

Elderhostel, Eh?: Senior learning, Canadian style

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### **The Program**

The founders of Elderhostel, a US-based organization delivering learning opportunities to elder adults, were inspired by youth hostels and the folk school tradition in Europe (Selman, Selman, Cooke, & Dampier, 1998; MacKeracher, 1998). “They agreed that the overriding objective of Elderhostel should be to stimulate the individual elder to become his/her own agent of change, and that the pathway to more productive and meaningful later years is not found by sitters, but by seekers” (Elderhostel Canada, 1990, p.3).

In 1986, the independent corporation, Elderhostel Canada was founded, adopting the parent organization's educational approach. Twenty years later, Routes to Learning Canada (RLC), formerly Elderhostel Canada, continues to provide Elderhostel and other programs that “offer an opportunity to enrich your mind, develop new passions, and share your experiences with engaging travel companions” (Routes to Learning Canada, 2006a).

RLC offerings are “open”, accepting any adult, although for Elderhostel programs, the main participant must be fifty-five or over. The RLC emphasis is to “encourage Canadians to learn more about their own country” (First Capital Challenge, n.d.). RLC programming has evolved to more onsite learning opportunities, rather than the more traditional lecture format on three distinct topics. The continuing thread throughout the Canadian evolution of Elderhostel is quality educational programming, providing lifelong learning.

### **The Context**

The world's inhabitants are getting older at a rate unprecedented in history. In Canada by 2026, one in five Canadians will be 65 years of age or older – up from one in twenty in 1921 and one in eight in 2001 (National Research Council Canada, n.d.). Most seniors live at home as opposed to institutions, are mobile, with generally good health and increasing average incomes; because only 6 percent of seniors work, they have leisure time; they spend their time watching TV, socializing, in physical activity, reading, and increasingly in traveling and volunteering (Statistics Canada, 1999). In this context,

seniors are creating a market for educational programs. Seniors Canada On-line lists 39 such programs, many billed as lifelong learning, including RLC's programs, which combine learning with personal growth, socialization, and travel in Canada and internationally.

### **The Philosophy**

Elderhostel (2006a) states "learning is a lifelong pursuit that opens minds and enriches lives", and "sharing new ideas, challenges, and experiences is rewarding in every season of life". Marketing materials reveal its vision for learners and learning: "learn together, exchange ideas...the world is our classroom...illuminate issues and broaden horizons...love of learning" (Elderhostel, 2006a); "excite your imagination, sharpen your intelligence" (Elderhostel, 2006b); and "for adults who love to learn for learning's sake" (Elderhostel, 2006c). Offered programs provide additional insight: intergenerational programs, cultural immersions, research work, service work, outdoor adventuring, and creative workshops.

These elements portray an organizational philosophy that views humans as caring, social beings who are intrinsically good, learn throughout life, and love learning. Society is viewed as stable, and educated global citizens important. There is a belief that learners have enquiring minds, seek to challenge themselves, and that learning is an active social process. The purposes of education are seen as opening minds, sharpening intelligence and enriching peoples' lives. These factors reflect an educational philosophy that is dominantly humanistic, part progressive, and minimally liberal.

### **The Socio-Economic Forces**

From the late 1920s, due to urbanization, industrialization, economic conditions and two world wars, Canadian families were less able to care for and support seniors. Ensuing government welfare benefits included paternalistic senior education. Seniors were considered non-contributors, and education was either remedial or to fill time. Universities and formal educational programs made an effort to attract seniors, but even with a tuition waiver, seniors were not enrolling.

A new approach began in 1972, when Health and Welfare Canada developed New Horizons, a partnership program between community organizations and senior-led committees and groups (MacKeracher, 1998). Elderhostel, imported into Canada by the University of New Brunswick in 1980, and evolving into RLC, is a very successful example. Elderhostel recognized that seniors want to maximize their strengths through personal skill development, relationship-building, and personal fulfillment, as opposed to reaching for certification, degrees and diplomas. Elderhostel programs are developed by an educational institution, voluntary agency or community organization with the advice of a committee of senior learners, and combined travel with intellectual activity. Rather than withdrawing from life, seniors involved in Elderhostel became “competent and engaged learners” who believe “The world is our classroom” (Elderhostel, 2006b).

### **Conclusions**

Elderhostel and RLC offer lifelong learning opportunities for seniors, incorporating travel throughout the world. At the time of their founding, prior to globalization and the elder adult bubble, only a well-connected non-profit organization could have accomplished such an undertaking. However, in today’s context, it is conceivable that a for-profit business could successfully compete with Elderhostel and RLC Canada. Large travel aggregators such as Orbitz, Travelocity and Expedia could add to their travel offerings and target seniors. Whether current program developers would partner with a for-profit corporation, remains to be seen. Exclusiveness is a drawback to this program. Costs are prohibitive and a limited scholarship program is insufficient to extend opportunities to everyone

Elderhostel and RLC are the flashpoint in a rapidly growing movement of learning opportunities for third age learners – “adults ... in retirement ...having varying degrees of physical, cognitive and sensory functions” (Hazelwood, 2002, p.3), pursuing personal growth and development (Laslett, 1991). The evolution of Elderhostel in Canada into RLC is a good case study of the success of the organizational style and philosophy of Elderhostel. RLC continues to bring seniors together in experiential lifelong learning, combining travel and learning in an affordable way for many, with stewardship of the earth an important focus (Routes to Learning Canada, 2006b). Elderhostel’s and RLC’s

intergenerational projects and other activities serve to develop new social and relational structures. The participants learn to view themselves as global citizens as a result of travel and exposure to new people, geographical areas, and ideas. In these ways, the program has achieved the vision of the social activists who founded Elderhostel.

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