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Generations In Dialogue, Intergenerational Education And Learning

Active Ageing: Towards a New Policy Agenda

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Generations And Intergenerational Learning

This European year 2012, as we know, pays special attention to older people and to intergenerational solidarity. Those of us who assuming different roles had participated in the preparation of this year, know how difficult it had been to persuade policy makers that the issue of active ageing is in fact the issue of cooperation of generations. If generations do not cooperate or are not in a position to cooperate, no active ageing can be expected.

Introduction

We all have experienced intergenerational ties. Literally all of us, because without them, we would not have survived. It is obvious that generations depend on each other, and our communities, an indeed society as a whole, are dependent on the ties between generations. Speaking about communities, there is at least one characteristic they share. Communities and their supporting ties are rarely a matter of a public or professional debate, or a matter of innovative policies as long as they do not raise problems. Today we have a problem to discuss, a problem of our societies where the traditional family ties of solidarity have become loose due to the fact that the way of

working has changed (family members do not live and work at the same place any more as they used to in pre-industrial times and have become extremely mobile) our societies that need changing in order to remain integrative for all generations.

So the idea of togetherness is already there in the title of the project.

(1) What has made ties, bonds, connections among generations become loose and how to consolidate them;

(2) What does the concept of generation mean and to what extent generations can have common characteristics?

(3) What is intergenerational learning/ education, how can it be made possible, and why do we need it?

(4) A Slovenian case study *We see, we hear, we read together*

These questions followed by a presentation of a case study named *We see, we hear, we read together* questions also underpin the structure of this lecture.

1. What has made ties, bonds, connections among generations become loose and how to consolidate them

Different generations have been born into different communities and different societies. There are words and concepts qualifying the present society (risk, change, uncertainty, competitiveness, responsibility, choosing, taking decisions) *Today's society wants us to function as individuals*. The past society, on the other hand, was offering more safety and stability, it was putting on individuals and structures more constraints and above all it was more hierarchical. The present society is different, as we know, and the most frequently asked question in contemporary society is: "Am I

able to do this and that?" In the past society the most frequently asked question was: "Am I allowed to do this and that"? Generations born into these different societies unavoidably differ and in order to create and consolidate ties, bonds and connections between them, these differences are to be overcome or used as a source.

Like society, *family* is a social unit, performing functions for the larger whole. Therefore it is important how it is structured and how it functions. Around 1960 family became less hierarchical and let its members live in a more individualised way. This caused a lot of problems and family members started searching for support outside their family in the so called "inter-communities" where they started creating different intergenerational ties, bonds and connections: ties of solidarity and co-operation. Personal issues started to be public issues supported by social movements like the one supporting the right to abortion or the women's liberation movement.

In addition, our societies have undergone many changes producing all sorts of inequalities (economic, urban, dwelling, cultural, educational, health inequalities, etc.) and this importantly supports our topic, also inequality based on age. Huge inequalities that we are facing now in our societies should be overcome in order to have a more cohesive society and better ties among generations and other social groups and within communities.

Speaking of community in social sciences the *theory of social capital* has come up replacing to some extent the concept of community, neighbourhood, etc. The central theses of the theory of social capital can be summed up as follows: *relationships matter*. It could be also said: *intergenerational relationships matter*. Or again: *Let's put people first*. By making connections with one another and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things, either they could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common norms, emotions and values with

other members of these networks : to the extent that these networks constitute a resource.

In the theory of social capital *values* can either build or dismantle communities, social capital itself can be either positive or negative. Our societies seem to be dominated by a reduced number of prevailing values (health, family, friends, work). Thus in many countries, especially Eastern European countries, work comes immediately after health. In Germany work comes third after health and family, the same in the Netherlands and in Denmark. But in societies where the prevailing value is work, there is little room for some social groups (generation is not an age, but a social group!) younger and older people are being squeezed to the edge of the society. *A plurality of values would be needed.* Additionally, stereotypes about ages also help dismantling cohesive society. What can be done about dismantling them?

2. What does the concept of generation mean and to what extent can generations have common characteristics

Generations were first shaped into a concept in 1952, in the post war Germany.. The first conceptualization was done by Karl Mannheim in his work "Problem of generations" . An age related concept is *cohorts* where the successive age groups are important, while generations are not an age group, on the contrary *generations are a social group* and should be approached as such." Let what is social be explained by what is social" Emil Dürkheim said. Thus analyses of generations are based on how we perceive its members in social context and in different fields of their life : work, culture, civic engagement, perception of community, experience with education and training, etc. Different fields can be chosen as a basis for comparison (Field, at all, 2008).

Generations are groups of people who have lived in similar cultural and social contexts and generations are marked by their experience of normative and unnormative events

during their life course. How members of different generations develop, is a source of *generational similarities or dissimilarities*, it is a source of their typical common characteristics. But not all generations develop common characteristics. *Generations are produced by social order* and at the same time they create it. Also *social division of work* impacts on generations, making them differ.

Youth is a different generational social group having a different everyday life and a different culture of everyday life. The role of young people is to get ready to take on adult social roles. Today, the transition from youth to adulthood is different from what it used to be. It is individualized, more independent. Some activities which used to belong to adulthood are now being transferred to the time of youth.

Today also *older people* are different from the older people in the past. They are a product of their times and of their life course, but they live in a different social reality, so their identity is also being shaped by this reality. The social group of older people is changing as a result of it. It is no more a roless group. It is also a numerous group and this will unavoidably change also the relationships among generations.

Generations in the middle are currently under a great deal of pressure. Their position is extremely responsible and endangered by the requirements and expectations of the other generations. Knowing that work is a central value in this society, they are not easily ready to share it with other generations, thus producing conflicts between young and older generations.

Ties and bonds, and connections between generations can be in the field of *co-habitation, solidarity, co-operation*. Emotions these ties produce can be extremely different, even opposing; understanding, love, caring emotions, but they can be also ignorance, mild or overt hostility. Knowing this, consolidating ties, bonds and connections between generations seems to be crucial as to avoid much feared "the war of generations" and to construct a more cohesive society for all of us.

3. What is intergenerational learning/ education, how can it be made possible, and why do we need it?

At the Slovenian Third Age University was conducted a research into generational characteristics and how they influenced programming education for people in later life and intergenerational educational programmes. It has been found that not all topics were convenient for intergenerational learning and education, but some were intergenerational par excellence: relation within families and within other communities, rural or urban environment where we live, common events generations lived together in different ways. *The basic aim of an intergenerational educational programme is not so much learning about a common topic, but learning how to create intergenerational ties, or at least both objectives are equally important.* And there lies the greatest challenge for the facilitators of intergenerational learning.

It has also been found that basically intergenerational learning could be about: one generation learning about another generation, two or more generations learning about each other and what seems to be the best, generations learning together and constructing new knowledge together on the basis of reciprocal, mutual and experiential learning.

An important question that has been raised at the end of our research was that we still know very little about the way that people's networks , not only social structures, affect their access to learning. Do these networks function as learning networks or learning communities? To put it differently, how do our social networks help us create and exchange skills, knowledge and attitudes that in turn allow us to tap in to other benefits? If we have more social capital – stronger and more extensive network ties – then are we more likely to learn new things than people with less social capital? And is our learning affected by the types of networks (generational or intergenerational, etc.) we belong to?

Intergenerational learning and cooperation draw on positive sources generations can offer each other. Intergenerational approach is an efficient approach when wanting to create relationships, community, volunteering, etc. Intergenerational initiatives have a direct impact on the level of participation of generations in communities.

(4) We see, we hear, we read together, an example of a truly intergenerational educational and learning programme

In bNf, Bibliothèque nationale de France there was a cluster of events on reading and also an exhibition attracting the cooperation of thousands of amateur photographers, keen on reading. They were supposed to contribute to this exhibition by sending bNf photos or videos representing situations in which people read. The basic thesis of the organisers was that when one reads, one is aware of the meaning of what he reads, but one is also aware of the situation in which one reads. The aim of a cluster of events bNf staged was to make the audience and general public aware of the importance of reading and understand the process of reading.

Students of andragogy and adult education at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana got interested in one of the bNf's events, namely the exhibition *Choses lues, choses vues* (Eng. things read, things seen) and in studying the process of reading. Moreover in those days I was directing a doctorate thesis on how literacy of adults develops under the influence of family members' level and nature of literacy, so it was easy for me to direct my students of andragogy to most relevant interesting studies in the field. Consequently they developed a questionnaire on the attitudes adults have towards reading, they discussed the reading process among them and prepared a leaflet on reading presenting a common event they were asked to stage together with Slovenian Third Age University students.

Simultaneously the same process took place with U3A students involved in the programme Art of story telling. So when both groups, students of andragogy and U3A students met for the first time they were more or less familiar with theory and practice of reading. Both of them suggested that their event *We see, we hear, we read together* should become one of the events staged in Ljubljana (the capital in Slovenia) during the time when Ljubljana was chosen to be the *World capital of reading which gave to the event another dimension*. Both groups invited the Town Library to be involved in the project offering them access to conference rooms and offering them support in staging a public event. Both , the *Town Library* and *U3A* used their institutional power inviting journalists and radio and television studios. Students of andragogy and older U3A students participated in the shaping of the event which on purpose was lead by young students. Radio programmes were recorded by both of them. Young students staged a video presentation of the photos featuring situations of reading they had sent to bNf.

Common loud reading a text belonging to the Slovenian classics set up a climate of mutual understanding and participation and cultural continuity. There are several tangible results of this intergenerational educational programme: generations contributed their knowledge and culture to this event, all of them stepped out into public space shaping it, a permanent cooperation has been established between Faculty of Philosophy and U3A, There are numerous students of andragogy wanting to join U3A, some of them as volunteers, two of them got employed at U3A. The project has become a study case for future generations of andragogy students, it was filmed by ARTE. We set an example of how to join generations in common endeavours and common learning and I think to the extent of our possibilities we developed an initial awareness about what is intergenerational learning and what is not since *intergenerational learning is not just anything*.

Conclusion

The changes family and our societies have undergone over the last decades have brought about looser ties between generations which have would gain being *consolidated into ties of co-habitation, solidarity and co-operation*. This can be done by creating more social capital, more open social networks, as well as better access to knowledge, culture and other social sources. Intergenerational learning and educational programmes constitute a step further in creating new ties among generations and consolidating the already existing ones in need of renovation.

Literature and further reading

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