The Value of Writing for Senior-Citizen Writers

JEFF PARK
University of Saskatchewan

BEVERLEY A BRENNA
University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

This qualitative study used content analysis of questionnaire data and thematic analysis of writing samples to explore the writing of senior citizens aged 65-93 who participated in a public library *Writing Challenge*. The research questions focused on the importance of writing as well as themes emerging from participants' work. Non-fiction, including lifewriting components within fictive pieces, utilizing the expressive function, appeared as the predominant genre. Key themes included identity, *olden days*, progress, humour, nature, religion, and the love of family. A key implication was the importance of community writing events for writers who may not have other means to develop individual writing networks. Further research related to seniors and literacy is recommended in order to add to the limited available research.

Seniors are, for the most part, a neglected population within literacy research, and figure much less prominently as a group than children or young adults in questions about literacy use and themes within writing products. Opportunities that encourage seniors' writing, including writing groups, writing workshops, and writing contests, are becoming more prevalent than in years past, although there is limited research to examine what, if any, influence such opportunities have on seniors' motivation to write.

This qualitative study of the writing of senior citizens who entered poetry, short stories, or reminiscence in a public library's *Writing Challenge* examined the value of the act of writing and the particular motivational factors that prompted this particular population to write. Two university literacy researchers, working alongside a public library outreach co-ordinator, began this three-year study in the spring of 2011, collecting, compiling, and ultimately publishing the work of the seniors in a writing anthology (Brenna & Park, 2012).

The work was conceptualized as a way to explore the value of writing in the lives of older adults. Both of the researchers are writers who publish in a variety of forms and genres, and who had perceived a gap in research related to senior populations and writing. One of the researchers with long term experience conducting writing workshops for adults with mental health issues was particularly interested in the role of life writing and whether it played a role in the impetus behind the public library's writing challenge (Park, 2005). The other researcher had studied the role of writing as an avenue of connection between seniors in isolated living situations and other people (Brenna, 2012).

In addition to assisting with the compilation of seniors' writing for the anthology, the researchers examined the writing for patterns and themes and collected further data

through semi-structured questionnaires (see Appendix A) related to writing endeavours and interests as well as writing techniques. Data from these questionnaires were analyzed for emergent trends and issues. The results of the study, while contextualized within the group of participants, offer implications related to community supports for seniors' writing as well as illustrate ideas about implications related to the functions of language for this age group.

Previous Research

Sumara's (2002) work on literary resources for schools identifies the importance of personal connections with texts and intergenerational relationships, weaving personal anecdotes about his mother into theoretical narrative. Sumara argues that "literary experience is a place" (p. xiv). An envisioning of such a "place" in the lives of senior writers is lacking in current research where much of the focus is on individual benefits related to cognition. Some of the research available on the writing of older adults focuses on memory: cognitive benefits related to journal writing (Brady & Sky, 2003), and the relationship between age, memory, and linguistic ability (Byrd, 1993; Hoskyn & Swanson, 2003). Of the previous studies that focus on the functions and uses of literacy by elderly writers, Kazemek's (1997; 1999) work emphasizes the need for further research into how elders, ages 65 and up, engage with writing. Kazemek (1999) also supports this population in sharing their stories so that literacy may make society "more vital, humane, and just" (p. 523).

Research that focuses on the landscape of individual seniors engaged in the act of writing—and the benefits of writing—is relatively rare. What studies there are indicate that external rewards were not necessary to support motivation (Staples, 1981), that increased interaction with others was important, and that participants found the completion of writing very valuable (Koch, 1977; Staples, 1981).

Koch (1977) taught poetry in a nursing home in New York City to elderly people in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, all from working-class backgrounds with limited education, Though many of the writers were physically incapacitated in a variety of ways, by the end of the workshop all were actively writing poetry with enthusiastic involvement and participation. Koch maintained that the writing and the interaction within the group led to a sense of richness and value in the writers' own lives. Dreher's (1980) work with elderly writers found that the participants often asked for homework because they wanted to practise and share their work with peers. Initial assignments led to a drive to write more to gain an understanding of the participants' own lives.

Gillis and Wagner's (1980) work with lifewriting considered how writing contributed to elderly people's sense of better self-worth as well as to their social involvement. Butler (1985), who utilized writing workshop techniques with a focus on lifewriting in a social and recreational centre for senior citizens, discovered that this group was determined to continue and function "as an autonomous group, with the ability to become self-sustaining, to expand its activities and to provide leadership for other similar groups" (p. 239). Butler and Bentley (1992; 1997) defined lifewriting as biographical, anecdotal, and expressive modes of discourse. Lifewriting has become a major focus in writing research, as evidenced through the International Auto/Biography Association (2014.)

Winterowd (2007) documented his decade-long workshop experiences with senior citizens and included samples of the group's writing in a published book. A second volume of compiled writing was published by a participant in the group (Reid, 2009). Winterowd (2007) found that his "community of writers" (p. 5) used writing to remember (or 'chronicle') experiences in their lives, and to share stories with family and friends, and in doing so, writing became an important part of their lives.

Previous Explorations in a Writing Workshop Context

Park (2005) has been facilitating a writing group for the past twenty years though a local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. Although there are no age restrictions on participating in the group, the writers who are 65 and older constitute a very significant portion of the group. For the first few years, the facilitator provided writing prompts and participants wrote for ten to fifteen minutes, then read their work aloud to the group. More recently, the participants have been very keen to suggest their own topics. Although offering generalizations about a thematic focus is difficult, many of the seniors are exploring issues of memory and the past, as well as experiences that were important to them as individuals and as part of a social situation. Themes include family, traumatic events, vocation, and dealing with mental illness. Much of the writing could thus be considered as personal writing, or expressive writing (Britton, 1972), with a focus on personal experiences.

Each year the facilitator collects and compiles all the writing to be typed, edited and published at the end of the year. The group now has published 22 books of their collected writing. The weekly sessions act as a place to write, a social gathering, as well as a possible therapeutic means of dealing with current situations in theirs lives. The weekly meetings also appear to value the experience and self worth of the writers, who are often marginalized or forgotten by the wider society. The facilitator does not consider these writing sessions as therapy, but observes that the act of writing and the social aspects of the group seem to have therapeutic value for the participants. Further study is indicated related to avenues of community support in terms of writing endeavours that may have profound effects on various populations.

Context: Saskatoon Public Library Contest

Since 2004, the Saskatoon Public Library has offered an annual seniors' writing contest, an event that has provided a rich context for research on seniors' motivation to write. For this research project, the two researchers collected the writing that was submitted in 2011 and published the collected work in an anthology that was distributed to all writers who entered the contest. The anthology provided the researchers with a rich source of writing for content analysis by the research team, although this was not originally part of the library's mandate for the Writing Challenge offered in 2011.

The Research Framework

Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings

The researchers' invitation to participants to act as informants on their own cognitive processes follows other work in educational research which treats study subjects as important sources of information (Emig, 1971). The researchers designed this

study as qualitative research, where categories for inductive analysis would emerge from the study data and have the potential to shift as the study progressed. Hugo's (1979) concept of a writer's *triggering town* relates to this research in that the researchers were attempting to identify the place in which writing held importance—socially or otherwise—for the writing participants. Investigations of the influences that inform a writer's work establish implications for communities interested in facilitating this work, and a conceptualization of the *triggering town* for the senior writers involved in this study was anticipated to be an important finding. An interest in exploring these frameworks lead to the following research questions:

1. How and why is writing important to a group of seniors who have entered a Saskatoon Public Library writing contest?
2. What themes emerge from the entries to the seniors' writing contest?

Methods

The larger study entailed collecting the writing that was submitted to a public library initiative and utilizing this writing as data in addition to obtaining data from semi-structured questionnaires and follow-up in-depth interviews using qualitative methods (Guthrie & Hall, 1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This article summarizes the results of the interrogation of the writing itself in addition to an exploration of the questionnaire data.

Forty-two writers over the age of 65 entered a local public library's Seniors' Writing Challenge—an invitation to submit work to the library's outreach co-ordinator in any or all of four categories: poetry, short stories, reminiscence, and short dramatic works. Along with the invitation to submit writing came an opportunity to have some of the work selected and read aloud by a team of library staff at a celebration of writing, as well as having entrants' names included in draws for door prizes. Although the call for writing mentioned the possible opportunity for inclusion in a writing anthology, it was not indicated as a certain outcome of the challenge. In the end, the two researchers compiled all the entries sorted by category, and edited and printed the anthology, making a copy of the resulting 265 page anthology available to all entrants to the contest.

The senior writers were presented with copies of the anthologies at a public gala. At that time, the writers received research information and consent forms, as well as copies of a questionnaire which they could mail back anonymously to the researchers should the writers wish to participate in the research project. From the 42 entrants, 22 of them agreed to participate in the study and mailed in completed questionnaires for a participation rate of over 50 percent. The anthology itself provided an artifact for content analysis related to our research questions. In addition, the 22 questionnaires completed by the willing participants in the research project provided a lens through which to examine the significance of this writing challenge, and value of writing in more general terms, in the lives of the participating writers. The researchers then applied an inductive content analysis (Berg, 2009; Merriam, 1998) to the questionnaire data to recognize important trends and issues identified by the participants. The anthology was analyzed for themes, and topic focuses of the writers. Pseudonyms have been attached to questionnaire responses and writing in the sections that follow.

In addition to the detailed questionnaires that most participants completed, three of the writers asked to be interviewed to explain their views on the value of writing to them as individuals; these interviews and the resulting analysis using a case study methodology are not included in this article, and will eventually be presented in another paper. The writers' interest in further participation demonstrates evidence of the importance many of the writers place on the value of writing in their lives.

Discussion

Analysis of Types of Writing

One of the first questions the researchers were concerned about was the type of writing actually completed for the contest. Categorizing writing is always more complex than it first appears, and there are a myriad of ways of doing so according to one's focus. For the purposes of this study, we limited our analysis to three forms of categorization: genre; fiction/nonfiction; and Britton's (1972) categories according to writing function.

One way of examining the individual pieces of writing was to look at genres, beginning with the categories of the contest itself. The writers could enter their completed writing in one of four categories: reminiscences, short stories, poetry, or short dramatic works (labelled as skits in the library challenge brochures). In total, 42 writers submitted 112 separate entries in the four designated categories. In terms of these genres, the writers submitted 28 pieces into the category of *reminiscences*, 21 pieces as *short stories*, and 63 submissions as *poetry*, with no entries in the category of *dramatic works/skits.*

Another categorization scheme addressed two categories—fiction and non-fiction—a common way to organize library books. The researchers used this type of categorization as a starting point to determine if the writers were mostly writing about memories and events from their own lives, or creating fictional works. Although it is often difficult to completely be sure of even this simple categorization, not knowing the intent of the writer, the researchers were able to use the questionnaires (see Appendix A) to gain some insight. In response to the question, *Do you write about your life? (Experiences? Memories*?), 19 answered *yes*, 1 answered *sometimes*, 1 answered *only indirectly* and only 1 answered *no*. To illustrate, Neil stated that, "Yes, I draw from my life experiences, but mainly use them to tell mostly fictional stories." Jake mentioned that he "started a project that tells stories about things that happened to me when I was a child. I want to give a copy to my three kids so they'll maybe understand the world the way it was then, for me." Although this evidence is certainly not conclusive, it does lead one to consider through the writers' own responses that personal experience is often the basis of their writing.

In addition to dividing contributions by genre and fiction/nonfiction, we also utilized a categorization that Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) utilized when they examined the writing of thousands of samples from secondary school students in Great Britain. This research team came up with three categories according to the function and the purpose of the writing—Transactional, Expressive, and Poetic. A simplified explanation of of this categorization would show a continuum of language use with transactional language at one extreme, expressive language in the middle, and poetic or aesthetic language at the other extreme. Transactional writing informs, persuades, and instructs, and is always concerned with an end outside itself. Examples of this type of

writing include exams in educational situations, formal essays, non-fiction books, newspaper reporting, and instruction manuals. At the time of Britton et al.'s study, the researchers found that most of the writing that occurred in educational situations focused on transactional writing. Fortunately their work has been extremely influential and as a result the writing that is done in schools now has broadened substantially in range and type. Expressive writing expresses the personal ideas and feelings of the writer, using language that is "close to the self" (Britton, 1972, p. 96) to verbalize the writer's consciousness. Journal writing, personal notes, and descriptions of day-to-day events are examples of this type of writing in its early developmental stages. Britton et al. (1975) define poetic writing as "a verbal construct, an 'object' made out of language. The words themselves, and all they refer to, are selected to make an arrangement, a formal pattern" (p. 90). Examples of this type of writing are poems, short stories, novels—anything where the structure itself is integral to the meaning of the writing, and provides an aesthetic response to present a writer's ideas.

Britton (1972) believed that all writing starts from the expressive and can develop from that initial point into transactional and poetic writing, as well as more complex, developed forms of expressive writing including personal letters, memoirs, or autobiographical works. Using expressive writing as the starting point for a matrix of writing, Britton maintained that writers develop and thereby create more mature forms of writing that increasingly take into account the reader as audience. In terms of expressive writing, Britton et al.(1975) maintained that as a writer advances, "he [sic] develops mature forms of expressive writing…forms very different from the multi-purpose of expressive writing of a young child" (p. 84). The research team provides an example of a letter from the poet Keats to his brother, as a mature form of expressive writing (p. 84). It is important to note that expressive writing can be developed through revision and acknowledgement of the intended audience into complex pieces of writing. It is the expression of the personal that is central to the idea of expressive writing as a function, rather than the transmission of information (transactional) or the creative focus of the poetic forms. Obviously dividing all writing into three types is ultimately simplistic since the categories will break down under deep analysis (as all metaphoric structures do). Despite that possible limitation, Britton's (1972) three writing functions can provide a valuable insight into analysis of writing.

In our analysis of the writing in the anthology, the researchers found that much of the writing utilized the expressive function. Most of the writing used personal, everyday language to convey personal perspectives on experience and memory. This was obviously true in the case of the entire reminiscence section, but even in the short story and poetry classifications much of the writing was very personal (as further evidenced in the writers' questionnaire responses). Britton et al. (1975) have suggested that all writing begins in the expressive function and later develops into transactional or poetic writing as writers acquire more of an awareness of audience, and the various structures of writing that are available for expression. In the case of the senior writers, most of them wrote to gain a sense of understanding of events that directly impacted their lives and it is therefore very understandable that the expressive function was so dominant in their work.

Examples of the expressive function include Mary's reminiscence from her classroom career, in "Teaching Memories."

> I began teaching at Tipperary in September, 1937, and I stayed there for three years. I boarded at a home where there were three children, all of whom I worked with at school. Luckily they were well-behaved and allowed me to relax when I was off duty!

Another author, Helen, provides the following description in "A Touch Stone of Life," illustrating memories from the summer of 1952:

> We had such fun that week! We felt so grown-up & we went swimming after dark & the jelly fish in the water sparkled. It was all so beautiful. We ran wild and free and baked golden brown.

In "Before Automatic Coffee Makers," Gerald narrates a humorous event about chasing a cow from a country yard:

> I took a good length of stick and Ruth picked up an old piece of fence post stating that madam cow was going to have a big headache if she came her way. In reality it worked 'cause when the old cow seen us three threatening people coming her way she picked up her head and tail and ran for, and through, and open gate and kept on running as far as we could see her.

An Analysis of the Writing Themes

Through content analysis, the researchers found seven key themes emerged in the compiled writing included in the anthology. The first and most common of the seven themes was *identity*—a centering of self or fictive self in and with the world. This category demonstrated the most versatility in that it quite evenly collected all three forms: reminiscences, short stories, and poetry. Ken wrote, "When I was a kid…old people…were a little bit weird, a little bit eccentric, a little bit withered-looking and a whole lot different from me…Well would you believe it? I have realized that I am he and he is me."

A close second in terms of preference was *the old days – what it was like when....* This category held mainly reminiscences although some short stories and one poem were connected to this topic. Sentiments expressed related to the old days were overwhelmingly positive about the past, or, at the very least, neutral. For example, Ken wrote about Nana Watson's rocking chair:

> It sits quietly now, not often used…it is my choice among all the good, soft, welcoming furniture in that place…it is also my choice when I think about all of the chairs where I have sat throughout my life…I can recall holding each of our three children on my knee and rocking them back and forth, back and forth…generation after generation has rocked in that chair and there the chair sits…just imagine the stories it could tell.

Another chair is immortalized in Shirley's reminiscence, "Grandma Pulled Teeth."

> Many a time while visiting her on a Sunday afternoon someone would come along for a tooth extraction…(and would be) immediately ushered to "the chair" by Grandma…as grand kids, we would never mention a loose tooth or a toothache in her presence…After all, nothing slipped by Grandma. Bless her for doing this service for the community.

The next two categories, tied for third and fourth place, were *progress* and *humour*. In the former, entries were almost exclusively poetry, although there was one short story; in a treatment of *progress*, which was often ironical, authors waxed on various incantations of environmental destruction along with other enmities. For example, Jim's poem "Naked Ape on a Lonely Planet" encapsulated the message in a number of entries: "Fueled by black gold/Until your air is filthy/You fly through the sky in silver planes/Then shower your species with bombs…"

In the humour category, word play (through poetry) and comical incidents (through short stories and reminiscences) provided a sharp contrast to the authors' views on *progress*. Many of the pieces took advantage of physical comedy to create a laugh. Bev's short story "Where are Your Feet" outlines a golfing excursion where mother triumphs over son.

In fifth place appeared *nature*, a category replete with poetry about the loveliness of the natural world—another striking theme when juxtaposed against *progress*. Brenda's poem "A View from a Window in Spring" closes the collection:

> A rainy day,
> A rusting car;
> Billowing Smoke…
> I can't see far.
>
> A rattling truck
> With a heavy load;
> Garbage sticking
> To the muddy road…
>
> I look again—
> Then I can see
> Pink petals
> On a little tree.

A virtual tie appeared for sixth and seventh place: *the power of religion*, all poems, and *the love of family*, a mix of poetry with a few short stories and one reminiscence. Two themes in addition to the seven already described, each with respectively two entries, were *heroes* and *extreme sports and adventure*.

It appears that these authors quite strikingly used particular forms to address specific subjects—poetry coupled with *nature* themes and the topic of *progress* for

example. Both across the collection and within the *progress* poems, a reader finds nature eloquently pitted against the negativity of human activity.

A more integrated mix of forms appears in categories such as *identity* and *the old days*. In this collection a reader gets the sense of many writers seeking to delineate their pasts while other writers defined the present and predicted the future—with particular attention to the passing of time throughout all three operations.

In Marianne's poem, "The Piper," she invokes another text, that of *The Pied Piper*, to frame her reminiscences of a past career as a fly-in nurse to northern communities. Marianne's piece ended with a note about the future:

> Someday soon,
> I will pipe above the sky.
> The children will listen, and remember,
> "She loved us, but only for a while."

Ken's poem "Trivialities" contains a warning about progress, and a benediction of sorts:

> In our great country, this land of plenty from sea to sea to sea
> I see great promise as we look towards the future.
> The future belongs to us if we learn from the lessons of the past…

James writes, "Now I stop and wait/For remembrances to emerge/They float in a turbulent river/Dissolving in unforgiving waters…days and years/Altering the outrage of time…" Evocative statements appear in this poem about aging, as James says, "Oh fate, let me escape the river without end."

The dominant themes in the compiled writing tended to focus on personal experience and a need to better understand the past. The writers often used their own experience as a means to document and validate their lives, and communicate those experiences to others in both fictional and non-fictional writing.

Questionnaire Findings

The following section explores the themes that emerged from the written responses to the questions asked on the questionnaires (included as Appendix A). The researchers asked a series of 16 questions, including simple questions designed to collect participant information regarding age and categories entered. There were also a series of questions that explored motivations for entering the contest, and the significance of writing in the participants' lives.

One of the main inquiries of the questionnaires was an attempt to understand the motivation to enter the writing challenge in the first place, where adjudication and prizes were not part of the framework. There were, however, a number of door prizes awarded on a random basis, and storytellers/readers were invited to share particular pieces of writing with the audience of writers.

Darlene responded that she "read about the challenge in the *Outreach* newsletter. At the same time I had been working on a memoir for three years and decided that one of

the chapters might interest a senior audience." Neil also "saw a notice in the Library News and just thought I would try it. …I also have had my share of experience, but I thought no one would be interested. Then I came to the realization that I too have a story to tell." Ken also noted the importance of entering in order "to get my story told."

The Writing Challenge provided a venue for the writers to express their writing, and in doing so to share their experiences and their lives. Marianne noted that she liked "the idea of sharing writing, not just to have their writing read and heard, but also to read other's work." The social aspect of entering the writing challenge was quite prevalent in the responses in the questionnaires. Charles noted that the challenge provided "a sense of camaraderie of like-minded expressive folks sharing mental content in a format others appreciate." Gerald entered the library challenge because "…writing is a hobby of mine … and [I wanted] to be part of something."

The social aspect of the challenge was extremely important to the majority of the participants. The writers who usually worked alone and in isolation saw this as an opportunity not only to get involved but also to have a place to share their writing and to have the opportunity to read others' writings. In doing so, the writers created a community. In addition, the social aspect was clearly evident at the final celebration, where writers visited and stayed to talk to each other. Each writer was also given a printed compilation of all of the writing entries that the two researchers had typed out, edited, and printed. At the celebration event, many of the writers approached the two researchers and expressed a great appreciation for the printed anthology and being able to read what others had written.

Another factor in entering the challenge was that the contest acted as a motivation for the writers to finish a piece of writing or to give them a deadline to aim for. Sharon noted the challenge "was an excuse for me to write something new—an incentive." Many of the writers repeated this idea in their written responses on the questionnaire. Laura entered the challenge because she "decided to polish up a piece of writing …started last fall." Don had been submitting work to the library for the past six years. He noted that the "writing challenge at the SPL gives me a submission goal—gets me motivated to write more." Cheryl stated that "it is important to compare my writing with others to see what quality it is." It is important to note that the comparisons were not competitive. Instead, the writers relished the chance to share writing and to learn from each other in a non-threatening environment.

Originally, the challenge was a writing contest with prizes awarded for the best writing in each of the categories. Charles "appreciated the change from an adjudicated competition to a celebration of avocational writing." There was one exception to this perspective. Mary had been an avid writer for years, completing an entire book of sonnets based on prairie life, and had won in a few categories the last year of the competition. Age had not diminished her competitive spirit, even at age 93. When the library changed the writer submission format from a contest to a challenge, she expressed her frustration. Mary said that she submitted for "the prize." Instead of awarding prizes for the best writing, the library arranged for book certificates to be randomly drawn from the names of all writers who submitted work. Ironically her name was drawn for the first draw. She acted surprised and turned to one of the researchers and asked, "So, this prize is

meaningless then?" The researcher answered with a laugh: "No, it means you get $100 worth of free books."

In addition to the writing challenge itself, which provided the motivation and a clear deadline to complete writing projects, another factor that needs to be considered is the social significance of the library. The library provides a sense of community for many seniors in Saskatoon—a place to go and get out of their own homes, a place to read newspapers and gather writing materials and reference books, and a place to meet other people. In addition, the library's Writer in Residence program may have increased its visibility on the community landscape as a supportive place for writers. Many of the senior writers who entered the writing challenge availed themselves of this opportunity, and many mentioned the value of the library and the various library programs in their questionnaire responses.

Another central question that was asked of the participants was, "Why do you write?" Responses were very revealing. Darlene stated, "I write because I enjoy writing. I write for myself mainly, but I also want to interest others in my work. I believe the sharing of ideas, experiences and emotions creates a more perceptive awareness of life. And that deepened awareness is what makes life worth living."

Many of the writers used the act of writing to make sense of their lives and experiences, and in doing so to create a narrative of their lives. Margaret responded that she writes "because I enjoy remembering my life, it gives me pleasure and I want to leave something of myself." Ken said he writes "because I have stories to tell. I must. For me it feels like an imperative." Dave echoed the importance of writing: "I found out early in my adult life, that for me, writing provided a format for clarifying and expressing my thoughts. This seemed easier for me than using the spoken word, mainly because I have much needed time to think about what I am going to write about." Sharon wrote, "Since I write memoirs it gives me satisfaction recalling incidents in my life." These writers utilized writing to record their experiences and to document their pasts.

The writers often used the act of writing to clarify their thinking. Charles mentioned that he wrote "to explore my own state of mind as I challenge myself to articulate in written form, and at the same time to enjoy how language manipulates metaphors and analogies to say things in a more refreshing and revealing way." Shirley mentioned that she wanted not only to record her ideas, but also to communicate with others: "I want to put thoughts on paper that can be read in the future. I write for enjoyment and to share thoughts with others. I write because there is a certain amount of pride in seeing your work in print." Don mentioned in his response that writing helped him gather his thoughts: "I write in order to know what I think" as well as "to express emotion (deal with grief and loss) when required, and to keep me mentally engaged and sharp." Don's ideas reflect the writing theories of Donald Murray (1999) and James Britton (1972) who both maintained that writing is a way of knowing—Murray (1999) even used the phrase *write to learn* as the title of one of his most important texts.

In addition, some of the writers wrote for social reasons. Another question that generated a great deal of response from the participants was "What is important to you about writing?" For many, writing was a form of connecting with others. Ron mentioned that writing was "a great form of communication along with oral communication. It is hard to write well but great satisfaction in doing it. Leave a legacy for my children."

Marianne also mentioned the importance of connecting to others: "I would like to write something that other writers or family or friends would feel free to respond to." Expressing one's ideas and communicating them to others was a very important aspect of writing for many of the participants. James claimed that writing helped him "to escape solitude" while Jeanette said that writing "relieved boredom." Charles mentioned that being able to *play* with language was very important. Gerald said that "I get a chance to express my feelings or ideas, maybe even more than talking to someone." Dave mentioned that "the ability to express myself and connect with people" was a very important aspect of writing for him. Grace echoed this idea when she noted that she liked "being able to write about something interesting and beneficial to others and myself."

Writing is more than being able to express oneself and communicate to others. Darlene said that "(t)he act of writing is a continual learning experience. It requires research into new subject matter, a willingness to empathize with different feelings and situations one has previously never encountered. It is also a means of self-discovery. One not only learns so much more about other people but so much more about oneself." Darlene suggested that writing was an act of exploration and constant learning, and not just a means to communicate. These writers' written comments suggest that writing helps one understand one's own identity. Darlene wrote a lengthy response in her questionnaire about the value of writing in her life, and why writing is important for senior citizens:

> Writing is very important in my life. I love working with language. The inspiration comes and goes but the treasure is always *in the house* somewhere. I have done many things in my life—student, teacher, farmer—but writing never lets me go…and I hope it never will. It is a wonderful way in old age to keep the mind alive and active and proves to society that seniors still have a strong voice. They have valuable thoughts and important viewpoints to offer, gained from a lifetime of experience.

The writers' comments led the researchers to a final observation: researchers need to understand the importance of writing for people, not just the communication aspects, but also the significance of identity construction and self-discovery that is a life-long endeavour for many people.

What this study has delineated is the importance of writing in the lives of the particular participants involved. One profound finding is that so many writers participated in a public library writing initiative without a "contest" protocol applied. Thus, although no prizes or particular recognition was offered, other than the opportunity to have their work read by librarians and some of their work read aloud at a public event, 42 senior citizens submitted writing. The place of literary endeavour in the lives of these people is clearly delineated by their enthusiasm in this context. How many individuals in other populations would write for such subdued public outcomes? In order to apply Sumara's (2002) conceptualization of writing experience as a "place" (p. xiv), it is apparent that this place is internally motivated, individually conceived, and resonant with the perceived value of lifewriting and other forms of creative written expression.

It is interesting that while some of the participants discussed the apparent role of writing's cognitive benefits, supporting research findings that attest to writing's value in

this capacity (Brady & Sky, 2003; Byrd, 1993; Hoskyn & Swanson, 2003), and connecting with previous research related to seniors and the conceptualization of benefits related to writing practice in honing one's craft (Dreher, 1980), there was clearly much more emphasis placed upon the personal social rewards that writing offered in addition to the manner in which writing provided individual satisfaction related to goal attainment. Developing identity through writing—centring one's self or fictive self in the world and exploring one's thoughts and feelings—was clearly an important outcome for many of these writers.

This emphasis on the value of writing for personal and social reasons supports previous research related to a variety of writing products including lifewriting and poetry (Butler, 1985; Koch, 1977; Gillis & Wagner, 1980) and reinforces that external rewards are not necessary in motivating writing activities in this population (Staples, 1981). Although the development of an audience for the writing submissions was not a certain outcome of the public library's initiative as far as the participants were concerned, there is evidence to suggest that they did envision their work in contributing to society in some way, whether through sharing at the library's celebration of writing event, or perhaps through some imagined future publication opportunity once the writing had been completed as a draft for the public library challenge.

Conclusions

This study, with a small sample of 22 writers ages 65 and up, identifies patterns and trends from questionnaire data and explores insights into the value of writing for this population. Analysis of the contributions of the writers to the writing anthology offers further support for the idea that these seniors write widely in many genres and forms. The choices these writers made in regards to writing went beyond popular stereotypes related to the idea that seniors' writing fixates on *old times*, although there was a predominance of non-fiction, including lifewriting components within fictive pieces, emphasizing the importance of personal writing and the expressive function to this group of people.

Considering Sumara's (2002) argument that literary experience is a *place* necessitates going beyond a clinical identification of the cognitive benefits of writing for senior populations. The value of writing within the context of lived lives, as well as the themes that emerged as important are components of what Hugo (1979) might refer to as a *triggering town*. In conceptualizing writing supports for this group of writers, motivating factors may be employed to encourage and facilitate, with cognitive benefits appearing as one of a number of ensuing positive results.

Key themes in the writing collected in the anthology included *identity, olden days, progress, humour, nature, religion,* and *the love of family*. Motivating factors included general social benefits, opportunities for individuals to tell personal stories, opportunities to improve as writers and to read others' work, and suggestions on how to become more aware of their own lives, thoughts, and identities in the process. In addition, the motivating influence of the library itself played a part in the lives of these writers, and many indicated feeling a sense of community with an event that was library-oriented. Numerous individual reasons for writing were listed, and these, as well as the unique content of the work itself, created a resonant and diverse picture of writing in the lives of this group of senior citizens.

Implications of the study include the importance of community writing opportunities for older writers who may not have other means to connect with others through writing, as well as the entertainment and motivational impact of an anthology developed by seniors. This study also reinforces the importance of expressive writing and lifewriting as potential motivating frameworks for teachers of school age populations. Further research related to seniors and literacy is recommended to add to what is currently a limited academic viewpoint regarding this population. Projects that query and interview senior writers as to how best to support and encourage writing in their lives might be a good starting point for further study. It is imperative to ask older writers for their opinions on what kinds of supports they appreciate, and also to draw out the role of writing in their lives, so that community supporters may contextualize any initiatives within the specific population for writing mentorship. It was clear from this initial research project that the participants appreciated the opportunity to speak to researchers about writing, and valued the chance to have their views explored.

References

Brady, E. M., & Sky, H. Z. (2003). Journal writing among older learners. *Educational Gerontology, 29*(2), 151-163.

Brenna, B. (2012). One literate life: A case study of a ninety-four-year-old reader. *The Reading Professor, 34*(1), 33-37.

Brenna, B. & Park, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Saskatoon seniors' writing challenge: Saskatoon Public Library 2011 Submissions*. Saskatoon, SK: University of Saskatchewan.

Berg, B. L. (2009). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (7th ed.). Toronto: Allyn & Bacon.

Britton, J. (1972). Writing to learn and learning to write. In G. M. Pradl (Ed.), *Prospect and retrospect: Selected essays of James Britton* (pp. 94-111). Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.

Britton, J., Burgess, T., Martin, N., McLeod, A., & Rosen, H. (1975). *The development of writing abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan Education.

Butler, S. (1985). Writing for posterity. *Adult Education, 58*(3), 234-240.

Butler, S., & Bentley, R. (1992). Literacy through lifewriting. *English Quarterly, 24*(3), 33-41.

Butler, S., & Bentley, R. (1997). *Lifewriting: Learning through personal narrative*. Scarborough, ON: Pippin Publishing.

Byrd, M. (1993). Adult age differences in the ability to write prose passages. *Educational Gerontology, 19*(5), 375-396.

Dreher, B. (1980). Directing a writing program for retirees. *English Journal, 69*(7), 54 - 56.

Emig, J. (1971). The composing processes of twelve graders. Research Report no. 13. Urbanba, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Gillis, C., & Wagner, L. (1980). *Life-Writing: Writing workshops and outreach procedures.* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA, (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED186824).

Guthrie, L., & Hall, W. (1984). *Ethnographic approaches to reading research*. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), Handbook of reading research (pp. 91-110). New York: Longman.
Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Hoskyn, M., & Swanson, H. L. (2003). The relationship between working memory and writing in younger and older adults. *Reading and Writing, 16*(8), 759-784.
Hugo, R. (1979). *The triggering town*. New York: Norton.
International Auto/Biography Association (2014). Retrieved from http://www.theiaba.org/
Kazemek, F. E. (1997). They have yarns: Writing with the active elderly. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 40*(7), 516-523.
Kazemek, F. E. (1999). "A gathering of individuals": A longitudinal study of a writing workshop for older adults. *Adult Basic Education, 9*(1), 3-20.
Koch, K. (1977). *I never told anybody: Teaching poetry writing in a nursing home*. New York: Random House.
Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Murray, D. (1999). *Write to learn* (6th ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace.
Park, J. (2005). *Writing at the edge: Narrative and writing process theory*. New York: Peter Lang.
Reid, B. (Ed.). (2009). *Senior citizens writing II*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.
Staples, K. (1981). *A writing course for elders: Outreach, growth, synthesis.* Paper presented at the Community College Humanities Association Conference, Farmer's Branch, TX, (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED21233).
Sumara, D. (2002). *Why reading literature in school still matters: Imagination, interpretation, insight.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
Winterowd, W. R. (Ed.). (2007). *Senior citizens writing: A workshop and anthology, with an introduction and guide for workshop leaders*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.

Author Biographies

Dr. Jeff Park is an educator and writer, working in a number of genres including short fiction, poetry, and drama. He has published a book on writing theory and narrative entitled *Writing at the Edge (*Peter Lang, New York, 2005), and had three stories published by Oberon (2009) in *Coming Attractions 09.* His book of poetry *The Cellophane Sky: Jazz Poems* was a Saskatchewan Book Award winner in 2012. He is currently at the University of Saskatchewan, where he teaches courses in writing, curriculum theory, English language arts, and literacy.

Dr. Beverley Brenna is currently Acting Associate Dean Undergraduate Programs, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan where her research interests include literacy and children's literature. Her artistic work includes a young adult novel, *The White Bicycle*, shortlisted for a 2013 Governor General's Award.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Questionnaire Protocol

Comments about Writing

(Please return in the stamped, self-addressed envelope along with one copy of the signed consent form; add any further comments on additional pages if you like)

*****Please do not include your name on this questionnaire.**

1. In what age range are you (please circle)?
   - under 60
   - 60 – 64
   - 65 – 69
   - 70– 74
   - 75 – 79
   - 80 – 84
   - 85 – 89
   - 90 – 94
   - 95 or up

2. What inspired you to enter the Public Library's seniors' writing challenge this year?

3. In what category/categories did you submit writing to the Public Library's seniors' writing challenge this year? Please circle: poetry, short story, reminiscence, and/or skit

4. Have you submitted creative writing to other contests or challenges in the last five years? _____ If so, which ones?

   _____

5. Have you submitted writing for publication in the last five years?

   _____ If so, where? _____

6. Have you had any kind of feedback from family or friends about your writing? If so, please describe this feedback here.

7. Why do you write?

8. What is important to you about writing?

9. What do you want to accomplish with your writing?

10. Do you write about your life? (Experiences? Memories?)

11. Do you write about imaginary events/ideas? _____

12. Is the social aspect of the writing experience important to you? _____Do you connect with other writers at events such as writing contests, and is this important? _____

13. What are your thoughts about having your writing produced in the anthology for others to read?

14. Where do you do the most writing?

15. How do you write? Pen? Typewriter? Computer? Why? How has technology affected your writing?

16. What other thoughts can you share regarding the place of writing in your life?

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire!