

Tamara Jare

Slovenian Third Age University

VIR Project – Cultural Mediators - Garden Volunteers Reshaping the Educational Role of a Botanical Garden

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a case study dealing with the conception and development of the *VIR Project* involving several and different actors learning and working for the benefit of the local community. Namely, *Slovenian Third Age University* and *Botanic Gardens Ljubljana* started a joint project establishing a group of cultural mediators-garden volunteers recruited from older students of the Ljubljana U3A. The innovative character of the project lies within the fact that two institutions, a non-governmental and a public institution were joined in common endeavours, both institutions producing knowledge and delivering educational programmes, both institutions in need of wider public recognition and both institutions dealing with general issues concerning the well being of the local community. On one hand the U3A needs to increase the number of opportunities to make older students' learning more visible, more recognized and more useful for the local community. On the other hand Botanical Gardens of Ljubljana need to be supported in their public mission. The project created a learning community of all actors involved, new model social roles have been shaped for older U3A students.

KEY WORDS

Slovenian Third Age University, Botanic Gardens Ljubljana, cultural mediators, garden volunteers, VIR project, volunteering, learning, education of older adults, local community, botany,

The new concept of cultural mediating-garden volunteering. How it was born and how it has been evolving

Slovenian Third Age University has been the leading educational institution for older learners and learning in later life in the country and region for over thirty years now. Its mission is to educate and to empower older people to maintain their active role in society by offering them access to education and culture.

At the time when the project began, many older students at the U3A had been already studying different academic topics. The need to demonstrate the usefulness of their learning and their old and newly acquired knowledge and to make them more visible has evolved into new simultaneously educational and volunteering programs: cultural mediators in museums, cultural mediators in hospitals, Each one teach one movement, to name just a few of them. The beginning of the VIR project coincided with the wish of the U3A to have more natural sciences programmes and the fact that in the vicinity of the U3A were Botanic Gardens Ljubljana and their public educational programmes in the field of botany etc. Botanic Gardens Ljubljana is a university research and educational institution with a 200-year long history and is a learning public space par excellence, though too often understated by the local and national community. These facts were behind the later idea of the VIR project.

In addition to what has been mentioned just now, the U3A is one of the founding members of the *EMIL network* dealing with intergenerational learning and cooperation of generations in Europe. Slovenian Third Age University has been actively and on a volunteering basis participating in the activities of this network. During one of the EMIL network meetings in Lisbon -the project was financially and morally supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation- *Tamara Jare* from Slovenian Third Age University got inspired by the Calouste Gulbenkian's story and love of gardening and she started developing the idea of *a new U3A project relating gardening, volunteering .culture and education of older students and by older students for the benefit of local community.*

First, the project required researching the needs and the readiness of all potential participants

in the project (students-volunteers, their mentors, the U3A and the Botanic Gardens Ljubljana as well the media) to take part in the project meant to develop and to evolve later into a permanent activity. The concept of cultural mediators-garden volunteers was shaped-to motivate students to learn botany, ecology, history, the art of story telling, etc. and to get familiar with the issues of bio diversity and its sustainability making them more responsible in these areas towards community.

The innovative character of this VIR project lies within the fact that a new learning public open space and a learning community have been established joining different actors working together and learning from each other. There is a lot of mutual learning, reciprocal learning, experiential learning and above all learning by doing in this learning community. Cultural mediators- garden volunteers are not only volunteers -different botanical gardens in Europe and elsewhere have known volunteers for decades - but they also act as an active and a learning tie between the two educational institutions and the community.

This concept presupposes also changes in the role of the Botanic Gardens Ljubljana which is no more just a university and educational institution, but has become an institution that closely collaborates with an important NGO, is concerned with the issue of aging and empowers its older volunteers to step out meeting the needs of local community and society as a whole in the field of ecology, environmental protection and sustainability as well as ageing. At the same time it offers a stage, public space, for performing different educational and cultural activities of U3A students, joining the latter with the visitors of the Botanical Gardens Ljubljana.

From the very beginning the project has been pursuing several objectives:

- introducing the practice of combined education and garden volunteering drawing upon older students' culture, experience and knowledge,

- introducing new types of active and acting relationships of older students with the local community, and above all with younger generations,

-protecting the bio-diversity of the Botanical Gardens Ljubljana and

-raising public awareness about the need to protect bio-diversity and the need to enable new social roles for older people adapted to their wish to gain knowledge and to offer it to local community.

VIR Project, recent and future activities

A year after cultural mediators-garden volunteers started working, the VIR project got financial support of the Municipality of Ljubljana. The city recognized this project as an important one for all older people themselves and the local community.

The VIR Project -VIR being the Slovenian acronym for Garden Volunteers and Invasive Species - has been offering to the garden volunteers the possibility to learn about the botany of invasive plant species, this education being taken over by Botanic Gardens Ljubljana. Together with this institution our garden volunteers have acquired knowledge about invasive plants and now they struggle against them.

In the future we are planning to increase the number of active garden volunteers, to strengthen the learning ties among them and to develop educational programs for autonomous and group learning. Garden volunteers will become *plant ambassadors* with better knowledge about different plants. They will be responsible for presenting their plants in Slovene and English to the visitors of Botanical Gardens of Ljubljana. More intergenerational learning and events will be taking place in the Botanic Gardens Ljubljana. We are planning to customize our present educational programs and the new ones to the needs of all who are involved in the project. We are also planning to intensify the accompanying public campaigning, thus changing the idea of older peoples 'possible social roles in later life.

Conclusion

Cultural mediators-garden volunteers build a bridge between Slovenian Third Age University and Botanic Gardens Ljubljana, demonstrating what active aging based on permanent education and learning is or can be. The project has shown one of the ways towards reestablishing a more cohesive, more inclusive and community based society. The project objectives have evolved from simple learning botany and simple volunteering in botanic gardens to a clear wish to make older U3A students actively participate in the community for the common benefit drawing upon their past, present and future culture and knowledge. Consequently, the local community has started recognizing older garden volunteers' potential for its own well being. Moreover, this project enables the necessary transformation of a public institution enabling its approaching the members of the community. Basically, it has been found that a double transformation has been made possible through this project: the transformation of older students themselves and the transformation of the community and its actors.

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