

CONFERENCE ON “ACTIVE AND HEALTHY AGEING” Celebration of the “European Day of Solidarity between Generations”

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Workshop 2 “ Long life learning”

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“Lifelong learning during the third age - benefits and challenges”.

Summary:

- I 10 years of experience in seniors’ education - presentation of the organization (3 min)
- I. the significance of lifelong learning for the seniors’ well-being (2 min)
- II. the specificity of seniors’ education (4 min)
- III. the challenges of lifelong learning in the third age (4 min)
- IV. conclusions, proposals, recommendations (2 min)

Ideas for the content

I. 10 years of experience in seniors’ education - presentation of the organization (3 min)

The Fullness-Of-Life Academy is an association acting in support of middle-aged and elderly people. Our goal is to improve the quality of their life by organizing a wide range of educational opportunities, tailored to seniors’ needs and possibilities.

We also aim at changing the negative stereotypes concerning the position and role of elderly people in society, as well as changing their own attitude towards their ageing.

We organize:

- various computer courses - for beginners and advanced - from using a mouse to the digital processing of photographs
we are a national leader in this field, an author the first Polish computer textbook for seniors
 - lectures, seminars, discussions
 - memory and assertiveness training
 - language courses (English, German, French, Russian)
and furthermore:
 - art workshops,
 - hobby groups,
 - a film and theatre club,
 - trips, special meetings for holidays and festivities
- ... and everything our seniors like to do

We also take part in and organize innovative educational projects for seniors, both national and international. We help other seniors' organizations to develop their activities

The most important feature of our organization is that all our activities are initiated and co-organized by the seniors themselves. This not only ensures that our activities are perfectly adjusted to the seniors' needs, but also has a significant activating impact on our elderly learners.

We are a very flexible organization with an informal structure. Thanks to our intense, friendly contact with our elderly learners we can constantly adjust our educational activities to their needs, thus developing their interest.

Let me give you an example: we started our English teaching as a part of an international project, then we noticed that the seniors got interested in learning English as such, so we organized regular classes, then we learned that some seniors prefer to have informal conversation meetings so we ran them too, then the seniors said that they would like more practice and more fun so this summer we will organize a summer

English school for seniors. They will go out of the classroom, to practice in real-life situations: in cafes, shops, the airport, they will talk to foreigners, they will go to a museum and have an English guide and so on.

There is no sharp division between students and teachers. Majority of our teachers are seniors, and they also take part in our classes, some elderly students become teachers – after our training they teach their peers or give lectures on the subjects they were experts in, or just share their interests with others.

We also have no strict curriculums nor teaching materials – they are constantly being developed according to the changing situation.

II. The significance of lifelong learning for the seniors' well-being (2 min)

It is a well-known fact that learning in later age has a positive impact on seniors' well-being and improves the quality of their lives. But in countries like Poland where the older generation has spent the majority of their lives behind the iron curtain and where there are still a lot of stereotypes regarding the elderly, this positive impact is enormous.

It not only boosts self-esteem and self-confidence, and it not only has a positive health effect especially in the brain-functioning sphere, not only prevents loneliness and social marginalization, but also develops a sense of being fully-fledged citizen and European.

When we get old we sometimes lose our identity, we are not a manager, teacher, engineer anymore because we are retired, we are not parents because our children are gone.

We lose the sense of our life. The learning helps us to recover that sense, joy of life and to regain our identity. The learning fills our life with new content.

III. The specificity of seniors' education (4 min)

I am not going to talk about adjusting the teaching process to the specificity of old age: slower pace, understandable language and so on – they are well known facts.

I would like to draw your attention to another factor – to explain this let me give you one example from my practices:

A young person has completed the basic computer training with satisfaction and says: It was a good training, the instructor was competent, now I know how to use computer

An older person has completed the basic computer training with satisfaction and says: It was a good training, the instructor was very nice, now I am going to start another training.

As far as seniors' education is concerned, the thing that matters is the process rather than the results of the training, personal development rather than the gained knowledge.

So the main profit of seniors' education is not necessarily gaining the certain skills or knowledge but something that can be named “personal positive changing” and includes satisfaction, pleasure, readiness to undertake new challenges and so on.

The other issue I would like to mention is working with the resources already possessed by seniors. I mean the memory.

In this case learning do not mean assimilating new things but using ones we already have.

One example I took from books by Dutch psychologist Douve Draaisma: 20 years ago Dutch seniors were discouraged from thinking about the past; seniors should look ahead toward the future. Now it is changed: there are special centers in Holland, collecting old photographs, movies, everyday articles and so on, where seniors are invited to come and take advantage of this recourses . It turned out to be great idea, which contributed to enriching educational offer and also improving seniors' well-being and seniors' health.

IV. the challenges of lifelong learning in the third age (4 min)

In my opinion the most important is to define what it means to be senior, to be old in the modern society and discover the real value of being old. It is important to be aware that some of these values are recognized by seniors group, some by younger generations and some are common to both this groups. These values would serve as a guiding factor for developing seniors' education and also help to get rid of the kind of ambivalence we can meet in seniors' issues.

The next challenge is the growing diversity within the group we call “seniors” - diversification of needs, expectations, personal possibilities: physical, mental and also financial. We have really big problem with distinguishing homogeneous groups.

Keeping balance between being nice and patronizing is both important and difficult.

Intergeneration activities: it is not enough just to gather together young and old people and give them something to do. We must develop the common communication skills and teach both groups how to understand each other.

One example from my practice: we have a young well educated girl working as a volunteer for our organization. Couple weeks ago we sat together with her and a few seniors to discuss ideas for an intergenerational activity. She said: let's organize a workshop where young ones teach seniors how to prepare sushi and old people teach young how to prepare pierogi (a Polish national dish) . Seniors nodded but without conviction, so I said provocatively: "I hate sushi and I am fed up with preparing pierogi". The seniors burst with enthusiasm: us too, us too.

Now let's try to figure out what both parties were thinking:

the young people thought: „sushi is very good and I want seniors to have good thinks. To prepare pierogi which I like is the main interest of seniors – let's them do it for us.

the old people thought: she is such a nice, well educated girl, it is so touching that she wants to do something for us, so though I hate shusi and I hate to prepare pierogi – let's her do it.

From this example we can see how the same matter could be seen differently by both generation.

V. conclusions, proposals, recommendations (2 min)

1. In my opinion there is an urgent need to develop a new European educational program for seniors. The Grundtvig program it too broad. Being very specific and important seniors' education needs special care and support.
2. We have to worked out a new role model of being old in the modern society including the specific values of ageing, both these important for seniors only, and also these interesting for the rest of the society. This model and value should become a guiding principle for seniors' education.
And we must understand that active and healthy ageing does not mean pretending that we are younger.
3. We have to develop new approaches to seniors education like for instance working with their own memory.
4. Good intergenerational contacts demand improving communication between generations. We have to support projects and researches which undertake this issue.
5. If we like to have good and fruitful international projects on seniors' education field we should support partnerships which include countries both from the West and the former East Block . Their experiences are so different and complementary to one another that we can get projects really inspiring and creative.