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## Intergenerational learning between teenagers and seniors with the help of computers

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### Abstract

This project has been developed with the help of the Educational Committee of Chiusa (in northern Italy) and by children of a local middle school. The students taught the elderly to use computers. On the other hand, the elderly people told stories about their lives and the teenagers wrote biographical narratives. This experience highlights different positive aspects: it promotes a respectful intergenerational exchange of skills; it provides seniors with basic computer skills, to gather information and to meet friends on the Internet; it provides access to self-organised learning. Finally, it is a precaution against loneliness in old age, when people are no longer as mobile as they once were.

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### 1. Introduction

This article describes a pilot project based on a research design that was carried out in a small town in South Tyrol in 2011. The project has aroused interest in other communities, and has been copied and successfully implemented in some neighbouring villages in 2012. The concept involves three types of cooperation: the establishment of a network between school and seniors clubs, teamwork between teachers and teenagers and the partnership working between teenagers and seniors. The uniqueness of the project is that it involves face-to-face-learning at a ratio of one-to-one between teenagers and elderly people. The teenagers support the seniors in improving their computer skills, and seniors offer their biographical stories to the teenagers in exchange.

The main research work will be carried out by the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano between October 2012 and June 2013 as a bilingual research project as part of a network. It will be carried out in collaboration with three middle schools and a lyceum in Klausen-Chiusa and Brixen-Bressanone, and old people's homes and associations on a voluntary base. In total, 100 people (50/50 senior/student) will participate. The project will allow children to demonstrate their abilities in a critical phase of their lives, to stabilise their psychic balance by being aware of their own skills, and to share experiences with people from a different generation. In addition, it will help seniors by improving their well-being.

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## 2. The importance of relationships in a network

Postmodernity has been characterised by the end of certainty and by the inability to interpret the world in terms of uniform principles (Bauman, 2005; Abels, 2009). The incapacity to "read" (to understand) the central significance of life, combined with a permanent change in circumstances, creates feelings of uneasiness and disconformity. Abels (2009, p. 153) suggests the existence of three signs of perplexity: People don't know where they are, because borders between occasions, processes and interactions blur. People don't know how they are, because the borders and the contours of order disappear. People don't know who they are, because they are always on their way to their future demands. The consequent lack of security leads to a personal perception of reality that considers the common experience of the objective world less real than the subjective. The pluralisation of the social world causes a permanent alienation of the individual from his former life patterns (Luckmann & Schütz, 2003). Therefore, for the postmodern human being, it is difficult to choose a safe identity.

### 2.1. Relationships in postmodern life

The identity crisis has a grip on all generations - teenagers, youths, people in transition and elderly people. Consequently, people try to construct a private world, a "Heimatwelt" (Berger, Berger & Kellner, 1996) and to withdraw into their private spheres. But family structures have changed over the last few decades. Families are no longer a secure refuge for family members in difficult life situations; the superficial bonds of family relationships fall apart under difficult conditions.

Seniors tend to experience helplessness, uncertainty, loneliness and a lack of general recognised values. The resulting relativism of postmodern life requires from seniors a reflection about their own personal identity and requires them to re-think the entire concept of the world, their expectations regarding security and stability, and a reconsideration of the established understanding of values. Furthermore, the elderly have to replace the hope for security with an increasing feeling of unpredictability regarding the future. With regard to their experiences, seniors have to redefine their life plans and share an appreciation of values with younger generations.

According to Luckmann & Schütz (2003), the individual being experiences the OTHER in different situations from a variety of perspectives, activating different levels of anonymity, profoundness of experience and experience of closeness. Sharing the life world, the individual experience is always connected to the real body experience. The face-to-face situation is the only real social situation, and is one which is marked by spatial and temporal immediacy (p. 101). Exclusively in the case of an altering attitude towards the OTHER, social relationship can be formed. This Luckmann & Schütz defines as a "relationship between us", as "Wir-Beziehung". Inter-subjectivity can be developed only in this form of relationship.

The weekly contact between seniors and teenagers in school provides the opportunity to share opinions and helps the participants to experience learning together. The face-to-face learning at a ratio one to one between teenagers and elderly people allows them to establish a relationship (Wir-Beziehung) in which inter-subjectivity can increase. Intergenerational relationships influence the seniors' perceptions of well-being, because sensitivity for the other generation and mutual recognition can arise as a result of respectful encounters and mutual assistance and cooperation. The social appreciation of elderly people can be developed only in a framework of measures aimed at social integration (Böhnisch, 2012).

### 2.2. Biographical narrative as a contribution to mutual understanding

During the first meetings as part of this research project, teenagers teach seniors at school (in their free-time, optional subjects and/or school time) how to use the computer and the Internet. Afterwards, seniors tell life stories and exchange their experiences, such as adventures on the way to school or their perception of learning with the teenagers on a one to one basis. Two teachers assist the students and the seniors in case they should need help. One of the teachers is responsible for help with computer skills and the other for assistance in terms of text production; both help teenagers and seniors if there are any communication problems.

Fragments of memory and stories are gathered in virtual diaries. The exchange of stories consists of a mutual taking and giving, and is based on the recognition and confidence derived from trustful cooperation in the earlier meetings.

The early teaching of computer skills establishes self-assurance and well-being on the part of the participants and raises mutual confidence. Through the exchange of stories and any confrontation between different perspectives in a protected environment such as the school, communication between generations and two-way-understanding can be developed. According to Ruhe (2012, p. 131), communication never consists of "all-one-way-logic", but exists between human beings through encounters. Dialogs bring people closer together and help them to perceive each other. Intentions change by means of rejoinders.

Biographical narrative helps one to perceive the inner personality: the body, the brain, the heart and the soul (Gudjons, 1999). Biographical narrative serves to reflect the life of an individual and allows one to appreciate personal experiences. Based on actual studies (Bertaux, 2003; Meyer, 2008, Antz, Franz, Frieters, Scheunpflug & Tolksdorf, 2009; Kade, 2009) biographical work creates and cultivates an inner sense of time and temporal experience. According to Kade, the sense of time can be developed by memories, but not as a result of direct experiences. Therefore, biographical work has a special significance in terms of aging. When remembering, one can develop consciousness and awareness about oneself; by looking back one's past life becomes conscious and present. The process of biographical narrative is crucial to health and well-being. Narratives have a strong expressive power. When working with seniors, it is important to take into account three different life functions: the exploratory function in order to interview people, the analytic function in order to analyse the implication of words, and the expressive function in order to attract the reader (Bertaux, 2003, 64-68).

### *2.3. The network between schools and voluntary associations*

The network between schools, senior clubs and other voluntary associations creates efficient social relationships and new models of collaboration. The social commitment must start at the point where needs will be greatest. Opportunities for self-realization in the third phase of people's lives and extensive self-determination for all, allows a much greater say in shaping learning programs and meaningful tasks, and are referred to as such by Hummel (1988, p. 172) 25 years ago as primary principles of an holistic way of working with elderly people. The network between schools, senior clubs and voluntary associations creates a bridge between generations, and facilitates the exchange of views creating conditions for mutual understanding, sensibility and tolerance. Intergenerational learning has been increasingly emphasised in the last ten years (Kolland, 2005; Stadelhofer, 2006; Marquard, Schabacker-Bock & Stadelhofer, 2008; Antz, Franz, Frieters, Scheunpflug & Tolksdorf, 2009; Kolland & Ahmadi, 2010), but the importance of a network between voluntary associations, clubs of elderly people and schools as a basic condition for long-life learning, has not been particularly taken into consideration in terms of the concepts of life-long learning. Kade (2009) raises the question as to how seniors' needs with regard to learning, social integration and solidarity can be satisfied without depending on anonymous formal structures. The author is convinced that the reorganisation of private life and old age provision should not be organized exclusively by social advisory and public welfare groups, but also by social networks. Social conscience has to be developed in order to find appropriate responses to new challenges and new structures in old age. According to Kade, the network between generations is the most important element in long-life learning. Solidarity between generations must be treated as a challenge, and responsibility for elderly people should be given due consideration.

### *2.4. The school - an institution, which opens its doors*

This research project is divided into research involving five different groups which act independently of each other. It takes place in one retirement home, three middle schools and one lyceum at Chiusa and Bressanone. About 50 teenagers and 50 seniors will participate. The coordination of all the groups is in the hands of the headmaster of one of the school and, in the special case of the youths who teach in the retirement home, in the hands of a social worker. Schools place teaching rooms, computers and teachers at the disposal of the researcher. Teachers motivate teenagers and provide school time for the project. Senior clubs and voluntary associations contact elderly people. Elderly people will not face any costs. The researcher maintains contact between the schools and the associations.

This project is a contribution to life-long learning and to the development of a strong network between schools and voluntary associations, aiming to open the doors of education to the world. For a long time schools have been an object of criticism for being unworldly and for resistance to practical applications by clinging to obsolete methods.

For centuries, school reformers such as Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and Georg Kerschensteiner (1854-1932) demanded a strong connection to the outside world and to associations, a call that has been picked up by critical voices in the last few years (Hentig, 2011; Trabant, 2010). Calling for de-schooling programs ("Entschulungsprogramme") Hentig considers that programs set up between schools and associations are particularly advantageous for children.

### 3. Method

This research takes a mixed research approach with the aid of action-research. The goal is to create advantageous conditions for seniors which allow them to adopt new technology and which support the contact and development of knowledge on the part of both the elderly and young people in order to enable the creation of valued relationships of mutual respect and reciprocity. The exchange of biographical stories, which takes place in the second phase of the project, is based on mutual trust created during the work sessions in the use of the new technologies. Among the participants, which are not related to each other, biographical stories might be transmitted through mutual respect and sensitivity. Based on the experience gained as a result of the pilot research, elderly people are probably disposed to use computers even after the end of the course.

According to the research hypothesis, it is possible to activate a reciprocal relationship in circumstances in which the elderly and the young learn together at the computer, making a contribution in terms of life-experiences through biographical narratives and by creating mutual perceptions of well-being. The research questions are presented on different levels:

1. Is it possible to create mutual recognition and to improve the perception of well-being through reciprocal relationships between teenagers and non-related elderly by teaching the use of technologies and exchanging life stories?
2. With reference to the biographical narrative constructions of seniors, have there been changes in their life plans during their lifetime?

The research design aims to adopt different measures using a quantitative-qualitative approach. Through the method of triangulation (Flick, 2011) - as an optimisation strategy - the same phenomenon should be observed under different views in order to understand its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, it becomes possible to bring together different elements of research without overstating one method. According to Flick, the results of both methods have to be considered, and have to be evaluated as being equivalent and providing independent findings, with the objective of bringing them together. From a second point of view, the results are integrated in a valuations procedure. This makes it possible to consider and assess them in terms of a broader overview. In all cases, using qualitative episodic interviews presumes a high ethical sensibility and responsibility on the part of the questioner, avoiding any influence of the field as a result of using suggestive questions, prejudices and unchallenged personal perceptions. During the narrative interviews, the search for the truth question ("Wahrheitsfrage") has an important function (Helfferich, 2011). Consequently, the interviewer has to be aware of his role and his power in this situation.

The research instruments consist of a questionnaire, episodic interviews, the use of triangulation, quantitative-qualitative approaches, the collection of episodic narratives with regard to the main questions in the questionnaire, and qualitative and quantitative analysis of all data collected.

The questionnaire is based on the statistical and demographical data of the Statistical Institute (ASTAT) of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, and on questions raised in a workshop with the elderly at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano in October 2012.

### 4. Discussion

In times of financial, economic and social crisis and great uncertainty regarding the future, people tend to reinforce family ties and become aware of the importance of mutual social support. The increasing demand for mutual social support makes the desire for personal integration evident. Models for intergenerational collaboration (as described in

the methodology of the research) might contribute to improving social well-being and relationships between individuals. Recognising this, identity crises can never be seen as the "crisis of a SINGLE individual"; the crisis is the expression of a society which is not able to respond appropriately to the wishes and needs of the individual. The loneliness of old age which is evident in old peoples' homes is not only the loneliness of ONE senior citizen, but the loneliness of a member of society, of a society which is not able to appreciate old age. Furthermore, the crisis of a teenager is not only the problem of ONE young person in search of his/her identity, but the crisis of a society which cannot find an appropriate answer to the need for recognition and tolerance towards teenagers. Against this background, mutual volunteer work might contribute to improving social relationships between all participants. The concept of action-research is based on giving and taking, on the teaching and learning associated with digital competence, and on biographical narrative too, in order to generate respect and sensitivity.

If learning with the help of the Internet requires technical competences, basic skills, communicative competence and an ability to select information, the ideal framework of conditions should be created. Undoubtedly it is fundamental for the success of long-life-learning projects, to provide the right conditions for learning in old age. Seniors, who probably come from a range of different educational and school cultures, have to learn how to take autonomous and self-reliant decisions on what should be learned and how it should be learned. The teaching model: one teenager - one senior - is specifically tailored to individual needs. It creates a field of experimentation in which seniors and teenagers can contact each other, get to know each other, and acquire competences which lead to self-empowerment. Parents, seniors and council representatives are closely observing the joint effort of this network project put forward at the school level. The idea behind the project is to lay down a model of the modern school that opens its doors in the free-time of the scholars as well as during lessons, with the goal of cooperating with other generations. Seniors and teenagers will work together for a period of five months. The project might turn into an offer of supplementary teaching within the curriculum.

Considering that the elderly have grown up in times of certainty, how can senior citizens find adequate answers to the need for change and consolidation of life plans now? In this research project, the exchange of experiences between generations during a school year might create relationships in which probably one's own perceptions and that of the other will change. From this perspective the data collected from the questionnaire, the episodic narratives and the biographical stories (gathered by teenagers) could bring to light some interesting details. Furthermore, the emphasis on episodic interviews with the elderly will focus on the transformation of their life plans. This additional information could help to obtain qualitative information that can be compared with the results from the questionnaire survey.

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