Creating and sustaining international connections: an analysis of the development of an international journal concerned with critical scholarship and equity and access in the field of education and ageing

Keith Percy, Lancaster University, UK

Paper presented at the 41st Annual SCUTREA Conference, 5-7 July 2011, University of Lancaster

Introduction
Since the mid 1980s, about 15 papers concerned with education and older adults have been presented at SCUTREA conferences. They do not give the impression of a field of study developing through dialogue over time. The stronger papers (e.g. by Findsen, 2010; Gaskell, 2005; Withnall, 1995) do not indicate the presence of a field-wide conceptual coherence or dynamic. Empirical work, such as there is, is small-scale and disconnected. There are some non UK papers and they argue, from positions of relative isolation, the importance of the topic and the need for a greater volume of work.

This paper argues that the study of the education and learning of older adults (known academically as educational gerontology in the English-speaking academic world but more popularly as learning in later life), although not a well developed field, offers enormous potential in terms of theoretical discourse and practical relevance. It is not actually a new field – significant texts have been published in the USA since Sherron and Lumsden published their Educational Gerontology in 1978. In the UK there have been sturdy attempts over a couple of decades to define a field of study (see, for example, Glendenning, 2000; Jarvis, 2001; Withnall, 2010) but none have been adopted as authoritative. Academic conferences, such as those organised by the British Association for Education and Ageing (AEA) still receive proposals for papers in which familiar material is recycled and the same basic questions are asked, but not answered. Other countries of Europe seem to be behind even the United Kingdom in this matter. In Germany, it was as late as 2010 before the first comprehensive attempt to define an academic field of study around education and ageing was made under the title Geragogik (Bubolz-Lutz et. al., 2010)

It is clear why society may want to understand more about learning in later life and why systematic, empirically-derived knowledge, informed by theory, is needed. Given the imperatives of longer and healthier later life, changing models of retirement, inequalities in access of older people to learning and other resources
and exponential increases worldwide in the over 50s population, there is scarcely any other field of adult education which merits more attention.

Quoting the Population Division of the United Nations, Benyon (2010) shows that:

in 1950 across the world there were some 200 million people over 60, by 2000 that had reached 600 million and by 2050 it would be at least 2 billion.

The ageing of societies is a worldwide and simultaneous phenomenon and it is reasonable to suppose that academic interest in learning in later life will become international.

Origins
The fourth issue of the International Journal of Education and Ageing (IJEQA) will be with the printer as the July 2011 SCUTREA conference takes place. The first issue was published one year before, in June 2010. It was to be a peer-reviewed journal, published three times each year, with about 80 pages per issue and an annual total of about 240 pages per volume. It was to be published only in the English language and in printed format. On-line format was an aspiration.

In one sense, this was a re-launch. The Association for Education and Ageing (AEA) had been founded (as the Association for Educational Gerontology) in the UK in 1986 and immediately published a new, modest, scholarly, peer-reviewed journal called the Journal of Educational Gerontology. After a decade, this journal, enlarged and re-titled as Education and Ageing, was taken up by a commercial publisher and enjoyed an increased readership and reasonable success until 2004, when the publisher withdrew. Subscriptions had started to take a downturn for several reasons – among them, the relative demise of Adult Continuing Education departments in UK universities and the consequent small number of research students engaged in this field of study. There followed a period during which publication was suspended and AEA considered the feasibility of maintaining a journal at the same time as it reviewed its own future development. Short-term funding from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation made it possible for this review to be comprehensive and to include investigation of further funding sources, including those for a re-launch of a journal.

It is important to ask why the existence of a journal concerned with education and ageing remained on the agenda. The answer is that, even in the first decade of the new millennium, it seemed that the study of later life learning was still an unformed and under-developed field of study. Moreover, the connections between that field of study and provision and facilitation of learning opportunities for older people remained tenuous and uncertain. A journal could have a crucial role in developing, reinforcing and re-invigorating the scientific study of learning in later life and in making the necessary connections with policy and practice. In particular, in the six or so years since Education and Ageing last appeared, the support of the EU
through its Grundtvig programme had led to many innovative educational programmes for older people across Europe which deserved attention from researchers.

*IJEA*’s mission was economically stated:

> the Journal will contribute to a better life for all older people by promoting critical knowledge and understanding of education and learning in later life.

In editorials, promotional literature and conference papers, the *IJEA*’s editors and publishers identified the core of this mission as a concern with equity and access - “a better life for all older people”. The means were to be not only the publication of “critical knowledge” – new scientific knowledge and critiques of extant knowledge concerned with later life learning – but also the promotion of “understanding” through dissemination to a wide variety of professional and other audiences with the direct goal of informing and improving educational practice, including the points at which it touched, social, health, and medical gerontological practice. All of this was to be achieved on an ‘international’ basis, with ‘international’ contributors and an ‘international’ readership (see, for example, Editorial, 2010a; Editorial, 2010b; Editorial, 2011).

It was a resounding mission and the editorial interpretations of it were consistent, if somewhat rhetorical. However, they were probably made more in hope than certainty. The *IJEA* began without detailed plans of how the mission was to be operationalised.

The remainder of this article will be concerned with the three key dimensions in expressions of the *IJEA*’s mission - research, practice and international mission - and will argue that one of them (the ‘international’ dimension) has not been adequately conceptualised. If it were, it would provide a unifying and theoretically satisfying framework within which the Journal could create its future.

**Research**

In their first editorial (Editorial, 2010a), the editors observed that it was unlikely that they would reject any research-based article which was recommended by referees as being publishable. However, they were going to be particularly interested in theory-based research which could be seen to have possible practical applications and applied research arising from practical needs so long as it was rigorous and generalisable where possible. They would want to encourage research which took an open approach to methodologies and was based on a willingness to use mixed methods of enquiry as long as there was an adequate discussion of concepts, justification and validity.

The editors said (ibid.) that they wanted to encourage investigations on issues which concerned older people themselves. This wish was not motivated by a form of
political correctness but by a belief that the scarce human and financial resources available world-wide for research into learning in later life should be systematically focused. A sensible starting place would be with what the people most concerned said was important.

**Practice**

It follows that, in *IJEA*, research and practice were not going to be treated as conceptually and pragmatically separate. The first editorial (ibid.) argued that policy and practice on learning in later life were not normally systematically evaluated and were certainly not discussed, as often as they should be, in a context which drew upon research-based knowledge. Governments were increasingly making rhetorical statements in policy papers about the benefits for society from older people being engaged in learning. Moreover, older people themselves were reasserting a belief in continued education through published testimonies and stories. All of this material, said the editors (ibid.), needed to be assessed, its significance agreed and its connectivity with accumulating bodies of knowledge and other policy and practice demonstrated. This suggested an important role for *IJEA* with a wider audience than that normally targeted by academic publications.

**International mission**

In early 2010, the initial flyer for the new journal announced in a confident, even declamatory tone, that *IJEA* aimed ‘to bring together the best of international research, scholarship and practice on education, learning and ageing in a critical and accessible manner’.

It was well-said. However, the reasons for the *IJEA* espousing an international mission were also pragmatic. An international target readership would be potentially bigger than a mainly British readership; there was a need to make a distinction in the Journal’s title from the predecessor journal (Education and Ageing) formerly published by AEA; and a search for a unique selling point for the Journal had identified an international orientation as critical.

Despite the pragmatism, the editors did not expect the appropriateness of the ‘international’ label to be disputed. In their second editorial (Editorial, 2010b), they wrote:

> as for the insertion of the descriptor ‘International’ into the title, it was thought to be a self-evident requirement. The *IJEA* has to be international in both contributions and readership or it will not be worth preserving. The question is not should it be international but can it achieve and maintain a reputation for publishing quality articles in the English language from across the world and can it secure an international audience.

Beyond this, however, there was no discussion of the implications of being ‘international’. Over the first year, the *IJEA* published 18 articles; 7 were by non UK
authors. There was no pattern to these non-UK authored articles. They were evidently what had been offered and what had reached the standard established by editors and referees. If any thought had been given to a systematic rationale for the choice and grouping of international articles - say, in terms of seeking a group of internationally authored articles on Third World gerontology, or spirituality and learning in later life, or retirement and learning or some other theme - the practicalities and time-frame of starting a new journal appear to have prevented it.

As an international journal, the IJEA was immediately constrained by the fact that it was an English language journal only; there were no plans to translate it or to publish it, in whole or in part, in other world languages. Logistical and financial reasons made this inevitable. It is true that the English language has wide currency, giving access to first language readerships in North America, Australasia and parts of Africa as well as the United Kingdom and Ireland. Many people world-wide learn English as a second or professional language. Nevertheless, there is an obvious dissonance in publishing an ‘international’ journal in one language only

**A possible framework**

It may be that the IJEA will continue as it is - in essence defining its international mission as little more than publishing articles by non UK authors and seeking a foreign readership content to read the IJEA in English. Nevertheless, the remainder of this article seeks to articulate an international rationale for the IJEA which would make it more likely to achieve its mission. The framework is made up from the combination of two conceptual approaches which can be related to international research and practice – perspective contextualisation and communities of practice.

**Perspective contextualisation**

Hantrais (1995), writing about international comparative research, identifies the invalidity and inutility of simplistic combination of international perspectives and international data. She observes that:

linguistic and cultural factors, together with differences in research traditions and administrative structures, cannot be ignored

and

attempts at cross-national comparisons are still too often rendered ineffectual by the lack of a common understanding of central concepts and the societal contexts within which phenomena are located.

The readership of, say, a journal merits frameworks and contexts if it is to interpret international material adequately. Demographic and employment statistics from different countries, for example, are socially constructed and may conceal quite different national understandings. Time-series data can be complicated even by the
historic shifting of political and geographic boundaries and the definition of what counts as a particular state or society.

For Hantrais (1995), the *IJEA*’s use of the English language alone would be an issue. Language, she says:

is not simply a medium for conveying concepts, but part of the conceptual system, reflecting institutions, thought processes, values and ideology, and implying that the approach to a topic and interpretations of it will differ according to the language of expression.

Nevertheless, Hantrais (1995; 2008) turns the difficulties and discontinuities of the aspiration for an international mission on their heads and underlines the creative and challenging opportunities for deeper understanding which they provide. The value of the international dimension lies in the perspective contextualisation which it makes possible, although Hantrais does not use this term. Building on her views, it can be argued that the international dimension:

increases *awareness* of possibilities and alternatives. An international journal such as the IJEA, in effect, brings researchers and practitioners from different backgrounds together. It should be able to construct a space in which varying experience and different intellectual traditions are compared and evaluated.

promotes deeper *understandings* and creative approaches to issues that are of central concern in different countries. These can lead to identification of knowledge gaps and suggestions for the development of practice to be pursued through international debate and investigation.

encourages intellectual *distance*: that is, gives the opportunity to step back and to situate a problem in a larger context. This should promote a valuing of the dynamics of other cultures and new insights into one’s own culture.

However, perspective conceptualisation requires planning. It should not be a matter of chance what international material is placed together in an issue of a journal such as *IJEA*. Such decisions should be made with clear expectations of the kinds of increased awareness, deeper understandings and intellectual distance which the material might usefully generate and these expectations communicated to the readership at the time.

**Community of practice**
The notion of the community of practice was developed in professional practice literature in the 1990s and belongs to a family of notions including the ‘learning organization’ and the ‘reflexive practitioner’. Wenger (1998) defined a community of practice in terms of three elements – a shared domain of interest; a grouping of people who develop that domain through regular interaction; and a direct connection between the domain and the improvement of practice.
Wenger (ibid.) certainly saw that a community of practice might ‘cover the globe’. He observed that:

members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice …Some are quite small; some are very large, often with a core group and many peripheral members. Some are local and some cover the globe.

Wesley and Buysse (2001, 114), building on Wenger, emphasised that:

reflection within communities of practice not only extends our own understanding, insight, and command of the situations in which we work, but also holds the potential to advance the field as a whole.

Their claims for the outcomes of a community of practice are extensive. They considered that:

it stimulates thinking that is divergent and inductive, rather than convergent and deductive… by inviting the ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge as a means to interpret new situations and to solve problems with imagination (ibid., 115).

Interestingly, Wesley and Buysse suggested that communities of practice allowed practitioners to collaborate with researchers, other practitioners and clients (in this case, older people) as partners in research. This collaboration gave an opportunity for multiple perspectives to influence the research agenda, participate in its conduct, interpret data and disseminate findings. (ibid.,121). They also suggested that it went some way to the ‘democratisation of the research process’, which they advocated – as did the editors of the IJEA in Editorial, 2011 when they wrote of giving older people a ‘voice’ in what research is undertaken into learning in later life.

Indeed, Wesley and Buysse seemed almost to be talking directly to the editors and publishers of the IJEA when they castigated a ‘theory-to-practice journal’ as contrived and ‘one-dimensional’. They said that it was far away from:

the ideal community of practice [which] incorporates diverse expertise to bring together research, policy ,and practices in a way that is both meaningful and relevant to all participants - something that is almost impossible to achieve through more contrived, one-dimensional approaches (e.g. a theory -to- practice Journal) (op. cit.,119).

Conclusion
By combining these two conceptual approaches of perspective contextualisation and community of practice, it seems that a framework for the development of the International Journal of Education and Ageing could be constructed that is not ‘one-
dimensional’. The concerns of the IJEA’s editors to relate research to practice on an international basis could be encompassed by the building of an international community of practice, as characterised by Wenger, with a shared interest in learning in later life. It could possess the vibrancy and creativity identified by Hartrais as the positive outcomes of an international mission, properly conducted. Such an international community of practice would be sure to contribute to IJEA’s ultimate equity and access aim of the promotion of a better life for older people. However, an IJEA with international ambitions, but without a clear rationale for them, runs the risk of drift and non-survival.

References


Gaskell, T (2005) "You learn all your life - and then you die still stupid": lifelong learning and transience. Paper presented at the 35th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 5-7 July, University of Sussex.


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 29 June 2011*