

How the Slovenian third age university has been established: its present roles

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Professor Krajnc is a specialist in international adult education and social participation. Ana undertook postdoctoral studies at OISE, Canada. As a professor at the University of Ljubljana she introduced new studies of andragogy and established the new national journal, Perspectives of adult education. Ana is co-founder of the Slovenian Third Age University and its president. She has been considered a "Grand Dame" of andragogy, especially in Europe.

There is no lifelong education without the education of older adults

Inspired by the new concept of lifelong education, new areas of education were challenged in the second half of last century. Previously, adult education practices tended to follow primarily the needs of jobs and work. Slovenia could not readily submit to lifelong education, because education is "life wide" as well. At the same time, the third age has prolonged up to 30 and more years of life. Can we talk of lifelong education if we don't also include the last decades of life? Older adult education brings new aspects and emphasis on the social role of lifelong education.

Journalists showed great interest in the new phenomenon of third age universities. Their first and common question was: "Older people have finished with their jobs, why would they need education?" There are two immanent functions of the human race: people are born for learning and doing, like the birds are for flying, from their birth to death. They die if these two functions would be stopped.

The beginning of Slovene third age university

We were inspired by our cooperation with UNESCO, through Paul Lengrand and Pierre Vellas from France, who created the first third age universities. The first experimental group started in 1984. An advert in the newspaper attracted one student. Some of our friends and relatives joined the first study circle. The public considered our advert to be a joke or mistake. The social stereotype about older people was very strong among our public. In the beginning older people demonstrated reservation about the idea and needed encouragement from friends and family. Also, in the next few years, when entering the Third Age University, people would appear in the company of neighbours and friends. But later senior education was commonly accepted and known also among younger people saying: "I don't look with fear to the time of my retirement anymore, because I have a different perspective now: the third age university."

The media who were interested in the phenomenon, helped to promote the idea of third age education, challenging negative old age stereotypes.

Democratisation asks for a national network of third age universities

From the very beginning of the Department of Andragogy, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana began in 1985/86 two-semester long continuing education for future leaders of local third age universities and their potential mentors. Democratisation of education really begins when it reaches people in small towns and offers them equal opportunities. The response from the public showed us a major social need. The interest was great; letters and calls enquiring about learning possibilities abounded. The Slovene Third Age University was established as a national, independent NGO with the status of "special social importance" supporting a basic network for older adult education.

Today the Slovene third age university consists of a network of 55 local members. Modest financial support to all members is provided by our Ministry of Education, local communities and via engagement in EU projects. It is multiplied by regular, constant volunteer work of third age university leadership, mentors, animators and students themselves. Without voluntary work, third age education in Slovenia could not have experienced its broad expansion. In 2006 it ranked second in Europe, following only Austria, in the rates of older people pursuing education (Source: Eurostat 2007)



Basic concept: older adults are the subjects of their own education

The concept of older adult education was carefully prepared by the Department of Andragogy, University of Ljubljana. Older students should be, according to their knowledge and life experiences, the "subjects" of their education in a full sense and not passive objects, when education and learning derive from personal interests and are carried out with joy. But at the same time their new knowledge may lead them to new activities of work and engagement in local community plans, projects, and activities. Part of our concept was from the very beginning that older adult education has goals and objectives: gaining new knowledge and engagement in activity can help older people to overcome social exclusion.

The basic unit is a study circle consisting of a mentor, animator and 10 to 14 students. Small study groups are more intimate and can more readily meet the social needs of older people for new social relations after their retirement, overcoming empty family nests and social exclusion. Study circle functions as a primary social group like the family does. All members are connected via friendship, responsibility to each other, cooperation, and trust among themselves, leading to open communication and keeping negative emotions to a minimum. Mentors provide professional services, working as external collaborators. Certain operations can be taken over by animators, who are students, members of their study group. They expand the possibilities to learn by conducting extra mural events (concerts, exhibitions, excursions, visits to various organisations, media, visitors, internet links etc.). They also keep the link between their study group and its leadership, taking care of the information flow in both directions.

Students are active in all stages of education, as pointed out before: they are subjects (and not objects) of the whole educational process. They co-operate in shaping the annual or long-term study programme; they suggest the most effective methods of learning; they help to solve problems, representing, together with mentors and leaders, the Third Age University in the media. Based on their social capital they have obtained throughout their life they support their education in various ways.



Older adult education becomes a way of life



The Third Age University is not a school which lasts for 2-4 years. Students who join it, tend to stay for ever with it. We have students who were with us for 20 or more years. The population of students grows according to the “snowball principle” and constantly enlarges. The study group has its entity and usually stays together even if members change the subject of learning, because it is their “social nest”.

Our research shows that older students are very sensitive to the social climate

in the study group. Frequently some who enter the new study circle, usually in October each year, will after a few meetings come back to the office and ask to change their study group. Their usual reasons would be: “there is one person in the group, who disturbs me very much”; “I could not connect with this mentor”; “the group did not accept me”; “there are several things, which disturb me in this group”, etc. Mainly, they are looking for another “nest”, to which they would better fit and learn more efficiently. We call it “changing the nests” which happens each year. Older students are socially conscious, and they want to learn efficiently, in a favourable social climate with positive emotions.

Is this the privilege of education in older age? Can children in regular schools ask for something like this? How can they change class or teacher without affecting their social status? Even in adult education environments older adults are under constant pressure of other obligations; they need to adjust to the situation.



Conclusion

The concept of third age education has been continuously re-developed and expanded, modified to include the theoretical and practical developments at home and abroad. During the crises in 2009 we introduced the social trend of “each one, teach one” or education in pairs of mentor-student, sometimes located at a student’s home. Knowledge can be seen as a present, where many of our students became

mentors to other people. We have recommended this approach when the student had learning difficulties or could not pay the fee for education, or emotional problems such as a fear for computers.

In the last few years, during the pandemic, quick digitalization of the older population and distance learning has been required. The change necessitated other forms of keeping in touch with our students such as video telephone calls, listening to the same music on you-tube, singing together a song from their homes, groups celebrating someone's birthday, communicating by zoom with a glass of champagne in their hands, or by e-mails. Their imagination discovered more new ways to communicate. At the same time third age universities have put greater effort to improve the digitalisation of older people.

Basically, older adult education at our third age universities involves social responsibility and at the same time respect to individualization of an older student's education. Without these aspects, there is no learning effectiveness.

Bibliography

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