Learning for the Elderly: Education as a Relational Process

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Summary:

From the perspective of age, education and learning can be understood as the impulse to meet the challenges of each phase of life in a learning open manner even in old age. The learning concept of Geragogy is concerned with perceiving of the individual benefits of learning: education is seen as the possibility to enter into the world in relation to others and participate in the world, as a responsible protagonist, by means of interaction and relationships. This following view will present in detail the articles available on learning processes in old age and discuss their meaning for the concept development of Geragogy.

Introduction:

Why is lifelong learning or education for the elderly meaningful? What is the difference between learning for elderly and extremely old aged people and learning in the earlier phases of life? How do we conceptualise the education process for the elderly? What are the consequences that arise from this?

An initial explanation of the terminologies is necessary to answer these questions adequately: a distinction is established between a third and a fourth age: "the third age" is associated with activity while the "fourth" is characterised by withdrawal (cf. Laslett 1995).

The life phase of old age can stretch from 30 to 40 years. This phase is marked by diverse and quite different ways of life, precisely in view of activity or withdrawal. Likewise, physical and cognitive capabilities as well as material and social situations differ greatly from one another this focuses attention on both the inter-individual differences i.e. the fact that people age differently and the intra-individual differences i.e. a person ages in various capabilities at differing rates within him or herself. From the developmental psychological point of view it is well known that people in the third and fourth ages grapple with different development tasks, existential questions and themes. During the third age the individual often has relatively greater mobility and so called "young old agers" are often interested in cultural themes and engage themselves in social matters. As a rule the radius and sphere of activity in the fourth age contracts and developmental tasks and themes (such as the maintenance of health, organising self determined everyday life, how to cope with limits, dependency, accepting help, mortality etc.) become foremost.

Geragogy as a scientific discipline that involves research, teaching and practice with learning and education for the old aged, both actually in old age or approaching old-age stems from the understanding of old age as a development task: the limitations of which may, however, be accompanied by potential gains. Education is hereby understood as an impulse, in which the challenges of old age, in all their diversity, are confronted with openness and learning. Higher life expectations, longer health, bound up with the potential and individual gains (e.g.knowledge experience and the necessary spare time for actual involvement) are

perceived as favourable conditions that the elderly have the opportunity tore think anew and organise as development options in both their individual and public spheres. (cf. BMFSFJ 2005; Jopp et al. 2013).

What is at under consideration in the following text is learning for the elderly, in the context of lifelong learning under relational aspects. It also embraces the complexity of accompanying aspects in the learning process to see how they interact. The relationality of learning processes is of particular emphasised in reference to the educational science of Künkler (2011) and Faultisch (2013). Furthermore the importance a relational understanding of education to the conceptual development of Geragogy is discussed.

1. On the importance of learning and education for the elderly a socio gerontological categorisation:

When we speak of geragogic concepts regarding both learning and education, for clarification, it is necessary to distinguish between the terminologies. In the discourse of learning (in old age) the construction of behaviour and knowledge patterns are them atised primarily. The education discourse includes this learning understanding, but goes beyond that. It aims at the individual that is learning and becomes learned and the organisation of the world in which it learns (Thiersch 2011, p. 162). In this instance what is referred to is the understanding of education as already formulated in 1960by the *Deutscher Ausschuss für das Erziehungs-und Bildungswesen* (German Committee for Education and the Educational System). The committee states that with regard to adult education the actual term 'educated' applies to a person living in the constant endeavour to understand society and the world and acting upon this understanding accordingly (*Deutscher Ausschuss für das Erziehungs- und Bildungswesen* 1960, p.20).

In terms of the necessity of lifelong learning, in the framework of this discourse, what is involved, above all, is the understanding of learning meaning adaptation to the new as well as the construction of knowledge and behaviour patterns. Increased life expectation on the one hand, the many years the individual wishes to organise, constant changes and further transitions occurring along the way and the increasing changes in society, on the other, demand a continual re-orientation processes.

Of the broad educational terms favoured here those formulated for the understanding of education in old age by the Gerontology Commission (cf. BMFSFJ 2005, p. 125ff; BMFSFJ 2010, p. 81f) are also appropriate. Here education is not confined only to the acquisition of knowledge and qualifications but also refers to "…capabilities, skills and experience that make for effective, creative interaction with current or future demands and tasks"(BMFSFJ 2010, p. 81).

In this way the education terminology becomes the guiding concept of Geragogy, in which the discourse on lifelong learning is situated. Thus the reasons for lifelong learning can also serve as the postulate for offers in education or take the lead in the context of aging itself. Furthermore, the term "education in old age" crops up once more in the concepts of education policy: as a factor to be taken seriously regarding the organisation of personal and public life in times of demographic change. Thus in terms of the educational possibilities for individuals: learning and education can contribute by grappling with the constant change, and meeting with the challenges ushered in as a consequence to find ways to deal with them constructively and use the opportunities that arise in each case (cf. BMFSFJ 2005). Learning and education understood as synonyms here is given the following functions: to open options and encourage the organisation of individual's lives. They can also contribute to the knowledge and competences between the generations, to the maintaining of health and as a result help avoid diseases.

They can even contribute to extended employability or support the possibilities of (active) social participation in the post acquisitional phase for example regarding qualification offers in the context of voluntary involvement, as well as special education offers. The education concept of Geragogy certainly goes beyond a listing of individual benefits. Education can be seen far more as a potential to enter into a relationship with others and the world and to organise connections and relationships with them as

a responsible participant.

2. The education discourse in the debate:

2.1. Understanding of education: understanding and doing:

(Self-) education of the elderly differs from learning at earlier phases in life in as much as it no longer concerns itself with the acquisition of professional qualifications but exceptions do of course exist. The goal of learning is no longer an immediate usability of the content e.g.in professional life. This de professionalization offers the opportunity for the elderly and extremely elderly age to recognise their own conscious as well as unconscious competences and potentials and the choice to further unfold "potentials": thus allowing them, for instance, to discover new interests and fields of activity or define new tasks.

The objective of the organisation of learning and educational arrangements in the context of the elderly is to accompany the learners in the process of their dealing with their personal, societal and historical (life) worlds, for that process of dealing and gaining understanding to open up further, new courses of action (cf. Holzkamp 1993).Learning for the elderly pursues therefore far less an output orientation such as the continuing and further education during professional life but aims more at a developmental process that is open to its results and potentials. This simultaneously encompasses understanding and acting. In concrete situations understanding and acting are closely linked: self reflexion and personal life organisation, exchange in "reflexive milieus" and joint action as well as socially related open discourse and political activity are often mutually determined (Bubolz-Lutz et al. 2010, p. 26).
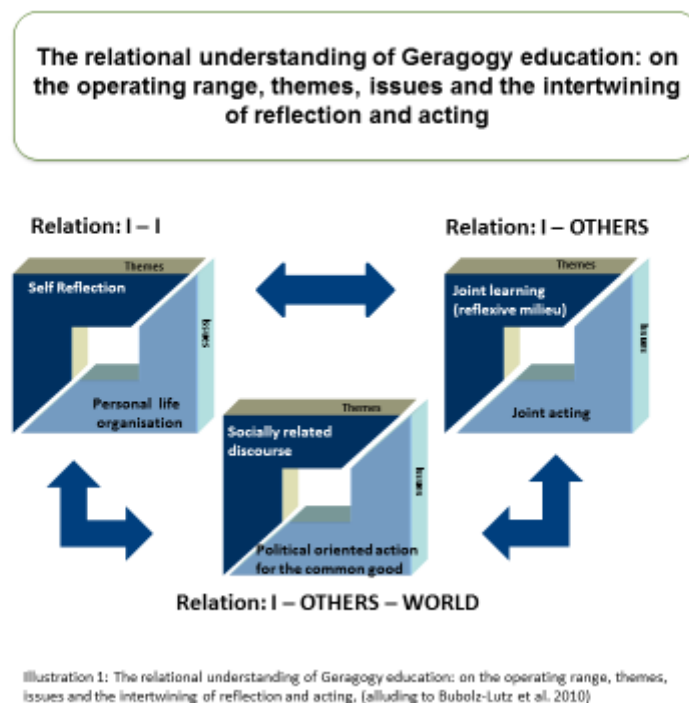

Illustration 1: The relational understanding of Geragogy education: on the operating range, themes, issues and the intertwining of reflection and acting, (alluding to Bubolz-Lutz et a.l. 2010)

The education theory of Holzkamp (1993) is also taken up here, based on the learners learning significantly from a fundamental and continuing connection with their own learning projects. Education is then understood as a specific form of human action, in which the individual develops him or herself in new social constellations of meaning and acquires an expanded competence to act enabling the individual to improve their quality of life.

2.2 Contexts and interpretations of learning:

In the post professional life phase education processes rarely take place in formal environments: most of them occur in the life world of the elderly person; in informal environments and activities (e.g. via lectures, travel, in joint intergenerational activities). While learning in everyday life occurs almost unnoticed and almost "en passant", the learning processes become established in connection with civic involvement or neighbourhood developments schemes. Schäffter (1999) talks here of learning in the "intermediary field" between everyday learning and institutional learning arrangements offered by education providers such Germany's Adult Education Centres (Volkshochschulen) particularly for the elderly (cf. Kade 2007, p. 64). Regarding civic learning the exchange within an initiative and learning through reflection of joint praxis is at the centre. Learning stems from practice and for practice. In this way, out of the learning impulse for practice there also arise learning opportunities and requirements for practice. And here too, the three above-mentioned ranges of education are found again: learning from oneself, learning through the organisation of social relations and the (participatory)-organisation of social relationships through learning.

The intentions and motivations for learning change in old age as well as changes in the life phase, de professionalization, for instance, play additional roles. The organisation of their own lives and the everyday move more into the centre, the motives for learning become strongly linked to the individual's requirements and interests. With this knowledge, offers are established in the social sphere or in the realm of their motivations. They offer impulses to learn close to the living area and utilise locations of everyday life as new learning places (Harhues 2009, p. 285ff).So called "anchor points" (sites where elderly and old age people are known or where they are relevant) become sites of education (Schramek 2015). Education impulses which are available for old people by other old people are of great significance in this context, (cf. e.g. Holzapfel 2013). Thus an onsite learning consultancy for older people can be offered. In this instance the elderly act as learning consultants. They create the possibilities for other senior citizens to open up to learning processes, to inquire about individual paths of access, interests and needs "on an equal footing" and search for suitable solutions.

2.3 Learning arrangements between externally organised offers and support for self organised learning:

In the meantime, a broad range of offers, usually for full time activities for the elderly, has become available in the context of education for the elderly. Of these are offers of professional (further) education for the elderly, to keep access open to them regarding the developments in particular concrete fields of work. These take the form of offers from further educational institutions such as the Adult Education Institute (VHS), studies for people in the third age at Universities, qualification offers for a chosen voluntary involvement or a new professional career and offers from (church) communities etc. The number of educational offers for elderly and old aged also in the field of further education has increased significantly in recent years. Likewise the interest and participation of old aged people has grown correspondingly (cf. for the 65-80-year-old group Tippelt et al. 2009; and for older people up to 64 years old Bilger & Strauß 2015).Direct offers from educational institutions are, however, used primarily by those people who are well situated, trained and already accustomed to searching for education offers and making use of them. Formally organised educational offers such as offers in the field of blended learning (connecting traditional learning forms with modern forms of E-learning) will naturally be used by better placed elderly and old aged people with a higher educational background and higher educational attainment (cf. Iller 2008). It is noteworthy that this group corresponds to the increase in recent years of the image characterised by the term the "active old aged".

On the other hand, over the last two decades, a trend has been observed that has nothing to do with externally organised offers, but with the capabilities and will of old-aged people for self organisation. From a theoretical perspective, in 1999, Schäffter already criticised the orientation of the offers of education for the elderly (Schäffter 1999, S. 136ff).During the same period, adult educator Dräger designed an educational

infrastructure model for the use of the elderly (Dräger et al. 1997). As a result, concepts were developed taking into greater consideration the self-determination of the organisation of the learning process that had been observed (e.g. Bubolz-Lutz& Rüffin 2001).

Currently self determined learning approaches are of the same value alongside offer oriented educational conceptions. It has been shown that the heterogeneity of old age calls for manifold concepts and offers, appropriate to the differing and various life situations, needs, interests and a need to develop tasks for the elderly and old aged. Solely to establish conceptualised education offers, embraces only one aspect of the requirements. For the new generation of stronger, independence-oriented old-aged people, the provision of "learning spaces" is appropriate. In this instance, the themes and concerns are chosen by themselves and the organisation of the learning processes is incumbent on those interested. But it is not to be overlooked that even such self-organised approaches are in need of secure basic conditions, like those frequently on offer at educational institutions (cf. Schramek &Bubolz-Lutz 2016).

2.4 The specifics of learning for the elderly:

The organisation of learning processes for the elderly requires some "age typical" specifics. In view of the fact that the aging process, particularly that which occurs in people of really advanced age, means one has to take into consideration the slower learning pace of certain individuals in the group. One has to schedule in more repetitions and pauses at briefer intervals and pay attention to intelligibility. One has often to take into consideration, in a special way, the wish for an exchange of experiences, contact and the desire for community. During the connecting to the life world, requirements and interests constitute the learning desideratum for all age groups and the importance of orientation to biography in educational work with the elderly is particularly clear. After all, the experience knowledge of the older generation is central to the concept of old age education, flanked by principles of self-organisation and self determination and the advancement of the individual (cf. Köster, Schramek & Dorn 2008). For that reason, the "participative learning" approach remains central.

2.5 On the relation of education and relationship a relational understanding of the understanding of education:

In the last decade brain research has demonstrated the importance of "successful" interactions for human development quite impressively. It describes the brain as made up of individual parts, an adaptable and plastic whole and that which most crucially influences us, throughout everything, is what flows through our senses. Our social experiences, our experiences with relationships play a vital role here. They lead, in fact, to structural changes in the brain. The neurobiologist Hüther speaks of the "social construction of the human brain" (2006).Furthermore; trauma research informs us that emotional injuries change the biology of the brain. This is the effect feelings and relationships have on our senses. Conversely, if we have the feeling to have mastered something or we experience a happy relationship it feels good, for in this moment the motivation systems release feel good hormones. We feel recognition and affection or love. This satisfies fundamental human needs of attention and recognition.

It follows accordingly that the most important competence required in life is skill in relationships the competence to create relationships. Doctor, gene researcher and neurobiologist Baueruses this as the foundation upon which learning is built (2006). The neurobiologist argumentation postulates that learning from role models works simply through watching, which then activates the nerve cells in the brain responsible for the specific action required. Through inner participation while watching (without actual participation in reality) a learning process is actually completed. As a consequence, what is observed connects to the learner's own experience. One such activation of nerve cells in the brain is also possible through feeling. But in order for an activation of the corresponding brain area to occur through watching, a positive, emotional relationship to the observed is required i.e. to want to learn something in particular or to

want to be able to do so. In this way, through the relationship to the activity/competence, the learning process is initiated: a fact will be linked with feeling (through the limbic system) and reaches another sphere of activity other than that of the mere storage of facts. Transmitting through interpersonal relations is known to us in this process between parents and children. For example, if parents try to say something to children during the age of separating, they cannot accept it, whereas should the same words come out of their friend's mouths those self same words can be integrated into their own actions.

In Educational Science concepts, particularly in the area of professional learning in grown adults, this link is usually only rarely noted. In clear contradistinction, Geragogy has observed this connection and emphasises the principle of relationship orientation to be a distinguishing feature of the learning process relationships to the closest, to relatives, others and to the "world" as the focal point of their observations (Bubolz-Lutz2007). The experienced relationship quality to the lecturer, learning guide and/or to the other learners is seen as a central factor which opens people up to learning, to addressing the new, the unfamiliar, accepting criticism and to critically reflect and change their own attitudes.

In this sense learning psychology particularly underlines the importance of experience of "integration" for the development of learning motivation(c.f. Deci & Ryan 1985).Educational scientist Künkler states that in his differentiated analysis of modern learning theory approaches (2011,p. 450), that the subject of the relation so him/herself and to the world in the relation to others is learned. The central importance of encounter and relationship is to be found again in approaches of existential philosophy for instance in Buber's concept of encounter. This descries the phenomenon of coming to oneself in others (Buber 2006), affirms the relationship as the "beginning" (ibid.,p. 22) and postulates a level of "between". Learning is carried out therefore "…beyond the subjective and on this side of the objective in the sphere of the between" (Künkler 2011, p.475). Thereby the dialogical moment in the encounter of *I and thou* is termedas the transforming moment in the learning process.

What now becomes interesting is considering what kind of relationship quality benefits learning in a special way. For this purpose research results already exist from the 1950s: they refer to a competence motivation moored within people (cf. White 1959), who already in their childhood demonstrated the meaning of the expression "to be able to be alone". Gerontologist Wahl has described this in his book,"Das kann ich allein"(I can do that alone). He emphasised that the competence motivation is effective even at a very advanced age and how difficult it is for instance, for nursing personnel to be granted scope for action in looking after such subjects in old age (Wahl 1991).

Over our entire lifespan we need the feeling we can solve problems, annoyances and difficulties, overcome then and to manage something ourselves, with support, if necessary. The feeling of self effectiveness comes from this continually necessary experience of self determination. Finally, communication research tells us that successful communication does not arise from the objective level but actually from the relational level: the relational level determines that which will be taken up at an objective level (cf. Watzlawick et al. 1969).
The knowledge summarised here from the various scientific disciplines refer to the necessity to create a far stronger relation oriented understanding of education. Hereby the learning process appears to be embedded in an interactive and dialogical relationship (cf. Künkler 2011). Thus the relationship quality in learning processes is the pivotal point for learning which focuses on a "good" life or quality of life.

The educational understanding of Geragogy takes the relational aspect up in a particular way: here three central "relational fields" are discerned: the relationship to oneself (relation I-I), the relationship to other people (I-OTHER) and the relationship to society/ the world (I-OTHER-WORLD) (cf. illustration 1). Accordingly, education scientist Faulstich (2013) also distinguishes three effective directions or levels of learning: 'Individual' (micro-level) 'neighbourhood' (meso-level) and 'society' (macro-level). In his understanding, education means to acquire competences that the individual needs, "…to understand concrete, societal problems, to which they find their own position and to be able to influence them by

acting" (ibid, p. 214). Thus human learning should be "…geared to a stubborn insistence on the best possible future life" (ibid, p. 215).

3. Starting points for didactics for the elderly future related necessary actions:

In Künkler's approach in "Lernen in Beziehung" (Learning in a Relationship) (2011) referring back to neuroscientific and constructivist theories the most important role of the others, in this interpersonal field for learning is particularly emphasised. This following relational understanding of learning conceives of education as a radical occurring of relationships. The person learns in an interaction with him/herself, with the others, with the group and societal relationships. In the context of the educational process it involves according to the approach balancing out the various needs and standpoints and reconciling of paradoxes such as the freedom of the individual and the given order. Thus the process of learning is understood as a process of "subjectivation" and likewise as a process of "participation" (in social milieus, groupings) (cf. Künkler 2011, p. 563). Learning can also be understood, however, asa "…relational occurrence", which ultimately evades the distinction between the individual and the social (cf. ibid., p. 568), and as a process which takes place "through the meshing of self-, world- and other relations". Thereby the aspect of the unplannable and openness to results of an educational process is introduced. "Learning in between takes place in the mode of interconnectedness such as relatedness and through these is … essentially determined" (ibid,p. 568). In this sense learning is to be understood as a dialogical process from the ground up, that not only focuses on itself and its counterpart, but also on the world and society (cf. in addition the approach of Bateson, 1981).On the basis of such an understanding of education the following three central challenges for learning in the phase of old age can be named, which emphasise three different aspects simultaneously:

1. Education for the elderly to be the opportunity for self-affirmation and identity development in the light of the challenges of old age to develop a new understanding of self/an identity in differing relationships to people.

2. Education for the elderly to be the impulse for interaction with others and the development of a relationship culture quite detached from any thinking of performance and product.

3. To see education for the elderly as a task to understand social relationships and grasp their logic and enabling them to provide a contribution to cope with change in a manner proper to human dignity.

4. The final critical assessment:

In conclusion, if critical comment on education for the elderly be allowed education is smeared with the stain of the exclusion of certain groups. This is accurate particularly in regard to older and very old people in differing or in precarious life situations. It emerges that traditional education offers are excluding, as these are more in demand by people of a middle class milieu. Furthermore, impaired mobility often presents a limiting factor. Also in the context of commitment, positive images of active and productive old age are forcibly one-sided. As a result all these old aged people become marginalised as they cannot or do not want to meet with the predominantly more middle class image of productive old age. A critical perception of education for the elderly comes to the conclusion that it cannot be a school-like approach for the elderly nor can it exclude certain groups in any way. Education should also not serve as an instrument for societally "standardised" presentations of the elderly geared to being "active" in terms of productivity. Nevertheless, the personal as well as the societal use of learning and education for the elderly has to be recognised. A way to deal with the critical aspects connected with learning for the elderly consists in conceiving of learning and education for a long and healthy life so that the old aged design their development and learning themselves and are therefore accompanied and, when necessary, supported.

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