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The Internet as a chance for continuing education of seniors in a united Europe

Growing importance of the Internet

The importance of the Internet has changed fundamentally in the last 10 years. While during the first LiLL Conference in Ulm in 1995¹, many of the participants did not even know what the Internet is, there is hardly any area today which the Internet did not enter yet. The rapid changes in technology through the new information and communication technologies (ICT) influence, together with the rapid changes in economy, science and society, directly and indirectly the daily life of each individual as well as the society as a whole. It effects all: those who respond to the new developments and who acquire the competences needed to use these technologies as well as those whom these developments are distant. This applies also to the strongly increasing group of older people. One can assume, that those, who do not respond and do not learn how to use the new media as well as those who are not given the opportunity to do so, could be disadvantaged in many areas: time (speed of information retrieval), information (the richness and differentiation of information) and with it also partially in an economic sense. Also the field of continuing education decisively changes through the new technologies. Information is accessed per Internet from libraries and databanks worldwide, there is an increasing number of online education offers in the way of blended learning², virtual networks, etc. This means, that the acquisition of skills needed for the use of the Internet, respectively the “acquisition of multimedia competence” is about to develop into a (“fourth”) key competence like reading, writing and counting.

Target group differentiation and education orientation

People in the 'third age' represent a very heterogeneous group. It is a case of the so called 'active seniors', who differ in terms of their individual health condition, gender, education preconditions, social situation, interests, needs, financial resources, etc. The sociologists speak in this connection also about various life styles and social milieu³. This has enormous effect also in the relation to the Internet use as well as the motivation for continuing education and the utilisation of own potential in old age. Interest in continuing education is often related to educational opportunities which the person had in the childhood. European comparison shows that education prerequisites of older people in Europe greatly vary from country to country, not to forget, that they vary within the countries themselves.⁴ This applies also to the (active) knowledge of foreign languages which are not as common amongst older people as amongst the younger ones. One large scale German research also points out, that the readiness to learn to use the new technologies in old age and to use it in an interactive way is very diverse.⁵

¹ European expert conference „Competence and Productivity in the Third Age“, February 2005, organised by ZAWiW of Ulm University, see Conferences at www.lill-online.net

² A combination of virtual learning offers and face-to-face learning

³ The market research institute TNS Emnid in cooperation with the TV-promoter Seven-One-Mediastellen differentiates between “passive old people” especially in the group 70+, the “culturally active”, especially represented in the group 60+ and the “experience-oriented active” between 50 and 59.

⁴ Pilos, Spyridon (2001). Bildung in den Regionen der Europäischen Union, Luxemburg: Eurostat

⁵ Stadelhofer, Carmen; Marquard, Markus: „SeniorInnen und Online-Medien“ (PDF 759 KB). In „Medien und Erziehung“, Zeitschrift für Medienpädagogik, 48, Jg, Nr. 4, August 2004, pages 9-17

Older people's learning fields

In spite of the heterogeneity within the 'older people's' group in each country and beyond the borders, the old people have in common that they have to face today many challenges on a personal and a social level that influence their immediate life situation. Dealing with these issues forms the basis for their social participation. In spite of all the differences, the following common learning fields can be determined that can be only briefly described here:

1. *Learning field "learning to age"*: preparation for own ageing, for the time of reduced mobility: living situation at home, care, social contacts, spirituality.
2. *Learning field "health and prevention"*: to maintain and strengthen own health through relevant measures.
3. *Learning field "knowledge"*: deepening and widening own knowledge and acquisition of new knowledge (for example ecology, medical care, new technologies).
4. *Learning field "competence transfer and post-professional engagement"*: recognising own competences and transferring them to others in an adequate way, combining given knowledge with new one.
5. *Learning field "generation dialogue/intercultural dialogue"*: experiencing and learning to understand other worlds and ways of living; knowing and practicing acceptance, frustration tolerance and conflict-solving strategies.
6. *Learning field 'Europe'*: opening oneself for Europe, acquiring 'European knowledge' and integrating it with own experiences, 'Europeanization' of other learning fields.
7. *Learning field "New technologies"*: learn to use computer and Internet facilities in a meaningful way.

Media competence and cross-section competence

The rapid change in economy, science, technology and society makes lifelong learning necessary for all people, for the old people too. Continuing education is therefore not a luxury, but a necessity. Starting from these considerations, it is a central task of continuing education institutions of older people in Europe, through various programs in the political, social and cultural education, to foster understanding of political themes, to strengthen preparedness for political and social cooperation and participation and to encourage this target group to commit themselves for others and for society.

The mediation of the technical use of the new technologies, especially the Internet, gains in this context a central importance. Information needs to be classified, processed and critically reflected upon. This is of special importance when information can be spread in high quantity in seconds around the world without warranted quality. Important is therefore mediation of



“media competence” as a cross-section competence that besides technical skills includes also their constructive application, structuring and critical reflection and forms the basis for democratic civic competence.

In relation to the empirical data on 'digital gap' in



Europe⁶ and the demographic changes, programs that make Internet attractive to this target group should continue to be developed. However, the technology and the transfer of technical competences should not become a means to an end. Computer and the Internet should be trained in connection to the above mentioned subject fields and must become matter of course instruments, such as phone, fax and handy are today.

Function of the Internet in continuing education

The following will deal with what is the potential of the Internet for the continuing education of older people in relation to the above introduced learning fields and what could the contents of 'good practice' examples be.

Differentiated should be four central functions:

- Information and research function
- Communication function
- Interactive learning
- Participation function

No other medium makes such fast retrieval of information possible as the Internet. Also as far as the variety of information is concerned, the Internet cannot be beaten. There are Internet portals, Internet newspapers, websites of organisations and initiatives, information offers from continuing education providers, companies, political organisations and lexicons, such as for example Wikipedia, which is offered in more than 100 languages. Over searches in libraries, universities and other Internet sources, special knowledge can be retrieved. To all of the above mentioned learning fields much information could be retrieved (for example from health portals, sites on care for old people). Seniors use the information function of the Internet mainly for daily tasks (e.g. shopping), free time activities (e.g. hobbies, theatre, travel planning), seniors who are interested in continuing education and who are already familiar with the Internet use it also for study and research. Problem exists in the targeted search functions and the assessment and validation of the information. This is only possible with relevant orientation knowledge. This presents new tasks for the continuing education of older people, for example the provision of training advice.

Before the information function ranks the application of the Internet. The most important communication media is the email, besides emails to individual persons, mailings can be made over mailing lists. Communication between people with similar interests is fostered also by forums (asynchronous communication) and Chats (synchronous communication) as well as Skype (making phone calls over the Internet) and videoconferencing. These communication forms can be applied in various ways in learning processes. While Email is suited for quick information distribution, tandems or correspondence partnerships, forums and chats can be well used for group communication. Interviews with experts or politicians are also often done over forums or chats. This does not usually lead to an open and critical discourse of the actors. Forums are also used for experience exchange, for example in the area of self-help. The new technical developments in the Internet area that can be summarised under the term "web 2.0", open many possibilities of interactive communication and cooperation.⁷ But only a limited number of older adults take the initiative to learn these new possibilities on their own. It is here, that the institutions of continuing education are asked to offer target group specific courses and consultancy.

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⁷ please see the contributions to this subject in the website of the conference „web4seniors“ organised by ZAWiW at ulm University in November 2007 www.web4seniors.eu.



Due to its interactive potential, the Internet differs from other mass media, it is not a 'one way street', it makes novel learning processes and learning forms possible. In virtual learning courses, in interactive role plays or self-determined learning groups, the learners receive feedback and are integrated in a "community". Interesting example is the national association ViLE "Virtuelles und reales lern- und Kompetenz-Netzwerk älterer Erwachsener (ViLE) e.V." ⁸, whose members get together virtually (and sometimes also in face-to-face meetings) to work together in self-formed under-groups to work on subjects of their choice. For example in the virtual project 'Die kulturelle Werte Europas (European Cultural Values)' the seniors discussed together over a longer time period the chapter 12 of a book of the same name. The project is moderated and documented by the participants themselves. Virtual learning does not mean in any way giving up meetings in person, it stimulates meetings and makes them possible. Good examples are the European Learning Partnerships 'TownStories' and 'ODE - Open Doors to Europe' in which also ViLE cooperated.⁹ Together seniors from various European countries search for so called 'door openers' which should help to overcome cultural and language barriers. The results are exchanged over the Internet, discussed and published. In both projects, adult and seniors' education organisations from various European countries were the responsible partners.

Because of the above shown possibilities, the Internet has yet another aspect, the participation function. The learning projects of the ViLE group Lübeck on the subjects of 'European Election 2004' and the 'Wahlversprechen auf dem Prüfstand 2006'¹⁰ show, that seniors articulate their interests and over the Internet involve politicians in their discussion. The members of the group researched, placed information in the Internet, held discussions with politicians and experts via forum and chat. The results of the discussions and enquiries were published in the Internet. This group is currently working on the subject of election and legal systems of the European neighbour countries. In spite of a good resonance from political bodies and the community, influence of such projects should not be overvalued. The real successes of such learning projects lie in the acquisition of knowledge on part of the participants, not in the direct influence on the politics. A new form of social participation is tested also by the Senior-Online-Editors of the 'LernCafe', the first German online magazine for older adults. ¹¹ This group was formed from one of ZAWiW's model projects. The editorial members publish every three months an online issue of the magazine on a subject that they selected. They write the articles on the subject and the editorial work as well as the technical application is made in a team – via the Internet!

Conclusion

The Internet offers many possibilities for information, communication, and interactive learning participation. "Those who are already interested in politics, are motivated and active, use the new potentials of the Internet to the full; but those who were apolitical until now, will not be motivated nor mobilised by the new technology alone."¹² In this respect, continuing education is challenged to provide innovative programs which help to reduce the digital gap in our society and to empower older people to lobby for themselves, for others and for the society.

⁸ More at www.vile-netzwerk.de (in German)

⁹ these projects were supported in the frame of the Grundtvig II Learning Partnerships, see www.gemeinsamlernen.de/townstories and www.gemeinsamlernen.de/ode as well as the article about Townstories at [page.](#)

¹⁰ 'Election promises examined 2006'

¹¹ www.lerncafe.de

¹² Hoecker, ApuZ 39-40/2002