

Developing competencies to cope with transitions in later life. Particularities of learning offers for older adults

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Abstract

Beyond the transition to retirement, research rarely focuses on transitions in later life. This may be due to the absence of appropriate theoretical models. In order to remedy this, the article contains a theory-based reflection with the aim to work out aspects of educational offers for older people. It links the knowledge about ‘transitions in later life’, ‘skills and competencies’ to concepts of learning in later life. The systematic approach is based on a detailed review of the state of the art of the different concepts in the field of educational science and related academic disciplines. The analysis identifies the crucial aspects of different learning situations which help develop relevant competencies and skills useful for coping with transitions. Based on these reflections we derive some relevant features for programs to help develop older adults’ abilities to cope with transitions.

Oltre alle transizioni verso il pensionamento, la ricerca si concentra raramente sulle transizioni in età avanzata. Ciò può essere dovuto all’assenza di modelli teorici adeguati. Per rimediare a ciò, l’articolo contiene una riflessione teorica con l’obiettivo di elaborare aspetti per le offerte educative per gli anziani. Si tratta di collegare le conoscenze sulle ‘transizioni in età avanzata’, sulle ‘abilità e competenze’ ai concetti di apprendimento in età avanzata. L’approccio metodologico si basa su una revisione dettagliata dello stato dell’arte dei diversi concetti nel campo delle scienze dell’educazione e delle discipline accademiche correlate. L’analisi riguarda l’identificazione degli aspetti cruciali nelle diverse situazioni di apprendimento che permettono di sviluppare competenze e abilità utili per affrontare le transizioni. Da queste riflessioni derivano alcuni aspetti rilevanti per i programmi di sviluppo delle capacità degli anziani di affrontare le transizioni.

Keywords: transition; later life; competences; skills; learning

Parole chiave: transizione; età avanzata; competenze; abilità; apprendimento

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1. Introduction

Transitions as drastic changes during life challenge us in a special way. At the very least, various parts of everyday life must be reorganised and routines that provide a feeling of certainty must be reinvented. Above all, such transitions often change a person's status, role, and reputation within their social environment as well as within society (Stauber et al., 2022). This is another reason why transitions ought to be understood as a process that requires those affected to adapt and shape their lives in many ways. The question therefore arises as to how people cope with or shape these transitions, which internal resources of the person play a role in this and how can these be strengthened. Two perspectives seem particularly obvious here. A biographical perspective, that understands the genesis of coping skills and competences for reorganising one's own life as a product of biographical learning (Hallqvist, 2014), and a pedagogical perspective that considers the possibilities and limits of learning opportunities to prepare for upcoming transitions or to cope with current transition phases.

By theoretically linking the psychology of the lifespan and related coping-strategies like the SOC-model (Staudinger & Baltes, 2000) to classical developmental-psychological concepts of life crises (Erikson 1959; 1982) and to social science transition research (Walther et al., 2020; Bernardi et al., 2020), crisis-like upheavals in middle and older adulthood are conceptualized as coping experiences. By focusing on knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes, potential personal resources acquired during learning and educational processes and their contribution to coping with upheavals in the life course are considered. This also allows for links to the concept of life skills (Stephoe & Wardle, 2017), however, that is aimed much more at general everyday coping and focuses less on transitions and crisis situations.

In this article we reflect on individual challenges related to transitions in later life, older adults' resources to cope with them and the accumulation of these resources during the lifespan. In a second step we try to figure out what is known about strategies to strengthen relevant resources for coping with transitions in adult education programs and how such skills and competencies can be conveyed to.

2. Transitions in later life

In developmental psychology, at the latest with Erikson (1959), the entire life course is conceived of as a sequence of crisis-ridden developmental steps. In middle and later adulthood, Erikson focuses in particular on the question of taking responsibility for subsequent generations (generativity vs. stagnation) and accepting one's own biography (integrity vs. despair). He sees these developmental steps not as events to be anchored at individual biographical stages or points in time, but rather as processes that are largely indefinite in duration. In relation to the last age stage of his model – the old age – Erikson returned to it late in life with an interesting evaluation. If, in the first model the crises should be negotiated in a dichotomist manner between the two poles, 'integrity' and 'despair', upon reflection in his later years, Erikson admitted that 'despair' needs to be accepted as substantial part of old age and that it should be anticipated since the early ages (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986, p. 45; 72). This modification, inspired by the self-observation of the researcher introduced a strong component of realism to his model. Its significance for the understanding of the aging process is not to be underestimated. In fact, the training of older adults cannot ignore the reality of the participant's life, which when confronted with despair can be a powerful obstacle to learning processes.

Beyond the various proposals for conceptualizing, categorizing and even standardizing the life span (Houde, 1999), it must be noted that these articulations always run the risk of euphemizing the resolutely continuous nature of life. In fact, the contradiction between the two dichotomous perceptions of continuity vs. rupture is an academic question. For the individual, both inevitably fit into their one and only personal, original and

unique life span. Just as it is impossible to cut a stream of water coming out of a tap with a pair of scissors (Heslon, 2020), the categorization of life stages remains a theoretical undertaking. Nonetheless, the focalization and deepening of these presumed contradictions and differentiations is indispensable for a better understanding of their influence on the solution strategies developed by individuals or groups.

For a long time, transition research has focused primarily on transitions in childhood and adolescence. Numerous studies are available, for e.g., on the transition from school to work (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009), from primary to secondary education (Scharenberg et al., 2017), or from adolescence to adulthood (e.g., Evans & Heinz, 1994), including studies on identity-related crises and their effects on these life phases (see, e.g., Benasso et al., 2019). With regard to the second half of life (Kern, 2016b), there is a comparable state of research only pertaining to the transition to the post-employment phase of life, which has increasingly become the focus of empirical studies since the 1980s (for an overview, see Schmidt-Hertha & Rees 2017). It has to be noted that in the field of both sociology and economics, transitions in older adult age have been theorized. Entrance into the ‘age of fragility’ (Lalivie d’Epinay & Guilley, 2004) is characterized by the appearance of first serious physiological difficulties. The duration of this period depends on the individual themselves and notably on their capacity to take an active part in managing the process of adaptation to difficulties. If this is not (or no longer) successful and difficulties start to affect strongly the capacity of a person to actively self-direct their life, they enter into the phase of high old age (Bonnet, 2001). But, in general, these phases have not yet been further analyzed with regard to the skills needed to cope.

Furthermore, recent research has rightly criticized the fact that too often in these studies a normal male life course is presumed, i.e., a life course defined by largely continuous full-time employment until the abrupt age-related transition to a post-employment phase characterized by the complete elimination of gainful employment (Phillipson, 2019). Even during the second half of the 20th century, this premise would have been far from the reality of most people’s lives. For both female and male employment trajectories today, a much higher degree of discontinuity and a greater frequency of transition scenarios must be assumed (Bloemen et al., 2016; Bredt, 2008; Duberley et al., 2014). In addition to a broader perspective on post-employment transitions that considers the possibility of different stages between full-time employment and no employment at all, as well as female life course trajectories and the reversibility of exits from employment, transition research is now increasingly addressing other potentially crisis-prone transitions in the second half of life. These include family-related changes (children moving out, grandparenthood, need for care or death of a parent or partner, etc.), health-related cut-backs (e.g., serious illness, transition to need for care), or other changes in the life situation (e.g., unemployment, relocation, new relationship, resumption of formal educational activities), or even transsexuality in old age (Fabre, 2015).

In analogy to Erikson’s understanding of crises, particularly challenging events in an individual’s life in the form of upheavals in the course of life, also harbor the potential to either endanger or stabilize an individual’s identity; they may continue to accompany those affected as unresolved problems or burdens, or they may strengthen them for further crises. Thus, inherent in many transitions - particularly when they are not experienced as self-determined - is a potentially crisis-ridden experience through which those affected have to navigate. In this context, social science research has so far focused more on the circumstances and trajectories of such transition processes, on their biographical effects and the impact of support systems. Thus, studies can, for example, be found on the circumstances and trajectories of moves (Herbers et al., 2014; Kemp, 2008) or changes in living arrangements in old age (Brown et al., 2012), with particular relevance being attached to social contacts as a key resource for coping with transitions during moves (Branson et al., 2019), as well as in the event of a divorce or the death of a partner (Bookwala et al., 2014; Lee & Bakk, 2001). Changes in marital status (e.g., Recksiedler &

Stawski, 2019) or the need for home-based care (Rafnsson et al., 2017), in particular, tend to be discussed in terms of their psychological consequences for those affected, as do changes caused by the children leaving the parental home (e.g., Mitchell & Wister, 2015) or, alternatively, by menopause (e.g., Chen et al., 2013). While at least a manageable number of studies focus on supportive interventions during transitions in old age (reviewed in Vrkljan et al., 2019), there is little work that actually enquires into the resources available to those affected for coping themselves with these changes or into the genesis of such resources. The focus is mostly on the educational experiences and the cultural capital of senior citizens (e.g., Recksiedler & Stawski, 2019; Robitaille et al., 2018). However, there is also scattered evidence that resilience and coping strategies may decline again in late adulthood (Bennett et al., 2019).

3. Skills and competences in later life

Existential or potentially identity-threatening crises, such as those that occur at biographical turning points, set in motion a chain of well-rehearsed, unquestioned routines, challenge the individual and harbor risks as well as opportunities with regard to autonomy and self-determination. Whether and how the opportunities associated with crises are actually realized is likely to depend not insignificantly on the psychological resources available to those affected, i.e. their cognitive strategies, skills and competencies, but also on other personal dispositions as well as on emotional and social resources for coping with drastic changes (Mälkki, 2012; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). In this context competencies are understood here as the interplay of knowledge, skills, and attitudes or motivations (Weinert, 2001; Ritzhaupt et al., 2018; Scallon, 2004).

3.1 Skills and competences

Older studies on the transition into the post-employment phase point to the importance of a basic optimism (Adis et al., 1996), the ability to anticipate changes (Jüchtern, 2000) and to develop potential future scenarios (Principi et al., 2020). Bye and Pushkar (2009) underline the relevance of motivational factors as well as cognitive activity and problem-oriented coping strategies as essential for the emotional processing of drastic changes in adulthood; their findings are based on a study among adults in transition to the post-employment phase of life. A closer look at how adults deal with life crises from the perspective of the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), reveals reflexivity, in particular, to be a crucial key to crisis management (Mälkki, 2012; McWhinney & Markos, 2003; Mezirow, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Other studies point to the importance of coping strategies (Hardy et al., 2019), to the willingness to question one's own value orientations (Walker et al., 2020), but also to spirituality (Kumari & Sharma, 2018) as important factors in dealing with crisis situations. All these factors may also be considered from the perspective of resilience; resilience research, however, shows that, whereas developmental processes are not necessarily linked to drastic events, crises or upheavals, coping skills are increasingly built up in the context of such crisis experiences (Greve & Staudinger, 2006). Boulton-Lewis and colleagues (2017) refer to learning processes as a means of coping with difficult phases in life and with upheavals. This is not about acquiring learning skills needed to cope with crises, but about learning itself as a coping mode, about learning processes as coping opportunities (Lapina, 2018). Conversely, coping with upheavals and crises itself can be seen as an educational process, insofar as previous goals and routines of action are questioned (Ducki, 2017) and the process is accompanied by fundamental changes in the relationship of the self and the world (Nohl, 2016).

Crises experienced and overcome in the life course are an important source and landmarks for coping with current and future upheavals and challenging life situations (Aldwin et al., 1996). To date, however, existing

research has focused, on the one hand, on the trajectories of transitions and on a few key life-course interfaces. In the second half of life, this is primarily the transition to the post-employment phase. On the other hand, issues of coping are addressed primarily with regard to socio-economic resources and institutional support structures, and – at least for middle and later adulthood – hardly any attention is being paid to individual dispositions beyond stable personality traits (e.g. Fillipp & Fering, 2002). In addition, research on learning and development in the second half of life generally neglects the importance of cultural framings, although individual studies point very clearly to the connections between cultural-historical and political-institutional conditions for human ontogenesis (e.g., Fivush et al., 2011). With regard to the supply side of continuing education, there are so far no comparative analyses of offers and supply structures that focus on educational offers for adults in the second half of life. It remains as yet unclear through which offers this target group being addressed, how the coping-relevant knowledge, competences and attitudes are didactically framed when being conveyed. Differences between cultures and nations may be vast here as the educational and social systems differ considerably from one another and concepts of old age are culturally and historically anchored (Achenbaum, 1995; Bouchard et al., 2009). Comparative studies in that field could provide an opportunity to test the assumption that the cultural influences from the school years remain operative into later adulthood or, on the contrary, diminish like it seems to be the case in the differences between women and men (Kern, 2018b). However, only a few international comparative studies on older adulthood so far focus on the importance of social and cultural-historical conditions of aging for individual coping strategies centered on age-related stereotypes (e.g. Bouchard et al., 2009; De Gracio Blanco, 2004).

3.2 Accumulation of experiences

Until adults faced retirement they usually went through a more or less long list of transitions during their life course before. They started school, developed from pupils to students, from students to staff, from children to adults, they might have become a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, etc. Perhaps they had to deal with the death of the near and dear, cope with serious illnesses or were affected by unemployment. All these transitions brought challenges and had to be managed and shaped. Through the accumulation of such experiences, those affected develop more or less efficient and successful strategies to deal with drastic life events. In old age, it can therefore be assumed that adults have a variety of strategies for shaping and coping with transitions, which are shaped by their previous life course and the experiences made in this context. In lifespan psychology Baltes model of selection, optimization, and compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) became popular as it describes implicit strategies that enable older adults to high performance in different areas. The central idea of this approach is that adults during their lifetime focus more and more on certain areas of knowledge and competence (selection) where they develop high levels of expertise by deliberative practice (optimization; see also Ericsson et al., 1993). Finally, adults learn to cope with their individual limitations and developmental losses (compensation) and thus to keep their performance at a high level.

This accumulation of experiences and skills is more than just a compensation of losses but can be a competence profile that can only occur after a long life. One example for this kind of competence is wisdom, which is mostly related to a high level of social competencies and problem-solving abilities in human interaction (Staudinger & Baltes, 2000). Empirical studies show that this level of competence can only be reached in later life and even then, by far not all older adults have it. In other words, age is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for wisdom (Staudinger & Baltes, 2000).

Experience has two meanings in this context. On the one hand, it is the base for all learning (Dewey, 1938) but, on the other hand, it may also hinder learning (Jarvis, 1990). The didactical framework is meant to create a sphere of experience that simultaneously makes it easier for the learner to reflect on past experiences (Durat & Kern, 2019). With regard to the epistemological beliefs, a recent doctorate thesis (Mehraeen, 2020) adapted an existing measuring instrument (Schommer, 1998) for older adults. The results may contribute to a better understanding of dispositions of learners in order to better adapt offers.

It can be expected that life experience can also significantly contribute to individual strategies and competencies relevant for shaping and coping with life transitions. But so far there is almost no evidence regarding this question: how these competencies and skills are generated during the life course and under what circumstances? Even though it seems plausible that biographical experiences (Hallqvist, 2014), former transitions as well as socialization in general or role models might play an important role here (see also Findsen & Formosa, 2011), research provides no clear results on that so far. Another central question is, if and how adults can be empowered to cope with transitions and other critical life events and what potential adult education courses offer in that context.

4. Learning offers for coping with transitions for older learners

Based on the reasons presented in the discussion above, it seems important to design educational offers and training programs in a way that makes participation successful and leads to the completion of the intended process (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). Learners should receive support in overcoming difficult learning phases, thus avoiding drop-out. Recent studies suggest that engagement and perseverance in learning offers does not only depend on the respective program's conceptualization; rather, family members, friends and former work-colleagues play an important role, too (Bjursell, 2019).

Reflecting on that state of research in the light of theoretical ideas mentioned before, the paper develops some significant desiderata and proposes some ideas on how to design an intervention for learning to cope with transitions in later life.

4.1. Learning in later life

Educational research generally has a strong focus on children and adolescents. A systematic interest in adults as learners only began to develop in the middle of the 20th century and included the elderly. The relevant pioneering work of the 1950s and 1960s, however, received little attention and has been discussed rather critically. Two researchers with opposite epistemological approaches may serve as examples here. Wilma T. Donahue developed special education programs for older adults at the University of Michigan as early as the late 1940s (Donahue, 1951) and evaluated them systematically. She can certainly be considered a pioneer of empirical educational research on the elderly population. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, on the other hand, approached the subject from a purely theoretical perspective. He termed this approach 'Gerontagogik' and considered the target group to be older people no longer able to independently cope with the task of learning (Bollnow, 1962). In subsequent years, the 'American' perspective largely prevailed. 'Educational gerontology' serves as the epistemological foundation, and the target group is defined as "middle-aged and older people" (Peterson, 1976, p. 64). Although there have been attempts to epistemically situate the subject in adult education (e.g. the *Education Permanente Intégrale* by Carré, 1981) or to critically question it (e.g., Percy, 1990), these initially failed to prevail over the gerontological approach (Kern, 2018a).

It is important to note that, due to the historical context and the thematic roots of the traditional concept of ageing, research favored a deficit orientation. Older learners were largely considered in terms of generic deficits resulting from the biological and physical process of ageing. What we are dealing with here is a form of discrimination and of stereotyping that is discussed in the relevant literature under the term of ageism (Butler 1969). There are numerous explanatory models (Oliveira Batista, 2016) for this phenomenon, such as the terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986; Boudjemadi et al., 2015). It explains ageism with the intrapsychic conflict between the instinct of self-preservation and the evidence of one's own mortality. Since older people remind us of the finiteness of life, to reject them is seen as a resolution of the conflict.

As shown above, the empirical gerontological approach presupposes the existence of older learners as a heterogeneous target group. Yet, at what point should one be considered an 'older' adult (or learner) and based on which criteria? The simplest solution is to look at the chronological age and accordingly, we are used to referring to such groups as 50+, 55+, 60+, etc. (for details see Kern, 2016a). The basic assumption underlying this approach is that essential aspects of learning change with the number of years. But strictly speaking, this merely concerns the educational infrastructure (learning offers), whereas the learners themselves are at most concerned only indirectly (Bjursell, 2019).

These indirect factors explain, for example, why older adults engage in learning processes in the context of structured offers (Schmidt-Hertha & Müller, 2017). This is particularly relevant in the case of retired individuals. As a result of the elimination of economic pressure, the motivation to learn depends on intrinsic factors (e.g. learning skills, learning experiences, the ability to anticipate and to plan learning processes, etc.). If the learner has clear objectives that also allow him to overcome difficult phases, learning is more likely to be successful (Chen & Wang, 2016). This is the case, for example, in patient education where it is necessary to learn self-care skills related to a chronic disease (e.g. diabetes) (Grangé et al., 2011). Without a clear goal (considered significant by the learner) or without developed learning skills, the risk of abandonment or of drop-out increases. Therefore, the methodological and didactic design of educational offers needs to be considered. Furthermore, hedonistic aspects that allow instant gratification of needs (e.g. the need for pleasant social contacts) are likely to be of major influence (Bjursell, 2019). It is important to design educational offers and training programs in a way that makes participation successful and leads to the completion of the intended process (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). Learners should receive support in overcoming difficult learning phases, thus avoiding drop-out. Recent studies, however, suggest that engagement and perseverance in learning offers does not only depend on the respective program's conceptualization; rather, family members, friends and former work-colleagues play an important role, too (Bjursell, 2019).

4.2. Learning situations and didactical questions

Older adults did not learn that often in formalized environments (Wienberg, 2013). Entirely or partially self-directed settings (Carré, 2005) seem fit better the heterogeneity of older learners (Kern 2016a). This leads to the hypothesis that in order to be successful, defined as sustaining participation in learning projects in this instance, older adult education has to consider primarily the learners' needs and skills and only then should the didactics adapted to the learning environment be taken into account (Kern, 2021). This aspect is probably also relevant to training aimed at other audiences. In this sense, research on training for older adults allows us to re-examine theoretical aspects of the research on adult learning in general.

The academic debate on didactics has animated education scientists for a long time, as is shown by the *Didactica magna* (Comenius, 1632). Today, four hundred years later, we still find ourselves far from a widely shared

paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). From an international perspective (limited here to the French-German-Austrian context), the debate is already a complex one due to the different cultural approaches. However, whereas in Germany, Education Science is drawn upon to conceptualize general didactics, including didactics in older adult education (Schneider, 1993), the French Education Sciences take recourse to ‘professional didactics’ (*didactique professionnelle*, Pastré, 2006). Here, the processes of the transmission and appropriation of knowledge are being studied, with the small difference that the focus is more on (professional) activity than on knowledge. The aim is to link the theoretical and operational dimensions in order to go beyond the empirical analysis (*ibid.*) by applying a theoretical framework and methodological rigor.

A refreshing academic debate culminates in the systematic analysis of the *Francophone Perspectives of Learning Through Work* (Filliettaz & Billet, 2015). The results show that the French approaches are compatible with the internationally shared approaches of ‘workplace learning’. The ‘didactics of practice’ perceives learners as possessing multiple resources that not only need to be included in the conceptualization of the learning process but also need to be recognized (Billett, 2011).

Although the approach is developed in relation to the concept of workplace learning, its epistemological base is that of the wider anthropological definition of practice (*ibid.*). In this sense, we apply the learning-related results from research on workplace learning to our context. There are at least four reasons for this: first, there is a lack of systematic research on didactics for older adults (Kern, 2016a); second, ‘practice’ takes place in all different kinds of life situations (not only at work) (Billet, 2011); third, even if the institutional context of work-related and non-work-related practice differs, learners maintain the same personal internal framework of competencies in both situations (Communautés européennes, 2007); fourth, the motivational aspect (Fenouillet, 2016) is important for learning in both situations, but because of the independence from training injunctions in the post-work phase, the intrinsic aspects of engagement in learning are more important here than the extrinsic ones (Deci and Ryan 2000). With regard to this last aspect, perseverance needs to be sustained through pertinent learning arrangements (e.g., Boulton-Lewis, 2010, Duay & Bryan, 2008; for a general overview: Kern, 2016a).

5. Conclusions

Reflecting on that state of research in the light of theoretical ideas mentioned before, the paper develops some significant desiderata and proposes some ideas how to design an intervention for learning to cope with transitions in later life. Here, the special challenges in the context of transitions, which older adults also face, must be considered. It can be assumed that the density of possible and probable drastic life events in old age is disproportionate to the little attention paid to transitions in the after-working phase in research. Particularly with increasing vulnerability in old age, upheavals such as a move or the death of a family member presumably harbor a higher stress potential than in younger or middle adulthood. Although life experience increases with age and with it the possibility of developing coping strategies and maintaining the ability to act even in problematic and complex social situations, the realisation of this potential is likely to vary greatly between individuals. Overall, gerontological studies point to the fact that the differences between persons with regard to their psychological potential increase with age (Lövdén et al., 2005). It can therefore be assumed that many - if not all - older people have a greater need for support in transitions.

Even if the concepts and research presented points to a general right to educational opportunities and their positive effect on learners, the question arises as to how an educational concept for preparing for transitions in old age should be designed. By applying a theoretical framework, the complexity of learning arrangements can be reduced by a precise attribution to categories. In order to focus the analysis on the needs of the learners, we

use a theoretical model that can distinguish between different learning situations. We here refer to the ‘seven learning situations’ (Carré, 2005), which should contribute towards assessing the level of core competences needed by learners for each learning situation and pedagogic practice. Furthermore, it contributes towards allocating competences to cope with transitions to the most adapted learning situations and pedagogic practices. The seven learning situations (Table 1) result from crossing pedagogical guidance (external guidance, no guidance, self-directed training) and learning environment (formal closed, formal open, informal) in a matrix (the sectors crossing ‘no guidance’ and ‘formal closed’ / ‘formal open’ remain empty). The framework thus achieved allows to precisely identify learning situations.

Table 1. Matrix of seven learning situations (Carré, 2005, p. 177-180).

Pedagogical guidance	External guidance (by others)	No guidance (by things)	Guidance by the learner (s) subject (s)
Learning environment	Directed training	Non directed training	Self-directed training
Formal closed	1 st situation: Classic learning situation (training, lesson)		5 th situation: Self-guided learning group
Formal open	2 nd situation: Individualised learning situation		6 th situation: Accompanied self-learning
Informal	3 rd situation: Learning by doing	4 th situation: Experiential learning	7 th situation: Autodidact

Competencies and experiences that have already been built up in the context of transitions that had already been mastered were usually acquired informally on the path of experiential learning as well as by engaging with others (learning by doing) and perhaps supplemented by autodidactic preparation for such life situations. The question now arises as to how these informal learning processes can be supported and supplemented in more formalised contexts. For older adults, self-organised learning groups are likely to be attractive and purposeful in addition to classic training and individualised learning opportunities such as coaching. Which form is particularly suitable depends not least on the learning experiences and the learning competence of the participants and whether they are able to organise and reflect on the exchange of experiences and joint learning themselves.

Special attention needs to be put on the fact, that a single learning offer and even a training session can contain several learning situations. For example, a training for preparation to retirement transition can contain a theoretical introduction (1st situation), a self-reflecting moment (6th situation) and a group-work moment (5th situation). The model sustains an increased awareness of the roles of learners and facilitators. They depend on the specific setting.

Based on presented theories and empirical research results, one could assume that the three situations in the column *Guidance by the learner (s) subject (s) / Self-directed training* are privileging older learners when it comes to prepare oneself for transitions. However, one should not forget that these forms of learning require specific competencies in order to really use them. The same is true for the 4th situation. If learners do not have the necessary competences, the presence of an educator (facilitator, etc.) is probably necessary. This is the case in the three learning situations in the first column (*External guidance (by others) / Directed training*).

With sufficient caution, as a hypothesis, one can think that the design of learning opportunities for older adults should aim for a suitable relationship between the different learning situations. In fact, the right mix depends

not only on the skills of the facilitator (trainer, etc.), but also on the competencies of the learners. It becomes clear that learning opportunities should be diversified and modularized to the extent that they can be easily adapted to the learners.

The article does not focus on the trainer skills. But a profound knowledge on the specifics of older adults is surely necessary. The SOC-Model, for example, presents a generic adaptation strategy for older adults. This also includes possible health issues, internalized images of later life and ageing, and the richness of individual experiences (see also Friebe & Schmidt-Hertha, 2013). Health issues are in particular in the fourth age one of the most relevant barriers to participate in educational programs and therefore learning arrangements should respect and consider certain limitations related to health. The same is true for (negative) images of ageing. When being old is perceived as a burden and is stigmatised, self-efficacy is negatively affected. Educational offers to prepare for transitions can and should address and reflect negative stereotypes about getting old. Finally, all learning arrangements for older adults – in particular when they are aimed at preparing for transitions – must be built on the older learners' rich and broad experiences, reflecting upon them and using them as an extremely fruitful resource for further learning.

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