

La Trobe University

**Molly Travers*****Older Women and Community Writing Groups*****Abstract:**

*Writing groups for women are not new, having been offered since the last century as a way of educating working women, or giving middle class women a political voice. However, the community writing groups run in Neighbourhood Houses, TAFEs and by U3A cater for older women now retired or alone when spouses and children no longer depend on them. This paper reports on a survey of such groups in city and country Victoria, looking at why these women begin creative writing late in life, how they view the groups and group leaders and what they write, in the context of the concept of lifelong education and the provision of intellectual activities for older women.*

For some reason, popularising creative writing courses is very offensive to successfully published writers. Nevertheless, many are quite willing to speak to or conduct community workshops for adults who would like to write in their latter years. These successful authors do so for money, because publishers and the book-buying public do not reward them sufficiently. I am in sympathy, of course, having just made minus \$400 from the sale of the first 1000 copies of a text book. However that may be, there seems to be an objection to people trying to write when they are not expert, though no-one minds amateur efforts at pottery or watercolour or music. Perhaps it is that published writers can voice their irritation, usually in the book review columns. V.S. Naipaul is reported to have said of courses he ran, '...bogus courses in bogus writing. I would take poison rather than do this for a living' (Burn 1994). The writers in these writing groups, whether in community and neighbourhood houses, adult education colleges or University of the Third Age, are almost all women, and perhaps that also has something to do with it.

The mistake is to assume that creative writing courses aim to produce publishable writing. Moxley (1989) sums up the changing attitudes:

The growing popularity of these programs now threatens the elitist assumption that only those students who clearly possess the ability and desire to succeed as professional writers should enroll in creative writing workshops... Some students... are possessed by a need to write, a need to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences... However, many... wish... to learn more about who they are and what they can do. (Moxley, xii)

Smith (1981) adds 'shaping reality', 'self-discovery', 'self-creation', and expressing 'ideas, actions, beliefs, dissent, taste, tolerance, beauty, and knowledge' (Moxley, xiii).

The history of writing groups for inexperienced writers has been covered in America by Ruggles Gere (1987), though her account deals mainly with those established to either educate the working class, or to empower them politically by making them literate - particularly women. Manheimer et al (1995) document exhaustively the history of research, programs and policies related to older adult education in America, the goals being:

- reducing isolation, depression, boredom and intellectual decline, which many assume goes with growing older, and, particularly for women, being alone;
- keeping them mixing with the young, which many assume they wish to do, 'viewing later life as a special time for unique learning needs and desires that will help older individuals to become "self-actualized"... to regarding education in later life as releasing hidden potential and creativity.' (13)

Perhaps a more positive view of those who are beginning to write at an older age is contained in McClusky's (1990) 'untapped creativity waiting to be released; a passion for knowledge triggered by new-found leisure; a desire to make their resourcefulness available to their communities.'

When you talk to those on the brink of retirement, one thing they fear most is the loss of their intellectual powers or senility. Manheimer quotes 'research showing that there are fewer incidences of Alzheimer's Disease among better-educated people and among those who continue to learn.' (26) So people are heartened when they hear from Bates (1989) that 'according to the Guinness Book of Records, the oldest author in the world was Alice Pollock, whose

*Portrait of my Victorian Youth* was published in 1971, when she was 102 years old.' (138) This also encourages women who have long wanted to write but either have not had the time before they retire either from work or housekeeping for a family, and remain hopeful of publication. Elizabeth Jolly and Olga Masters published late in life but had been writing for many years. But Bates adds the following:

Sometimes people who have never written until mid-life have often been prompted to do so as a result of personal tragedy... [e.g.] Anne-Marie Mykyta with *It's a Long Way to Truro* (McPhee Gribble, 1981), about her daughter's murder. Ellen Newton was in her eighties, ill, and had been shut away in a nursing home for seven years when she started writing a diary... *This Bed My Centre* (McPhee Gribble, 1979) was the result; she moved out of the home into a flat. (Bates, 140)

Edna Ryan, a trade union administrator who left school at the age of fifteen, began writing after fifty, and 'at the age of eighty-three she was preparing notes for a third book on the effects of ageing.' (Bates, 140)

Notice that these are all women, and Manheimer et al (1995) note that the majority of those taking part in older age education programs are women, and that most of these had an above-average level of education and were white.

America has a wealth of organisations for older adults' intellectual life, including Elderhostel and the LRIs (Learning in Retirement Institutes), as well as Centres for Lifelong Learning in many universities. There are also bodies which are community-based, consumer- or learner-oriented, and participant-directed, as is the U3A (University of the Third Age) here - which we have from France. Thus older adults run their own centres for intellectual activity.

Australia has University of the Third Age (U3A), Neighbourhood and Community House programs run by local councils, the Councils of Adult Education, and TAFE College courses. Funding is local, state and federal, and irregular. Some universities run extension courses or summer programs.

**The Project:** Who, then, are these women who begin to write creatively when they are over the age of 60? What started them on this course? What do they write? Why do they need groups, when writing is really a solitary activity? What do they want from the group?

**Writing Group types:** This project included writing groups, as follows:

*Daytime:*

- Neighbourhood Community House group with a tutor funded by the local council and the Writers Centre;
- University of the Third Age class, with occasional paid tutors or a member of the group leading;
- Council of Adult Education group charging a higher fee with a tutor;

*Evening:*

- group run by a private person supplementing their own income.
- local council group charging a higher fee which went to the tutor.

The night groups attracted younger writers, from school students upwards, with a higher percentage of men though still with a majority of older women. The daytime groups were nearly all retirees and mainly women, with the occasional unemployed younger person who did not stay long. All groups except the last continued on from year to year, with a core of long-term members.

**Writing Group organization:** The groups all ran according to a similar format:

- the tutor or leader set a topic, on which members could write if they wanted;
- members brought their work each week and took it in turns to hand copies round for criticism by the tutor and group members;
- some came regularly but wrote seldom;

- some entered for competitions or sent their work to magazines;
- some groups produced an anthology of their work;
- some tutors gave a lecture each week on diverse aspects of writing, such as grammar, poetic forms, dialogue, finding a publisher;
- some tutors analysed the work of famous writers as models; all had a social coffee break or went afterwards to coffee, a drink, or a meal.

This is typical organization for any creative writing course, including those run for undergraduate university courses in America. (Moxley, xv) **Observation of the Writing groups:** Most groups were observed for one session with the permission of the members. The whole session was audiotaped, or the discussion was noted. However, group tutors said that the knowledge that a researcher was present had an inhibiting effect, and discussion was 'normally more lively.' The researcher took part in two groups as a member, one with the agreement of the group and one for unobtrusive observation.

Observations indicated the following:

- The tutor or leader dominated the group, acting as organizer, teacher and critic. The groups expected this. As one woman said, 'The leader should control the group and make sure everyone gets a turn and that no-one dominates and any criticism is positive.'
- Certain writers were clearly respected by the group - both for the quality of their writing and in their criticisms of others' writing, while other weaker writers were treated kindly. The majority of the group were discriminating in their judgements.
- Some members turned up only when their own writing was to be discussed.
- Many did not bother to make comments on work that was passed round, either in discussion or in writing on the manuscripts to be returned to the author.
- Some did not hand in any writing to be discussed.
- Some did not return to the group if their writing was criticised.
- A minority produced work from the exercises or their own ideas every week.
- Two or three in each group had either won prizes or achieved publication for which they had been paid.

Observing the groups allowed for the distribution of the questionnaire, which, without introduction and explanation, may not have been accepted and completed.

**The questionnaire:** All the writers in the groups were given the questionnaire, though they were asked to note age group and gender - and name if they agreed to an interview. The main purpose was to identify women over age 60 for interview. The questionnaire provided basic information about their writing. An outline of results is in the appendix.

The following information from those who returned the questionnaires is of interest:

### ***1. Age and gender:***

Two-thirds of the writers were over age 60, and nine out of ten were female. This is in keeping with the American experience of participants in older adult education programs. (Manheimer et al, 1995)

## 2. *Work lives:*

Three-quarters of the women were full-time parents for a large part of their lives, although all but one worked for money at some stage, in the traditional areas - clerk, teacher, librarian, nurse. Although the questionnaire did not pinpoint this, the majority gained their work expertise in middle age. Manheimer et al (1995) note that the majority of those taking part in intellectual retirement education are already educated. The stories of two women who were not educated are told later on.

## 3. *Self as writer:*

- **Early perceptions:** A third saw themselves as writers before age 12, one-third in adolescence and a third after middle age. In childhood, encouragement came from parents, almost always the fathers of girls; however, one won a medal in primary school and her parents said she must have stolen it. In adolescence, an encouraging teacher was always mentioned. One woman discovered a talent while helping her daughter write a poem for homework.
- **First serious attempt to write:** Over half the women did not try to write creatively until middle age, often in response to boredom while with children, or an emotional crisis. 16% began with joining the writing group after age 60. One as a child, however, had a poem published in a newspaper and got into trouble for embarrassing the family.

## 4. *Their writing process:*

- **Writing place:** A third wrote in the living room, and a quarter in their bedroom. However, over a third had Virginia Woolf's 'room of one's own,' usually the bedroom of a child who had left home, or the spare room if they were alone in a flat. Several of the country women wrote in the kitchen, in the tradition of kitchen as living room.
- **Writing time:** One third wrote in the afternoon or evening 'after the jobs are done'; even when living alone, these women felt the need to do the housework first. Over a quarter, however, wrote early in the morning as professional writers say they do. A few, recently widowed or divorced, wrote during the night when sleepless and feeling most sad or alone.
- **Frequency:** Over a quarter wrote every day, as writers are told they should. Nearly half wrote weekly (as the groups usually met weekly). However, a third wrote 'irregularly' and needed an incentive to keep going.
- **Writing tools and technology:** Despite myths that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," over half wrote directly onto word processors or computers and loved them. Another third wrote drafts by hand and edited on their computers. A fifth wrote by hand only and a few still used a typewriter. Manheimer et al (1995) report research showing that 'the degree to which people believe they have control over their lives and intellectual functioning is associated with feelings of competence and gender equity of computer use and skill' (Jay & Willis, 1992), and 'Women are not more technophobic than men. Older people are not more technophobic than younger people.' (Rosen & Weil, 1994) So it is not surprising that these intelligent, competent, older, female writers used computers comfortably.

### 5. Preferred genres:

Poetry was the favourite for nearly half the writers, and many had poems in group-published anthologies. Poetry is more emotional, and shorter, so perhaps it is not surprising that for these later starters, it was the preferred genre. Many wrote short stories, as well, but less often. A quarter were long letter writers or kept a diary, seen to be essentially female occupations. Some, whose childhoods had been particularly happy or traumatic, concentrated on autobiographical writing aiming at publication. These last had an urgent need for others to witness either their gratitude to a parent now dead, or their anger.

### 6. Publication and competitions:

Confidence to test the market was reasonably high, and often the result of group support. Nearly two-thirds had entered competitions and a quarter had won or been short-listed. Just over half had sent work for publication and over a third had been published. These included self-publishing and group publications, from which no money was earned. One man said he saw no point in writing if it was not for money, quoting Dr. Johnson. The questionnaire should perhaps have distinguished between paid publication and publication in non-paying magazines and booklets.

### 7. Reactions to the writing group:

A list was given of attitudes and reactions to the group. Members were asked to mark those which applied to them.

- **Reasons for joining the group:** Almost everyone agreed that it was because *they enjoyed the discussion*. Obviously, anyone who did not, would not continue with the group. Some certainly left after a few visits. Four out of five said *they liked others to read or hear their writing*, and the discipline of the group gave them *an incentive to write*.
- **Discomfort in the group:** Over half felt they *did not write as much* as the others, or lacked incentive. A third thought they *did not write as well* as others. Only a handful said they did not produce their writing for *fear of rejection*; such people would be unlikely to stay, but this group did, presumably, want to be heard - and accepted.
- **The value of the group:** Three quarters came to the group to get *inspiration* and ideas. Two thirds looked for *feedback* of any kind, or from those whose writing they admired, or from the tutor. Two-thirds also came to *hear and read what others wrote*.

However, they were far less enthusiastic about giving feedback to others. Only a third liked to listen to the tutor critiquing another writer's work; a third were interested in discussing the work of established authors. And only a quarter liked giving their fellow group members any feedback. This last is interesting and perhaps reflects the egotism necessary if one is to write. They wanted feedback from the rest of the group, but were not very interested in providing the same for others. I noticed this particularly when observing groups in action, and more so when I took part in a group for some months. The same few bothered to read, comment on and write critiques of the work of others. Perhaps it is that critiquing the work of others is a different skill and one that has to be learned. Certainly in an academic class I run on writing, the assignment which requires a critique of another piece of writing is often disorganised and poorly written, while the case study is coherent and the creative writing excellent.

**The interviews:** About half of those who answered the questionnaire agreed to be interviewed. Writers who go to workshops can be expected to like to talk about their writing. I visited them at their homes, for up to two hours, and audiotaped the interviews. I also collected examples of their writing.

Rather than draw information from the interviews for classification, I have decided to produce a series of portraits of the women who come to the workshops.

M, for instance, was a retired secondary art teacher: 'I really regard myself as a member of the art world, not the writing world,' but she said, 'Writing has always been a pleasure to me. I was always good at English.' She took up writing when her husband died and she had a chance of living near her married daughter. 'Therefore it was a new life in every possible direction and I felt I had to have something of my own contact with people. Physically I find it difficult to get out, I can't drive in the city now my eyesight is not good enough. Therefore I had a look around and the Neighbourhood Houses are excellent, I think. I find the people very congenial, they are very varied, it is an entertainment in itself. There is a great mystery about a class like that. You go to the class, and you are what you are

in the class. And you produce work which reveals your innermost feelings and attitudes. And yet you do not know where the other people live or anything about their families.'

She said she did not write much: 'Some people only do one thing a term, particularly the older lot. I am more interested in what goes on'. But then she produced some of her writing. 'I like problems, I like putting forward a social or even a political or a personal problem or complications and telling something around them and then coming to some sort of conclusion or not.' Language was important to her, as much as content: 'I am old fashioned in my style of writing. I can write in the post-modern style if I try, in a sort of version of it, but there is no point in someone like me doing it. For one thing I am too set and too old, and it is a pleasure for me to write English as it seems to come from the long history of language naturally through Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible.' She had written a story about a marriage celebrant, arising from her objection to the loss of the original wording: 'the appalling sentimental imitation of the prayer book; it is not the fact that it has to do with Christianity - it is purely language'.

She also wrote of the past. She said, of a poem about the cinema: 'I came to write it because I saw something on the television about Chaplin. It reminded me - I felt strongly about those days when you paid sixpence to go to afternoon cinemas. I remember it vividly. It's the usual story of old people remembering their youth. I suppose for most people in the class it is their favourite subject. On the other hand, it's interesting for me to write and the others liked it too'.

M is typical in many ways. She is well educated, was always a good writer, but began writing creatively only after retirement and widowed, coming to the group to escape loneliness and to find social and intellectual stimulation. However, when she began writing, she found using language, the expression of ideas and the recollection of the past all rewarding, as well as being heard - 'the others liked it too.' But as far as publication went, she said, 'I am not typical of anybody going to a writing group because they hope to be published. I am not interested in that. I am the only one in the class. I am past the stage of ever expecting it. It does not interest me really because I know all the palaver of getting it done and so on and so forth.' Which sounded as if she was interested.

For this section, I will focus on this desire to write about the past, often to protest about parents, long dead. C was over eighty years: 'And then I wrote something about my mother for the group which was quite courageous. And I thought I was being very hard on her, but they said I was not being nearly hard enough. I thought I was being very self-righteous, but they said "No, no!" And then they said I should put together all the bits I had written about my mother. So I have come to the idea now that I can write a whole book about my mother, and that will be my life, certainly until well after I was married.'

'Courageous' is the word C uses. Saying these things after more than half a century of silent resentment, is both courageous and a relief for many of these women. 'I suppose it is a case of giving yourself away in a way. It makes you feel too vulnerable. Public property - your feelings, your innermost feelings become public property, things that you would normally be guarded about,' J said. And yet she read her poetry to church groups: 'A number of people came up and said, "Oh, you were game to read that!" or "Thank you for reading that - I can identify with that." You hadn't thought of it that way, that you're not only giving your own feelings away, but you may identify with other people.'

A woman in her seventies wrote of a history of child rape, and actually achieved publication in *Quadrant*. Another wrote of the orphanage where her mother had put her and of sexual abuse: 'The reader may know what's coming, without the child knowing. I do everything through the eyes of the child.' For both, the writing had been both painful and a release. 'I feel that while I'm alive, the history ought to be recorded, but I want people to be able to feel it,' J said. But the most painful part is the portrait she gives of her mother: 'It's also about a relationship between a mother and daughter and that's really what usually fascinates people'.

She belongs to another group, those women who had little education and after raising a family, feeling inadequate with their own children, looked for more. She decided on night classes at a local school: 'I thought at least I might not make a fool of myself, but I was still feeling very inadequate about my spelling, so I actually went and had some private lessons before I enrolled, but when they found out what I was paying, they said, "Don't waste your money. Just come here." So I did and I just found that as you kept writing, your spelling automatically improved. That it was really just a lack of having the opportunities to write.' She reached university entrance, but decided to do what she now wanted: 'I started to go to creative writer's group and this is how I started creative writing'.

**Conclusion:** What impresses is the honesty of these women who have begun to write so late. Or perhaps it is that they are so skilled in language and in the manipulation of words to express emotion, that they come across as they want to: thoughtful, articulate, passionate and often gently humorous. They have strong views on language and literature, and on the value of the written word to clarify, document and preserve their experience, often painful, of life. Whether they are writing on their uneasiness with the way the world is now, or sorting and clearing their memories of the past, they use writing - and the opportunity to read to the group, and for some, to publish - as a way of achieving some satisfaction in their present lives. Growing old and living alone, or even living with a spouse who is no longer sympathetic, is not necessarily unsatisfying. Some look back at their childhood, their youth, or their early marriages and find the present less painful. 'Yes, it's lonely at times, but...' some say. They do depend on their

adult children, but apologetically. And when they cannot depend on them, they apologise for even expecting it: 'Of course, she's so busy with her job and her children.' But they do like to talk about their middle-aged children's successes. Having had children, wherever they are now, is so important. But it is their own childhoods that they write about, not their children. 'I haven't written much about my children,' JT said. 'I wrote one about my children and gave them each a copy in high seriousness and my youngest said, "Another of Mum's soppy poems".' And one is sharply aware that it is these children, so loved and so depended on, that may in their turn write about their mothers, perhaps with the same pain.

The writing groups offer much more than an occupation to fill retirement, as those who stay with them discover about themselves and about the others in the group.

*Molly Travers lectures in Creative Writing at La Trobe University.*

## Letters and Debate

Letter from Lorraine West

Rae Luckie, *Turning Memories into Memoirs*

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## Appendix

- Age range:
    - Under 50 - 16%;
    - 50-59 - 20%;
    - over age 60 - 64%.
  - Gender:
    - Female - 88%;
    - male 12%.
  - Occupation (all included several occupations during their lives):
    - full-time parent for part of their lives: 76%
    - secondary teacher: 24%
    - secretary/clerk: 20%
    - saleswoman: 16%.
    - others included: librarian, pharmacist (female), social worker (male), tailoress, farmer's assistant (as wife), and artist, singer and poet (from which each earned some money).
- Only two of the women over age 60 considered that they had followed a

serious career which was suspended while their children were young, these being the pharmacist and the artist/teacher; no others said that they had wished for a career other than wife, mother and some paid work when it was needed.

- First idea of being a writer:
  - up to age 12: 32%
  - during adolescence and young adulthood: 32%
  - in middle age: 24%
  - over age 60: 8%..
- First serious attempt at being a writer:
  - 20s and 30s: 20%
  - middle age: 56%
  - over 60: 16%.
- Place where writing is done:
  - kitchen: 20% (all country women).
  - bedroom: 24%
  - own study: 28% (child's, now left home; or the second bedroom)
  - sitting, dining or family room: 36%
- Time of day when writing is done:
  - morning: 28%
  - afternoon or evening: 36%
  - during the night: 12%
  - weekends, any time etc: 12%
- How often they write:
  - daily: 28%
  - weekly: 40%
  - irregularly: 32%.
- Writing tools:
  - typewriter: 8%
  - handwriting: 20%
  - hand-written drafter, then computer: 36%
  - directly on to computer: 52%
- Preferred genres:
  - poetry: 48%
  - stories: 40%
  - articles: 16%
  - long letters: 28%
  - diary: 24%
  - autobiography: 12%
- Competitions and publication:
  - entered competitions: 60%.
  - won competitions: 24%
  - sent for publication: 52%
  - accepted for publication: 36%
- Reasons for joining writing groups:
  - Enjoyment of discussion: 92%
  - Liking others to hear or read their writing: 82%
  - Incentive to write more often: 82%



- Lack of confidence in the group:
  - I do not write as well as the other: 32%
  - I do not write as much as the others: 52%
  - I fear my writing will be rejected so don't send it out or read to the group: 12%
- The value of the group:
  - Inspiration to write: 72%
  - Getting feedback of any kind on my writing: 68%
  - Feedback from those whose writing I admire: 64%
  - Feedback on my writing from the tutor: 60%
  - Listening to and reading what others in the group write: 60%
  - Feedback on other group members' writing from the tutor: 36%
  - Discussing the writing of established authors: 32%
  - Giving feedback on what others in the group write: 24%

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