

Abriendo las puertas de las instituciones de educación superior: aprendizaje  
experiencial en el curso de Educación Social

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## Resumen

En un mundo cada vez más envejecido, el esfuerzo por preparar a los futuros profesionales para el trabajo con personas mayores comienza a ser una preocupación de las instituciones de educación superior. Este artículo comenta la importancia del aprendizaje experiencial para preparar a los estudiantes de Educación Social para intervenir con personas mayores y presenta una actividad piloto en una Universidad Politécnica de Portugal. Unas 40 personas mayores de residencias de ancianos acudieron a una clase para experimentar los juegos desarrollados en clases anteriores por los alumnos. Para comprender los beneficios de experimentar los juegos con personas mayores para los alumnos, 37 alumnos han respondido un cuestionario sobre la importancia de esta actividad de aprendizaje. Los resultados de su evaluación mostraron que la experiencia fue en general positiva, con todos los estudiantes calificando como

muy importante/importante para su aprendizaje. A través de preguntas abiertas, los beneficios más mencionados de la actividad fueron la oportunidad de interactuar socialmente, tener contacto con personas mayores, desarrollar en la práctica algo concebido teóricamente en el aula y para estimular a las personas mayores. A través de preguntas cerradas el nivel de acuerdo con los objetivos pedagógicos de la actividad fue muy alto, con 32 (86,5%) totalmente de acuerdo en que sirvió para relacionarse con personas mayores y 24 (64,9%) de acuerdo en que la actividad les hizo realizar si les gusta esta área de intervención. Los autores describen el impacto que este tipo de actividad puede tener en el conocimiento sobre las personas mayores, las habilidades para motivar una actividad grupal y también las creencias, actitudes y valores de los estudiantes relacionados con el trabajo con adultos mayores.

*Palabras clave:* educación social, personas mayores, juegos, aprendizaje experiencial

### **Opening the doors of Higher Education Institutions: experiential learning in Social Education degree**

#### **Abstract**

In an increasingly aging world, the effort to prepare future professionals for work with older persons starts to be a concern of higher education institutions. This article comments on the importance of experiential learning for preparing Social Education students to intervene with older people and presents an activity piloted at a Polytechnic University of Portugal. About 40 older persons from nursing homes came to a class in order to experiment the games developed during previous classes by the students. In order to understand the benefits of experimenting the games with older persons for the students, 37 students have answered a questionnaire about the importance of this learning activity. Findings on their assessment showed that the experience was generally positive, with all students rating as very important/important for their learning. Through open-ended questions the most mentioned benefits of the activity were the opportunity to social interact, to have contact with older persons, to develop in practice something theoretically

conceived in the classroom, and to stimulate older persons. Through closed-ended questions the level of accordance with the pedagogical aims of the activity were very high, with 32 (86.5%) totally agreeing that it served to interact with older persons and 24 (64.9%) agreeing that the activity made them to realize if they like this area of intervention. The authors describe the impact this kind of activity may have on the knowledge about older persons, skills for motivating a group activity and also students' beliefs, attitudes, and values related to working with older adults.

*Keywords:* social education, older people, games, experiential learning

Aging is one of the most significant phenomena of the 21st century. All over the world, it is remarkable the increase in life expectancy, with older people living longer and in better living conditions than in the past. Portugal, along with a lower mortality rate has a very low birth rate, what makes it one of the oldest countries in Europe (United Nations, 2019). The highest representativeness of 65 plus age group poses several challenges for the society, therefore health, economic, political and social sectors are increasingly oriented towards this public. The effort to prepare future professionals for an aged society starts to be a concern of the higher education institutions. Although this phenomenon encompassing several areas and sectors, health and social work courses are the ones that should focus more on the specificities of aging, given the high probability of these professionals to care and intervene with older persons (Fernández et al., 2018).

According to a literature review about pedagogical interventions aimed at influencing aging knowledge, attitudes toward older adults, and/or interest in gerontological practice, 58 studies were identified in the areas of social work, nursing, and medicine (Chonody, 2015). Bearing in mind that attitudes toward older people and old age are one of the main factor influencing students into practice with older people (Quinn, 1999), it is mandatory to enrich the pedagogical practices in these courses so that, along with theoretical knowledge, the curricula contributes to fostering students' interests in pursuing practice with older adults (Maschi et al., 2013). At this point, several authors have been recommending experiential learning activities (Quinn, 1999; Karasik et al., 2017). Also educational activities promoting intergenerational contact in a positive

context are recommended since, according to systematic review on the determinants of ageism against older adults, the contact with older people seems to be the most important determinant to reduce this type of discrimination (Marques et al., 2020). Indeed, combined interventions with education and intergenerational contact showed the largest effects on attitudes, especially for females and for adolescent/ young adult groups (Burnes et al., 2019).

In the last years the gerontological intervention has come to recognize the importance of intervening in wellbeing and living well, rather than only in physical and medical care (Treadaway et al., 2014). Several interventions to promote cognitive stimulation, positive emotions and social inclusion are being developed at every minute in thousands of worldwide aged facilities. Ludic and leisure activities are shown to “support subjective wellbeing, encouraging living in the moment, absorption and providing new mental spaces that stimulate imaginative thinking” (Treadaway et al., 2014, p. 3). Actually, Cota and colleagues (2015) found that older persons preferred casual games and playing in relation to mental exercises. Games are a form of stimulating remember and transmitting social, personal and cultural frames, i.e. the heritage, which is of great importance to promote social bonds and personal identity (Civallero, 2007). Muñoz (2016) adds that games through the organization of stories, memories, sensations, joy and solidarity allows a certain distancing from the problems of everyday life. But to achieve this positive contributes, when developing games it is important to insure that they have an accessible design, are mentally challenging (Cota et al. 2015), satisfy needs for self-efficacy and connection and are offered by continuous interactive engagement (Khalili-Mahani et al., 2020).

Leisure is an important dimension of informal and non-formal education as a way of promoting personal development and social interaction, being of great potential in intervention with older persons (Mendizábal, 2007). Given the need to prepare students to intervene in a very old society, this study aimed to evaluate the importance and benefits of a experiential learning activity with older persons developed in the degree of Social Education.

## Methods

The experimental activity here presented was developed in a curricular unit about “Socioeducative Intervention with Older People” of a degree in Social Education in a Portuguese Polytechnic University. During the classes conceptual information about informal/non-formal strategies of intervention with older persons was presented and more practical activities (i.e. role-playings, *world-café*) were developed. In the final of the semester, each group of four students had to present a game oriented to older persons and aimed to promote their mental, physical, sensorial or social stimulation. The game was first presented to the professor and colleagues and then tested with older persons from nursing homes, who came to the University campus purposely for this activity.

Each game was experimented with three groups of older persons so that students can have contact with different people. Depending on the type of game, students defined the number of participants and the duration for each game round. After 2 hours of activity, the older participants returned to their (nursing) homes and the professor and students had a brief about how the activity went.

In the next academic year, students were asked to remember this activity and fulfil an online questionnaire about the same. The questionnaire included a brief demographic section (age and gender), followed by questions about the importance and benefits of that activity with open and close-ended questions. First an open question about the benefits of developing the game with older people, allowing students to give a free-form answer; then, a range of 8 possible benefits defined based on literature were presented and students were asked to indicate their level of agreement based on a Likert scale (Totally disagree – Totally agree). Also a question about their positive or negative surprise with the way in which the dynamics of the game went, and associated justifications, and a final question about suggestions to improve future editions of this activity were included. The answers were analysed, using quantitative (i.e., calculation of frequencies) and qualitative (i.e, definition of categories) analysis.

Thirty-seven students that have participated in an activity with older persons during a class answered to a questionnaire about the experience of participating in this

activity of experiential learning. They were aged between 20 and 45 years (mean of 22.6), 36 women and one preferring not to answer.

## Results

When asked about the importance of that activity for their learning, 30 (81.1%) students rated as very important and 7 (18.9%) as important. About the benefits of that moment, first, when asked in an open format question, six types of benefits were referred. The most mentioned, by 14 participants, was the opportunity for social interactions that this activity has provided, with three students emphasizing its intergenerational component. The second benefit most mentioned (n=13) was the opportunity they had to contact with older persons, as a future intervention target group, which made it possible to better understand their characteristics. As referred by the students, it allowed to “get to know people's preferences and needs better” and to “understanding how older people feel in the world and how they experience it”. Then, the opportunity to develop in practice something theoretically conceived in the classroom (n=8), i.e., “it gave a sense of how the activities work in practice, that not everything goes well at first and that things have to be adapted to each person and their level of difficulty”. Also mentioned by 8 participants, this activity was important because of the benefits for the older persons, since the activity was an opportunity to stimulate their capacities. Four students mentioned general benefits as the opportunity to learn, have more knowledge. And one student mentioned that this activity allowed her/him to realize that she/he don't want to work with this age group.

When asked the level of agreement of a series of sentences, which correspond to the pedagogical objectives of the activity, most participants totally agreed that these were benefits of the activity, as presented in table 1. The benefits with higher percentages of students totally agreeing were to interact with older people (86.5%) and to understand the adequacy of materials (75.7%) and people's difficulties (75.7%). With lower percentages of students totally agreeing are the benefits of to test if the difficulty of the game was appropriated (67.5%) and to understand if I like this area of intervention (64.9%).

**Table 1**

*Benefits of experimenting the games with older persons*

	Totally disagree	Partially disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Partially agree	Totally agree
To test if the difficulty of the game was appropriated	-	-	-	12 (34.4%)	25 (67.6%)
To understand the adequacy of materials	-	-	-	9 (24.3%)	28 (75.7%)
To know what people like	-	-	3 (8.1%)	8 (21.6%)	26 (70.3%)
To know people's difficulties	-	-	1 (2.7%)	8 (21.6%)	28 (75.7%)
To interact with older persons	-	-	-	5 (13.5%)	32 (86.5%)
To understand if I like this area of intervention	2 (5.4%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (2.7%)	9 (24.3%)	24 (64.9%)
To experiment how to motivate a group game	-	-	-	10 (27.0%)	27 (73.0%)

The way in which the dynamics of the game went, positively surprised 33 (89.2%) students and negatively surprised four (10.8%) students. Most of the students were positively surprised because of the commitment and joy that older persons presented during the activity, as these testimonies express: “I was reticent that the older persons did not cooperate, however they collaborated a lot”; “The dynamization of the game positively surprised us, as it was seen in people who were interested in trying out our games and were satisfied”. Also the fact that this was their first practical activity was mention as a justification for their positive feedback: “I was nervous because it was the first time that I had carried out an activity with this target audience and so I thought it would go wrong, on the contrary it went well”. The students who were negatively surprised with the way the dynamics of the game went, presented justifications related with the space since “the room was small and it was very noisy”.

Therefore, for possible further similar activities in the oncoming years, they suggest changes in the space (n=15), in the duration (n=8) and in the procedures (n=8) of the activity. More specifically, they suggest developing the activity in a room with more space or even in the outdoor, so that older people can have more space to circulate, there may be less noise and groups can be further apart each other. In relation to the duration, they suggest to extend the time of the activity, for instance in more than one day. The suggestions related with the procedures are: having more diversity in the games (e.g., of physical stimulation), having group work of students of a lower dimension (i.e., 2-3 students by group), having older persons with vulnerabilities (e.g., cognitive and functional ones) and having more time for socialization, which could be before the activity (e.g., presentation conversations) or at the end (e.g., farewells). Seven participants do not recommend modifications since “everything went well”.

### **Discussion**

The present study reports students’ opinions regarding an experiential activity developed in their degree of Social Education, in which older persons from nursing homes went to the university to experiment games previous conceived by the students. Their answers confirm the importance of the activity as an opportunity to improve their knowledge about older persons, but also to improve their skills for motivating an activity with this specific age group. Both, the better understanding of a potential target group of future professional practice and the better understanding of the game (i.e., the adequacy of materials, the levels of difficulty) were valued by the students. Their opinions goes in line with previous studies, such as a systematic review on pedagogical interventions for gerontological practice of Chonody (2015), which recommends activities including an informational component and direct experience with older adults.

For more than half of the participants, this activity contributed to understand if they like this area of intervention. Most of the students were positively surprised with older persons participation. Therefore, it seems that this activity contributed to influence students’ attitudes toward older adults, contributing to reinforce the literature on the importance of face-to-face learning opportunities with older adults in the curriculum of social work courses (Young et al., 2016; Maschi et al., 2013; Chonody, 2015). This type



of learning activities are associated with an improvement on students' beliefs, attitudes, and values, particularly related to working with older adults (Brown & Roodin, 2001; Yamashita et al., 2011).

The fact students valued the benefits of the activity for older persons and for social and intergenerational interaction remind us the importance of university-community engagement (Roodin et al., 2013). Universities should not be a space of only students and professors. Opening its doors will contribute to bringing students closer to the real world of work but also to improve the social responsibility of Universities in promoting the well-being of social Institutions and more vulnerable persons.

As possible recommendations to future similar activities, along with the modification in the space and duration of the activity suggested by the participants, we purpose the inclusion of community dwelling older adults instead of only those that may be frail, which can better influence students attitudes toward older people (Chonody, 2015). Also, the development of digital games, being performed on a computer, tablet or smartphone. In fact, as the future of leisure and even cognitive, physical and social intervention with older persons will be more and more in digital platforms and applications, we believe that there is here a window of opportunity for Social Educators. For insuring that older persons can access the several possibilities of the digital world, non-formal and informal education must develop learning opportunities of information and communication technologies (Pihlainen et al., 2021), namely in third age universities, adult education centres or even nursing homes. In relation to the study, it would be interesting in the future to analyse the possible effects of this type of experiential learning activities in promoting student's interest for pursuing a future career with older adults and in promoting a more real and positive perception and attitude about older persons and old age (Sanders et al., 2009). Also to evaluate the impact of the activity for older persons, as it is considered a gap in the literature on intergeneracional learning activities (Roodin et al., 2013).

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