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The Importance of Activating Learning in the Third Age²

Abstract: This article contains the discussion on possible different meanings of the phenomenon of activating learning, their special significance in the learning process of the elderly, as well as the role of this phenomenon in the cross-generational dialogue and its possible contributions in the Danube countries' effort to further the development and integration of the European society. This work analyses the differences, in a didactic sense, of this concept, as well as its various roles and functions in the learning processes in childhood, adulthood, and old age. The paper seeks answers to the following question: when is activating learning that learning which carries the potential for change and progress, and which changes the misconceptions and prejudices about the elderly's notion of self? As a relational category, activating learning requires dialogue and interlocutors on the other side from which many shortcomings originate, but it also requires learning about the basic advantages of this form of learning over other forms. This type of learning requires social investment, and it is the reason why one can find various options for activating learning for seniors especially in developed and more organised societies. However, the efforts to remove individual and social barriers to activating learning and support for seniors are common across the board.

Key words: active ageing, activating learning, intergenerational dialogue.

Introduction

Active Ageing and Intergenerational Dialogue (especially in the Danube Countries) required that the phenomenon of activating learning be considered from various points of view: the possible meanings of this phenomenon, its special

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significance in the learning process of the elderly, its role in the cross-generational dialogue, and the possible contribution of active learning to the further development and integration of European society in the Danube countries.

Notwithstanding the universality and the complexity of the notion of activating learning, there are certain limitations to the broader generalisation of its meaning. These limitations have been defined as: the possibility of providing the meaning of the notion by referring to the specific social context to which it relates, the time frame in which it is positioned, and the cultural and education system within which it is considered.

Defining the activating of learning theoretically is more difficult as it hampers its relational meaning, whereby it relates to the learning process that takes place in the correlation with, and common activities of the person learning, as well as the environment (relations between the individual and the society) in which they learn. Our focus of interest regarding activating learning is the relation between the elderly and society, and the significance and importance that the activating of learning can have for the elderly and for the society.

What is activating learning?

Activating learning is, first and foremost, learning with strong social and psychological tasks and effects. The tasks and effects relate equally to the individual who is learning and to the surroundings in which they learn. Activating learning is a socio-psychological construct and it is most frequently considered and researched in two scientific areas: in the educational sciences within didactics and methodology, and within the field of psychology in developmental psychology and lifespan developmental psychology.

Didactical meaning of activating learning

New paradigms of learning, together with their extensions, threaten to lead to “pan-pedagogism” – the idea that everybody, with the aid of everything, learns about everything, everywhere. The *differentia specifica* of activating learning with regards to other forms and types of learning is that for the activating of learning the motivation and needs of the person learning are as equally important as the learning process and the learning outcomes themselves. In the didactical sense of the word, activating learning can be defined as the specific strategies, techniques and learning styles (or styles of learning process management) whereby the one who learns produces (creates, develops, establishes, redefines, changes)

the mechanisms that encourage him/her towards new forms of thinking, acting, behaving or feeling.

In the papers, the notion of activating learning is used in different contexts – i.e. meanings. In the didactic sense, activating learning is sometimes referred to as self-directed learning, or it is otherwise considered as a key word in the concept of LLL. The entirety of the learning process incorporates different key elements typical of it: activating the desire to learn, activating the learning material, and activating the learning ability. As for the methods upon which activating learning in seniors' education relies, those that foster self-directed learning, learning through research, and learning in peer groups are stressed. Some methods have also been defined within those contexts that gain strength through special contents: this includes learning through arts, history, dance, or theatre. Definitions of activating learning through negations are also not rare: e.g. learning is not about accumulating knowledge, but about being able to deal with information and conduct tasks appropriately; or, activating learning is not about theoretical teaching and formal exercises playing an active role in intellectual development, but it instead places the emphasis on empirical learning which relies on practice, interpersonal communication, and inductive skills.

Meaning and importance of activating learning in different ages

In the research on the significance and importance of learning for the development of people, the relationship between development and learning in different theoretical concepts of learning have been positioned differently, as have been its significance and importance in different ages of life. The proven power and participation of learning spans the continuum from becoming a human being to living as a human being. A rough classification of the periods of human life that uncovers different meanings of the activating of learning (which is to follow) at the same time points out the roughest differences encountered in the understanding of the activating learning phenomenon.

When we speak of activating learning in childhood, we usually speak of learning that provides intellectual development, the “material” for the development of dispositions; and of learning that precedes development and “run” merged with biological development. In adulthood, it is learning that is related to actual adult socialisation as a response to the new life, to the environmental and working context, or expected changes. In the third age, it is a bridge between individual and society, needed for successful integration in a changing society. And in the fourth age, it is a functional learning that secures or “keeps” the potential for the development and establishment of relationships with others in a new way.

Activating learning in old age

Activating learning is a concept focused on the activity of the person at the centre of the learning process. When the elderly population is concerned, this is learning in which personal life experience dominates, and it incites practical activities and actions within a real social environment. This type of learning brings together two types of knowledge and experience: knowledge which comes from experience: practical, personally experienced and filled with emotions, and experience which comes from school, which is academic and professional. In activating learning, practical activities are joined together with the complex internal mental activities, forming a foundation for this process.

The concept of activating learning is closely connected with multiple intelligences theory. A stronger reliance on this theoretical model in the process of learning organisation of the elderly can increase the efficiency of learning and the “emotional charge” of knowledge that is being built. The implications of multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1999) have been analysed and researched mostly in the school learning of children. The transfer of such findings to the learning of the elderly is limited, and so are the critical remarks on the fallacies that this theoretical concept can cause in the organisation of children’s learning (see e.g. Žiropadja). The theory of multiple intelligences should achieve an authentic application in the understanding and organisation of the learning of the elderly.

Apart from the standard ones, there are also special dimensions of activating learning which bear importance for the learning of the elderly:

- Activating learning is a simultaneous learning performed by mind, body, soul, emotions, and senses;
- It is the learning in which one takes and gives to others;
- It is the learning in which one feels the presence of others and the others also feel their presence;
- It is the learning in which one feels alive and lives as a human being;
- It is the learning through which others comprehend the learning individual;
- It is the learning which raises the awareness of one’s own place and role in society;
- It is the learning which raises the awareness of the society’s age-based discrimination.

Activating learning is made meaningful by the establishment of a firm connection between the person who learns and their surrounding, since the products of

activating learning are the development of practical and mental skills that become the means for the implementation of aims with an immediate purpose in life.

Centrifugal and centripetal POWER of Activating learning

Activating learning is, as it has been mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a relational category: it is the learning in which there are two sides participating and learning at the same time – the one who learns and the society in which the learning is conducted. It is a two-sided and reciprocal process. The effect of learning on one side is proportional to the “permission” from the other side.

Activating learning in old age, based on recent scientific findings on old age and ageing, as well as on the existing demographic trends, means that the society should, as Glendenning (2000) believes, change the functionalist perspective towards the elderly, where they are treated as the social, medical and economic problems of the society. Instead, the elderly should be seen within a socio-political framework whereby it is believed that the first task of learning is to raise the awareness in the elderly of the society’s systematic discrimination towards them because of their age. The elderly population’s learning can be a way to raise awareness among them of their role in the society, their quality of life, personal growth, and self-fulfilment. Future research should be able to show who controls the processes of learning by the elderly, and whose interests are served by learning programmes. It should be explored how the prejudice which the elderly have about themselves, and the society, can be changed through learning, and how such experience can raise the awareness of the elderly with regards to themselves and their social surroundings.

Such a paradigm shift on old age introduces learning to the personal and social processes as a centrifugal and centripetal force for social integration, inclusion, and cohesion. Activating learning of the elderly is the centripetal force that moves the elderly from the margins of social life towards the centre of the society. But, the society’s learning about old age also has a centrifugal force, since it opens up a space in the centre of society and towards the social margins, the space for mobility and integration of the elderly. The relationship towards the elderly and old age, based on modern scientific discoveries, directs the professionals, politicians, and other age groups in the society to redefine the areas and activities of which they are in charge, or to govern them and create a possibility within these areas for a new quality of life for the elderly, their mobility, activism, and participation.

This is how activating learning becomes only the complementary force through which the elderly should fill in the space that opens up in new social

circumstances. Learning is the strength through which the social community can take the elderly towards the centre of social life. However, it is also the strength for the elderly, so that they can learn how to use these spaces towards the sources of social life. Modern scientific findings on ageing and old age form the basis for all the measures that are undertaken within different social policies, in order to provide a correct and adequate response to the different needs of the elderly. On the other hand, the “usability” of the new social policy for the elderly depends on empowering seniors to use personal and societal resources, while developing proactive mechanisms of reacting to new social circumstances brought on by ageing and the times we live in. Lifelong learning for all can be provided through this necessary balance that arises from the society of knowledge. Lifelong learning is the opportunity for seniors to use the benefits and the achievements of modern civilisation, and to put this knowledge to the function of preservation and improvement of health and life quality, of professional resources, social contacts, communication and social participation, personal fulfilment, preservation of independence, functionality, and self-esteem.

When does activating learning carry the power for change and progress?

Scientific knowledge about old age accepted by politicians, professionals, and younger generations should remove misconceptions and prejudice, negative associations, inadequate strategies, unproductive solutions, and the waste of time and energy in the shared lives of different generations. Change and progress can happen when the consciousness and the entrepreneurial spirit of older people (which are related to their own needs and rights, their social position, learning needs, and benefits brought by learning) exert pressure on the society to open space for a new type of participation by seniors in social life, and for activities through which they could learn to have a different quality of life. Change and progress happens when older people and society have a consensus about their interests. Without such an agreement, activating learning is frustrating for both sides and can easily slip into a different type of misuse of the elderly.

The risk is equal on both sides. Without learning on both sides, the door for a better life for the elderly will not open, and the elderly will not be able to achieve a better quality of life. A more detailed analysis of this relationship in Serbia is given in the critical consideration of the role of the education of seniors in the Strategy for The Development of Social Care of Seniors in Serbia (Medić, 2010).

In this relationship of causality both parties' contribution is contentious: we can ask how much the society is prepared to learn and to base its development

strategies on modern knowledge and redefined understanding of old age, and on the other hand, how much the elderly are prepared to learn and thus change the quality of their lives and their social position. According to Eurostat data, the number of the elderly who are participating in different activities of education and learning, indicates a discouragingly small percentage of participants (EUROSTAT, 2012), so it seems that learning will only slowly open pathways for a better life for the elderly.

When discussing the importance of activating learning in the third age, the question of who the seniors we have in mind are, is rightly posed. It is the question of whether we are talking about the minority included in various learning and education processes, and to whom activating learning should be introduced as the most suitable form of seniors' learning, or if this elderly learning paradigm should be promoted and learning should be made closer and more desirable for the millions of seniors who are not learning.

Do seniors love to learn? No!

When different issues regarding learning in third age are considered, there seems to be a taciturn agreement on the fact that the elderly love to learn and that they are only awaiting such an invitation. Experience in working with seniors, and the research of their needs and learning motivations are facing us with the reality that they mostly say no. They do not wish to learn and are stating different reasons for this:

- Too old to learn
- Their mind is not as functional as when they were young
- Do not see and hear well
- Do not react quickly as when they were young
- Technology is too complicated
- They are not interested
- Do not see purpose
- Lack of money
- Lack of time
- Illness, dependence on others

What do they say “NO” to?

They say “NO” to the learning that they are familiar with and that they have experienced, and that is not appropriate to their actual needs, opportunities, interests and purpose:

- NO to learning that is formal and that they had already been introduced to in their previous education
- NO to learning that is informal and that they are not familiar with, since they do not consider it to be valuable
- NO to learning that is a tool for achieving other goals
- NO to learning that is based on didactical pragmatism
- NO to learning that is centred on the educational content or the teacher
- NO to learning that is based on memorisation, reproduction, and repetition
- NO to learning that is created according to the different norms and averages
- NO to learning that is competitive
- NO to learning in which they need to join/affiliate with others
- NO to learning – because they have accepted the stereotypes that others have about their learning

What do they not know about learning?

Activating learning consists of various activities that the participants are conducting but not recognizing as learning, although we as professionals do recognize them to be learning. Many seniors are learning continuously but they are not aware that they are learning; they are not conscious of that because of different concepts, in our minds and theirs, of what learning is.

- They do not know, as we know, that they are learning and that we are researching new ways for their learning.
- They do not know that we could offer them significant support in that process.
- They do not know that many people similar to them are interested in the same things, and that we could support their connection, cooperation, and networking.
- They do not know that many young people are interested in the same things, and that we could join them together in the right way.
- They do not know that we have the institutions and organizations that could organize learning in the manner appropriate for them.
- They do not know that we have trainers who could support their learning in the way they require.

- They do not know that their learning is in the society's best interest.
- They do not know that they are making a contribution to themselves as well as to the society by learning.
- They do not know that educational policies and strategies are focused on their needs, interests, and abilities.
- They do not know that society is changing the functionalistic perspective towards seniors that treats them as a handicapped group and a social problem, and that society is seriously counting on them.
- They do not know that they have a right to spend the money from education funds in which they were investing during their entire career, on their own education also.

What is the society's responsibility for activating learning?

In brief:

- That all that we know is the reality and the truth.
- That all that we know should also be known to seniors.

Differences in perception of the importance of Activating LEARNING IN developed and in transitional countries

Compared to developed countries, in transitional and less developed countries:

- There is less and less of the above mentioned "truth" present in society concerning our knowledge about the possibilities and importance of seniors' learning
- Less and less seniors know what we know and what the "truth" is regarding learning in old age
- In developed countries, seniors are a resource for the society, but in the less developed ones, they are the victims of the transition
- Paradox: In developed countries, old people are becoming older, but in transitional countries, as victims, they are becoming younger and younger
- In less developed countries, life in old age is ten years shorter and the perspective on life is different! (Mercken, 2004)
- Different personal concerns of seniors in different countries: in developed countries 10% worry about their own income and in transitional

countries 50% are extremely worried about their life circumstances. Females are more worried than males (*ibid.*)

- Those who worry more expect other to resolve their problems more. For them, the need for activating learning is bigger.

In less developed countries education is less valued by everyone: the society as well as its third generation. Activating learning is more a frustration for seniors and the society than a meeting point of real interests for those two sides (on the difficulties for the application of the EC recommendations regarding education in less developed and transitional countries see Medić and Popović, 2007)

How to remove individual and social barriers and support activating learning for seniors?

- Through activating the desire for learning through introducing the new learning paradigm to the elderly;
- Through creating new learning opportunities that are closer to the expectations of the elderly;
- Through merging seniors' activities with the learning programmes, and by creating the programmes on the basis of seniors' activities, not vice versa;
- Through the usage of activating learning methods in seniors' education and self-directed learning;
- Through preparing specialized professionals/educators, and reducing the stereotype that adult education and education of the elderly could be performed by the same teachers and with the same methods;
- Through the diversification of learning activities for seniors, and inclusion of all kinds of acting, thinking, and feeling;
- Through creating special programmes and learning activities for a shared cross-generational learning, and not simply adding the elderly to the programmes for other generations or simply including younger people in the programmes for the elderly;
- Through the development of a sustainable structure for lifelong learning with room for seniors' learning;
- Through society's financial support for improving the quality of learning and participation of the elderly in the learning activities (on differences in indicators and measuring the quality in adult and elderly education see Medić *et al*, 2011).

Activating learning is, in the first place, an issue related to the new space opened up in the society for seniors, to which they arrive through learning.

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Značaj aktivirajućeg učenja u trećem dobu⁴

Apstrakt: Članak predstavlja diskusiju o mogućim različitim značenjima fenomena aktivirajućeg učenja, njegovog značaja za proces učenja kod starijih osoba i ulogu u transgeneracijskom dijalogu. U tekstu se raspravlja i o mogućem doprinosu razvijanja koncepta aktivirajućeg učenja u naporima podunavskih zemalja za razvoj i integraciju u evropsku zajednicu. Rad analizira razlike u didaktičkom kontekstu, kao i različite uloge i funkcije učenja u detinjstvu, odraslom i starom dobu, i traži odgovore na sledeće pitanje: Kada aktivirajuće učenje – učenje koje sa sobom nosi snagu promene i napretka – uspeva da menja pogrešne postavke i predrasude starijih osoba? Aktivirajuće učenje je kategorija koja zahteva dijalog sa sagovornikom, koja ima mnogo mana, ali i bazične prednosti u odnosu na druge vrste učenja. Za realizaciju ove vrste učenja neophodna je uključenost socijalne sredine, pa stoga postoje brojne opcije za aktivirajuće učenje starih u različitim razvijenim i organizovanim društvima. Učestali su i naponi da se uklone individualne i socijalne barijere za aktivirajuće učenje i podršku starijim osobama.

Ključne reči: aktivno starenje, aktivirajuće učenje, intergeneracijski dijalog.

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