

Informal intergenerational learning on the part of older adults

Illustrated by the acquisition of media competence

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Abstract

The proposed study focuses on the question of whether and how the encounter and exchange with younger generations is of significance to the development of an interest in and know-how regarding the use of modern media on the part of older adults. The study is based on the assumption that contact with younger people motivates and helps older adults to use modern information and communication technologies.

The investigation follows a predominantly qualitative structure and is supplemented by a secondary analysis of the representative data collected within the framework of the EdAge Study (the quantitative data set includes 4909 interviews with adults aged between 45 and 80). A total of 32 guided, problem-centered qualitative interviews were conducted with non-active computer users (at least 60 years of age). All qualitative interviews are evaluated following the qualitative content analyses. In order to reconstruct the implicit orientations of older adults, selected interviews were conducted and interpreted according to the documentary method.

First results of the quantitative analyses show that the interest in intergenerational exchange in organized learning activities depends on the personal conception of ageing rather than on the frequency of contact with the younger generation. And the frequency of contact with the younger generation has less impact on computer use among older adults than other predictors such as gender, educational background, employment status, migration background or cultural activity.

Key words: intergenerational learning, informal learning, media competence, elderly

Theoretical background

Many aspects of daily life are facilitated by internet applications. To give but a few keywords: online banking, online shopping, or the classical search for information via the internet. Media competence is a necessary prerequisite for the use of these services and equal and active participation in society (Stadelhofer & Marquard, 2004).

National and international quantitative studies show that we are faced with a rapid increase in the participation of older cohorts in the use of modern information and communication technologies (ICT). Empirical studies, for example the ARD-ZDF-Online- and Offline-Studies (e.g. Eimeren van & Frees, 2011; Gerhards & Mende, 2002) or the (N)onliner-Atlas (Initiative D21, 2011) also investigate patterns in the use of media in old age. Empirical findings show the use of media and media competence (following Treumann, Baacke, Haacke, Hugger, & Vollbrecht, 2002) to be dependent on socio-economic and educational background. At the same time, different studies dealing with competences in the field of ICT reveal a distinct differential with regard to age (e.g. OECD, 2005). With a higher level of education, the entertainment function of media loses importance and communicative and informative aspects gain in significance (van Eimeren & Frees, 2011). At the same time, the studies mentioned reveal the importance of social environments, individual living conditions and life styles with regard to the choice of media and media contents; however, these factors lie transversely to the differences in age and partially superimpose these.

Intergenerational exchange

For many European nations - and for Germany, in particular – drastic demographic changes are to be expected for the coming years and decades. Until 2020, the percentage of older people no longer economically active will grow up to 40% (from now 30%). This target group increasingly requires the attention of educational institutions and researchers and leads to the question of the potentials of intergenerational forms of learning.

According to the summary given by Blome, Keck and Saraceno (2006), research on intergenerational relations has become increasingly important for at least four reasons:

- processes of population aging that alter the intergenerational structures (fertility, life expectancy);
- demographic changes affecting the pension systems;
- manifold factors leading to changes in family structures (e.g. number of divorces, single-parent or reconstituted families; increasing mobility); and
- an increased alertness to causes of social inequality.

In this context, the scientific discussion reveals two major trends. On the one hand, empirical studies point to a harmonious coexistence of the generations (e.g. Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, 2003). Studies on adolescents, for example, reveal a high degree of respect for and interest in older people (e.g. Hurrelmann & Albert, 2006).

Research on solidarity between the generations within families and kinship is usually based on the following dimensions of intergenerational support: the first dimension focuses on the frequency or intensity of contact between the generations. Secondly, practical assistance (e.g. care, household chores or paperwork) is examined. Thirdly, financial and other economic support is investigated (e.g. Blome et al., 2006). In addition to practical and financial support, some concepts also take into consideration

emotional (comfort and encouragement) and cognitive support. Several empirical studies from Germany show that family members are the most important contact persons for older adults and that social support in all its dimensions is mainly provided by members of the family (Hoff, 2006).

On the other hand, it becomes evident that the opportunities for exchange between the generations have been reduced due to the growing segregation of the generations in society. The increasing spatial separation of multi-generational families restricts exchange between family members to the nuclear family (Bien, 1994; Jurczyk, 2011). And the overall social development leads to an age-related segregation in institutions and in all areas of everyday life (Kolland, 2008). In adult education, for example, the concept of target-group orientation is applied and programs are directed at specific age groups (Schmidt, Schnurr, & Tippelt, 2009). In media education, in particular, there are target-group oriented programs such as computer courses for children, for parents, or specifically for seniors.

The resulting limitation of opportunities for contact may well lead to a suppression of the natural intergenerational dialogue and to alienation between the generations (e.g. Busek, 1997). Against this background, warnings have been issued against a growing loss of tolerance, experience, and understanding between the generations (e.g. Fassnacht, 1993). In this context, the question arises whether potential fields of conflict remain irrelevant simply because the different generations live separate lives in different environments (Schmidt & Tippelt, 2009).

Intergenerational Learning

The theoretical debate on intergenerational learning is legitimized from two perspectives. From the macro-perspective or long-term perspective, taking into account the historical process, the focus is on the passing on of cultural and social knowledge for the continuity of the culture (the passing on of norms and values). On the micro-social level, individual learning processes on the part of members of several simultaneously existing generations are investigated. In this, special emphasis is placed on how the parties are involved in intergenerational exchange deal with the reactions to the changed structures in society, within the family, and in the work environment (Franz, 2006; Franz, 2008). Taking into consideration both perspectives, the term “intergenerational learning” can be used to subsume all forms of learning for which the reference to age or to the generation to which the parties involved belong is of relevance in that it emphasizes either the difference or the parity in age as well as those forms of learning which are of significance to the mediation and appropriation of culture and to the personal development (Liegler & Lüscher, 2004). Intergenerational learning thus is the result of vertical (the passing on of cultural and social norms between young and old) and horizontal (the development of empathy for other social and societal positions) intergenerational relations (Kolland, 2008).

Organized intergenerational learning arrangements are thought to provide an opportunity for the promotion of the dialogue between the generations (Klercq, 1997; Kolland, 2008). Therefore, an increasing number of intergenerational projects have been developed in several educational fields since the mid-1990s (e.g. in education for children and young people, in family education, in adult education (Karl, 2009; Franz, 2009), some of them triggered by (federal) initiatives, all of which aim at counteracting the functional separation into youth cultures and cultures of the elderly.

Following Siebert and Seidel (1990), three didactic scenarios can be differentiated in intergenerational learning contexts. In the first, one generation clearly learns *from the other*. In dealing with modern media, however, the classical distribution of roles among the generations is often reversed and the younger generation passes its knowledge on to an older generation. When a group of learners heterogeneous to age is working together on a specific subject, learning will take place *in cooperation* and without any hierarchies. When the exchange among the generations and the change in perspective becomes the focus of the teaching-learning-event, this is referred to as *learning about one another*. We assume that, whenever generations jointly deal with digital media, there is a strong potential for learning about one another in these activities.

Existing studies on intergenerational learning have so far mainly focused on intentional, didactically pre-structured and externally organized processes of learning (e.g. Franz, 2010). Intergenerational exchange of knowledge taking place within the family or in the everyday side-by-side has, as yet, hardly been the topic of studies. The contents and conditions of intergenerational transmission of knowledge in informal processes of learning were mostly neglected.

The research project IGeL-Media

So far, studies on media use and media competences among older people, on the one hand, and studies on intergenerational learning and intergenerational exchange, on the other, can be considered two separate, rather isolated strands of research. While research on the use of media and studies on the transfer of media competence are firmly anchored in media education, issues of intergenerational learning and educational motives have primarily been discussed and investigated in research on adult education. This strict separation is to be abandoned by the current research project and both strands of research are to be merged in a common approach.

The presented research project, sponsored by the German Research Association, is dedicated to this research desideratum. Under the title of “Informal Intergenerational Learning for Media Competence” (short title: IGeL-Media), the informal acquisition of media competence among adults of post-employment age is investigated. The main emphasis is on determining the significance of the encounter and exchange between the generations for the development of media competence among older adults. The central research questions may be divided into three categories:

- First, we examine the role of ICT in the everyday lives and biographies of the target group. Of special interest in this is the question of how the individuals use the computer and the internet today. In addition, we want to know how this came about and how they learned to use the computer.
- In a second set of questions, we ask whether and in what form an exchange on the issue of computers is taking place with younger people from the private environment. What is the role of family members in this and which role is played by contact persons from outside the family? We also inquire into the prerequisites, framework conditions and barriers for this dialogue.
- Thirdly, we are interested in how older adults assess their media competence and where they consider their limits as to the use of the computer and the internet to be. In addition, it is of interest to us whether organized educational programs on the topic of media are attended and which further information sources are used in informal learning.

The methodological organization of the research project IGeL-Media is based on the idea of the triangulation of data and methods. It follows predominantly a qualitative structure and is supplemented by a secondary analysis of the representative data collected within the framework of the EdAge Study (Tippelt, Schmidt, Schnurr, Sinner, & Theisen, 2009). As part of the Adult Education Survey, the EdAge project examined the educational behavior and educational interests of older adults aged between 45 and 80. The quantitative data set includes a total of 4909 interviews. The evaluation of the actual project concentrates on the sub-sample of adults aged between 60 and 80 because this age group also constitutes the focus of the qualitative surveys. The data are examined as to systematic interrelations by using descriptive and regression-analytical procedures; the secondary analysis of the data focuses on the scales on media use, on intergenerational learning and on informal learning. Within the framework of these quantitative analyses, factors favoring the intergenerational development of media competence have already been distinguished.

On the basis of findings gained from the secondary analysis of the EdAge data and the available literature, a guideline was developed for problem-centered qualitative interviews. The interview sample is divided into sub-samples with respect to relevant factors influencing the use of ICT (age, gender, education, employment). The composition of the sample follows the principle of typical cases. A total of 32 guided, problem-centered qualitative interviews were conducted with computer users of post-employment age (at least 60 years of age). Three variables proved to be of special significance: age, gender and educational background. The aim was to get a sample of interviewees that includes - in rather equal proportion - women and men, younger elderly people and very old people, as well as people with and without higher school-leaving qualifications.

The following figure shows the composition of the sample of interviewees.

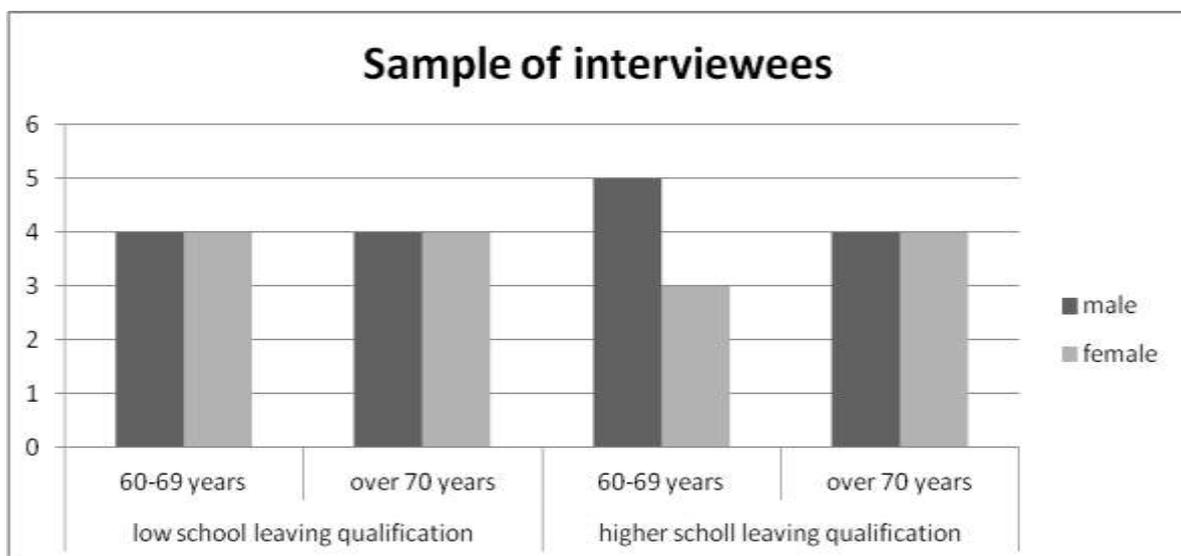


Figure 1: Composition of the sample of interviewees

The field phase started in July 2011 and was completed in March 2012. The length of the interviews varies between 30 and 230 minutes. The interview analysis is based on the method of qualitative content-analysis. To reconstruct the older adults' implicit orientations, selected interviews were conducted and interpreted according to the documentary method based on Nohl (2005, 2008).

First results: exemplary results of the secondary analysis

The focal point of the secondary analysis of the representative survey is the identification and in-depth investigation of interrelations between behavior regarding the use of media, on the one hand, and educational behavior as well as contact with the younger generation, on the other.

Computer use and frequency of contact

Contact with the younger generation occurs on a much more regular basis *within the family* than *outside the family*. According to the data collected, 79,1% of those aged 60 to 80 state that they have daily or weekly contact with the younger generation *within the family*, whereas contact with the younger generation *outside the family* is much less frequent, here only 60,2% report daily or weekly contact. As is to be expected, older people with children of their own report on a much greater number of encounters with the younger generation, both *within* and *outside the family*, than childless older people.

New communication technologies facilitate contact and exchange with the younger generation even over greater distances (Gloger-Tippelt & Walper, 2011). However, with regard to the frequency of contact with the younger generation *within the family* no statistically relevant differences between computer users and non-users were found (see figure 2).

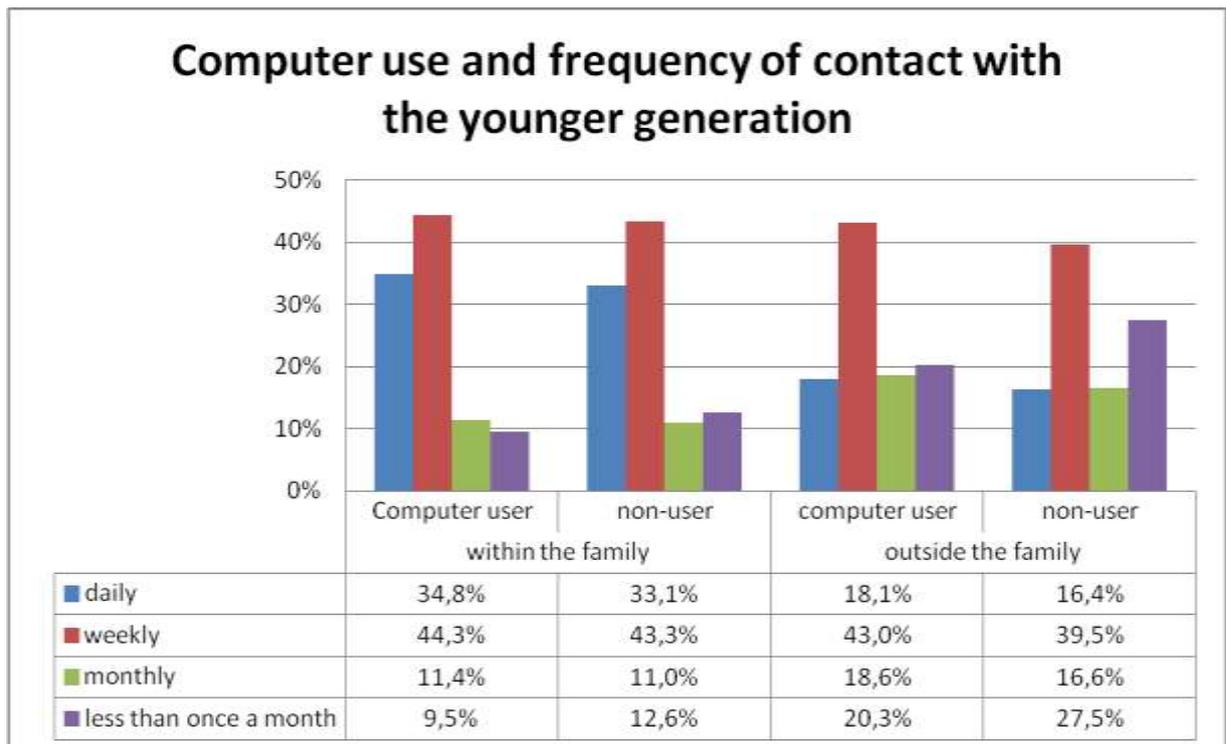


Figure 2: Computer use and frequency of contact with the younger generation within and outside the family

Interestingly enough, the difference between computer users and non-users with regard to frequency of contact with the younger generation *outside the family* is statistically highly relevant (Mann-Whitney-test: $p=0.001$). During the post-employment phase of life, computer users aged 60 and older tend to have somewhat more frequent contact with the younger generation *outside the family* than people in that phase of life who do not use a computer (see figure 5).

However, the results presented here do not allow for statements regarding the organization of the exchange between the generations or regarding the contents and the learning processes within the framework of the intergenerational exchange. Based on the results outlined, the qualitative interviews carried out in the project IGeL-Media focus on both intra-familial and extra-familial contacts with the younger generation in connection with media use.

Interest in intergenerational learning

In the EdAge study, data was collected on who was planning¹ to attend a course or event of further education during the next twelve months and what was expected from such educational activities (among other factors, the “interest in an exchange with younger people”). So far, it could be shown that for close to 80% of the interviewees aged 45 to 80 the exchange with younger people within the framework of organized educational contexts is “important” or even “very important” (Schmidt et al., 2009, pp. 151ff). What is true for the overall sample also holds for the sub-sample of those aged 60 to 80, namely that gender and parenthood do not have an influence on the interest in intergenerational exchange within the framework of educational events.

The descriptive analyses also reveal that the interest in exchange with younger people within the framework of continuing education events is independent of the frequency of contact with the younger generation *within the family*; the distribution is almost identical and there is no statistically significant correlation. On the other hand, the descriptive analyses also show a weak, but highly significant correlation between the interest in exchange with younger people within the framework of continuing education events and the frequency of contact with the younger generation *outside the family* (Kendall-tau: $r = 0.196$, $p < .001$).

However, when taking into consideration diverse activity scales in multivariate regression analyses, the significance of “frequency of contact with the younger generation outside the family” as a predictor for the interest in intergenerational learning within the context of continuing education is reduced in relation to other predictors (see table 1).

¹ The case numbers here are, accordingly, significantly lower. Of the 4909 interviewees 16.5% (n=809) planned to participate in a continuing education event within the next twelve months.

Table 1: Interest in the exchange with younger people within the framework of continuing education (logistic regression analysis; n = 121)

<i>Interest in intergenerational learning (reference categorie: not very important)</i>		<i>model 1</i>		<i>model 2</i>	
		<i>Wald</i>	<i>significance</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>significance</i>
Constant term		.006	.937	2.946	.086
Educational qualification	Low	3.978	.046	2.569	.109
	Middle	2.071	.150	2.494	.114
	High	-	-	-	-
Supervision of grandchildren	no	8.610	.003	6.322	.012
	yes	-	-	-	-
Continuous variable	Life satisfaction	6.384	.012	.875	.350
	memberships	3.217	.073	2.604	.107
	Voluntary work	5.207	.022	4.685	.030
	Cultural participation	10.787	.001	7.412	.006
	Images of ageing			7.894	.005
		<i>Quality of model 1</i>		<i>Quality of model 2</i>	
		Cox und Snell: .266		Cox und Snell: .322	
		Nagelkerke: .376		Nagelkerke: .454	
		McFadden: .252		McFadden: .315	

Interestingly enough, it is the variables of “life satisfaction”, “voluntary work”, and “cultural participation” that contribute significantly to the explanation of the variance (cf. model 1). The respective items register, firstly, the basic satisfaction with the current life situation (life satisfaction), secondly, different forms of voluntary work and active citizenship (voluntary work), and thirdly, - as cultural participation – participation in cultural events (concerts, movies, etc.) as well as individual creative activities (acting, photography, painting, etc.).

The strongest predictors for interest in exchange with younger people within the context of intergenerational educational events prove to be supervision of grandchildren and cultural participation. All in all, this model allows for explaining 37.6% of the variance (Nagelkerke’s R^2 : .376).

The proportion of the variance explained is increased significantly up to 45.4% once the individual attitude towards ageing² is taken into account (see table 1), a fact which is not really surprising in view of the significance of personal conceptions of the life phase of old age and of one’s own process of aging for an active organization of life during old age, in general (Schmidt-Hertha & Mühlbauer, 2012).

Outlook

The results gained through the secondary analysis so far underline the significance of biographical experiences and of the current life situation for both intergenerational learning and the use of digital media to the same extent. It can be assumed that medial socialization and individual educational experiences, on the one hand, determine the

² The individual conception of old age was registered by means of the respective scales from the German Ageing Survey (Tesch-Römer, Wurm, Hoff, & Engstler, 2002). In this, the conception of aging describes the personal conceptions and expectations regarding the life phase of old age, in general, and regarding one’s own process of ageing (also Schmidt-Hertha & Mühlbauer, 2012).

attitude towards intergenerational learning and that, on the other hand, these factors have a fundamental impact on the current use of computers and of the internet. Yet, these correlations are by no means to be considered deterministic, because the current life situation and the participation in diverse fields of activities, in particular, seem to have as strong an impact both on the interest in intergenerational learning and on the use of media.

Within the framework of the qualitative analysis, we above all want to reveal the intergenerational learning processes as such, the motives and causes for learning. In this context, one of the central issues is to determine which of the characteristics of informal intergenerational learning can be transferred to institutional learning situations.

The analyses that have been carried out so far hardly dealt with the central questions of the overall project. Especially with regard to the motives, patterns, and progression of informal intergenerational learning processes in the context of digital media as well as the related opportunities and limitations many questions still remain unanswered; these will have to be taken up in the coming research phases.

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