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Older People's Learning for Understanding and Interpreting Local Architecture and Urban Environment and Stimulating Cultural Tourism

Abstract

This paper deals with concepts and theories with regard to older people and later life, older people's learning for understanding and interpreting local architecture and urban environment and with regard to cultural tourism. These concepts and related theories underpinned the development of *Squares, Streets and Buildings around us*, an innovative but traditional educational programme that was later transformed into a study circle. The initial educational programme was designed at Slovenian Third Age University by one of the authors of this paper and redesigned by all members of the study circle. To sum up, the initially devised educational programme has slowly moved towards learning in community, a study circle on architecture and town planning, as well as occasional providing cultural tourism tours.

KEY WORDS: older people, later life, older learning in community, socio-cultural animation, town planning, architecture, urban environment, cultural tourism, leisure time

Introduction

Learning by drawing upon a variety of sources – literature, members of the learning group and local environment- and methods like learning in community, community education etc. seem to be more in tune with post-modern knowledge society than structured, linear formal education. Knowledge, experiential knowledge and culture are put together. Members of learning community exchange and construct knowledge that concerns and supports individuals, groups of individuals and local community.

Theoretical background

A number of concepts and theories supported the initial designing and delivery of the programme *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around us*

- (1) *Older people and later life* were approached through the *activity theory* (Havighurst, 1969). This theory suggests that successful ageing takes place

when older people remain active and maintain social interactions. There is a positive relationship between activity and life satisfaction.

(2) *Architecture and urban environment* were discussed on the basis of the theory of cultural heritage by Krstić (2010, pp. 19-21). Composed of single monuments, towns and villages, cultural heritage is a testimony of civilisation and its important developmental phases. Krstić's premises are that architectural heritage is a testimony of the wholeness of life of a nation and country and of their past. Being an authentic testimony of societies and times, it is also an expression and testimony of historical continuity, as well as the future of its past.

Architectural cultural heritage was further studied mostly with reference to legal texts, European Charter of The Architectural Heritage (1975 to quote just one of them:

The European architectural heritage consists not only of our most important monuments: it also includes groups of lesser buildings in our old towns and characteristic villages in their natural or man made settings.

The past as embodied in the architectural heritage provides the sort of environment indispensable to a balanced and complete life.

The architectural heritage is a capital of irreplaceable spiritual, cultural, social and economic value.

The structure of historic centres and sites is conducive to a harmonious social balance.

The architectural heritage has an important part to play in education.

(3) Cultural tourism is a leisure time activity therefore reference was made to the theory of accidental versus serious leisure time (Roberts, 1981, Stebbins, 2000). Serious leisure time and its formats make it possible for older people to overcome themselves, to construct their identity. Serious leisure time develops a feeling that one directs oneself and it betters one's social integration in society. Stebbins (2000) describes serious leisure time as reasonable and purposeful activity. Shields (1997) says serious leisure activities have a tempo, rhythm and develop in a well defined direction.

(4) Development and delivery of the programme *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around Us* dwells upon different theories among which the French *Theory of socio-cultural animation* by Nicolas de Condorcet, André Malraux and Paul Besnard (Besnard, 1980, Findeisen, 1995).

Socio- cultural animation provides access to culture and knowledge for all social groups, thus increasing their social power. It is a reaction to social changes or an anticipation of the changes to come.

In the discourse of André Malraux, the first French minister of culture, art and cultural heritage are not given in their own right, but have to be acquired, reached, internalised.

Culture and knowledge spread by actors of socio-cultural animation have both individual and social transformative role, historic role, a role of transmitters of universal values, a role of those who tie up social communities and struggle against social inequality. Socio-cultural animation are also actions led by individual actors who have formed a group, having set up the content as well as social and eventually economic goals of their action.

Socio-cultural animation is also a sector of social life. Its actors pursue goals like: modification of standpoints and interpersonal relationships by being active in public media and by using non-directive learning methods.

Finally, socio-cultural animation is a cluster of methods based on the understanding of the others, establishing equal relationships, abolishing hierarchical relationships in group. Members of the group decide on how their learning process and their doings will develop, thus changing themselves and their environment.

Older people and modifications of later life

Only three decades ago, in former Yugoslavia of which Slovenia was a constituent part, in the socialist times, when the State was largely co - responsible for shaping citizens' life, and meeting their needs, old age seemed to be roleless. After retirement few older people were enabled to go on with their creative life but artists, researchers, translators (Krajnc, 1999). The majority of older people were socially speaking idle retirees with lower income and limited possibilities to construct themselves and community. There was top down organised collective leisure time and entertainment, which could not be labelled as serious leisure time - construction of both oneself and community (Stebbins, 1992, Shields, 1997, Rojek, 2000). Of course one could volunteer but volunteering was also organised top down and not vice versa. There was practically no education for older people, except rather well developed animation activities in nursing homes and occasional public medical lectures.

In today's knowledge based society and market economy older people's position has been changing in most European countries. Moreover, in knowledge based society learning and knowledge are required for all activities (Lyotard, 2003), older people's activities being no exception to the rule.

Once termed *the third age of life* (after the Greek poet Hesiodos) it is now called *time between work, retirement and old age* stressing the new dynamic character of the time following the end of professional work. Though older people get retired, they can

reactivate themselves or take on new social roles more in tune with contemporary social developments. Due to new cultural organisation of ages (Guillemard, 1986) and new social stratification, older people are gaining also new, unprecedented social roles. Consequently, the importance of their learning and education has been increasing. They are invited to both learn and contribute towards local development upgrading simultaneously their *cultural* and *creative capital* as well as *local capacity*. The study circle *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around us* at Slovenian Third Age University is meant to cultivate older people's' competencies of understanding and interpreting local architecture and urban environment and to enable older people to contribute to cultural tourism in their locality.

Defining cultural tourism

Cultural tourism concerns broadening horizons and knowledge and concerns the desire to experience emotions, when face to face with cultural heritage and the territory where cultural heritage is located (Origet du Clouzeau, 2007).

At first sight cultural tourism seems to be a pleonasm, since in the past each tourist traveling was of cultural nature. It was exclusively meant to broaden horizons, facing one's own with foreign cultures. Cultural tourists used to be well off young people sent abroad by their parents. In addition to that, cultural tourists were philosophers and writers who, while travelling, wrote down their impressions, comparing their own culture with foreign cultures and civilisations, their own way of thinking with other people's way of thinking. To illustrate this point, let us quote Michel de Montaigne:

»Travelling is a valuable activity. Spirit is active all the time, eager to see unknown and new things. There is hardly a school of life surpassing travelling“ can be read in *Journal of Montaigne's Travels in Italy by way of Switzerland and Germany in 1580 and 1581* (translated by M.K.).

Thus cultural tourism means acquiring knowledge. It is a school of life. Typical of cultural tourism is the tourists' will to return from a journey enriched and different. Therefore cultural travelling cannot be accidental, on the contrary, it has to be carefully planned. Knowledge is mostly acquired before, during and after the travelling. By no means cultural tourism can be mere consuming of impressions. In contrast it requires cooperation of tourists and hosts.

Barretto (2000) argues that cultural tourism is a type of tourism witnessing the existence of attractive, valuable and authentic aspects of life, societies, culture. Therefore cultural tourism is necessarily linked with knowledge and gaining knowledge on both sides; on the side of tourists and on the side of hosts. Cultural tourism meets two human needs: the need to be mobile in a given space, and the need for symbolic expression (Malinowski, 1945).

Further, Lyotard (2003) emphasises that the post modern times are subordinated to constant changes and searching for what can not be reached. Cultural tourism seems to be an expression of this. It is not based on data, on the contrary it is based on live relationships, experience in a given context and time, experience that can always be upgraded or clearly transformed. Cultural tourists expect that their travelling will help them meet other people and their ways of life. Cultural tourists visit sacral buildings, museums, archeological excavations, thematic museums, memory sites, fortresses, eco-museums, parks, festivals and other events. Most interested are they in classified cultural monuments; buildings, monuments, parts of buildings (staircases, balconies), public cultural heritage (town halls, court palaces). They are also attracted to memorial sites.

Squares, streets and buildings around us - from study programme to study circle

The study circle, learning in community, reciprocal and mutual learning going on under this title, have proven to be a constant source of innovative topics, action research, publications, exhibitions and projects etc. More importantly, this kind of older people's *learning in community* was made public through planned public campaigning: a number of educational and cultural events, newspaper articles, TV and radio programmes, conferences, Slovenian Third Age University electronic news, newsletters and webpages of different international educational networks. *Learning in community and community education can be effective only when they produce changes not only on individual level but also on the level of community.* To this end permanent public campaigning is needed.

Squares, Streets and Buildings Around us was later incorporated into the European project *Personal Town Tours* or vice versa, whose participants were collecting and exchanging stories about their towns, shaping them into thematic tours, tailored tours with guides revealing their own or their peers' stories in relation to buildings and urban environment.

Three years ago *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around us* was established at Slovenian Third Age University as one of the fifty-six educational programmes. Ever since members of this study group/study circle have been sharpening their view of the Ljubljana's characteristics and have been building their competency of reflecting their personal experience of the urban environment in general. At the same time, urban environment has been approached as a mix of built structures, historic, cultural and social elements. The study contents have been delivered and/or jointly constructed by all members during weekly meetings in the lecture room and in the town. Members of the group never stop thinking about their environment and exchanging their findings. One might say that they live as "architects and town planners". These study meetings quickly yielded a number of new projects.

The study programme *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around Us* was basically designed by one of the authors of this paper to visually present the rich contents Ljubljana has to offer to its townspeople. But there was also her wish to enable the members of the study group to overcome the usual user's perception of the built environment and to consider- in addition- how town planners and/or architects perceive the same built environment.

On the basis of single examples from their own town - which is never known and studied enough- the participants have been exercising their competency of analysing the conception of urban environment, thus getting insights which helped them discover their own and in the same way also other towns. Reflection about their personal experience of urban environment has become unavoidable. A permanent two-way process between the observer and the observed object was set up. *The programme dwells upon studying examples of built environment, slowly creating a bridge towards the kind of abstract thinking and understanding that are typical of architectural designing and urban planning.*

One of the projects shaped in this study circle was a two-year European project *Personal Town Tours*, closely related to the contents, methods and goals of the *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around us* study programme. A small study group of nine members designed and put into practice three thematic architectural itineraries through Ljubljana. Moreover, they organised an international conference and finally they published a somehow different architectural guide. Different, because it introduces the reader to architecture by means of architectural description and analysis of architectural heritage, with photos taken by one of the members, with interpretation of buildings based on the collected individual memories and impressions of older urban space users.

Kevin Lynch argues that the image of environment is a result of a two-way process going on between the observer and what is observed. Shapes and interconnections are offered, the observer selects, categorises, classifies them and gives them meaning according to his or her current interests and goals. (Lynch, 1960). When engaged in his or her everyday ways, the observer is mostly occupied with his or her urgent activities, getting to work, waiting for a bus at the bus stop, etc. Since these activities are urgent and unavoidable, the environment does not impact him or her. Once engaged in their routinized ways, the users act in their usual way, excluding the majority of their sensorial perceptions. Quite opposite is their behaviour in foreign towns. They perceive colour, light, the silhouette of the castle in the background, they feel the pattern of the pavement, they smell streets etc. Most of the times they start classifying these impressions only when they get back to their hotel or at later home. By that time many information are lost and their narrative related to them is composed with difficulty.

One of the initial aims of the *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around Us* study circle was that members would learn to observe the town as architects and urban planners do. So

far, members of the study circle have delineated several own research topics: "The importance of having water in town" "Senses and perceptions of towns", "Co-habitation of traditional ambients and new interventions into urban environment". "Ruins in architecture and architecture of ruins".

Moreover, over last years Ljubljana has undergone substantial changes. Its cultural and technical roots are important for preserving its identity and unity, which calls for a different and active role of its older townspeople. On one hand these are interpreters of culture and tradition and on the other hand without new knowledge, they might feel the many changes to be aggressive and could not understand them.

Started as an educational programme to be delivered, *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around Us* ended up in a true study circle, true learning in community, where time, experience, knowledge, culture are put together and new knowledge is being constructed together by all members. Concepts and principles of socio-cultural animation are being applied. Whatever the study circle does, is accompanied by appearing in public.

From learning in community towards cultural tourism

Cultural tourism is dependent on the tourists' cultural capital and consequent tourists' expectations. The study circle *Squares, Streets and Buildings Around us* published a guide based on the research done by the members of the study circle. Three thematic itineraries had been collectively shaped and researched combining the members' individual culture, the knowledge study circle members internalized through their studies, their newly acquired perception of the town, "through the eyes of urban planners and architects" and through collecting personal stories and impressions about architecture and urban environment. The guide has become a basis for guiding specific groups of tourists through the town, mostly foreign visitors to Slovenian Third Age University.

The collected narratives build the bridge between professional data and feelings about the town which is a start for creating a basis for more structured and goal oriented cultural tourism. In the end this could turn into an economic activity, a good example of the today's phenomenon of economisation of culture and culturalisation of economy.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that a structured older adult education programme can be slowly, even spontaneously changed into learning in community with the prevailing learning Methods such as study circle, project learning, action research, reciprocal and mutual learning, It has been empirically proven that learning in community is best when closely connected with local environment drawing upon its resources and bettering it through outputs and outcomes of collective learning. Turning learning in community into both

public and economic activity has an important impact on the individual and social identity of older learners and the identity of local community.

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