

# More than tea and scones: including women as third age learners in rural communities

## Author:

[Jillian Marchant, Glenna Lear](#)

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**Abstract:** Research investigating adult education in rural settings indicates that women are more likely than men to engage with adult education for its particular learning outcomes, such as formal qualifications, as well as self-development and self-realisation. The personal transformation associated with education may be termed third age learning when the individual develops a new midlife identity and personal fulfilment. Previous education research suggests that third age learners have the potential to offer significant social benefits to their communities. However, research on the outcomes of third age women's initiative to further their education is minimal at best. Thus, this paper introduces some of the issues facing women as third age learners with a particular focus on those living in rural/regional communities. The study utilises the principles of autoethnography to construct a composite narrative of the lived experiences of the two authors as third age learners in their rural communities. Ongoing informal email conversations between them identify striking similarities in their social experiences whilst living in different regions of South Australia. Their portrayal illuminates the lived experience of being qualified rural third age women and the issues they face in regional Australia. This study highlights a gap between policies emphasising lifelong education across the life span and opportunities for the placement of qualified individuals on completion of their educational aspirations. Their limited inclusion as third age learners negates the self-realisation of their potential and the social and economic benefits of their education to the wider community. Identifying the structures that constrain both personal and social development facilitates an exploration for better inclusion of third age women who have a desire to make a difference in rural communities. It is critical for their ongoing prosperity that rural and regional communities retain and encourage the innovative knowledge and skills of qualified individuals. Thus, this paper argues that developing adequate structures to include qualified women in rural communities will give them a choice of roles that encourage them to remain in

**their communities. It concludes with suggestions that may enhance the inclusion of women as third age learners and direct further research in this area.**

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