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Adult learning in a European Context

Abstract: The European Commission predicted that the ratio of people aged 65 and more as a percentage of the population aged 15-64 is expected to increase from 25% in 2007 to 54% in 2060. This change in demographics will have an impact on adult education and training because adult education will to a great extent be expected to include older people in the future. How will adult learning and training adapt to this new trend? Will the learning and training for older people be institutionalized, or will it be positioned in the informal sector? Or could this be organized from the top or by political decisions considering the importance of the motivation, psychological, and health status of the participants as well as the understanding of the degree of flexibility and understanding from the trainers and educators? The intergenerational gap that will exist between older participants and younger professionals might be overcome but should be taken into account.

Keywords: adult learning, active ageing, intergenerational learning, policy

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Introduction

The European Commission predicted that the ratio of people aged 65 and more as a percentage of the population aged 15–64 is expected to increase from 25% in 2007 to 54% in 2060. This change in demographics will have an impact on adult education and training because adult education will to a great extent be expected to include older people in the future. How will adult learning and training adapt to this new trend? Will the learning and training for older people be institutionalized, or will it be positioned in the informal sector? Or could this be organized from the top or by political decisions considering the importance of the motivation, psychological, and health status of participants as well as the understanding of the degree of flexibility and understanding from the trainers and educators? The intergenerational gap that will exist between older participants and younger professionals might be overcome but should be taken into account.

The impact of intergenerational issues increases when more and more individuals, institutions, and organizations realize the importance of the changing demographics in the world and how this relates to well-being for individuals as well as communities and countries.

Therefore, organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) have incorporated intergenerational learning. In the OECD publication “Demographic change and local development” (Martinez-Fernandes et al. 2012), the authors emphasize that the intergenerational approach is narrowing gaps between different generations in the labor force. In connection to this, the authors advocate “promoting tailored quality employment for the populations over 65” (ibid). This will be needed as many of the OECD member countries are becoming elderly societies. The word “silver economy” is used for the new technologies, products, and services designed for senior populations. Another concept is “active aging.” The definition used by the OECD (Reforms … 2000, p. 126) is “the capacity of people, as they grow older, to lead productive lives in societies and the economy.” Because more seniors are working, formal and informal education and training will be needed. Therefore,
the importance of intergenerational learning is stressed as this supports mature workers to learn from young workers and young workers learn from their seniors. There are also other definitions of “Active Aging.” For example, WHO launched a framework for active aging in 2002 with the following words: “the process of optimising opportunities for participation, health, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (Hutchinson et al. 2006). WHO stresses the health aspects while OECD more focuses the economic issues of active aging. The term active aging can be traced back to the 1960s in the USA. The EU commission defines active aging as follows: “a coherent strategy to make ageing well possible in ageing societies. Active ageing is about adjusting life practices to the fact that we live longer and are more resourceful and in better health than ever before, and about seizing the opportunities offered by these improvements. In practice it means adopting healthy lifestyles, working longer, retiring later, and being active after retirement” (Christensen et al. 2003, p. 18).

The European Union has incorporated the health aspect and the economic aspect in this definition. This is also evident in the “Joint Healthcare report” (2009). Here the connection between health and economic growth on one side and education and labor market participation on the other can contribute to individuals’ health and welfare through better jobs. This affects individuals and societies. One suggestion regarding these issues was called “the compression of morbidity” (ibid.). The hypothesis is that disability and ill-health are compressed toward the later period of life. When people live longer, they can also expect better health. More focus on intergenerational learning as a part of lifelong learning and social capital is needed, and therefore, the concepts, their background, and connection will be described below.

**Lifelong and lifewide learning**

Lifelong learning has been on the agenda for the last 50 years (Tuijnman and Boström 2002). One of the first researchers to envision and develop encompassing models of lifelong learning and lifewide learning was Arthur Cropley (1976, 1980). In the two studies cited, Cropley conceptualized and developed lifelong education in more detail, three important principles. The first is that lifelong learning refers to learning across the entire lifespan, from birth to death. The second principle is that the lifewide perspective refers to learning that takes place through formal education and other activities, non-organized and unsystematic, undertaken in various settings. The third principle is the statement that these first two principles are put into practice by individual people, and “will thus depend upon their possession of the personal characteristics necessary for the process” (Cropley 1980, p. 5).

In more recent research, as reported by Aspin and Chapman (2001), lifelong learning is treated as a triad concept, with three factors: economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, and social inclusiveness, democratic understanding, and activity.
These different factors in lifelong learning, whether in the form of formal or informal education, largely operate in settings where relationships with other people, organizations, or communities are paramount. In this context, social capital links up with Cropley’s (1980) third principle of lifelong learning, the importance of individuals possessing the personal characteristics necessary for the process of lifelong learning in practice. Further, regarding the triadic concept proposed by Aspin and Chapman (2001), the first factor can be interpreted as representing the human capital perspective, the second the social capital perspective and the human capital perspectives, whereas the third factor represents the social capital perspective.

Many of the changes in the workplaces in the Western world occur because of many technical innovations, an aging population, and increased segregation in society, i.e., between age groups and between ethnic groups. Since the 1970s, lifelong learning has been connected to human capital, which of course still is important, but a new concept is involved in learning and working life. Globally, there is now a focus on well-being and quality in life as an effect of using and appreciating social capital/social cohesion. Positive relationships within the workplace, professional integration, and social integration can give improved motivation and more satisfaction in life, which also can increase productivity. Social capital is described by Coleman (1988, 1990) as composed of defined entities. These are good communication within the group, sharing values or having the same norms and structures, and working toward a common goal decided on by the group. Together, these entities provide increased social capital in the workplace with no room for frustration, anxiety, or disinterest.

According to Coleman (ibid.), social capital is not as a single entity. The most important elements of social capital are trust, communications, and norms and structure. These features can be found simultaneously in any context where individuals are working toward a common goal, one recognized as worthy and worthwhile by the group as a whole. Hence, social capital may be nurtured and developed through co-operation between individuals (Putnam 1993).

**Intergenerational learning**

Intergenerational learning is an integral part of lifelong learning. In the literature on intergenerational interventions, intergenerational transmission has been defined in many different ways. One definition (Newman et al. 1997) targets specific programs, namely, intergenerational programs. Another definition is derived from explorations of all intended intergenerational transmissions (Kaplan et al. 1998). In 1999, Toshio Ohsako from UNESCO organized a meeting in Dortmund, Germany, for researchers dealing with intergenerational programs from ten countries. The researchers all contributed with a report about the situation in their country. They agreed on the importance of connecting generations rather than dividing them and restoring broken ties between generations. Therefore, the researchers agreed on the following definition: “Intergenerational programmes
are vehicles for the purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations.” (Boström et al. 2000, p. 3)

This definition incorporated different statuses and cultural contexts of the participating countries. The researchers came from China, Cuba, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Palestine, South Africa, and Sweden. One of the pieces of advice from participants regarding future work with intergenerational programs was related to the importance of older and younger generations learning from each other and together with each other: “Older experienced retired managers and workers can also offer their expertise and support to younger workers in developing countries (e.g., the Netherlands) or within their own industries (e.g., Cuba).” (Ibid., p. 4) One difference between the countries was related to the social policy and volunteering when intergenerational programs were implemented.

The impact of intergenerational issues has increased as more and more individuals, institutions, and organizations have realized the importance of the changing demographics globally and how this relates to well-being for individuals, communities, and countries. Therefore, a focus on intergenerational learning as a part of lifelong learning and social capital is needed.

In the United Kingdom, an inquiry was set up to evaluate how the goals of the Lisbon Strategy were achieved. In the summary of the main report of the inquiry into the future for lifelong learning (Schuller et al. 2009), written for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the authors claim that the right to learn throughout life is a human right. The task for the inquiry was to formulate a longer-term strategy to achieve their vision. In this, lifelong learning concerns all ages, but the primary focus was adult learning and adults returning to

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**Figure 1: Lifelong and lifewide learning (Boström 2002).**
learn. Learning takes place in education or training institutions, the workplace on and off the job, in the family, or cultural and community settings. Therefore, they used a broad definition: “Lifelong learning includes people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts – in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities. It focuses mainly on adults returning to organised learning rather than on the initial period of education or on incidental learning.” (Ibid., p. 4)

Boström (2002) has described a framework where learning and values can be found in the educational setting from an intergenerational perspective. Figure 1 shows the lifewide perspective in which the formal parts of learning and values are situated on the left side of the continuum and the more informal learning and values are on the right side.

There is also a lifelong perspective, and this figure shows a situation in adult education or training where the educators and trainers are younger than the participants. The educators and the participants can be found in the formal setting. Between these groups and individuals, relationships can be created. According to Coleman (1988, 1990), social capital can be found in relationships between individuals when they are working toward the same goals, understand or share each other’s values, and have networks that involve transparent information channels. These positive human relations create social capital. In Figure 1, this is exemplified by respect for intercultural values, communication through ICT, and knowledge of languages. This creates networks where social capital can be found in the educational setting. When these networks are aggregated in the system (country) level, social cohesion and a foundation for solid forms of democracy through community well-being are created.

**Community well-being**

Community well-being is a concept that is being used differently as well. In this context, community well-being refers to aggregated social capital that can develop within different networks in a community: intergenerational relationships in society or in workplaces. Community well-being can be found within informal and formal settings organized by volunteers or be arranged as a result of a policy within the community’s official administration. Cropley (1980) clarified when community well-being he put different learning experiences on a continuum of learning, from informal to formal, in this case, and included a barrier between his “two zones.”

Cropley explained that people are exposed to different educational influences, which can be institutionalized or not, as seen in Figure 2. At some point on the continuum, a dividing line separates private and personal learning experiences from those that can be institutionalized in society. States tolerate that the barrier moves to the left (totalitarian) or to the right (liberal) to a different degree. However, Cropley also stated, “it is important to note that lifelong education does not imply organizing or “taking over” those educational influences which are on the left hand side of the barrier. This does not mean, however, that lifelong education is not concerned with them. On the contrary, one of its major principles is that
learning is supported by a much wider range of influences than those provided by schools, and that the formal or institutionalized aspects of education.” (Ibid., p. 9)

**Problems and barriers in adult education in later life**

The EU lifelong learning program funded a project (IANUS) that looked for ways to solve problems for learners in later life. The partners collected key factors to cover the heterogeneous needs of the target group of later learners and the expectations of different learning groups. The partners came from Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. This was made into a model, and the perspectives of the individual contexts are shown below.

The model shows the individual key factors in the following areas: bio-genetic, social psychological, and pedagogical. The key factors collected by the ten countries that participated in the IANUS project and the summary of the key competencies were analyzed to identify the most common problems. The results provide suggestions for compensating for and solving the problems. This result shows that the problems need social capital and can be solved by increasing social capital. Figure 3 describes the fact that the problems within the bio-genetic sector are often individual perceptions from the participants and how this can be met by the educators and trainers. This could be compensated by giving extra time when needed and use of the educators’ and trainers’ tacit knowledge. The trainers should be aware of and know how to deal with the heterogeneity among participants that can be found within adult education. Anxiousness and lack of confidence among the participants are important problems within the social psychological sector. This could be compensated by the trainer’s competence and time. More particularly,
the trainers should show respect for individuals and that the participants should feel and be co-responsible for their education and training. Regarding the pedagogical part, the main problems are the participants’ understanding of the subject in question and their motivation to participate. The way to compensate for this was found mostly to be up to the trainers and their competence and use learning by doing and helping the participants find different possibilities, explaining, and discussing the usefulness of the subject. Using small groups, adequate locations, goals adjusted to learners’ ambition, visible outcomes, and sensitivity toward the group and the individuals were different ways for trainers and educators to solve this problem.

**Conclusion**

Adult education and training has not always been given the same value as primary education. Recent research and policy depend on the changing demographics increasing globally focus the impact of a well-functioning adult education and training, which means formal and informal learning. This positive situation regarding adult education and training, for countries and individuals, depend on factors that are economically related but also largely focused on the importance of increasing well-being and better health. Fear of the economic costs for the aging
baby-boom generations has decreased as there are evidence that the active part of life is prolonged for most people while the time in need for care is the same (Joint Healthcare report 2009). The question is then how to provide the education and training needed by individuals who want to change their job or lifestyle in their later part of their life? This is of course related to the situation for each individual and his or her context in terms of family situation, health, background, and experience. There are many suggestions for how to solve these problems, and one was made in a European project (IANUS). Ten countries worked together to find factors important in this issue. They made a key factor analysis that show common denominators that are important to consider regarding education and training on the individual level and found that many of the problems and barriers for individuals to join and enjoy adult education can be overcome. This happens at the individual level, but at the same time, it is also important to consider new policy trends. An already existing policy can be exemplified by words such as “silver economy” used by OECD among others and the “compression of morbidity hypothesis” discussed in the EU joint healthcare report. Researchers such as Tom Schuller et al. (2004) searched for the factors in life that are important for adults regarding the benefits of learning.

Lifelong learning, in the form of intergenerational learning, is important regarding adult education. Lifelong learning (LLL) has always been used depending on the context. This is related to the policy and the economic context, and the understanding differs, as described by Aspin and Chapman (2001). At the same time, the concept is easy to use for big organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and the EU. The most common understanding by people in the education sector is to connect the concept with adult learning and training. This was also the target for the UK inquiry when they evaluated the status of lifelong learning in the UK. One of the guidelines for LLL has been that the individual should be responsible for his or her education. When this has been implemented, the result has not always been the best for society. Some see a tendency of individualistic individuals who do not see the work for society as important; rather, they want to enjoy life by themselves. Therefore, the human capital theory that was closely connected to LLL from the beginning has been losing favor, and the use of the social capital theory, building on relationships and networks, is growing internationally. Closely linked to this trend is the intergenerational issue. Different generations need to meet, work together, and learn from each other. Adult education and training has an impact on this area. The question is, who will take responsibility for the education and training of older generations? Will this be institutionalized, or will the individual take responsibility within a more informal agenda? Or will it be up to volunteer associations to arrange the training?

References


