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Lifelong learning, intergenerational relationships and ICT: perceptions of children and older adults

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Abstract

Ageing population is one of the topics that have attracted the attention of several countries in the interest of social cohesion, economic growth and financial sustainability.

Promoting active ageing population is one of the strategies adopted by different countries to avoid early retirement and to encourage older workers to remain longer in the labour market, to remain healthy, active and independent, as long as possible. Active ageing requires the involvement of older adults in a increasingly global, technological and digital contemporary society. This participation presents challenges for education and lifelong learning, especially to older people who did not acquire digital skills during their previous education and training. This is a group that, as a consequence, might suffer from a high risk of exclusion of the benefits of the Information and Knowledge Society.

Active ageing, generational relations, coexistence and solidarity between generations are topics on the developed countries agenda. Therefore, active ageing and intergenerational solidarity are two complementary subjects in favour of a common challenge, in which education and learning play an important role.

This paper seeks to find out and to understand how children and older adults think of lifelong learning and generational solidarity, particularly through organised training activities with the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). For data collection in this process we will conduct informal conversational interviews with younger and older participants as well as observation of the way the activities develop. The analysis and data interpretation will allow us to get relevant inferences to understand their interests and perspectives on ICT skills, digital literacy

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and digital inclusion in society. The conclusions will be crucial not only to develop strategies to encourage useful and significant learning, but also to investigate new opportunities for understanding education and intergenerational lifelong learning, supported by ICT in general and the Web 2.0 in particular. Then, we will make our contribution to the promotion of active ageing, solidarity and intergenerational relations, trying to collaborate in building a better future for all generations.

Keywords: lifelong learning, education and learning of older adults, intergenerational relationships, active ageing, information and communication technologies.

Introduction

From the second half of the 20th century, ageing European population, has become more pronounced due to declining rates of fertility and mortality, representing a demographic shift in many European countries with socio-economic and health care implications.

The latest projections from Eurostat (Europop2010) for the period 2010-2060, indicate that the population of the EU27 will continue to age, it is expected that the population aged 65 years or older will increase from 17% in 2010 to 30% in 2060, and the population aged 80 years or more increase from 5% to 12% in the same period. For Portugal, the projections indicate a significant increase in the population over 65 years, from 17.9% in 2010 to 32.0% in 2060, and with over 80 years, 4.5 and 13.5% in 2010 % in 2060 (Eurostat, 2011a).

Consequently, the ratio of older people in EU27, i.e. the population aged 65 years and older divided by the population aged 15 to 64, is projected to increase from 26% in 2010 to 53% in 2060. In Portugal, this ratio increases of 26.7% in 2010 to 57.2% in 2060 (Eurostat, 2011b).

These indicators represent challenges and opportunities for the development of European society, especially in terms of economic growth and financial sustainability.

To promote healthy ageing and active population in the interests of social cohesion and greater productivity is one of the strategies adopted by the European Union, through the Action Plan on "Ageing Well in the Information Society" (COM, 2007) under the "i2010 - a European Information Society for growth and employment" (COM, 2005) to halt the trend towards early retirement and encourage elders to stay in the job market staying healthy, active and independent for longer.

In the perspective of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002) the concept of active ageing is understood as “the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. Active ageing applies to both individuals and groups. It allows people to realise their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout their lives and to participate in society according to their needs, desires, and

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capacities, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they require assistance."

Active ageing denotes the participation of older people in contemporary society, increasingly global, technological and digital. For this participation to be real and effective is necessary to involve older people in opportunities for lifelong learning and e-inclusion to bridge the digital divide and make e-Inclusion a reality. The European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion "To be part of the information society" expresses the idea of "ICT solutions for active ageing". Despite these initiatives, older people do not often use ICT tools in general and computer usage skills in older age groups is low. According to Eurostat, in 2007, 81% of respondents in the age group 65-74 and 60% in the group 55-65 said that they have no computer skills. In the group of 55-74 years old, highly educated respondents used computers more and felt more skilled (75%) than older people with low education (19%).

In an increasingly digital and technological society, learning throughout life is principal for the elderly to continue to participate in community social life, economic, cultural and civic, and not only physically and psychologically healthy. The European Commission communication "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality" identifies strategies and measures for fostering lifelong learning for all (European Commission, 2011). Adult learning communications "Adult learning: It is never too late to learn" (European Commission, 2006) and "Action Plan on Adult learning" (European Commission, 2007) emphasize the importance of an efficient adult education system in lifelong learning concentrating on the quality of learning approaches for adult learners, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, investments in the education of older people and migrants.

According to European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning, lifelong learning covers education and training across all ages and in all areas of life, be it formal, non-formal or informal. It shall enable citizen's emancipation and full participation in society in its civic, social and economic dimensions. Its objective should not only be described in terms of employability or economic growth but also as a framework for personal development (EUCIS-LLL, 2010).

Lifelong learning can be seen as an answer to the problems of older people, providing opportunities to develop new skills, particularly in areas such as ICT, and opportunities of intergenerational sharing of experiences and knowledge. Learning can enrich quality of life for older people, and also for the people interacting with, and learning from, them. Older people have a lot of valuable in-depth knowledge to give to younger workers and to each other, and new technologies can provide new means for enabling this. 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).

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Speculating that through the use of new technologies, we may find out and understand how children and older adults can experience lifelong learning and generational solidarity, particularly. We conducted informal conversational interviews with younger and older participants as well as activities observation in the context of ICT workshops of the tin@ project, a Project on Information Technology for Grandparents and Grandchildren, in Bragança, in the northeast of Portugal.

1. Description

The tin@ project is an initiative of the School of Education - Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, particularly the Department of Educational Technology and Information Management, and aims to promote the link among grandparents and grandchildren through ICT, the coexistence between generations and family cohesion.

This project began in 2010 with two workshops. Given that this pilot experiment, involving two groups of grandparents and grandchildren of Bragança and Mogadouro, beat initial expectations, the project decided to promote more workshops in the city of Bragança in 2011. Contacts were made with different social agents involved directly or indirectly with children and the elderly, potentially interested in participate in this project. The Social Centre Santos Mártires joined the project again, supporting the dissemination to users of the Social Centre and to the general community and helping in the process of registration of participants and context analysis. Three ICT workshops were organized for July (one for grandparents, other for grandchildren, and another for intergenerational) and a basic ICT general program was defined.

The first workshop in ICT, targeted at grandparents and adults over 50 years, was held 18-25 July, from 2:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., at the School of Education. The second workshop directed at children and grandchildren from 6 to 12 years took place in the School of Education, 25-29 July from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. The intergenerational workshop was held 20-29 July, from 8:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., in local premises of Nogueira parish.

These workshops provide the basic ICT skills and use of Web tools for communication/interaction, including the following contents: ICT, word processing, electronic presentations, Internet and e-mail, Web security and Web 2.0 tools. From this general program, the contents were changed and adapted to the characteristics, interests, needs and abilities of students. In these workshops, and at participants' request, they can also make the examination of basic ICT skills to obtain the Diploma of Basic Skills in ICT (DCB).

After knowing the students, identify their level of digital literacy and understand where their interests and needs in ICT, we began training with a brief and clear presentation of ICT and the Digital Society, referring to the advantages and benefits to the active ageing, lifelong learning and intergenerational relations. Thus, we now present the contents and activities in each of the training workshops.

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In the workshop for grandparents/older adults contents focused on general concepts of ICT, use of word processing (insert and format text, images and tables), electronic mail (creating an email, send and receive messages), Internet (general concepts, navigation and information research). The activities focused on oriented utilization of resources and software, exercises, using Google Maps and operation of the iPhone.

The workshop directed at children turned around notions of ICT, drawing programs and word processing, electronic mail, Internet and Web security activities were based on the holding group and individual exercises in computer programs, with particular emphasis for the creation of "gifts to the grandparents' day" with using ICT, examples of which are letters, poems, drawings and electronic postcards. The theme of Web security has stimulated the children by conducting educational games. In this workshop, three children approved out the examination of basic ICT skills and have obtained the DCB.

In the exploration of the intergenerational education content was made through the theme "Arts Atelier", as this group meets once a week to learn various artistic techniques. ICT, word processing and electronic presentations, the contents were selected to perform word processing documents, the materials and procedures to be followed in conducting the workshops, and creating electronic presentations with photos of the work produced. The e-mail and Internet integrated activities only in the last two sessions, once the workplace did not have Internet connection and had to move the students to the Social Centre (16 km). Although the students have recognized the advantages of email, no one has created a personal account because they do not have Internet access at home. Navigation and Web searching focused on finding information about the community, arts and crafts, photo view and video.

At the end of the workshops the students expressed satisfaction and interest in participating again in intergenerational learning activities with ICT.

2. Methodology

Informal conversational interviews and observation were the methods used for data collection. These research methods are qualitative and intended to explore interesting topics for research and gain a holistic understanding of the interviewee. This type of interview resembles a chat, during which the informants may sometimes forget that they are being interviewed. Most of the questions asked will flow from the immediate context. Informal conversational interviews are useful for exploring interesting topics for investigation and are typical of ‘on-going’ participant observation fieldwork (Berry, 1999). Kvale (Kvale, 1996) defines qualitative research interviews as "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations."

The interviews took place in the first session for each workshop. During the presentation of students, the teacher/interviewer was talking and asking questions to students about their

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behaviours, opinions, values, feelings, knowledge and background characteristics. In this relaxed and informal atmosphere, students felt free to express themselves and engage in the group.

The observation during the activities enabled the assessment of actual behaviours and attitudes of students concerning the use of ICT to lifelong learning and generational interaction.

3. Results

Informal conversational interviews

In the workshop for grandparents/older adults' eight persons participated, two residents in urban and six in rural areas. Through the personal data we found that female participants are in the majority (7). The age group is between 64 to 77 years, the average age being 70.5 years. All participants are retired, and the professions who played were: home (4), immigrant (2), businessmen (1) and teacher (1). The predominant qualifications were primary education, except for a grandmother who had a degree. When asked about ICT, we found that none of the adults have ICT skills and only one has personal computer with Internet connection at home. Also the use of mobile devices (mobile phones and the iPhone's) is reduced (4 elderly) and limited (making and receiving calls). Nevertheless, 75% showed interest and need to acquire ICT skills to communicate and interact with family and friends, as well as a more active and critical in the digital society. Lifelong learning, intergenerational solidarity and other issues were discussed in interviews. Socialize, share, learn, discover and know, were some of the words that the group used to refer the objective in attending this workshop, highlighting the importance of harmony between generations, solidarity and mutual learning, which can be rediscovered and sustained through new technologies.

The workshop for grandchildren/children received eight participants, three males and five females. The average age of children was 9 years, ranging between 6 to 12 years. All children were students, 75% attended the primary education and 25% studied in the secondary education. Most children lived in the district of Bragança and two lived in Lisbon. In relation to ICT, we found that all the children had used a computer (mainly to play), but only three children (the oldest) had basic ICT skills, e-mail address and profile on social networks. They were also children who had personal computer in their homes with Internet access and used more than four times per week, either to play, see multimedia content, communicate with friends/family, and to do school homework and research. Regarding the intergenerational relationships, children appreciate and respect older people, especially grandparents. Consider them as digital excluded but willing to help grandparents and other seniors how to learn and use new technology in order to spend more quality time with them.

The intergenerational workshop is characterized by a diversity of ages (4 to 63 years) and female predominance (79%). Fourteen learners participated in this workshop, 9 adults and 5

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children/youth. The children were students and adults were still in active, whose occupations were farmer, auxiliary operations, bank, hairdresser, businessman, household, trainee and assistant. The educational skills of children were: pre-school (20%), primary education (40%) and secondary education (40%). Adults had the following qualifications: primary education (45%), secondary education (33%) and higher education (22%). Asked about digital literacy, all students know how to use a computer and access the Internet, though the majority had basic skills and on average used ICT once or twice a week. Two students and three adults used e-mail and social networks. Personal computer and Internet connection were available in half the homes of students. Although this group is fairly young (average 36.3 years), older people do not feel the need to make use of ICT in their day-to-day, mainly for lack of time and interest. However, they emphasize the importance of lifelong learning, relationships and generational solidarity, and were receptive to update and acquire new digital skills with the help of the youngers, according to their interests, needs and availability.

Observation

During the training workshops we found that the elderly and older adults felt some averseness in using the computer because it was considered old to learn ICT and for fear of damaging the equipment. Situation that has been successfully overcome in the following sections as the elderly and older adults felt more comfortable with the computer and identified positive and useful to their personal and family life. We found some limitations of accessibility for this group in particular some troubles to view information in the screen and the level of skills in handling the mouse and keyboard. Other difficulties were linked to cognitive limitations of the age, such as lack of concentration, attention, memory and mental exhaustion. Some people said they felt some difficulty in remembering instructions and actions to work with some programs, and that computers could be designed with them in mind in order to better adapt to their physical limitations. Another factor pointed out by the students was that they wanted access to personal computer and Internet connection in their homes. However, these difficulties have been removed during the lessons or by the motivation and curiosity of students and by the encouragement of grandchildren/ children, other learners and teacher for the use of ICT.

About children, we confirm that they were distracted very easily, ably to use the computer and have very basic ICT skills. However, if integrated in joint activities with the elderly they become more responsible, helpful and guiding in tasks.

An interesting aspect is social and emotional relationship that developed between some learners, provided by the learning and intergenerational solidarity.

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Conclusions

The dynamics of these workshops provided to the elderly demystification of technological complexity, empathy with the digital devices, the acquisition of basic ICT skills and appreciation of lifelong learning as an opportunity for active aging and generational living.

The older adults are a very heterogeneous group, not only because they fit into different age categories (50-64, 65-74, 75+), different stages of life (working/retiring and living independently/dependently), but also by other factors that influence their view and quality of life (financial, social, family, literacy and personal interests). We found that these aspects affect the way older people think of lifelong learning, interests and needs of ICT.

Therefore, knowledge and understanding of these limitations of individual elderly is essential to plan correct methodologies, strategies and activities that are important and significant for lifelong learning.

Although this was a short study limited to a small group of participants, these informal learning initiatives provided the increase of the use of ICT by the elderly and promoted intergenerational sharing of experiences, also supporting in giving new meaning to the lives of older people as we can demonstrate elderly participants' satisfaction, enhanced pride and autonomy.

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