

TECHNOLOGY IN INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING RESEARCH PROJECTS IN THE GREEK CONTEXT

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Abstract

The University Research Institute of Applied Communication (U.R.I.A.C.) and the New Technologies Laboratory in Communication, Education and the Mass Media (N.T.L.C.E.M.) have been carrying out a number of research projects in the field of Intergenerational Communication and Learning. Members of community centres for the elderly and public high school students have participated in the projects focusing on the social need for intergenerational communication. This paper presents the projects held, as well as their research goals and the conclusions the research team has arrived at.

There were two key factors, common in all projects, which outline the chosen approach and contribute to the uniformity and concreteness of the conclusions: firstly, in all cases the intergenerational communication took place in an composite environment which offered online and offline interaction at the same place and time, and, secondly, all activities were designed in a way which promotes the idea that the elderly may not only benefit from ICT, but become active members of the new digital world and provide precious knowledge and experience in both local and global level.

During the first research project 14 year-old students acted as tutors of the members of a community centre teaching them basic aspects of internet use. One year later another project was held, bringing together adolescents and elderly people in order for them to co-create digital videos

based on the personal narrations of the elderly and implementation of the technical skills of the adolescents. As the elderly revealed their life experiences the students recorded them on video. They cooperated on the editing process and presented the final outcome to all participants. Social games and intergenerational learning was the main theme of the third workshop. High school students played the popular game “Frontier ville” with their elderly team-mates and participated in an on-line competition. A hands-on workshop was set whilst both generations grew their digital farm in the far-west. The fourth research project was called “Music for Two Generations”, and was based on the hypothesis that both sides would be interested in discussing their musical tastes. Students and seniors used “every-day” digital applications, under the guidance of the research group members, in order to create a youtube account where they composed a playlist with their favourite songs. A general conclusion deriving from these projects would be that people from different generations can work together and communicate in a well-organized digital context. Moreover, they can create valuable digital artifacts as a confirmation of their co-operation and interaction achieved.

Keywords

intergenerational communication and learning; elderly and adolescents; technology, internet and digital media; interaction and collaboration

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1. Introduction

Social knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, from the elderly to the younger, through various means (Chabert Ramon and Turrini, 2008). Intergenerational Communication and therefore Intergenerational Learning are core ingredients of the evolution of human civilization. The social phenomenon of sharing the accumulated knowledge diminishes when the elderly and the new generations become isolated from one another. Family structure and geographic mobility of

citizens are considered a proof of this isolation (Lowenstein, 1999). As intergenerational exchanges fade out, in terms of both quality and quantity, researchers attempt to restore equilibrium (Meliadou, Giannakouloupoulos and Meimaris, 2011). The social need for intergenerational communication is an arising issue for all generations. An intergenerational context should help the elderly restore their social connections while the new generation will learn the value of continuity in human life. Intergenerational learning means bringing adolescents and the elderly together in order for them to learn from one another, under the assumption that the learning process never ends (Loewen, 1996). Therefore, every intergenerational project accomplished works as a mutual promise that the learning process is a life-long process.

Nowadays, a strong social need for the integration of senior citizens in a world of digital convergence has emerged. Even though they remain financially and socially active, senior citizens may abstain from using the current technological means. They are deprived of the opportunity to use modern “digital tools”, in contrast to children and adolescents who are born into a technology oriented environment and are considered to be “digital natives” (Prensky, 2007). Moreover, elderly people miss opportunities for social interaction, communication and information, thus often being marginalized and isolated from the wide social headcount, even from their beloved ones. We consider technology to be a field where both generations can meet not merely in terms of gaining technical competence or acquiring information but also in terms of utilizing it as a creative means of communication. As the elderly get left out of the mainstream society, meaningful intergenerational learning programmes could reinforce intergenerational links and enhance communication between the generations.

The University Research Institute of Applied Communication and the Laboratory of New Technologies in Communication, Education and the Mass Media of the University of Athens are developing projects and processes that bring the generations together to their mutual benefit. There has been increasing interest in intergenerational learning initiatives, but as far as technology is concerned most initiatives are restricted to helping the elderly obtain digital skills. The challenge of our intergenerational research projects is to offer communication opportunities in a digital context, both for the benefit of the elderly and the young. Our main goals during the scientific planning of all the following initiatives were to:

- demonstrate the potential contribution of the elderly and the adolescents to the society.
- make evident that technology can be a communication facilitator for all generations instead of an obstacle.
- suggest modern activities for the elderly that reconnect them with the modern world.
- help different generations adopt more positive attitudes towards each other.
- reinforce family relations.
- prove that technology serves as a common interest for both the elderly and adolescents.

- give adolescents the opportunity to share their digital knowledge, and the elderly the opportunity to explore the new digital world.

2. The workshops: An overview

In the overview (in figure 1) the differences and similarities of all four workshops are noted. At a first glance the age range of the participants does not vary. The most recent findings in intergenerational learning programmes report that the age difference between the participants can be at least twenty years but this difference varies in all sorts of interesting new ways. So kindergarten children visit a home for the elderly in the programme “It makes them so happy” and the significant age difference is an issue to be researched (Fair, Davis and Fischer, 2011). In another programme 40 year old online players interact through online gaming with 18 year old players and their different playing style is observed (Kurniawan, 2008). The intergenerational interaction in the following workshops is between adolescents and elderly people over 65 years old. Another common characteristic is the duration; every workshop had to be held during one day, to avoid practical problems between the institutions involved. Finally, a qualitative research method was chosen for interviewing the participants at the end of each session. The researchers also carefully watched the videos of the video screening. Each workshop had similar objectives concerning intergenerational learning and communication but focused on different aspects of technology.

Project title	Participants	Duration	Main technology theme	Type of observation	Place
1. Generations online	A total of twenty 14 year students of a public school and 20 elderly people from a local Community Centre	6 hours in the same day	Internet	Participatory observation, interviews, video screening	Local Community Centre
2. Stars and producers of digital memories			Digital storytelling		
3. The game goes digital			Social games		
4. Intergenerational music			You tube		Public High-school

Figure 1. Intergenerational events and activities

3. “Generations online”

The elders were the “users” and the adolescents were the “teachers” in this workshop. This role-changing was challenging enough to engage both age groups, especially under the light of the fact that the project took place in a laboratory-like environment providing the means for both offline

and online interaction. The internet served as the facilitator of their communication as a technology that they are both interested in, from different perspectives. The most basic guideline given to the students by the researchers was that they should talk with the elderly participants about their interests and visit accordingly relevant websites.

The hypothesis was that an intergenerational workshop would increase the positive attitude of each generation towards the other. Having the leading role would strengthen the self-confidence of the adolescents, while the elderly would better understand the potentials provided by the internet, which fascinates adolescents.

In their interviews students underlined the fact that the elderly were good listeners and showed respect towards them. They also made valuable comparisons between the elderly they met in the workshop and their own grandparents, concluding that the elderly in general can actually learn how to use the internet. According to researchers in successful intergenerational projects adolescents raise the level of awareness regarding the elderly and therefore develop a positive attitude towards them (Middlecamp and Gross, 2002). The elderly during their interviews stressed the need for communication and expressed their intention of practicing the internet at home with their grandchildren. Findings from the literature suggest that many grandparents want to improve their influence and relationships in their families as well as their communities (Strom and Strom, 1995) and this workshop suggests that their familiarity with the internet is an effective way of achieving their goal.

4. “Stars and producers of digital memories”

Students and elderly participants came together in order to produce a video in pairs. The workshop was designed on the concept of creative learning, which means that all participants would contribute to the project, taking an active role and would be encouraged to develop their full potential. In this workshop technology involved shooting and editing a stimulating life experience of the elderly. The added value of this process would be the creation of a digital archive of memories available to all.

It is of great importance to observe during which part of this process the participants developed a meaningful dialogue. The variety of technical characteristics that they used in the editing process manifests their mutual interest in creating the final video. The workshop was organized in five consecutive sessions in order to provide the participants with a clear idea of the process. At first there was the pre-production session where students were familiarized with the use of the editing tools before the workshop. The first-discussion session that took place between the participants involved discussions about the story, the shooting, the editing session. Finally, at the viewing session all participants could share their video creations.

Half of the elderly chose to narrate a story from their childhood, two of them narrated their lifestories as immigrants in foreign countries and the other three narrated their own favourite

classic tale. During the shooting session the narrator (one of the elderly) talked directly to the camera while the adolescent remained silent and did not ask any questions. The editing process was especially creative for both as they co-operated trying to transform their raw video material into a “professional” video. Students accomplished their mission and felt content having contributed to a special assignment much different than the ones they are usually assigned to do. They acquired a growing sense of responsibility throughout the workshop, as they interacted with their elderly collaborators. The 14 year old students admitted that only when they actually met the elderly and heard their stories, did they change their attitude towards them and felt connected. This workshop accomplished the co-operation between two different generations and the creation of a series of videos that can serve as a pleasant reminiscence of their cooperation. Of all projects, this one underlined in the most satisfactory way the participatory opportunities which the new digital environment provides to the elderly in order to effectively share their knowledge and experience.

5. “The game goes digital”

During this workshop, 10 students and 10 elderly people played in pairs for 60 minutes the popular Facebook game “Frontier Ville”.

In this workshop our goal was to present a social network game as a new way of communication between generations. Researchers have noted that adults over 50 consider the internet only as a tool for their transactions with banks or as a search engine (Lenhart, 2009). During this workshop, our main intention was to study what each representative target group could gain out of social gaming.

It can be asserted that social games provide an appropriate environment for interplay among generations in general. More specifically, the students were excited with the idea of becoming the tutors of the elderly. Students were not competitive towards their co-players and were patient enough to give their co-players the time they needed to accomplish their missions in the digital far west. The seniors, having had real-life experience in agricultural activities, proved to be very skilled and helpful.

6. “Music for Two Generations”

Students and elderly people created a youtube channel with their favourite songs and shared their preferences online [<http://www.youtube.com/user/diageneaki>].

This workshop aspired to answer the following questions: Could adolescents and elderly people interact within the environment of popular digital applications? And, does music offer the potential of Learning and Tutoring (Mentoring)?

As far as communication issues are concerned, 20% of the students described their interaction with the elderly in general as good, 60% as very good and 20% as excellent. Twenty percent of the students had second thoughts about the use of ICT by seniors, altering their previous negative view.

Only 10% stated that they dedicate time to the grandparents in their spare time, while 35% declared that they dedicate no spare time to them. Almost all of them (90%) would like to dedicate some time to “teach” seniors how to use the Internet and all of them think that You Tube could actually be a source of digital education for the elderly. In the specific workshop the adolescents eagerly undertook the teacher’s role, promoting seniors’ technological literacy. On the other hand, seniors contributed with their experiences while they followed the children’s instructions and stayed focused on the activity’s flow.

7. Results & Discussion

In all the aforementioned workshops, the participants had the chance for positive interdependence, personal interaction, appropriate use of interpersonal skills such as leadership, communication, team spirit and, of course, mutual contribution and sharing. The fact that all interactions were held in both offline and online environment at the same time signifies the role of new media as a technological facilitator for intergenerational communication. Nevertheless, it can be asserted that these hands-on activities created communicational conditions in which students used verbal and non verbal expression in order to interact with the elderly. Another point is that the use of technology in creative programmes can completely change the nature of what students in co-operation with their teachers can accomplish, as students cross the boundary of “learner” to “contributor” (Levin 2003). Students enjoyed the programmes and, what is more, had a particular digital outcome to share with others and remember -such as the videos and the youtube playlist.

Elderly people are not acquainted either with the digital artifacts and applications or the computer in general, but are eager to learn and connect to the digital world. Their interest was maintained throughout the process and they did not abandon the projects. It proved that a successful way of engaging them to the process and rewarding their commitment is keeping the technology simple. Also, being respectful to their memories and experiences encourages them to participate even when technology is involved. There was also enough evidence to conclude that the elderly enjoyed and acknowledged their bidirectional role in the new digital environment as both beneficiaries and contributors, which departs from previous approaches focusing only in new media literacy as a means for bridging the digital intergenerational divide. In conclusion, technology holds a significant role for elderly users especially when it is integrated in a meaningful programme with a clear goal.

As interactions between the elderly and adolescents diminish, intergenerational learning programmes offer the chance to overcome the obstacles and achieve the raising of awareness on the issue. Our research projects will continue to evaluate the benefits of the intergenerational interactions mainly in a digital context, and to observe the changes induced in human attitudes and social cohesion. After all, intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the creative and positive potential of adolescents and the elderly (Beth Johnson Foundation, 2001). If the differences between generations are perceived in a new challenging way then adolescents will learn to appreciate the past and the elderly the future.

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