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Pedagogical Proposal to Increase Senior Citizens' Quality of Life

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Abstract

Quality of life is a very broad and complex issue. It has objective and subjective components, as well as physical, psychological and social components. High Quality of Life is beneficial to the individual, but also to society. Quality of life can be influenced through education; it can be achieved by comprehensive pedagogy that includes content, but also tries to integrate facilitators, teachers and classmates into the process of lifelong learning. This is a long-term objective, but one that is showing results in increasing the subjective perception of quality of life, well-being, integration and participation of senior citizens in society. This paper reports on a pedagogical proposal focusing on five main topics (pedagogies, contents, contexts, models and trainers), based on analysis and research carried out within the QEDuSen project (supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission).

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1. Introduction

When educational institutions offer courses or activities, they should first try to focus their aims on a specific target. Educational institutions usually address their courses and activities to citizens who are unemployed or who wish to update their knowledge to increase their competitiveness in the labour market. Other institutions endeavour to achieve other social aims, such as integrating immigrants or the socially excluded. Senior citizens (over 65 or retired) in general (not disabled or excluded) do not want to learn because they are seeking promotion at work, but because of personal motivations. Modern societies accept lifelong learning as a right for all individuals and educational institutions offer courses and activities for all citizens from cradle to grave, but these can easily fail when the same pedagogies and courses are applied for all ages. Older people's personal motivations in attending a course may be to increase their knowledge, to keep up-to-date, to be active, to socialise with other classmates or simply because they enjoy learning. However an educational institution's formal aim should be go beyond simply

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offering courses for fun. In the QEDuSen project, we propose a pedagogical guide targeted to educational institutions aiming to increase the quality of life (QoL) among their senior learners.

The European project (within the European Commission's LifeLong Learning Programme) QEDuSen started on November 2011, with seven participating adult education institutions. The aims of the project are to develop two products: a guide and an evaluation tool for educational institutions that want to increase the impact of education on their learners' QoL. The first stage of the project is now completed. It consisted of a study into the relationship between education and quality of life among senior learners. Quantitative and qualitative research was undertaken with learners to discover their perceptions of quality of life due to education. Staff and teachers groups with experience in teaching seniors were also surveyed to gather their approaches to improving their impact on learners.

QoL can be influenced through education, but that educational activity should be undertaken in an appropriate way and direction. In this paper, we present the experience of the QEDuSen project and qualitative interviews with experts to demonstrate how senior learners' QoL can best be impacted.

2. Quality of Life

QoL consists of dimensions and facets that help to define, understand and evaluate the QoL of an individual. The World Health Organisation (WHO 1997) defined six dimensions: physical health, psychological, level of independence, social relationships, environment, and spirituality/religion/personal beliefs. Other authors have put forward different dimensions. Cummings (1997), for example, proposes the following seven dimensions: material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, place in community, and emotional well-being. There are as many different theories and models of QoL as authors writing about it, which demonstrates the complexity of understanding and evaluating QoL. However it is possible to extract some common elements from the most accepted theories.

The work of Escuder-Mollon (2012a, 2012b) introduces the concepts quality of life (QoL) related to education, and from which the following QoL aspects are taken:

- The importance of the subjective factor. QoL is governed by objective and subjective elements, most of which are part of the culture (WHOQOL Group, 1994) or are used to weigh the importance and satisfaction of any objective perception (Cummings 1997)
- Life satisfaction. Once basic needs are met (housing, subsistence, basic relationships), life satisfaction is based on covering other needs (Maslow 1987)
- Personal improvement. Schalock and Verdugo 2002 (p.11-30) state that QoL has the same essential foundations for everyone, regardless of physical or mental disability or age. Once basic needs are met, for QoL to be enhanced, the aspects that each individual considers most important in his or her life must be improved
- Adaptation. According to Cummings (in Rapley 2003, p. 206), high QoL is maintained by people with the ability to adapt to any changes in their lives
- Subjective Well-Being. The cognitive protective factors Cummings identifies – self-esteem, perceived control and optimism – are also known as subjective well-being. To raise QoL, actions designed to enhance previous factors must be implemented.

Escuder-Mollon (2012b) also highlights certain needs the elderly have that should be considered by any educational institution:

- Illness and disabilities. Age does not directly determine health status; rather it is related to socio-cultural factors and behavioural styles. There is no single way to live old age; different lifestyles are particularly dependent on the subjective constitution and the type of relationship with the environment. Each person experiences the aging process in accordance with his or her previous life history, which determines the lifestyle that he or she takes at this stage of life. It is important to be sufficiently informed and also to be able to deal with illness or disability.

- Changes and new role. Changes in the environment (structure of the family, social context, home) and the individual's personal and family role can affect his or her own personal status and role either positively or negatively. The new environment, structure and the new role must first be understood. Several options are available in the second stage: to accept changes, to negotiate or to act.
- Social participation. QoL is closely related to social participation. In this sense it is understood as the satisfaction individuals experience as a result of their participation in the activities in the family, in the workplace and within their community, for which they exercise their abilities and develop their personality. By social participation we refer to 'significant social participation', the process of personal interaction that involves taking part in an active and engaged manner in a joint activity, which the person perceives as beneficial. Social participation refers to support systems or psychosocial resources as links between individuals, characterised by material aid, physical assistance, shared thoughts, feelings and experiences, and positive social contacts. Significant social participation essentially occurs in four areas: education, occupation, physical activity and recreational groups, and social relations where the aim is mutual interaction and social integration. However the quality of social contacts is more important than their quantity.
- Loneliness and exclusion. In consequence, among the main risk factors of deteriorated QoL is the social isolation linked to the exclusion and rejection of old age. According to Furstenberg (1989), one of the criteria for assuming the status of being 'old' is the decline of social participation and the feeling of uselessness.
- Lifelong learning. Recent research has shown the importance of lifelong learning (as a psychosocial activity) for enhanced QoL. Learning can be seen as an activity that keeps people active, but also enables them to increase their creativity, personal development, personal skills and life satisfaction (Brockett 1985, Ladmin 1997, Schuller 2004). Lifelong learning in this way is a powerful tool that is commonly part of the "Personal Development" dimension (Shallock and Vertugo 2002)
- Usefulness and aims. Continuing to have goals and objectives in life and being an active member of a social group is related to continuing good health. According to Erikson (1985), older people must maintain a generative function: on the one hand they should produce and create, and on the other hand, they should build links with other people and feel responsible for them, because all citizens' lives are interlinked, and this implies working together to achieve common goals and causes by interacting with others through communication and social solidarity. But social participation must not only be related to each individual's own initiatives, which could be linked to their individual lifestyles, their internal motivations or other external motivations; social participation is also related to the place that society assigns to its older citizens

3. Research

Six institutions of the QEduSen project were involved in this research: the Senior Citizens' University (SCU), at Jaume I University, Spain; the Università delle Libertà del FVG (ULE) in Udine, Italy; the Akademia im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie (AJD), Częstochowa in Poland; the Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education(PCCE) in Helsinki, Finland; Assist Net EOOD (ANE), from Sofia, Bulgaria; and the Personality socialization research institute of Rezeknes augstskola (PSRI-RA) in Rezekne, Latvia. A total of 39 interviews were conducted with teachers, technicians and managers involved in adult education activities, with an average experience of teaching seniors of 10.7 years.

The interview consisted, firstly, of explaining QoL (in the broadest sense of the term) applied to senior learners (over 65 or retired) and also highlighting that when talking about education, we were referring to any component (institution, staff, facilitators, tutors, classmates, environment, etc.) or tool (pedagogies, courses, activities, etc.) available in educational institutions to provide senior citizens not only with content, but also with competences, skills and attitudes.

The first interview question was: “Considering your experience and expertise, how much do you think education can influence quality of life among senior learners?” and was answered on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). Responses are reported in Figure 1.

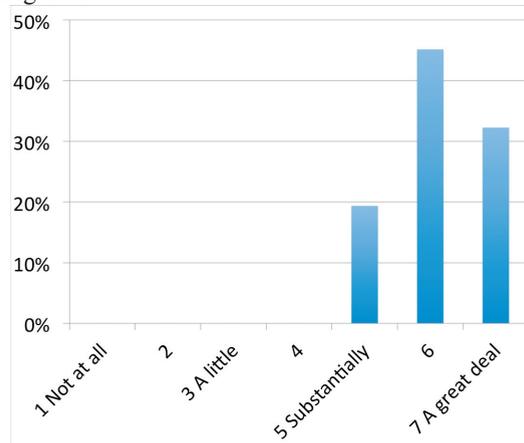


Figure 1. Percentage of responses to the question “How much do you think education can influence QoL?”

The interview consisted of three main questions:

- What are the most important educational aspects that increase the impact on seniors’ quality of life?
- How do you think they should be applied? (Which pedagogies, courses, activities, competences, staff, skills, models, etc ...)
- If you had to explain to an inexperienced person how to approach education for seniors, on which aspect would you focus?

4. Pedagogical proposal

Based on the experts’ interviews, the following educational proposal was drawn up:

4.1. Pedagogies

The most appropriate pedagogies when teaching senior learners, and aiming to impact the QoL dimension of their lives, are those that combine group activities, conversation and discussion. The basic principle is to encourage active learning, where the learner is not a mere recipient of information. However, it must be remembered that classes are not chat groups or coffee circles, and the educational aims should be always present. Instructional pedagogy therefore also has a major role in senior learning. Some institutions offer theoretical lectures and talks, and from the experience gathered in the interviews, they are a good teaching methodology to match the needs of elderly learners.

On the other hand, there are far more courses and activities where learners play a more active role. As education for the elderly is usually focused on learning skills or attitudes rather than content, constructivist pedagogies are most commonly used. Teachers apply this pedagogy even when new content is being taught (such as philosophy, sociology, history, arts, etc.) because of the long life experience that learners have. Teachers can take advantage of that to complement the content with practical information and examples. Also because learners are not afraid to ask questions in class, participate or share, group activities produce good results. Pedagogies should aim to facilitate the acquisition of parallel skills apart from the subject itself, namely, capacity for discussion, debate and negotiation, but also tolerance and respect.

Teaching pedagogies should take into consideration the physiological changes that occur among the elderly. No teacher bases his or her methods only on learners’ memorising capacities; because older people’s learning skills are different from those of young people, the teaching method must adapt to the elderly’s extensive experience rather

than memorising. Even in the case of languages or when learners need to remember facts, words, or dates, teachers use a great deal of practicing and repeating.

Group activities allow learners not only to share and talk about the class subject or activity, but also to receive support, sometimes indirectly, on specific subjects from classmates (such as health, society and family). In this case, this kind of activity can be seen as an excuse to encourage seniors who are not used to talking or to sharing, or who are often at a loss for a subject to talk about. In some examples from the interviews, this kind of activity had been useful for integrating immigrants into the group.

Educational institutions generally teach young people or adults because they need a degree or a better position at work. The most common pedagogies or techniques tend to produce results in terms of increased knowledge or competences that are evaluated through exams, making it easy to verify a student's improvement during the academic year or at the end of the course. In the case of senior education, there are no exams (or at least, they are usually kept to a minimum) but it is beneficial to provide evidence of a learner's progress and improvement, and also to show what achievements have been made. The sense of having reached the goal and having increased the learner's capacities in a specific subject is highly beneficial.

4.2. Contents

The simple fact of learning is a very positive activity; it is memory-stimulating process that enables learners to be active members of the society in which they live. An expert from the ULE stated that "learning keeps the mind young, the heart serene and the body active".

The most suitable subjects are:

- Philosophy, psychology and society. It is not a good idea to focus only on "sociology of the elderly" or "psychology of the elderly", as it would seem that instead of a teaching class, senior learners were in a self-help group. These subjects can help students to understand the changes they experience in their lives, in their families and society, enabling them to cope better with changes and adapt to other challenges; the subject must therefore be broad. Learning on these subjects must also aim to promote a positive attitude to facing changes, incorporating constructive feelings and a perception of control.
- Languages and technology. Some ICT and languages teachers took part in the interviews. They stressed the importance of teaching these subjects for practical reasons: integration in a foreign society, access to services, use of communication tools to keep in touch with friends, etc. The teaching of these subjects is unquestionably motivated by practical considerations, focussing on needs that should be first identified and then met. However, it is worth noting that learning new languages and ICT skills for their own sake also has a very positive psychological effect as they require cognitive skills that seniors do not generally use. These subjects can be regarded as 'exercises for the brain'.

Secondly, ICT and languages provide the necessary skills to keep up to date in our increasingly technological society. Learning and applying them as much as possible therefore makes citizens feel (and be) included in this society.

- Physical activities. If performed correctly, these activities can provide great benefits to the physical health of seniors, and although they can not be considered strictly as educational activities, institutions have found ways of incorporating an educational approach. This is the case of a dance activity that is also used to improve balance and coordination, or a hiking activity offered as a way of enjoying the environment, socialising and learning informally about healthy habits. The experts usually considered this kind of activity as extra-academic.
- Creative activities. Some courses or activities can lead to a valuable outcome. This could be a short piece of work (research work done by the learner), a product (a web site, or a painting) or through intergenerational or volunteer activities. This has an impact on the senior's environment (family, friends and community); it is a way of recognising the learners' efforts, and also improves their self-esteem, as well as being productive by giving back their knowledge and experience to society.

4.3. Institution

The context is important because senior learners do not go to a building or classroom only to acquire knowledge; they are also looking for a pleasant learning experience. It is important for them to feel comfortable (seats, temperature, light) and they can sometimes need some specific support (in case of physical difficulties). Spaces for socialising, meeting with colleagues, chatting, etc., such as a coffee lounge can be even more important than the classroom itself.

It is important for the institution to have an intergenerational context; the building and classrooms should not appear to be only for old people. Although when teaching, the content should be tailored to senior learners, the shared spaces must allow some intergenerational exchange. Being in a residential home for the elderly or disabled makes learners feel older; being in an adult school or a university, sharing spaces, makes the elderly feel younger.

Senior learners must be an active part of the teaching-learning process, and that participation should be there at all levels; from classroom to management. Therefore, learners should be given some way of participating in institutional decisions (where possible). This may be done through the students' representative.

4.4. Models

The non-formal teaching method is preferred when teaching senior learners, in contrast to more strict or formal methods that are less adaptive and are designed to get results. Teachers usually follow a well structured course content, with clear aims and content to deliver. This is the most formal part of the teaching model. On the other hand, the application of the teaching is usually non-formal.

Some institutions offer a list of courses from which learners are free to choose the ones they want to register on. Other institutions (SCU) offer courses in blocks (first year, second year, and third year). This second, stricter approach obliges the learner to enrol on a specified number of courses each year. This provides great benefits: firstly, learners should follow a learning path of courses designed in the area of the humanities, but also technology and economics. Secondly, it allows learners to be monitored over a period of at least three years; technical staff and a gerontologist can follow their progress. Thirdly, it enables the learner to integrate in a group that is consistent for at least three years. This model offers optional subjects (ICT and languages) that learners are free to choose, depending on their interest and levels. In addition, when they finish the third year they can continue learning in more flexible groups of subjects classified by topics.

Extra-academic activities or complementary activities undertaken outside the classroom have revealed that the application of informal learning led to good results among senior learners. This can be seen when teachers motivate learners to share learning activities with members of their families or friends. Through these activities, the main objective of the subject can be learned (e.g. creating an intergenerational blog), but also other competences (e.g. tolerance and respect) can also be learned and sometimes taught. The interviews provided some examples where learners could apply something learnt in class to their daily routines to discover new knowledge or abilities. In this context, education happens in the classrooms but also during daily life.

4.5. Trainers/Staff

The teacher's social and communicative skills are considered by all the experts as the most critical factor when teaching seniors. Although knowledge and competence in the subject is important, they become a secondary requirement for any trainer. As a teacher from the ULE stated, "It is not important what to teach, but how and why".

The trainer is responsible for creating a good, serene class atmosphere, for motivating students to learn and for providing additional support. They must teach more than contents, but transmit passion and the joy of learning. Other necessary skills are empathy, respect and understanding (ANE)

The trainer can face great difficulties when trying to teach contents, skills or competences because senior learners are a very heterogeneous group, with very different life experiences, knowledge and capacities. This may cause the teacher certain problems in pitching the teaching level.

Some institutions have technical staff members who act as facilitators between the learner and the institution. That lends a human touch to institutions that can sometimes seem very cold. The importance of these technical members of staff has been highlighted, as they have to deal with learners throughout the whole academic year, and sometimes for a number of years. The level of trust reached is higher than with the teachers. In some institutions, the senior learners see them as confidants, and they talk to them about issues they would not even discuss with their sons or daughters. These members of the team are trained in gerontology and act as educational advisors; they know the adult learner very well and can provide educational solutions and support.

5. Conclusion

QoL can be impacted through education, but certain necessary conditions must first be achieved for this to occur.

All the experts coincided that the most critical factor in increasing senior learners' QoL is the human factor (facilitator, teachers and technicians). The teacher is the main contact with knowledge available to the learners, but he or she is also the facilitator to achieve a better understanding of themselves, their context and the society. The teacher becomes not only a provider of skills and information, but also a friend and a support, who maintains a certain distance and the respect from the learner, but who is near enough to know the learner's needs.

The topics of the activities or courses are the first tool that teachers can use to impact QoL; the second is the pedagogy that they apply. Some topics have been mentioned as teaching suggestions for students and are significant to their QoL, but there are many more topics that senior students can enjoy learning and that can be highly beneficial to their knowledge, self-esteem or personal growth. The teaching-learning process itself is highly valuable, regardless of the content, if there is interest from both parties in the process (the teacher and the learner)

The final factor that has an impact on learners' QoL is the institution or environment that is created. The learning context is important not only because it facilitates the learning process, but also because it allows the learner to become part of a group, providing benefits for socialising and support.

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