

Generative derailments: Collaborative curriculum design with older adult language and literacy learners

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Tension is central to teaching. All the same, I somehow always feel surprised when my lesson plans come off the rails, failure haunting me as I try to understand what went wrong. As an adult literacy and language teacher, my curriculum development process has often felt similar to the halting, meandering progress of the Toronto subway: hopeful, but never certain I'll arrive where I intended. When I was invited by my supervisor, Natalia, to collaborate with her on a research project designing a ten-week creative and arts-based language and literacy program for older adult learners, I was excited to practice what I had been learning in graduate school. This project's premise was deceptively straightforward. We wanted to explore how older adult language and literacy learners made sense of their experiences through creative and arts-based approaches to language and literacy learning. However, we both quickly found that our well-laid plans were often derailed by the realities of working collaboratively with learners to design the program. In this article, Natalia and I turn to the nature of tensions to imagine how derailments can be understood as both places of uncertainty and a generative force central to collaborative processes of inquiry and teaching. Natalia and I wrestled with questions about literacy and the purpose of education. These unanticipated questions became generative spaces for rethinking our pedagogical assumptions. Uncertainty about where we were headed was no longer a failure, but an opportunity to wonder together about where we all (as teachers and learners) really wanted to go.

Research as derailment

"I like this idea of derailment. As a trained educator that to me is loss of control. So that's a lot of unlearning that has to be done here, because it is not losing control. It's actually learners being agents of their own process." (Natalia)

When Natalia and I began a research project with older adult language and literacy learners, our curriculum plans were neat and ordered. We met and discussed the logistics, what we wanted to focus on and dreamed pedagogy into practice. However, as we taught, these dreams were complicated by the tensions of real people negotiating their learning together. This process was far from orderly, requiring attunement to one another and the learners. Co-designing curriculum (Deketelaere & Kelchtermans, 1996; Voogt et al., 2015;

Voogt et al., 2019) with our learners was a way to challenge our own assumptions about when learning was happening and what learners wanted. In this process, one question kept coming back to us: How can tensions be embraced as part of curriculum design processes, rather than felt as failures? In this paper, Natalia and I share with you two pedagogical derailments: places where our own visions for learning were interrupted in the process of co-design. We share these derailments to support other instructors doing curriculum co-design with their learners and to help all of us find new tracks to travel together. Additionally, we focus on two activities we used in the project and suggest ways to expand them. We hope that modeling how moments of failure can be a generative space, can guide us to more deeply understand how to learn from those we teach.

Designing curriculum together

For Natalia and me, co-designing curriculum for this research project was born out of necessity and intention. Working with twelve older adults with varied language backgrounds and literacy experiences, we wanted to explore how the participants' experiences of age and language learning intersected. As community-based researchers, we had a firm commitment to conduct participant-centered project that would be meaningful to the learners as well as our research goals. In addition, there was no pre-existing language program in the community space, so Natalia and I decided on the following structure. First, we loosely planned the themes for the ten-week language learning class. The structure of the lessons followed the three phases of Creative Collaborative Inquiry (Artem Research Collective, 2024), a research methodology but also a pedagogical invitation. In the first phase, we explored a creative activity together (including storytelling, collaging, singing, and creating advertisements). In the second phase, we guided a group discussion about the personal and collective significance of the activities. What had we learned through these creative approaches? What meaning were our learners making through the creative activities? Finally, we sought feedback about the session. What was working, what wasn't working? We used this information to design upcoming lessons. Table 1 is an example of how two activities: collaging and creating advertisements, were planned for the three phases described.



Table 1: Collaging and Advertisements with Creative Collaborative Inquiry

CCI	Collages	Advertisements
Phase 1: Exploration	We provided pictures for learners to choose from. We asked learners “What do you want to learn in English class?”	We introduced the concept of ageism and gave learners different copies of advertisements. We then looked at the advertisements together and discussed whether these ads were ageist or not. After viewing the ads, we gave them the slogans and the photos and had them create their own advertisements.
Phase 2: Discussion	After finishing the collages, learners presented their collages and explained the pictures.	We asked questions about their advertisements and asked them to share why they chose the photos and slogans. Then we asked the question: What do you think other people would find surprising about aging?
Phase 3: Feedback	We posted the collages in the classroom for them to look at and collected feedback forms about the activity.	We gave a multimodal feedback sheet to the learners to tell us whether they enjoyed the activity or not.

After each class, we discussed our impressions and reshaped the curriculum for the next week. At this time, we returned to our original plan and removed activities that did not receive enthusiastic endorsement from the learners. In what follows, we share with you how collaging and creating advertisements with our learners were moments of derailment which challenged us to expand and suggest new ways to adapt these activities for future educators.

Collaging as derailment: Doing school or having fun?

In the first class, Natalia and I laid out dozens of images on the table in front of the twelve learners, offered them colourful paper, and asked them “What do you want to learn in this English class?”

The results (Figure 1 below) were brightly coloured images scattered across the paper, sometimes carefully placed, other times glued haphazardly. We laughed and chatted as people glued and designed their collage, sometimes speaking in English and sometimes Italian. This activity was fun, and learners told us in their feedback and through their body language, that they enjoyed collaging. In the classes, Natalia and I heard important language learning happen through their requests, questions, explanations, and joy. As researchers, we believed in the value of other ways to express themselves beyond reading and writing (García & Kleifgen, 2020; New London Group, 1996). How could this be a derailment? On paper this activity was a success.

But the learners were not satisfied with fun as a learning outcome; they felt collaging was not really *doing school*.



Figure 1: Collages about Language Learning

Switching tracks: Collaging

Doing school or having fun? Research on using multimodality with English language learners suggests it benefits their language learning and identity formation (Burgess & Rowsell, 2020; Sharmin, 2022). However, it also highlighted the expectations learners bring to the classroom about what school is and what counts as doing school. Reflecting on another experience using multimodal activities with literacy learners (Veselka, 2025), I was reminded that bringing art and multimodal activities into the classroom does not always feel like success and requires scaffolding to ensure the learning is meaningfully connected to students' lives. Co-designing curriculum meant negotiating between very different sets of expectations about how to learn and teach English. In re-imagining this activity post-derailment, Natalia and I wanted to imagine the connections between *doing school* and *having fun*, building pathways to remind ourselves and our students that these are not opposite ends of a spectrum. *Having fun is part of doing school. Doing school is part of having fun.* The following ideas listed below are offerings to other educators, to experiment with in their own use of collages.

- Teach about famous collage artists and have students make a collage in one of their styles
- Write a journal with vocabulary from the collage, have students create collages in each new unit and add new vocabulary to the journal
- Use collages as a self-created picture dictionary. Have students create collages in each new unit and write phrases, vocabulary, and other important information on their collages

- Use a book/reading text and have students create collages using photos from a book, then have them re-tell the story to a classmate

Advertisements as derailment: Literacy assumptions

Creating advertisements was intended to serve two purposes. First, it allowed us to introduce the concept of ageism in a creative way. Second, it offered a way to reflect on aging through images, rather than through reading and writing which would have been challenging for some learners in our class. Natalia printed images from the [Age-positive Image Library](#) and a variety of age-positive slogans, ready to create age-positive advertisements with our learners (see Figure 2).

It was only when we started discussing the advertisements and asking learners to explain their choices when designing their own ads that we noticed a key assumption embedded in our curriculum design. We had assumed advertisements, as a multimodal text, would be more accessible for learners with limited formal education. Advertisements are not just images, but text and audience. Advertisements are meant to convey a message, to raise awareness, or to generate action. This activity generated wonderful discussion but failed to meaningfully connect oral to visual or written literacies. This should not have been surprising, as Altherr Flores (2017, 2021) discusses the literacy assumptions that are embedded in multimodal texts, and how difficult they can be for literacy learners. But this derailment was a needed reminder for me about the assumptions I bring to my curriculum design (multimodal texts are easier; less writing is more accessible). The reality was that our learners needed more time and scaffolding to support their multimodal literacies, in the same way they needed time to develop reading and writing literacies.

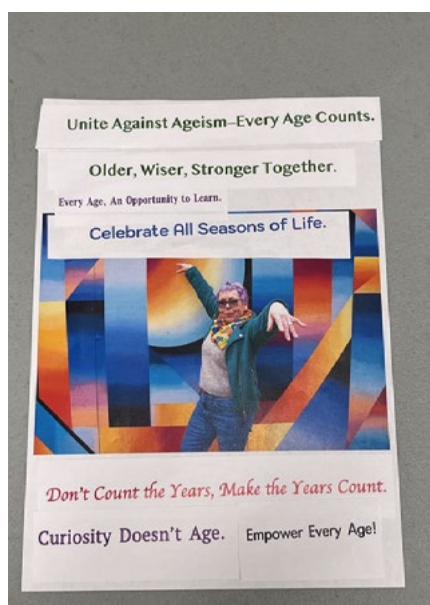
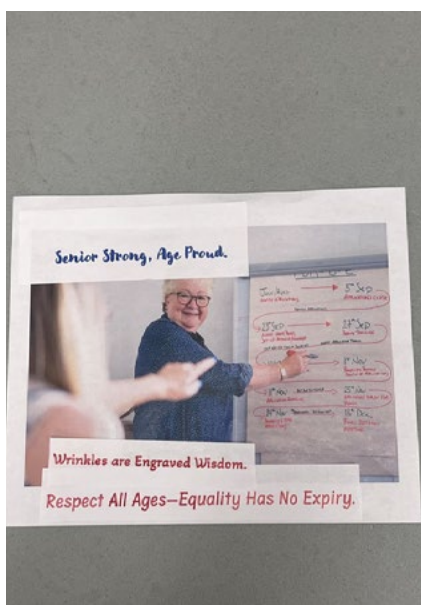


Figure 2: Advertisements about Ageism

Switching tracks: Advertisements

While the learners loved discussing their perspectives as they looked at ageist advertisements, more scaffolding was needed for learning through a multimodal text. This derailment suggested to Natalia and me that more time and support was needed to deeply engage with advertising as a genre. We would not give a developing reader a dense book and expect them to read it fluently. Similarly, we had to check our own assumptions about the accessibility of advertisements and other creative activities. Sometimes the reason a creative activity did not go well was because we assumed literacy skills our learners were still developing. For example, in rethinking how to create advertisements with literacy learners, we found more time is needed to build up learners' background knowledge and critical and reflective skills. Focusing on doing one creative activity (such as advertisements) over many weeks might have been more supportive for the learners in our class. Below are further suggestions about how this activity might be more meaningfully scaffolded.

- Have students bring in ads from their own countries, cultures or communities; compare different regions, types of advertisements, colour choices, or purposes of advertising
- Teach colour theory and design an advertisement that draws out the connections between colour theory and feelings they want to convey through the advertisement
- Have students go out into their communities and take pictures of advertisements around them; ask them to bring these back to class; analyze the words, vocabulary, phrases and types of advertising they see
- Have students design together an advertisement for a product or service important to them (could be a new business or their favourite snack); do classroom presentations once they have worked on it together

Conclusion

How can derailments be embraced as part of curriculum design processes, rather than felt as failures? This question remains with us as we continue to uncover how creative and collaborative approaches to curriculum design can be used with older adult language and literacy learners. What our study revealed

is that collaborative approaches to curriculum development often reveal tensions, rather than eliminating them. In our moments of derailment, we hope to illustrate the value of multimodal curriculum while also acknowledging the layered complexities of introducing this type of learning in English language and literacy classrooms. We would encourage educators to embrace these tensions, to pay close attention to the learners in front of them, and to scaffold multimodal activities. Rather than believing we are fully in charge of what goes on in the classroom (Waterhouse, 2020), collaborative curriculum development provided Natalia and me with a space to acknowledge the unpredictability of classroom life. The expansions suggested in the *Switching Tracks* section of this paper are evidence that when we embrace tensions in our practice, new (and perhaps better) pedagogical possibilities await us.

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