
Older Adult Education in a Maltese University of the Third Age: a critical perspective

MARVIN FORMOSA

University of Malta

ABSTRACT The education of older adults has been considered the fastest growing branch of adult education in post-industrial countries and one of the most crucial challenges facing current adult European education. It has generated a significant number of research projects and publications seeking to analyse the character of third age learning. This article represents a further attempt, in Sandra Cusack's words, to root down the expansion of older adult education programmes in 'Critical Educational Theory', as a distinct form of 'Critical Sociological Theory'. Critical field research was carried out at the University of the Third Age (U3A) in Valletta (Malta), due to the fact that the U3A represents one of the most successful and important educational programmes specifically developed for older people. Data were interpreted through Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and critical educational gerontological theory. The study revealed that despite the often reported positive functions of U3A for older persons and society in general, the Valletta U3A is grounded in mainstream and traditional models of educational practice which equate education as a one-way flow of information from teachers to students. The study concluded that as a result of such a 'banking' ideology, the U3A fails to act as an archetype of transformative education but is yet another euphemism for glorified occupational therapy that is both conservative and oppressive.

Introduction

Adult education for older people has been widely advocated by many social scientists due to its potential to develop alternative visions for democratic social change and to empower older persons (e.g. Felisatti, 1995). Yet, one cannot fail to note contradictory research (e.g. O'Rourke, 1994) which highlighted a number of lacunae in older adult education. Such research makes it evident that not all older adult educational

programmes are examples of good practice and may even elicit factors which they are supposedly eradicating. In light of such a dilemma, I agree with David Battersby's (1985a) contention, recently reiterated by Sandra Cusack (1997), that the analysis of older adult educational programmes should be embedded in a critical paradigm. The critical path in the social sciences follows Karl Marx's (1964) early humanist phenomenological writings by seeking to outline the inherent inequalities and injustices present in society, and generate possibilities for the emancipation of oppressed social communities/individuals (Gibson, 1986). Following the radical movement in adult education (e.g. Simon, 1992), it ensues that 'critical older adult education' is the process of determining whether the learning experience leads to 'transformative' practice. Incorporating the dialectical ideals of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Paulo Freire (1972a), Peter Mayo (1999, p. 24) defined transformative educational practice as 'one which recognises the political nature of all education interventions', and whose pedagogical work incorporates what Giroux (1985, p. xiv) termed as the languages of 'critique' and 'possibility'. Consequently, critical older adult education aims to clarify to what extent the educational exercise empowers older people from their oppressed situation, and includes a 'sociological imagination' that explores emancipatory pathways that facilitate the liberation of older people from the fetters of laissez-faire capitalism (Mills, 1970). It is within the above concerns that this study of older adult education was developed. In order to situate the research in a praxeological epistemology, critical field research was conducted at the University of the Third Age in Valletta, Malta. Data were collected through 'data-combined triangulation' (Fielding & Fielding, 1986), employing non-participant observation, informal non-structured interviews, conversational probes, and elite-interviewing. Subsequently, the data elicited were interpreted through Freire's (1972a, 1985) critical pedagogy and critical educational gerontological theory (Glendenning & Battersby, 1990).

Towards a Critical Educational Gerontology

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Few educators have received as much widespread acclaim and worldwide recognition as the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (McLaren, 1997).[1] Although Freire's emphasis in his initial works, such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972a), is clearly on class categories (Freire & Macedo, 1995), an overall perspective of his works (especially his talking books [Horton & Freire, in Bell et al, 1990] and interviews [Freire & Macedo, 1995]) indicates otherwise.[2] In fact, although Freire 'stressed that racism, sexism or class exploitation are the most salient forms of oppression ... he also recognised that oppression exists on the grounds of religious beliefs, political affiliation, national origin, age, size, and physical and

intellectual handicaps' (Gadotti & Torres, 1998, p. 1). Freire's critical pedagogy commenced by distinguishing a dichotomous societal division between the 'oppressors', those who occupy positions of privilege and power, and the 'oppressed', whom the oppressors dominate (Freire, 1972a). Freire asserted that non-dominant groups do not live in a democratic system and are defrauded of their humanity by the social system within which they live. Freire shared Marx's (1963) and Gramsci's (1971) concern as to how ideology serves to sustain an oppressive social formation and departs from the view that the ruling class governs the non-powerful classes through direct coercion. In this respect, Freire maintained that the dominating classes employ educational practice, in the form of banking education, to instil a submissive and compliant consciousness amongst the dominated. Banking education is referred to as:

an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor ... the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the pupils patiently receive, memorise and repeat ... the educator's role is to regulate the way the world 'enters into' the students. (Freire, 1972a, pp. 45–46, 49)

Banking education leads to what Freire (in Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 35) termed 'castration of curiosity' where 'the educator, generally, produces answers without having been asked anything'. In turn, this leads to a 'cultural invasion' of the oppressed consciousness where the oppressors as 'invaders ... impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression' (Freire, 1972a, p. 121). Banking education culminates in the imposition of a 'false consciousness' amongst the oppressed, who being manipulated by the ruling class myths, reflect a consciousness which is not properly their own (Freire, 1985, p. 159). Such a state of affairs establishes the oppressed in what Freire (1985, p. 159) referred to as 'cultures of silence'.^[3]

Against such a social background, Freire (1972b) turned to Marx's (1964, and Marx & Engels, 1963) early humanist phenomenological writings, to devise a role for education that leads to 'cultural freedom' from the state of oppression. Education would thus invert its domesticating role to one of praxis at the service of permanent human liberation – a counter-hegemonic activity which would liberate human beings from their state of 'dehumanisation'. Freire's (1985, p. 80) most revolutionary and subversive tenet in his pedagogy is the explicit notion of the political nature of education: 'education is a political act, whether at the university, high school, primary school, or adult literacy classroom'. For Freire, education either functions to facilitate freedom or assist further domestication (Freire, 1972b, 1974). Freire (1985, p. 85) maintained that 'there are no neutral educators' and demanded of

educators an important choice in that they 'must ask themselves for whom and on whose behalf they are working'. In contrast to banking education, liberatory education involves a constant unveiling of reality and strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (Freire, 1972b). In showing how such a liberating education is to be achieved, Freire (1974) generated a learning process involving 'codification' and 'decodification' processes 'where-by learners are encouraged to re-experience the ordinary extraordinary, through a process of critical distancing' (Allman et al, 1998, p. 12). This located learners in a social *praxis* – as 'the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1972a, p. 52). On a more practical level, Freire proposed 'dialogue' and 'problem-posing' as the central techniques of liberatory education.[4] Through liberatory education, the subject is able to achieve critical consciousness [5] – a state of mind where the world is recognised 'not as a *given* world, but as a world *dynamically in the making*' (Freire, 1985, p. 106). Freire (in Shor & Freire, 1987) also pointed out that the educator and educatee are not immersed in what Jarvis (1985) terms an 'education of equals'. Freire locates in the liberatory teacher the authority to direct the student's beliefs towards a political goal, while simultaneously insuring that students become their 'co-investigators' in this process. As Freire (in Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 378) asserted, 'teachers maintain a certain level of authority through the depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject matter that they teach'.[6] Despite the fact that Freire's pedagogy has not been immune to negative criticisms in both mainstream educational studies (e.g. Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991) and educational gerontology (e.g. Nye, 1998), Freire has made an invaluable contribution to radical and emancipatory adult education (Gadotti, 1998). Hence it is not surprising that Freire's critical pedagogy has been a central influence in adult education and has also directly influenced the development of a distinct path in educational gerontology, namely 'critical educational gerontology'. This will be the focus of the following subsection.

Critical Educational Gerontology

Critical educational gerontology emerged first from the radical concern to overcome the oppressions which locked older adults into ignorance, poverty and powerlessness, and secondly, as a reaction to the uncritical acceptance of the language and the underlying ideological approach employed in older adult education (Glendenning, 1992). The origins of critical educational gerontology can be found in Chris Phillipson's (1983) and Paula Allman's (1984) rationales. Whilst Phillipson (1983) argued that education in later life should aim to clarify the social and political rights of old age, Allman (1984, p. 87) claimed that the enhancing of the quality of life of older persons will not be achieved by just any learning

experience but only education that enables learners to be in control of their thinking.[7] Phillipson's and Allman's thoughts were later elaborated upon throughout the subsequent years by David Battersby. Battersby (1985a) advocated a more critical analysis of older adult education, and pointed out that biological, physiological and psychological explanations of learning in later life were unsuccessful in recognising in old age its social and cultural phenomena. In a paper delivered at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia (HERSDA) conference, Battersby (1985b) urged participants 'to take stock of this third age educational revolution and examine critically whether the continued proliferation of these innovations is justified'. He criticised older adult educational programmes for being heavily represented by financially secure older adults and those who had already benefited in some way from the educational system, assuming that older persons were a homogeneous group, that educational is a self-evidently good thing for all older persons, and for occurring amid an almost complete lack of philosophical reflection or clarification about its aims. In two related articles, Battersby (1990) proposed and elaborated the concept of 'gerogogy'. Gerogogy contains many similarities with Freire's 'liberatory education'. Gerogogy is defined as 'a liberating and transforming notion which endorses principles of collectivity and dialogue central to learning and teaching' (Battersby, 1987, p. 7). In a distinct Freirean mode of analysis, he asserted that gerogogy assumes the status, not of an imposed set of prescriptive guidelines and strategies, but as a concept which conceptualises teaching and learning as a collective and negotiated enterprise amongst older adults. Furthermore, Battersby (1990) argued that older adult education should include a concern for transforming the conditions that promote the disempowerment of older people, and for unsettling learners' assumptions that they cannot affect social change.[8]

Gendenning & Battersby, in the first of three articles that sought to establish firmly the rationale and practice of critical educational gerontology (Glendenning & Battersby, 1990; Glendenning, 1992, Glendenning & Battersby, 1990, pp. 222–223) argued that critical educational gerontology relates to older persons 'gaining power over their lives ... and, above all, it should be an important mechanism for individual and group empowerment'. Freire's influence is highly evident in the authors' rationale but any doubts vanish in lieu of their assertion that:

Freire's ideas inform us as to how we might go about creating these transformations for older people through a more liberating and empowering form of education than that which is currently available for many adults. (Glendenning & Battersby, 1990, p. 119)

Glendenning & Battersby (1990, pp. 220–221) argued that most older adult educational programmes are based upon erroneous, taken-for-granted perceptions, which they referred to as ‘conventional wisdom’. These included ‘the tendency to consider elderly people as a relatively homogeneous group’, the use of the psychological ‘deficit’ model of older adults’ learning abilities, assuming that any type of education emancipates and improves the quality of life of older persons, deliberating about the aims and purposes of education in later life in a shallow manner, disregarding that older adult education is largely driven by middle-class notions of what constitutes education, overlooking the fact that older persons are marginalised to different degrees from society, and finally, assuming that older adult education is exercised in the interests of older people. Following a sound challenge of such conventional wisdom (also elaborated upon in Glendenning, 1992), Glendenning & Battersby (1990, pp. 226–228) put forward four major principles for critical educational gerontology. These included:

a ‘shift away from a functionalist approach’... ‘an exploration of this relationship between capitalism and ageing should occupy a more central position in examining the concept of education in later life’;
going beyond ‘educational gerontology’ to what we will call ‘critical educational gerontology’ ... ‘a critique of the dominant liberal tradition involving a negation that education for older persons is essentially a neutral uncontested enterprise’;
including ‘such concepts as emancipation, empowerment, transformation, social and hegemonical control and what Freire calls “conscientisation”’;
developing ‘the notion of praxis’ to establish a ‘critical gerogogy ... this can lead older people to greater control over their own knowledge and thoughts, or to use Freire’s words, promote conscientisation’.

All proposals, or ‘principles’ as they call them, clearly revolve around the languages of ‘critique’ and ‘possibility’ found in Freire’s critical pedagogy. Moreover, the authors followed Freire’s pedagogy by interpreting knowledge as originating in the social relations of power, and thus advocating for the generation of educational possibilities which would lead towards the emancipation of older persons. Although I have focused extensively on Battersby’s and Glendenning’s writings, there were other gerontologists who argued in a similar fashion. Harry Moody (1987), for example, minced no words when concluding that older adult education should not take the form of a leisure pursuit but should be a ‘vehicle’ for social transformation. However, the rationale in favour of critical educational gerontology is found nowhere so painstakingly elaborated and discussed as in the former authors’ articles. The remainder of this article aims to present the data elicited from field research carried out at the Valletta U3A as well as its critical interpretation.

The University of The Third Age in Valletta

*The International University of the
Third Age Movement: a brief introduction*

The idea for a University of the Third Age (U3A) was first proposed in 1973 at the University of Toulouse by Pierre Vellas to raise the quality of life of older people, realise a permanent educational programme for older people in close relations with other age groups, accomplish gerontological research programmes, and complete initial and permanent education programmes in gerontology (Vellas, 1997). Since its inception, the U3A movement has developed into a global adult education success story, spreading to all continents, and amounting to several thousand units with varying structures and programmes (Louis, 1995). However, there is no dominant preferred model of U3As (Swindell, 1995), with 'variety being the spice of U3A life' (Midwinter, 1984, p. 18). Nevertheless, one can classify U3As in two major archetypes (Swindell, 1995): the French and British U3A models – both of which have been successful in establishing branches outside their countries of origin (Laslett, 1996). The distinctive feature of U3As following the francophone model is the belief that older people would engage in forms of university learning, on and off campus, organised and lectured by university staff and funded by the government (Williamson, 1997). The first British U3A, founded in 1981, 'underwent a substantial change' (Swindell, 1997, p. 478), embracing only the Francophone's 'spirit' rather than its 'form' (Withnall & Percy, 1994, p. 65). The British U3A curriculum is as wide as its human and financial resources permit, but the preference of members is the only criterion of what is done. Hence the inclusion of everyday leisure pursuits such as crochet, dressmaking, bridge and wine appreciation, as U3A courses (Midwinter, 1987, 1996).

Fieldwork at the Valletta University of the Third Age

Malta is a relative latecomer in establishing its University of the Third Age. The U3A in Valletta, or as we call it in our native tongue, *L'Universita Tat-Tielet Eta* (U3E), was launched in January 1993 and thus could draw on some 20 years of European experience. The U3E was founded as part of the Institute of Gerontology within the University of Malta and is, therefore, more in accordance with the French U3A model than the British one. The drive behind the founding of the U3E arose neither from responses to community needs nor from requests by older persons themselves. The first U3E programme, was not launched as a pilot project but as a full-scale activity, resulting from the aspirations of academics and government officials working in the field of ageing. The U3E is governed by a 'mission statement' written and developed by university academics, stating that:

one can say that real life, free of constraints, of worries and of imposed responsibilities, starts with retirement. Yet, as long as one lives, one feels a natural yearning to know more, to explore and to understand. The University of the Third Age (U3E) is making this possible for everyone. Thinking keeps us young ... The U3E will encourage creativity and will propose several projects for this purpose ... The U3E will also encourage special interest groups for pursuing hobbies or other interests. (University of the Third Age [Malta] Prospectus – undated, c. 1992)

The U3E is governed by two main committees. Whilst the academic matters are in the hands of a committee chosen by the University of Malta (including one U3E member as a representative of U3E learners), the U3E's social undertakings are managed by a democratically elected 'Association' from the U3E members. The U3E aims to offer courses which are not intended to lead their participants to obtain any material or credential gains. The U3E approaches education as consisting of the pursuit of non-utilitarian knowledge through which one's mind and personality can be enhanced. The U3E Division has since implemented two new arrangements. First, members who attended at least four units and had at least 75% attendance for each of the four units received a certificate of attendance, and secondly, participants were graded according to whether they are in their first year, second year, etc. Although in most subjects the level is high, participants are not expected to sit for examinations, but to engage in learning as an end in itself. It was also asserted that the U3E also endeavours to 'be like a movement' so as to empower its members as well as make them 'agents of change within their own countries in the field of ageing'.

From my informal conversations, I found that a relatively high number of members had succeeded in completing secondary education and had occupied posts in white-collar or professional occupations prior to retiring. Many males and females alike expressed their disappointment at the fact that they were forced to retire when reaching the height of their intellectual abilities and after attaining extensive experience in their occupational responsibilities. The relinquishing of occupational roles was deemed by U3E members as decreasing the members' status, prestige, and consequently, self-esteem. Consequently, many members applauded the U3E for giving them a new lease of life. Despite such a higher incidence of well-educated older persons [9], the U3E planners maintained that the U3E was 'open to everybody', offered 'no hindrances or obstacles', and contained 'people from every walk of life'. The U3E did not discriminate as regards older persons' educational, economic or political background. The only requirements were a birth certificate indicating that one is over 60 years old and willingness to pay a nominal fee. The U3E increased its membership from 180 in 1993, to about 900 in 1999/2000 – a remarkable 500% increase. Nevertheless, this only numbers

about 2% of all older persons in Malta. One founding member and past director of the Institute of Gerontology commented that 'the U3E is not appealing to low income and low educational older persons ... they might even be afraid of the term 'university' in the title but then one cannot remove the title ... however it is important for this older segment to be reached for even they have a great life experience'. At the same time, U3E's coordinator asserted that the programme best suits older persons who have 'an adequate level of education', that is, those who 'understand English, and Maltese, and know how to write ... only those who have a secondary level of education' and can keep track of what goes on at the U3E.

I also asked about perceived possible reasons why many old persons in Malta do not join the U3E. Many members expressed the view that the U3E's lectures are of a high standard and that many older persons do not have the necessary educational background to comprehend the lecturers' presentations:

It is true that the U3E can be attended by any older person. But what's the use of attending university lectures if one does not have the necessary background? You have to remember that a large percentage of older persons are illiterate. A larger percentage are illiterate in the English language. It is impossible for such older persons to participate fully in the U3E. Non-educated older persons would find it very difficult to understand the lectures. (Male U3E member)

At the same time, most members were against the idea of providing low standard education since this would demean the association's role! When I inquired whether the title 'university' might be another potential factor preventing people from participating, many members appeared perplexed at this suggestion. The reason was that most of them had joined the U3E in the first place precisely because they were attracted by the term 'university' in the title! Many members were opposed to the term's removal since they believed that consequently the U3E would lose both its overall meaning and status.[10]

The U3E offers a wide variety of courses, based on the assumed needs and interests of older persons. According to Troisi these 'range from heavy courses such as philosophy to day-to-day courses such as gardening' that 'aim precisely to empower older persons and improve the quality of their lives and ... potential'. U3E members have no direct control over the institution's programme content and although members are free to submit feedback and suggest new courses, the choice of courses rests solely in the hands of the board of the Institute of Gerontology. The U3E's coordinator encourages members to engage in activities for their own sake which are also thought to have a therapeutic effect. Hence, the range of liberal, non-remunerative, and non-instrumental types of courses.[11] The U3E planners believed that older

persons who are interested in learning crafts or hobbies, or possess a low level of education, should frequent senior day centres rather than the U3E. On the issue of distance learning, Troisi maintained that:

distance learning is not lacking because the aim of the U3E is learning for its own sake. The members who are coming to the lectures are participating and it is not a question of receiving knowledge, one's participation is important. You are meeting people, sharing ideas, while distance learning is a one-to-one affair which is not the aim of the U3E, at least here in Malta ... using the principles of distance learning would kill the aims of the U3E for which it was set up. (Troisi, 1999)

Class distinctions amongst different members could easily be perceived such as different emphasis on dress codes, linguistic variations, etiquette and gestures. However, on the whole, almost all U3E members tended to incorporate a middle-class culture.[12] Most learners employed the term 'we' to describe themselves, denoting older persons, 'who possessed a good level of education and cultured taste'. The U3E's members believe that learning should form the crown of life, a fulfilment of a lifetime of intellectual growth and discovery. With such a habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) in stock, it is not surprising to note that most members stressed the importance of being knowledgeable in 'culture'. Most members accepted the authority of liberal subjects and abstract theory, whilst at the same time devaluing vocational education. One member commented that:

It is important that all persons, including older persons, are not only economically comfortable, but that they are rich in culture ... Not all authors, books, and music are cultured ... It is important to read cultured books, no Mills and Boon, but Sartre and Dickens for example ... Venice and Florence are cultured cities ... do you deem current music as cultured? Well, with the exception of a handful, Pavarotti, Mozart and Verdi are the real musicians ... everything else is a waste of time. (Female U3E member)

The tutors are non-U3E members and are either full-time or part-time university lecturers. They are engaged by the Academic Committee and are paid according to university rates. The dominant pedagogical style used in U3E lectures included the lecturer addressing the learners in a didactic arrangement without allowing any possibility for free discussion on the subject. This type of education enabled a very limited number of students to gain the attention of the lecturer and to give their own contributions to the subject. Most lectures then progressed in a monologue fashion in which the lecturer assumed the position of the 'speaker' and the members that of 'listeners'.

Some Critical Reflections

There are obvious similarities between the oppressed peasants Freire worked with in Latin America, and Western nations' older persons. The latter also inhabit an oppressed position due to prejudiced national policies and social practices that discriminate against older people because 'they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this of skin colour and gender' (Butler, 1987, p. 22). In contemporary societies, ageism is a powerful discriminatory force, and manifests itself as a complex and subtle phenomenon in historical, social, psychological, and ideological dimensions (McEwen, 1990; Butler, 1994). In some social quarters it is even giving way to 'gerontophobia', a 'fear of growing old or fear or hatred of the aged' (Hillier & Barrow, 1999, p. 18). Ageism manifests itself in all spheres of public life, such as in societal images, employment relations, and economic affairs, with lower classes, ethnic minorities and women being more acutely affected than others (Hendricks, 1995). Ageism also places older persons in a 'culture of silence' since their consciousness is ignored, with politicians and professionals dictating what they think is best for older persons and society as a whole (Bytheway, 1995). Therefore, there is no doubt that liberatory older adult education is an essential prerequisite in Western societies if older persons are to liberate themselves and their oppressors from their dehumanised position. The fieldwork data indicated that the U3E fulfils various positive social and individual functions for older persons and society as a whole. The U3E aids lonely older persons to resocialise themselves in society by enabling them to form new groups and increase living interests. It provides opportunities, stimulation, patterns, and content for the use and structure of the older persons' free-time which would otherwise be characterised by inactivity. At the same time it makes older persons more visible in society, enhances members' ability to understand the objective world by aiding them to better grasp world development and social progress. It helps them to keep healthy by enabling them to master medical care knowledge and prevention of disease.

Nevertheless, an overly positive and functional analysis of third age education is surely an extremely myopic conclusion. Seeking to go beyond the deficit psychological-functional analysis of older adult education, one notes a number of limitations within the U3E. Analysing the U3E's rationale, it becomes clear that its underlying principles contain much of the typical erroneous conventional wisdom reported by Glendenning & Battersby (1990), as well as being based on wide-sweeping and untested assertions. Only a minority of older persons are free of constraints, of worries and of imposed responsibilities. For many, but especially lower-class elders and older women, retirement brings about increasing financial and caring problems. Not all older persons feel a

natural yearning to know more, to explore and to understand cultural/artistic phenomena. This may be more applicable to middle-class older persons possessing certain bourgeois dispositions, and there is no overruling evidence that thinking keep us young. By founding its ideology in a liberal framework, where education is supposed only to function to increase the life-satisfaction and self-esteem of older learners, the U3E overlooks the political nature of education and the influence of capitalist structures on experiencing later life, without taking any direct responsibility towards the emancipation of the learners. Although such a liberal rationale can be perceived as noble in romantic terms, it relieves educational coordinators of the responsibility of making decisions as to why it is worth educating and learning and avoids any discussion of the empowering potential of the educational practice – hence confirming Battersby's (1985b) assertion that most older adult education is designed without any due reflection concerning its aims and purposes. The U3E's policy to provide only those subjects that draw a substantial number of learners is also oppressive since it contains the risk of turning the U3E into a market place that would deprive the U3E of its transformative potential. If the coordinators' aims rest solely in setting a number of interesting courses to meet the individual interests of as many older persons as possible, the U3E is dismantling the communal goals that were once at the core of the initial U3As (Vellas, 1997). In this manner, the U3E functions to engender a state of consensus, contributing positively to societal hegemony, and being exclusively concerned with the transmission of analytical skills. Such an emphasis makes the U3E less able to relate to the oppressive structures inherent in society or to pose a challenge to the established social realities.

Furthermore, the U3E's rationale is too much concerned with 'individual' outcomes and 'personal' growth, with the educational experience being presented in the form of a leisure and luxury activity. This only serves the interests of the assumptions and value systems middle-class older persons, who lead a more comfortable life than their working-class peers (Atchley, 2000). It is also lamentable that the U3E's prospectus does not comment on the various ageist policies and social practices in Maltese society. In this respect, the U3E's umbrella ideology acts as a vehicle for distracting and evasion of the economic-political questions of later life. This predisposes the U3E to be a long way off from acting as a vehicle for group consciousness since its favoured ideology does not lead learners to experience a radical questioning of the status quo, but only to gain knowledge of legitimate 'high culture' that embodies 'high status' knowledge. By not taking an active part in a critical deconstruction of reality, the U3E is collaborating with dominant social groups to entrench older persons in a state of 'false consciousness'. This is clearly discerned by the fact that most of them were totally unaware of the medieval meaning of the term 'university' in the organisation's title,

taking it as a sign of cultural status. Whilst this is convenient to bourgeois older persons, the typical U3E's members, it is a conspicuous 'cultural invasion' on non-bourgeois older learners who end up internalising their oppressors' perception of social reality and even embracing it.

The U3E's coordinating body claimed that an important ideological aim of the U3E is to act as a social movement that combats ageist misconceptions and policies. Yet, field research indicated there is no evidence that the U3E supports a political agenda and consequently does not take the form of a *political* movement. There is no indication that the U3E aims to induce, or even introduce, within the fabric of society, a social change of any kind such as the Danish High School Movement did (Freire, in Bell et al, 1990). The U3E's structure does not lead, either directly or indirectly, to advocacy or empowerment for older persons. The U3E does not qualify as a social movement since it does not concentrate on attempting either to influence legislative structures or exert pressure on the government to make new laws and change ones which are regarded as offensive to older persons. It does not educate the public through mass education, or propagate fundamental values and objectives in favour of older persons, doing so through collective action. The institution's incompatibility with the notion of a social movement is more evident when one considers two other factors. First, the U3E is devoid of an articulate critical understanding of the real social forces opposing and indifferent to older persons' interests, or an action plan containing practical steps that serve to confront such forces. Secondly, it lacks a 'counter-hegemony' or the presence of 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1971).[13] Furthermore, it is unfortunate to point out that the U3E does not seek to aid housebound older persons who are evidently more socially marginalised than others. This was demonstrated by the fact that the U3E does not engage in distance learning. Together with outreach work, distance education can be an instrumental strategy for the U3E to break its parochial boundaries. Despite its weaknesses of having to address a huge and heterogeneous audience, distance education has the potential to play a major role in housebound senior adults' productivity, entertainment, socialisation, daily functions and, not least, emancipation.[14]

The U3E treats the choice of a large number of liberal-arts type of courses as an unchecked intellectual supermarket, where the processing of good marketing skills brings anyone to the door. It is true that individual choice and learning suggest an elevated respect for individual differences, but it is also true that acquiring information can act a vehicle for distraction, for evading critical social questions regarding later life. More specifically, the subjects are not specifically concerned with the development of critical thinking and action regarding ageing issues. Despite the emancipatory emphasis found in the U3E's prospectus, the subjects available were all of a liberal kind whose aim was not to lead

older learner to unveil reality, reach critical consciousness, or intervene critically in society, but to transmit dominant (i.e. bourgeois) knowledge. It is also lamentable that there are no subjects that investigate the socio-historical nature of the widespread discrimination being experienced by older persons. Furthermore, the facts that the U3E was formulated entirely by university academics and that courses were not chosen by the older learners themselves, go directly against Allman's (1984) appeal for learners to be in control of their thinking. The reasons for the advancement of liberal courses may be that the kind of participants frequenting the U3E do not need survival courses (for example, learning for economic efficiency) since they enjoy a relatively high socio-economic status and are financially secure. However, apart from the fact that such an approach discriminates against non-bourgeois older persons, it is still inherently flawed since it neglects the indisputable fact that all older persons are discriminated against by a multitude of ageist misconceptions and policies.

The U3E's liberal curricular approach is also unsatisfactory due to its bias in favour of middle-class attitudes. This can be clearly witnessed from the fact that most courses are of a field-dependent and non-instrumental type focusing on artistic, literary and historical dimensions. Whilst such subjects are highly popular with middle-class individuals, since they represent a continuation of mid-life interests and possess the necessary skills for the material's intellectual absorption, they tend to alienate lower-class elders as well as subjecting them to 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Therefore it is not at all surprising to find that middle-class older persons are heavily overrepresented amongst its ranks. The popularity of liberal-arts types of liberal courses also reflect the erroneous dominant assumption that the world is a relatively just and adequate place, a central aspect of the middle classes' habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). This ideology permits the U3E to focus its energy on cultural issues without feeling guilty that it is not contributing to the transformation of society. However, this approach discriminates against other cultures, particularly that of the working classes, by not incorporating practical life skills. The latter incorporates subjects that focus on specific problems of everyday living in such areas as care of elders, finances, and how major circumstances in old age, such as loss of a spouse, the onset of chronic illnesses, or dependence on substandard retirement income, can be tackled. The U3E's curricular approach does not involve learners in a mutual process of formulating learning objectives. Even if it is proved that the U3E's curriculum is meeting the needs of its members, one must take note that its members are not representative of the general older population in Malta. But what is perhaps the U3E's curriculum's greatest oversight is the fact that despite the great majority of *female* participants, and feminist gerontologists' focus on the feminisation of later life and the double jeopardy in women's

later life, the U3E still lacks a focus on feminist issues. The U3E's curriculum is still a reflection of men's ideas, assumptions, and priorities. The lectures contained total ignorance of the conceptualisation of women as home-makers and consumers of patriarchy, with the phenomenon of women's liberation being ignored. The U3E reinforces traditional assumptions which are counterproductive in terms of women's full involvement in a democracy. It is lamentable that the U3E's curriculum does not include either a political dimension that incorporates a movement to improve the conditions and life-chances of older women, nor a feminist critical dimension that incorporates a sustained, intellectual critique of dominant patriarchal forms of knowing and doing. As any feminist gerontologist would probably conclude, education at the U3E consists of women learning about society from a male point of view.

The U3E's utilised pedagogical methods were mainly of a 'didactic' and 'Socratic' nature, thus being nearer to the form of 'banking education' outlined by Freire (1972a) as well as being far removed from Battersby & Glendenning's (1990) advocated principle of gerogogy. This is not surprising since both are central features of liberal learning. The U3E's 'banking' character is especially evident when considering that the U3E fails to incorporate dialogue, problem-posing, and the unification of theory with praxis in its pedagogical work. The lecturers act as the expert dispensers of knowledge rather than taking the role of 'co-investigators' who, together with the learners, strive to uncover oppressive societal relations. Lecturers who adopted the Socratic method provided a logical sequence of questions. However, this only resulted in an expression of knowledge reflecting the accepted body of cultural knowledge that the learners had internalised in their socialisation, and, therefore, a type of conformity. The genuine dialogue through which the learners 'learn' and 'teach' was absent, thus further embedding the participants in a 'culture of silence'. In almost all lectures, the lecturer was deemed to be the 'fount of all wisdom' with the aim of filling up the attendees with knowledge. Taking on a role of domesticating agents, lecturers assumed an authoritarian position as if they were the only beings in the room who possessed 'knowledge'. The lecturers and members did not seek any meaning in learning beyond the activity itself, as if learning becomes analogous to art or sport – hence missing the opportunity to view the world not as given but as a social construction. Older adult education was thus equated within an aesthetic view of the purpose or meaning of late-life learning, where older learners are not led to pass from passive consumers to social constructive members and achieve *conscientização* – the heart of liberatory education.[15] A further pedagogical oversight was that the middle-aged lecturers did not perform participant observation so as 'to tune' to the vernacular universe of older persons – as an emphatic search for generative words in keeping with Freire's suggestions (1974). The experiences that older adults bring to the learning situation were

neglected. Moreover, there was little attempt on the lecturers' part to infiltrate the meaning systems of older learners. One can also argue that, with the coming of age, older learners develop their own learning styles – an arena totally underinvestigated. The barriers between learners and lecturers were not broken but, one can say, even intensified. In the context of older adult education, educators must be inclined to travel into the boundaries that shape older persons' lives. Lecturers also failed to perform what perhaps can be aptly called an 'age-suicide' in order to recognise the various age discriminations that affect older persons' lives. This process can be best achieved by the educators' readiness to be educated through exposure by means of dialogue to older persons' different experiences (Allman et al, 1998). Without doubt, this has its number of difficulties and limitations. However, without such an attempt at 'border crossing' (Giroux, 1991), older adult education cannot achieve its transformative potential.

Conclusion

Seventeen years have passed since David Peterson (1983) published the first in-depth investigation of older adult education, *Facilitating Education for Older Learners*. After appraising the Western provision and direction of older adult education, he proclaimed, 'the future, then, is bright' (p. 306). In partial agreement with Peterson's prognosis, there is no doubt that the provision for older adult education in Malta has undergone a vast improvement in the past two decades. Malta's U3E in Valletta represents a commendable effort to enhance the quality of older persons' lives by dealing with increasing longevity, as well as contesting the erroneous suppositions that associate ageing with predestined physical and mental decline. However, viewing the U3E's assumed curriculum and pedagogical work in the specific context of critical educational gerontology insights, the following conclusions have to be regrettably affirmed.

The U3E is nearer to being a reproductive and domesticating educational agent than otherwise since it does not elaborate on all the various forms of learning but only that from a functional-liberal paradigm. In doing so, it first functions as a 'cultural arbitrary', and secondly, as a perpetuator of 'symbolic violence' by imposing 'cultural arbitrary' meanings as legitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The U3E has not escaped what Baldacchino & Mayo (1997, p. xxi) aptly called the 'pervasiveness of schooling' since it consists of a top-down model of instruction which cultivates respect for authority, experts, and universal knowledge. Rather than taking the form of a corporation of persons devoted to a particular activity, as the medieval interpretation of the term 'university' presupposes, the U3E contains traits highly similar to those found in traditional education.

The employed liberal approach brands the U3E as a conservative institution that fails to reinvent society by unveiling the reality kept hidden by the dominant ideology. The U3E dissociates education from politics and strives to equate education with the attaining of meaning and self-fulfilment. By not recognising the political nature of its pedagogical work, the U3E takes the form of a conservative institution that is devoid of the 'languages of critique and of possibility' (Giroux, 1985, p. xiv).

The U3E does not cater for the transformation of particular subaltern older persons who tend to be incessant victims of oppressive social relations and does not draw up radical roles which it can carry out within the wider social context. The U3E keeps separating its pedagogical work from the socio-political reality that surrounds it, deeming older persons as a homogeneous group similar to its typical members.

One can argue that the U3E's lacunae result from an overemphasis on the question, 'How can one increase the number of older persons involved in formal learning activities?', but then neglecting 'To what end and why?' As a consequence, the U3E has ended with a relatively high number of older persons being educated for erroneous ends and purposes. I believe that it is of the utmost importance that the U3E abandons its functional stance, and develops itself as an archetype of transformative education. Essentially, this involves a commitment to expose oppressive social structures experienced by older persons, and envisage educational centres as sites of social struggle committed to social transformation. The following points comprise an attempt to suggest changes and alternatives to the U3E's current set-up in order to distance itself from being another euphemism for glorified occupation therapy.

First, the U3E's rationale must incorporate transformative terms, such as 'empowerment' and 'critical consciousness', so as to highlight its commitment to the replacement of oppressive (i.e. ageist) social structures. Since education is politics (Freire, 1985), the U3E must move beyond the conviction that meeting the learner's felt needs is the goal of good educational practice, as these needs may be shaped by the dominant entrepreneurial culture. This necessitates the U3E's rationale to incorporate a social vision for the future – one that centres on social change whereby the current oppressive social structures are overthrown.

Secondly, the U3E must refute the myth that any type of education leads to 'critical consciousness' and should incorporate a liberatory curriculum and gerogogy. A liberatory curriculum treats knowledge as being socially produced, with 'some' being attributed high status without being practical, and 'other' is possessing low status but which are highly useful. Through gerogogy, the U3E would be in a position to utilise a

dialogic and problem-posing approach to aid learners realise that the world is not given, but dynamically in the making.

Thirdly, the U3E must aim at improving access and provision to all distinct segments of older persons. Although the majority of the U3E's participants come from the ranks of the bourgeoisie, it is wrong to assume that other subcategories of older persons have disengaged themselves from social life. Given equitable circumstances, I am sure that they will also render themselves available to the U3E. This can be achieved by developing strategies that are successful in recruiting those type of older persons who are normally underrepresented in older adult educational classes, such as outreach education and critical use of broadcasting media and distance learning techniques.

Fourthly, the U3E needs to adopt a self-help culture, becoming more decentralised and autonomous. A self-help culture, in which members will direct the U3E's academic/social activities, will increase its autonomy from the University of Malta, and allow it to meet provincial needs. Moreover, such a decentralising strategy will definitely act as a catalyst for the attainment of transformative education. I firmly believe that older learners are the best suited persons to propose courses and activities that challenge ageist stereotypes and deem age as an asset rather than a liability, as well as playing a primary role in advocacy against ageist social structures.

Finally, the U3E must take the role of a 'progressive' movement by engaging in counter-hegemonic activities that aim to replace the dominant ageist subjugation. An anti-ageist hegemony is a real possibility if the U3E adopts a pro-active leadership that guides citizens to become aware of the oppressiveness inherent in the dominant ideology, and subsequently, forms a political vision which contains wider discourses for revitalising democratic later life. In this respect, the role of the U3E is to educate citizens (irrespective of age) that an ageist society leaves much to be desired and that equity, democracy, and justice, are not its forte.

In the meantime, until these recommendations are adopted, the U3E seems to be yet more evidence in favour of Verner & Newburry's (1958, quoted in Swindell, 1991, p.184) 40-year-old assertion that 'adult education is widening the gap between the educated and the under-privileged'. The U3E, by embracing uncritically the ideological approach found in traditional education, fails to act as an archetype of transformative education and functions as a conservative institution that reproduces existing power relationships. Moreover, the U3E falls short of contributing to society's improvement by making it more egalitarian. Occurring amid a complete lack of critical reflection and an overreliance on the assumption that any type of education results in emancipation, the U3E enhances and legitimates social inequalities rather than alleviates them. Regrettably, fieldwork data indicated that the U3E is a far cry from

Freire's role for education to aid learners 'to organise and mobilise themselves in order to get a greater share of power' (Freire, in Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 34). Such a premise should be at the heart of any educational programme, but especially in older adult education where the subjects are a predominant social 'border group'.

Correspondence

Marvin Formosa, Institute of Gerontology, University of Malta,
MSD 06 – Msida, Malta (mfor2@um.edu.mt).

Notes

- [1] Freire has been described as a 'legendary figure in the field of education' (McLaren, 1997, p. 147), the 'most important educational theorist of the twentieth century' (Allman & Wallis, 1997, p. 113), and 'one of the leading figures in critical pedagogy' (Mayo, 1999, p. 58). Freire's impact on adult education has been aptly summed up by Torres who asserts that 'there are good reasons why, in pedagogy today, we can stay with Freire or against Freire, but not without Freire' (Torres, 1982, p. 94).
- [2] Such works clearly signify that Freire goes beyond the 'new' sociology of education which simply denounced schools as agencies of social, economic and cultural reproduction (e.g. Young, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) but goes on to designate education as the means for 'the various oppressed groups [to] become more effective in their collective struggle against all forms of oppression' (Freire, 1997, p. 310).
- [3] The imposed state of silence does not signify an absence of response, but rather an internalisation of negative images, feeling incapable of self-governance, and consequently becoming dependent on the culture of the oppressors, the so-called experts, specialists in society (Heaney, 1998).
- [4] Dialogue demanded the problematic conformation of that very knowledge in its unquestionable relationship with the concrete reality in which it is engendered between teachers and learners (Freire, 1972a). On the other hand, 'problem-posing involved a constant unveiling of reality', and is '*revolutionary futurity*' (pp. 56–57).
- [5] Critical consciousness 'is the deepening of the coming of consciousness ... to search for rigor, with humility, without the arrogance of the sectarians who are overly certain about their universal certainties, to unveil the truths hidden by ideologies that are more alive when it is said they are dead' (Freire, 1993, p. 110).
- [6] However, Freire was adamantly opposed to the practice of authoritarianism: an educator has authority in so far as s/he helps 'learners get involved in planning education, helping them create the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education' (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379).

- [7] Furthermore, Allman (1984, p. 87) argued that older adult education would lead to the emancipation of older persons only if the self-help concept of elder learning leaves older people in control of their own thinking rather than being subjected to the thinking of others, and concluding by insisting that older adult educational practice was important.
- [8] In a later article co-authored with Glendenning, Battersby asserted that gerogogy 'provides older persons with opportunities for a self-conscious critique of their life and experiences ... that promote critical reflection and action' (Battersby & Glendenning, 1992, p. 120).
- [9] One has to keep in mind that from the over-60 national cohort, 17.5% have no schooling experience, 23% left school during their primary school years, 32% and 20% left school at their completion of primary education and secondary education respectively, and 81% of the 60 plus cohort have no qualifications whatsoever (Central Office of Statistics, 1998).
- [10] From my various informal conversations before, during or after lectures, only two members were aware of the medieval inference behind the usage of the term 'university' in the organisation's title. Most members believed that the term refers to the fact that the U3E 'promotes a high standard of education', 'all teachers are university lecturers', 'forms part of the University of Malta', 'it offers academic subjects', 'functions to give older persons a chance to attend university lectures', and 'is frequented by older persons who have an above average level of education'.
- [11] The U3E's prospectus states that the curricular programme 'has been designed to cover aspects of special interest to the elderly – social rights and responsibilities, pensions, support services, health care, including physical exercise, dieting, food and the prevention of illness and disability. Other programmes will be purely cultural'. Typical and well attended lectures included History and Appreciation of Art, Religions of the Mediterranean, Malta's Middle Ages, Culture Switching, Europe and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages, The Rise of Islam in the Mediterranean, and Malta Under British Rule.
- [12] Various members could be overheard flaunting the prestigious positions and significant responsibilities they occupied before retirement. Many conversations amongst males revolved around honourable deeds performed during their adult life. Most members communicated on title-surname basis – especially in opposite-sex interaction. Most attendees for the lectures spoke with idealistic overtones, were cynical of the routine and pragmatic pattern of practice, were polite and used various foreign words to express their ideas.
- [13] Whilst the primary factor would function to confront the various forms of ageist discriminations, an 'organic intellectual' is a leader who is active in 'active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10) towards the emancipation of older persons as a subaltern group. In this sense, it corroborates Freire's (1972a, p. 48) assertion that educational establishments 'will never propose to students that they consider reality

critically. It will deal instead with vital questions as whether Roger gave grass to the goat, and insist on the importance of learning that, on the contrary Roger gave grass to the rabbit'.

- [14] Furthermore, one has also to keep in mind that distance education can also be participatory in nature. It is positive to note that developments in telecommunications have allowed some U3As (e.g. the London U3A) to organise telephone conferences where participants can interact socially with each other.
- [15] The ugly 'head' of 'banking education' was especially obvious in activities in which the learners are asked to recollect and reflect on their past experiences. It is surely good news to read that the U3E encouraged learners to engage in collective reminiscence activities (Coppini, 1995). Yet, it is lamentable that the reminiscence exercises were engaged in an 'unbridled subjectivism' (McLaren & De Silva, 1993), rather than as a form of Freirean redemptive remembrance and social dreaming where learners 'remember in a critical mode ... to confront the social amnesia of generations in flight from their own collective histories' (McLaren & De Silva, 1993, p. 73).

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