A new lifelong learning model based on intergenerational exchange: 
Premises and foreseen benefits

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Received October 22, 2009; revised December 31, 2009; accepted January 12, 2010

Abstract

Europe is facing within the last decade important shifts within its age related population structure, being confirmed an empathic process of population aging. Within the framework of the European project titled \textit{Intergenerational Learning: from Diagnostic to Impact Evaluation – CROSS AGES}, an integrated learning model based on the support and enhancement of intergenerational exchange was defined, as a lever for promoting successful ageing (active ageing) and social inclusion of older people in the local communities. The project identified a series of LLL methodologies and tools designed to meet the specific requirements of older people’s learning, such as motivation, contents of experience, communication and transmission means, flexibility needs in terms of time and methods, in order to favour the complete fulfilment and active participation of older people in the different living and working contexts. Because of social and demographical changes mentioned before, older and younger people may have to cooperate together in their current activities at workplace and even outside of it. However, the intergenerational exchange and cooperation may encounter some difficulties, as different generations use ‘different languages’, have different social and working practices, and activate and work at different paces.

In order to study and promote intergenerational exchange between young and older adults, University of Padua, the coordinator of the CROSS AGES project, developed a battery of questionnaires, called Motivation to Acquire, Use and Transfer knowledge (MAUT), in order to assess the intergenerational knowledge exchange. The MAUT battery was applied in three European countries: Italy, Romania and France and, thus, the research results reveal the similarities and differences concerning the motivation to acquire and transfer knowledge in the working domain. Still, the focus of the present article is on the intergenerational exchange premises in Romania and Italy, a comparative analysis being offered.

Keywords: Intergenerational learning; active aging; age stereotypes; workforce.

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Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 2 (2010) 2761–2765

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1. Introduction

1.1. An aging society: demographical and social changes in Europe

People over 60 years of age make up 18.6 per cent of the population in Europe. One third of Europe’s population will be aged 60 or over in 2025, with a particularly rapid increased in those aged 80 or over. The number of older people aged 65 – 79 has increased significantly since 2000 and will continue to do so until around 2050.

In the European Commission Communication regarding adults’ learning, one out of the five key messages for widening the adults’ participation in education concerns the third age population: the fourth key message: Investments in older population and in immigrants”. In the Action Plan which followed this Communication (“It is always a good time to learn”, 2007) are provided concrete measures to be undertaken at policy and public management levels, which mean that educational provisions are also regarded in order to increase the rate of participation in education according to the “Europe 2010” objectives (Europe to become the most competitive and inclusive society).

The lifelong learning philosophy argues through itself the imperativeness and usefulness of such action: “LLL is of key importance for individuals of all ages and holds an array of benefits for them and society. It promotes their full economic and societal participation, enables them to be better informed and more active citizens, contributes to their personal well-being and fulfilment, supports their creativity and innovation and increases their efficiency as workers and volunteers. Learning is intrinsic and we engage in learning throughout our whole lives.” (v. „Lifelong learning as a tool for all ages”, 2007 - The European Older People Platform)

Aging population also implies that a large part of the workforce is middle-aged or older. Old workers are remaining in or re-entering the workforce, such that the percentage of older workers has gradually increased over the last two decades - this growth is expected to continue.

1.2. Age discrimination and age stereotypes

Many current studies are examining the effects older workers have on the workforce, partly with the aim of seeking ways to improve the work conditions of this group and their work relationships with other age groups of workers.

Slagter (2007) claims that in order to motivate their employees, managers should invest effort in satisfying their needs in line with a hierarchical theory of human needs (Maslow, 1954).

As employees grow older, there is an increased need to encounter respect, whether self-respect or respect given to or received from others. The same is true regarding needs for self-fulfillment. Both these needs act as a motivator for the senior worker (Keuning, 1998). Moreover, Heymann and Terlien (2003) showed that older workers want work that has a meaning, and want to feel useful in the workplace.

Besides this, workers can suffer age discrimination that is often based on generalized assumptions or casual stereotypes. Although both younger and older persons may be affected by such stereotypes (for example, younger persons are often assumed to lack maturity; older people are often assumed to lack flexibility, motivation and ability to absorb new ideas), the negative impact of age stereotypes and prejudice is particularly marked in older workers (see S. Fredman, ‘The Age of Equality’, in S. Fredman and S. Spencer, Age as an Equality Issue: Legal and Policy Perspectives, Oxford: Hart, 2003, pp.21-70).

Some studies have shown that older people may encounter particular difficulties in performing complex and demanding tasks (such as those requiring monitoring and responding to multiple sources and types of information); an age-related decline in performing jobs that require these abilities (e.g., airline pilot) may therefore also be expected (Schulz & Salthouse, 1999). However, these types of job are not typical. Furthermore, aging appears to have little detrimental effect in some professional and artistic fields, and may ever be related to improved performance. The best example of this concerns artists and musicians: their best work often occurs in later life.

Apart from these acknowledged examples, most research has shown that negative stereotypes about age are largely inaccurate; indeed, Falkenstein and Sommer (2007) suggest that there is no reason to consider older workers as less productive than younger counterparts. Kolev, Falkenstein and Yordanova (2005) recorded event-related potentials (ERPs) from two groups of adult subjects - younger (mean 22 years) and older (mean 58 years) - who were asked to perform a four-alternative choice-reaction task, in which four different letters A, E, I, and O were
delivered as stimuli; the task was to respond to each letter with a predefined finger. They found the expected reaction time to slow down in the older adults. The authors suggested that this behavioural slowing was not due to delays in stimulus processing (as reflected by latencies of early ERP components), or in response selection (as reflected by the onset of the lateralized readiness potential); but to an alteration of movement-related components, in particular an amplitude enhancement and prolongation of the motor-related potential in the cortex contra lateral to the responding hand. Consequently, the overt response requires a higher activation level in older subjects; this extra-activation needs time and hence prolongs reaction time with aging.

In other words, this behavioural slowing is not due to slowing in decision-making about response selection; instead, it seems that older adults need higher cortex activation in order to trigger the motor response. However, it also appears that this slowing allows them to react more carefully as they attempt to avoid mistakes.

According to Rhodes’ (1983) comprehensive review of studies of age and work performance, there is equal support for observation that job performance declines, increases or remains the same with age. Rhodes (1983) stated that these contrasting results are mainly dependent on job type and performance measure. Waldman and Avolio (1986) substantially confirmed these results. The most justified conclusion therefore appears to be that age often has little or no relationship to job performance, but that some exceptions may be expected in certain jobs (Schulz & Salthouse, 1999).

Despite age stereotyping, many older workers have a strong desire to work and are as competent as their younger counterparts, or even more so. Discriminating against older workers because of age is therefore detrimental to the individual - as well as being illegal - and in addition probably also represents a loss to an organization of valuable and productive workers (Schulz & Salthouse, 1999).

1.3. A concrete experience: CROSS AGES project

As a response to the above mentioned, University of Padova, Department of General Psychology developed a questionnaire - the MAUT battery through Cross Ages Project.

Inter-Generational Learning: from Diagnostic to Impact Evaluation (Cross Ages) project is aimed to give a contribution in favour of older people’s active participation in our society, through the definition of an integrated learning model based on the support and enhancement of intergenerational exchange, as a lever for promoting successful ageing (active ageing) and social inclusion of older people in the local communities. The project defined a series of LLL methodologies and tools designed to meet the specific requirements of older people’s learning, such as motivation, contents of experience, communication and transmission means, flexibility needs in terms of time and methods, in order to favour the complete fulfilment and active participation of older people in the different living and working contexts.

1.4. Researching the motivation to acquire, use and transmit knowledge: the MAUT questionnaire

The MAUT battery was developed to evaluate the willingness of someone to exchange and share abilities and knowledge with people of other generations and to analyze which factors could impact on the willingness to intergenerational exchange. The MAUT questionnaire was administrated in three European countries: Italy, Romania and France and, thus, the research results reveal the similarities and differences concerning the motivation to acquire and transfer knowledge in the working domain. But the focus of this article is on the intergenerational exchange premises in Romania and Italy, a comparative analysis being offered.

1.5. Results of the MAUT research: comparative analysis for Italy and Romania

The use of the MAUT questionnaire, has enabled an accurate research to be carried out both in Italy and Romania, regarding the beliefs, the preferences and the emotions that characterize the relations in the working and interpersonal environment.

The preliminary analyses have shown that the questionnaires administered to Italians and Romanians is compliant to the same factorial structure for all the scales, except for one: the scale “After retirement”. The discrepancy indicated for the scale “After retirement” may be explained formulating various hypothesis.
It may be argued that there are cultural differences that lead to the assigning of the same items, interpretations that have a different meaning on grounds of nationality. This theory is supported by the argument that the questionnaire was drawn up by an Italian research group and it is exactly for the questionnaires administered in Italy that the intended factorial structure is complied with.

It could also be taken into account the hypothesis that it is about the translation of the text from one language to the other. The words in Romanian may not adequately mirror the meaning expresses by the items in the original language.

The insufficiency of the sample is a subsequent element that needs not to be neglected and that bears upon a certain importance in explaining the scarce accuracy indicated by the elaboration of Romanian data for this scale. There are only 21 subjects that belong to the categories “Old workers” and “Students of the Third Age” and who have filled in the last section of the questionnaire. Such a number is obviously too low and it might not suffice to obtain accurate and generalizing results.

For the emotions scale it also emerged the presence of two items with low and ambivalent saturations regarding the Romanian sample, but it did not alter the factorial structure of the scale that remains the same for both samples: thus, the comparisons have been made for all the scale except for the sixth.

The second part of the analysis deals with how at age variation, beliefs, emotions and preferences change and whether this can influence or not the availability to collaboration and the efficiency of the interpersonal relationships in an intergenerational working environment.

The results obtained for the two nationalities have been subject to analysis in order to verify the presence of differences caused by origins, and, therefore, the background culture. In each of the three sub-scales regarding the “Relevant abilities”, the Romanian have reported higher scores as compared to the Italians showing that the above mentioned activities are more important. They were more optimistic about the possibility of transferring them, but less in their decline (according to the scores obtained for the scale regarding “Belief about age”).

Concerning the subscales “importance” and “transmissibility”, the comparisons within the Italian sample have not suggested significant differences; the scores are equally high for all the categories. Within the Romanian group for the “transmissibility” scale, however, we find that the young present scores higher than the categories of Third Age people. These data cannot be disregarded in their shaping the interventions that are meant to enhance the inclination to change: the belief in the possibility to transfer the knowledge, is a fundamental element, that must be a focal object for reflection for all Third Age workers while for the young, seems to be an influence of the nationality factor and, as it results, for the Romanian, should be intervened on other components, such as motivation to interact with older colleagues.

As for the “Decline”, from the intra-group differences, emerges a common data for the two samples: the more one ages the more optimistic one becomes about the decline of the mentioned abilities. This positive belief may be used as a starting point for enhancing the motivation, and, therefore, the attitudes towards seniors in terms of transmitting knowledge to less competent colleagues.

For young, however, regardless of the origins, such data proves the presence of a negative vision of aging, especially in the working environment (Slagter, 2007). As previously stated, a significant part in this sense is played by the unfavorable stereotypes about the Old that are now deeply rooted in the society. Certain “hostility” towards the Old emerges also from the 5th scale of the questionnaire: the negative emotions experienced by the young that have to work with a senior are in average higher regardless of the nationality. Enforcing “an information campaign” about the cognitive effects of the aging might be a useful tool to counteract this rootless belief that feeds a vicious circle that hard to be interrupted.

For the scale “Inclination to change”, within the Romanian sample the scores are higher for the groups of Third Age people suggesting the tendency to a slight increase in the Inclination to change with the growing of age.

The same applies for the “Willingness to work in intergenerational groups” where, in the Romanian group, students at University of Third Age prove to be more open to the interaction with colleagues that belong to various generations; for the Italians, however, the Young Workers are the ones available to work in groups of all ages. Therefore, an effect of the nationality variable is observed.

As for the Romanians, it results that there is a general tendency according to which the Old people are more inclined to intergenerational relations. The data obtained for these scale for the Italian sample might seem to be discordant with the consideration made above, especially if the results obtained for the scale “willingness to work in groups of the same age” are taken into consideration. For the samples of both nationalities, the latter scale indicated
how the young score higher. As such, the young Italians prove a higher willingness to work both in intergenerational group and in groups of the same age.

Such contradiction may be explained by the fact that they recognize the experience of the older colleagues and understand that by appealing to their wisdom advantages can be obtained, but also they find it difficult to interact with them.

As shown by literature, the conflicts arise especially from the intergenerational communication difficulties that do no allow the productive intertwining of the competences (formal and tacit) belonging to the groups. Consequently, it must be acted upon the beliefs that render difficult the collaboration and the motivation necessary to open a dialog that generates sharing; for the Italian workers stressing the use of working in intergenerational groups is almost superfluous as the subjects of both groups (young and old) are conscious of the fact that together they can do more. The companies are also aware of this fact. As already experimented, the use of training that supports collaboration between seniors and young; even before these enter officially on the labor market seems to be a preventive method (Hanks & Icenogle, 2001). Subsequently such collaboration has to be stimulated through programs that encourage sharing of abilities and competences for one common goal; the “collaborative technology” is one example of how communication and cross-generational exchange may be favored in the working environment (Covertino, 2007).

2. Conclusions

All in all, from the comparisons made between the two nationalities it can be stated that both samples show various common characteristics allowing the generalization of almost all the data obtained, regardless of the reference culture. Still, the emerged differences may be a good starting point for reflection from where to draw up strategies and interventions that aim to improve the business environment by acting upon the relations between the colleagues. As already showed, an increase in the intergenerational collaboration may bring about significant advantages to the productivity of the company. It also increases the individual’s satisfaction, especially of the Third Age person. If we consider the world to be in an historical moment when the presence of the senior workers is higher and higher, it is fundamental that companies become aware as soon as possible of the necessity to intervene in this sense with positive measures, aimed at increasing the possibility on generational interchange. As the age of retirement grows in the entire productive sector, the presence of senior manager in the business sector, public administration, sports are now inevitable.

Furthermore, with the continuous demand for higher competences, the companies become aware of the fact that presence of seniors with knowledge that can be nowhere else traced is mandatory. A policy aimed at valuing the intergenerational exchange of competences may be a genuine competitive factor for the companies; also, the reciprocal understanding between seniors and future generations, beyond the physiological reduction of the contrasts within the productive reality, will lead to a major personal enrichment of all workers, with a positive and productive result in the social relations area and in subsequent increase of each of the involved actors.

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