

Learning in Retirement
at McGill University
Centre for Continuing Education

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Part I: A Brief History of Continuing Education at McGill University
[C. Rafman]

This brief history on adult education extension courses at McGill University is intended to give you a sketch of the fertile ground where the McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement began to grow. McGill's tradition of supporting adult education is almost 200 years old—although 200 years is not long compared to China's history. The beautiful University campus is situated in downtown Montreal in the Province of Quebec. In 1813, James McGill, a Scottish immigrant, bequeathed his 46 acre estate to the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning which became McGill University. It was chartered in 1821 and began instruction in 1829 with the Faculty of Medicine and in 1843 with the Faculty of Arts.

Extension courses share a parallel development with regular university courses. In the mid-1800's a main source of general education was the public lecture series provided by learned citizens. The University Extension Department provided a forum for scientific discussion and McGill faculty also lectured regularly to workers at the Mechanics Institute about science, art and literature. Dawson, McGill's fourth Principal, actively sought the support of the Montreal community. His belief that the university should not be isolated from the community it serves is still in effect today. His lecture series on natural history, zoology, natural philosophy, civil engineering and the chemistry of life were only open to 'gentlemen.' The Montreal Ladies Educational Association began to offer lectures for women in 1871 and successful candidates received an "Associate in Arts" certificate. By 1884, women were allowed to register as regular McGill students, although in separate classes.

In addition to its public lecture series, McGill launched a summer school program on a permanent basis-- the first by a Canadian university-- as well as a French language summer school. The McLennan Travelling Libraries, with the support of private endowments, were established in 1900 to serve the needs of rural Quebecois. The libraries consisted of indestructible wooden boxes filled with 40 books each that could be borrowed for 4 months for \$4. By 1930, 213 libraries were in circulation to various locations including mining, lumber and construction outpost camps.

Stephen Leacock, a renowned poet, author and McGill faculty member, took an active interest in developing extension courses at McGill. Beginning in 1910, he offered evening lectures in chemistry, physics and botany to 'serious' students who would supplement his lectures with readings. The responsibilities, assets and records of the Extension Department were taken over by the University soon after the close of World War I. By 1920 McGill was planning a wider range of extension courses based on the successes at Chicago and Columbia

Universities. Practical lectures prepared specifically by Leacock for bankers opened up ties with the Montreal business community.

During the depression and war years, McGill did not augment its extension activities, although a 1935 survey of the needs of Canadians led to the founding of the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education with a national mandate to promote the development and improvement of adult education. The initial meeting was held on Macdonald campus, now the site of the McGill Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. The McGill Extension Committee started in 1935-36 with over 600 students enrolled. The committee had jurisdiction over all organized educational activities other than those of regular faculty curricula. Courses were of university standards but not equivalent; such as lectures from the Natural History Society, courses on agriculture, an evening accountancy program, and summer schools. Other activities were the travelling libraries, lantern slide lectures and radio lectures. There was cooperation with external organizations such as the Workers Educational Association.

Since the late 1940's language courses have made up the largest part of extension—especially English for immigrants and French-speaking Canadians. The first director, F.S. Howes, a Professor of Electrical Engineering, was appointed in 1949. Then with a name change in the 1960s, the Centre for Continuing Education expanded its departments of Languages and of Management Studies under the leadership of Alistair Duff. The mandate of Continuing Education became to meet “the needs and aspirations of adult members of a rapidly changing society.” During this time, the different needs of older adult students were beginning to be recognized. Course guidelines stipulated that the University must “open its doors to those, be they young or old, who are unable for one reason or another to be regular full-time day students.” Fees were also reduced for people over 65.

Internationally, evidence of ‘third age learning’ or ‘learning in retirement’ programs began in the 1970's as a ‘grass roots’ movement. This social phenomenon was set in motion by the older individual's need to continue learning after fulfilling the demands of professional or household obligations. The third age gives birth to a time when we can devote ourselves to learning. In New York, early in the mid-1970's the New School for Retired Professionals started giving classes for and by retired university professors. About the same time in Toulouse, France the University of the Third Age also started. T.A.L.I.S. begun by Jean Costa grew from this natural devotion to provide learning opportunities for people in their third age. Successful programs also flourished in Canada: Senior Studies at Ryerson, the Alumni Lecture Series at the University of Toronto, an auditing program at Concordia and the University of British Columbia Community of Third Age Learners and Scholars that was modeled on the UCLA Plato Society.

At McGill an advisory committee had been meeting since 1984 to explore ways of giving seniors better access to university resources. Two courses under the name ‘Studies for Seniors’ had low enrolment and the initiative lapsed until 1987 when the first Dean of Continuing Education Pamela Stewart identified the priority to develop seniors programming. The work group made up of older students and Continuing Education staff benefited from the accumulated experiences of these other organizations. Their choice was to adapt the peer-learning model of the Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement. Peer learning means peer teaching—there is not a conventional separation between professor and student—teaching and learning become interdependent. The proposal to create an Institute for Learning in Retirement that would offer non-credit daytime classes for seniors was well received and in April 1989, the Senate Committee on Continuing Education gave the go-ahead, although skepticism was expressed about how much interest it would receive.

To close Part 1, I would like to address two concerns that haunt Continuing Education and that were crucial to the founding of MILR. First, the University's need to be reassured that each program is financially self-supporting. McGill's limited human and financial resources are focused on 30,000 graduate and undergraduate students (approximate age 18 to 25). There is

apprehension that non-credit or night courses-- (presently over 11,000 students in Continuing Education, approximate age 25 to 40) -- put a strain on the university resources designated for daytime programs and research. Hence, the policy that all extension activities pay for themselves. This is short-sighted because academic work solely supported by course fees may be deficient in quality and student services. The second concern is that adult education courses meet 'university-level' standards. This translates into a cautious attitude about introducing innovative programs when, in effect, greater flexibility in standards could benefit many more students. Experimenting with learning models does not reduce the desire for a quality education. McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement was able to fulfill these two concerns. In fact, the success of the experiment in peer learning is proof that a self-sufficient quality program can enhance people's desire for life-long learning. And that is the aim of education for all ages.

Part 2: Development and Flourishing of McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement *[M.Aikens]*

Part 2 of this paper describes the development of the peer learning concept over the thirteen year history of McGill ILR. First, I begin with background of our beginnings to the present size with close to one thousand members actively attending and participating in the program. Our study group subjects cover a wide range of topics from Area Studies/Civilizations to Religious Studies and Science; "*Getting to know more about Asia*" is a regular study group given by a Chinese member of our organization. Secondly, I will delve into the advantages and problems of continuous growth in a volunteer-run organization where members wish to maintain the principal of peer learning in small groups. Lastly, I will discuss the development of two popular lecture series and a weekend musical program.

The strength of our partnership with Continuing Education is based upon MILR's evolution into a self-administered profitable organization. After five years of discussion and approval by McGill Senate, the time to determine the interest in such a venture came during the summer of 1989. The Steering Committee sent an invitation signed by Principal Johnston to McGill graduates ages fifty-five and over, to people taking night courses at Continuing Education and to an Elderhostel group staying at the university. An astonishing four hundred people attended and great enthusiasm expressed. MILR was launched that same fall!

The peer learning program is modeled on the Harvard University Institute for Learning in Retirement-- now celebrating its twenty-fifth year. Our ILR's are similar because we both maintain 100 per cent peer-led study groups; that is, the curriculum is planned and led by the members of the ILR. The differences are that we manage our own income and our fees are a fraction of theirs. We also modified our program from regular University credit courses to suit our clientele. We offer: daytime classes, low cost, no admission requirements, no exams, subjects of interest to the age group and a friendly non-threatening atmosphere. We believe that adults learn most favorably in an environment where they are encouraged to contribute to their learning experience. Our aim is to provide opportunities for our members to participate and interact with each other.

An essential element in the success of MILR is the caliber of persons who volunteer to moderate the study groups. Moderators are volunteers who are members of the organization; they come from varied backgrounds— from retired university professors, to retired professionals and experts in various fields, approximately 70 per cent have degrees in higher education though this is not a requirement. We have found that a far more important skill is the willingness to organize and sustain a group of peer learners. There is a melange of neophytes, experts and semi-experienced people that creates a peer learning milieu. This variety of backgrounds may be a problem for a moderator who wants to make sure no one is left out. There are benefits too: a retired physics professor attempting to present Einstein's theories

said that the questions asked by newcomers often gave him the most pleasure. Many moderators agree that leading a study group is the best learning experience.

During the early history of MILR the main concern was where to hold the study groups and classes were held wherever space could be found on McGill campus. In 1993 with a membership of over 600 persons, MIL R was allocated three classrooms in an off-campus building. As MILR continued to grow, the space problem again became a major concern; so that when MILR was moved into our present location with Continuing Education it was able to acquire an extra classroom. Our 'home' at 688 Sherbrooke Street consists of four classrooms, an office, members' lounge, storage and kitchen. This expansion allowed the number of study groups to increase – twelve two-hour sessions per day for a four and a half day week in the fall term.

MILR is administered by a Council chosen by their peers; the fifteen members, nine of whom chair the various committees, meet monthly. The administration is responsible to the general membership for keeping the organization running in an efficient, democratic manner. The general membership is kept informed of new or ongoing activities through our Newsletter which is published four times a year. The Executive Committee, made up of the officers, meets when required.

The Curriculum Committee plays a major role in the success of MILR. It requests submissions for study group proposals for each ten-week term— fall, winter and spring. Initially, there was concern over who could be recruited to moderate. Over the years it has become apparent that many members who are willing to take on that responsibility have the background and expertise in a wide variety of subjects. This fall ten new moderators were recruited to give study groups during a special workshop. Moderators who have potential are also recruited by other moderators within the study groups. All study proposals are approved by the Curriculum Committee; new people are assigned a 'mentor' to help them get started and give them guidelines on group participation and suggested topics for presentations. Moderator workshops are organized to exchange ideas among those with similar interest and to discuss various strategies for successful groups.

A key member of Council is the Registrar who is responsible for collecting fees and registering people. The registration process has been improved, thanks to the efforts of a member who customized a computer program to suit our needs. Each term members can register for two groups, space permitting, for \$75. This is not a course charge, but rather a membership fee. First and second choices cannot always be guaranteed—it is first come, first served, according to the date received. As a result, members get their registration forms in early as popular groups fill up quickly. Members are notified if there is no room in a particular group and many find they are pleased with the new choice.

Fall is our busiest term where registration is the largest and the 20 maximum per group space constraints make it difficult to please everyone. In popular groups a second session is scheduled. This is not critical during the Winter term because, largely due to the Canadian weather, registration decreases to half when 'snowbirds' travel to warmer climates in the south. The spring term is small as moderators are unwilling to lead groups. To encourage more Spring classes, moderators have the option to meet twice weekly, making a five-week rather than a ten-week term.

The emphasis is on peer learning discussion groups, but in addition, MILR offers special lecture series: on Fridays during the Fall and Winter terms and on Wednesdays during the Summer. Any member with an interest or expertise in a subject submits a proposal to Curriculum. Lectures include topics such as 'Black Holes,' 'Are we running out of water?' or a biography of a poet, artist or musician. Members pay \$5 per lecture and it is gratifying to see the numbers attending the lectures in the 50-seat auditorium located in our building. We also hold Sunday afternoon musical get-togethers every second week when an opera, ballet or

symphony is shown. The Wonderful Wednesdays Summer lectures were designed three years ago on a trial basis. The response was overwhelming! Many members bring lunch and spend the day.

How is our self-sustaining organization financed? Our \$75 membership fee covers the needs of running an operation of our size. The accounting is managed by McGill and income tax receipts issued by the University. The additional monies collected for the special lecture series have paid for our state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment. Moderators are allocated \$25 for photocopying materials. The annual budget covers the printing of the Calendars, the Newsletter and promotion material, mailing costs, telephones, office supplies and our Treasurer keeps track of all expenses and provides Council with monthly operating statements.

And do we have fun? Yes, we certainly do! We have an annual 'Holiday lunch' in December and a 'Spring Fling' in May. Many study groups become close knit and on the last day of the term there are many celebrations. The 'Jazz' group usually goes to a Montreal Club for a night of live music. One of my 'Write the story of your life' groups met at an Indian Restaurant at the end of term. One of the most gratifying spin-offs of MILR is the rapport and friendships that develop among members.

All of this organization does not happen spontaneously. The Long Range Planning Committee keeps things on track and in perspective. Every two years a 'Maintaining Momentum' day-long conference is held for the general membership. Our recent fourth conference was intended to recruit new moderators. After a panel discussion with experienced moderators, people sat at round tables with a leader and a scribe who kept track of the suggestions. The end result was many new topics and ten new moderators giving study groups this fall.

Our affiliation with McGill University is an essential part of our success. As a department under the umbrella of Continuing Education, our responsibility is to provide learning programs for adults who are retired or semi-retired.

Part 3: Mutual Benefits of the Relationship between the University and the Institute for Learning in Retirement [C. Rafman]

Peer group study at McGill ILR is unlike any other program in Montreal or in Canada. It fills a need that conventional courses do not satisfy and most importantly it is a product of the retired members of the community in partnership with the University. Instead, of designing a tailor-made program, Continuing Education became the facilitator to enable seniors to plan and administer their own program. The mutual benefits this relationship represents for both partners are numerous.

3.1 What MILR gets from McGill University

MILR is a special fund that manages its own finances. In return, it reports annually to its members and provides the Centre with a Budget and Year-end Report. About one third of its operating income is returned to McGill for administrative fees. Benefits to MILR include:

1. Central downtown location on the second floor of a McGill office building across from the campus. This location is a reflection of the close yet 'arms-length' relationship MILR enjoys under the umbrella of Continuing Education.
2. Continuity and expertise from University staff.
3. Access to McGill's 17 libraries that contain more than five million books and journals in addition to Internet access.

4. University support services, such as: telecommunication networks, security, mail, accounting, printing, room bookings, publicity.
5. An intangible, yet highly valued, benefit is the pride of attending an internationally renowned university.

3.2 What McGill gets from MILR

1. The University benefits from the presence of older people who bring their personal and professional experiences and heritages.
2. The University receives the benefit of the skills of volunteers who run MILR without the responsibility to pay staff benefits.
3. Retired professors and staff may continue their affiliation with McGill through MILR.
4. The University benefits from public awareness that MILR is providing a needed and respected community service.
5. Relationships between the senior community and the University complex are being built through MILR.
6. The McGill name is magnified nationally and internationally through MILR's affiliations with networks set up by seniors learning organizations.

I would like to close with words from Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) that reinforce the T.A.L.I.S. theme of 'education for all ages.'

"In the wider sense, what I want to advocate is not to make education shorter, but to make it much longer - indeed to make it last as long as life itself."

from *Too Much College*, 1939

Part 4: Forecast for the Future [M. Aikens]

The first wave of the baby boomer generation will be retiring in 10 years, 2012. In fact, we are already experiencing an increase in registration from early retirees. There is no shortage of people wanting leisurely educational activities and we have published a new flyer to reach out to more Montrealers. Our MILR program is admired and recognized as a leader in the field of older adult learning as well as for the scope and quality of our activities. Our challenges are to maintain the commitment of the volunteers who sustain MILR and to keep the University supporting our innovations. The world is getting closer thanks to the Internet and our memberships in T.A.L.I.S., CATALIST and the Elderhostel Institute Network which put us in touch with 20,000 Canadians and 70,000 Americans. The future for growth in third age learning opportunities looks very bright.