

## SKILLS AND COMPETENCES OF ADULT EDUCATORS: LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH SENIOR CITIZENS

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### **Abstract**

Due to the increasing importance given to lifelong and intergenerational learning, adult educators are taking on new roles and their work is gaining greater impact, especially in a general context of financial and social crisis. Therefore it is important to respond to the educational challenge of an ageing population in Europe and to help in the provision of pathways to improve adults' knowledge, competences, culture and education.

Involving a rich assortment of actors and contexts, adult education has an heterogeneous nature, engaging people, working with adults in exploring issues of intergenerational competence. In addition, such professionals (or volunteers!) ought to identify the competences required for adult education and to find ways in which their performance may be developed. The improvement of these skills and competences will help increasing seniors access and in widening participation and motivation in adult education, thus making the learning experience of adults more relevant, enjoyable and fun.

On the one hand, the recognition and feedback given by participants and the experience of working is decisive for the development of specific skills and competences for professionals in the adult learning sector; on the other hand, competence profile of adult educators is complex and involves a multi-dimensional set of skills, personal attitudes and values as well as knowledge and understanding.

The need for more information on adult education justifies more action research and action learning in this field. Therefore, the aim of this communication is to present some experiences in adult education, in the context of non-formal and intergenerational learning, focused on various and different aspects of the teaching and learning process and also on how to improve the skills and competences of adult educators in their actual practice.

Trying to find a fine answer to the question "What is the importance of learning experience with senior citizens and its contribution for professional development?" we intend to describe, analyse and reflect different training intergenerational contexts in non-formal adult education and identify the factors that influence teacher and learning work that can contribute to professional development. The need for a proper emphasis on diversity and on motivating adults, using different learning methods, styles and techniques assuming the expertise and background of the learners is being taken into suitable consideration.

**Keywords:** adult education, adult educator, lifelong and intergenerational learning, professional skills and competences.

## **Adult education practices**

The challenge of an ageing Europe in the social and educational context are motivating the interest in the study of lifelong and intergenerational learning and an opportunity to improve professional skills of teachers in initial and in-service training. The world is changing and educators need to adapt new realities and new educational challenges.

Education for older adults and seniors is different from education for younger people, because their needs are very different. While younger people are expected to study to improve their career expectations, older adults and seniors' educational activities have more to do with personal interests and needs, increasing sociability, integration, adapting and participating in today's society, and improving their quality of life throughout lifelong learning.

The increased use of new technology and innovations in the digital society determines the need for ICT skills and competences. The experiences presented refer to intergenerational ICT workshops provided in Bragança, Portugal, adapting different pedagogical approaches and measures within a non-formal educational context. This learning project involves different generations in activities supported by ICT, focusing in different generations (in 2011 grandparents and grandchildren; in 2012 higher education students and older adults; in 2013 adults and seniors). The project aims to promote intergenerational learning through ICT; cooperation between different generations in learning digital skills, sharing interests and difficulties, experiences and knowledge; contributing to digital inclusion and participation of adult and senior population in the community and knowledge society, mutually benefiting from the intergenerational environment.

The workshops took place in a higher education institution, were access free and participants were volunteers from the local community. We didn't have a clear and fixed or defined plan or program. The workshops were adapted to adults and seniors' interests and needs. They had part and involvement in their learning process and in the development of their skills and abilities. Younger people gave support and shared their digital skills and competences. Likewise, this learning environment promoted the transference of experience and knowledge from the older generations to the younger.

## **Adult educators: professional (or volunteer) development**

The role of adult educators (professionals or volunteers) is facilitating and motivating adults and seniors for lifelong learning, to find ways to reach and engage older adults, but also to improve the quality of adult education.

Previous experience, prior knowledge, investigation of the field and collection of good practices in international conferences and networks provide us information, resources, ideas and methods for learning and teaching. Scientific background merged with practical experience results in a better understanding of adult and senior education, optimize the performance of adult educator and enhance the education process.

Since 2010 we have been studying and trying to understand the process of intergenerational learning with theoretical and practical action research, in addition to

research skills and competences of volunteer teachers working in ICT education for adults and senior citizens.

We have identified the following adult educators competences: obtaining the trust and friendship of older participants; suitable social and affective relationship between teacher and older adults; knowing the socio-economic environment of the older adults; assessing learner's needs and curiosities; perceive individual needs and reactions; adapt oneself permanently to different publics; communicate and pass the message across; provide learners with support (in person and online); deal with group phenomena; acquire new content and new techniques; maintain professional relationships with the professional community; assessing the outcomes of learning and learners' achievements; reflecting upon and evaluating one's own performance and planning future practice.

These practices show that adult educators are responsible for personal development and social intervention. It is also evident that adult educators need to play different roles: teacher (mediator of knowledge and supporter of learners' activities), guide (orient and motivate learners to work and learn), facilitator (help the learner to find their role in the group), and trainer (provide the learner with skills for self-actualization).

## **Findings**

Adult educators have a complex task. They require different abilities and roles that go far beyond the professional competences (knowledge, pedagogy, didactic, methods or technics). Personal and social competences and approaches based on experiences and challenges that practitioners face in their everyday work are determinant to engage older adults in learning and achieving the lifelong learning process. Thus, educational contents, methods, objectives and strategies need to be flexible and re-designed accordingly to the target group to increase the impact and efficiency of the adult education process.

The evidence allowed us to get relevant knowledge in volunteer practice and to understand and develop professional or volunteer skills, competences and attitudes as adult educators. Huge benefits were noticed in the adult and older people general wellbeing and satisfaction through their acquisition of ICT skills and continued interaction in online social networks, with friends, family and learning group.

Adult education, in the context of lifelong and intergenerational learning, can help to ensure adults to improve their literacy proficiency and is the key for anyone who wants to participate in learning. It enables many different benefits for adults and seniors: help to overcome exclusion and isolation, maintaining independence and wellbeing in later life, promoting mental and physical health, encouraging intergenerational understand and solidarity and active participation in an European digital society.

Despite the limitations of this learning experience with adults and senior citizens, we are truly convinced that the findings of this project are significantly contributing to the professional and personal development of adult educators and also to encourage other adults in learning (with) ICT.