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INFORMATICS WORKSHOP GROUP LEARNING – PROS AND CONS

Experimenting with basic informatics teaching to groups of elderly adults is not only enlightening from a didactic point of view, but creates opportunities to analyse group dynamics.

Being part of a group of students in this kind of activity has the advantage of being able to sustain each other, to join forces and to socialize; however working in groups has many drawbacks too, for students as well as for teachers.

From the pupil's point of view, working in groups can lead to easy distraction, to depending on others (if I do not understand the teacher, I'll copy from my neighbour) and to being ill at ease.

Being part of a group can be a reason to feel embarrassed for novices (often elderly people are ashamed of their own difficulties), but it can also make them feel secure because they aren't the only ones in need of teaching.

Teachers need to be patient, because pupils often do not put up with each others poor understanding and the ones that have the possibility to exercise at home are less indulgent with the difficulties of the other pupils.

A reason to create tension is very often the fact that the teacher has to treat the elderly pupils like children, because they are chatting and disturbing the lesson.

In any case, all participants, apart from the difficulties above mentioned, show great enthusiasm in studying the subject. Considering its complexity, they really do very well and in rather a short period of time they manage to learn the basics, probably because they are highly motivated.

Results and suggestions for basic informatics courses for adults.

Among the more popular courses attended and requested by adults, we find basic informatics.

Today, more than ever, it is necessary to try to resolve the digital gap existing between the different categories of the population.

The key word is "digital inclusion", a basic requirement for "social acceptance". Unfortunately for many social categories, digital inclusion remains a problem they have never faced. Especially the elderly adults belong to the category that should become familiar with the computer, even if they were born and grew up without this kind of technology.

Compared to other people, they have to face and to overcome various obstacles. Among these, we find the problem of the language and the uneasy feeling the computer inspires and of course practical problems like using the mouse and the interface between computer and user.

The language represents a real problem. For an elderly person, the word "computer" is his first problem, because the pronunciation is different from the written word. Besides, the greater part of today's technical expressions is in English, a language unknown to most of the students who attend Adult Universities.

Translating does not always resolve the problem, often the word loses its real meaning and this doesn't make the "natural intuition" of their meaning any easier. The other obstacle, not less important than the first one, is the uneasy feeling the elderly person has in the presence of the computer as a machine.

The uneasiness of the student when seated before the computer becomes embarrassment, as soon as the teacher tells them to switch on the computer. Many times this provokes a flat refusal for the

subject from the student. They are afraid to do something wrong or to damage the computer, not considering that it is only a machine that obeys given orders.

Therefore, teachers who coach adult groups of students in basic informatics, have to be, not only very well prepared as pedagogues, but have to show a high level of sensibility when they face this kind of difficulty. They should use careful methods, when helping the students to approach the subject, being aware of their insecurity and embarrassment and trying to make them overcome these problems.

Keeping in mind the difficulty of the student, the teacher shouldn't take anything for granted. Everything should be explained in detail, leaving nothing out, even things that seem superfluous. It is very important to let the students realize that one is "never too old to learn" and above all, "nobody was born as a teacher", especially in informatics. Making this concept clear, the student soon feels encouraged, more open and accepts with more ease the teacher's help.

Generally, a class is made of persons with different characters, aptitudes and learning capacities. That is why the teacher's program should never be defined, but should change each time depending on the pupil's needs or/and shortcomings. This makes every course "unique" and "special". It must be said, that the elderly person spends all his time and energy in a learning process, only if he can see and understand the value it may add for the quality of his or her life, therefore only if highly motivated.

The teacher should carefully value each situation during the lesson. Therefore, he/she should try to understand which expectations and which purpose the student has in attending the course. Among various reasons elderly persons have for wanting to attend informatics lessons, the more explicit are "I would like to be on a level with my grandchildren" and "my grandchildren talk and talk, but I don't understand what they talk about".

The teacher should pay attention to the fact that after each theoretical argument, a practical exercise should follow in order to obtain lasting results.

As we mentioned before, the second problem teachers and pupils have to face is the language. This problem becomes a major handicap and can be a real obstacle for elderly persons.

The teacher should overcome this obstacle by using very plain and simple language, and by using familiar expressions and common words. The use of common Italian terminology can turn information technology in a more friendly and easy subject for elderly persons. For the teacher, therefore, paying attention to the language barrier means referring to concrete examples until the elderly students master the correct terminology.

Analysing the practical problems of basic informatics teaching, we find one regarding the use of the mouse and another concerning the interface between computer and user.

Mouse control is the first practical obstacle, the elderly person has to face. In spite of the fact that the instrument has been introduced and explanations of how to use it have been given, the elderly students need time to master the mechanism. We need to stress the fact that often the correct use of the mouse can be a problem for elderly persons because of physical problems, but notwithstanding all these problems they don't lose heart because they are highly motivated. In this case it is the teacher's task to explain how to use the computer with the alternative of the mouse: the keyboard.

The interface between computer and user represents a problem because the elderly student has to get used to the idea of "a virtual desktop", and to the fact that the items within have a graphical representation and a name of their own. Even if the teacher tries to explain this fact with various examples from the "real world", this idea is hard to assimilate and of difficult understanding for many of the students.

Once the students have mastered the principles of how to use the computer and its peripherals, the theoretical part as well as the practical one, the teacher can pass gradually from the “ machine to the instrument”.

One of the principal and more obvious computer applications to teach the elderly student, and often requested, is word processing. Writing, in fact, is an activity that comes naturally to elderly persons and many of them are already familiar with the use of a typewriter.

This application not only gives teachers an opportunity to introduce several theoretical arguments, but after the theoretical explanation, practice can follow immediately, which the students need to boost his or her self respect and to gain, in this way, major motivation because they see the immediate result of their work.

In this phase of basic informatics teaching, it becomes essential for the students to understand that, to become really accomplished, it is important to exercise continuously. Not only by doing the homework the teacher gives them to do between one lesson and the next one, but also by doing the practical exercises during the lessons.

For an easier understanding and memorizing of the subject, the teacher should prepare notes, encouraging the students to read them carefully.

A qualified teacher has to show capacity of listening at a verbal level as well as at a non-verbal level, to have a correct and authoritative behaviour and at a practical level, to use small tricks like handing out lecture notes, repeating some concepts often, demonstrating and simplifying as much as possible, behaving and speaking in a simple way, creating time and taking care to reserve moments of explanation, trying to stimulate the interest of their students treating arguments they request.

The lecture notes need to be plain, written in simple language, understandable to all and if possible, they should contain pictures, to guide students who wish to practice at home.