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Critical Geragogy: Situating Theory in Practice

Abstract: The goal of this article is to document the planning and coordination of an older adult learning program premised upon the tenets of critical geragogy. The learning program took place in Dingli, Malta, and was called "Age-friendly communities: the case of Dingli." Its purpose was to open spaces for older learners to participate in the development of a curriculum that makes our experiences of power, privilege, and discrimination explicit. Its objectives were twofold: to what extent does critical geragogy raise older learners' consciousness of their role in the society and hence unlock older adults' critical imagination? And secondly, to what extent does critical geragogy lead older learners to engage in a social activity that has the potential to change their lives for the better? As far as this learning program is concerned, there is no doubt about the potential of critical geragogy to help older learners locate their positions and voices, as well as to create spaces for resistance, subversions and new possibilities. As the direct consequence of this course, a small group of older Maltese elders currently are more knowledgeable about the structural issues hindering the establishment of age-friendly policies. Yet, critical geragogy's promise to lead older adults from "reflection" to "action" seems more problematic and difficult to achieve in practice. On the basis of this article's data, it seems that as individuals grow older, they tend to experience a shift from material to transcendent values which eclipses their interest in political commitments.

Keywords: critical geragogy, educational gerontology, older adult education, late-life learning

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Introduction

Learning is a lifelong activity and older learners are not so distinctive to merit a special learning methodology. However, the fact is that older adults inhabit physical, emotional, and social realms that are different from those experienced by middle-aged peers. This has influenced educators to recommend teaching strategies that promise to facilitate the learning experiences of adults who are generally post-work and post-family, and sometimes, frail and with intellectual limitations. Indeed, geragogy has become a well-known term in adult and third-age learning, and refers to those teaching and instructional strategies that target learners aged 50 years and older (Findsen and Formosa 2011). Whilst such writings are welcome, as they draw attention to the uniqueness of older adult learning, most of the literature on geragogy is characterised by various limitations and inadequacies. First, most studies focused on the learning interests of middle-class, highly educated, and healthy adults from dominant ethnic populations. Second, most literature focused on the positive effects of older adult learning and rarely discussed its potential negative effects. Finally, initiatives do not offer different perspectives on older adults' experiences of learning despite the fact that many older adults tend to experience oppressive and discriminatory conditions due to age, class, gender, and/or ethnicity. Seeking to overturn such lacunae, critical educators found inspiration in Paulo Freire's (1972, 1985) critical philosophy to reject the dominant functionalist paradigm in older adult learning to embed the field in a socio-political framework whose key task is to awaken learners' critical consciousness (e.g., Glendenning and Battersby 1990; Findsen 2007; Formosa 2002). In their efforts to bridge "theory" with "action," critical gerontologists call for educators to embed their learning programs in a critical geragogical framework that provides older persons with opportunities for a self-conscious critique of their lives and experiences, as well as possibilities for critical action. Hence, critical geragogy follows a radical agenda in that it demands older adult learning to include a concern for transforming the conditions that promote the disempowerment of older people, and for unsettling learners' assumptions that they cannot effect social change.

The planning and writing of this research article emerged from a concern that, in academia, the promise and potential of critical geragogy remain ambiguous. First, critical geragogy holds a Janus-faced character as it was both acclaimed and dismissed by older adult educators. Whilst critical educators argue that critical geragogy embraces a self-help culture, leading towards more decentralised and autonomous older adult education as power is shifted from teachers to older learners, others point out that one cannot assume that older learners are necessarily motivated by an emancipatory critique, and the practice of critical geragogy is simply to impose a new kind of ideological constraint. Secondly, the field of educational gerontology is still unclear as regards the possibilities and limitations of critical geragogy. The term "educational gerontology" refers to the integration of the institutions and processes of education concerned with the knowledge of human ageing and the needs of older people. Hence, it must be distinguished from older adult learning, which reflects the process in which older adults, individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounters and then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their ways of knowing. Geragogy, on the other hand, refers to the management of teaching and learning strategies where the target audience is older people. Indeed, it is unfortunate that Battersby's 20-year-old statement still rings true in current times: "What is missing from the literature in educational gerontology, and in philosophising about the competing paradigms in the field are narratives from educators working with older adults, reflecting upon the appropriateness of the content, the strategies and the social and political contexts of education in later life." (Battersby 1993, p. 22)

Keeping the above issues in mind, the goal of this article was to document a learning program that evaluates the potential of the critical geragogical framework. Its aim was to report upon the outcome of a learning program that followed the analytical tenets of critical geragogy, focusing especially on feedback generated by the learners, as well as the program's overall successes and failures. In this respect, the article's objectives are best understood by posing two key questions: First, to what extent does critical geragogy raise older learners' consciousness about their role in society, and hence unlocks older adults' critical imagination? And secondly, to what extent does critical geragogy lead older learners to engage in social activity that has the potential to change their lives for the better? This research article includes five sections. Whilst the first delineates the genesis and development of geragogy, the second part presents an overview of the critical strands in the field of geragogy. A brief discussion of the methodological implications that guided the action research project is found in the third section. Whilst the fourth section focuses on the planning and establishment of a critical curriculum framework, the fifth part overviews that learning dynamics that characterised the actual learning sessions. The sixth section documents the perceived successes and failures of the learning program.

Geragogy

Although the concept of older adult education was propounded by Comenius in Czechia as early as the 16th century, the term "geragogy" only achieved prominence after appearing in Lebel's (1978) article in "Lifelong learning: The adult years". Lebel was the first writer to advocate the term "geragogy" as a description of an educational theory for older learners. Some years later, Yeo (1982) advanced the term "eldergogy" without, unfortunately, developing any educational theory. A fuller attempt at expanding the notion of geragogy emerged in John's "Teaching and loving the elderly" (1983) and "Geragogy: A theory for teaching the elderly" (1988). John's approach, however, is distinctly a "top-bottom" one where teachers are responsible for meeting older adults' need for stimulation. Teachers, for instance, are expected to assign homework that – amongst other tasks – request learners to measure pens and pill bottles, and name body parts.

Recent years witnessed other attempts at developing and expanding the concept of geragogy. For instance, a number of academics (Baringer et al. 2004; Peterson 1983; Van Wynen 2001), researching older adult learning, turned their attention to how practioners in the field may facilitate the smooth transition of older adults back into a classroom setting after an absence of sometimes more than five decades. Baringer and colleagues pointed out that older adults returning to the classroom generally face a challenge to their independence and control, since "individuals grow to be independent in life, but as adults return to the classroom, they may fall back on the educational experience of their youth" (Baringer et al. 2004, p. 550). Wlodkowski (1999) reports that older adults thrive in learning experiences where there is a positive rapport between teacher and learner, as this setting provides a feeling of social inclusion that generates much motivation and enthusiasm and a sense of community. Moreover, if course material is to be successful in engaging older learners' imagination, it must be presented in a way that reflects the "real world," which is very popular with older learners, rather than some abstract component, (Peterson 1983). Keeping in mind that older adults tend to suffer from visual problems as well as other general health issues, older learners develop a preference for auditory rather than visual learning (Van Wynen 2001).

As far as teaching styles are concerned, the consensus is that peer teaching is the most effective method in late-life learning. Peer teaching is a learner-centred activity because members of educational communities plan and facilitate learning opportunities for one other. Peers will plan and facilitate courses of study and be able to learn from the planning and facilitation of other members of the community: "peer teaching is a rare and provocative model of education in which, in the morning, a person may teach a class for her peers, and that same afternoon have one of her students become her teacher" (Brady et al. 2003, p. 853). Recently, there was an emergent body of literature focusing on peer teaching in Lifelong Learning Institutes (Erickson 2009). Originally called Institutes for Learning in Retirement, Lifelong Learning Institutes constitute college and university-based programs that arose in the United States of America during the mid-1970s to

organise learning opportunities for older persons (Findsen and Formosa, 2011). An early study by Clark et al. (1997) examined 42 course moderators and their perceived roles, and found that a moderator who was overly didactic risked causing passivity among the learners. Brady et al.'s (2003) work reported several distinct challenges such as managing the wide range of older students' educational backgrounds and reasons for attending, adjusting to learners' physical deficits associated with aging, such as hearing, vision, or memory loss, and perhaps the most fundamental challenge, determining a mission for teaching. Nevertheless, surveys clearly indicated that the peer teaching experience is an overwhelmingly positive one, with peer teachers noting many rewards such as personal satisfaction and intellectual stimulation (Simson et al. 2001). Studies also examined several peer teaching methods that ranged from group discussion to a mixed-method approach in which teachers employed a combination of approaches they deemed appropriate. Brady and colleagues (2003) report that a mixed-method approach is the most frequently employed strategy among peer teachers because it allows them to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of older learners.

Without doubt, the extensive character of literature focusing on geragogy is promising since older adults are overlooked in mainstream discussions on teaching strategies. Yet, this corpus of literature has been taken to task for its lack of critical imagination (Formosa 2002, 2005). Most writings perceive older people as a relatively homogenous group, embrace the psychological deficit model of older adult learning, and assume that any type of education improves the quality of life of older persons. Moreover, one finds no attempt to problematise the fact that late-life education is driven largely by middle-class notions of what constitutes education. Indeed, only exceptional articles adopted a critical lens towards the geragogical field that asks: whose interests are really being served? Who controls the learning process? Why is education "good" for people? How is the quality of life enhanced by education? Seeking a response to these enquiries, critical educators embarked on a quest to develop a rationale as well as a practice-oriented front for older adult learning that is sympathetic to the constraints of social structure and that accepts that the educational process occurs within particular social, economic, and political contexts. This issue is the subject of the following section.

Critical geragogy

The concept of critical geragogy developed as part of the field of critical educational gerontology (CEG) which, as its name implies, has its origins in that interface between critical gerontology and critical education (Formosa 2011). Inspired by Freire's (1972) philosophy of education, Glendenning and Battersby (1990) argued that a critical epistemology in late-life education denies that education for older persons is a neutral, uncontested enterprise, whilst developing "the notion of praxis" to establish a "critical gerogogy" which leads older people to greater control over their own knowledge and thoughts. CEG, hence, distances late-life learning from patronising and condescending teaching practices, and is

closer to a liberatory agenda premised upon the Freirean strategies of "authentic dialogue" and "problem-posing" (Freire 1972).

The preoccupation of CEG with critical geragogy can be traced to the late 1980s when Battersby (1987) called for a radical vision for the practice of geragogy, one that conceptualises teaching and learning as a collective and negotiated enterprise. Battersby defined "critical" geragogy as "a liberating and transforming notion which endorses principles of collectivity and dialogue central to learning and teaching" (ibid., p. 7). He asserted that geragogy assumes the status, not of an imposed set of prescriptive guidelines and strategies, but of a concept that conceptualises learning as a collective and negotiated enterprise amongst older adults. In Glendenning and Battersby's words, "central to critical geragogy would be its attempt to unsettle the complacency that older people feel about social conditions in the community and wider society and about their conviction that they are too insignificant and powerless to effect any serious change. Critical geragogy would also recognise that education is not a neutral enterprise and that it involves moral and ethical dimensions." (Glendenning and Battersby 1990, p. 228) Inspired by such views, Formosa (2002) argued that critical geragogy should (1) be directed by a political rationale to highlight its commitment to the transformation of ageist social structures, (2) employs a communal approach towards the transformation of the ageist world (even despite the diverse heterogeneity of older persons), (3) refutes the myth that any type of education empowers older people, and be grounded on liberatory education, (4) realises that older adult educators are not just facilitators but that they must be committed to the sufferings of older people, (5) occurs not only within the walls of the older adult learning programs, but reaches out to all distinct segments of older persons, and (6) embraces a self-help culture towards a more decentralised and autonomous learning experience as power is shifted to older learners. In other words, proponents of critical geragogy invoke a reflective stance whereby the voices of learners and facilitators are given an opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness of the content, strategies, and social and political contexts of learning in later life. To this effect, Battersby (1993) suggested four questions that have the potential to help educators develop narratives about their own practices, namely (1) describe – what do I do? (2) inform – how am I informed in what I do? (3) confront – why do I do the things I do? and (4) reconstruct – how might I do things differently?

Critical geragogy was a welcome addition to the sphere of adult education. However, not all feedback has been positive and, as one would expect, critical geragogy has not escaped criticism. For instance, A. Withnall (2010) argued that whilst critical geragogy is fettered by practical problems since we simply cannot assume those who teach older people are unfettered by ideological beliefs, critical teaching also runs the risk of substituting a partial view of human experience since emancipation itself may become a new form of oppression. One finds two research narratives of educators who coordinated older learning programs guided by the critical geragogical framework. One is E. F. Nye's (1998) reflective account of a seniors learning program on writing skills which included able-bodied learners ranging in age from the late fifties to the eighties. Although E. F. Nye pointed out

that the learning program was a success as far as self-disclosure and self-awareness are concerned, she stressed that it did not lead the learners to any levels of critical consciousness or social action. E. F. Nye concluded that "it would be a stretch of Freire's ideology to say that the seniors' writing was 'liberatory' [...] Freire may be more applicable in the school classroom than the senior center" (ibid. pp. 108–112). A second narrative is authored by Formosa (2005) who conducted learning sessions on elder abuse with older women. This venture produced more positive results as it was successful in engendering a normative and ethical engagement amongst learners, and in making them more aware of the hegemonic nature of daily "normal" lives. Many learners were delighted with the possibility of taking part in "student-led" and "bottom-up" educational classes: "Sharing my ideas and taking part in the development of the curriculum was very beneficial. I found that I count […] The great thing about this course was that I had a role in the construction of the agenda […] I feel very elated not because I have learnt but because I have learnt what I wanted to learn." (Older woman learner cited in Formosa 2005, p. 403)

However, even Formosa's undertaking faced insurmountable challenges. As E. F. Nye (1998) herself experienced, Formosa found it difficult to balance authority and democratic teaching, become accepted by the learners as "one of us," attract older adults from non-middle-class populations, and empathise with the various forms of discrimination faced by older persons.

It follows that – to date – literature on critical geragogy raises more questions than answers. There is clearly an unfinished debate on the expediency of critical geragogy, and a way must be found of beginning to establish a practical memorandum about transformational learning in later life that faces the difficult questions that are raised in a rigorous way. The field can no longer be satisfied to rely on anecdotal evidence and self-evaluation, as has been the case until now. It is precisely the scope of this paper to examine and develop the field of critical geragogy in greater detail by documenting the planning and coordination of an actual "critical" learning program. Such a research project would include the following objectives: What is the best way of negotiating the curriculum so that it strikes a good balance between the teachers' and learners' goals and objectives? To what extent do older learners drop self-awareness and self-consciousness in favour of more social and collective perspectives? How do older adults interact with contemporary political scenarios? What pitfalls are faced by the teacher in his or her attempt to facilitate better levels of critical action and reflection amongst older learners? Whilst the subsequent section provides an overview of the methodological underpinning guiding my research project, the remaining sections provide extensive commentary on the extent to which the learning program met and answered such critical objectives.

Methodology

The research project sought to meet its goal and objectives through the "case study" method.

In essence, this case study attempted to meet its aim and objectives by planning and carrying out an older learning program that is faithful to critical geragogy. I approached the Dingli Local Council with a detailed proposal. Dingli is a *rural* village on the west coast of Malta, with a population of 3,326 persons (November 2005). Malta is a micro-state located in the Mediterranean Sea with Sicily 93 km to the north, Africa 288 km to the south, Gibraltar 1,826 km to the west and Alexandria 1,510 km to the east. In 2010, the total population of Malta was 417,617 (National Office of Statistics 2011). Following some discussion on the objectives of the course, the council accepted the proposal and gave permission for the sessions to take place at their premises. The learning program was called "Age-friendly communities: the case of Dingli." An age-friendly community is a place where older people are actively involved, valued, and supported by infrastructure and services that effectively accommodate their needs (Alley et al. 2007). This choice of focus was decided on the basis that in a recent study on sustainable development focusing on Dingli, many residents highlighted their yearning to continue living in the village even when they become frailer and more dependent (Formosa 2010a). Hence, the choice of the name and the focus of the learning program was in line with critical geragogy since it provided older adults with the opportunity to look at Dingli from the inside-out, from self to society, and hence, towards collective action. The local council made a short announcement about the learning program, declaring that any resident older than 60 was welcome to attend. Nine persons registered and attended the course, with ages ranging from the early sixties to the mid- seventies. The learning sessions took place during November and December 2010. The data in this article is taken from the learning sessions, which were recorded, and feedback forms were distributed during the final session. Both the participants and the program were "representative" of the research problem under study. In addition to a healthy gender balance, all participants were aged 65 years plus, functionally mobile, and came from all walks of life. At the same time, programs tackling "age-friendly communities" are well suited to the implementation of critical initiatives in older adult learning considering that research documents clearly show how older people living in rural areas experience various forms of disadvantage (Mott 2008).

In planning the learning program, I engaged in two parallel strategies. On the one hand, I instructed myself in the area of "age-friendly communities," a task facilitated by the fact that my occupation is a senior lecturer in social gerontology at the European Centre for Gerontology, University of Malta. On the other hand, I engaged in a reflective exercise, contemplating upon the research queries that need to be made when situating critical geragogy in practice. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with all participants conducted at different intervals during the learning program, and an evaluation questionnaire which participants were asked to complete at the end of the program. On the one hand, in

semi-structured interviews, "questions are normally specified, but the interviewer is more free to probe beyond the answers in a manner which would often seem prejudicial to the aims of standardisation and comparability [...] [interviewees] answer more on their own terms than the standardised interview permits, but still provide a greater structure for comparability [of] the context of the interview is an important aspect of the process" (May 1993, p. 93). The interviewer is normally required to ask specific open-ended questions but is free to probe beyond them if necessary with the interview developing as a joint product of what the interviewees and interviewers talk with each other. The schedule for the semi-structured interviews is presented in Picture 1. On the other hand, the evaluation questionnaire sought to find out what the learners' levels of satisfaction with the facility, the instruction, the content, and the overall program were. Its schedule is presented in Picture 2.

To what extent did the program make you think critically about your surroundings?
To what extent did the program encourage critical thinking in the learning process?
To what extent did the program enable you to think more fairly?
To what extent did the program help you learn how to think from the point of view of those with whom you disagree?
To what extent did the program enable you to act upon the world so as to improve it?
To what extent was the learning program different from other learning programs you have previously attended?
Would you recommend this learning program to others?
Would you recommend the teaching and learning style to other education providers?
What aspects did you enjoy most in this learning program?
What aspects did you enjoy least in this learning prohramme?

Picture 1: Schedule for the semi-structured interviews

Participation reactions.
How do you feel about this program?
Are you satisfied with this program?
Teaching and facilitation.
How do you rate the facilitator?
What are the learning program's (i) strengths and (ii) weaknesses?
Outcomes.
What do you think are the results of this learning event?
What are the benefits of this learning program for participants?
Future programming.
Do you have any further educational needs that have not been met?
What other types of learning programs would you like to see organised in the future?

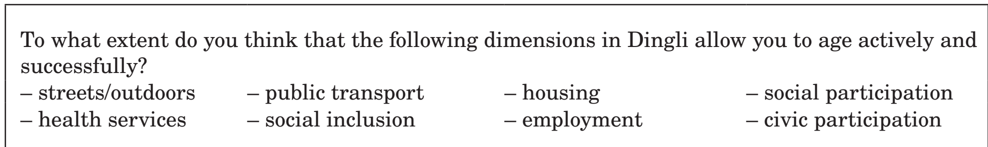
Picture 2: Schedule of the evaluation questionnaire

The data analysis followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) advice to assign codes, annotations, and memos to data, together with "pattern-matching" and "analytical induction." Whilst the former compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one if the patterns coincide where the results can help a case study strengthen its internal validity, analytical induction excludes any negative

cases by hypothesis reformulation or phenomenon redefinition until a universal relationship that fits the observed facts is established.

The planning stage

Critical geragogy views the curriculum as a powerful ideological tool. While mainstream educational gerontology defines "curricula" as both the sets of courses that make up the program of study and the content of those sets of courses, critical geragogy goes a step further by including the hidden and ideological constructions of curricula. Critical geragogy follows feminist pedagogy by viewing the "curricula" as "contested, complex and multidimensional" terrains that "offer partial and selected knowledge and serve the interest of particular and competing groups" (Burke and Jackson 2007, p. 166). On my part, I endeavored that "Age-friendly communities: the case of Dingli" would explain and dissect the age-friendly communities movement and its relationship to ageing and developmental disabilities to highlight major ageing initiatives and nuances in Dingli. I hoped that learners would have an opportunity to outline the existence and absence of innovative projects that demonstrate inclusive age-friendly principles, as well as to foster possibilities for the collection of ideas for developing inclusive age-friendly practices in Dingli. Finally, I endeavored that the information generated during the workshop would contribute to the policy of the Dingli Local Council and would be used to help create an Ageing Action Plan for this locality. Hence, my overall quest was to use the curriculum as a device to engage older learners in a reflection-action chain of command in the hope that the Dingli Local Council would embark on an age-friendly policy agenda which would, ultimately, serve to improve the quality of life of its ageing residents. To this effect, I posited a number of questions for participants taking part in the learning program (see Picture 3).


To what extent do you think that the following dimensions in Dingli allow you to age actively and successfully?

– streets/outdoors	– public transport	– housing	– social participation
– health services	– social inclusion	– employment	– civic participation

Picture 3: Original curriculum objectives prior to consultation with older adults

The first session of the learning program included a preliminary meeting which had the objective of setting the curriculum. This is because critical geragogy can only occur through a negotiated curriculum between learners and teachers which allows for learning outcomes to emerge so that learners and teachers engage together in new possibilities of knowledge. As was expected, learners showed both positive and hesitant feelings about my premised objectives. Whilst all welcomed my intent to research the various aspects related to an age-friendly community, which I highlighted in box 1, participants raised questions about the directness of the questions. Highlighting how such questions may restrict the discussion, they

voiced support for a more unregimented way of learning: "If, as you say, we are going to have an active part in the learning sessions, it is best if you give us more leeway as to what we wish to discuss and debate. If you give us specific topics in advance, we will be unable to – I am going to quote you now – to think outside of the box so as to see the work with our own eyes." (Peter)

Such assertions lend support to the potential of critical geragogy in ensuring that all learners are engaged in the learning development process, helping them to recognise their own voices, and locating strategies to meet their interests. Following much healthy debate, I took their cues on board and reconstructed my enquiries in wider and more uninhibited formats (see Picture 4).

> An age-friendly community is a community that enables older persons to live in security, maintain their health and participate fully in society. We are going to talk about many different aspects of the community, including the city environment, buildings, roads, and the different services and activities in the community. From your experiences as an older person, what are the positive and negative experiences of Dingli that show the ways in which the city is "age-friendly"? I want your suggestions on the ways to improve the "age-friendliness" of the village. There are no right or wrong answers. Every person's opinion is important.

Picture 4: Amended curriculum objectives following consultation with older learners

After the end of the first "consultation" meeting, I set out to plan the mode of delivering learning. Influenced by various literature on critical geragogy – especially Gladdish's (2010) advice for third-age learning, I planned that learning sessions were to be based upon the strategies of "group learning" and "open learning." Such approaches proved to be highly commendable in late-life learning as can be evidenced by the learners' feedback on the evaluation forms: "What I enjoyed most is that learning occurred in very different formats from what we usually experience. I learned by opening myself to others, by listening to what others had to say, and by giving my views on issues on which I had an opinion. Now I believe that you learn most by joining others in discussion." (Rita)

As the above excerpts show, the strategies of "group learning" and "open learning" allow older learners to manage their own learning, whilst embodying democratic practice and employing procedures that develop learners' capacity to become confident as both learners and citizens.

"And action!" Practicing critical geragogy

The learning sessions exemplified the great complexity of rural environments and the difficulties that arise as residents reach their later years. It was promising to note that rural localities have immense potential to lead older residents towards improved levels of active, successful and productive ageing. Learners highlighted how the community comes together by providing volunteer services that meet older residents' needs, and how they are often strongly attached to their surroundings and will only accept to relocate as a last resort: "I have lived in Dingli all my life.

I would feel uncomfortable elsewhere. My desire is to continue living here, close to my friends, neighbors, and family. The community is very strong in Dingli, we look for each other here, we feel safe here. The church is close to my home, I have everything I need here." (Rita)

However, the learning program also presented information about the complications of living in a rural environment such as limited access to formal care services, inadequate transport, a lack of medical facilities, and living a great distance from urban settings where most of the social events take place and health care services are located: "The lack of medical services is a problem. There are no dentists, podiatrists, or other specialist services here. One has to go to [Malta's capital city] to query about social services or pension entitlements. This is very time-consuming and uncomfortable. Public transport is not very punctual and it takes long to arrive anywhere from here." (George)

Emphasis was also put upon the problems faced by dependent older residents living in rural environments and how their difficulties affected their participation in the community. One key obstacle in this respect constituted the lack of respite for caregivers working with frail elders: "I am worried that when I get older and need help, I will not find any relatives willing to take care of me. Family carers in Dingli are very stressed and tired. There is no local respite program or any sheltered housing facilities. There is a need for a nursing home for older frail residents but there are no plans for such a venture at the moment." (Mary)

Inspired by the tenets of critical geragogy, the learning sessions were not just an opportunity to disseminate information on age-friendly policies, or for the learners to engage in mindless discussions, but – above all – to open new spaces for critical reflection and action. To my satisfaction, the debate led learners to agree how "age-unfriendly communities" are not natural affairs but only the result of policies that have created or maintain community characteristics unfavourable to the well-being of older adults and outdated norms and traditions that might be overcome by forward-thinking policies. For example, learners discussed how housing regulations impact the physical layout of a community and the types of residences available to its inhabitants, since most zoning policies reflect the priorities of earlier rather than contemporary decades. It was stressed that whilst past governments developed zoning regulations so as to separate commercial and residential districts, these regulations are presently contributing to the isolation of rural neighbourhoods and social exclusion of older adults. Similar success was achieved with respect to the issue of transportation policies, as learners aided each other in becoming aware of how this field is deeply intertwined with government policies due to subsidies that keep fuel prices low and failure to adequately account for the secondary environmental costs of automobile use. In the group's earnest desire to engage in critical action, learners constructed what they believed were the crucial components of an age-friendly society (Table 1).

Physical infrastructure ↑ ↓ Social environment		
	well-maintained outdoor spaces and buildings	consistent, efficient, reliable, and inexpensive public transport
	sufficient and affordable housing that caters for the needs of frail elders	community and personal health and social care services
	social and civic participation	lifelong learning
	outreach activities to reach isolated and excluded elders	flexible options for older volunteers and older workers

Table 1: Crucial components of an age-friendly society according to older learners

The table demonstrates that learners were concerned with issues that cut across both physical and social aspects of the environment. This goes hand-in-hand with an underlying assumption, now widely shared by policy-makers and planners, that an enabling social environment is just as important as material conditions in making communities age-friendly. Rather than focusing narrowly on technical or architectural guidelines or design specifications, learners stressed the critical role that social relations, like respect and inclusion, play in the enhancement of successful ageing. Emphasising social inclusion as one of the most important aspects of age-friendly communities, many learners specifically emphasised the importance of public attitudes and perceptions in affecting the well-being of older residents. As underlined by one participant, they regarded an age-friendly community as not just a space with a range of services, but also as a place that facilitates the participation and contributions of older people: “Having a person responsible for the improvement of the quality of life in Dingli misses the point. Our quality of life will not be improved if they pamper us with gifts and services. What we want is a greater level of involvement in community affairs. We must have a greater say in how we want to participate and contribute to society. This is what I understand by the term “age-friendly community.” (Rita)

Unfortunately, a proposal to present the above components to the Dingli Local Council as both a tool for self-assessment and a map for charting progress was unpopular amongst the learners. This venture had the potential to act as a kind of manifesto for the implementation of age-friendly policies in Dingli, whilst also serving to complete the “reflection-action” linkage that lies at the core of the critical geragogical framework. Whilst the learning body surpassed expectations as to their participation in critical reflection, they were less ready to initiate collective action that advocates for authorities to improve their application of age-friendly policies in Dingli. This was more or less expected since the above-average levels of deference –that is, an endorsement of a moral order that legitimises their own political, material, and social subordination – among residents in rural communities is well-documented (Formosa 2009). In rural communities, residents tend to hold conservative values and are far from earnest in engaging in any actions that may “rock the boat.” Nevertheless, as argued in the following section, such a failure to achieve praxis remains a disappointment.

Achievements and limitations

Looking back at particular instances of the learning sessions, it clearly ensues that a number of in-roads have been made in a terrain thoroughly dominated by traditional learning and teaching methods. Embedding the program in various values and humanist principles, the sessions proved to be a strong example of dialogic education. The program was successful in arousing students' curiosity as many were very enthusiastic to debate and participate in the discussions proposed. This was very beneficial to the older learners who, beforehand, were only accustomed to monologue forms of educational practices. The peppering of the learning style with a certain level of humour and verbal prose enabled the learners to speak in more or less informal language, hence, making use of their true cultural assets. Discussions were therefore not hindered by the use of elaborated language codes. On the contrary, the learning sessions were guided by the learners' true opinions on the issue of "age-friendly communities", the roots of the problems they were encountering, and how it was possible to overcome the obstacles that were hindering age-friendly policies. As the following excerpt demonstrates, the learning program was successful in enabling older adults to engage in critical reflection: "The best thing about this course was the teacher's role in helping us understand better how and why certain policies and not others are put in place. I never thought that some organisations have more power than others, and how, as a result, they succeed more than others to get their message across." (Silvana)

The re-negotiation of the pre-specified curriculum is another cause for celebration. As the consequence of such action, learners were allowed to inhabit a space for learning that provided a sense of new possibilities, a space that is open, creative and potentially transformative. Another positive outcome is that women and older adults coming from working-class backgrounds participated actively in the successful and collaborative negotiations. This is yet another achievement for the critical geragogical enterprise since, as Paechter (2004) reminds us, most educational curricula are inherently gendered and classed. Indeed, this is the case in most examples of late-life learning programs – especially the universities of the Third Age – where the curricula are firmly rooted in elite/male agendas developed by professional bodies usually employed in traditional university settings (Formosa 2010b, 2012). The possibility of having rapporteurs that addressed their own peers and even related their own personal suggestions served to make the learners aware that the division between "teacher" and "student" is blurred, whilst it also served to provide the opportunity for enhancing non-cognitive skills such as public-speaking. Indeed, the learning sessions were far from a one-way process – that is, from "teachers" to "students." This process provided me with the opportunity to learn about the older adults' values, customs, and knowledge. To my satisfaction, I also noted that with each session more questions on behalf of learners commenced with "why" rather than "what", as they became more interested in uncovering the hidden societal structures that gel society together. Indeed, by the end of the learning program the learning body accepted that learning is not simply acquiring unrelated bits of information. This achievement is not to be

understated considering that most, if not all, learning opportunities for adults in Dingli follow traditional (banking) methods of education where learning occurs in a one-way process of communication, from teacher to student, with no space for dialogic interventions. One augurs that in the foreseeable future the Dingli Local Council will coordinate "training the trainers" sessions that seek to sensitise adult educators to critical learning practices.

This is not, however, the same as saying that no problems were encountered and that everything was a resounding success. Some learners were – at least initially – clearly uncomfortable with the power being granted to them as they expected me to present them with the solution to how to render Dingli more age-friendly. It was evident that these learners equated learning with an authoritarian and omnipotent teacher, and it took much energy and time to convince them otherwise. Indeed, in many instances my efforts in helping learners to reflect on wider socio-economic and -political realities were met by what Shor and Freire (1987) call a "culture of silence." This was due to the fact that for so many years the learners had internalised the passive roles that "students" are expected to conform, with the result that they found it difficult to engage in critical reflection. Another obstacle to the goals of critical geragogy consisted of many learners having been quick to subscribe to the "blaming the victim" phenomenon. This was based upon their belief that the society is more or less just, and that difficult situations are the result of people's personal faults: "My only disagreement is that I still believe that people get the type of society they deserve. They elect the politicians, who are responsible for policies, and therefore, it is useless to complain. I also believe that older persons who are the risk-of-poverty could have worked harder and not squandered their money away." (Mary)

Challenging such mystifications was harder than envisaged as I was battling not just against past conditioning, but also against the present Maltese neo-colonial ethos. As the critical educator's role is to militate directly against the dispositions encouraged by mass culture and politics, the advances made in class were frequently nullified when learners re-immersed themselves in the dominant society. Hence, it was not unusual to find that learning had lost the critical skills acquired in previous settings. Most problematically, perhaps, was the fact that the learners did not proceed to radically change their lives with words, and the only "radical" changes that were observed were of a "personal" nature. Learners were not interested, and perhaps were even afraid, to set up a pressure group which would strive to compel the local council to instil more age-friendly measures in Dingli. My idea was for the learning body to author a manifesto for age-friendly living in Dingli. This manifesto would be presented to the Mayor to act as a catalyst for the implementation of further age-friendly policies in Dingli. However, this proposal was never popular amongst the learning body. Whilst they were very motivated to think critically, they were reluctant to take any action. Hence, no inroads were made with respect to my goal to enable them to think critically about one's political circumstance. Although some groups of senior citizens, such as the Raging Grannies (Sawchunk 2009), are attracted to a Freirean approach, it is difficult to superimpose a paradigm of compulsory revolution on older adults.

As one learner explained, one reason why a Freirean ideology may be unpopular with older adults is related to the specific stage of biopsychosocial development that characterised later life: "What's done is done! Our life has already been lived. It is no use trying to change the future. It is a lost cause because time is not on our side. It makes more sense to see what mistakes one made in the past can be salvaged and perhaps even be patched up. At our age, we live in our memories, not in the future." (Rita)

On a final note, critical geragogy is based upon the extent to which the educator empathises with the learning body. Yet, this is easier said than done. Although I succeeded in empathising with many older adults' everyday experiences in Dingli, my gender and generational habitus presented me with strong limitations. For instance, whilst I am a staunch environmentalist, most learners came from families with strong bird-trapping and -hunting cultures, and nowadays I am aware that the classroom is made up of a heterogonous set of values where consensus and reconciliation may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Conclusion

This piece should not be interpreted as an attempt to create new kinds of instrumental knowledge on critical geragogy, but only as an effort to reach a better understanding of the practicalities that manifest themselves in the running of a critical learning program. In many ways, this article is a continuation of my efforts to embed the field of older adult education in a critical perspective (Formosa 2000, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2010b, 2011, 2012). It is nothing more than an opportunity to continue supporting the development of educational programs that encourage active and participatory learning, so as to make programs of learning relevant to the lived experiences of learners, and that support older learners' ability to draw on and develop their accumulated knowledge. Taking a leaf out of feminist learning, my goal was to highlight the need for both educators and learners "to participate in the development of a curriculum which makes explicit the ways in which our experiences of power, privilege, and discrimination [...] affect our practice" (Burke and Jackson 2007, p. 166). As far as this learning program is concerned, this goal has been achieved with mixed success. On the one hand, there is no doubt as regards its achievement in inviting older adults to engage with the struggles, and find their positions and voices, as well as to create spaces for resistance, subversions and new possibilities. On the other hand, however, it is clear that critical geragogy's promise to lead older adults from "reflection" to "action" failed to materialise. Generally, older adults living in rural areas hold dispositions of deference, namely an endorsement of "a moral order which legitimises their own political, material, and social subordination" (Parkin 1971, p. 84). Whilst the learning program enabled learners to get a better grasp on their individual identity, as well as their personal relationship with contemporary socio-economic structures, what Hooks (1993, p. 147) calls an "identity in resistance" did not materialise. On the basis of this article's data, it seems that as individuals grow older they

experience "a shift in meta-perspective, from a material and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one" (Tornstam 1989, p. 60) which overshadows radical political commitments. One final issue regards the "external validity" of the results of the case study – in other words, the extent to which findings can be generalised to other settings. Yet, as Payne and Williams highlight (2005, pp. 295–296), "belief that one must choose between an 'interpretative sociology', which rejects all generalization, and a sociology dependent on total and axiomatic generalisations [...] is too simplistic" (ibid.).

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