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**A Community Partnership Approach to Digital Literacy Training for Older Adults Between Public Libraries and Seniors' Organizations**

**Une approche de partenariat communautaire pour la formation à la littératie numérique des personnes âgées entre les bibliothèques publiques et les organismes pour personnes âgées**

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**Article abstract**

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# A Community Partnership Approach to Digital Literacy Training for Older Adults Between Public Libraries and Seniors' Organizations

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This exploratory case study investigates the role of a partnership approach in Canada between two public library systems, a volunteer seniors' organization, and a seniors' centre as a means of enhancing digital literacy among older adults (65+). The inquiry draws upon individual semi-structured interviews with administrators, instructors, voluntary facilitators, and older adult learners who participated in the training. Findings highlight the importance of incorporating opportunities for socialization and relationship-building into training sessions. Implications and considerations for future research in the realm of community partnerships and digital literacy for older adults are discussed. The study emphasizes the value and challenges of partnerships in enhancing digital literacy among older adults through social support and tailored instruction.

**Keywords:** older adults, digital literacy training, public libraries, seniors' organizations, community partnerships

Canada's older adult population is increasing at a rapid pace. The need to provide digital services and support that facilitate older adults' active participation is urgent. For example, Statistics Canada (2022) projects that by 2036, about 25% of the Canadian population will be 65 years or older, and that older adults will face barriers that make it challenging for them to engage with technology effectively and participate in modern digital society on a daily basis. In response, this article presents findings from an exploratory case study on community partnerships in the London/Middlesex region of Ontario, Canada that aims to enhance digital literacy among older adults. Insights from this investigation shed light on ways to enhance the digital literacy training of older Canadians, and those in other jurisdictions.

As the world increasingly transitions its social and communication activities to digital platforms, there is a need for educational support to boost digital skills among older adults who generally lack familiarity with digital technologies. This lacking status - sometimes described as the digital divide - highlights the urgency of providing strategically designed programs that address older adults' unmet needs, namely

programs that address the unique needs, challenges, and perspectives of older adults' learning in the context of their local community.

Community partnerships offer important options to provide digital literacy training to older adults and may offer solutions for combating social isolation and loneliness experienced typically by this population (Donovan & Blazer, 2020; La Rose et al., 2022; Moore & Hancock, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the crucial role of online resources and services in preserving a sense of social connection and well-being among older adults (Dalmer & Mitrovia, 2022).

Digital literacy is defined as broadly "the set of skills, knowledge and attitudes required to access, create, use, and evaluate digital information effectively, efficiently, and ethically" (Julien, 2018, p. 2243). By this definition, people need to know not only how to operate digital devices (such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets) but also how to critically assess the information accessed through these devices. For older adults, being digitally literate can lead to improved health outcomes, resulting from better access to health information and government services, as well as reduced social isolation, and improved protection against online threats such as phishing scams and identity theft (Barrie et al., 2021; Detlor et al., 2022; Julien et al., 2021, 2022).

Public libraries have played and continue to play a significant role in responding to the crisis of lower rates of digital literacy among seniors and the growing importance of being

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digitally literate (Dalmer, 2017; Horton, 2019; Joseph, 2009; Wynia Baluk, Griffin, et al., 2021; Wynia Baluk, McQuire, et al., 2021). Public libraries in Canada are frequently embracing external community partners to help deliver this training (Detlor et al., 2022; Wynia Baluk, Griffin, et al., 2021). Libraries form these partnerships to draw upon the expertise and resources these community organizations provide. These partnerships can potentially help overcome common challenges associated with developing library programs for older adults, such as limited training space, tight budgets, and constrained staff capacity, as well as managing older adults' digital literacy unique training preferences (Wynia Baluk, Griffin, et al., 2021).

On this basis, this case study considers partnerships among two public libraries, a volunteer seniors' organization, and a seniors' centre to deliver tailored digital literacy training to older adults within the local regional context. These community programs are highly valued for providing accessible, low-cost/free digital literacy training and resources to often underserved demographics (Bennett-Kapusniak, 2013; Huynh & Malli, 2018; Nelson Decker, 2010). As a result, it is important to analyze and examine the present challenges and benefits of these programs and the future of partnerships that rely on volunteers to implement training. Our research delves deeper than standard descriptive analyses, offering a nuanced, problem-centric view of digital literacy for older adults. Through the experiences of administrators, instructors, and older learners, we emphasize the pivotal role of collaboration and its challenges. Our findings intend to offer actionable and theoretical insights to guide subsequent endeavours in this domain.

Digital literacy training can be affected by a host of factors. For example, Detlor et al. (2022) provide a model of community-led digital literacy training success that outlines factors significant in producing a positive effect in community digital literacy programs (see Figure 1). This model serves as a conceptual framework structuring this case study emphasizing the role of the learning environment and program components in positively affecting the learning outcomes of community-led digital literacy training.

Of importance and relevance to our case study, Detlor et al.'s (2022) model describes how the confluence of learning environmental factors and program training components substantially influence three distinct types of learning outcomes: i) psychological outcomes (e.g., increased digital skills confidence and competence); ii) behavioural outcomes (e.g., increased ability to apply the learned digital skills); and iii) benefit outcomes (e.g., improved use of digital devices and digital information; improved well-being). Detlor et al.'s (2022) model is based on information literacy and educational assessment theories, community informatics, and situated learning theory. By aligning our case study with this model, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how

partnerships between public libraries and seniors' organizations can navigate these various factors to deliver effective community-led digital literacy training.

Under the learning environment, factors such as funding, classroom resources, teaching staff competency, evaluation metrics and knowledge sharing are important for training success (Detlor et al., 2022). Classroom resources and qualified instructors are equally vital for delivering effective digital literacy training. The presence of adequate instructors, technology, and instructional design can facilitate a more engaging and productive learning experience for older adults. In terms of program components, the timing of the instruction, marketing approaches, types of training offered, and characteristics of the training itself can significantly influence participation and engagement levels. Effective marketing can raise awareness and generate interest among potential participants, thereby increasing attendance and engagement. The timing and type of training should be aligned with the learning needs and availability of older adults, ensuring that the courses are both accessible and relevant.

Furthermore, by incorporating Detlor et al.'s (2022) model as a guiding theoretical lens, this case study extends its investigative scope to the role of community partnerships in facilitating digital literacy programs for older adults. Such partnerships often serve as the cornerstone for the effective delivery of training, especially with regard to resource allocation and strategic planning. In this context, the existing literature highlights the crucial factors of mutually shared values, sustainability, and strategic alignment as being instrumental in the success of community partnerships (Intindola et al., 2016; Ordonez-Ponce et al., 2021). For example, Austin (2000) delineates a 'collaboration continuum' in an inter-organizational partnership, which comprises three distinct stages. The first stage is *philanthropic* where partner resources are limited and interaction between partner organizations is minimized. The second stage is *transactional* where mutual benefits and strategies are identified and put in place in order to align desired partnership outcomes. The third stage is *integration* where the partners involved achieve new levels of integration of their missions through mutually shared values. Organizational culture is an important aspect of the integration stage: by adopting common and shared values alongside strong leadership and a supportive work environment, cross-sector collaboration becomes boundaryless and mutually supportive, shifting the focus from transactions to creating mutually shared values (Austin, 2000).

In the realm of services targeted at older adults, existing research substantiates the tangible benefits of forming and executing collaborative community partnerships. For instance, Wong et al. (2022) investigated the utility of a partnership approach between community organizations and older adults in the implementation of care planning interventions, revealing a notable enhancement in the well-being of older adults.

Similarly, Stevens et al. (2023), in their study of a partnership between six community-based organizations, demonstrated how the collaboration strengthened local services and enhanced the capacity of a community to provide services as well as meet the diverse needs of older adults.

To contribute further to this body of knowledge, this case study delves into the potential benefits and challenges of partnerships between public libraries and senior organizations in offering digital literacy training for older adults. Specifically, it focuses on the combined efforts of a volunteer-driven seniors' organization, two public libraries, and a seniors' centre. The research not only examines digital skills acquisition but also underscores the importance of social interactions and instructor support. Additionally, it sheds light on the intricacies of inter-organizational community collaborations, addressing a noteworthy gap in current literature.

Therefore, the following research question is proposed: *What are the benefits and challenges of a partnership approach between public libraries and a seniors' organization in the delivery of digital literacy training for older adults?*

### The Case Study

The community partnership under investigation involved a partnership between CreativeAge Network (CAN) - a voluntary organization with the goals of facilitating digital literacy education and assisting in the transition to online workshops during COVID-19 - and three organizations: i) London Public Library (LPL); ii) Dorchester Senior Centre (DSC); and iii) Middlesex County Library (MCL). The authors on this paper were not part of this community partnership (i.e., they served as outside observers).

All four organizations are situated in, or are geographically close to, the City of London in southwestern Ontario, Canada. The City of London, Ontario supports multiple initiatives and resources to enhance seniors' lived experience of their local/regional community. In some ways, this collaboration speaks to the longstanding commitment of the greater London area to meeting the needs of aging populations. To illustrate the level of this commitment, for example, in 2010, London became the first city in Canada to join the World Health Organization's Global Network of "Age Friendly Cities" through the creation of the Age Friendly London Network (AFLN). Today, AFLN comprises more than 100 volunteer older adults, as well as caregivers, and service providers; AFLN's mandate is to implement strategies that make London a more supportive environment for older adults and a locale that adapts to support the changing needs of constituents as they age (Network, 2023).

One of AFLN's first initiatives was the creation of a creative aging program with London-based community partners at a municipally owned retirement and nursing home. From there, CreativeAge Network (CAN) was born (see: <https://creativeage.ca>). Based on the principle that arts edu-

cation programs can improve the lives of older adults (see: Cohen et al., 2006; Lifetime Arts, 2023), CAN focuses on the provision of age-friendly arts and culture programming to older adults in London and Middlesex County. Its social mission is to identify, develop and share creative initiatives to improve the lives of low-and-mid-income older adults and their families in the communities in which they live. CAN consists of a group of older adults with interests in facilitating creative programming (e.g., arts-based workshops, activities, and events) with older adults' populations together with a range of community partners like Museum London, London Art Council, London Community Homes, Dorchester Senior Center and London Public Library. Within its origin in the voluntary sector, CAN has secured various funding grants which have allowed for a small number of paid positions (from time to time) as well as small honoraria for some incentive volunteers.

Recently, CAN has collaborated with LPL to provide targeted digital literacy training, leveraging LPL's long-standing expertise in this area. Established in 1896, LPL has evolved into an extensive network with 16 branches, serving diverse urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout greater London, Ontario. The library system offers a blend of standardized digital literacy services across all its branches while also customizing programs to meet the unique needs of specific regional areas and/or patron groups.

LPL provides three main programs that are particularly relevant for the digital literacy needs of older adults: The Book-a-Librarian program, Tech Tutors, and Digital Essentials. The Book-a-Librarian initiative allows patrons to schedule one-on-one sessions with a librarian for personalized instruction on using the library's digital resources, ranging from downloading e-books to navigating the library's digital catalogue. Tech Tutors are (predominantly) volunteer post-secondary students in IT-related fields, who assist patrons with basic computer tasks and specific tech-related issues, such as setting up email accounts or browsing the Internet. Finally, the Digital Essentials program offers classroom-based, pre-registered courses on a variety of topics from basic to advanced digital skills.

These classes attract a significant number of older adult participants and cover a spectrum of skill levels-from fundamental computer basics like mouse and keyboard use to more advanced topics like Internet safety and social media navigation. The instructors are (generally) paid to deliver these programs either as part of their employment with LPL or are contracted to deliver a particular course or skill set (Library, 2023). The partnership between CAN and LPL has allowed each organization to contribute their knowledge and strengths to the provision of digital literacy services to older adults in the greater London area. Promoting a comprehensive and flexible array of services, in terms of program offerings and alignment with broader community initiatives

aimed at making London a more age-friendly city, means that this partnership has enhanced to the mandates of both organizations.

The LPL/CAN project has expanded access to funding grants and facilitated the development of programs in several locations across the city. The partnership has relieved CAN volunteers from much of the administrative work required to obtain, maintain, and expand funding. Greater institutional support by LPL means CAN volunteers may concentrate their efforts on instructional delivery and developing programs to suit the needs and wants of their constituents.

In 2015, a few members from CAN started arts-based programming for seniors in rural Middlesex County in the town of Dorchester. Through the help of administrative staff at DSC, CAN members applied for and received grant money for programming. The DSC plans, facilitates and promotes CAN activities and events to its senior constituents. CAN members are responsible for the delivery of the training. Depending on roles and responsibilities, some CAN members are paid for their work, while others are volunteers. DSC has a long-standing commitment and a critical mass engagement with older adults. Seniors from London regularly use this Center, even though it is designed to cater to older adults living in rural areas.

The work of DSC was further enhanced by expanding its partnership to include MCL, which participated in arts-based education led by CAN members at DSC. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MCL helped launch online workshops pertaining to the use of iPads for creative arts. These included a “card tricks” workshop taught over Zoom using *trickstercards.com*, and a virtual iPad sketching class. These workshops continue to expand across the 15 library branches of MCL and support older adults’ access to a greater range of digital literacy programs in Middlesex County.

## Methods

As a means of ensuring the ethical conduct of research involving humans, the study’s research design was reviewed and approved by the relevant research ethics boards prior to recruitment, which was followed by a horizontal networked recruitment process as guided by Geddes et al. (2018). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed using a professional transcription service. The interviews were conducted with instructors, administrators, volunteer facilitators and older adult learners, including two founding members of the CreativeAge Network. In total, 15 interviews were conducted with 12 participants—two males and 10 females—all of whom were aged 65 or above. This specific age criterion for older adult learners aligns with previous relevant studies, such as the work by Barrie et al. (2021), which examined the experiences of a comparable group of older adults participating in digital literacy programs offered by public libraries in

an Ontario city with a comparable population.

The interview questions were based on questions used by Detlor et al. (2022) in their study of community-led digital literacy instruction (see Appendices A and B). The questions polled participants’ perceptions of the training context and the outcomes of the training. Participants were encouraged to speak about the benefits and challenges of community partnership in delivering the training and/or the training received. Specifically, administrators, instructors and voluntary facilitators were asked about the background of the training programs offered, and the goals and purpose of offering programs aimed at older adults, as well as the psychological, behavioural, and benefit impact of those services. Questions asked of older adult learners focused on reasons for participating in digital literacy training programs, and the effect of this training on them, especially in terms of emotional impact and improved life experience.

We opted for a similar set of questions for administrators, instructors, and voluntary facilitators to ensure consistency and support in-depth analysis. Within this case study, instructors, administrators, and voluntary facilitators often shared intersecting opinions within a small library system that relies on role flexibility in order to ensure that programming mandates are met appropriately. Therefore, by asking these groups similar questions, we could directly compare their intersecting and individual perspectives on the program’s effectiveness, thereby enriching our findings through data triangulation (Myers, 2019). Furthermore, the shared questions served to reveal alignment and diversion of goals among administrators, instructors, and voluntary facilitators, helping us identify gaps for potential improvement. This afforded us a set of rich, targeted questions, with a more holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of digital literacy training, while also facilitating a streamlined data analysis process.

The analytical approach used in this inquiry was shaped by the conceptual framework informed by Detlor et al. (2022). For example, theoretical constructs from the conceptual framework were used to code and analyze the interview data and identify key themes. Analysis was supported with the use of Dedoose, an online software package allowing for team-based qualitative data analysis. Additionally, the study employed grounded theory techniques endorsed by Charmaz (2014) to support an inductive approach to discovering and defining categories and themes in the data.

An iterative approach was used, which involved two rounds of coding and analysis. The coding was conducted by the three authors who brought unique disciplinary perspectives to the analysis, which included knowledge from Social Science, Information Systems and Adult Education. The review process allowed for interdisciplinary perspectives to emerge and provided an added layer of theoretical rigor.

The demographic profile of participants in this case study was predominantly Caucasian and largely female - a demo-

graphic that is reflective of the older adult community in London, Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2022). Participants' occupational contexts were also diverse, while retired professionals made up a significant portion of participants, the findings also revealed older adults are also engaging in second careers as entrepreneurs who are turning creative hobbies into income sources.

Our data analysis goes beyond merely descriptive insights and offers a more theorized, problem-based lens to digital literacy based on the study's conceptual framework. This inquiry aims to explore the challenges and significant role of collaboration in digital literacy training for older adults. This component is substantiated through the lived experiences and perspectives of our study participants, who include administrators, instructors, voluntary facilitators, and older adult learners. By doing so, we aim to provide both practical and meaningful theoretical insights that could serve as a roadmap for future initiatives.

## Findings

Findings are organized under two broad themes: i) the digital literacy training of older adults; and ii) the utility of a community partnership approach to digital literacy training.

### Digital Literacy Training of Older Adults

The predominant categories identified during data analysis concerning the digital literacy training of older adults were: i) the digital literacy skills most desired by older adults; ii) digital literacy training preferences; and iii) the need for a good instructor who goes beyond mere delivery of instruction. These three elements directly support benefits of the training, namely an increase in confidence towards the use of digital technologies among the older adult population who take the training. Specifics are described below.

#### Desired Digital Literacy Skills

Many participants discussed the *digital literacy skills most desired by older adults*. The primary digital literacy skills reported were the ability to search and browse information on the Web and to connect with others. Several participants described how the main motivation behind older adults' willingness to take digital literacy training was their need not to be "left behind," to "stay up to date," and to learn how to use a computer so they can interact with family members (especially grandchildren), stay connected with friends, and pursue hobbies. Nonetheless, a few participants acknowledged that *not all seniors want to be online*. Some student participants commented that they had a decreased desire to go online, especially after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Training preferences

Participants commented that seniors want their digital literacy training to be *conveniently located* close to where they live. For example, one participant lamented about having to travel a significant distance to LPL from her home in order to take a training course and wondered why the training could not be more conveniently located by having it offered at the local community centre in her rural community. Many participants spoke of the need to provide digital skills training in *clear everyday language*, removing any jargon that older adults might not understand. Allowing *flexibility* in attendance was identified as a successful way to help alleviate anxiety experienced by older adults related to their participation in a training program. Some participants reported the *timing of the digital training* as an important point to consider for older adults because the time a course was scheduled could either enhance or negatively affect an older adult's capacity to learn and retain digital literacy skills.

Many participants expressed the need for digital literacy training to incorporate a *large socialization component*. CAN participants stressed the need for any digital literacy training program offered to older adults to be six to eight weeks in duration, rather than a one-off or short series of training sessions, in order to allow seniors sufficient time for socializing and making friends. This socialization component was felt by some to be a key reason why CAN training sessions had waiting lists (a rare occurrence with traditional library digital literacy training programming), as CAN sessions often ran six to eight weeks long and incorporated time and activities for students to socialize during the training. Although participants commented on how older adults were very appreciative of being able to take online digital training and socialize over online platforms, many older adults indicated a strong preference to *meet in person*. Socialization between students, which occurs naturally with face-to-face instruction, was especially difficult to replicate in courses offered over online settings, like Zoom.

#### The Need for a Good Instructor

Several participants stressed the importance of having a *good instructor*. One participant said, "you need somebody that knows and [is] a good explainer, a teacher. but that isn't overly too complicated." Another participant discussed how they liked one particular instructor who was approachable and provided various options on how to do things with technology allowing time for experimentation, which was a new way of learning for him. A few participants commented how they appreciated that CAN instructors were seniors themselves and thus understood the needs of seniors very well.

Some CAN instructors went the "extra mile" to ensure that *personal connections* were made with students so that they truly understood their digital training needs and that the

students were made to feel welcomed. For example, one participant (an instructor) described how she went to students' homes to deliver training materials in advance of the class and build personal connections with the students before the training. According to this participant, it was very important to establish personal connections with students in order to engage them in the learning process and have them more likely to take future digital literacy training.

Participants also discussed the need for an instructor to *modify the training based on feedback* received by older adult learners. Participants commented on how older adult students often shared their opinions and perspectives on the digital literacy training received, providing suggestions and ideas about other needs not yet being met through these training programs, and how the community organizations were open to receiving this information, and developing or modifying their programming in response to those needs. According to one participant, figuring out what type of digital literacy training to provide requires more than just reflecting on training attendance numbers or student satisfaction scores; it involves an instructor or administrator knowing what people are interested in (based on feedback received) and then launching a course on that topic.

Participants commented that it was important when teaching seniors that *various levels of training be given* by an instructor in order to accommodate the different digital literacy skills levels of students. Participants described how CAN primarily delivers intermediate level training, along with some advanced training. No rudimentary beginner training is given by CAN. In fact, one instructor expressed that it was a misconception that most seniors need training in basic digital literacy skills and stated that the seniors she interacts with in her own social circles want more advanced digital skills training.

In terms of teaching styles amenable to older adults, a few participants stressed the need for instructors to offer *experiential "hands-on" training* for this particular demographic. According to one participant, older adults need to be taught "in a holistic way and experiential way [rather] than in a step by step process." This could involve designing activities where students are asked to do a task where they inadvertently learn digital literacy skills (e.g., having students do a card sorting exercise on their iPads as a means of teaching them how to use an iPad) or creating a fun activity where students experiment with a new piece of technology (e.g., getting students to create a short video recording on their cell phone and having them experiment with editing the video recording). A few participants mentioned that some patience is needed when teaching older adults.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of taking a digital literacy training course for seniors go beyond the digital literacy skills learned. Accord-

ing to one participant, "Sometimes with older adults, it's not so much the skills development, it's the social connections that are made during the learning process. the social connections are just as important as the information that's being transmitted."

A key benefit identified was not just the socialization that occurs during the training, but the socialization and involvement in CreativeAge Network after the training is over - not only as future students, but as future instructors as well. Also, socialization improved after the training in terms of better enabling seniors to use technology to socialize with friends and family. In sum, the *socialization benefits* of the training for older adults occur in three distinct ways: i) during the training with other students; ii) post training with others when older adults take, or even teach, other digital literacy courses in the future; and iii) when using the digital skills learned to interact with others (e.g., friends and family).

Another benefit of the training is the *increase in confidence* among seniors in their ability to use technology. As one participant described, many older adults prior to the training are "scared of the technology out there because they don't know how it works and they don't understand it." However, after the training, these same older adults have "a lot of increase in confidence," as the sessions provide opportunities for seniors to experiment with technology and understand that "they are not going to mess anything up or create any huge problems on their device by just playing around and getting to know it."

### **A Community Partnership Approach to Digital Literacy Training**

The predominant categories identified during data analysis concerning a community partnership approach to the digital literacy training of older adults were: i) the sharing of resources and tasks; ii) the tensions between different organizational structures and ways of working; iii) digital literacy training preferences; and iv) an unknown future. These four elements feed into a general concern about the health and well-being of the partnership going forward. Specifics are described below.

#### ***Sharing of Resources and Tasks***

A predominant theme elicited from the analysis of the interview data was that participants felt that the partnership was beneficial in facilitating the *sharing of resources and tasks* between the organizations involved, thus allowing these organizations to better deliver digital literacy training to older adults in their communities than they could individually do alone.

At the beginning of the partnership, CAN applied for grants themselves to deliver digital training programs to older adults in their communities. However, as the partnership evolved, the task of grant application writing has been assumed by



DSC and the two public libraries. In general, DSC and the two public libraries are responsible for the provision of a digital platform and classroom facilities for teaching, and marketing the training to seniors in their communities, thus freeing up CAN instructors to concentrate their time and energy on developing and delivering learning content and maintain relationships with learners. However, the division of labour between the organizations in this partnership is flexible and dynamic. One CAN participant described how the roles and duties between CAN and LPL would often vary.

One LPL participant commented on the benefits of sourcing out digital literacy instruction to those outside the library especially in areas where library staff may not have the background to teach those courses themselves, such as for a digital arts-based course. Also, CAN provides the two public libraries and the seniors' centre with access to a large group of older adults to whom to market the digital literacy instruction.

### ***Different Organizational Structures and Ways of Working***

Several participants spoke to the common shared interest across all four organizations in supporting the digital information needs of seniors as being the “glue” behind the formation of the partnership. Despite this shared interest, tensions between *different organizational structures and ways of working* challenge the partnership approach. For example, differences between unionized and volunteer environments among the four organizations caused different beliefs and expectations about the structure of work, leading to the need for regular negotiating and the “sorting out” of differences in work habits among the people involved. This sentiment was summarized by one participant as follows,

“Every organization is different. There are sensitivities that are involved, sometimes the staff and the organizations are unionized staff and they have maybe a different attitude about involving or they want to make sure that their department or their jobs have a high level of control of what’s going on. Then some organizations are very open, and they allow staff to be involved and to participate and they encourage their volunteers to get involved. So, there may be a very open approach in some organizations to these kinds of initiatives. Some organizations are what I would call [a] pretty closed shop and they maybe want to be involved but the existing organizational culture doesn’t really allow for them to move that quickly.”

Some CAN participants described a forgetfulness among partner organizations that CreativeAge Network instructors are largely volunteers and cannot provide as much dedicated time as paid employees would. According to one CAN instructor,

“We have full attendance all the time and we have waiting lists. and they definitely want us to do more with the library. But there’s a limit in what amount of time we can dedicate

to do that because most libraries require that everybody does this on a volunteer basis. Because we don’t get any money for doing this, we have to be very aware of how much energy and time we can contribute to it so we’re not taking advantage of.”

### ***Digital Literacy Training Preferences***

Some partner organizations are unaware of the unique approaches required to provide digital literacy training to older adults. For example, some CAN participants commented on the lack of awareness by some organizations they partner with that seniors require a very high degree of socialization and hands-on experiential learning in the digital literacy training they receive. One CAN instructor spoke to how various community organizations - though appreciative of the training that CAN provides - prefer the training given to older adults be provided in the form of a one-time workshop, and how CAN must stick to its principles to advocate the type of training it believes its seniors community needs,

“So a lot of people [community organizations] say, well, we want to do seniors programs and we want you [CreativeAge Network] to come and do a workshop and cover everything in that workshop.. We [CreativeAge Network] say no, the foundational pieces - if you want us to work with you, Mr. Library or Mrs. Library or Mr. Museum - every program has to be 6 to 8 weeks because we need to make connections within the [seniors] group.”

CAN sees itself as a network of volunteer associates with no formal structure, which runs counter to that of other community organizations in the partnership, particularly the libraries, which are more formalized in terms of operations, credentialization of staff, and work hierarchies. Though digital literacy training is a key part of a library’s organizational mission, it is not the only item with which libraries task themselves. Sometimes, other priorities take precedence in libraries over the delivery of digital literacy instruction.

One CAN participant described LPL as a more conservative organization whose values, approach to time and its shared focus on other priorities mitigate the eagerness of CAN members to experiment with new digital literacy training ideas and programming, especially if more funding is required.

### ***Unknown Future***

Some CAN participants were uncertain about the future of the community partnership. They mentioned how CAN has evolved over time and continues to evolve. One participant reflected that if CAN were to hand off digital literacy instruction entirely to partner organizations, then this would complicate the delivery of the instruction due to internal administration, politics, and the bureaucratic structures of these other organizations, and that the current aspects of digital literacy training for older adults that CAN emphasizes would be in



jeopardy. The way forward for this partnership was unclear. Its sustainability, especially with respect to the reliance on a volunteer network of a passionate group of seniors to deliver instruction, was identified as a cause of concern.

## Discussion

### Contextualizing the Findings

The findings from this case study offer a nuanced perspective on the importance of partnerships between public libraries and senior organizations in digital literacy. A key insight from the interviews is that a significant portion of older adults highly value the ability to navigate the Internet, seeing it not merely as a tool but as a gateway to broader social and informational landscapes. Having said that, older adults' positive feelings towards being online may be the result of a lack of opportunities for in-person interactions.

Older adults positive view of the Internet corresponds with the convenience factor, indicating that seniors prefer training facilities to be geographically accessible, with course length and timing that align with their schedules. Moreover, this desire for convenience is coupled with an emphasis on easy-to-understand, jargon-free instruction. It appears that making the learning experience enjoyable and less intimidating is vital for this demographic, especially for novice users. Older adults prefer instructors who go the extra distance and put emphasis and priority on knowing the digital literacy training needs of seniors, offer active experiential learning activities, modify the training based on feedback received, and offer different levels of training to accommodate beginner, intermediate and advanced learning needs. The benefits to older adults include socialization opportunities with others during and after the training, as well as increased confidence in using information technologies. Building on this, the social component emerges as a core expectation among older adults. Courses that allow for extended engagement where people meet in person over an extended period of time (e.g., six to eight weeks) enhance learning and fulfill a social need that is often as crucial as skill acquisition. The benefits to partner organizations include the ability to share tasks and resources to offer digital literacy training programs that meet the needs of seniors. Challenges exist for partner organizations in terms of navigating different organizational structures and ways of working, as well as the sustainability of the partnership in the future.

In many ways, these findings support research reported in previous studies. For example, the study's findings verify Detlor et al.'s (2022) model of the factors affecting the success of digital literacy training programs delivered by community organizations, where learning environment factors (e.g., competent teaching staff, adequate funding) and program component factors (e.g., the timing of the instruction, the type of instruction offered, the characteristics of the training) impact student learning outcomes (e.g., increased digital

skills confidence, increased ability to apply the digital skills learned, improved well-being) in positive ways. The study's findings also support Wynia Baluk, Griffin et al.'s (2021) work showcasing the advantages of library community partnerships: offering digital literacy training that end-users want and pooling resources to offer more robust programming. In addition, the study confirms the advantages of a community partnership approach to the delivery of older adult services (Stevens et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2022) and the importance of mutually shared values and sustainable integrated plans in community partnerships (Austin, 2000; Intindola et al., 2016; Ordonez-Ponce et al., 2021).

Beyond the benefits for seniors, there are organizational advantages and challenges to consider. Partner organizations can significantly benefit from sharing resources and expertise. However, navigating differences in organizational cultures, structures, and operational approaches can be a challenge and should be surpassed to meet midway to align the objectives and purposes of the training. These organizational dynamics not only impact the quality of the training but also pose questions about the long-term sustainability of these partnerships. Overall, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of what makes these collaborations both promising and complicated.

### Theoretical Implications

First, our research underscores the crucial role that socialization components and active learning opportunities play in digital literacy training for older adults. These elements are not just peripheral aspects but are fundamental to the educational experience, especially for the older demographic. They augment the traditional focus on technical skill acquisition with holistic learning environments that leverage social interaction and experiential learning. This could fill a gap in current educational theories that may not fully address the unique learning needs and preferences of older adults.

Second, the findings emphasize the role of the instructor in going beyond the mere dissemination of information for older adults. Instructors who are willing to "go the extra mile" in understanding the specific training needs of older adults have a greater impact on learning outcomes. This aligns with pedagogical theories that emphasize the importance of differentiated and individualized instruction but adds an extra layer by highlighting the human element as a significant variable in the success of digital literacy programs for older learners.

Third, the utility of a community partnership approach between public libraries and seniors' organizations introduces a novel multi-stakeholder model that enriches digital literacy training. This does not merely amplify resources but allows for a more nuanced, tailored approach to meet older adults' learning needs. It suggests a paradigm shift in the way community organizations can collaborate to produce more effective, resource-efficient outcomes. This is also supported in

a study by Lenstra et al. (2022) which suggests that there is a pressing need to enhance and expand continuing education and professional development opportunities tailored to integrate public libraries into the wider scope of supporting aging individuals in the US.

Table 1 synthesizes these findings into a comprehensive table for successful digital literacy training aimed at older adults. This table not only catalogues the expected learning outcomes-spanning psychological, behavioural, and benefit outcomes-but also encapsulates the benefits and challenges inherent in the partnership model. These include improved understanding of how to navigate the Internet, increased ability to use digital technologies to socialize with others, increased digital skills confidence, and improved well-being. Collectively, these learning outcomes lead to the successful implementation of community-led digital literacy training aimed at older adults.

### Practical Implications

Turning to the practical implications, the study illuminates actionable pathways for collaboration among organizations. By adopting a partnership model, public libraries can mitigate access to social network constraints and provide more personalized, socially engaging, and flexible digital literacy training. For example, by adopting a partnership approach, public libraries can overcome the challenges of limited resources (e.g., time, staff, access to the network) to carry out tasks and provide digital literacy training that is more personal, offers socialization, and delivers training in new and experimental ways. Volunteer seniors' organizations can benefit from the help received from public libraries and seniors' centers (e.g., marketing, grant writing, provision of learning platforms) that reduce work burdens and allow volunteer instructors to concentrate on program content and delivery. However, despite these strong advantages, attention must be paid to differences in organizational structures and ways of working among partner organizations that potentially can undermine the digital literacy training offered and the sustainability of the partnership going forward.

In terms of digital literacy needs, learning how to browse and search the Internet effectively is an important need for older adults, as well as socializing with colleagues, friends and families via digital technologies. With respect to program components, older adults require active (experiential) learning and socialization opportunities in their training sessions. This training should be modified based on seniors' experiences from prior instructional sessions. Basic and advanced levels of training should be provided. The training should be offered at times suitable to seniors' schedules. In terms of the learning environment, community partnerships are vital as tasks and resources can be shared among partner organizations.

However, healthy communication is needed among part-

ners to ensure any inherent tensions over differences in organizational structures and ways of working are mitigated. Instructors must go the "extra mile" to ensure that older adults' training needs are met in the provision of the instruction. Sustainable funding and resources are necessary.

### Future Research

Suggestions for future research in this area include more interpretive case studies, not only in the Canadian context but also in other jurisdictions around the world. Also, quantitative deductive studies could be conducted to test and verify the findings revealed in these case study investigations.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to report on an investigation of a case study involving two public libraries, a seniors' center, and a volunteer seniors' organization to better understand the benefits and challenges of a community partnership approach in the provision of digital literacy training to older adults. By conducting a thematic analysis of interviews with administrators, instructors (both paid and volunteer) and students, insights on the digital literacy training needs of older adults and the utility of a community partnership approach to digital literacy training were presented. Findings verify and extend results reported in the literature concerning the provision of digital literacy training by community organizations and the use of community partnerships by public libraries to offer extended library services and programming to community members.

Though these insights are beneficial, the study is constrained by certain limitations. Most significant is the collection and analysis of data from a single case study of a community partnership approach, limiting the generalizability of the study's results. Other limitations include the study's sample size - more participants could have been recruited; and the lack of data collection over the lifecycle of the community partnership that was investigated - a longitudinal research design may have discovered additional benefits and challenges in the delivery of digital literacy training to older adults particularly at specific periods of time (e.g., at the beginning, middle and near the end of the community partnership arrangement).

However, these limitations are counter-balanced by the rigour of the study's data collection and analysis procedures: i) a complex, long-running community partnership involving four organizations was investigated allowing the collection of a rich data set; ii) key informants were included in the population sample (e.g., two of the 12 participants were original founders of CreativeAge Network); iii) participants interviewed were involved in the partnership in different ways (i.e., as students, instructors, and administrators), providing methodological triangulation; and iv) members of the research team have a long history and familiarity investigating

**Table 1***Factors Affecting Successful Digital Literacy Training for Older Adults*

Factors	Description
Older Adults' Digital Literacy Needs	Older adults want training that allows them to: 1) Browse and search the Internet effectively; 2) Socialize with others via digital technologies.
Digital Literacy Training Program Components	Older adults prefer training that: 1) Offers active/experiential learning opportunities; 2) Provides socialization opportunities; 3) Is modified based on seniors' feedback of previous training; 4) Offers different levels of training (e.g., basic, advanced); 5) Is delivered at times that are convenient for seniors.
Learning Environment	The learning environment should facilitate: 1) The sharing of tasks and resources among partner organizations; 2) Healthy communication among partner organizations to manage different organizational structures & ways of working; 3) Teaching staff who go the "extra mile" to understand older adult training needs and modify the training accordingly; 4) Sustainable funding and training resources.
Learning Outcomes	Older adults want: 1) Improved understanding of how to navigate the Internet; 2) Increased ability to use digital technology to socialize with others; 3) Increased digital skills confidence; 4) Improved well-being.
Partnership Benefits	The benefit of a partnership approach is the sharing of resources and tasks
Partnership Challenges	Challenges confronting a partnership approach include: 1) Different organizational structures & ways of working; 2) Uncertain future.

the delivery of digital literacy training by community organizations, such as public libraries, and thus had sufficient "theoretical sensitivity" to analyze the data and compare findings with those reported in the literature.

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## **Appendix A - Interview Questions (Administrators/Instructors/Voluntary Facilitators)**

*The following are the questions asked of administrators/instructors/voluntary facilitators during their one-on-one interview sessions.*

- What kinds of digital literacy (skills) training programs does your organization provide to older adults?
- Why does your organization provide this training?
  - Is it part of your organization's mandate or mission/vision statement or strategic plan?
  - Does your organization's mission/vision statement or strategic plan mention digital literacy? To what extent?
  - Where can I find a copy of your organization's mission/vision statement or strategic plan?
- How does your organization go about deciding which type of training to offer to older adults?
- How does your organization promote (advertise, market) this training to older adults?
  - Who is responsible for this activity?
  - Comment on the success of each type of promotion.
  - How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the promotion?

### **In terms of the digital literacy training provided to older adults. . .**

#### ***Purpose***

- What is the purpose of providing this specific type of training?
- Why is your organization interested in this type of training?
- What does your organization hope to gain from offering this type of training?

#### ***History***

- How did this type of training emerge (come to be)?
  - What is the history of this training? Describe how the delivery of this type of training came to be?
  - When/how long ago was this training first established?
  - How has this training emerged/changed over the years?

#### ***Impact on the Organization***

- How has the delivery of this type of training impacted your organization?
- How has your organization reacted to the delivery of this training?
- Are people in the organization pleased? Worried? Concerned? Explain.
- How has this training affected your staff on a personal level, in terms of their
  - Daily role
  - Job motivation?
  - Job satisfaction?
  - Organizational loyalty?
  - Intrinsic motivation?
- What do you envision the future impact of the delivery of this type of training will be on your organization?

#### ***Impact on Older Adults***

- How have older adults reacted to the delivery of this type of training?
- What do you see as the outcomes of this training in terms of digital literacy skills and/or changes in attitudes towards digital literacy among those who participate in the training
  - Psychological outcomes?
  - Behavioral outcomes?
  - Benefit outcomes?
- What do you envision the future impact of this type of training will be on older adults?

***Set up and delivery of this type of training for older adults***

- If another local community organization or public library called you up and asked you for advice on what are things one needs to do, or have in place, to deliver this type of training for older adults. what would you tell them?
- What worked well?
- What aspects of the training were especially useful (e.g., specific topic elements, timing, instructional method, pedagogic techniques)?
- What things could be improved and/or things that someone should be aware of in order to prevent a poorly designed/implemented training program from happening?
- Are there ways in which the training might be improved?

**Other Things to Ask**

- In your opinion, what constitutes a successful digital literacy training program for older adults?
- What are the key characteristics of a training opportunity for older adults that make it good (effective)?
- What are the main challenges of teaching digital literacy skills to older adults?
- Are there any official or commonly-accepted guidelines you use to design and deliver your digital literacy training programs for older adults?
- Do you benchmark your training programs? Explain.
  - What performance measurements do you collect?
  - How do you utilize these performance measures?
    - \* Reporting?
    - \* Re-design of the training?
- Comment on the governance structure / project management approach used in design and implementation of the digital literacy training programs your organization provides to older adults.
  - What works well?
  - What needs improvement?
  - What challenges exist? How can they be overcome?
  - What unique challenges exist for a training initiative involving multiple partner organizations. are there special tensions (e.g., different objectives among the partners) that need to be considered?

**Last Question**

- Is there anything I have forgotten to ask or comments you want to include that we haven't covered yet in this interview?



## **Appendix B - Interview Questions (Older Adult Learners)**

The following are the questions asked of older adult learners during their one-on-one interview sessions.

### **The Learning Environment**

- How did you learn or find out about the training you just took part in?
- Why did you decide to take part in this training?
- How do you typically keep your digital skills up-to-date?
  - Take courses such as this?
  - Self-learn?

### **Program Components**

- What aspects of the training did you like the best? Why?
  - What worked well?
  - Content?
  - Need for the skills taught?
- What aspects of the training did you like the least?
  - Why?
  - What needs improvement?
  - What challenges exist? How could they be overcome?

### **Psychological Outcomes**

- To what extent did the instruction affect your confidence and/or level of anxiety with the content taught specifically, or toward digital technology in general?

### **Behavioural Outcomes**

- What is the likelihood that you will apply / utilize the skills taught in the course in the future?
- To what extent, because of the training that you received, do you feel that you can perform those skills more efficiently or effectively than before the training?
  - Time-savings?
  - Reduction in effort?
  - Finding better information sources?
  - Finding more information sources?
  - Finding more relevant information sources?

### **Benefit Outcomes**

- What are the benefits of the training you received?
  - Will it influence your well-being in any way?
  - Will it influence the degree to which you can participate in society more?
  - Will it allow you to access more services than before (e.g., government, medical)?
  - Will it affect your personal life in any way? Explain.

### **Last Question**

- Is there anything I have forgotten to ask or comments you want to include that we haven't covered yet in this interview?