

## Senior Learning Model of European project SMARTE

*Consortium SMARTE*



The "Senior Learning Model" presented within the framework of the EU project SMARTE differs from other learning models especially by the fact, that people with very different learning biographies and competences are brought together to a learning group, whereby all learners give specific contributions to the learning process and the learning outcome. Metaphorically speaking, the leaves from individual "knowledge- and experience-trees" are mixed together, and new, "colourful trees" can grow as enriching learning outcome for all involved learners, who jointly develop new competences and skills.

### **Guiding principles for active ageing: Contribution to the Senior Learning Model**

Our society gets older and older due to demographic change. Nowadays, more and more people live by themselves, some have already lost their partners and they withdraw from the active part of society. But it does not have to be like this. Especially older people can stay active after their retirement and participate in social life, orientate themselves culturally; can contribute in a number of ways and not fall into meaninglessness (as is sometimes perceived by society). Not only the older adult benefits from staying active and vital, but the younger can also learn from the experience and knowledge of the older generations. Furthermore, the capacities for civic engagement for over 60-year-olds are by far not exhausted. So there is a lot of time and often also the wish for continuing education, to learn new things, to deepen old knowledge and to keep physically and mentally fit during retirement.

In order to realise this, attention has to be paid to some peculiarities that are more distinct for older people and that have to be considered more than for other target groups. We combine these peculiarities into 'guiding principles'. With these guiding principles we outline our basic messages in the SMARTE project. Guiding principles are foci for concretising professional action in educational work with older people but also for reviewing educational actions and projects.

The guiding principles are:

1. Focus on participants
  - Competences
  - Interests
  - Heterogeneity and diversity
2. Focus on learning as a social process
  - Daily life
  - Participation
  - Learning from each other
3. Focus on the environment
  - Reducing barriers
  - Enhancing resources
  - Informal settings

### **1. Focus on participants**

Most participants choose to take part in education totally voluntary and without any pressure from outside. The possible motivation here is an interest in the subject and in the learning process. The learning opportunities have to adjust to these interests; common subjects are e.g. health and nutrition, sports and culture, society, history, politics, technology, civic engagement and more. However, older people are a very heterogeneous group. Participants differ in age, gender, education, origin, former profession, voluntary engagement, learning experiences, self-perception, support, interests, mobility, and participation and so on. In order to develop appropriate learning opportunities it is surely helpful to contact the target group itself and get ideas from them; this also leads to the older people feeling involved into the developing process and therefore being able to adjust the courses to them instead of them having to adjust to the courses.

#### *Focus on competences*

Competences that have already been gained and those that are yet to be gained are also important aspects. With their experiences of life and work, older participants have already gained a multitude of competences. It is necessary to strengthen these existing competences and build on them in order to learn something new. The focus should not be on deficits, but on existing knowledge and competences that can be used for further development. This does not only mean that the learning biography of a participant should be like a biographic continuity and building on social and personal competences.

#### *Focus on learning interests*

Here, self-determined learning is an important component. According to Holzkamp (1996), the learning objectives should be placed in a context of theory and practice, that is learning and action. The learner faces an action problem and in order to solve it, he or she has to gather new competences first and thus engage into a learning process. The main focus of this participative learning is on 'having the world at one's

disposal' and to be 'close to oneself' instead of achieving a degree or passing an exam. This learning method promotes engagement and an interest in life and leads to an expansion of one's own decision-making and responsibility and therefore to more quality of life. The learner's interest in the learning objectives is ensured. He or she needs the new knowledge.

#### *Focus on heterogeneity and diversity*

It has to be noticed that older adults are characterised by high heterogeneity and diversity; the opportunities have to be designed appropriately for the target group and with attractive motivation and with the right to a say for participants concerning learning opportunities and their implementation. Knowledge and experiences gather over life and this leads to the fact that people develop their interests and competences more and more individually the older they get. When it comes to education for older people, everybody has a very personal view on how this education should be designed. This heterogeneity has to be met when offering and implementing learning opportunities.

## **2. Focus on learning as a social process**

The learning process takes place in a social context. Our interactions with others shape our learning process. Daily life is being actively formed, changed and developed; personal development and vitality are being enabled, one's own mind is being broadened, the socio-political life of a mature citizen is being maintained and social inclusion can be increased.

#### *Focus on learning for daily life*

The "Senior Learning Model" is primarily a learning model, which is based on real-life-related settings. It stresses the importance that senior learning settings cover everyday aspects of real life and so improve health, individual well-being and social inclusion of senior citizens in all EU countries. Consequently, it is suitable both in intercultural and intergenerational learning settings. It takes into account the demand for integration of marginalised groups and encourages joint and mutual learning with younger generations (e.g. in the field of new media).

#### *Focus on participation*

Participants should always have the opportunity to actively shape the learning process during the courses and also to be able to understand the process. Participants have their own individual learning targets and need the opportunity to follow them. Moreover, developing new senior learning fields for older people could not only have positive effects on the individual level but could also lead to more civic engagement and participation in social and political processes. The concept that best captures this perspective is 'Active Ageing'. Active ageing applies to both individuals and groups. It allows people to realise their potential for physical, social and mental well-being throughout their lives and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and capacities. However, It must be emphasized here though that this 'active ageing' paradigm does not exclude inactive or frail older persons, it is an inclusive one.

### *Focus on learning from each other*

Common to all learners is their interest and wish to work on a certain topic and to learn. The learning process as well as the learning outcome within this model are designed in a very open and flexible way and are primarily driven by interests and needs. The learning goals are not exactly defined in the beginning. They develop during the learning process by the learners themselves. No specific learning method is provided within the described "Senior Learning Model", since people with different learning biographies and learning levels will also show different kinds and methods of learning. Such approach represents a valuable enrichment for all participants and creates new learning pathways. The "Senior Learning Model" represents both a mutual participation model and a joint development model, which is chosen and formed in a self-determined manner by the learners themselves, thus facilitating a joyful and enriching learning.

### **3. Focus on the environment**

The immediate living environment or the neighbourhood are important in people's lives. Especially for older people, it has been found that their relationship with locality has become even more important for a number of reasons. This is also the case for senior learning. On the one hand, the environment could be a barrier for participating in senior learning activities. On the other hand, senior learning could have a positive effect on the environment; friends who are the same age can be motivated to take part as well, the family benefits from vital and mobile grandparents and society benefits from it, too. It appears that education for older people and civic engagement determine each other; someone who participates in senior learning areas will also be more motivated to volunteer in his or her community or city; there are still unused potentials.

### *Focus on reducing barriers*

The active ageing discourse emphasizes that older adults should be given the chance to participate fully in society. Consequently, one of the key challenges of active ageing is not only to encourage older people to be active, but also the removal of barriers that segregate older people or limit their activities. Older people may be especially sensitive to environmental barriers because of the vulnerabilities associated with increased age. Attention should be given to the presence of services, the availability of transport, characteristics of the local population, and aspects of security and safety within an area. These barriers can block the involvement in learning and can prohibit older people in experiencing the possibility to learn in later life. Therefore it's necessary that a learning environment should be tailor made for older people taken possible barriers into account.

### *Focus on enhancing resources*

The political actors will have the task of creating appropriate frameworks allowing the implementation of different projects that follow the vision of the "Senior Learning Model". Senior citizens at all levels of society should be encouraged by political actors to take the initiative, in order to take care of the common good and increase these capacities even further.

### *Focus on informal settings*

Learning does not only takes place in formal settings. Also informal settings, like learning by doing things in daily life, for example learning from friends or relatives during conversations or learning from neighbours during participation of activities in the neighbourhood can appear. Informal learning mostly fits in the daily life of the learner and in his or her surroundings. Most of the time one learns by experiencing new things in interaction with other people (if possible) during the day in the daily life circumstances.

### **Discussion**

The presented principles connect with some further characteristics which should be noted for the processes of education and learning.

The last learning process of a participant might have taken place several years ago, so first of all, new faith in old competences and one's own ability to learn has to be recovered. The "coach", "trainer" or "teacher" has to build a bridge between action and learning and thus lead into the learning process.

It becomes evident that especially learning for older people is a very personal and individual learning process. The learner himself/herself has to participate in its development and he or she is learning himself instead of being instructed.

**These results has been produced by the consortium of 8 partners and 5 countries, to be mentioned:**

1. Artéduc (NL): [www.arteduc.nl](http://www.arteduc.nl)
2. Vugherstede (NL): [www.vugherstede.nl](http://www.vugherstede.nl)
3. Vrije Universiteit Brussel (BE): [www.vub.ac.be](http://www.vub.ac.be)
4. CVO Antwerpen (BE): [www.cvoantwerpen.be/](http://www.cvoantwerpen.be/)
5. Belgian Ageing Studies (BE): [www.belgianageingstudies.be](http://www.belgianageingstudies.be)
6. Università degli Studi del Molise (IT): [www.unimol.it](http://www.unimol.it)
7. BFI Tirol (AT): [www.bfi-tirol.at](http://www.bfi-tirol.at)
8. BBB Büro für berufliche Bildungsplanung (DE): [www.bbb-dortmund.de](http://www.bbb-dortmund.de)

For more information see: [www.active-ageing.info](http://www.active-ageing.info)

## **Practical implementation: The subject-oriented learning approach of Klaus Holzkamp and the Steps of Holzkamp for the Senior Learning Model**

### **Biographical background:**

Klaus Holzkamp developed his learning approach based on the experience of the student movement of the 1960s. Back then he experienced how productive the cooperation with students becomes, if they are treated like adults as actively thinking, laterally thinking, ahead thinking individuals instead of pressing them into canonised learning and examination system. He also experienced how students are ready and willing to learn in these “free” situations.

### **Why and when do we learn?**

Holzkamp developed his ‘subject-oriented’ learning approach within a critical analysis of traditional comprehensions of learning. The central question in his approach is, when and why people learn. He argues: we learn when it is justified for ourselves, i.e. when we declare it to be subjectively reasonable. Subjectively reasonable means: ‘I need it, it is useful for me!’ This means: We are ready to learn when we are not able to solve a problem or a new challenge with our present experiences and knowledge. Then – according to Holzkamp – and only then, when our know-how is not sufficient, we engage into a ‘learning loop’. The following applies especially to adulthood: For us adults it is not about acquiring a subject per se, but it is about living our life better, with more or higher quality – while ageing it might be about maintaining the quality of our life as much as possible. Learning makes sense when it improves or maintains the own quality of life.

### **Consequences for adult education**

Holzkamp was a critical psychologist, not pedagogue. He was being received in pedagogy, especially in adult education, by those representatives in Germany, who attach great importance on the autonomy of learners (for example Tietgens, Faulstich, Weinberg).

Holzkamp's learning approach has been concretised especially in the following model with the steering factors for learning for the practise of adult education:

### **Leeways for learning autonomy**

Reason/motive/cause for learning (Why?)

Clearly determined from outside----- open / subjectively determinable

Aims of the learning process (Where to?)

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

Content of the learning process (What?)

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

Learning paths (How, in which way, with which means, with which media?)

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

Learning times (When? How long? How often?)

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

Persons (With whom? with how many people?)

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

Places (Where?)

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

Checking the learning success

Clearly determined from outside ----- open / subjectively determinable

## References

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