

**Learning ICT later in life:
Looking for relationships with active ageing**

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Abstract

This paper debates the relations between older adults, learning, active ageing and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). We focus adults older than 50 years old who have abandoned school at an early stage of their lives. More recently, they become involved in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes, which include the recognition of competences in ICT. Our particular aim is to analyse their interest and use of ICT, digital literacy, in their daily activities (including the use of mobile phones, computers, internet, and email, among others). We will present the results of five biographical interviews to adults and present our conclusions.

Keywords: Older adults, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), active ageing.

Introduction

Technology development is an unquestionable societal dimension, making knowledge and information a structural determinant for citizens to understand their world, and to be able to act in it. ICT has brought changes in information, the dissemination and importance of ideas, and people's life. To have ICT skills and competences is therefore fundamental. Nowadays, there is a common idea that older adults have been digitally 'excluded'; we tend to think that older adults cannot or do not use technology (Olson, O'Brien, Rogers & Charness, 2011). However, ICT is becoming increasingly important in older adults lives. Taking into account older adults are a heterogeneous group with differences in experience, income, gender and ethnicity (Crossan, Martin & Whittaker, 2001), ICT can carry a number of advantages: it can be seen as a "powerful tool for development" (International Council for Caring Communities, 2003, p.4); it has the potential to help them to renew or develop social contacts (Pereira & Neves, 2011), among other factors. Because ICT development is recent, learning is key to ensure that older adults can use these tools daily for a number of purposes. Hence the importance to understand older learner's experiences and social practices that includes ICT, as a part of a wider understanding of literacy.

Theoretical framework

Literacy is fundamental in social life. Not only to ease the access to information, or in the functional perspective conveyed by the ability to reading, writing and applying technology; but it is a very complex phenomenon. People develop a set of social practices with different meanings in particular contexts. Literacy is acquired and developed not only by school processes, but also from people's experiences throughout the life course. According to Torres (2010), literacy is a strategic key-element essential for the development and quality of life, especially when people's skill levels are low. Considered as a 'golden' competence in modern societies, literacy can be seen as a social construction being made in the different contexts and over the different periods of life. In this sense, NALA (2008) refers that older citizens represent a large group with literacy difficulties and because of this "many older people feel marginalised and discriminated in our society" (p. i).

Illiteracy of older people is quite common. However they have the opportunity to learn and their skills should be recognized and valued in our society. Older adults are encouraged to learn or return to learning (Jarvis, 2001), in spite of the different motives that lead them to return to learning in later life, like self-fulfilment and pleasure (Lalor et al., 2009). According to Kim and Merriam (2010), learning can be a 'sociocultural activity' because it is situated in a specific social context and culture. Learning at old age seems to contribute to active ageing. According to Patrício and Osório (2011), active ageing requires the involvement of older adults in global, technology and digital contemporary society. This participation represents a "challenge" for education and lifelong learning. Different countries have been implementing some strategies with the goal of promote active ageing. Active ageing allows people to realize their "potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the life course and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and capacities, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they require assistance" (WHO, 2002, p. 12).

Literacy uses technological tools – telecommunications, computers, internet, or email – to solve everyday situations. ICT has the potential to improve life styles of older adults (ICCC, 2003). Mitzner et al. (2010) defined technology as "any electronic or

digital product or service. To be able to predict technology usage in general it is important to understand the factors influencing older adults' acceptance and adoption of technology" (p. 1711). ICT literacy can be seen as an important resource which can influence social participation, human capital development and social support networks. So, it's possible to recognize the importance of literacy as a key point that enables individual and collective learning –also for older citizens.

As a resource, Internet has an important role in access to information, services and leisure or social life (Cavaleiro, 2011). Internet and email can enable quick or cheap contact or communicate with family and friends. On the other hand, older people (similarly as young people) can use technology for other purposes, for example, learn or acquire more skills; promote active citizenship in social and political terms; and generally speaking, technology can help older adult's to have an independent live and the possibility to remain active at work or community (Crossan, Martin & Whittaker, 2001).

By creating a link between generations, ICT may provide new and flexible learning opportunities, developing and sharing skills and competences with others. In addition, ICT can help older people to participate in activities, such as learning opportunities, access to information and services, social networks, among others (Amaro & Gil, 2011). So ICT has an impact on abilities, skills, opportunities and relationships of older adults; provides pathways to improving their self-esteem, autonomy and, at the same time, to reduce loneliness.

Methodology

This paper is an outcome of a research project¹ focused on adult literacy. Its main aim is to understand the influence of learning in adult's lives, in a broad variety of dimensions. Specifically, we are trying to identify and understand adult's literacy practices. The subjects of our research are adults who had left school at an early age (because of economic or family related reasons, low self-esteem and low self-efficacy), and later on registered in adult learning centres that deliver Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Our project involves questionnaires made to the adults, interviews to those adults; interviews to the RPL teams (including trainers), during the learning processes, and also after the processes are concluded. With this methodology we expect to understand the evolution of literacy practices in adult's lives.

In this paper, we decided to use qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994) to study ICT learning and its use in the daily lives of older adults. We conducted five biographical interviews (Poirier, Clapier-Valladon & Raybaut, 1999) to older adults who, in their daily activities in RPL centres, had some training in ICT in order to improve their skills in this domain. ICT training sessions took place once a week and aimed to identify and to recognize ICT adult's skills and competences. If adults have little ICT skills to begin with, they can be advised to enrol further training.

These older adults have narrated their stories, giving us versions of their experience in a first-hand basis, allowing us a better understanding of both their learning and the social contexts where it was produced. In a word, biography becomes a field of learning (Alheit, 1995). Thus our research questions are the following: Can the new knowledge and technology skills improve significantly the lives of older adults? What are the personal and social benefits from these learning experiences and its consequences in their lives? Can technology strengthen ties with families and friends? What are the opportunities and the challenges in this issue?

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Learning ICT in later life...

We have space to provide only very brief biographical elements on our research subjects. Julie is 50 years old, married and has two sons. She was born and lived until the age of 24 in a small village in northern Portugal. After marriage, she moved with her family to southern Portugal. Her parents were subsistence farmers. Julie studied only until grade 4. Approximately 40 years after abandoning school, she registered in a RPL centre and obtained a 9th grade certification. Julie, although currently unemployed has had a professional career that required the use of some ICT skills – and so she attended a training course. Julie is using some of the technological skills she has learned before RPL. She is using the computer to access the internet, to research, read news, send and receive e-mails, make online payments, and also uses social networks (also mobile phones). She claims that ICT has contributed quite positively in improving her everyday life. Even though she is using social networks for entertainment and talking with friends, she does not believe that using these technologies will help strengthen family ties. That is, relationships at general or friendship in particular involve mainly face-to-face meetings and the possibilities to make things together. Also Julie argues that despite the ICT's benefits, you really need to know how to use it, or otherwise they can be harmful to all people.

Teresa is 56 years old, married and the mother of a daughter. Although she was a good student during her school career, she left school in the 4th grade because her parents lack of financial resources. Many years later she completed the 9th grade through the RPL process. Although she is currently unemployed, Teresa has devoted much of her life (39 years) to the profession of being a florist. She occupies her free time doing theatre and handcrafts. Teresa has used ICT in her profession, especially the computer, to access the internet and search for models and different shapes and techniques to create decorative boxes. She sells them at fairs in the region where she lives. Teresa learned to use the computer “practically alone” and claims these technological skills to have helped greatly her life. For Teresa the internet is a source of learning. Despite all the major contributions the internet and computers in general have given her she does not believe that new technologies can strengthen family or friendship values. For Teresa, the Internet also has many disadvantages. And when the Internet is addicting and people become “slaves” to it there arrives the moment it no longer makes any sense.

Lourdes is 48 years old, married and the mother of two sons. Both sons are studying human resource management at the university. Having studied only until the 6th grade, for family reasons, Lourdes returned to learning in a RPL centre. However she dropped because it had no the patience to do so. Lourdes worked for many years in an architectural firm but became redundant. The employment centre forced her (for not to lose her unemployment subvention) to go back to a RPL centre. This time she completed the processes and obtained a 9th grade certificate. Although Lourdes has had lessons in ICT she says she learned to use the computer alone. For her ICT can significantly improve people's lives. In her case the skills acquired through the use of new technologies were essential to carry out her job well (in the architectural firm). Lourdes regards with satisfaction a great deal of new technologies in the life of his mother, who despite being illiterate, learned all mobile phone numbers of their sons in order to be able to talk with them. For Lourdes new technologies can bring people together.

Robert is 57 years old and two sons. He studied until the 6th grade and after 39 years out of school, he completed the 9th grade certificate in a RPL centre. After leaving the

Navy, Robert has worked as a professional diver for many years; currently works in a shipyard. New technologies have contributed significantly to improve his life. Robert uses the computer to access the internet and to research, to speak with his daughter who lives in France, and to chat with friends through social networks (facebook). For him, it is important because it is a cheap way to speak with family and friends. When Robert does have any questions he always uses the computer. His dream is to continue his studies to be able to access higher education.

Johnny is 57 years old and married. He abandoned school in 4th grade due to his family poor financial resources. He had to start work at the age of 10 to help his family. He has worked in Germany in construction, but much of his life was dedicated to being a meat cutter. Currently unemployed, he decided to register in an RPL centre, where he obtained a 9th grade certificate. To learn ICT he participated in a training course, when his wife was doing the 9th grade. He uses the internet daily to research, especially agriculture, and uses this information to improve his vegetables plantations. He also makes use of social networks (facebook) to make new friendships and contact with former friends. In his opinion ICT can contribute much to strengthen family ties and friendships. He states that the real contributions that people can have with the use of ICT depends only on themselves. He mentioned that one should never be afraid to explore and learn about these technological resources.

Conclusion

The adults we have interviewed all are in a particular situation that carry meanings closely associated with the context and the historical moment Portugal is currently living. These are adults in their 50s who have been losing their jobs (four out of five) due to the economic crisis with low prospects to be “employable” in a near future. They are low qualified, even after their participation in RPL processes; they had low qualified jobs that did not provide them with further opportunities for skills development or further training. This particular situation of our research subjects is also important in the sense that triggers some comments: first, despite their very low educational levels, learning ICT was not a difficult task; quite the contrary, some of them even claim to have learned at least basic procedures by themselves – even if the training they received in RPL centres helped them to improve their ICT skills or discover other dimensions they were not aware of. The easiness of ICT learning is therefore an important point to stress; it can be a tool for fostering autonomous learning and that is easily noticeable in our subject’s stories. The awareness that they can learn autonomously is central because it can extend to other areas than ICT and eventually bring other types of benefits for these persons – maybe help them in the most sensible part of their today’s life: to find a job. Second, our subjects are not that old and this means they are not still grandmothers or grandfathers; we see no evidences of intergenerational learning also because they are not in a phase of their lives in which learning from the younger ones or fostering kids learning is a possibility in their contexts.

Looking at our interviewees, what are the main advantages they claim ICT has brought to their everyday lives? First, there is an instrumental use of ICT related with work. Using the computer is an unavoidable necessity of the majority of professions and this is clear in our stories. In some cases, internet search can improve their knowledge – like Johnny in his farming. Second, these adults use ICT to communicate better with friends and family, especially important in the cases where family is away (Robert talking to his daughter in France; or Lourdes’s mother using the mobile phone to be in

touch with their sons and daughters), to read news and be connected to everyday events. Especially important seems to be the use of social networks for socialization, leisure and to escape loneliness – despite the fact that some stress that friendship is supposed to be developed in face-to-face contacts. Facebook or other social networks are not supposed to substitute real contacts and real meetings between people; rather they are seen as a way to complement and expand friendship. Third, it seems ICT can make everyday life easier, by providing means to make on-line payments, access information easily, etc. Some of our subjects use internet in a constant base whenever they have doubts or need a specific piece of information.

Our research questions were the following: Can the new knowledge and technology skills improve significantly the lives of older adults? What are the personal and social benefits from these learning experiences and its consequences in their lives? Can technology strengthen ties with families and friends? For these adults ICT provided significant improvements in the areas of work, personal, family or social communication, bettering their everyday managing of matters. So we would say that are visible improvements brought up by the development of these soft skills. It seems obvious that technology at general can bring people together and in a way, can strengthen ties with family and friends, being an important tool to fight isolation. Again, social networks are not seen as a substitution of face-to-face contact, and some of our interviewees are well aware of a certain risk and danger associated with internet and social networks, namely addiction.

We have hints to show us that ICT can provide a bridge towards autonomous learning. This is, for us, the most important point to retain, especially because of the profile of these adults. To be aware that they can learn by themselves might be an organic path for them to understand the importance of education and learning in modern live, and to act accordingly. However, we need further research to confirm and complete this conclusion.

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