences of educators, gerontologists, physicians, academicians or other scholarly readerships.

SUMMARY: RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

People who elect the guided autobiography experience are as involved in elaborating, promoting and extending their spheres of awareness, engagement and influence as they are in resolving or consolidating past issues, thus supporting Butler's (1998) debunking of "the stereotypes of old people as confused, decrepit, and leading meaningless lives". Moreover, they are clearly capable of identifying learning in a wide variety of forms as substantial components of their guided autobiography experience. They report that their learning agendas extend well beyond the beginnings of their life-stories as the sole outcome of their participation. While there may be aspects of *development* that do not directly involve *learning*, the reverse is probably untrue: any form of learning implies development, at any stage of life. Thus, learning and meaning-making through guided autobiography fulfill one or another of Kegan's (1982) terminology of various forms of development imperial-self, social-self, self-authoring, or self-

transforming. Future guided autobiography workshops should continue to ask participants to report on what they are learning and will merge new scripts together with existing records to form a running inventory of how guided autobiography promotes learning and meaning in developing the continuing self.

The learning reports and topics outlined in this exploratory study address three major deficiencies in social and educational policy guidelines which inform and shape learning and education strategies in mid-to-late life. First, there are too few coherent educational conceptions of how the individual “becomes” and “adapts” over the life course or life span. Second, there are limited education studies of older adults’ learning potentials and capacities informed by emerging studies of adult learning and developmental psychology. Third, socio-educational policy offer limited guidelines or programs to study or fund any responses to these barriers in community-based programs and forms of informal adult education. Riley, Kahn & Foner (1994) identified this limitation as “structural lag” i.e. when social policies intending to respond to social or cultural groups are framed by “fixed categories,” “wrong labels,” and “outdated metaphors”, and obfuscated by imposed myths about aging and the capabilities of the older people. The results are policies, practices, and programs that do not match the values, expectations and potentials of older people.

Systematic study of older adults’ learning in community-based programs holds great potential to contribute to our understanding of life-span and life-course perspectives, particularly when expressed by adults in activities centrally relevant to them. For example, Havighurst’s (1972) outline of the “developmental tasks” of the life course shaped educational policy in its time, but did not reflect more current social-cultural-gender-race-age complexities and issues of diversity which face current populations of older adults. Similarly, Schaie’s (1979) theory of

cognitive development over life-span stages and his re-integration stage is particularly relevant to the learning experiences of older adults' late life transitions and transformations, as illustrated by the learning reports explored in this project. As well, Baltes' and Carstensen's (1996) phrase of 'selective optimization with compensation' of daily challenges and opportunities for successful aging and life course transitions was exemplified as these participants' learning reports and topics indicated. The learning reports and topics collected in these guided autobiography workshops and described in this article provide ample illustrations of these concepts.

This poem from a Vernon workshop participant early in the workshop series neatly summarizes the scope and depth of learning experiences in the narrative activities of guided autobiography.

I am grateful.

Unstoppered I am --
The dam
of the cork
has been thrust
from the throat
of the flask
that enclosed me
in glass
And I float
Free, at last!

Gladys Scott (by permission)

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Participant Characteristics in Six Guided Autobiography Workshops

	Male	Female	Total
Age:	--	--	--
45-50	--	2	2
50-60	3	16	19
60-70	6	31	37
70-80	7	20	27
80 and Up	8	15	23
Not Known	2	4	6
Education:	--	--	--
High School	4	9	13
Post-Secondary	5	32	37
Baccalaureate	9	29	38
Masters	5	11	16
Doctorate	3	3	6
Not Known	--	4	4
Location:	--	--	--
Vernon, BC	1	15	16
Ajijic, MX	8	14	22
Arbutus Ridge, BC	--	3	3
Citadel, Victoria, BC	7	12	19
Shoal Ctr, Victoria, BC	4	22	26
Saanich, Victoria, BC	6	21	28
Birthplace:	--	--	--
BC	1	11	12
Prairies	5	22	27
Ontario	1	3	4
Quebec	--	1	1
Maritimes	--	2	2
UK	8	9	17
Europe	--	3	3
US	1	2	3
Asia	1	3	4
Not Asked	9	32	41
Learning Reports	25	84	109
Not submitted	1	4	5
Totals	26	88	114

Table 3. Correspondence between Respondent Learning Reports and Literature Themes
(as summarized in the literature review portions of this article)

“What am I learning?” Participant Responses	Growth and Development	Purposeful Adaptive Change	Restructuring Past Interpretations	Reconciliation Therapeutic	Making Meaning	Personal Growth	Involvement in Learning	Developmental Exchanges
Learning Reports								
Learning Outcomes	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Learning Processes	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Consolidation Learning	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Expansion Learning	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Learning Topics								
<i>Self-Referential</i>								
S-Beliefs/Values	•		•		•	•		•
S-Goals/Tasks/Plans		•				•		
S-Meaning-Making			•	•	•		•	
S-Mental Health	•	•	•	•	•	•		
S-New Learning	•	•				•	•	
S-Reminiscing			•	•	•			
S-Self Value	•		•	•			•	•
S-Well-Being	•	•	•	•	•			
<i>Other-Centered</i>								
O-Communicating	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
O-Family	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
O-Legacy	•				•	•		
O-Trust/Openness	•	•	•	•		•	•	
O-Universality			•	•	•	•		•
<i>GAB Workshop-Related</i>								
G-Developmental Exchange	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
G-Small Group Work	•			•	•	•	•	•
G-Triggers/Primers		•		•				•
G-Writing		•	•	•			•	
G-GAB Value		•	•	•	•	•	•	
G-Thanks			•					•