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Lifelong Learning for All: What Can Be Done to Promote Lifelong Learning?

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Problems with the Participation of Older Adults in Further Education

Abstinence of Older Adults From Further Education

It is a well-known international experience that people at an advanced age -- about 55/60 and over and then especially from the age of 65 onwards -- take much less advantage of further education offers than younger people do. (2, 81, 106, 108)

In Germany, people aged 65 or over (about 15 percent of the total population) account for only about 6percent of the participants in further education programs, even in those with a more general orientation and in the "Volkshochschulen", the adult education center, which are the organizations most frequented in comparison by older adults. Here, the senior citizens most often choose courses on local history and regional studies (20.8percent), arts (18 percent) or history (13.5 percent) (20)

People of an advanced age avoid most strikingly targeted learning courses that require active involvement and are aimed at improving and measuring the learners performance. This can be seen even in language courses, which adult education centers often provide especially to elderly people, who are rather fond of traveling abroad: 32percent of the courses provided by adult education centers to older adults are language courses, but only 5,8percent of the participants in these courses are older adults. (20)

This reticence may be found as well with regard to computer training courses. In Germany, people over 60 account for just 1percent of the participants. (1, 71)

Aggravation of General Attendance Problems Caused by Old Age

Beyond all differences in terms of biography, educational background or sex, the notion largely applies that most difficulties of general nature with further education intensify in old age.

It is a known fact that people who express their interest in certain topics do not necessarily attend corresponding further education courses. This is especially true for elderly people Health and keeping fit" range uppermost among the interests of most senior citizens (42, p 28-29) but only 6,8percent of the participants in health education courses provided by adult education centers are older adults (20)

It is also a known fact that participation in further education mostly depends on a successful educational background. This, too, applies especially to the elderly people. (52 p 37-38)

Most people from the large group of adults not taking part in further education programs -- in Germany about 58 percent of the adult population, (33 p.23) would feel uncomfortable with the idea of attending school-like lessons in educational programs which causes in them unpleasant reminiscences of their own schooldays -- pressure to do well, examinations, class tests, fears of failure or looking foolish. Mature adults are not likely to expose themselves again voluntarily to such troubles.

In the elderly this school frustration blockage plays an even more determining role: Their readiness to attend an educational course decreases with a marked school-like nature of this course. It increases if the course content may be related to practical contexts of real life. (54 p.138)

The Intensified Impact of Individualization

Another factor of increasing importance in old age is the individualization of life and learning. (36, 52 p.23-27) Growing older, people increasingly follow their own way, away from others. (29) That is why older people have difficulty in adapting themselves to rigid curricula and learning forms.

Learning in elderly people is, by its very nature, not aimed at collecting supplies of knowledge for the future. They usually wish to learn things that appear relevant to them at the present time -- for example in a situation that requires their action or in a crisis. (52 p.145) Further education programs mostly do not provide for this in a sufficiently direct and specific manner. Instead of accepting the detour of systematically structured long-term courses, older adults therefore often prefer other forms of learning, as being more helpful and purposive. This could be, for example, open exchange of experience, and an opportunity of self-directed communication with other people having the same questions and problems - and with experts in the matter. (42 p.64-66, 91) This means: Individual counseling becomes more important to older learners than general information. And the telephone will increasingly become the most important connection with the world outside. (42 p.74)

Men Staying Away From Further Education

Elderly people taking part in further education programs are mostly women. In further education courses for elderly people the percentage of women is between 80 percent and 90 percent whereas "elderly" men are almost not reached at all". (7,54, p.139)

This has to do with the stronger orientation of men towards vocational training and continuing education, improvement of careers prospects or chances of being promoted and social recognition. Viewed from this perspective, a more generally orientated further education after ones working life is "pointless". After leaving the job most men will lack opportunities to make use of their professional know-how and skills on which their male self-image is largely based. The more specialized one's professional know-how is, the more difficult it will be to constantly continue to learn on the basis of the prior professional background.

Leaving the job means a break in one's orientation towards life and learning. In any case it means a decisive change in roles, which usually proves harder to men than women. Lifelong learning", then, does not just mean a lifelong continuation of learning, but has to cope with difficult biographical changes. (54 p.79-80, 97) Further education after leaving the job mostly requires the development of new approaches, interests and skills. This often represents an obstacle difficult to overcome. Also, men usually fear dependency and compulsion to prove themselves in further education more strongly than women.

The chance provided by further education courses, to establish new social contact appeals, seemingly, more to elderly women than men who rather have a tendency to retire into themselves or the intimacy of a club. (42 p.75)

Special Fears of Elderly People

With advancing age people feel more unsure about the own ability to keep pace with the learner group and more afraid of appearing dense and senile. Elderly people therefore are often deterred by performance comparison with the young -- not least because they cannot elude the impact of societal deficit attributions. (42, p.64-66, 82, p.62)

Other determining reasons for elderly people's abstinence from further education include a latent fear of dependence and incapacitation. The wish to maintain one's own freedom of decision-making, autonomy and independence (42, p.35) causes a particular sensitivity to any form of spoon-feeding or incapacitation, heteronym and extrinsic control in their own further education process. (52, p.145) They wish to take advantage of their '~ late freedom" (91) after the retirement and maintain it to the greatest possible extent. This is why they object to live or learn according to instructions of others if there is no necessity. (42, p.40) This is also why they try to avoid being placed into a compulsory learning situation -- or similarly, in an old people's home.

As a consequence, elderly people have a marked predilection for lectures or open discussion groups -- in contrast to compulsory courses -- when taking part in organized forms of further education.

In this context, the form of the traditional lecture is one of the reasons -- alongside the higher standards and prestige of universities -- for the popularity of "Seniors' Universities" or "Third Age Universities" with elderly people. (4, 16, 37, 95, 100)

The "Natural" Learning of Older Adults

We see that the lesser participation of older adults in further education is not due to a lack of interest. It does not mean either that elderly people are no longer willing or able to learn. In actual fact, elderly people use different, more self-determined and open learning forms.

80 percent of elderly people learn regularly by means of reading, travelling, films, television magazine programs etc. but only 10percent of them attend corresponding further education courses. (52, p.17, 99)

Thus, a research project on education for older adults, carried out between 1991-94 in Germany, could

come to the conclusion: "It is an important finding that elderly people have by no means stopped learning in old age, although a vast majority of them are keeping away from institutional educational offers". (54, p.138)

Language and Environmental Barriers

Elderly people coming from educationally or linguistically deprived backgrounds have particular difficulties in coping with the elaborated forms of communication and language that characterize most of the further educational programs.

For persons coming from a different linguistic background. This middle-class language represents a serious obstacle to participation in educational programs that are mostly based on verbal communication. That is why this group tends to restrict itself to informal learning, which bears more relation to practical situations and phenomena of everyday life.

Persons from educationally deprived background also have to reckon with their social environment disapproving of any apparent stepping out of line towards "higher" educational realms. This entails social pressure to prove oneself and corresponding fears of failure and identity crises. All that may be largely avoided by concentrating on informal learning forms, which are closely related to everyday life. (10)

Little Consideration Being Given to Personal Experience

As learning in elderly people is very much characterized by their prior experience, the connection of this experience to the new learning demands represents a fundamental learning prerequisite for them. (14, 28 p.39-43, 105)

Such connection proves difficult to realize in the context of specialized and systematically structured courses. As most of one's own experience has derived from practical life, real events, encounters, situations of crisis etc., it is difficult to connect to a type of learning that is not based on real experience and situations, on concrete examples taken from the learner's world.

Later on, however, also a form of learning that is more strongly related to situations and experience (14,28) must be accompanied by reflective processing. And this step towards the recognition of conditions, rules and contexts, their condensation into concepts and the approach to a more elaborated and abstract formal language is a particular critical one in the learning process of older adults.

External Barriers to Participation

External barriers, too, contribute considerably to the low participation rate of older people in institutional further education programs.

It is obvious that high course fees may represent a major hindrance to participation, especially to old-age pensioners. This is one of the general obstacles to learning that become aggravated in old age. Others include lack of transport, solitary and badly lit footpaths, bad weather, cramped and

uncomfortable rooms etc.

Equally important are the obstacles specifically caused by old age. Elderly people often have poor sight and hearing, which means that small prints and speaking in a low voice hinder them in taking up the information.

Furthermore, elderly people are usually less mobile. They do not like going out in the evening when their energy starts falling off. Arduous climbing of stairs, draught and fear of infections while the own immune systems is loosing its robustness cause older people to prefer less troublesome learning opportunities within their own four walls such as self-learning with the aid of written instructions and a telephone advice service. (60,p.319)

Elderly people, however, lack the particular learning forms, independent of time and place, that have been developed for an ad-hoc self-learning with support from the distance. These were partly designed within the framework of external studies and learning with the new media (21) and they are tailored to suit systematically organized long-term programs rather than the elderly's studying at home.

Distinguishing Features of the Learning Process in Older People and Didactic Consequences

Basic Understanding of Human Learning

Basically, we understand by "learning" the procedures of mental processing (understanding, organizing, interpreting) of impressions and experiences, and the constructive development of coherent knowledge and dispositions to responsible behavior.

This conception of learning represents a model which is largely independent of factors such as age, sex or biographical background. The single learning processes, however, which are implied by this model, may differ considerably with different learners, according to framework conditions, the learners' qualifications and interests or the individual situations.

Decreasing Learning Ability in Old Age?

There is a broad academic consensus -- in Germany and at international level -- on the view that decline in physical strength with advancing age is not necessarily combined with a parallel decline in mental and learning ability of elderly people. (29) Age represents one factor among others (such as educational background, stimulating environment, health and, foremost, the individual life history) determining the learning ability of elderly people. (8, 41, 68, 69, 70, 96) (82 p.52-53)

During the past 30 years intelligence research, in particular, has brought about more differentiated concepts of the development of mental ability. The "Konstrukt" (constructed term) "intelligence" is increasingly used to define the totality of abilities needed for information processing and intellectual mastery of one's tasks in life. These abilities include, for example, the construction of meaningfully

coherent knowledge obtained from single disparate impressions, the recognition of patterns and rules, the forming of concepts and "Superzeichen" (supersigns, generic terms), translation and transfer ability, open-mindedness and readiness for changes, creative interpretation and innovation. (82)

We know today that the various intelligence factors are determined by individual experience and educational background, by society's expectations and self-images of elderly people rather than biological age itself. (82, p.36-50)

Although biological age no doubt affects intelligence, its impact varies considerably in nature, enhancing some abilities whilst inhibiting others. Therefore, it would be better to speak of alterations rather than decline caused by old age within the intelligence structures. At the same time as short-term memory and pace of learning may decline, expressiveness, accuracy and discernment may grow with advancing age. (29)

It is possible to further the development of learning ability in older adults through training and lifelong learning.

Here is a main reason for elderly people to continue with learning. The desire to maintain one's potential and keep mentally fit ranks high among motives for older adults to engage in further education activities. (48, p.49) Keeping fit by learning means, especially, to keep re-interpreting prior experience in the light of new experience.

The Impact of Negative Cliches of Elderly People

Although the theory concerning an overall decline in intelligence and learning ability in old age is no longer tenable and therefore cannot account for the low participation of older adults in further education programs, (35,38) negative stereotypes of "old people" being mentally inflexible continue to exert a strong influence in society'. (42 p.64-65). Prejudices concerning the rigidity, denseness, conservative attitudes and closed-mindedness towards new ideas and developments in old age continue to represent widely held views on elderly people. Sometimes they will lead to a stigmatization of older adults as "Gruftis" (after the German word "Grufi" = vault). (49)

As these extrinsic attributions may partly turn into self-attributions, they affect not only public funding of further education programs for senior citizens but also self-assessment and self-confidence in older adults. (112)

Thus, information on a large-scale about the latest findings of gerontology proves to be of vital importance for the endeavors to mobilize education for older adults in the era of lifelong learning. (109)

Reduced Pace of Learning in Old Age?

It is a commonly held view that people learn more slowly with advancing age. This is only partly confirmed by empirical studies. (70, 82 p.56)

Most older adults need more time for a learning processing of information and experience that do not fit into the existing, earlier developed imagination and interpretation patterns. On the other hand, learning processes that may be integrated into familiar interpretation frameworks may develop more quickly in

older adults than in younger people thanks to their greater routine.

These differences in the pace of learning are apparently related to the fact that older adults possess more relevant experience. With an increased volume and variety of already stored experiences and patterns, any new piece of information will be compared and related to an equally increased amount of insights, ideas and interpretation patterns. For an adequate incorporation of the new information it may also be necessary to restructure the existing sedimentary knowledge which is more extensive and complex than in younger people. And this may, of course, take more time, if the new information appears to be not simply a variant on something already known or familiar. (29)

With a more extensive repertoire of experiential knowledge, processes of selection or retrieval of relevant information may also become more time consuming.

It follows from this that it is necessary to allow more time to older people when confronting them with new information or innovative learning. If possible, options for classifying the new information and hints for recognition should be given, for example "advance organizers" according to Ausubel. (6.29, 82 p.56, 89)

Meaningful Learning

Further studies have shown that elderly people have greater difficulty in learning and retaining things which are not meaningful and coherent (e.g. arbitrary sequences of numbers) (82 p.57). This may, in part, account for their poorer performance in memory tests of this kind.

This means that in order to promote lifelong learning even in old age it will be necessary to concentrate on meaningful learning -- rather than on meaningless memory training exercises -- and to enable, facilitate and support the ability to establish during the learning process connections with plausible contexts of ideas and needs.

And why should older adults learn things that make no sense to them?

Experiential Learning

Elderly people (and different cohorts of them) have more and different experience (related to historically different situations) on which their learning is based. (54, p.26-62)

Experiential schemes that have developed over a long period of time tend to become more fixed rather than change fundamentally (54, p.27). With elderly people, it will thus be necessary to include to a higher extent their individual experiential schemes into the learning process and, possibly, to break up and restructure them. (29)

If older adults are to be involved more intensively in continuous lifelong learning, it will be necessary to develop new approaches to better linking new information and experience to prior experience, which is still present in the memory (especially in the long-term memory). (59)

Learning in View of Applicability

With advancing age, most people prefer to learn things that are directly applicable. They usually learn in order to improve their ability to deal with real problems and situations in their lives.

Very often they are also more impatient in this, wishing to satisfy their pressing needs directly, without having to make the detour of a systematic training course.

Elderly people -- if one wishes to encourage them towards lifelong learning -- must be given stronger stimuli and learning aids whose content should be related to real situations or problems. This means that corresponding modules must be developed to support a problem solving learning that is related more clearly to real situations, cases, and practical action. (13, 52 p.145, 111)

Individualized Learning

Due to the differences in the socialization process of individuals within their families, workplaces and society and the different ways in which individuals respond to these influences, people at an advanced age usually have developed in most diverse manners and, thus, are more different from one another than in their younger days.

In his comprehensive comparative analysis of international developments in adult education and education Alan Knox comes to the conclusion that: "Diversity increases as people become older, therefore, program option should be greater," i.e., "a great variety of educational opportunities should be available to be responsive to the older population". (60, p.3 1 8-3 19)

As the overall trend towards individualization is reinforced in old age, learning and learning support has to be developed in individually different ways. That is to say, individual learning processes need a greater variety of learning opportunities and learning aids.

One possible consequence may be the so-called "contract-learning" which means learning according to individual contracts between the educational institution and the person interested in learning. (21, p.76-83)

Open, Life-Related Learning

A form of learning that is more clearly related to individual interests and backgrounds and also to practical applicability in real situations not only requires individual counseling, it is also necessary to develop more flexible and open learning opportunities which may be stimulating and useful in different individual learning processes.

Traditional systems of teaching and learning are not usually open or flexible enough in this respect. In many countries, education for older adults therefore has now been opened to a greater variety of informal learning forms, a wider range of individual learning opportunities in situations with practical demands, including jointly practiced "learning by doing". and new forms of self-organized and self-directed learning, including jointly practiced open learning with the elderly exchanging their individual

"know how" and "know how to know" with one another. (30, 54 p.140, 60 p.317)

More Independent and Self-Directed Learning

One of the main reasons for elderly people not to take part in further education programs is their fear of being instructed and controlled like pupils or being looked after overattentively.

A specific sensitivity to social tendencies to regard elderly people as deficient and incapacitated and hence lavish care on them (42 p.35, 40) deters older adults from participating in further education programs specifically designed for senior citizens. (54) "Avoidance of dependency" (60 p.319) is a basic motive of older adults -- in life as in learning.

On the other hand, many older adults feel unsure about the extent to which they are still mentally fit actually. This keeps them from attending general further educational courses. They fear comparison with the younger participants there and are afraid of looking foolish in front of younger people.

As a consequence, older adults prefer to attend, if ever, arrangements allowing for non-committal listening and uncontrolled self-determined learning.

As it is impossible to properly support the completely different and specific learning processes in elderly people by means of organized and more or less standardized training programs that have been designed for larger groups of students, education for the elderly will increasingly have to adapt itself to a new kind of learning, organized to a higher degree by the elderly themselves and taking place in open and varied learning situations.

Self-directed learning is arguably the most adequate response to individualization occurring in the field of lifelong learning. It has also the potential of developing a civic involvement in further education in front of authoritarian traditions. (30, 112)

New Approaches in Educational Policy Towards More Involvement of Older Adults in Lifelong Learning

Improving Framework Conditions

To surmount external barriers to learning it will be necessary to provide at local level -- a part from financial subsidies, not to be discussed here -- more access opportunities to further education for older people. This may be done for example by improving public transports, in accordance with the hours of the lessons/lectures etc., and arranging (private) transport services, or by means of increasing decentralization of educational facilities. (11)

Equally important is greater flexibility in scheduling so as to make offers better fit into the individually different time "blanks" of older adults interested in further education. ("Zeitfenster" for lifelong learning, 80).

All this, however, would be insufficient if it is not accompanied by clearly laid out information on the totality of educational provision, qualification opportunities and counseling services available at local level for citizens. This should also include an integrated network of all formal and informal learning opportunities, expert supports, hot-lines etc. (28, p.88)

To overcome mental barriers caused by reminiscences of school frustration it is necessary to develop new and more appealing open forms of teaching and co-operating such as "learning offices", "learning service-centers", "learning shops", "learning clubs", "learning cafes", "learning workshops", "learning paths", "learning parks" etc. (30)

The development and enhancement of informal learning opportunities in connection with real life, i.e. relating to most varied activities (work, travelling, shopping, watching TV etc.) appears to be especially important in this context. (30, p.29-38)

Developing Holistic Learning Opportunities Close to Life

All people continue to learn even in old age in as much as they take in new information, try to orientate themselves in new situations and adapt to changing demands. (58)

This natural but often unconscious learning that takes place throughout one's life practice may be exploited and further developed to form the basis and starting point for a permanently continued lifelong learning of adults, even of those elderly people who in the past did not participate in organized forms of further education. (34)

Developing learning opportunities, learning stimuli and learning aids in the learner's environment seems to be the most effective way to further this natural and holistic learning. This brings about the concept of a "learning society", where everybody will encounter learning opportunities at any time and in almost any place and where educational institutions will join and support the more extensive network of manifold formal and informal learning opportunities, open counseling services, learning partnerships, communication opportunities etc. (28, p.61-73)

Why should senior citizens not become important supporters and frequent users of these new learning networks within the forthcoming learning society?

This "natural" learning in a stimulating environment basically means learning in situations that challenge people to learn. As a consequence, learning arrangements and aids referring to this kind of learning should concentrate on a situation-based learning. Instead of prefabricated knowledge the learner will be confronted with realistic and challenging situations to deal with. In this context, it will be necessary to establish new connections between life and learning, work and learning, working world and life, which enable elderly people to make use of their individual experience and competencies when coping with real situations or processing information. (31, p.255, 56, 66)

The consequence will be a change in paradigms: from a teaching didactic towards an enabling didactic. (5)

Learning in the Context of a New and More Open Service Society

The more learning has to unfold within the framework of real situations requiring action and is related to practical tasks of problem solving the more important it is that people remain active in old age, accept tasks, deal with social problems and become committed as citizens.

This raises the question of the so-called "second labor market", i.e. forms of work that are not connected to regular posts of gainful employment but are more open in character and involve casual services such as helping other people in the house and garden, in the streets, on journeys, in case of illness, disability or isolation, looking after children, offering support in dealing with authorities, and, mainly, in learning and continuing learning. This also opens new horizons for other "unemployed" people and for cross-age cooperation. (32, p.53)

It is in new combinations of work and education, work and communication, work and experience, work and entertainment, work and neighborhood care, work and civic commitment, work and involvement in district activities etc that learning opportunities and stimuli are to be found and further developed with the help of creative imagination. (3)

Learning occurs at any place in a modern learning society. It is only a question of discovering and exploiting it. The much quoted "Entgrenzung des Lernens" (opening the traditional borders of approved learning) may then become a key to overcoming learning abstinence, especially in the elderly.

Developing a New Civic Commitment

In Germany, there are some interesting approaches towards a new civic commitment and its connection to lifelong learning. (7, 19, 43, 46, 47, 75, 84, 104) (47, p.96-294)

In this field of civic self-organization a large variety of activities unfolds, by far exceeding the traditional range of unpaid honorary occupations:

- Guided tours (with different subject matters),
- learning shops and "Wissensborsen" ("knowledge stock exchange", knowledge pool) "Erzahlcafes" ("story-telling cafe"),
- history workshops study tours,
- accompanying people in need of care on journeys,
- care for children,
- sick and old people,
- standing-in for people on holiday,
- working as a museum attendant,
- telephone answering,
- emergency services,
- information service on educational facilities,
- learner counseling,
- learning partnership agencies,
- expert support for self-learning,

- repair service on weekends and holidays,
- art and theatre groups,
- various clubs (music, sport, hobbies, film),
- internet cafes and internet groups,
- private tuition for schoolchildren,
- political forums and citizens' initiatives at local level,
- women's houses,
- meeting points for senior citizens,
- self-help groups,
- health and ecological groups,
- local history societies,
- associations for the preservation of customs and tradition,
- senior citizens' expert service and clubs for the elderly,
- building and maintenance of playgrounds and learning paths,
- contact agencies,
- counseling service for setting up business,
- agencies for flat sharing and car-pooling etc. (54, II p.48-204, 63 p.20)

With a view to promoting lifelong learning, it is crucially important that in each of these initiatives and activities learning stimuli and opportunities will be developed for specific purposes. Learning is usually implied if the successful and qualified implementation of the various projects and services depends on a permanent acquisition of additional knowledge and skills. Here it is useful to arrange learning partnerships, which may often be done through exchange co-operatives whose members share their own specialized know how and competence with others and receive, in return, from them support and advice where needed.

The knowledge that is needed or acquired during these activities may then be exchanged, discussed and reflected in discussion groups meeting regularly and including both elderly and younger people.

Civic commitment of older adults may also bring changes to the "contract between the generations". It means that older people are not simply a burden to be carried by the younger generation. Rather, they take an active part in the solution of current problems and social tasks, bringing in their know-how and experience. The elderly may also be of help for younger people, as counselors, tutors, by helping them with setting up business or granting credits etc. (9, 43)

Two Examples of Senior Citizens Network Models

Sylvia Kade, one of the leading German researchers into learning of the elderly, reports in this paragraph on two initiatives by elderly people in Frankfurt and Gottingen which she values as interesting examples out of an increasing range of similar activities in German towns.

"Seniorenburro" (Senior citizen's advice bureau) in Frankfurt (connected with the Institut fur Sozialarbe it): A job centre for pensioners

The initiative of the Seniorenbüro goes back to a seminar held at the "University of the Third Age" in Frankfurt, investigating possibilities of action in old age. First, a survey was conducted among the elderly to explore their wants and attitudes towards social involvement. It was followed by inquiries about the demand for unpaid work with non-profit-making organizations. The findings prompted the Institute für Sozialarbeit to participate in the nation-wide and state-financed implementation of "Senior Citizens' Advice Bureaus", a piloting series with exemplary character.

Some elderly persons, almost all of them unpaid, set up a "job centre for pensioners" which acted as an intermediary between older providers of knowledge/know-how and competencies and demand for unpaid work within non-profit-making institutions: schools, homes, museums, libraries sent inquiries and numerous elderly persons were prepared to:

- teach German as a second language to children,
- conduct ecological guided tours through fruit plantations,
- work as a museum attendant,
- contribute as workmen to the renovation of nursery schools and homes for the aged,
- visit lonely old persons in nursing homes,
- computerize school libraries, etc.

These examples, among many others, show the extensive, yet largely unexploited potential of elderly people.

The emerging particular needs for further learning and training were met by new educational programs offered by the Institute.

One of these consisted in self-experience groups where elderly women came together who exposed them selves to strong pressure when visiting old people in old people's nursing homes. Other women acquired the additional knowledge/know-how needed for specific activities.

Another facility provided by the Institute was a communication centre ("Erzahlcafe") for elderly people where historical witnesses reported on their district, on dying professions ("the last fisherman on the river Main") or ways of living in past times. This met with great interest especially of younger people and, finally, the elderly presented their experience also to schools.

This concept was taken up by homes for the aged who arranged regularly afternoon meetings where the elderly evoked the past in their reports with varying topics such as "family chronicle", "our younger days", "our district". The guiding questions underlying these meetings were: "How did people live in other times and environments? How did they arrange their lives under different circumstances? By which means did they try to render their lives meaningful?"

Finally, elderly people and gerontologists met together at regular intervals in the "old people's forum" to discuss possibilities of making life easier in old age and to start new initiatives.

*Freje Altenarbeit e.V. Gottingen social centre, fiat-sharing for the elderly',
"Zeitzeugenbörse (historical witness exchange)*

The project of Freie Altenarbeit developed from an initiative taken by old people's nurses, who in 1986 founded an association with 16 members with the aim of promoting the integration of mobile nursing services and open assistance for older people and the further education of trainees in order to maintain and enhance autonomy in old age.

In 1989 the initiative founded with the support of the local government a mobile nursing service, connected since 1991 to a day care center, for improving regular provision for older people according to the aims of the association.

In cooperation with the University of Gottingen the project "Living together, not lonely" was set up by a discussion group composed of students and elderly people. They were supported by the local government who gave at their disposal an Art Deco villa for rent-free use over 10 years. Further subsidies came from the Land in support of the flat-sharing project for elderly people and the renovation of the villa.

The "Company of good will", a workmen initiative by elderly people from the Ruhr area, undertook the renovation of the villa, making it suitable to the needs of old people. At the same time, the villa became the new location of the association, and in 1993 eleven elderly women moved in. each into her own apartment. These women had abandoned the environment familiar to them to avoid isolation and try out new forms of social life together with others. In this they were assisted by the younger members of the association.

In the year of "solidarity between the generations" the association started a Euro-pilot project under the title "Dialogue on nursing relations" with the aim of promoting exchange between people in need of care and younger old people's nurses. During the course of this Europroject mutual visits for evaluation were organized for the participating projects in Europe.

At the same time "planning groups" were set up by the association with the task of bringing together old and young people, professionals and laymen, for a continual and structured development of educational concepts. These activities gave rise to another Europroject in 1996, promoting dialogue between the generations, between witnesses of past times and young people, with the aid of the "story line" method.

This project focuses on "biography groups", "Erzahlcafes" and a "Zeitzeugenbörse". For these activities, an additional training program for speakers/presenters has been developed.

Next Steps

As there are initiatives like those in Frankfurt and Gottingen also in many other towns in Germany we begin now to collect information about relevant activities and experiences also on a national level, to bring the engaged people together for exchange and learning from one another and to build up broader "senior learning networks".

But as the problems of learning in the "third age" often are aggravations of general problems of adult learners the endeavors to develop more adequate learning opportunities for the elderly are seen as part of a necessary general strategy to promote "lifelong learning for all" by furthering:

- more individualized and self-directed learning,
- more open learning independent of fixed times and places,
- more problem solving learning related to real situations and civic commitment,
- more modular structures of learning, software and retrieval systems and
- the creative development of a "learning society" with a great variety of stimulating (formal and informal) learning opportunities.

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