

Training for intergenerational dialogue and solidarity

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Abstract

Intergenerationality is a great challenge for all developed countries since the elderly population is growing, both in terms of their age and of their percentage presence in our societies. The solidarity between different generations is becoming so important that we can consider intergenerational dialogue a fundamental goal for us to aim at, developing those skills that allow us to act properly as citizens in the "ageing societies". Any context and activity with an educational purpose (formal or not formal) should deal with intergenerational dialogue.

This paper first suggests some reflections on the main theoretical issues that put intergenerationality at the core of the educational debate on elderly education. Once the theoretical background has been outlined, it presents an analysis of some educational contexts and activities aimed at developing intergenerational activities. These experiences involved elderly people together with learners from other generations. The experiences that have been carried out highlighted that some contents and teaching methodologies appear to be more effective to meet the needs of elderly and young learners and to promote the dialogue between them. In particular, the methods involving significant tasks and stimulating both cognition and perception fostered the dialogue between the different generations and allowed each learner to get more involved in the process. These experiences can help to define some appropriate teaching and learning strategies for promoting intergenerational dialogue and solidarity.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades European population has grown more and more long lived. The decline in birth rate and a longer life span are progressively changing the demographic profile of our society. This phenomenon has been accompanied by the significant increase of educational activities and environments addressed to elderly citizens. In most cases these educational contexts have been founded and managed as spontaneous experiences in response to the needs of the elderly population, which is constantly increasing. This spontaneous growth has not necessarily been accompanied by an intentional planning of educational goals, strategies and expected outcomes. Nowadays educational and training environments for the elderly are becoming progressively richer and diversified and the growing importance of this phenomenon is food for thought in pedagogical and didactic terms.

Most of these environments are addressed to elderly people, but the next challenge for Elderly education should consist in overcoming the boundaries of generations in order to promote experiences leading to dialogue and solidarity between young, adults and elderly people. This kind of experience already exists as “pilot projects” that need to be enhanced and investigated from a pedagogical perspective.

2. Intergenerationality and education: theoretical perspectives

The basis for an educational approach promoting intergenerational dialogue can be found in all the theories referring to life-span perspective and lifelong learning approach.

The life-span perspective overcame the traditional views of human ages and all the theories that considered life course as a curve shaped like a bell where adulthood was placed at the bottom and childhood and third age at the beginning and at the end of this curve. In this model the most important period of human life is adulthood and any other moment is relevant just in relation to this life step. Childhood is considered as a preparation or a training for adult life and old age is seen as the progressive decline of abilities and possibilities of adult life.

Life-span perspective (Baltes, Reese, Lipsitt, 1980) brought on a very different point of view on human life. This approach conceives life-course as a dynamic path, in which life is seen as a discontinuous line.

According to the *Lifespan perspective* there is not one age period that affects an individual's development more than the others and there is not an optimum or peak age for learning. There are experiences which are especially significant and that may affect the direction of our development, as is the case of challenges or moments of transition. However, one cannot predict the moment in which these experiences will occur nor the impact that they will have on the individual. Life is characterized by *life marker events* and *development tasks*, and development is influenced by variables that are different for each person. The entire picture of human development and growth can only be understood in relation to the cultural and social dynamics in which they occur.

If we see development as a constant and multifaceted process, we assign a fundamental role to lifelong learning. One of the linchpin for an intergenerational educational approach is Lifelong learning perspective. This approach considers that learning is effective when it enriches and allows the individual to acquire a range of transversal skills that are connected with “learning to learn”. (Montedoro, 2001). In this perspective, each individual has his own educational and formative history that has evolved within institutional environments such as schools or universities, in formal

extra-scholastic settings or within environments that are not explicitly educational. The lifelong learning perspective always focuses on the learner himself.¹

Many theories of psychological development follow this perspective. Erikson's Personality development theory (Erikson, 1986) is focused on the idea that old age is a period characterized by the polar tension between desperation and integration of previous life tasks and marked by some specific development tasks. Schaie Life stage theory (Schaie 1977), considers old age as a period of recapitulation of previous ages and defines it as a phase that is characterized by both a decline in cognitive complexity and flexibility and the improvement in the individual's ability to adapt to biological changes. Erikson (1986) considers elderliness as the age in which people need to face two opposing tensions: defeat or failure on the one hand, and the acceptance acquired as one seeks a perspective for life's directions, on the other. Wisdom is seen as the ultimate force that can positively resolve the tension between desperation and acceptance as "*involved estrangement*". Old age is marked by the return of tensions from previous life phases. According to Erikson, the achievement of balance between desperation and integration involves a process of revision of one's past life leading to positive resolution or, at least, to a form of serene acceptance that is not stained by feelings of rancour, repentance and regret.

Levinson (1978) affirms that humans' development stages are strongly influenced by individual and historical variables. Growth is a cyclical process, influenced by markers and their interaction with self. Individuals grow when facing tasks that very often bring conflicts. Human life is not linear but shaped according to the personal reaction to development tasks, considering one's historical background.

If life span is seen as cyclical, young people's experiences and markers events are not so far from elderly people's. It is essential for the elderly person to maintain the ability to regenerate over adult years and to express this in new ways such as: communication and transmission of personal experiences, safeguarding of a cultural patrimony that may otherwise fade away. helping in upbringing children and grandchildren.

3. Toward an educational approach to intergenerationality

Educational initiatives addressed to the over 65's are included in a set of strategies aimed at promoting life quality in ageing. The elderly today deal with the demands of a continually changing society. Education can facilitate the acquisition of knowledge that will allow them to adopt an active and participatory approach to changing society.

Some basis for an educational approach to the third age can be found in those theories of learning and teaching in adulthood that build a link between the learning needs of different generations.

The theories of adult learning place the learner at the centre of the educational process. Lindeman was one of the first authors who developed a theory of learning in adulthood; he claimed: "... the greatest resource in adult learning is the experience of the learner. Life experience is the living textbook of the adult learner ..."(Lindeman, 1961).

The model of andragogy developed by Knowles (1973) and defined as the "art and science of helping adults to learn" is based on the idea that adults are primarily open to learning in areas that they need to learn about or to perform in order to face life's events successfully. According to this approach, adult learning is centred on real life. Adult learners are motivated to spend their energy in education and training in so far as they

¹ *Lisbon Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* European Commission, 2000.

perceive that they will compensate them in terms of accomplishment of tasks or resolution of day to day problems. For this reason, methods that take advantage of the learner's experiences and that refer to real life are regarded as the most effective in adult learning.

Lindeman offered a further interesting contribution to the theories of the central role of experience in adult learning. Each adult presents his own particular set of circumstances, which are different from those of others and operates within a number of spheres, fields of interest (work, family, social life, etc.) and situations that require some adaptation. Adult education is based on this premise, as it accompanies and facilitates the process of adaptation and guides the individual during his/her many stages of development, which are not necessarily sequential as the development in infancy. The content of adult educational and training programmes must always relate to the individual's life context and current circumstances.

According to Lindeman, each individual has an "autonomous motivation to learn" that the teacher or facilitator must bring to the forefront. In order to facilitate learning, it is also necessary to create a climate of acceptance combined with great confidence in his/her responsibilities as a student. Rogers (1969), in particular, highlighted the fact that an adult confronted with demands of learning which involve a change in mental organization and self-perception may feel threatened and resist to the process. For this reason, he maintains that it is important to minimize new elements and contrast them with previous learning or experiences, and to introduce new elements gradually.

The central role of the learner, the importance of experience and the need to facilitate learning through the creation of a climate of acceptance and support are all concepts that can influence education for the third age but are also central for educating young people and adults. We can find the same emphasis in the educational theories of some authors who deal with learning in childhood, such as Dewey (1955) and Bruner (1997). These principles do not apply only to elderly learners, but also to younger ones. A young, adult or elderly individual can be regarded as educated when he/she knows how to learn, to adapt, to change and to progress to further educational experiences. Even if they have as their main focus the older learner, educational initiatives should attempt to overcome generational barriers, thus bridging the gap between old age and other life phases.

4. Elderly education contexts

Elderly education in Italy has become more and more widespread and diversified in the last twenty years. The opportunities of educational experiences for elderly people are growing very fast, both in terms of quantity and variety. We can distinguish at least three kinds of educational environments for elderly people:

- the Universities of the Third Age, which can be considered a sort of formal environment for senior learners;
- the Social Centres, managed by and for elderly people, which offer educational activities, which are less structured in terms of educational planning but more participatory;
- the Voluntary Organisations, which offer informal education and meet the needs of the volunteers to be active with the needs of the target, who are elderly people who need some kind of help.

All the educational environments involving elderly are characterised by the presence of both the *young elderly* and the *elderly elderly* groups. We consider as *young elderly* (Minguzzi, 2003) those individuals who are still active, who enjoy relatively good health and who can be seen as elderly largely because they are pensioners or grandparents, two roles that have traditionally been associated with old age. The “so-called” *elderly elderly*, are people aged more than 70-75, who are less active, healthy, and closer to fragility and loss of autonomy². The proportion between the two groups in participating to educational activities can change according to the characteristics of the local population and the educational offer given. The *young elderly* tends to be more numerous in the Universities of the third age and the *elderly elderly* in the Social centres but they still coexist in both contexts. What is still missing in most of these environments is the presence of young people. This is particularly evident in the most structured elderly educational organisations, such as the Universities of the third age and the Social centres. Both these organisations do not address their activities to other generations apart from the elderly and in general they do not consider the participation of young people as a goal to be reached. On the contrary, many Voluntary Organisations are trying to promote intergenerational activities involving elderly as well as young people and to address their services to all generations.

Intergenerational educational experiences very often take place in the form of projects involving pupils, teenagers and elderly people. These projects take place in schools and in non-formal educational environments. Even if this latter kind of experience is increasing in number, intergenerational dialogue is still rather unfrequent. The “pilot projects” promoting intergenerational dialogue should become more widespread.

5. Educational experiences for intergenerationality

We will now present some experiences of education for intergenerational dialogue. They do not represent a significant number of activities. Nonetheless, they all brought positive results in term of learners’ involvement and satisfaction, and they are characterised by the use of educational methodologies that appeared to be effective to promote dialogue between different generations. They all took place in Bologna, a town with a high percentage of elderly in the population, but also with many students attending one of the biggest universities in Italy.

Some projects involved the *young elderly*, others the *elderly elderly* or both groups. Different kinds of young learners have participated: children aged from 5 to 9, teenagers, University students and young adults (about thirty years old).

All the projects were aimed at promoting dialogue, and significant relationships and solidarity between generations. The projects last between four and six months, with an average of two meetings per month. In most cases the meetings took place in significant environments for elderly people, such as Social Centres, where elderly usually met but young people are not present nor involved in the activities planned. These environments represent a big opportunity for creating relationships and social well-being and should begin to include people from other generations apart from the *young elderly* and the *elderly elderly*.

²² United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing – Madrid, Spain 8-12 April 2002. Building a society for all ages (<http://www.un.org/ageing/>).

The topic that all these projects were dealing with was memory. This appeared to be a significant subject to deal with for promoting dialogue between generations. The memory topic included:

- local history (the Second World War, the Resistance movement);
- daily life in the past (the ancient traditions, crafts, games, foods);
- memory of significant personal biographical events (life marker events, important experiences).

Each of these topics was developed through different educational strategies and methodologies.

The recovery of elderly memory on local history was carried on by giving to younger people the role of researchers or reporters and to the elderly the role of witnesses.

Working with groups of teenagers or adults and elderly a part of the project was dedicated to train younger participants to interview as methodology for qualitative research. Young participants were given the instruments to access elderly memory through an approach of in-deep dialogue, inspired by the model of Rogersian interview (Rogers, 1951). They were first trained to this approach and then opened a channel of communication with the elderly in order to collect and appreciate their memories. The children were introduced to the topic of Second World War and were then asked to collect all the memories of the elderly witnesses playing the role of young reporters or scouts.

In both cases a film maker supported the group and helped in collecting the project's results, so that a multimedia report was finally produced.

Other projects were focused on the description of daily life activities in the past, as were recalled in the memories of elderly participants. In this case, the young person had the task to collect all the stories of past experiences of elderly people either in a written form or in a video. These experiences were compared to more recent ones in order to reflect on the changes that have taken place. This can contribute to the work on the topic of sustainable development in daily life. In particular, cooking tradition seems involve quite effectively both elderly and young people. This is an issue that can also be used when trying to activate the *elderly elderly* participants or even the younger elderly who tend to avoid talking about their life experiences.

Elderly people can often have difficulties in recovering their past memories, so it is always important to start recalling small things instead of talking about big events or about their own feelings. Telling the story of a significant object, for example, can encourage self-talk and avoid the risk of recovering bad memories and feeling exposed to others' judgement. The discourse on living places is another important means for promoting the dialogue between generation which meets at least two goals: it enhances the sense of active citizenship, and offers to elderly and younger people a concrete issue for dialogue and negotiate.

The projects focused on the memory of significant personal biographical events (life marker events, important experiences) were conducted emphasising the group as the holder of each person's feelings. In this case, elderly and young people were led to recover their memories through some hints such as movies, poems, opera. Art can represent feelings in such a way that they are perceived as more universal and as independent from specific events. Threatening with the feeling itself it becomes easier to compare and make closer younger and elderly experiences.

Another very effective technique for self talk dealt with sensory memory: elderly and young people were suggested to evoke memories related with taste, olfactory or tactile sensations and to compare them. Using this method, it is easier to access positive memories, to control the negative ones and to connect the past with the present.

In both these cases, elderly and young people's experiences became closer because the projects emphasised the meaning of the experiences as life marker events and did not represent them along a timeline. All these projects showed that a dialogue between elderly and young is possible and worthwhile.

7. Conclusion

The experiences that were carried out have highlighted that some contents and teaching methodologies appear to be more effective to meet the needs of elderly and young learners and to promote the dialogue between them. In particular, it is crucial to select direct easy topics which can involve everybody and stimulate both cognition and perception. Each project was aimed at developing a final product or event that can be considered as an indicator for assessing the project itself. This became a very important task for all participants which allowed them to strengthen the cohesion of the group and to make the project more sustainable and durable.

With a view to theories referring to lifespan perspective and to lifelong learning approach, it is possible to plan educational strategies that make elderly and young people's experiences closer and give answer to the learning needs of both groups. As Ericson suggested, in order to give meaning to the final stage of life, one must definitely build a bridge between its beginning and its end that spans its early stages as empowered by hope and its last stages as threatened by desperation.

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