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HOW CAN INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING WITH ICT HELP TO STRENGTHEN INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY?

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Abstract

The participation of older adults in the Information and Knowledge Society implies the need to strengthen the improvement of their skills, particularly in the context of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). We believe that if younger generations are involved in this process of learning supported by ICT, in an intergenerational perspective of development, the inclusion of older people in society will be reinforced and will promote active ageing, also fighting loneliness social exclusion. Therefore, the following research question was formulated: how can intergenerational learning with ICT help to strengthen intergenerational solidarity?

This paper presents a learning project involving different generations in activities supported by ICT, focusing in older people and volunteer higher education students. The project aims to promote intergenerational learning through ICT; cooperation between youth and seniors in the digital skills, sharing experiences and knowledge; and contribute to digital inclusion and participation of the senior population in the community and knowledge society. The intergenerational workshops run in a non-formal learning environment, in order to respond to technological needs and interests of seniors. This article reports on the findings of a qualitative study, in which surveys, focus groups, informal interviews and observation were used to explore learning needs and experiences, and how intergenerational learning with ICT happened.

The findings suggest that intergenerational learning promote a dialogue, interaction and mutual cooperation between different generations.

Keywords: Intergenerational learning, Intergenerational solidarity, Lifelong learning, Information and Communication Technology

Introduction

The challenges posed by ageing population are changing the relations between the generations, either in the communities or in the field of education and learning. The importance of new technologies in a global world and of solidarity between generations represents an opportunity to contribute to a new view on education and learning for strengthened intergenerational relation.

Recognizing the need to call world-wide attention to the social changes that take place due to ageing population besetting a growing portion of the populations of the world, European community promote the development of initiatives and programs to face these issues, such as European Year 2012 - 'European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations'. The year is intended to raise awareness of the contribution that older people make to society. It seeks to encourage policymakers and relevant stakeholders at all levels to take action with the aim of creating better opportunities for active ageing and strengthening solidarity between generations. Active ageing means growing old in good health and as a full member of society, feeling more fulfilled in a job, more independent in daily life and more involved in citizenship. European Year 2012 seeks to promote active ageing in three areas: employment, participation in society and independent living (European Union, 2012).

In the context of the economic and social crisis, increased by demographic change, the coalition of stakeholders for the European Year 2012 to launch the 'Manifesto for an Age-Friendly European Union by 2020'. It means fostering solidarity between generations and enabling the active participation and involvement of all age groups in society while providing them with adequate support and protection (AGE, 2012). This Manifesto identifies ten aspects that will benefit every age. All aspects are important but we emphasize the access to lifelong and intergenerational learning to acquire new skills and knowledge at any age.

In your technology-dependent societies, all citizens need to be able to use technology. The development of ICT skills is crucial for elderly people's participation and contribution in society. Lifelong and intergenerational learning with ICT can be seen as a key for the older people digital inclusion and provide a new European society based on greater solidarity, equity and cooperation between and within generations.

But, how can intergenerational learning with ICT help to strengthen intergenerational solidarity?

Intergenerational learning

Learning is a continuous and on going process involving the assimilation of information, ideas and values, constantly building and updating of knowledge, skills and competences. It is intrinsic, taking place anywhere, any time and at different levels: personal, familiar and communitarian, societal, national, international or global.

Intergenerational learning is when learning takes place across generations and is bi-directional. Intergenerational learning is one form of lifelong learning involving the transfer of tacit knowledge across generations. It is informal, mostly unplanned and self-directed learning. It is situational and experiential learning through personal conversations and activities (Ho, 2010).

Intergenerational learning provides a context that can improve both learning the specific learning topics and the tacit knowledge and life experiences relating to them. In this way, the learning situation also enriches the general understanding between generations (Ala-Mutka, Malanowski, Punie & Cabrera, 2008). Intergenerational learning may provide many types of positive effects, as studies have shown that young people who learn with older people have more positive and realistic attitudes to the older generation (WHO, 2002).

Intergenerational ICT Workshop

Intergenerational ICT workshop is a learning project involving different generations, older adults/seniors and higher education students, in activities supported by ICT. The project aims to promote intergenerational learning through ICT; cooperation between youth and seniors in the digital skills, sharing experiences and knowledge; and contribute to digital inclusion and participation of the senior population in the community and knowledge society which is also referred to 'learning society' (Cribbin & Kennedy, 2002; Jarvis, 2001; Coffield, 2000; Dearing, 1997).



Picture 1: Intergenerational ICT Workshop

The workshops began in April 2012, taking place once a week in an ICT classroom of a higher school of education (where students are graduating), in a non-formal learning environment. According to the European Commission (2012), non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. However, it is intentional on the part of the learner and has structured objectives, times and support.

All Wednesdays, during an hour and a half, we have three groups of ten seniors each and eight students that are oriented by an ICT lecturer. The workshops are adapted to seniors' interests and needs. We don't have a defined plan or program. The seniors have their part and involvement in the learning process and development of their own skills and abilities. Students are giving support, and sharing their digital skills and competences according to the requests and preferences of the older participants. The lecturer's role consists of supervising the activities and of teaching some technological concepts or tools. The lecturer also observes and tries understanding the process of intergenerational learning. This learning environment promotes the transference of experience and knowledge between the older and younger generations (Image 1). The workshops are free and students are voluntary.

Methodology

The methods we used for initial data collecting were surveys, focus group, informal interviews and observation. These research methods are qualitative and intended to explore interesting topics for research and advance a holistic understanding of the participant. Surveys and focus group were used with older people; informal interviews for the younger group; observations of both groups were registered during the intergenerational learning activities.

Surveys were applied prior to the workshop, when the older participants made their registration in the project, and were used for assemble personal data, levels of technology practice and the importance of intergenerational activities for them. Focus group were conducted in order to gather information regarding attitudes, opinions and feelings related to ICT, intergenerational learning and solidarity and active ageing. The focus group session had three main objectives and was structured around three topics (Table 1).

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUP OBJECTIVES AND TOPICS

Objectives
Identify the motivation and importance to use ICT in everyday situations;
Identify approaches that facilitate intergenerational learning with ICT;
Identify attitudes that can be improved through active ageing and solidarity between generations.
Topics
ICT
Intergenerational learning
Active ageing and solidarity between generations

The students participated in informal interviews to identify why they volunteered for this project and what they think about intergenerational learning and solidarity.

The observation during the workshops enabled to distinguish behaviours and attitudes of participants regarding intergenerational learning with ICT.

Findings

Surveys

Through the personal data we found that female participants are in majority (83%). Older adults are in the age group between 50 and 83 years of age, the average age being 63,69 years. Most participants are retired and two are unemployed.

Concerning the main reason that led them to participate in this workshop, everybody said: learn to use ICT and share experiences and knowledge. Nevertheless, they all valued the importance of active ageing, socialize and engage with different generations.

In the group of questions about ICT, we found that 46% have computer equipment with Internet connection at home but the frequency of ICT use (less than once a week) is low (37%). Older adults that have no training in ICT represent 58% and 81% don't use the Internet.

Focus Group

Based on a thematic analysis of something acquired from the focus group, we present descriptors for each topic (Table 2, 3 and 4).

TABLE 2. ICT

Motivation and importance
Curiosity and interest
To be up-to-date
Connecting to family and friend
Necessity to adapt and participate in the new digital world

TABLE 3. INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

With ICT
Important to learn with younger because they are experts in computers and Internet
Sharing experiences and skills
More confident and safety to use ICT
Promote solidarity and digital inclusion

TABLE 4. ACTIVE AGEING AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Important to continue mental activity and healthy lifestyle

Lifelong learning can be a solution for it
Innovative approaches and policies aimed at encouraging intergenerational solidarity
Cooperation among generations contribute to cohesive and sustainable societies

Informal interviews

Student's ages are between 18 and 35 years of age. They frequent higher education at the 1st and 2st cycles of studies. Students identify cultural experience and knowledge as the most important aspects related to intergenerational learning. They recognized that they have much to learn with older people and also indicated the importance of help them to use new technologies for incorporate in their everyday life.

On the other hand, students were conscious that it is important improving the contact towards the older generations for combating age discrimination for ensure and support a greater respect, cooperation and solidarity between the generations. Students were enthusiastic and anxious for the workshop.

Observation

According to the analysis and data interpretation of observation results, we identified relevant inferences to understand learning stimuli, learning modes, learning interests, learning barriers and intergenerational learning process.

Young knowledge and experience in technology associate the attention and help provided to the older contributed to motivate and engage them in digital and communicational skills development.

About learning interests, older people would like to acquire competences in online communications (email and chat), Internet (navigation and information research), reading online newspapers and news, watching videos, seeing photos, social networking, play computer games, use word processing and presentations.

Non-formal learning environment is promising to different modes of learning. It means that older people learn at their own time according to their interests and needs, with the help of young or starting to discover themselves asking whenever they need young help.

Although motivation and willingness to learn, we recognized some barriers that difficult ICT learning, such as, the need for technology to adapt to older rather than older adapting to technology. Some older are not assiduous because of health problems or family obligations and it is necessary to repeat the same activity many times. However, not having a computer with an Internet connection for practice at home, is the principal reason; nevertheless, older participants continue motivated to learn.

Intergenerational learning process is very positive. We could observe good challenges from first session till now. For example: the initial feeling about some averseness in using the computer and the fear of damaging the equipment is beaten; seniors no longer need so much attention and support, which enables the readiness to share their life stories with young people; minds open to technology and the digital world; amazing with the power of Internet communication; increasing communication and social interactions between older and young in workshops and through email, chat and social networks. Other interesting aspect is social media being increasingly attractive to older people because the influence of younger. Social media bridges generational gaps and allow reconnect with relatives, friends and people from their past.

After three months of workshops we know well and fell that this initiative reinforce the social connection between generations and promote the exchange of good practice and mutual learning. Moreover, both generations to show appreciate and enjoyment in intergenerational learning.

Conclusions

The project is at the beginning, however we already have some relevant indicators from these intergenerational ICT workshops. With these workshops we aim to understand how different generations learn together across technologies and it is important to strength intergenerational solidarity. Education provides an opportunity for older people to continue learning and to share their knowledge and experience, while also offering the opportunity to engage with other generations.

This study illustrates how non-formal learning opportunities by intergenerational activities can contribute to outcome measures of wellbeing, to help assess life experiences and skills, increase comprehension between generations and have a impact positively on intergenerational relationships. Intergenerational programs constitute social vehicles that create purposeful and on going exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations. In a nutshell, it is about 'intergenerational engagement' – the full range of ways in which young people and older adults interact, support, and provide care for one another (Kaplan, 2002).

The initial results of this study pose some interesting questions and suggest some avenues for continue research, in regard to attitudes and intergenerational contact when older and young people learning together. The next intergenerational ICT workshop will base on project activities (storytelling, traditions, gastronomy, arts, literature and music) to develop common interests so they will have more opportunities to learn together. Successful intergenerational learning fulfils age-appropriate developmental needs of youth and adults, is relational and reciprocal, drawing on the strengths and assets of each generation (Kaplan, 2001).

Finally, the maintenance of intergenerational workshops may be able to exploit the vast learning opportunities among generations and intergenerational solidarity, and as a way of improving lifelong and lifewide learning.

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