

## Book review: Learning across generations in Europe

By Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha, Sabina Jelenc Krasovec, and Marvin Formosa (Eds.) (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015). 215 pp. ISBN 978-94-6209-900-5

Learning in later life is one of the fastest growing subfields within adult education. However, the focus on the elderly is a rather recent phenomenon. At first, learning and development of older people became a central theme within gerontology, termed as educational gerontology from the 1970s. Keith Percy (2012) now sees educational gerontology to be synonymous with education of older adults and learning in later life. Older peoples' learning is accordingly an overlapping area between adult education and gerontology. The first handbook on older adult learning has been published (Findsen & Formosa, 2011) and it has become a separate topic in other handbooks, encyclopaedias and review literature of adult learning. In 2010 ESREA established a new network on education and learning of older adults (ELOA), and so far it has organized six international conferences. *Learning across Generations in Europe* (2014) is one of its results.

Several researchers have suggested specific terms for this new field, for instance, eldergogy, gerontagogy or gerogogy. In one of the articles, Dominique Kern discusses the conceptual basis and frameworks for older adult learning. To date, however, there is no general agreement of separating a new field or discipline based on age and adding geragogy as a third element to the pedagogy-andragogy division. Currently a strong research emphasis on the life course perspective is working against separate thinking and so does the recent interest of intergenerational learning.

The book is divided into three sections: 1) Theory and policy issues, 2) Participation and programmes, and 3) Intergenerational learning. It consists of 17 chapters including introduction and conclusion. Only two of the contributors (Marvin Formosa and Dominique Kern) come from institutions of gerontology. This book is first and foremost the contribution of adult educators in Europe who have older peoples' learning and education as their main or partial interest. Does this mean that educational gerontology and older learning, although being synonymous, have not succeeded to establish a common area and meeting place for research and inquiry? The book demonstrates, however, that older learning is studied across Europe and comprises a diversity of themes. What is older learning, according to this book, and what does it bring to our understanding of learning in later life?

Firstly, learning in later life is about informal learning and is part of community learning. What is needed, António Fragooso claims (article 6), is to provide spaces for elderly to socialize, learn and live. Barry Golding gives in his article an extraordinary example of possibilities for such spaces. He writes about the men's shed movement, which has spread from Australia to New Zealand and United Kingdom. A shed is, according to an English observer, a "meeting place ... where men of all ages can go to talk, interact, learn and further their general wellbeing in any number of ways ... akin to guerrilla gardening in its 'bottom up' spontaneity" (Golding, p. 28). The shed is a form of intergenerational practise, Golding explains, and in line with the ideas of Ivan Illich it serves to bring about a de-institutionalized society for conviviality defined as a dynamic replacement for the control of human activity by institutions, professionals and

managers. Other meeting places –and real gardens – are discussed by Barry Hake, i.e. the urban allotments, community gardens and open spaces for recreation, exercise and education. What grows in these gardens, according to Hake, are more than fruit and vegetables, even intergenerational learning, healthy ageing and the practice of democracy.

Secondly, later life is a time for learning by volunteering. Malgorzata Malec-Rawinski presents voluntary work in Poland as a space for seniors' learning. Volunteering is a way of retirement and by retirement the active worker takes on a new role as an active volunteer to benefit the society as well as finding a personal meaning in life. In the Polish context, however, volunteering seems to attract the active and well-educated women, but why are not men visible as volunteers, she asks.

Thirdly, we find third agers as participants and learners in voluntary associations, universities of the third age, lifelong learning institutes, elder hostels and a vast number of private and community centres and institutions all over the world. Here the elderly learn by studying together, travelling, participating in cultural activities and by taking active part in running the activities. Irena Zemaitaitė adds some insight to these kinds of third age activities from a Lithuanian perspective.

Fourthly, later life may be a renewed opportunity for further and higher education. Some few elder are ordinary students, and some few universities in Spain, England, USA and other countries offer special programmes for older adults. In his article, Alfredo Alfageme suggests temporary exit from employment to be used for lifelong learning. An extended recurrent education into old age would especially be relevant if we postpone the age of retirement and consider the years 50-75 – as suggested by Tom Schuller and David Watson (2009) - to be a flexible phase of working and retirement.

Fifthly, the needs for skills and competence development prevail in later life. Tarja Tikkanen discusses this in her article, but the ageing workers are – in line with the available data used from EU and OECD – those aged 40-65 years. This is a serious delimitation in international research and statistics as we enter a new age shift (Biggs et al., 2006). Characteristics of the new shift is a changed working life in which people will postpone retirement, have encore careers and portfolio life of balancing work, leisure, volunteering, family life etc. (Kidahashi, 2010). Hence, the needs for work-related learning beyond the age of 65 will be increasing.

Sixthly, an important learning field is e-learning for elderly. Veronika Thalhammer explores in her article the e-learning programmes in Germany that are offered by universities, church-related institutions, senior citizens' associations, clubs, and self-help groups. These are not exclusively targeting older people and the programmes recruit a heterogeneous group of people.

A running theme in a number of the articles in the book is intergenerational learning which was the focused topic on the third ELOA-conference in 2012. The concept is especially discussed by Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha who analysis its meaning, use and forms as well as state of research. Ann-Kristin Boström relates in her article this concept to the creation of social capital exemplified by a Swedish granddad project and the Malmö longitudinal Study. Sonja Kump and Sabina Jelenc Krasovec discuss the meaning and rationales of intergenerational learning in the Slovenian context. They claim that a new paradigm of intergenerational learning is connected with the concept of community education and it should primarily aim to increase the quality of community life. The concept of empowerment also appears in several articles. Esmeralda Veloso and Paula Guimarães from Portugal point to empowerment as one of the rationales for learning in later life. The aim of empowering people is one of the key aspects of critical educational gerontology as advocated by Marvin Formosa (2011). In this book,

however, Formosa writes about policies and practices of lifelong learning in later life and concludes his article by some future policy directions. Finally, Georgios Zarifs brings into focus an often neglected group within the field of older learning, namely the disadvantaged who have neither the external or internal resources, abilities and possibilities nor the motivation to participate in the learning provisions. In times of crisis, this article is a most essential reminder that much outreaching and social work is needed in order to give the vulnerable, disadvantaged and care-dependent elderly real access and possibilities for taking part in social life and learning.

In conclusion, this book gives a valuable contribution to the research knowledge of intergenerational and older learning and I look forward to more publications from the ESREA network on education and learning of older adults.

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