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Online Elder Circles: A Guide to their Creation and Benefits

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Online Elder Circles: A Guide to their Creation and Benefits

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Abstract

This participatory research project explored the experience of creating and delivering an elder circle program in an online format as well as investigating the benefits to the participants. Elder circles are facilitated, elder-centred small closed groups of older adults who explore collaboratively the experience of growing old and living in old age. The researcher, with the help of her participant co-researchers, successfully translated a face-to-face elder circle model to an online format. The six participants, aged 70 to 87, met online without previously knowing each other and for six weeks engaged in facilitated asynchronous discussion on a secure dedicated website. The online format was shown to be an effective alternative to face-to-face delivery of an elder circle, with significant – even transformative – benefits to the participants. The report presents an overview of the process of creating and delivering an online elder circle, participants' reflections on their learning and the benefits received, key considerations for the effective implementation of the online program, and recommendations for future research.



1. Introduction

Elder circles are facilitated elder-centred small closed groups of older adults who meet face-to-face at regular intervals to explore and share ideas and insight related to the experience of growing old and living in old age. Participation in elder circles has enabled groups of older adults to reflect on their aging process collaboratively and has helped them to better understand for themselves a personal meaning of later life (Medcalf, 2009).

Using a qualitative participatory research method, I set out with six participants aged 70 to 87 to translate the elder circle model from a face-to-face format to an online one. The research questions that guided this research are:

1. What might be the benefits for participants of conducting an elder circle in an online format?
2. What might be learned, by carrying out an online elder circle as a research project and with the input of participants, about how to create and deliver an exemplary online elder circle program?

1.1 Background

In 2002, I offered to members of a local seniors' centre a series of workshops that explored the experience of growing old. I based the original series on the work of Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, whose ideas are presented in the book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. Over the next decade, I volunteered my skills as a teacher and counsellor to deliver many elder circles, initially as a way of learning for myself, at first hand, something true about growing old. Yet I was not the only one to benefit profoundly from taking part in a collaborative exploration of old age. Regular, facilitated engagement with their peers in collective "meaning-making" through participation in an elder circle enabled the participants to reflect on, to learn about and to better understand - and value - their aging process. Participants reported feeling validated by the group, experiencing positive effects from looking closely at their stage of life, and being helped to accept what *is* while also beginning to see theirs as a significant phase of life. Some spoke of their elder circle experience as personally transformative. In 2011, adapting it for a pilot program of their own, the Suicide Resource Group of Wellington-Dufferin (Ontario) used the face-to-face elder circle model for their ElderTALK program, which explored issues of older adult mental health.

Over the years, the elder circle model that I developed and continue to refine has become less and less curriculum-based and facilitator-driven, instead unfolding through close attention to the ongoing involvement of the participants.

Recently, after several years' experience teaching university-level courses online, I began to wonder how the elder circle model might transfer from face-to-face to online. I reasoned that elder circles offered online could greatly increase the availability of the experience to older adults.

1.2 Use of the Participatory Research Method

Participatory research was a suitable approach to use for this research project as it required, as did my objective, the direct involvement of the participants. Marlett and Emes (2010), writing about the value of partnered research with older adults, suggest that partners bring different perspectives and that appreciating and acknowledging the contributions of one's co-researchers contributes to the kind of openness that indeed characterized our time together. Participatory research usually engages participants from the outset, often in response to a perceived need articulated by the participants themselves (Morris, 2002). These participant co-researchers were instead invited to engage with a new delivery model of an existing elder circle design. I mapped out and, with technical help, erected the scaffolding – the online environment – around which we as a research team could begin to build the work. In this project, their central participation was essential and indeed has shown to be exceptionally enriching; their input is featured throughout the report.

1.3 Situating the Project Within the Related Literature

This project is informed by previous work in the areas of older adult learning, online learning, and online support for older adults. Findsen and Formosa, in their handbook, *Lifelong Learning in Later Life* (2011), connect older adult or later life learning to improved health status and characterize it as a way to empowerment, self-fulfillment and personal growth. Kenyon, Bohlmeijer and Randall (2011) present a wealth of viewpoints within narrative gerontology that argue for the central importance of story in later life.

The literature of online learning generally is vast, and some of it has relevance for this project. Guidebooks such as *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community* (Palloff and Pratt, 2005) contain helpful strategies for participant engagement and effective online group interaction. The fact that much of the literature of online learning is being written either for and about traditional student learning or about executive and enterprise training only means that one needs to tread carefully in the search for useful information that could be applied to an activity such as an online elder circle. Much of the journal literature about online learning and older adults has been focused on skills training (i.e., reports of projects in which older adults were taught computer skills). There are reports of studies that examine older adults' experience with online learning (see, for example, Dorin, 2007) but fewer, it seems, that address the design of online learning exclusively for older adults.

Research into online communities designed for older adult social support and personal growth provides opportunities for comparison with the online elder circle model. Nimrod's paper, "Senior's Online Communities: A Quantitative Content Analysis" (2009) explores the benefits and characteristics of online communities for older adults, finding that they result in increased well-being and feelings of empowerment. Online communities such as those discussed in the paper, however, are open discussion boards with thousands of discussion threads and thousands of participants. Discussion boards, chat rooms and social networking sites seem to be the examples of online



social support for older adults that are currently being offered and studied (see, for example, Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson, 2009). Online elder circles provide a different level of connection and support among participants, a declared focus on the exploration of one's aging process and a corresponding difference in learning potential.

1.4 Importance of the Research

The contribution of this research project, its relevance and timeliness, makes it worthy of attention. Online elder circles have potential as an important tool to combat social isolation in older adults, a concern expressed and investigated widely (see, for example, Cloutier-Fisher, Kobayashi and Smith, 2011; Jaeger and Xie, 2009; Khvorostianov, Elias and Nimrod, 2011; Masi, Chen, Hawkley and Cacioppo 2011; Sinha, 2013; Thomas, 2004; United Nations, 2002). Online elder circles provide learning opportunities to participants that in turn benefit them as they value their own aging process and aging in general. The online elder circle model may also be, in the way that face-to-face elder circles have been, adaptable for use in other circumstances, providing an alternative approach to the delivery of other initiatives for older adults.

2. What was done

2.1 Introduction

For six weeks the participants and I engaged in a set of ongoing conversations about the experience of growing old. Our elder circle project's objective was to explore the topic of becoming an old person and living in old age and to do that collaboratively in an asynchronous, online format. The research objectives were: 1) to learn about the benefits of participation in an online elder circle and 2) to determine how best to translate the elder circle model from a face-to-face to an online format, at the same time uncovering the essential elements for its online design and delivery.

2.2 The Participants

Those who took part in this participatory qualitative research project were not only participants but also elders (in this case, people over age 70) and co-researchers. Six participants were recruited to the Online Elder Circle Research Project from the Sheridan Elder Research Centre's (SERC's) database by means of a recruitment flyer posted on SERC's website (see Appendix A). All of the participants had previously indicated their interest in receiving information by email about SERC's upcoming research projects along with recruitment details. Two of the participants had previously taken part in a SERC research project, although not online. Names and email addresses of the first six people to respond to SERC's online recruitment flyer were sent to me, as well as the next six names to provide for a waiting list which turned out to be unnecessary.

Potential participants were contacted in the order that their responses to the recruitment flyer were received at SERC. It happened that all six of the first who



responded were women: four were aged between 70 and 73 years and two aged 83 and 87 at the time of their recruitment to the project. Five lived within approximately 20 kilometres of SERC, and one lived farther away, about 100 kilometres. The participants were unknown to each other or to me when the project began. They all lived in their own homes. Two were widowed and living alone, one was divorced and sharing a home with her daughter, three were married and living with their spouse. All were physically mobile, still driving, and involved in social activities outside the home.

2.3 Beginning the Project

The six respondents, contacted by email, agreed to receive a telephone call from me to learn more about the project. During my introductory telephone call, each consented to receive a letter of information and consent form, with a signed copy to be returned. Once enrolled into the research project, the participants each took part in a semi-structured telephone interview lasting about 30 minutes. (See Appendix B for interview guides.) The central purpose of these telephone interviews was to assess each participant's prior experience with formal online learning (they had none), to address issues of security and explain how safety and security within the online environment were to be maintained, to discuss participants' expectations of the project and of their contribution to it, and to answer any remaining questions.

Before beginning the online component, I asked each participant to prepare an autobiography of 150 words. I did the same. As some of the participants pointed out, 150 words allows little space for the recording of a long and complex life, but in fact it would give them each the opportunity to choose from those long lives the essential elements that they wished to share with the group as we began. Because I would ask them to post their autobiographies to our online elder circle site, it also provided an opportunity for each of them to access and try out the site, after receiving instructions from me by email, and to let me know if they were having difficulty with access, navigation or posting.

From this point we each kept a research journal, with the understanding that it would not be shared with other participants but would be sent to me at the end of the project, providing additional data for analysis. Each participant determined the format of their research journal entries as well as the frequency of entry.

2.4 Technical Support

Our project was possible not only because of the dedicated collaboration of the participants and the guidance of SERC staff, but also the support of the Manager of Learning Management Systems and Learning Technologies at Sheridan College. Through the Blackboard Learning Management System, we were provided a space for our virtual community via SLATE - Sheridan's online learning environment used widely within the institute by its students and faculty. For our project, the manager created a stripped-down version that provided for our needs as a learning community engaged in collaborative research.

For security we were each provided a username and password, giving us sole access to our site for the period of six weeks. During our telephone interviews, I



explained that postings once made could later be removed by their author, and that I could remove any posts that I considered inappropriate for our purposes, a feature that, as it turned out, I did not need to use.

With the exception of the links that the manager helped me to attach and activate, an average of two or three each week, we intentionally used no audio or video technology. The use of such additional technology would have made it difficult to establish with any accuracy the key elements of an effective online elder circle. How might participants' interaction, their collaboration, their learning, indeed their level of involvement, have been inhibited – or enhanced – by the fact of being able to see or hear each other? What might have been the impact on some of the participants of requiring them to learn about and use additional technology, something that was outside the project's purpose? The use of Skype, for example, which allows participants' auditory and visual input and output, would have introduced such potentially blurring elements into the project and its analysis. Our work as an online elder circle was carried out by means of the written word, talking with our fingers, through posts to the site.

2.5 Our Website and How it Grew

Our website initially consisted of two “rooms” or discussion areas. One was “Housekeeping,” in which my participant co-researchers and I posted comments and questions about the “how” or the process of the research project.

The other was the “Discussion Room,” in which the participants, with me as the facilitator, discussed elements of their aging experience in the context of the questions and links to articles, web sites and YouTube videos that I presented to them. After the first week, which I began with a quote from George Bernard Shaw about aging and life purpose, I worked to tie my choices of resources to comments and questions that were appearing within the participants' discussion. That is, there was intentionally no pre-existing curriculum for our elder circle; except for the first week, all resources were gathered and presented by the facilitator “in the moment,” in response to the participant-driven discussion. The content of the discussions, within the broad topic of one's aging experience, developed out of their own unfolding awareness. A new discussion began once a week, presenting at times a different perspective on the previous discussion and usually, but not always, accompanied by relevant online resources. In fact, all of the discussions became organically interwoven, building on each other as the weeks progressed.

After three days, I noticed that the circle members had begun posting “threads” - connected strings of interaction - to the group from their own and others' autobiographies. Reading their threads, I understood the necessity of a social space, a place for them to meet and become acquainted, and that I had neglected to provide one for them. The participants had understood clearly the purpose of both the Discussion Room and Housekeeping and found that neither provided them with an informal place for both reflection and free-flowing conversation. Unable to find this necessary space on our site, they had created their own with offshoots from some of the posted autobiographies. With their permission, I collected their threads of social conversation



together to form the beginnings of the third room, which became known as the “Tea Room.”

2.6 Ending the Project

At the end of our six weeks of discussion, the site became inaccessible, irretrievable, and was erased, as we all understood it would. In the final days I had added a “Goodbye Room” which, although used, turned out to be merely supplementary to the goodbyes and expressions of appreciation being given spontaneously within the group. Five of the participants decided to exchange email addresses, so that they might stay in touch with each other. One participant decided instead to contain the group experience within our agreed-upon six-week timeframe. Ten days after the end of our online elder circle, I once again carried out semi-structured telephone interviews lasting about 30-40 minutes with each of the participants. (See Appendix B for interview guides.)

We created our Group Statement (Appendix C) that could be printed and used by the group members not only as a memory of our time together but as a talking piece to be used when explaining the project experience to friends and family.

The research data used in the qualitative analysis consisted of a hard copy of our written online posts, a copy of each of our research journals, and transcriptions, with notes, from tapes of the semi-structured telephone interviews that I conducted with participants before and after the online project took place. Particularly as this has been a participatory research project, and much of the report incorporates their words, participants have had the opportunity to preview and approve the inclusion of their own input before the report’s submission.

3. What was learned

3.1 Introduction

A group of six older adults previously unknown to each other offered insight and support while collaborating on the online elder circle project, becoming not only colleagues but also friends. By their own report, they learned more about the experience of growing old, both their own and that of others. The secure online format, rather than inhibiting or limiting their learning, resulted in an experience that, while different from that of the face-to-face elder circles I had facilitated, was nonetheless positive and meaningful.

During the online project, we used our real names, and they appeared as authors’ names atop each of our posts. For this report, however, the participants each chose a first-name pseudonym to be used when threads of conversation are presented, so that we could avoid confusion for the reader while maintaining confidentiality. My own entries appear here under my name – Trudy. When stand-alone quotes from participants are used, given as examples or evidence and not part of a thread of interconnected responses, no pseudonyms appear. All material in unnamed quotes is



the opinion of one of the participants, and was either posted on the site when it was active, reported during a telephone interview with me, or recorded in their research journals.

This discussion section is organized around my two research questions:

1. What might be the benefits for participants of conducting an elder circle in an online format?
2. What might be learned, by carrying out an online elder circle as a research project and with the input of participants, about how to create and deliver an exemplary online elder circle program?

The participants in this project are best placed not only to give their feedback on the experience but also to enrich the research report with their insight on both the benefits of participation and on what was learned about how to create and deliver an online elder circle. They have become authorities on their own aging and bring to the report their expertise about online elder circles due to their first-hand experience of participation in one.

3.2 Further Consideration of Our Online Rooms

The Discussion Room came to be characterized as, “the work,” and, “the learning site, the more challenging one, the one where I often wouldn’t respond right away. I’d watch the video clip or read the link, then go away for a while. I needed time to mull it over before I knew what I wanted to say.”

To me as the facilitator, the Tea Room seemed a place for participants to build, extend and cement relationships. A breathing space. A place for elders to hang out. Naturally some chose to use it more than others. “The first place I went to. It gave me fodder for going on, filled a need, touched an emotional chord,” “It was the place for incidental conversation,” and, “It was the dessert, where we talked about whatever we liked.”

The Housekeeping Room served as our research reflection and problem-solving space, “The place to step back and look at the process rather than the personal responses.” It was also the place where we supported each other in using the technology. “It was good to know that if I was having a technical concern or question, I could go there.”

Our record of online posting totals by room gives a picture of the frequency of visits with posts. Frequency of visits to the site without posting a message, for reading or browsing only, was not recorded, although according to the participant’s reports, they often visited the site for purposes other than posting. The web links I had given them at the start of certain discussion weeks were there, and as several have said, they chose to read, reflect, take time to think about their response, make connections between and among the web links, their colleagues’ posts and their own lives, usually away from the site, and when ready, prepare and post a response.



Table 1. Post totals

| Name of Room | Participant Posts | Facilitator Posts | Total by Room |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Housekeeping | 72 | 44 | 116 |
| Discussion Room | 167 | 66 | 233 |
| Tea Room | 136 | 43 | 179 |
| Total | 375 | 153 | 528 |

There was at times an interplay, a kind of symbiosis between the posts in the Discussion room and those in the Tea Room. Perhaps because in the Discussion Room content appeared for participants to respond to, if they chose to, it was often approached as the more weighty of the two rooms, “the learning site, the more challenging one,” as someone suggested above. It may be that some of the participants saw the Discussion Room as the one where the research happened. And yet it was as often in the Tea Room that the learning took place, a place where they shared stories, gave and received support, and began the transformative process they hint at below. It may be that the learning that was evidenced in one room was made possible by the co-existence of the other.

Nevertheless, as the facilitator I worked to ensure that each room retained its identity. In our online learning environment, there needed to be a clear delineation between and among rooms, with a mutually-understood purpose for each. Otherwise the soup that would result quickly leads to frustration for all, as I had learned through many years teaching fully interactive university courses online.

3.3 Benefits to the Participants

Over the past decade, my work in facilitating face-to-face elder circles has taught me much about the benefits to the participants. Before beginning this research project, I had supposed that, while being of some benefit, the online format for elder circles might turn out to be an inferior one, that without face-to-face contact the experience, for all of us, would be somehow lessened – still beneficial but in a less-significant way.

The following are individual comments from the participants about the benefits of participation in the online elder circle:

“It’s a wonderful way for people to be mentally stimulated. Sometimes now when I’m alone the evenings can be long.”

“For me the wonderful thing about being involved in something like this is that it changes your thinking completely. You could actually feel people blossoming in that group. I understand the worth of it more than I ever thought possible.”

“At the beginning I didn’t know what to expect; I got hooked in when others responded to something I’d posted. When I saw others’ posts, there were places where their posts resonated with me. I admired their courage in exposing difficult times in their own lives and I tremendously admired the joy and exuberance that was expressed.”



“I started off being curious. Being an elder-elder, I felt I was qualified to have a go at it. It was a wonderful outlet to talk about things I’ve never talked about before.”

“And definitely for those who are socially isolated. When I was laid up I would have loved to have something like this.”

Particularly for an older adult, social connection online may sometimes indeed be preferable to face-to-face: during our Canadian winters, for example, or when poor health or lack of transport may prevent someone from leaving home. Yet I now see that there are additional advantages to the online format, less obvious, unanticipated. Here is an example. I had begun to notice that some posts were being made at times of the day when a face-to-face elder circle would not happen – in the middle of the night, for example. Here are two of those less-obvious advantages, delivered together in one insightful post:

“Older people often don’t sleep that well, so they can come on whenever they choose. Also sometimes if it takes a bit longer for you to think through, you have the opportunity to read, think, go away, come back, and still be in the same conversation.”

3.4 Participants’ Reflections on Their Learning

Asked about the learning that took place, here are some of the participants’ individual responses, from their research journal entries and our final telephone interviews:

“I am thinking outside my usual box. I enjoy these conversations with people I wouldn’t otherwise have met, and sharing our experience. This stage of our lives is a good place to be, a sweet spot after all the years of growing up, making a living, managing the family. I am also learning that so many of us have had to deal with the universal issues of life: with loss, betrayal, disappointment, calamity of one sort or another, and we come out the other end stronger, wiser, more able to cope with other vicissitudes. Even within our 5 weeks so far, there have been highs and lows in the lives of some of us.”

“I was surprised at the amount I hadn’t previously thought about in aging, I just looked at it as a natural process you don’t give much thought to. Learning about the different aspects was like a butterfly when it comes out of the cocoon.”

“I found out a lot about the stages of growing old from the participants, the ways they perceived certain situations. It’s different at different stages in your life and I hadn’t thought about that. Also about how beneficial it is to be in each of those stages. Generally people just clump it all together, they say he’s elderly, she’s elderly, but there are subsections and that became so very clear from participating in the online elder circle.”



“Often when I’m not writing it’s because I’m thinking. Lots of thinking required with the Week 3 Discussion. First response was, wow, this is more like a university assignment. How can a sock-knitting housewife make a meaningful comment on Nelson Mandela or Kofi Annan? But really it’s asking us to comment on the concept of elder wisdom influencing the decisions of those in more immediate positions of power, i.e., the adults.”

“I was blown away. I had many good role models (mother, dad, etc) but I’ve never thought of aging as a work in progress. To me it was always just something you did; you have no option, do you? I learned a lot that will stick with me from now on.”

3.5 Something Happens Within Our Stories

In this selection from the Week Four Discussion Room, notice how an observation of mine was enriched by the participants’ reflection on their story-sharing, and their insight into the ways that our collaboration was leading them to new learning, bringing support from the other participants, and feelings of empowerment.

Trudy – I’m very interested in something that is happening here in our circle. Several weeks ago we each started with a 150-word autobiography. Several of you commented that it was a difficult task and for a variety of reasons. My understanding is that it was difficult for you to chose only 150 words, and thus to introduce yourselves to the rest of us that way, with such a wealth of life experience to draw from. Now what I see is that you come round again to those stories, and each time there is a deepening of disclosure and a deepening of insight. Each time someone comes back to her story, she releases more of it to us. It is her choice. Each time she becomes more whole to me. Each time she is making connections between our discussions and reflections and her own personal life. Do you notice this, too? If so, what is the benefit to being able to revisit your story, or parts of your story, and release it to us? What is making it possible for this to happen?

Dorothy – I think we are getting to know each other and are feeling more comfortable discussing life stories and experiences we may not have openly discussed before. I think once I got my divorce I firmly shut the door on memories of my marriage, although as I look back, there were many good and happy times. I had to make the break to concentrate on moving house and starting again, learning about house maintenance etc. and being the head of my small family in Canada. I had to find out if I was going to be a survivor.

Wendy – It has been a crazy busy week, too many evening meetings, other commitments; often when I have time to write, the computer is being used. Will now try to catch up. Trudy asks what is the benefit to revisiting our stories and releasing them to others. I believe that as each of us catches a glimpse of what has occurred in the lives of others within our circle, we recognize and respect their strengths and resiliency, and can then see that that also applies to ourselves...kudos to Dorothy, a survivor, and to Laura, struggling with constant pain but still standing on that mountain peak,



appreciating experiences of the past, and looking forward to what is coming. And to Patricia, who has spent most of her life caring for others, now concerned for herself, but still the one that others turn to when they are themselves distressed. I applaud and admire you. To Anita and Fran, I value your wisdom, joie de vivre, experience and optimism, and have much to learn from you.

Fran – It's a privilege to read about everyone's worlds - both past and present - and for sharing your honesty, clarity of thought and frankness. When I read the words you all write they really resonate with me and make me more appreciative than ever of this opportunity the six of us have been given as part of this study. I don't know your faces - but I know your uniqueness - all within a one month time period. It's amazing!!! Our thoughts come bubbling out on the computer keyboard without hesitation - so much easier than if they were spoken words because I, for one, would edit my sentences or leave out chunks of information about the point I would be trying to make. Could it be that for us a new on-line experience like this strips away much of the top surface chit chat that makes up casual friendships with other people we meet up with face to face? With our (not too nimble) fingers we get to the heart of the subject matter and then lay it all out there boldly and beautifully.... and for me at least it makes my soul feel so much better at the same time when I am sharing.

Laura – This has been such an invigorating experience...and I feel we have quickly cut through the extraneous and really gleaned essences of the real person[s]. What a privilege to partake! Trudy asked about why it is possible to revisit the old stories and the benefits. I think the fact that there has been anonymity has helped hasten the process. With our group we were anonymous, but now I feel that has slipped away, and there is a trust that has built a rapport within the group and thus the comfort in sharing. And the wonderful support and feedback that comes from each helps too. Your thoughtful questions...open ended and provoking us to look inward are a great stimulus too, Trudy. Off to the Tea Room now. Have a good evening!

Trudy – You have shown me that online elder circles are not only possible but can be of benefit. Please accept that the credit goes to all of you. I can ask questions, but it's been up to you to make it happen. Tomorrow evening, Tuesday, I'll move us on to a Week Five discussion room. Before then, if you have time, scroll through this week's discussion and see if there are places where you want to respond to topics and questions you may have missed.

3.6 Creating the Online Community

My second research question centred on how to create and deliver an exemplary online elder circle program. It was essential to me to learn how we would establish an online community of people who, though previously unknown to each other, were trusting, supportive and eager to learn together. Without that, I believe, our project would not have been viable. Asking participants to write a brief autobiography and to take the risk of sharing it with strangers was, I think, one good place to start. The



autobiographies gave us some talking points and a base to build from. The key factor was not so much that we created and posted autobiographies but that together, from the start and in a non-judgmental way, we began to build a base for our small community and a method for our collaboration.

Fran – It's so interesting to read through the bios - but not sure that bios tell the complete story of who we actually are - just maybe touch on the outer shell of our lives - the side the world can see and record - and to some extent the side I share initially with strangers. And I know that these recorded chunks of my life are supposed to shape the person I will (or have) finally become - and to some degree I do believe that, but as the years go by I have accepted that life doesn't roll on and on (as I thought when I was younger) - so now I have a new vision and a definite purpose to live a guilt free life - now is the time to feed my soul, enjoy the goodness and joy in living my life, breathe in each new day with a sense of "no expectations" - everyday. And I wouldn't know how to express this in a bio - and probably it's not of value to anyone other than me.

Wendy – Thoughts on purpose; my mind jumps back 50 years to a line from Voltaire's *Candide*, the only line that has stayed with me, and on which I have based my life. "Il faut cultiver notre jardin." That is, we must tend our garden. There are many layers in my garden. Top layer (I put it on top now, tho not long ago it would have been further down) would be myself, to care for my own health, mental, physical, the whole shebang, self actualizing. Next layers would be my family, friends and community, being supportive, contributing. Underlying all would be stewardship of our natural world, learning, appreciating, sharing. Writing a brief autobiography pulled up soooo much from the past, some absolutely horrible times, some very contented. A goal of 150 words required strict distillation, tempered by the desire to remain positive. Reading others' bios suggests we've all had our ups and downs, and we are all survivors.

Trudy - I agree with Fran that our mini-auto-bios tell only some of the story. They do, though, open the door. It's interesting to me, Wendy and Fran, that in reading your posts there's a feeling that you both see, or are coming to see, your time of life as something new. Fran, you talk about a "new vision" and Wendy about a garden that has a different top layer from what would have been on top when you were younger. I wonder when that happens. And maybe how. I wonder when you begin to see more clearly that there is a newness to later life, something different or additional that isn't about creaky bones, whatever it may be.

Anita – A lot of what has been said plucks a familiar chord in me. My motto has always been "Help yourself and God will be with you." At this time in life I tend to find family and friends more important than cleaning. Also giving back to my community is very important to me. Learning from my grandchildren is a constant source of joy, especially my 18 year old granddaughter. She keeps me hopping with texting, SMS and Skype. Friends are so important, especially for those of us who have come from the old country and have no family (parents, siblings etc.) here. As I grow older I wonder how long I can



make the trek back to see my brothers and their families. The mini-auto-bios were all very interesting, and more than once I thought “dead on.” I love the analogy of tending our garden.

Patricia - Most of my life has been spent caring for people. My sister was paralyzed - my Great Aunt was bombed out from her nursing home in London and lived with us for a year. My Grandfather lived with us for 10 years, then my father came to live with us. Finally my beloved husband had Parkinson’s. Then there was the joy of baby-sitting grandchildren. Now the grandchildren don’t need me and there is a bit of a gap but I drive seniors to shopping and church. As long as I can drive I feel I can be of help to someone.

Anita - Good for you Patricia to pitch in where needed. I think we all want to be needed, or is that just our generation. My grandchildren still want to spend time with me, and I am thankful for that. But I am preparing for the time when they are too busy with their own lives. Participating in volunteer work gives me that opportunity. Having friends is a great blessing too.

Several days later...

Dorothy - My apologies for being late due to computer problems which resulted in a trip to my experts store. Now if I can upgrade my own computer skills. I think the rest of you are way ahead of me. My purpose in life has always been to cope with whatever I have had to deal with as well as I could; to keep busy; to treat other people as I would wish to be treated and wear out rather than rust out. My biography I found difficult to do - so many years to cover in such a few words - the result felt bleak and not like me.

Anita - I too had trouble condensing my bio - so much to say and so few words to say it with. Well we now have the Tea Room to chat about anything we want – great idea Trudy. Wearing out rather than rusting out is a good motto, love it.

Dorothy – Purpose in life – to do the best I can in whatever circumstances I find myself. To keep busy and try to justify my space on Earth.

Laura - Sorry to be so late, you would not believe what I have been coping with over the past 10 days. I found it very difficult to put “my life” into 150 words; what was important changed as I thought about the last 72 years. It was fascinating to read the other ones and note similarities and differences. Very quickly, I felt an affinity.

3.6.1 Accessing Deeper Levels of Connection

The Tea Room began with conversation about interests: knitting, books, tennis, gardening. Someone wrote, “Am enjoying the interplay between participants. We’re off topic, but topics are only starting points, and what’s important is that we’re learning about each other and our commonalities.”



On Day 3 there was a post in the Tea Room about a recent death in the family and two participants immediately responded with support. Later, another participant wrote, “You ask how is it possible for trust and respect to build in our virtual community? We have received each others’ posts with respect and that has encouraged us to be more brave and share further.” There follows part of a conversation held in the Tea Room on Day 7; it gives the first evidence of a shift to a deeper level of connection.

Wendy – The pain of her absence is with me every day of my life. And what’s that got to do with us and the elder circle? Well, here we are starting to open up and share some of the experiences that have shaped who we are. All we needed to do was to tap that tree, and all the sap comes flowing forth. Pardon me, more sap flowing forth, more salty than sweet.

Fran – Thank you for sharing these thoughts – and I wanted to reply immediately after I read your message this morning, but truly I didn’t know how to respond. I got on with my day – but every so often my thoughts kept returning to your story. I re-read it tonight – and I hope my words show the respect that I feel for the way your attitude to life has unfolded.

Trudy – Wendy, you say that most of your friends don’t know your story, and yet you’ve chosen to share it with us, a group who were strangers to one another a week ago. I don’t think that surprises me, but only wondering how it happens.

Fran - ...sometimes it may be easier to share experiences with “faceless” strangers than the possibility of entering into a two-way conversation by sharing a deeply personal story with friends. Personally, I would prefer to approach these deeply personal and “tender” subjects in conversation with dear friends face to face who have known me a lifetime. But this is what is so exceptional about forming this group – diverse backgrounds played out against exceptionally different experiences with just the singular common thread of being in the latter part of our lives.

Anita – All of us being in the same stage in life has probably something to do with it.
Fran I think you are dead on with your comments.

Laura – It is amazing how quickly each have shared very personal stories, yet makes sense when the sense of safety and common ages and experiences allow us a forum to do so. This is so exciting.

3.7 Technical Issues

A variety of technical problems followed us. In some cases, computer time had to be shared among family members and for some who lived alone, the lack of technical support could cause frustration.



Patricia – Sorry to be so long responding to Week Four - I did spend quite a time yesterday writing a long response and then – it just vanished! I will try again...Better send this before it does a disappearing trick again.

Fran – Hi Patricia – I have suffered from the “disappearing message” syndrome at least two or three times. And invariably they were long responses and once they disappeared before I managed to post them, then I lost the incentive to start over again. I write what I feel - and if that message disappears so does the feeling!!

Trudy – Have you tried writing your response as a Word document, saving it, making a copy and pasting it into the text box on our site? That way, if it disappears you will still have it on your computer. That’s how I usually prepare the opening post for each new week of the Discussion Room. Trying to recreate something that took time and thought the first time is too frustrating.

Patricia – I agree, Fran, but think it is good to get it out even if the message gets lost. It did it again today but I will try Trudy’s suggestion next time.

Dorothy – Patricia, sorry you lost your reply but relieved to know it isn’t only me who gets problems. I am firmly convinced that computers have a will of their own - and if they don’t want to co-operate - they just don’t.

Yet these two exchanges from Housekeeping, the first posted on Day 5 and the second in Week Two, show evidence of the participants’ growing facility with the technical component:

Trudy – What have you learned about how the site works?

Fran – I like to keep on threaded so I can see how the messages run in response to the one above. I discovered a small “+” sign as a way of opening up the whole subject area. I don’t feel that much more knowledgeable about the site though – maybe just a little less intimidated and more willing to experiment and feeling more confident that I won’t lose the messages now.

Anita – I’m with you there, Fran. It’s the intimidation factor, and boy could I lose it all. But now I’m fine and wander around without a problem.

Wendy – Once I recovered from the initial trauma of not being able to log on, I love it, as you can tell from the number of posts. No problems getting around, always on threaded, scrolling to the bottom to catch the latest.

Patricia – I like using threaded. [Later] Am having a problem with my lap-top – will check in when it’s working. I had to call for help yesterday because it kept telling me I wasn’t



“connected”! (I didn’t need a computer to tell me that!) If you read about some woman throwing her electronics out the window – it’s probably me!

When asked for, peer guidance was readily given:

Laura – I can remember seeing a second link for Week Two...a reading link I think. I cannot find the directions to it, but would like to participate. Could someone please give me the reference?

Anita – Laura, the second link was a post of Trudy of March 9 at 7:29am, in the Week Two Discussion folder. To get there look on the left of the page. There is a menu (choices) go to Web Links and the article is there. I found it interesting. See what you think.

Laura – Thank you very much Anita. I am off to read and ponder. Have discovered the favourites button...makes getting to the site sooooo much easier.

3.8 Resources

I chose resources for our learning community and posted them as web links that would fall in line with what I perceived to be the current week’s online activity. Here is one of many straightforward-seeming responses, this time to a YouTube video of an interview with James Hillman, that holds for me a compelling life lesson. From the Week Three Discussion Room,

“His thoughts on waking up at night were interesting - I find that I dream a lot and on waking try to analyze my dream. When I was younger I used to have vivid dreams and would bore my husband to death by retelling them in the morning. Then they stopped. Now they have returned. Perhaps I analyze them because I have no husband to listen? A friend once promised to loan me a book on the meaning of dreams but he died before he got around to giving it to me. I must go to the library.”

Sometimes, however, as indicated in this exchange from the Week Three Discussion Room, a resource was found to be far from inspiring:

Anita - I thought long and hard about this, but could not get as much out of it as I did from the topic of “The Elders.”

Fran - Same here Anita – didn’t get a lot out of that piece.

Anita - Fran, that is a relief, I thought I was losing it. I kept reading it and it did not grab me. Took me a long time to comment because of that.

Trudy - Thanks for your honesty - all who commented on the Wm Thomas piece. What interested me about Thomas is that he is in adulthood and trying hard not only to learn



about but also to promote “elderhood” as something different, new, important and necessary. Perhaps Thomas’s message is directed toward adults.

Our site included a Chat Room feature, and at the end of Week Three I asked the participants if they would like to use it. Their co-researcher responses clarified for me the reasons why they chose not to:

Trudy – If you would like to try the Chat Room next week, let me know here in Housekeeping and suggest one or two times of day and the days that you are usually available.

Wendy – Haven’t seen any comments yet re chat room, but so far I don’t see the need for it. We’re already chatting in Tea Room, & with two of us sharing this computer [at home], I have to get on when it’s available.

Fran – I agree with Wendy’s comment.

Anita – I agree with Fran and Wendy. Being able to write when the mood takes you, and having the time to ponder your answers is great. A given time in a ‘live chatroom’ might be inhibiting.

Patricia – Things are fine as they are as far as I am concerned.

Laura – I find the tea room and the rooms we now have are very comfortable and the ability to use them when the time is right or the feelings flow is very helpful. I cannot see what a chat room would offer that would be more helpful.

Anita – The three rooms are working well for me. I think the Tea Room was a splendid idea, makes me feel all comfy and cozy. I don’t think I have ever thought as much or as positively about aging before.

3.9 Example of Elder-led Analysis

Throughout our time together, the participants were encouraged to share directly in the research process. Here, from Housekeeping, is an example of elder-led analysis:

Wendy – Another aspect of our elder circle we haven’t discussed is size. When I think of the growing numbers of potential participants in such an arrangement, I wonder about the optimum size. With the six of us, for the first few weeks I made a chart, adding pertinent information under each person’s name, until I got to “know” them. Since we are all quite different, eventually the personalities began to jell, and I could “visualize” each person when I opened that post. (It would be interesting to meet everyone and see how expectations coincide with reality.) I think if we had vastly larger numbers in a group, this sorting people out and connecting with each other as individuals would be much more difficult. A long way of saying I think six is a good number for a group.



Trudy – I agree, Wendy. And thank you for bringing up this important point. My experience with face-to-face elder circles is that six works well. The most I've had is ten and that is too many. I've found that with more than six face-to-face, people who are more introverted tend to say less, and there is often someone who naturally dominates, or tries. But it doesn't work the same way, it seems, within an online format. Here there is time to digest, to reflect and to say what you choose to say when you choose to say it.

Patricia – I agree with 6 as an ideal number. I have difficulty in remembering names and have to keep going back over previous posts to remember who said what. The thought of dealing with 10 or more names puts me in a panic. One of the things I like about our group is that I can take time to think about the subject - it doesn't demand an immediate response.

Wendy – Rather like Anita, who learned there are advantages in listening before speaking, I grew up being more of a listener than one who dominates a group with conversation. But that doesn't mean there's nothing going on inside. Here we have ample time to listen, and when we do speak, each voice speaks with equal weight, and is equally valued and appreciated by others.

Anita - Wise Wendy, there is a time to listen and one to speak, and in this group we are under no pressure to do either in a hurry.

Fran - I agree with Wendy and Trudy - six is a perfect number - anymore it would take me too long to understand the uniqueness of my on line colleagues and because of this I think I would tend to be less communicative. Also there is an intimacy and camaraderie with a group of six that might not develop with a group any larger. And if the group was any smaller then it would become more of a responsibility to keep the communication flowing when maybe the timing isn't quite right.

3.10 Limitations of the Research

Our work together was participatory, research done with the participants rather than on them. Elder-centred research like ours necessarily provides outcomes that are specific to the elders who took part. Six participant co-researchers was, in the view of all who participated, the appropriate number for our online elder circle to function most effectively. While this work and its outcome are not generalizable to a broader population, even to another online elder circle, there are presented here many ideas that could be useful for future research.

3.11 Summary

A research community of seven, we created and carried out an online elder circle program lasting six weeks. We each took two main roles, either researcher and



facilitator or participant and co-researcher. Our project was carried out in a way that was collaborative, elder-centred and, when possible, elder-led.

I have presented evidence of the program's delivery method, finding it to be effective, as well as first-hand evidence of the benefits that the experience brought to the participants. An online elder circle is a concept that, in the explaining, begs for examples. I hope the examples presented have been helpful in laying out for the reader how one online elder circle has functioned and what it was that elicited such insight, resulting in transformative learning both for the participants and for the researcher.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Introduction

The research project answered my two research questions as well as offering up a variety of new ideas. That is a strength of the participatory, collaborative process, one well-suited to these particular research questions. Curiosity and an interest in learning something new characterized all of our initial telephone conversations and, while the online elder circle was active, participants reported "thinking outside my usual box," learning about the aging process – both their own and others' – through online interaction, being challenged by the Web Link resources offered to them, and seeing later life in new ways. They wrote often about the experience of learning and of valuing themselves within the collaborative online community. Yet it is clear that certain features need be in place for an online elder circle to function effectively.

4.2 Key Recommendations

Online elder circle participants require –

- Assurance that safety and security features are in place for users of the online elder circle website
- Regular access to a computer and the internet
- Basic computer skills
- Quick access to technical support for their own computer, preferably at no or low cost

Online elder circles require –

- The presence of a skilled facilitator
- A secure website housed within an institution or organization
- For the facilitator, ongoing connection to a technical support person working within the institution for occasional questions and clarification
- A small number of participants
- That participants are initially unknown to each other and to the facilitator



4.3 Importance of the Facilitator

The presence throughout of a skilled facilitator is essential. While peer support is a feature of the experience for participants, an online elder circle is not a peer support group. Indeed, while support is commonly given within it, the online elder circle is a learning group and not a support group, peer-led or otherwise. Here is an entry written at the end of Week One, from my own research journal, one of several entries that try to address the facilitator's role:

“At times I've felt quite apprehensive. Is this going to work? The participants do not yet know where our process will take us, and neither do I, and I must use considerable finesse to guide without leading, to steer without directing, to respond as much as initiate. And so that they continue to be engaged, collaborative, learning, and enjoying. There have been times when I thought some of the participants had opted out, but it seems that they were having tech problems or taking time to think. They are respectful of each other. They are friends, in fact. When to move us on? I'm doing it today as I sense that things in the discussion room are slowing. Even in a virtual environment, one needs to follow one's senses. Go carefully; be prepared to apologize. Pay close attention to what is being said.”

4.4 Technology Needs and Considerations

Participants in an online elder circle also need regular access to the required technology (i.e., a computer and the internet) in order to participate. In addition, the participants suggested that a set of directions be included for how to access and navigate the site. I thought I had done that, but in fact had embedded instructions within other posts so that the information was less accessible than it could have been. No matter how “savvy” the participants might be, they would likely benefit not only from a set of directions but also from a structured “get-familiar-with-the-website” time.

Regular access to a computer and the internet, however, needs to be augmented by regular access to technical support. For some of the participants in this project that was unnecessary: friends and family members were available to help out and in some instances help simply was not needed. Yet friends and family members cannot routinely be expected to be available, as some of the participants indicated. In two cases, participants sought advice and direct help from a service provider. Technical assistance must be a consideration. Essential, too, is a dedicated connection to an institution or organization that is willing to provide support through their information technology infrastructure.

4.5 Thoughts on the Online Format

I set out to create an online elder circle that, in technical terms, was as straightforward and uncomplicated as possible, while offering a user-friendly, appealing format within which our interaction could happen. I learned that a chat room was unwelcome and in fact would defeat some of the advantages that an online format has over a face-to-face elder circle.



Although most members of the online elder circle hoped they would have an opportunity to meet once our project had ended, not knowing each other before we began and not meeting during the project was a key factor in allowing each to explore the experience of aging with others, within themselves, and without hindrance.

Just as one of the participants learned that aging is, for her, a work in progress, I have learned that the concept of the online elder circle is itself a work in progress. I believe the concept to have significant value. Refinements are desired; likely it will always be so.

4.6 Participants on the Potential for Online Elder Circles

During our initial telephone interview, several of the participants mentioned their interest in taking part in a research project that could in future benefit other older adults. Later, online, comments such as these were posted, “I’m thinking about people who can’t normally get out, aren’t mobile. It must be difficult,” and, “I enjoy having friends to chat to, but friends move, lose their health or die as you grow older. The circle of chatting companions grows smaller.”

This thread is taken from the Week Five Discussion Room, as we were nearing the end of our project:

Trudy – Do you think that the kind of experience we are having here could be helpful to older people who are not as socially connected as you are? Those who may lack mobility, for example? What are your thoughts about online elder circles as one way of helping older people to combat social isolation?

Wendy - Yes, I do think that our elder circle could be helpful to those who lack mobility, for example. Perhaps health care workers or people like you, Trudy, could initiate such groups, almost like a book club, where people share ideas.

Fran - I believe it could be a hugely valuable tool to offset isolation and loneliness for an ageing population especially when mobility issues begin to minimize face-to-face socializing. Wendy’s comment on likening online elder circles to the book club concept is excellent. It is very valuable to have a central element (a starting point) for the circle to absorb initially and respond to, and then quite naturally conversations will expand to include other issues and experiences as confidence in the group grows. An online facilitator within the circle would be a key factor to help keep the group cohesive and help with offering advice/guidance because of the odd technical issue that always arises when working electronically. Without that guidance a less confident participant could easily drop out of the circle because of limited computer skills. There are lots more ideas buzzing around in my head, but I think that this is probably enough said.

Trudy – Thank you. Your reflections and suggestions are helpful. An additional feature of our online elder circle, as you know, is that it’s given us an opportunity to be participants and researchers at the same time - to engage, to create, and to evaluate. I am grateful to all of you for playing both roles so well.



Fran – I believe that as we get older (and we are not out and about as we would have been when we were younger), then society offers us less and less opportunity to have the deep seated “lifestyle” discussions in a casual and non-judgmental setting. When we do get that chance to listen, dig into our memories and share and then digest everyone else’s experiences it has a profound effect of lifting our spirits, and provides us with a feeling of comfortable companionship – both of which can impart a sense of self-worth and value as we continue to age.

Anita – The only thing that I believe would be essential is a facilitator, first to get the group going and then to give everyone a feeling of safety. To me that was very important during this experience. Having been laid up a few times with mobility issues, a group like this would have been a wonderful way to socialize.

Patricia – There are so many older people who can’t drive and they are desperately lonely. That is why I offer to drive Seniors to church, for a coffee and occasionally shopping. I have to retake my Driver’s Exam this summer - what if I don’t pass? How much longer can I go on driving? How will I manage when I can’t drive anymore? It’s scary. I would love to keep in touch with my old friends but none of them are computer savvy. I think this is an even bigger problem for immigrants. In my area there are many elders whose English is poor to say the least. They love me visiting them but it exhausts me trying to make out what they are trying to say. It would be good, wonderful, if they knew how to use the computer. Just think how a Croatian woman, for example, would enjoy talking to other Croatians.

Wendy – I so agree with Fran and Anita that a facilitator is invaluable in an on-line elder circle like ours, to introduce topics, smooth out technical problems, to tease out the little nuggets of thought that will lead to further threads growing. Our circle is of relatively short duration, just 6 weeks. I wonder how others would unfold over a period of years, if there would be offshoots as some participants exchange emails and continue their conversations. Perhaps there would also develop an aspect of mutual support and caring, so that if someone doesn’t respond within an agreed upon time, someone could check on her. Now here’s a thought outside the box: we have Meals on Wheels. What about Nerds on Wheels?

Wendy – Patricia, consider this a virtual hug: mmmhmn. Sometimes the caregivers are themselves in need of care, and I sense that is where you are now. Our elder circle has three who still have their spouses and three who are on their own. What a valuable insight this is giving us into each other’s lives. Shadows look deeper when next to the sunlight.

Laura – Trudy’s question. For sure! It would be helpful to older people: stimulating thoughts and memories. It would help them feel connected and bring positive feelings as they build rapport with others. Also, when people have physical challenges and pain,



often those symptoms feel less bothersome when we feel “up” and our mind is on topics of interest. The only potential problem I see is the frustration that sometimes comes when a computer gives me a technical challenge or won’t do what I want it to. A personal contact that I could call for help and know he/she will respond quickly would be very valuable and reassuring. Several others have said a leader is invaluable and I agree. Someone needs to quietly guide, challenge and keep the topic going.

Patricia – Thank you Wendy. I accept the hug. I do have a recent acquaintance who always greets me with a bear hug. I love it. In our family we were not huggers and showed our love by jokes (usually rude ones) and mock punches. If I ever meet you, don’t be surprised if I punch you on the arm! That means “Very glad to meet you!”

4.7 Suggestions for Further Research

With additional research, it may become increasingly evident that the online elder circle can be an important tool to combat loneliness and to promote feelings of social inclusion, with the attendant health benefits that may bring. Possibilities for further research with the model are many. The research focus could, for example, be on gender, age, ethnicity, or aspects of health both physical and mental. Social inclusion may not be an end in itself; circles also focus on learning and indeed problem-solving. An online elder circle could be a component of community engagement. Circles could intentionally serve a specific base or, like ours, consist of the first six people who respond to a flyer. Some of these suggestions clearly require, both in the research phase and beyond, the direct involvement of suitably-trained professionals. Participant groups to be considered might include, among others:

- A mixed-gender or one-gender group
- A group comprised of two different age groups within elderhood
- A group whose members share an ethnicity or new immigrant elders
- The recently retired or the about-to-retire
- Those at home whose chronic health status limits their mobility
- Those at home who are temporarily less mobile (e.g., recovering from surgery)
- Those who are homebound for any of a variety of reasons.

Online elder circle research might also focus on extending the reach of learning organizations such as Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs) or enhancing and indeed strengthening the experience of participation in an action-focused elder group. Members of such groups may reside near each other, as most of ours did, or on opposite sides of the globe.

We found that a six-week-long closed group was appropriate for our research project, enough to give us evidence of the online elder circle model’s potential. Depending on the circle’s purpose, however, its duration and indeed its configuration could be adapted. It is the idea of the online elder circle that can be embraced at this stage, and creative consideration of its potential adaptations made subsequently. My hope is that some of the readers of this report will give thought to ways they might



investigate and adapt the idea of the online elder circle to address needs within and beyond their own professional and research settings.

4.8 Closing

In Appendix C you will find a copy of our Group Statement, assembled from participant submissions as the project was ending. It takes the form of a compilation of independent statements made about our work together. Here is a concluding thread, also created in the final days of our project, a set of interconnected posts from the Tea Room:

Trudy – Here is a challenge for you. Answering in one sentence, what have we been doing here over the past six weeks? Bare bones. Basic. What have we been doing? It will be helpful both to you and to me if you can. It will help me to understand what is fundamental about our time here together.

Anita – Exploring the process of getting older and finding out the many wonderful things still to learn. That is my sentence, but like in the 150-word autobiography, one sentence is not nearly enough to express how many windows these weeks have opened up for me. I will never again think about getting older as just that, but from now on it will be a wonderful learning experience. Thank you all.

Trudy – With the intended purpose of investigating the possibilities of an online elder circle, I've been drawn into the stories and hearts of six people who have willingly given their time to the project, to me and to each other, with an outcome beyond my highest hopes.

Fran – Being guided through a process to discover how all the chapters of our lives provide us with an appreciation of how to embrace and move forward into our elder years. So pleased to know that our little project (because I look upon it as “ours” at this point) met your expectations as well as ours.

Wendy – What have we been doing here? We've been exploring, rediscovering and sharing the stories that compose the narrative of our lives. When we began, I had no idea what to expect. I found a connection with others and an opportunity to explore and exchange ideas that has gone beyond what I have experienced even with those I consider close friends.

Anita – I also feel privileged to have been able to take part in this research – though I must admit, most of the time I totally forgot it was research and just enjoyed the experience.

Laura – A time to recognize who I have become. A time to evaluate my variety of life experiences both positive and negative, and appreciate myself: the ‘almost’ end result.



To Anita, Dorothy, Fran, Laura, Patricia, and Wendy, from Trudy. As participants and co-researchers, you gave more than was asked. Your openness, willingness and commitment to our research project will lead to benefits for other older adults, and that is what I had hoped. You showed the way. Thank you.

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Appendix A

Sample Recruitment Flyer



Sheridan Elder Research Centre

Become an *Online Elder Circle* Research Participant
Be a part of this exciting new research direction!

**You are invited to participate in our 6-week online program
to study the effectiveness of Online Elder Circles**



An Elder Circle is a facilitated, elder-centred, small group of older adults who meet at regular intervals for the purpose of exploring and sharing ideas related to the experience of growing older and living in old age.

Elder Circles conducted face-to-face have been shown to benefit those who take part in them. This project will explore the effectiveness of delivering an elder circle for the first time in an online format.

Through activities, readings and conversation, six participants will engage in structured online discussion with each other and with the researcher-facilitator about the experience of growing older.

Six-week program beginning in mid-February
Participants will work online from home for a total of 1-2 hours per week.
Open to older adults aged 65+

You will need access to a computer and the internet.
Only basic computer knowledge is required.

If you have any questions, or to register please contact: serc@sheridancollege.ca
(This project has been approved by the Sheridan Research Ethics Board)

APPENDIX A



Appendix B

Pre-Program Interview Questions for Participants, by Telephone

1. Brief introduction and welcome
2. What interests you about taking part in this online elder circle project?
3. Do you have previous experience in online learning? If so, please tell me about it.
4. Whether or not you have previous experience in online learning, what questions do you have at this point about the project?
5. What do you hope to get out of the experience of participation in the online elder circle?
6. What do you think you will bring to the online elder circle?
7. What concerns do you have, if any?
8. As the facilitator, I have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of the participants. What will help you to feel safe and secure as we carry out our elder circle research project?
9. My hope is that participants in this elder circle will benefit from the experience. That is what has happened in the previous face-to-face elder circles that I have facilitated. What might be the benefit for you and for the others?
10. If a friend or a family member asked you about what you will be doing in the online elder circle, what would you say?

Post-Program Interview Questions for Participants, by Telephone

1. Please tell me about your experience of our elder circle.
2. What surprised you? What did you learn?
3. What, if any, were the benefits for you and for the group?
4. What worked well? What didn't work well? What improvements would be helpful?
5. Please comment on the online format specifically. In your view, what must be considered in offering elder circles online?



Appendix C

Online Elder Circle Research Project Group Statement

April 2013

I always picture us gathered together in the living room with our mugs of tea, shared stories floating about like dandelion fluffs in a gentle breeze.

We have been building a strong bond of trust with a wonderful group of six people we have never met through a medium that was not invented when most of us were born.

I was surprised how fast our group of six under Dr. Trudy's guiding hand came together as a group of friends able to discuss a wide range of subjects. I was able to comfortably share some thoughts I had never expressed to anyone before.

...like finding the root of my "being" - finally figuring out who I am, simply because the pieces of the puzzle of life have all slotted together. It's the absolute joy of knowing who I am, what I might do, or who I choose to spend time with - and then just going forward and doing it!

A time to recognize who I really have become. A time to evaluate my variety of life experiences both positive and negative, and appreciate myself: the 'almost' end result.

Thinking about getting older in a whole different way has given me a new outlook on the 'process'. Since longevity is in my genes I might get a good run at this experience of getting older, and am looking forward rather than backward.

Now the grandchildren don't need me and there is a bit of a gap but I drive seniors to shopping and church. As long as I can drive I feel I can be of help to someone.

We have been taking an ordinary natural occurrence [aging] and by taking that small seed or nugget of our essence and pulling off the covering layers, examining its contents and have given it space and light to grow and bloom into a much more understood and appreciated blossom.

I have for years had an image of me. I think as a baby I was like a wee raw diamond unearthed and sat upon a table. As I have grown older and had the variety of experiences of my life, I see many facets being created and my diamond is reflecting more and more light as it shines from the facets created. Every experience I go through...both the painful ones and the very special ones (hurrah, I am a grandmother!) all rub on the diamond, polish it and continue to change it and reflect back light.

One of the things I like about our group is that I can take time to think about the subject - it doesn't demand an immediate response.

When I reread the brief autobiography with which I introduced myself to the other five participants in our elder circle, I see that I did indeed choose the themes that have unified the composition of my life's story.

As we have dipped in to new discussion areas each week, we have picked out some point of connection with our own lives, a morsel which is shared, and others have responded with their own ingredients, and brought them to the table, some savory, some sweet, some a little bitter, but all with varied colours and textures, and blended respectfully together we have experienced a fine meal of friendship and discovery.

Now is the time to feed my soul, enjoy the goodness and joy in living my life, breathe in each new day with a sense of 'no expectations.'



I have often said that the way I wish to end my days is this, to be out on a hike, sharing wonder at the natural environment around us, and to be dropped by a falling 200-year-old oak. A non-native Norway maple won't do.