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# Creating Space and Pathways for Elder Knowledge Transfer in University Settings

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**Abstract:** This preliminary exploration of the literature informs a subsequent study that will focus on the richness of Elder faculty knowledge and how creating spaces for Elder knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer will significantly contribute to the overall quality of faculty life and learning for Other less senior faculty members.

## Introduction

*Elders will save the world...they are the glue that holds the human community together...(Thomas, 2004)*

This preliminary exploration of the literature is in preparation for a subsequent qualitative study that will explore the significance and impact when *Elder* faculty share the lifelong learning knowledge and wisdom gained, through their lived experience as academics, with less senior university faculty. Specifically, this subsequent study will focus on ‘spaces’ that support *Elder* knowledge sharing and the significance of this sharing on *Other* less senior faculty. The context for this subsequent study will be the university faculty community and culture. As it is not possible to capture all of the significant literature to inform a subsequent study within the confines of this paper, this overview is meant to prepare the ‘initial’ groundwork to support this future research.

This future study is rooted in the belief that *Elder* faculty knowledge is a rich environmental resource. This resource, in light of the aging workforce, is at risk of becoming ‘extinct’ if proper measures are not taken to protect, preserve and sustain it. Specifically, this future study will examine *Elder* faculty knowledge within university settings and contribute to the creation of more organic and honouring pathways that facilitate the sharing of *Elder* knowledge.

The terms *Elder* and *Other* are italicized throughout this paper. *Elder* knowledge refers to the knowledge and wisdom gained from the lived experiences of soon-to-retain or retired faculty. *Other* refers to less experienced faculty, to their lived experiences, and to the mentoring needs as teachers and researchers within university communities. In making this distinction, the intention is not to emphasize a mechanistic, age-based boundary that separates. Rather, whilst recognizing that lifelong learning is not determined nor limited by years of lived experience, this emphasis is meant to respectfully recognize the unique contributions of those whose lived experience as faculty members draws from a different time and culture within academia. There is also significant potential for reciprocal learning when *Elders* and *Others* come together to share and explore the knowledge and wisdom embedded within these storied experiences of life and learning.

## Scholarly Voices

To prepare the initial groundwork for this future study, the following themes in the literature have been explored: 1) shifting workforce demographics; 2) *Elder* knowledge; 3) stories and dialogue as knowledge sharing traditions; and, 4) mentoring models.

### 1) *Shifting Workforce Demographics*

The demographics of today's workforce continue to shift and reshape. Cole (2005) referred to a rapidly aging (versus shrinking) workforce. In fact, 2006 was identified as a milestone year in that 'early boomers' would have reached their sixtieth birthday by this time. Cole (2005) referred to a 14% increase in the 45-54 year age range by the year 2010. In addition, whilst other age groups will continue to decline, the 55 year plus group is anticipated to increase by 35%. This distribution demands attention as this trend will carry well into the future. Specifically, one-half of the Canadian population will be 55 years and older by the middle of this century. These are sobering statistics.

Although many Canadian universities no longer mandate forced retirement, 65 years of age remains a common benchmark as aging individuals contemplate significant changes in their work life. Changes may include full retirement, negotiating reduced work loads, or a shift in the location of work. Although all of these changes have obvious economic and organizational implications, it is the social, cultural and 'knowledge loss' implications that are of most concern to this researcher.

### 2) *Elder Knowledge*

'Indigenous' *Elder* knowledge, referred to in the literature, was defined as "organic [and] typically passed on from one generation to the next [orally]" (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 224). With regards to the role and position of *Elders* in Indigenous communities (and the knowledge acquired through lived experiences), several studies focused on the impact of receiving *Elder* knowledge and on the significance of integrating *Elder* knowledge within communities (Crate, 2006; Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005; Zhou, Staikidis, 2006).

*Elder* knowledge is best understood within an Indigenous context of learning and knowledge acquisition. Indigenous perspective(s) on learning and knowledge acquisition cannot and should not be bound into one definable category of meaning and understanding, however, although there is a shared epistemological essence that unites all Indigenous perspectives (Kawalilak, 2004). This essence is bound by several common themes: 1) environmental and humankind interconnectedness; 2) a deep commitment to community; 3) giving back to the greater community; 4) holistic perspectives and approaches to learning; 5) recognition of informal learning beyond traditional learning environments contexts; and, 6) story sharing and dialogue in the learning and knowledge sharing process (Kawalilak, 2004; Merriam et al., 2007).

### 3) *Stories and Dialogue as Knowledge Sharing Traditions*

Story sharing through dialogue, beyond Indigenous contexts, continues to gain momentum as a highly regarded (knowledge sharing) tradition. Capra (1988) described the human community as a network of [stories]...of conversations. Sharing stories of lived experience has the potential to co-create knowledge and shared understanding; one's sense of community is significantly strengthened as a result (Kawalilak & Dudley, 2002). Communities are strengthened by story-sharing and dialogue; both have the potential to transform

perspectives and relationships (Bohm, 1996, Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991; Ellinor, & Gerard, 1998). Schaefer (1998) affirmed the critical importance of story sharing and dialogue, reminding us that 'humankind' (cannot) exist in isolation. Making meaning of these experiences positions the "life course as an unfolding story" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 213). There is great potential for the co-creation of knowledge when stories are shared and reflected upon; this continues to be the focus for many researchers across disciplines (Lerner, 1992; Olshtain & Kupferber, 1998; Rushton, 2004; Samoff & Stromquist, 2000; Williams, 2000).

#### 4) *Mentoring Relationships*

Although the benefits of mentoring have received a great deal of attention in the literature, visibly absent was any specific reference to *Elder* faculty knowledge as a rich environmental resource. Although only a preliminary exploration of the literature was conducted, no research was located that identified '*Elder* faculty' as the research focus; and the significance of the knowledge acquired over the course of academic careers was not acknowledged. Although some studies referred to mentoring within higher education settings, the focus tended to be on more formalized, traditional mentoring strategies aligned to business and industry (Barkham, 2005; Faculty Diversity Standing Committee, 2006; King & Lawler, 2000; McKeachie, 2006; McMillan & Parker, 2005; Piercy, Giddings, Allen, Dixon, Meszaros & Joest, 2005; Olmstead, 1993; Sands & Parson, 1991; Wolcott & Betts, 1999). The creation of space(s) that supported a more organic, informal knowledge sharing process between *Elders* and *Others* was visibly absent. Tamburri (2003) did make reference, however, to senior and newer faculty and encouraged senior faculty to "step aside [to] make room for new ideas" (p. 11). MacGregor (2006) argued against this and maintained that senior faculty are needed to mentor newer faculty, challenging common misconceptions that newer faculty contributed more significantly to the higher level of knowledge acquisition in universities. Adamec (2006) maintained that relegating senior faculty to the margins was a grave mistake and that this would only serve to block potential pathways from which newer faculty would ultimately benefit.

In summary, the percentage of newer faculty is bound to increase as *Elder* members approach retirement. These shifting demographics draw attention to the need for recognition and valuing of *Elder* knowledge. This knowledge is soon to become an 'extinct' environmental resource if measures are not taken to preserve and sustain it. Indeed, business and industry mentoring models, processes and strategies are abundant. Although there are some similarities, there are significant cultural differences when comparing university with business/industry environments. This preliminary literature review did not uncover research that involved *Elder* faculty and what they could offer to less experienced community members. There is research, however, to support *Elder* knowledge sharing in Indigenous communities and the significance of this sharing. This researcher maintains that Indigenous *Elder* knowledge sharing traditions have the potential to inform and address some of the mentoring and knowledge transfer needs within university environments. Specifically, knowledge transfer through the sharing of stories is a long-standing Indigenous tradition; there is great potential here for higher education settings to benefit from these traditions.

#### **Emerging Theoretical Framework(s) for Subsequent Study**

Fowler (2007) referred to the challenge of finding "a single framework to adequately explain all [the] data" (p. 55) and pointed to employing multiple frameworks, when

appropriate, for qualitative studies that are better suited to “more than one theoretical framework” (p. 55). Often, a more enriched, expanded and multi-faceted perspective and understanding evolves out of positioning one or more frameworks to intersect with one another. Anfara and Mertz (2007) maintained that “[a] framework or theory allows the researcher to ‘see’ and understand certain aspects of [what is being studied] while concealing other aspects” (p. xxviii). When there are one or more points of intersection of theoretical constructs, there is potential to contribute to a deeper perspective and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

In response to this preliminary literature review, and in order to illuminate the potential for multiple dimensions to evolve out of the research data, the design of a subsequent study will be informed, primarily, from an informal adult learning perspective, positioned “at the intersection” (Merriam et al., 2007) of community and conservation theory.

### **Informal Adult Learning**

Viewing adult education and practice through a historical lens serves as a strong reminder of the significance and impact of informal learning and of the power and capacity of community, when individuals gather together and learn from one another, share resources, celebrate differences, and explore common ground. Informal learning also speaks to the organic nature of the learning process “[embedded] in our everyday activities” (Merriam et al. 2007, p. 35).

#### *Community and Conservation Theory*

Referring specifically to resource conservation and management, community and conservation theory focuses on the concept of community and “advocates [heavily] for communities role in resource management” (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999, p. 629). Agrawal and Gibson (1999) made reference to hunter-gatherer ways of the past and pondered, “If humans have shaped and used their environments in sustainable ways for thousands of years, it may be possible to establish partnerships that accomplish the same results today...” (p. 632). Although Agrawal and Gibson (1999) referred primarily to obtrusive ‘natural’ resource management, community and conservation theory is just as applicable to the management of environmental human resources that are at risk of becoming extinct. In the study to follow, *Elder* faculty will be referred to as an ‘at risk’ environmental resource, if measures are not soon taken to preserve and sustain it.

### **Summary**

Informal learning theory and community and conservation theory find common ground as both frameworks recognize the long-term learning and knowledge acquisition benefits, when there is a sustained commitment to include and care for all members within a particular community. What then becomes visible through inclusion and care are relational, organic and spiral learning processes, with the potential to impact all who participate (Farahani, 2003; Kawalilak, 2004; Merriam, 2007). Agrawal and Gibson (1999) also recognized knowledge sharing as having an organic essence when it evolved out of a creation of safe and challenging spaces. These are spaces that support member inclusion, trust formation, and dialogue (Kawalilak, 2004; King & Lawler. 2000; Mealman & Lawrence, 1998).

## Next Steps

This preliminary literature review will inform a subsequent study that will include a substantial sampling of *Elder* faculty from universities across Canada. This study will be guided by five key questions: 1) What does *Elder* knowledge 'look like'? 2) Does the acquired lifelong learning experience and wisdom of *Elders* align to the learning and knowledge needs of *Other* community members? 3) Who benefits from regarding *Elder* knowledge as a critical environmental resource? 4) What are the implications if this resource is allowed to become extinct? 5) Has there been a loss of space for *Elder* knowledge sharing in university settings (and if so, what is the relationship of this loss to current fiscal realities)?

This study will be significant in that it will affirm the importance of *Elder* faculty members in university settings and support the co-creation of pathways for knowledge sharing and transfer, ultimately benefiting the greater university culture and community.

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