Volunteering as a place of learning.

The picture of Polish seniors volunteers in Wrocław - a city in Poland

Małgorzata Malec

University of Wrocław, Poland

mmalec@poczta.fm

Abstract

The aim of my paper is to present the condition of Polish senior volunteers in Wrocław, a city in the Lower Silesia region in Poland. I briefly refer to activity at the U3A of University of Wrocław and focus on the NGO organization called "Foundation of Active Senior" - the place where the research about voluntary has been done. Refering to the data I will present volunteering as a place of learning and becoming a better person. The frame of the paper is my normative idea of three models of learning: learning to get old, learning by being old and learning in later life to which I refer my data as well.

Key words: volunteering, seniors, elderly, learning, active

Introduction

The volunteering of seniors is quite a new idea in Poland and raises a lot of controversies even among seniors. Volunteering is more popular among young people. The young generation which is considered to be active on the vocational, educational and family field has one more social task - volunteering. The elderly people – retired, who have more free time to do different things, also want to be active citizens but are identified with passive role in the community. This situation has at least two faces. The first face is that elderly people (probably because of the social practices) do not feel that volunteering is the right thing for them so they are not active in that field. The other face is that the society sees elderly people more as a problem than a benefit. Therefore there are not so many places where elderly people could be active and useful for community. In my opinion there is a task for both elderly people and society to learn to be active senior citizens. It is a process, which needs time.

The meaning of volunteering in the context of active ageing

Nowadays volunteering is becoming more a style of life, a way of being active in the social context or it is one of the ways of spending free time. "Volunteering is the commitment of time and energy - in an activity that involves spending time, without financial reward, doing something that aims to benefit the community, the environment or individuals outside one's immediate family. At the heart of volunteering is the willingness and ability of citizens to give freely of their time out of a sense of solidarity and responsibility without financial gain. It can also empower volunteers and give them the chance to travel, meet new people and accumulate life and career enhancing experiences and skills" (Volunteering explained).

There are a number of social theories of ageing which show the potential of elderly. One of them, the activity theory of ageing. Activity theory says that people construct ideas about themselves from two major sources: the things that they do and the roles that they fill in life. According to activity theory people give up many roles as they age - they retire from work, become widows or widowers, drop out of professional and other organizations, leave clubs and unions, and become a volunteer as well (Hampton. et al. 2005).

In Poland the elderly are involved in voluntary work but they are not visible as the volunteers. The voluntary work might be divided into non-formal and formal voluntary work (Sztur-Jaworska et al. 2006). Non-formal voluntary work is self-help taking place in the group of active people close to the church, helping in the neighbourhood or in everyday relations. As the research done by Artur Fabiś and Sabina Kędziora (2008) shows, the hospices are the places where non-formal seniors' volunteering is very popular. Though, in my opinion University of the Third Age (U3A) is one of the main fields where non-formal voluntary work is but is not appreciated as well. In Poland there are around 70 universities of the third age (U3A) and constantly new ones come out. One of them is U3A of Wrocław University of Wrocław, which belongs to University of Wrocław which I know very well. That U3A employs only one person who is responsible for secretarial work and financial service. It means that seniors who are there are involved in different kind of activities, working for free - they are volunteers. However seniors who are committed to organizing those activities most of the time don't consider themselves as volunteers.

The most important activities as the voluntary work, carried out by U3A of Wrocław with the aid of the local community are as follows:

- Cooperation with organizations and associations which show interest in the situation of old people .
- Cooperation with children and youth within the confines of integration of generations. One of the schools established a "Junior – Senior Club" where children and senior citizens organize different events and meetings together.
- Keeping in touch with people from old people's homes. Volunteers from U3A organize different forms of artistic activities for them, for example: cabaret, theater or chorus performances.
- Organization of help for students who attend and used to attend U3A, especially the disabled and the ill.
- Organization of conferences about old age in cooperation with students of pedagogy and psychology.
- Organization of weekly opportunities to meet e.g. a law or insurance advisors who offer help and advice to students of U3A.
- Offering help to new U3A in the Lower Silesia region. Presentation of U3A of Wrocław at the Science Festival every year.
- Participation of U3A's representatives in meetings, conferences and seminars organized by the local authorities and non – government organizations (Malec 2006).

U3A promotes a style of life alternative to getting old – learning and developing skills and abilities and is very popular in Poland nowadays. It means that people in U3A are proud of being a member and work there just for pleasure and self-development.
The formal voluntary work, mainly, takes place in different Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). The most popular is PAH (Polish Humanity Action), CARITAS, PCK, MOPS. In May 2004, The President of Poland brought social insurance of volunteers into force what is beneficial for volunteers but not for organizations (Swiątkiewicz-Nośny, 2004). It means that some of the organizations (especially the small ones) might not to be interested in voluntary work. The formal voluntary work is quite popular among young people but not so popular among seniors. The young people consider voluntary work as a good practice for their vocational experiences but older people need some external motivation and acceptance .

As a researcher of the issue of the elderly, I am really interested in the meaning of voluntary work in later life given by seniors engaged in formal voluntary work and the process of becoming and being volunteer in context of active aging. In my opinion seniors who consciously name themselves volunteers see the voluntary work differently than people who are engaged in non-formal volunteering. There are the research questions: What is the situation of volunteering of Polish seniors in Wrocław like? How do Polish seniors understand the meaning of volunteering? What does it mean to be a senior volunteer? What do they learn? What can help to be a volunteer? What are the obstacles to be a volunteer and an active senior citizen? In my paper, to get the answers for these questions I analysed the condition of Polish seniors volunteers. I have done research among the senior volunteers involved in activity at one of the NGO organization in Wrocław called "Foundation of Active Senior" – the formal voluntary work. I asked them to fill in a questionnaire of open questions. I got 16 questionnaires (15 women and only 1 man) which I analysed from the hermeneutic perspective.

Who are the Polish seniors volunteers

Most of my researched seniors are after 601. Some of them have already had volunteering experiences but haven't named them a voluntary work (non-formal volunteering). They just helped people who needed it or were active as the parents at their children's schools. Some of them have been volunteers for a couple of months some for a few years. Most of them spend around three hours per week, some as much as is needed and just a few of them ten hours per week doing the voluntary work. They are of different professions with different level of education (six have higher education and 10 secondary. In my their opinion a volunteer is someone who wants to be involved in work for free, who wants to share his/her time with others, feels the need to learn and to develop new things in a rapidly changing society. Someone who wants to cooperate with younger people, sharing the experience with them and learning from them as well. A volunteer is open, flexible, reflective and ready to help and learn. It is an active person who sees the voluntary work as a good way of being retired.

Being an active senior as a challenge for education

Learning about the obvious and simple dependence that exists from the beginning till the end of life, and taking care of life is one developmental task. Life can be divided simply into three clear periods: childhood, youth and old age. I argue that in every period of life we should keep in mind that our body is getting old, which means that we should learn to get old. The rapid changes in society are such, that we (not always older people) do not know what the world is coming to these days. We need not to be pushed aside as we age, but we should continue to learn and keep abreast with the changes with which we are continually confronted (Jarvis, 2009)

I present the outline of three models of learning: learning to get old, learning by being old and learning in later life as well (Malec, 2011). That model is the normative frame of my research about the elderly and is still developing and gathering the empirical references. The research done on the voluntary work of seniors has brought some as well.
The project of the models is an attempt to compile and establish the potential of learning which is spread across everyday life and to indicate the possibilities of educational activities of getting old, by being old, and while being old. These three models of learning should not be analyzed separately but should interpenetrate each other.

Learning to get old

Adulthood is a continuum of becoming an adult, it is a redefinition of our being in the world, our relations with the others, and a redefinition of our identity. The world is not 'our private world', we are like an actor on the stage, life is like theatre (Goffman, 2000) and we can create our existence in the world, we can create our micro-worlds in the macro-world. Therefore we can learn to be old. When we are young most of the time we do not think and we do not care about our health, our body. We do not exercise our body and mind. Quite often we do not eat healthy and proper food. We forget that we are mortal and that we are born, we get old and we die. We should remember that everything we do when we are young will bring consequences in later life. My survey shows that being a young volunteer and cooperating with senior volunteers, is good practice for both generations, giving a positive view of

---

[1] The age of retired in Poland is nowadays 60 for women and 65 for men. However is on discussion on the political field to change it into 67 for both women and men.

cooperation and changing the negative attitudes towards ageing. As my researched senior emphasized, cooperation with young people is big happiness and challenge as well; delivering satisfaction and possibilities to learn from each other and exchange different points of views. In their opinion the young are great, very warm, thoughtful, brave, open, patient, engaged, ready to help, appreciating the experience of seniors. While working with young people seniors feel younger, more skillful and happy. Only one person wrote that young people sometime forgot about abilities of seniors and that elderly people work in a different, slower pace.

Learning by being old

Showing diversity through pictures of the elderly and exposure to the elderly in public space is one of the ways to learn to get old by being old. One of the places where we can learn to get old by being old is popular culture. Media, popular culture – film, music, commercials - these are fields which appear in our everyday experiences. The existence of popular culture in every human being's life penetrates everyday life and embodies the elements of 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1967).

Almost all of the researched senior volunteers pointed that media, popular culture (for examples social campaigns) should show more information about profits on voluntary work. The picture of senior volunteering should be more promoted as a constructive and active way of aging. In the opinion of my researched senior volunteers it might attract seniors to the volunteering and show the positive view of the elderly to the society.

The other field where we can learn to get old by being old are public places where elderly people are most of the time transparent or even invisible. In Poland we cannot see so many elderly people in the cinema, in the theatre, in the pub, at concerts. If they are there, they are treated more like problematic objects than equal partners for discussion, they are "the others". At those places quite often volunteers are young people as well. I argue that we need inclusive education, intergenerational education, learning abilities to co-exist, to co-create the common sphere where both generations (young and old ones) would be visible as the volunteers. As Tapio Aittola (1998, p.107) writes,

"learning is an elementary part of everyday life world, and its practical activities and all spheres of everyday life and action situations should be regarded and studied as meaningful learning environments".

The way people are presented in popular culture, media - film, music, commercials - and are visible in public places (giving elderly people the equal right to take part in different entertainment) is conditional on how the society sees the elderly. Therefore learning by being old is very much connected with pictures of the elderly which are manifest in popular culture and in everyday life.

Learning in later life

The model of learning in later life promotes the idea of lifelong learning in later life. As my research shows, one of the characteristics of the elderly is having access to 'a big baggage' of experiences. On the one hand, experiences can be useful in learning new things, but on the other hand, they can become obstacles to learning. When the 'thought frames' or habits are inflexible, formed during a whole life and are difficult to change, learning while becoming older can be more complicated. To quote Withnall (2003, p.295)," learning in later life may

consist of the kind of reflection and life review which take place in an unstructured and spasmodic way but which may lead to greater self-understanding and individual insight". The elderly learner is an experienced person with an own view of life and the world. She/he has knowledge about different issues and has ideas about their own way of learning depending on their previous experiences which might be shared with young people on the voluntary field. Elderly people learn what interests them, what can be useful for everyday life, or could help them to communicate with others better. This means that learning in later life needs to be well recognized and problematized. The challenges of being active physically and intellectually, most of the time contribute to changes and to a better quality of life in later life, as well. One of the theories which can be useful in order to recognize, to understand and to analyze learning in later life, is the transformative theory of Jack Mezirow (1991, 2000). Transformative theory2 identifies four distinct forms in which adult learning may occur - learning through meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, learning through transformation of meaning schemes, learning through perspective transformation – the last two of which are transformative (Mezirow, 1991). However, problem-solving is crucial in all four forms of learning in transformation theory. The process begins with a doubtful or problematic meaning scheme and moves to scanning – exploring, analyzing, remembering, intuiting, imagining. Scanning in turns leads to propositional construal, imaginative insight, and making new interpretation. And then the interpretation may lead to reflective change in our original meaning scheme, elaborating, supplementing or transforming it (Mezirow, 1991). According to transformative theory, the structure of assumptions and expectations can be transformed even in later life. Being a volunteer and cooperating with young people can help to self-reflect on seniors' lives, beliefs, and the assumptions may be changed as shown in my research. My researched senior volunteers mentioned different kinds of trainings, workshops which they would like to take part in to extend their knowledge. They are eager to learn.

All the models need more research, critical analysis and reflection. As my research shows, volunteering is non-formal education where non-formal learning dominates. Senior volunteers learn to use new technologies (a computer, a camera, a DVD player) are more up-to-date with news from all the world and they are gathering new experiences. However, what almost each of the researched seniors pointed out they "teach themselves" – they learn to become better people and be more active when they are older.

Volunteering as a place of becoming a better person

Analysis of my research shows that volunteering gives self-confidence and self-worth that reflect on all aspects of life. Most of the researched seniors feel they have benefited from volunteer contacts and developed better interpersonal and communication skills while participating in voluntary work. They have learnt to put their life into wider perspective, listen to others, be more on up-to-date, be stronger and more open to being different and be more brave and neat. They have learnt the meaning of understanding, of humility and patience. They have had an opportunity to meet people who they can share the same interests with and might be helpful for. Many seniors find it difficult to meet new people outside work or home environment. Volunteering is a good way to make new friends, to be more engaged and learn about people's problems, dreams and happiness. Most of the researched seniors thanks to volunteering have become more optimistic, less selfish, and feel needed. They learn themselves, the others and the world which is given to them independently not as a system of individual unique objects but as a world full of meanings, symbols and purposes.
Thus, as Jarvis (2009, pp.30-31) argues, learning is

---

[2] Bateson's pioneering analysis of transformations in learning and Cell's differentiation of reflective learning are valuable contributions to the development of the transformation theory of adult learning (Mezirow, 1991)

"the combination of processes throughout a life time whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (meaning, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combinations) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person".

To conclude, doing voluntary work by seniors provides elderly people with a venue to engage themselves in their own communities as "learners" and "solvers" not only as "receivers". Consequently, through voluntary action elderly people can change the negative attitudes towards ageing.

Conclusion

The most important of all reasons of volunteering is to experience the sense of achievement and personal fulfillment that volunteering brings. Through volunteer contribution, the space is created for the elderly to improve their condition of life and for the society to benefit from the enormous asset represented by their energy, experiences and resourcefulness (Volunteerism in an aging society). By getting involved in volunteering they can support each other, take care of each other's needs and be busy and active seniors in a rapidly changing society, reducing or breaking isolation. As my research done among Polish seniors in Wrocław shows, being a senior volunteer brings profit for positive and active life and ageing as well. Not enough information in media about senior volunteering and its positive aspects is one of the most visible obstacles. The picture of Polish seniors volunteers in Wrocław is positive but senior engagement in voluntary work needs to be developed on the micro and macro level.

References

Aittola, T. (1998). Reflections on Learning in Everyday Life. In A. Bron, J. Field, E. Kurantowicz (Ed.) Adult education and Democratic Citizenship II. Kraków: IMPULS, 103-119.

Fabiś, A. and Kędziora, S. (2008). Wolontariat hospicyjny seniorów, In A. Fabiś (eds.).Biblioteka Gerontologii Społecznej. Aktywność społeczna, kulturalna i oświatowa seniorów.

Goffman, E. (2000). Człowiek w teatrze życia codziennego. Warszawa: Wyd. „KR".

Hampton, R. and Charles, R. (2005). Activity theory. In The Encyclopedia of Aging & The Elderly. Ebook from http://www.medrounds.org/encyclopedia-of-aging/2005/12/activity-theory.html (accessed 2 October 2011).

Jarvis, P. (2009). Learning to be a Person in Society. London and New York: Routledge.

Malec, M. and Wnuk W. (2006). University of the Third Age as a place of lifelong learning practice. In Strategie of Lifelong Learning: Access and Implementation in Practice. A handbook for regional educators compiled: A. Dwojak-Matras and E. Kurantowicz

Malec, M. (2011). Poszukiwanie recepty na starość - wyzwaniem dla edukacji dorosłych : refleksje nad uczeniem się starości przez całe życie. In M. Malec (eds.). Edukacyjne, kulturowe i społeczne konteksty starości. Wrocław : Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT.

Mezirow J. (1991). Transformative dimensions of adult learning, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow J. (2000). Learning as Transformation. Critical Perspectives on a theory in progress. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Polanyi, M. (1967). The tacit dimension. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Szatur-Jaworska B., Błędowski P., Dzięgielewska M. (eds.). (2006). Podstawy gerontologii społecznej. Warszawa: ASPRA-JR.

Świątkiewicz –Mośny M. (2004). Wolontariat jako cnota i instytucja obywatelska. In M.S. Szczepański and A. Śliz (eds.). Obywatel w lokalnej społeczności. Studia i szkice socjologiczne. Tychy-Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

Volunteering explained (2008). Volunteerism worldwide: News, views & resources. Retrieved from http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org (accessed 24.06.2012)

Volunteerism in an aging society. (2008). VOICE. Retrieved from http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org (accessed 24.06.2012)

Withnall, A. (2003). Reflection on lifelong learning and the Third Age. In J. Field & M. Leicester (Ed.), Lifelong Learning: Learning Across the Lifespan. (pp.289-299). London and New York: Routledge Falmer.