PEER LEARNING: A POPULAR MODEL FOR SENIORS EDUCATION

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Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs) in North America are member-led organizations associated with colleges and universities. Many practice "peer learning," in which seniors share responsibility for class activities. At McGill ILR (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) they meet together in small study groups. Group leaders, called moderators, are members who volunteer to lead a group in a subject of their choice. In a self-evaluation of the McGill ILR program, the majority of participants reported enjoying learning and interacting socially with peers. They experienced intellectual stimulation and increased understanding of their area of study. The success of peer learning depends on the quality of the contributions of the moderator and fellow participants. Learning from the knowledge and experience of others, and participating in well-informed discussion, are valued above all else. Study-group activities may be research-, expression-, appreciation-, or experience-oriented. Moderators' roles differ according to personality, experience, and area of study. Peer learning is a recent trend in seniors programs and is used in a variety of contexts. It can happen whenever a small group of seniors choose to study a subject of common interest. In future, by using the Internet, even those who are housebound or live in isolated areas may participate.

The McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement (ILR), in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, is one of a growing number of North American Institutes for Learning in Retirement. Like many other ILRs it practices a concept that has become known as "peer learning," in which seniors share responsibility for the class activities. They meet in small groups of 7 to 20 to study a variety of subjects.

Everyone is expected to actively participate to some extent, contributing to the planning, presentation, and discussion of the material. In contrast to traditional courses there are no paid teachers. Members of the Institute volunteer to lead study groups informally in topics of their own choosing. At McGill ILR these group leaders are called moderators. The model encourages a meeting of peers, in which members both teach and learn from each other, exchanging ideas, knowledge, and experiences.

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The McGill ILR is a member-led organization. It is governed by a Council elected by the members, in partnership with the McGill Centre for Continuing Education. Members volunteer their time to work on various committees, taking responsibility for all aspects of the Institute. The Curriculum Committee plans the study group program. Each semester members submit proposals on topics they would like to moderate, and once the proposals are reviewed and accepted, a printed program with descriptions of the study groups is circulated to the membership.

The range and availability of topics reflect the rich and diverse talent of McGill ILR members. Subjects range from *Footnotes of Montreal History* to *Marco Polo and His Times* and from *A Century of Modern Verse to World of Opera*. During the registration period interest in the topic determines whether or not the group has the minimum seven participants required to proceed. Each semester only one or two groups are cancelled because of an insufficient number of registrants.

The McGill program has proved extremely popular, in spite of the many alternatives available to seniors in Montreal, including noncredit Liberal Arts and Language courses at McGill University. From an initial start with 15 study groups and 180 members in the Fall of 1989, McGill ILR has grown to a Fall program of 45 study groups and 580 members. Programs at other institutions, such as the University of Western Ontario and Northwestern University, Illinois, have experienced similar success. Success is measured not just in numbers, however, what is noteworthy is the seniors’ enthusiasm for their programs and their effort and commitment.

This article attempts to analyze why the peer learning model is so popular among seniors. We also take a look at how peer learning operates at McGill ILR. A better understanding of the learning process helps identify problems and generates ideas for improvement. We also look at the feasibility of using the model in different contexts, and why it has become a trend in seniors’ programs.

**SOURCES OF DATA**

An 18-month comprehensive evaluation project undertaken by McGill ILR in 1993, with support from Health Canada, provided an opportunity to, among other things, take a closer look at our learning model. A full description of the self-evaluation model developed has been published (Lusthaus, Browne, Clarke, & Fochs Heller, 1995). The findings reported here are based on focus groups held with moderators and a survey of members, conducted as part of this evaluation project.

In April 1994 five focus-group interviews were held involving 42
moderators. Each focus group had between 7 and 11 participants, led by a member of the Planning Committee. Discussion centered on the role of the moderators and how their study groups operate.

In December 1994 a survey was sent to 639 seniors who had enrolled at McGill ILR at some time in the preceding year. There were 315 responses, a 49.3% return rate. In addition a survey was sent to 418 former members who had not attended for at least a year, with 106 responses (25.4%). Among the many issues addressed were satisfaction with the learning experience and the benefits members perceive from participating in McGill ILR.

**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS**

Our survey results indicate a high level of satisfaction with the program, and written comments testified to how important the Institute is to many people. The vast majority, 84% of respondents, had not missed more than one class that semester. Some questions were designed to determine what members value most in their study groups and what factors they consider contribute most to their learning experience. What stands out from the responses is that the quality of the moderator and participants can "make or break" the group.

The greatest source of satisfaction for many is the interaction with other participants. One member wrote:

> New people, new ideas, participation all add to stimulation of the senses, necessary to aging persons.

The opportunity to participate in group discussions stimulates interest in learning and researching. The quality and characteristics of other participants was the single factor identified more than any other as particularly satisfying. The quality of the moderator also was identified as a primary source of satisfaction.

On the other hand, although most mentioned participants and moderators in a positive light, there also were many who identified them as the most disappointing aspects of the experience. Some respondents had been frustrated by other participants who did not make a valuable contribution, or by volunteers with inadequate moderating skills.

Fellow participants and moderators are as important to members as the curriculum content, as they determine the dynamics of the group and the quality of the learning that takes place. This accounts for some moderators' consistent popularity. Some have a loyal following and many people select study groups by moderator rather than topic.

An overwhelming majority of respondents reported experiencing the
benefits of "intellectual stimulation," "increased understanding of a field of study," and "social interaction with peers," factors acknowledged in the literature (Leptak, 1989) as motivating senior students. These ingredients are key to the recipe for enjoyment.

It has changed my whole attitude towards retirement—restored some of the "joie de vivre."

In our pilot survey, we asked what benefits people had experienced, but "enjoyment" was not on the list of choices. So many of those who answered the pilot survey added "enjoyment" in the "other" category that we added it to our list. In the final analysis of the survey "enjoyment" ranked higher than any other benefit. The self-evident sometimes is overlooked, for even a casual visitor can sense the enthusiasm and pleasure experienced at McGill ILR.

Many members mention that this informal setting contributes to their satisfaction. Learning in a relaxed atmosphere with peers and without the pressure of grades, mandatory papers, or examinations takes away the stress often experienced in the traditional classroom. The level of commitment and study is largely left to the individual's choosing.

I have a sense of comfort and belonging... The whole atmosphere is of learning without pressure in the historical setting of this university.

Freedom from any set curriculum or need for credit enables people to continue study of a favorite subject indefinitely. Some groups at McGill ILR, such as Chinese Civilization and Creative Writing, have been continuing since the Institute's inception 8 years ago, with the same nucleus of members. This not only enables people to develop a deeper knowledge of a favorite subject but also creates an environment in which long-lasting friendships develop. Furthermore, the entire study group benefits from the experienced members, who contribute so much and share in the leadership.

**PEER LEARNING IN ACTION**

**Types of Study Group**

In peer learning groups, members are encouraged to share and exchange personal experiences that enhance the subject being studied. However, groups differ according to their aims and their methods of "data-gathering." Some groups pursue an academic discipline, some are
writing groups, and others explore the arts. Although no two groups are the same and each has its own persona, it is helpful to use categories to understand differences and similarities. The type of study group can depend on how the moderator communicates his or her approach to the subject matter. Ideally there is an interactive collaboration between moderator and member–participant. Study groups involve participants in different ways. Techniques for gathering information usually are determined by the study material.

Data from the McGill ILR study showed that four types of study groups can be distinguished: research oriented, in which participants consult bodies of knowledge established by academic disciplines; expression oriented, in which participants communicate real or imaginary experiences by producing written texts; appreciation oriented, in which participants examine works of art, music, film, and literature to deepen their appreciation and enjoyment; and experience oriented, in which participants exchange personal experiences on a chosen topic.

Some subjects inherently are suited to one of these four approaches. Science groups usually are research oriented and creative writing groups expression oriented. However, many groups cut across these divisions. Area studies groups use techniques from more than one discipline, for example using art works to illustrate aspects of the culture under study in addition to research data. Subjects such as psychology, mythology, and religion may incorporate several different approaches, combining academic research, writing, art appreciation, and personal experience.

**Participant Involvement**

The nature of participation that takes place varies according to the type of study group and the approach taken by the moderator. As an educational method, discussion impels group members to participate and helps people learn (Brookfield, 1991; Vella, 1994). The more members are active in the discussions, the better the success of the peer learning session.

In one very popular group,

People come so that they can talk their hearts out and they come every time. It hinges on a theme supposedly, but they come to hear a story and they enjoy each other's stories. We always have more people in this group than we should have because people want to talk.

Discussion in a literature or a theatre group requires participants
to read the text outside the session then talk about it. The important thing to getting a group discussion going is getting everybody to feel free and relaxed. When it's going well people are not always speaking to the moderator, they're talking to somebody else. It's not a private side conversation, it's a dialogue going back and forth—an animated discussion.

During the focus groups, moderators spoke about various aspects of peer participation. They identified participatory discussion as when people take turns listening and speaking and there is an exchange of dialogue that respects each learner's point of view. In a productive exchange members state their positions, listen to others' replies, respond to those replies, and continue the process until consensus, closure, exhaustion, or a time limit is reached. Full participation in an environment in which seniors feel comfortable speaking out helps them hone the critical thinking that informs their values, beliefs, and actions. The sense of having one's unquestioned "given" challenged and of being shaken out of one's habitual ways of thinking are significant advantages of peer learning.

Presentations on a researched topic are another distinctive and prevalent type of participation at McGill ILR. The subject matter is distributed among group members by the moderator. In the first session, many moderators come with a suggested list of topics and a bibliography to discuss with the group and encourage participants to choose a topic for presentation at a later date. Everyone else is expected to research the subject prior to the scheduled presentation, so that informed discussion takes place. Some experienced members can be counted on to volunteer for the first few presentations so that those who do not feel confident learn from example. Of the survey respondents, 65% reported having made a presentation in their most recent course.

In a recent *McGill ILR Newsletter* article a moderator wrote of the benefits of making a presentation. He described how those who were initially reluctant to present find their enthusiasm for the subject builds up as they get involved in their project. They become fascinated with the subject and are led on to further reading and have fun doing the research. Preparing and delivering the presentation becomes a fulfilling and rewarding peer learning experience.

Nonetheless, some members are concerned that sometimes the presenter benefits much more than others and feel that participation improves if members are not required to present papers but are required to participate. At times, those listening to the presenter may sit back and expect to be entertained, which results in one-sided participation. A knowledgeable presenter may dominate the discourse,
unintentionally overwhelming participants with information and inhibiting further discussion.

There are other occasions on which the group is unable to prevent a participant from monopolizing the discussion. There may be participants who speak and leave no room for listeners to absorb their arguments; some even may become dogmatic and quarrelsome while defending their opinions. Discussion also becomes unproductive if uninformed participants arrive without having done research, resulting in an exchange that leaves learners too comfortable and confirms their prejudices.

A minority of members are passive participants who get satisfaction from listening to others and learning from the moderator. Some do not wish to study, read, or write in preparation for class or to take part in discussion. In some groups, this is not seen as a problem. There are music appreciation groups, for example, in which listening is a principal activity. In other groups moderators adjust their teaching style accordingly.

Some members never intend to participate in a presentation but are still greatly interested in subjects. Having 9 to 12 in a group as “presenters” is adequate.

However, some members expressed frustration at the lack of participation by some people, stating it was detrimental to the effective functioning of the group. Out of 39 moderators who replied to the survey, 9 reported having problems with members who do not fulfill their obligations as peer learners.

Too many are finding excuses not to produce work agreed to, leaving it up to the moderator to fill the void.

Members who do not benefit from participating drop out or decide not to come back. At McGill ILR approximately 28% do not come back each year. The survey of former members showed that although most dropped out for reasons unrelated to the program, one quarter of the respondents felt they were expected to do too much study and preparation. Along a similar vein, 32% said they preferred lecture-style courses.

I do not have the initiative at this time to write papers, therefore, I wish passively to acquire stimulating information (no fault of MILR) from someone who obviously is well informed.
For the majority of current McGill ILR members, however, involvement at many levels is important. Not only do members want to discuss and present, more than half (55%) find it important to have the opportunity to contribute to the study plan or reading list from the beginning, and moderators generally consult participants before finalizing the content of their study group.

**Role of the Moderator**

From the focus groups, we concluded that moderators exhibit three dominant roles:

- **Animator:** “I found that moderating in a subject I knew nothing about was more stimulating. We were all learning from scratch together.”

- **Teacher:** “I also teach, I’m not only an observer or one of the people in a peer class. Some things I know better than they do, I share it with them. Some things I learn from them, I’m very grateful.”

- **Organizer:** “I make one demand: The group sets the format and the format has changed every semester. It’s their group, I’m at their disposal, if they’re not participating, they get two hours of silence.”

This was substantiated in the survey that followed: 58% saw themselves as animators, 22% considered themselves teachers, and 20% regarded themselves primarily as organizers. In addition to these categories moderators described themselves as taking on a variety of roles: activator, catalyst, colearner, coordinator, facilitator, guide, motivator, policeman, referee, resource provider, stimulator, watchdog, weaver. Sometimes moderators find themselves playing additional roles in their study groups, such as arbitrator, social worker or therapist. Two moderators describe their roles as follows:

The ability to initiate discussion, to listen when somebody wants to say something, to walk the tightrope, to be prepared to impart the knowledge that you had to gain to be a moderator, and at the same time be really able to motivate people to participate.

I spend a certain amount of time trying to help us all become friends with one another, especially in bringing out our creativity. It’s so important that we can trust one another and we know each other by our first names. Though I may start out being a teacher the first time, I really try to get out of that role although I do have to bring things into focus at times.
The level of moderator expertise in the topic under study varies greatly. Out of 41 survey respondents 6 considered themselves experts in their fields; the majority (30) considered themselves more knowledgeable or experienced than others in the group. Five considered their knowledge to be on a par with other participants. Some examples range from an immunologist who leads a group titled *Immunology, Friend or Foe* to an engineer who leads a group on *Visitors to America before Columbus*.

Moderator style determines what goes on in each group. They may express passive, peer, or dominating forms of discourse. It was not possible to assume from the data whether a moderator's particular approach is determined by background expertise in the subject, length of time as a moderator, or natural aptitude for moderating a group. However, variations in moderator styles are connected to how moderators perceive their role within the group.

Some moderators focus their attention around the participants; others around the subject of study. Some moderators lean towards a more didactic approach, others to a more participatory approach. The balance is the moderator who is a colearner, a guide, an *amateur* (in the French sense of the word) who awakens a passion for learning a subject in collaboration with the group.

Whatever the style or expertise of the moderator, the success of the group is largely dependent on his or her leadership skills. One group which studies current events has consistently attracted active participants who make high-quality presentations. This moderator provides a well-planned study outline and gives clear guidelines, giving participants the opportunity to choose their area of study. In contrast, a moderator of a creative writing group is equally successful in getting everyone involved, although his style is more informal. Both combine the roles of animator and organizer and each exhibits strong leadership qualities even though their styles are quite different. In cases in which leadership is weak, dynamic group members usually come forward to compensate and make the study group work.

**ACCESSIBILITY**

The McGill ILR attracts many people who are retired from executive, professional, or management positions and who are therefore used to assuming leadership roles. It has never been difficult to find enough moderators, and most members are accustomed to contributing to discussion and taking responsibility for their own learning. On the whole,
people who choose to join are those who feel comfortable in this kind of environment.

More than half the members of McGill ILR have a university degree, and many others have college or vocational training. However, the Institute is open to people of all socio-economic backgrounds. A substantial minority have no previous higher education, and they also feel welcome and enjoy the peer learning experience. Those who may not feel confident to fully participate in their first year gain confidence over time with the encouragement of others.

After people retire, not only does their thirst for intellectual stimulation continue, so does their need to work towards goals and interact with peers. They are glad to actively contribute to making learning opportunities available and thereby embrace the peer-learning concept. Colleges, too, welcome a community of learners who take responsibility for their own program, limiting the financial risk involved in offering courses for seniors.

The use of volunteer moderators has the advantage of keeping costs low. With no teaching expenses, and volunteers performing various administrative responsibilities, the membership fees are very reasonable compared with noncredit courses offered in traditional continuing education programs. In 1997/98 the McGill ILR fee is $55 per semester (also paid by moderators), and for this amount members can join either one or two study groups and attend special lectures. In addition they have borrowing privileges at the McGill library and Internet access. The fee is affordable and there is a scholarship fund for the few who cannot pay.

A CURRENT TREND

Leptak, in his 1989 review of the literature on older adults in higher education, reported that they enjoy participating in traditional course offerings on the same basis as younger students. Although seniors continue to enrol in traditional courses, earn degrees, and attend noncredit lectures, in recent years they have shown a growing interest in taking responsibility for their own programs (Fischer, Blazey, & Lipman, 1992; Manheimer & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995).

ILRs fulfill this need by fostering a sense of ownership and community. It was the Harvard ILR and UCLA’s Plato Society that extended these concepts to peer learning in the late 1970s. From a handful of these programs in the early 1980s, new institutes have emerged across North America. The Elderhostel Institute Network’s 1997 Directory of ILRs reports 217 affiliates, including 10 in Canada. Of these, 46 have programs in which all their courses are member-led, and most insti-
tutes have some member-led courses. Only 16 have no member-led courses. Peer learning also is a feature of many Universities of the Third Age in the United Kingdom and Australia. It has caught the imagination of seniors world wide.

The peer learning model epitomizes three acknowledged theories of adult learning: andragogy, self-directed learning, and perspective transformation (Merriam, 1993). In effect, peer learning is student-directed, planned by the learners themselves, and undertaken to suit their personal circumstances. Seniors, like other adults, learn best if they can contribute to group activities and have some control over what they learn, such as taking on a project and developing it in a way that is relevant to their own experience and interests (Agruso, 1978; Clark, 1995). These self-directed aspects are present wherever there is a seminar environment, such as in Study Circles, which have been practicing peer learning for many years in Sweden and North America (Study Circles Resource Center, 1993).

Peer learning programs need not be limited necessarily to urban areas. Even in a small community a group of seniors can get together to form a study group. In this technological era, lack of a local expert and a good library are not barriers. Computers ensure the finest libraries are only a few keystrokes away. Local schools with electronic conferencing facilities make it possible for a rural group to meet “at a distance” with a study group in an urban community.

The most exciting recent development is the promise of an ILR on the Internet. With today’s electronic highway people can learn together without ever leaving their homes. Like the newsgroups and discussion groups already on the Internet, seniors can conduct learning groups on various topics on the Internet. A first step already has been taken in this direction, with Northwestern ILR in Illinois hosting the first study group on-line in Fall 1996. It was fully subscribed within a few days of being advertised. This group has been publicized to members of existing ILRs, but ultimately seniors who are housebound or far from community centers also will benefit from such opportunities. Communicating electronically, they will exchange materials and ideas on a chosen topic, encouraging each other to continue learning and reducing their sense of isolation.

**SUMMARY**

The peer learning model that is so popular in many ILRs offers seniors an effective and rewarding environment for learning. The nature of the educational experience varies according to the personalities of the learners and the styles of the moderators, but in general the rewards
are simple: The more one participates, the more one learns. Because this model is readily transferable to different environments it has enormous potential to extend learning beyond the traditional classroom. The current trend in college-based programs towards the peer-learning model demonstrates seniors' desire to set their own direction toward continuous learning.

REFERENCES


