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Older Adult Education Is Not Just Casual Leisure Time. Socially Engaged Education, Art and Filmmaking Of Older Students At Slovenian U3A

Abstract

“Those who are active do not appreciate those who are inactive” argues Simone de Beauvoir (2019) though those who are active may legally impose inactivity on older people. This case study deals with the social engagement of Slovenian U3A’s students. Namely, Slovenian Third Age University’s socially engaged older people’s education, art and filmmaking were conceptualized as approach and method that enable older people to remain socially included and become social actors. Ever since 1984 Slovenian U3A’s educational programmes have been implicitly or explicitly focusing on: reaffirming older people’s personal and social identity, constructing older people’s quality of life, their active position in society as well as increasing public awareness about social existence, position and value of older people. Thus U3A’s programmes stimulate older people’s collective liberating from social stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination. Moreover, they are a method enabling older people to collectively liberate from the type of policy discourse that supports their casual instead of their serious leisure time (Stebbins, 2015). Older adults’ education-based engagement addresses the issue of social justice on redistributive, socio-economic and symbolic-cultural level (Fraser, 2011). The EU project RefugeesIN is one of the recent examples of Slovenian U3A older students’ educational social engagement, dealing with refugee problematics and the issue of approaching and making documentary films.

Key words: casual leisure time, serious leisure time, social engagement, film, older adult education, older people, social inclusion, social justice, social stereotypes, CINAGE, RefugeesIN.

Methodology and conceptual background

In this paper will be presented a study case of Slovenian Third Age University and its more recent practices which helped conceptualize Slovenian U₃A's *socially engaged older people's education, its socially engaged art and filmmaking*, as an approach and method that enable older people *to remain* socially included and become social actors. »It links theory with practice« and offers »problem solving skills« (Schmidt, 2010). A theory is good and useful if it has the ability to explain the present and predict the future. In the case of Slovenian Third Age University the already established practices were linked with theories later on. Or to put it differently, practices were linked with theory before, during and after becoming a source of generalisations. This study case is meant to deepen reflection of those who are engaged in older adult education and improve their understanding of the wider and far reaching role of such education.¹ Due to its social transformative role, older adult education should never be understood as simple transmission of knowledge, rather as a collective *construction of knowledge*. It is expected to increase older people's influence and contribution to social, built and natural environment.

Practices of socially engaged education of older people described in this case study were grounded on a number of reference theories and concepts. It would not be possible to present them all, rather a selection of them. I will also explain how they inspired us.

Theory of activity is based on the concept of activity, of Man's work. Working is impacting the environment. Changing the environment Man inevitably changes his own nature, while activity is considered in this theory as initial category, shaping Man's social self.

Theory of disengagement (Kastenbaum, H., Cumming, E.). A study including a sample of 251 adults between 50 and 90 years of age was conducted in the years 1957-1960. The sample included healthy older people, healthy enough to be independent. Disengagement is a process that takes place in-between older people, others and the social system. When the process comes to an end Man's equilibrium is no more the equilibrium he experienced in his middle age when.

¹ Older people are most often treated as passive recipients of »social care and protection«. Only exceptionally are they considered as contributors to social and economic development and transformation of society.

Theory of social fairness by Fraser (2011) Social (un)fairness may be felt on the distributive, economic, socio-cultural and symbolic *level*. The latter is associated with stereotypes, patterns of social representations, interpretation and communication showing lack of recognition of older people, their invisibility, humiliation they may suffer, lack of respect towards them. All of these treatments are not explicit, mostly difficult to be perceived but they are clearly felt.

Theory of the quality of life. This theory was initiated in the field of health and medicine. However, *promoting, maintaining and reinstating quality of their participants' life has always been a mission of educators and providers of older adult education*. According to this theory, quality of life is not imposed top down by preset norms. Man is a bearer of resources and able to consciously or unconsciously impact the perception and evolution of the quality of their life. When measured, quality of life, has its subjective and objective dimensions. Both of them should be present in older adult education.

Theory of identity by Mucchieli. There are subjective and objective identity, personal and collective or social identity and social identity is built out of personal identities.

Theory of leisure time by Robert A. Stebbins. »For some retirees the post work fun is all right. They have managed an interesting casual leisure life style« but Stebbins opposes *casual leisure time (unskilled time)*, *serious (skilled)* and *project leisure time (short-term)*. Casual leisure time brings people together to socialize or to practice a hobby. Serious leisure time, however constructs the persons themselves and their community. »

Theory of public space by Hannah Arendt. According to Arendt, human beings are born to begin anew. Public space is characterised by stimulating social interactions, diversity, spontaneity and plurality.

Slovenian Third Age University its mission and organisation

In former Yugoslavia and Slovenia, one of its republics, work therapy or education for the fourth age dedicated to older people in institutional care had been already well developed when education for the third age started with the establishment of Slovenian Third Age University by the endeavours of two university teachers in agreement with their institutions.

Today some of its core areas and activities are:

education *of* older people;

education *about* older people;

creating supporting structures for older people's autonomous learning or learning in tandems (Each-One-Teach-One);

research and development, integrated counselling, international co-operation; publishing;

increasing professional and public awareness about the meaning of education for older people and their cultural contribution, and society;

creating and promoting visible opportunities for older people for their participation in social and economic life of localities and country.

Older adult education is measured by criteria: (1) of economic development (more wealth), (2) social development (more independence, more participation and co-making decisions (3) more personal growth (more knowledge, creativity, less conformism). It is also necessary to find out which cultural conditions are to be changed as to consolidate the role of older adult education (Besnard, 1985). Moreover, older adult education is most predominately born to meet social and less to meet personal needs.

Established back in 1984, Slovenian Third Age University is today a network of 52 universities, in the course of its development its structure has often changed as to face its steady growth and the adoption of new functions to meet the existing and anticipated personal and social needs.

Initially inspired by the model of Third Age University in Toulouse as well as Paul Legrand and Edward Faure's theory of lifelong learning Slovenian Third Age University's belief was that education in old age "should aim at collective liberation of older people from social stereotypes, prejudices about older people and overcome the discriminated older people's position at the edge of society and their social value.

In those days our initial knowledge about old age and education of older people was drawn from the rare available sources offered by American, French and German authors in the field of educational gerontology and mostly from reference disciplines (pedagogy, adult

education, social gerontology, educational gerontology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, medicine, literature- belles lettres, but our basic source were our first older students' analytical insights). In theories we were looking for confirmation of our own findings based on interpretative observational methods, etc.

Actually Slovenian U3A was the first attempt at democratising education of adults in former Yugoslavia and Slovenia.

Meaningful older adult education - a way to alleviate social stereotypes and increase the quality of older people's life

In societies where all generations are continuously exposed to the necessity to learn, having access to quality and meaningful older adult education is an essential element of older people's equality as well as their *subjective* and *objective quality of life*.

Representations of the quality of life of older people however are strongly influenced by social, economic, political and historic representations of old age and the needs of older people. Corvisier (on line), De Beauvoir, 2019).

Naturally, representations and position of older people are largely determined by stereotypes and prejudices often leading to discrimination of older people. It has been generally admitted that stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination are poorly recognized and one of the major aims of socially engaged education of older people is to raise awareness about older people contributing abilities and rights.

"I do not feel discriminated" due to my age argues (M. G., 69), a retired researcher, one of Slovenian U3A 's students, explaining that since her retirement, she has been a silent leader of a research group despite the fact that she is being considered as one of the most outstanding researchers in her field. She can do the work without being paid, as a hidden activity, no more and interestingly enough, she thinks she is not discriminated.

Crucial for older people's education are representations of policy makers, educational staff, educational providers, journalists, employers, public authorities etc. To illustrate this point,

in her unpublished diploma thesis Matajec Judnič *Social Aspects of Baby Boomers* compares the answers coming from three groups of respondents (older people themselves, civil society activists and public institutions) as concerns demographic ageing and the new associated needs. Interviewed representatives of Slovenian public authorities and public institutions dealing with older people are in favour of the current policies regulating the position of older people. They consider them good and protective and see no need to upgrade them, informants however, report that;

(1) authorities are not ready to face nor introduce changes that will be needed due to higher number of older people;

(2) they are aware of the necessity to introduce changes but feel that they lack both knowledge and skills to do it;

(3) their professionals who are responsible for the issues of old age are young and inexperienced concerning the issue, and their attitude is stereotyped;

(4) they do not consider older people as their equal;

(5) they do not see any economic opportunities that might arise as a result of demographic ageing;

(6) they do not think about new generations of retired people with new needs and abilities. As concerns raising public awareness about the need to enable older people to remain contributing, included in society or to get included, she says.

(7) Slovenian Third Age University seems to be the only one in the Slovenian context to be raising awareness about the need to be changing the position of older people in society (Matajec Judnič, 2019).

Stereotyping is defined as primitive thinking schemes that have a tendency to spread quickly based on emotional experience and the opinion of one's social group. Prejudices on the other hand are difficult to be alleviated due to their strong emotional component and discrimination exists when it is based on a characteristic that cannot be changed (age, gender, race, disabilities etc.)

There are many stereotypes about older people and old age, and they persist because they are consolidated by older people themselves due to their lack of consciousness, knowledge and empowerment. Moreover, older people end up using self-debilitating language like "I am getting senile [...]. You will excuse me at my age [...]. I am no good at ... " consolidating the existing stereotypes.

Due to numerous social stereotypes about old age and older people expectations towards older people and the adapted expectations of older people themselves. Already in the pre-retirement time and even more after retirement older people are by rule considered professionally less capable, poor learners, clumsy etc. No wonder if older people adapt to the expectations and their abilities start decreasing.

"It makes me happy now when everybody would like to persuade us, that we do not know and are not able, we have managed to do something that is new for us and overtly recognized" (M. P., 65) said a retired editor of the national cultural radio programme.

Combating stereotypes is at the core of older people's education. At Slovenian Third Age University the struggle against stereotypes has been going on for 35 years by developing and implementing empowering educational programmes and activities, public campaigning, working with journalists and policy makers to change their policies' frailty discourse, to shift their interest from pathological and dependent ageing to normal ageing.

Achieving these goals requires professionals older people's engagement, supported by socially engaged education and socially engaged art.

Socially engaged education and socially engaged art of older people

Socially engaged education and art of older people are about recognizing both older people's contributive abilities and needs and about societal current and anticipated needs. As soon as 1974, Mc Clusky 1974 emphasised that older people had "coping, expressive, contributive and influential needs" all of which are to be met by carefully programmed and implemented older adult education.

Krajnc and Findeisen (1992) argued that education of older people is needed to enable them to participate in social and economic development, though there was no clear idea about how it could be done in practice except for offering assistance to young people with their school work. But what we did know was that older people in education experience greater social fairness (Fraser, 2011), greater equality, collective emancipation and should have the same right to non-formal education as middle aged workers ² (Krajnc, Findeisen 1992, Findeisen 2016).

Older people's education in its own right is empowering and by no means can it be mere transmission of knowledge. It should give older learners the feeling of achievement and not mere enrichment. Halguera, Education of older learners is preferably d'avant garde and necessarily of good quality as to overcome stereotypes concerning older people's ability to learn and their learning allegedly "to kill time". It should be actual, scientifically grounded. It requires research, counselling, guidance of older people. It is to be participative. It encompasses education *of* older people and *about* older people. It can not be just neutral, causal leisure time since it is supposed to construct both older learners themselves and community. This type of education targets older people and it influences both their social environment and society.

"I am glad that older people are seen and their voice due to their involvement in meaningful activities and in a way that is good for society" has recently said one of U3A's students".³

Moreover, socially engaged education and art of older people should in tune with the educational provider's mission statement. They require careful programming and implementation. Therefore engaged education/art of older people presupposes:

topics that are concerned with older people themselves and society;

² In 1984 the author was about thirty years old and her attending a course of Italian language was only natural in the eyes of her social environment while her own older learners enrolled in the then Third Age School was considered as a joke and mere killing time.

³ Quotation is by a university professor about the 5th International Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later Life.

Educational topics and programmes concerned with major social issues preferably those that are urgent but somehow insufficiently raised by policy makers and public authorities;

topics dealing with older people themselves and other socially marginalised groups;

methods: Educational activities involving critical thinking about how the others think and how older people themselves think, including value judgments; educational activities that involve learning by doing and creating in community; Inclusion of thoughtfully chosen and graded learning **methods** that constitutes building a learning and action community and social practice out of older learners; **an appropriate choice of public sites** where education takes place and its achievements are presented; **a structured inclusion in public places** where older people's ideas can be crossed with the ideas of others and spontaneously new activities may be born; **research** of such educational programmes and social practices and their results; **public campaigning; public actions and social practices** where older learners are not just learners. On the contrary they may act as "activists, sociologists, ethnographers, politicians."

Tate Glossary defines and describes socially engaged art as follows:

*"Socially engaged practice, also referred to as social practice or socially engaged art, can include any art form which involves people and communities in debate, collaboration or social interaction. This can often be organized as the result of an outreach or education program [...] Socially engaged practice can be associated with activism because it often deals with political issues."*⁴

To summarize: socially engaged education and art are characterised by meaningful interaction and social engagement. By rule such practices happen *on specific sites* that are open to wider audience. Besides the site *the process itself* is important, less than the final achievement. "It is not enough to take steps which may someday lead to a goal; each step must be itself a goal and a step likewise" argues Goethe.⁵

⁴ Tate web page available on <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice>

⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Peter Eckermann, Frédéric Jacob Soret (1850). "Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret", p.65

Socially engaged art is almost by definition less centred on individual and is less built on the personality of the artist like in conventional arts. Almost by definition it is dependent on the involvement of others besides the instigator of the art work (Helguera, 2011).

Socially engaged art of older people is today quite often identified as mere *social practice*, term which however excludes an explicit reference to art making such social practices used to be called "relational aesthetics" and "community collaborative", "participatory", "dialogic" and public" art (idem).

Older students have a tendency and desire to be individual creators of art while socially engaged art does not allow it. Older students would like to introduce the audience to their individual work, but socially engaged art does not allow it. On the other hand there are also conventions requiring that art individual artists should be visible. Hence, making films within the European projects RefugeesIn we constituted a film crew and did not specifically distribute the roles of film director, cameraman, script girl, editor etc. which was perceived as a mistake.

Socially engaged older artists enrolled in non- formal art making education have to overcome the neglect of the audience or critics or political circles, local community authorities since and their socially engaged art is not considered as an art because they are not professionals, because they are at the edge of society, because they tackle social issues society would prefer overlooking them (migrants, refugees, beggars).

Socially engaged art of older people is related to questions that in principle belong to other disciplines. These questions being treated in art, new insights into them emerge.

Again, as in the case of socially engaged education of older people, socially engaged art of older people is characterised by **meaningful interaction and social engagement**. The sites where engaging social practices happen are carefully chosen, Besides the site *the process itself* is important, less than the final achievement.

Socially engaged education/art at Slovenian Third Age University

Slovenia U₃A started in 1986 with a group of six students of French who enrolled in an experimental programme, learning the system of French language and old age, discussing their own aspirations and had critical views on position of older people in society. What they said was transformed into basic theses of Slovenian Third Age University and its mission statement. They participated in all public events and public campaigning of the emerging U₃A.

Basic education and learning format applied at Slovenian U₃A are **study circles** with both cognitive and action goals. They are supported by the so called third “excluded partner” (Findeisen,) the U₃A, and by all members of the study circle, Learning is purposeful supposing final public appearances and supporting local development (topical exhibitions, professional volunteering activities, translations of locally important literature, psychological support offered, publications, drawing landscape plans for public institutions, civil dialogues, festivals, conferences, round tables, etc.)

The role of art is to be a witness of Man’s dignity (Malraux, 1996). We like to make Man aware of both his greatness and dignity, though he does not know he possesses them. Some of European projects mirrored Slovenian U₃A’s values and perfectly overlapped with their mission statement. By rules these projects’ impelling force gave U₃A the force to go further on the national level.

Volunteering cultural mediators were conceptualized and initially put into practice Co-operation with selected public institutions took place within LACE, a European project in 2006. Our intent was to prepare older people for their role of active citizens.⁶ Studying literature, we came across university studies of cultural mediation at French universities.

So, we conceptualised *volunteering cultural mediation* and the role of cultural mediator adapted to our circumstances. In our case this is a person, a learner in later life, a U₃A student who in an organised and structured way transmits intangible cultural heritage to different audiences. It was important that mediation took place in public institutions and

⁶ Médiation culturelle de l’art (Aix-Marseille 1); Médiation culturelle et communication internationale (Nantes); Médiation de la culture et du patrimoine (Avignon) ...

subsequently make knowledge and skills acquired through studying at Slovenian Third Age University visible, recognized as well as useful for society, Simultaneously we wanted the staff of host institutions enabled for creating new volunteering roles for our students. and we wanted to promote the institution at the same time. The same goal is to be attained by our International Festival of Knowledge in Culture in Later Life and all our activities.

Some *European projects* were perfectly in accordance with our values and mission statement. Therefore they gave us the impelling force to go on and work on the national level. Such a project was *Personal town* tours based on students' exploratory learning; it was highly transformative for the students and U3A. It brought heightened interest in the role of public space into older adult education. Personal itineraries were created based on personal stories and architectural photography of buildings, bridges and other urban spaces. A group of English speaking guides was established, a large number of small scale projects were introduced, like the one of the small number of streets named after women. and exhibition and study about urban invisible fragments, large media coverage. The group appears in international conferences. A doctorate thesis is being prepared etc.

Poetry study circle, creative study circle or photography study circle often appear in public. Students are convinced that making a small vase and taking it home is a valuable act, but supporting social issues is something quite different. The study circle on photography had many thematic appearances like the one titled "I have even met happy employed older adults"

The group of older painters *Želva* published a catalogue a kind of manifesto for older artists and their learning.

Among the most recent and visible socially engaged art making examples are CINAGE European film for active ageing and Refugees In European cinema for social inclusion of refugees. A course on refugees' problematics, legal framework, refugees feelings, fear to change and all about making documentary films ended up in conferences, festivals and films made by older students. *Mariana* is one of them. Knowledge acquired will be exploited in a number of coming projects, festivals etc.

Older people's filmmaking, the true otherness of older people and reaffirmation of older people's social value

Older people are not in the social mainstream and their position is dependent on the generations in the middle. Because these "measure giving generations" have not experienced old age yet in their own body and soul, and because they lack relevant knowledge they have to rely on social stereotypes about older people and old age. So, they compare old age with young age, counting advantages or disadvantages of old age in comparison with young age. Naturally this does not help understanding the true otherness of older people.

Films convey images about older people and teach about how to understand them and deal with them. Films about older people made by younger film directors often deal with issues of older people in a way that is funny and amusing. In fact younger film directors reflect their own fears and incapacities i.e. to rebel, to struggle with institutions, their own quest of love etc. In this type of films older people experience romantic love, they are against conventional expectations, they sing, dance, get tired, oppose totalitarian institutions especially nursing home, they get ill and die happily. In this way the fear of death is denied. In addition to this younger film directors do not know how 80 years old persons feel, how they talk.

The other type of featured films are about pain, long and painful illness and death, loneliness.⁷

Therefore it is important that older people may make films about their different competencies necessary for their active ageing.⁸ Moreover, understanding cinematographic text is important today in order to screen or to make films in old age. Cinematographic text is different from linear written texts and therefore more in tune with fragmented post modern society. Using film in adult education will become an important part in the

⁷ Noćni brodovi (Croatia), Good to go (Slovenia), Die Spätzünder, Die Himmel soll warten (Austria)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORMMD2ieJzE>

⁸ Trailer Joy; Lemon dance; The right to adventure (Short Films CINAGE, 2015, Slovenia) Available on:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8okgwWoiC8>

development of literacy of older people addressing all senses and triggering emotional learning without imposed constraints.

Refugees followed the already validated CINAGE Model. There was a Course Manual, Guide for adult educators, 12 European films on refugees that are role models.

Documentary film and its language were studied in this project.

Discussion

Those who are active do not appreciate those who are inactive or vice versa. There is an important contradiction between the two groups often experienced in older people's study groups with the older students rejecting the presence of rare students still in their active age. Social inclusion of older people is possible on condition each of us has fair access to social resources education and culture being among them and/or we exert an impact on cultural circumstances.

Moreover active ageing is possible if older people are not considered as a burden and are not an excluded group whose lives are not interconnected with lives with many other people. Older people will contribute to the development of society on condition their contribution is expected and valued. Contributive abilities of older people enrolled in empowering education meeting their needs and exploiting their abilities can alleviate harmful stereotypes about old age and older people and may contribute to a more cohesive society. Socially engaged education of older people and socially engaged art of older people by rule make them people seen, heard and recognized helping politicians to create better policies more in tune with contemporary social developments and changed old age. Conceptualizing engaged education and art as well as special practices is still open. Is education socially engaged because the topic deals with social issues or is it because structured and organised educational social practices change older learners into activists, politicians, ethnographers etc? For now there are some assumptions about community and society being necessarily in focus, the importance of the sites where education and its achievements take place, the importance of the process of education and art and lesser importance of the educational attainments similarly to the cultural heritage processes which are more important than their results. With regard to this Tania Brugera says "I don't want art that points to a thing. I

want art that is the thing". This seems legitimate since socially engaged education and art are a way of being engaged, a way of living, creating and doing in community.

Conclusion

By rule engaged education and art of older people are not just casual free time activity but typically serious leisure time, if at all. Education and art are not about learning one's living

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