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Title: Intergenerational learning in a video production project: Digital memories

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### Abstract

An intergenerational learning research project brought together young students and elderly participants, to study both the level of communication between them and the role of digital technology as an agent in that respect. Use of digital media production was regarded and employed as a method towards acquiring 21<sup>st</sup> century social and communication skills. Given that creative learning is all about developing one's own creative potential through meaningful projects, the theoretical approach here rests on the principle, according to which creativity lies in co-construction of meaning and encourages the learner to an active role.

Fourteen year old students and members of an Elderly People Community Centre worked together in pairs of each, to make a digital video out of memory material of the elder by utilizing the digital skills of the youngsters. To keep with the formal stages of video production, each and every pair elaborated on its own story, did the actual shooting, went on to edit the sequences and, finally, presented the finished video file to all project participants – researchers included. In all cases the outcome was a coherent and interesting digital story made with reminiscence, while it had simultaneously turned each young student into a responsive listener of yesterdays, save a promising producer of tomorrow.

Editing came out as the most important among the session's four phases (planning, videotaping, editing and viewing) and it counted up to an actual, mutually fruitful experience of intergenerational interaction. In terms of quality assessment, interviewees spoke invariably of a surprisingly pleasant experience, as well as of a challenging channel of communication between them.

### Introduction

The handing down process refers to a social phenomenon that transforms memories of the elders into something valuable or worthwhile to the young. The whole process, for the most part, takes place within the family or social circle and sustains continuity. Sharing of accumulated knowledge is, therefore, preserved in the oral storytelling tradition present in virtually all human activities, as witnessed throughout history. However, observable changes in the family structure appear to impinge on values and ideas flow on the part of the elder, thus giving rise to new level standards of intergenerational relations. As intergenerational discursive exchange fades out, both in terms of quality and of quantity, researchers try out restoring equilibrium.

Current research has shown increased longevity to “alter the length of time spent in specific family roles” –that being the main reason for having even four different generations living within one family at the same time (Lowenstein A.,1999). Further, as modern couples give first birth past the age of 30, the age gap among family members follows a growing tendency. Accordingly, fear of social and cultural isolation of the elder mark out the ethical framework of building new communication channels between distant age groups.

On the other hand the adolescents (11-18) are experiencing a transitional period from childhood to adolescence and they are seeking to define their identity. A healthy family environment that encourages a strong and equal coalition is an important factor for soothing the emotional tension rising in every growing adolescent (Liner,D. 2006). Studies show that students (11-18 years old) who participated in an intergenerational program gained a sense of civic responsibility (Druin,A.,2009, Dorfman, L., et al.2004) and increased their level grades compared to others who did not participate (Strom R.D.,1995). Younger individuals need to be able to explore the diverse relationships between themselves and others; and moreover need to see the perspective of others. Interactions with a supporting peer group is essential

for developing the ability to solve tensions but so is to make a social contribution and engage for an important cause. (Liner,D.2006). Co-operating with the elder is a both a valuable and engaging cause, offering learning opportunities which facilitate their transition to adulthood.

The expected obstacle to the meaningful construction of intergenerational relations is mainly the lack of common interest (Gonzalez, V.M. ,et al 2008). We can only overcome this situation by creating a common ground that would not be offending neither to the young nor to the elder and that would take into consideration their own way of thinking. Another obstacle is that the displacement of families for career opportunities leads the members away from their paternal family and as a consequence children may develop stereotypes and prejudices against the elderly (Fair,C.D.2011) Hence, we are studying intergenerational relations as they can evolve and offer possibilities for communication and common understanding. New media offer the potential of communicating across different media forms in an authentic and meaningful way, connecting the digital to the human way of thinking. Media world includes different sorts and levels of communicative tasks as it expands to setting up a website, editing videos, keep in touch with long distance relatives, or creating a new group in the social media. In this sense the objective obstacles, we have mentioned, can be eliminated if we bring together the young and the elder to get involved in a media rich environment where the challenge is to communicate and the digital technology is the agent.

### Literature review: The young as producers and the elder as storytellers

The workshop was designed to combine the memory material of the elder and the digital skills of the young students. Each age group would be able to offer their creative potential in their field of knowledge and produce a digital artifact together. Most of the current technology applications do not involve real social interactions, or physical contact but mediated communication. In this workshop the objective is to increase the level of direct communication between the old and the young while keeping up with the standards of digital video production. Youth as producer and the elder as a storyteller of the past can interact in a meaningful way for both and co-operate constructively for a common goal. The roles assigned to each age group are well justified by the literature review that shows on the one hand that telling personal stories is an effective source of relief for the elder (Luepker, E. T.,2010) and on the other hand that adolescents have developed technical competence through their everyday occupation on the internet and are looking for a more creative digital expression. (Buckingham,D.2007)

Youth is no longer a neutral consumer of media information but moreover an active participant through social media, video platforms as youtube, my space and others. (Rideout *et al.*, 2005) Everyday use of computer games or the internet involves a range of informal learning processes, where users learn through trial and error and are able to pass on their knowledge to others. One of the current trends is media production and could be used as a tool for research into new types of informal learning. Not only young students are fluent in new technologies, but moreover they are providing a new perspective of digital creativity. The evolution of computer-based tools to edit and share video has changed their perception as viewers. The abundance of free tools for amateur producing video is altering the viewer's identity into a new more creative one, as he is coming to terms with the idea of him being able to alter the content. Cary Bazalgette (Former Head of Education in British Film Institute) is underlining the need for a further development of students' talents with non-print media since they are no longer merely consumers of information but active participants. Access to technology- and the development of technical skills implied- is no longer an issue, whereas "access to cultural forms of expression and communication" (Buckingham,D.2007) is the new challenge.

During the workshop the students will be presenting their digital skills and the elder their personal narrations. Literature reports that narrating personal experiences is a source of relief to the elder and the whole process seems to be having a therapeutic effect on them (Luepker, E. T.,2010). Recalling the past, or as it is reported in an article "life reviewing", is considered as an interesting alternative to psychotherapy for elderly people who are not institutionalized, but are starting to experience a late life depression. A great example of life reviewing is the movie "Wild Strawberries" directed by Ingmar Bergman where a man in his 80s takes the journey of reminiscence, travels through bitterness and pain to finally return into

reconciliation. There is not a great distance from fiction to real world considering that scientific evidence show the value of this journey through time. Despite the conclusions mentioned above, the use of video recording is uncommon for capturing the memory of the elder while audio recording is used more often.

There are already some aspiring projects towards the digital production of narratives of the past like Denshō, (<http://www.densho.org/densho.asp>). It is a non-profit organization that means “to leave a legacy”. Real-life heroes narrate their stories during World War II. The goal is to preserve the testimonies of Japanese Americans who were unjustly incarcerated during World War II. Another interesting initiative which implicates young students along with the elder is Digi-club ([www.digiclub.org/sofs/](http://www.digiclub.org/sofs/)). It invites teenagers to “capture the stories of the World War II generation”, motivating them to preserve their history and eventually creating an ongoing historical documentary.

### Designing the workshop

Fourteen year old students and members of an Elderly People Community Centre worked together in pairs of each, to make a digital video. The workshop had been specifically designed on the creative learning principles of comprehension, divergent thinking as well as original work production (Ferrari, A., et al 2009). In the world of new media it is not the specific tool, nor the application proposed as a single motive to learning, but, rather the operative conditions about it (Shneckenberg, D. 2009). Creative learning results in the awakening of self-guided motives of those involved seeking out a creative result. Creativity lies in co-construction of meaning and encourages the learner to an active role.

The aim of this was to study both the level of communication between the young and the elder and the role of digital technology as an agent in that respect. The level of communication can be observed through the developing dialogue between them, the level of collaboration and of interaction when working together. The role of digital technology is crucial to whether it facilitates or blocks the interaction. The workshop assigned technology an intermediate role to help out communication, using it also as a tool to transform the nonfigurative concept of session experience into a solid creative outcome.

The workshop was organized in the five following sessions in order to provide the participants with a lucid and understandable structure.

**Pre-production:** Members of the research group visited separately the community center and the high school. First they asked the elderly to decide and prepare an autobiographical short story that would be interesting to them and wished to share with others. Relevant pictures of the narrated story could be digitized and used afterwards during the editing process. At the same time high school students experienced a hand-on workshop where research members explained the basic technique rules of the editing software Microsoft Movie-Maker.

**First discussion:** Active listening and dialogue encourages critical thinking, so the participants had the opportunity to interact and organize their work. They would have to decide about their shooting setting and talk about the elder’s story. In approximately fifteen minutes this session should be completed and move forward to the next one.

**Shooting:** The shooting process was programmed to be no more than 20 minutes. With limited time amateurs tend to better organize their work than having to think over it excessively. According to experience amateurs get carried away by the process, shooting scenes irrelevant to their main scenario and the additional video material gets them frustrated throughout the editing process. (Hernandez-Ramos, P. 2007).

**Editing:** The instructions given to the participants were simple enough so to accomplish their target and complete a 5 minute video. They were asked to add opening and ending titles, at least two transitions, insert at least one image and add a music soundtrack. There weren’t made any restraints about the camera movement nor the shooting angle.

**Viewing:** Sharing with the audience the outcome of their work is a major step. The creative teams of each video would gain feedback watching the verbal and non-verbal reactions of the audience. Furthermore the elder would have the opportunity to listen to

themselves and to their personal stories, while the young students could realize in what way their shooting and editing work has an impact on the story.

## Results

Each separate group had a clear understanding of the specific role assigned to each and avoided confusion. Students fostered the responsibility of explaining the technical terms to the elder and

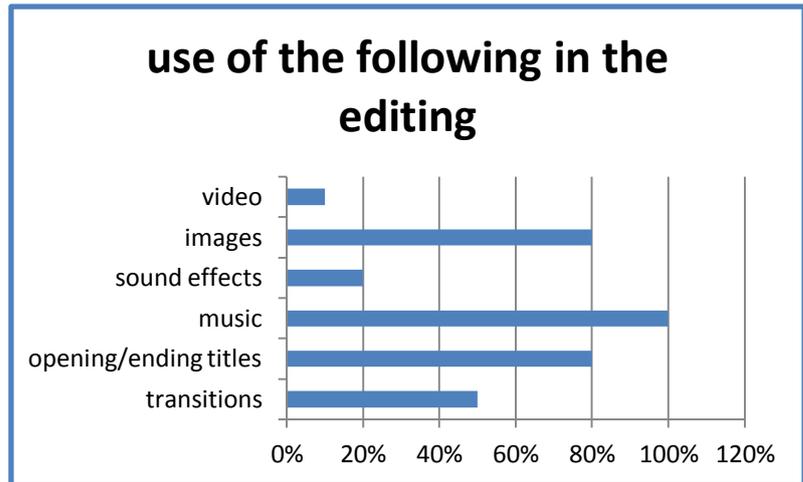
of answering their questions. A significant change has been observed in the students' attitude towards the elder. When the research team first visited the high school the class did not positively respond to the fact that their video production partner would be an elder person. Although as soon as the workshop ended they acknowledged that the elderly were fully capable of contributing to their common goal and moreover they found this experience to be inspiring and life-changing.

A lesson of History took place in every working team, where students developed curiosity about the past. The 14 year old participants stated that only when they actually met the elderly, they started to get interested about them and their stories. In other words the workshop itself did not attract their attention right from the beginning (during the pre-production session). In conclusion the physical contact and communication should not be underestimated in an intergenerational setting. As digital technology motivated the students to participate so was the actual social interaction with the elder. Listening to their stories encouraged the students to extend their vision and relate with the elder.

During the shooting session the interaction between the participants was rather weak. The elder had already decided their story to be filmed and were anxious to say it in front of the camera, while the students worried more about the shooting itself. Although the elder person of each pair was eager to listen to student's instructions and collaborate. The final shots were stable and the filmed persons were looking directly to the camera. Amateur video making magazines note that the aesthetic of capturing people looking to the camera is a common mistake made by amateurs. (Buckingham, D., et al 2007) An interesting element of the video narration is that almost every elder participant, while unfolding the story, is referring to their adolescent collaborator, saying his or her name, as if he or she were the only audience.

Editing digital video enabled students and the elder to better communicate as they manipulated the video material and discussed about the decisions that would form the final outcome. The use of musical background was a common ground for every group, whereas the use of another video was not. It is interesting that they used all of the possible inserts (music, sound effects, video, images, titles, transitions) in order to make their video "look more professional", as they said. During the editing session they both developed the ability of justifying their choices by watching the video several times in the preview and knew exactly the kind of shots that they should cut. Both the young and the elder developed a sense of solidarity while editing because they started to recognize the video as the outcome of their collaborative and creative work.

Watching the video along with others was a rewarding and fulfilling experience for all. The elder regarded the audience's positive reaction as an acknowledgement of their narration talent and felt content sharing their personal stories. All the participants were showing great interest in watching all the videos, being respectful towards the other members' work. Positive feedback increased the self-esteem of the elder and motivated them to show their work to family and friends. The workshop's achievement is that the digital artifact made by the participants can be carried forward and be a symbol of intergenerational collaboration.



## Discussion

Making moving image narratives is a challenge that can be used as an alternative to teaching, communicating and learning in different contexts. Filming and editing are both interesting activities for the young and the elder motivating them to create and share. Completing their work was challenging enough to stay alert and active throughout the whole project. The procedure was demanding for both the age groups, they had to organize the content, keep up with the time restrictions and elaborate on their work. Needless to say they have developed synthetic abilities in the sense of seeing a problem in new ways (Folmer, P. 1975), analytic abilities, that means choosing the best solution and technical abilities, working with the camera and the editing software.

In order to support creativity and intergenerational collaboration digital technology can serve as a facilitator providing opportunities for open learning. There are affordable tools to shoot and edit a digital story addressing the needs of a demanding digital storytelling project. It is difficult to teach creativity but through a challenging project where students can unleash their talent and integrate writing, composing and digital skills creative outcomes may be achieved.

Storytelling for the elder is a form of expression, personal fulfillment and an act of communication. If the modern society of digital age can provide the elder with the space needed to make their stories flourish and grow, it would be a social service of great importance. Constructing a narrative helps their memory to increase and sharing stories helps them gain their self-esteem. Listening to the elder people's stories enhances students' history knowledge and leads them to become respectful of the past. In addition narration from the past in a video project is contributing to the conservation of the historical memory and through a meaningful process for students and elders.(Darcy,A.2007)

Social inclusion for the elder community can be carried out through intergenerational programs in schools, volunteering in community centers, co-operation of relevant organizations towards a rising awareness for the elder. Interactions between older and younger people can be developed under different contexts and for different reasons, but nonetheless they are a source of learning for both.

## Video titles

“An old acquaintance”, “Memories”, “Something from me”, “Being a boy scout”, “My mother's lullaby”, “Immigrant in Australia”, “Singing in the choir”, “Fairytale”, “My life in a few minutes”

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